



The Black Wife Blessing

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Billionaire Romance, Adult

Description: He needs a fake fiancée.

I need a breakthrough.

Falling for each other?

That was never part of the plan.

I'm Monica West—chef, hustler, and survivor of too many “you're not good enough”s.

Landing Leo Blackwood's birthday party could change everything for my catering business.

But then his cousin Henry—blue-eyed, brooding, billionaire

Henry—drops a bomb.

“We're engaged.”

In front of his mother.

At a party full of Manhattan's elite.

And I was just trying to serve lamb chops.

Now I'm caught in a fake relationship with a man who kisses like it's real, defends me like he means it, and looks at me like I'm already his.

He promises to make it worth my while—investment, influence, a chance to finally open the restaurant of my dreams.

But every moment we spend together blurs the lines between fake and forever.

I've worked too hard to fall for a man who only needs me for show.

But what if he's not pretending anymore?

Read on for: A fake marriage filled with sizzling tension, nosy relatives, and one dangerously sexy “husband” who's way too good at pretending. Things are about to get complicated... and very steamy. Escape your life with Miss Tyla—and don't be surprised if you forget it was ever fake in the first place. HEA guaranteed!

Total Pages (Source): 61

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MONICA

I adjust my chef's coat for the hundredth time, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from the crisp white fabric. The mirror reflects back a woman who looks more confident than I feel inside.

"My innovative approach to fusion cuisine combines traditional techniques with unexpected flavor combinations..." I practice the pitch, then shake my head. Too rehearsed. Too stiff.

My small apartment bathroom isn't the ideal rehearsal space, but it'll have to do. Landing this catering gig for Leo Blackwood's birthday would be a game-changer. Not just because he's a tech billionaire, but because Olivia Blackwood and Celia Saint-Pierre are culinary royalty in New York at this point. And if they see something special in me, then that has to mean something.

"Focus on the food, Monica. Focus on the damn food," I tell my reflection. "You've got this."

I take a deep breath and start again. "The menu I've designed celebrates Mr. Blackwood's appreciation for both innovation and tradition. Each course tells a story?—"

My phone buzzes on the counter, making me jump. The time display shows I have forty-five minutes until the interview. My stomach knots.

"The amuse-bouche features a compressed watermelon cube with..." I trail off, running my fingers through my curls before securing them into a fresh bun. "Damn it."

The truth is, I know my food. I know every flavor combination I've planned, every technique required, every plating detail. It's not the cooking that has me second-guessing myself—it's the pitch. One shot to impress two of the most influential women in New York's culinary scene.

I straighten my shoulders and lock eyes with my reflection. "I'm Monica West, and my food speaks for itself. Each dish I create is a reflection of my journey, my passion, and my commitment to pushing boundaries while honoring classic techniques."

Better. More natural. More me.

I grab my portfolio containing detailed menu proposals and plating sketches. These women understand the language of food. That's what I need to focus on—not rehearsed speeches, but the stories my dishes tell.

As I tuck my portfolio into my bag, Benjamin's voice echoes through my mind.

"A fancy chef? Come on, Monica. You're good at cooking, sure, but let's be realistic here." The memory of his condescending smile in our old apartment kitchen makes my jaw clench. "Stick to what you know. Maybe open a little soul food place or something."

I zip my bag with more force than necessary. That night, I'd served him my first attempt at a deconstructed seafood boil - butter-poached lobster with corn foam, compressed potatoes, and andouille oil. He'd barely looked at it, ordered pizza instead.

"You're trying too hard to be something you're not," he'd say whenever I experimented with new techniques. "No one wants that fancy shit from you."

But that only made me work harder. Every dismissive comment became fuel for late-night practice sessions, for the burns and cuts earned mastering French techniques, for the endless hours studying flavor profiles and plating designs.

I pull out my sketches one last time. The first course is a play on my grandmother's black-eyed pea fritters - but mine are transformed into a delicate crisp, topped with pickled watermelon rind and smoked pepper aioli. The main is my pride: sous vide duck breast with collard green kimchi and sweet potato puree spiced with gochugaru. Every element tells my story - Southern roots meeting global influences, tradition dancing with innovation.

"This isn't just food," I whisper, tracing the plating diagram with my finger. "This is my voice."

Each dish I've designed for this interview weaves together threads of my heritage with techniques I've fought to master. The dessert especially - a dark chocolate cremeux with bourbon-soaked corn cake and salted caramel popcorn - it's something that could only come from me. Sophisticated yet playful, familiar yet unexpected.

The portfolio feels heavier in my hands as I stare at my designs. What if they hate it? What if they think I'm trying too hard? What if?—

No. I close my eyes and grip the edge of my bathroom counter. I've seen what Olivia's done with Flavor Fusion, turning classic techniques on their head while incorporating her heritage. And Celia? The woman practically invented a new genre of cooking with her West African-Japanese fusion.

"They started somewhere too," I remind myself. "They had their first big breaks."

I flip through my portfolio again, studying the progression of courses. Each one represents hours of testing, of failed attempts, of burning myself and cutting myself and starting over until it was perfect. Until it was me.

Opening my eyes, I look at my reflection again. "Olivia Blackwood worked her way up from line cook to head chef before she was thirty, and then she amassed enough capital to start Flavor Fusion. Celia Saint-Pierre worked as a bartender and sous chef before she got her big break."

Their stories are legendary in New York's culinary scene. I've read every interview, watched every cooking segment. The way they transformed the landscape, proved that innovation doesn't just belong to white male chefs with classical training—they're the reason I believed I could do this.

"And now they're going to critique my food." The thought sends electricity through my veins, equal parts terror and excitement. This isn't just about getting a catering gig. This is about being seen by the women who changed what's possible in a professional kitchen.

I think about the articles I've saved, the Instagram posts I've studied. Olivia's signature plating style that somehow makes classic French dishes feel modern and alive. Celia's fearless combinations that shouldn't work but create something entirely new. They're not just chefs—they're artists, revolutionaries.

And today, they'll decide if I have what it takes to join their ranks.

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Source Creation Date: May 20, 2025, 4:08 am

I give myself one final look in the full-length mirror by my front door. The black pants are pressed crisp, no wrinkles in sight. My chef's coat gleams white against my skin, the collar perfectly starched. I've paired them with sensible but stylish black leather shoes that can handle hours in a kitchen while still looking professional.

My portfolio tucked under my arm, I pat my pockets - phone, keys, small notebook. Everything in its place.

The hallway light flickers as I lock my apartment door. I take the stairs instead of waiting for the ancient elevator - can't risk getting stuck today of all days. My footsteps echo in the stairwell, keeping rhythm with the mantras running through my head. Each dish, each technique, each flavor combination.

The underground garage is dim and cool, smelling of concrete and motor oil. My little Honda sits in spot 23B, not the fanciest ride but reliable. I run my hand along its hood as I walk to the driver's side.

"You've got this," I whisper, sliding into the seat. The leather is cool against my back, grounding me. I place my portfolio carefully on the passenger seat, making sure it won't slide during the drive.

The garage door rumbles open ahead of me, revealing a slice of bright New York morning. My chest feels lighter than it has in weeks. All the practice, all the testing, all the late nights perfecting each element - it's led to this moment. Whatever happens in this interview, I know I've put everything I have into these dishes.

I start the engine, and my favorite cooking playlist automatically kicks in through the

speakers. The first notes of Nina Simone float through the car, and I can't help but smile. It feels like a sign.

2

HENRY

The jet bridge creaks under my feet as I step into JFK's Terminal 1. Four years away, and the distinct New York City energy hits me like a shot of espresso - sharp, familiar, and slightly overwhelming.

"Mr. Blackwood, welcome back!" The flight attendant who'd been particularly attentive during the flight hurries after me, holding out a business card. "If you ever need recommendations for restaurants in the city..."

I accept it with a smile. "Thanks, Sarita. That's very thoughtful."

A group of women at the currency exchange counter pause their conversation, their heads turning in unison as I pass. One of them drops her passport, creating a domino effect of whispers and giggles. I've grown used to this reaction in Europe, but there's something distinctly American about their boldness that almost makes me smirk.

"Excuse me." A businesswoman steps into my path, smartphone in hand, designer heels clicking against the terminal floor. "This is terribly forward, but would you mind helping me with directions? I'm trying to find the Uber pickup point."

"Of course." I point her toward the right exit, watching as she hangs on my every word. She lingers a moment longer than necessary, playing with her hair and shifting her weight to highlight the curve of her hip. Subtle as a freight train.

"You must be new to New York," I say, knowing full well she isn't. Her Manolo

Blahniks and the confident way she navigates the crowd screams Manhattan native.

"Born and raised, actually." She winks, sliding her business card next to Sarita's in my jacket pocket without asking permission. "But sometimes we locals need a little... direction." Her emphasis on the last word makes her intentions crystal clear.

My phone buzzes - another message from Mother. That makes twelve since I boarded in Paris. Each one more desperate than the last, all circling around the same theme: my perpetual bachelorhood and her social calendar full of eligible daughters from New York's finest families.

The latest text reads: "Darling, the Ashworths are hosting dinner next Friday. Their daughter Caroline just finished her MBA at Harvard. Perfect timing, don't you think?"

Perfect timing. Right. Because four years building my own fashion empire in Europe means nothing compared to finding the right society wife to complete the Blackwood family portrait. The weight of generations of carefully curated marriages and social connections settles across my shoulders, heavier than my carry-on.

I scroll through the barrage of messages, each one a carefully crafted guilt trip about family obligations and ticking biological clocks - not mine, of course, but those of the parade of debutantes she's lined up.

My driver waits at the curb in a sleek black Maybach, the Blackwood family's preferred mode of transport. As I slide into the leather interior, my phone rings - Leo's face lighting up the screen.

"Look who's finally stateside."

"And how did you know that?"

"I was tracking your flight, of course." Leo's deep laugh fills the car. "How was the ride?"

"Long enough to receive approximately eight hundred texts from Mother about potential wife candidates."

"Ah, the joys of being the last eligible Blackwood bachelor. Speaking of social obligations, you're coming to my birthday gala, right?"

I loosen my tie, watching the city blur past the tinted windows. "Actually, I was thinking-"

"Don't even try it, Henry. This isn't like ditching one of Aunt Catherine's garden parties. The whole family's coming, including that ancient great-uncle who keeps threatening to write us all out of his will."

"Fuck." I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You know Mother's going to parade every single woman under thirty-five in front of me."

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"Better you than me. Though Olivia would kill anyone who tried." There's a pause, and I can picture Leo leaning back in his CEO chair at NeuraTech, probably wearing that shit-eating grin. "No exceptions, cousin. If I have to suffer through another round of 'when are you having a second child' interrogations, you can handle some matchmaking."

"I just got back. Can't I at least-"

"Nope. Consider it payment for all those times I covered for you sneaking out to art galleries instead of attending board meetings."

The car pulls up to Mother's Upper East Side penthouse, where tonight's welcome dinner awaits. Through the ornate windows, I catch glimpses of staff setting up the formal diningroom - Mother's favorite crystal, fresh flowers, and enough place settings to suggest she's invited half of Manhattan's elite.

"Fine. I'll be there." I grab my bag, dreading the evening ahead. "But I'm not dancing with anyone's daughter, niece, or conveniently single friend."

"We'll see about that." Leo chuckles. "Welcome home, Henry."

I end the call and stare at the imposing limestone facade of my childhood home. Same pretentious columns. Same manicured topiaries. Same suffocating expectations waiting behind those double oak doors.

The driver helps carry my things inside while I take a deep breath of crisp autumn air. Despite Mother's overwhelming... everything, a part of me has missed this city. The

energy. The possibilities. The network of friends I'd left behind to carve my own path.

My phone buzzes with a text from James, my old college roommate who now runs an art gallery in Chelsea:

"Heard you're back in town. Drinks at The Morgan tomorrow? Got some pieces you need to see."

A smile tugs at my lips. At least some things haven't changed. James still knows how to tempt me with the perfect combination of art and scotch.

"Count me in," I text back. "7PM?"

The front door opens before I reach it, revealing Harrison, our long-time butler, looking exactly as he did four years ago - down to the perfectly pressed uniform and slightly disapproving arch of his eyebrow.

"Welcome home, Mr. Blackwood."

"Good to see you, Harrison." I hand him my coat, feeling the weight of the family estate settle back onto my shoulders. "How bad is it in there?"

"Your mother has invited the Pembrokes, Astors, and Vanderbilts for dinner." He pauses, his expression perfectly neutral except for the slight twitch at the corner of his mouth. "All of whom, I'm told, have daughters of marriageable age."

"Fantastic." I loosen my tie, already feeling like it's choking me. Four years in Europe without this bullshit, and within ten minutes of being home, Mother's matchmaking machine is in full swing. "Any chance the wine cellar still has that '82 Bordeaux I hid behind the Merlots?"

"Third shelf from the bottom, sir. I've taken the liberty of having it decanted."

This is why Harrison has always been my favorite. The man's practically raised me, and he knows exactly when I need reinforcements. He's been more of a father figure than my actual father ever managed to be.

The sound of voices drifts from the formal living room - Mother's distinctive laugh, followed by what sounds like an entire sorority's worth of feminine giggles. Christ. She's really gone all out. I'm going to need more than just one bottle to survive this ambush disguised as a welcome home dinner.

But before I face the firing squad of eligible bachelorettes, I need a moment to remember why I came back. Not for Mother's matchmaking schemes, but for the chance to expand my European ventures here, to reconnect with the people who matter. To find my own balance between the Blackwood legacy and the life I want to build.

3

MONICA

I push open the doors of Flavor Fusion, my portfolio clutched tight against my chest. The restaurant's modern interior gleams with polished wood and brass accents, while soft jazz music floats through the air. I suck in a shaky breath as I approach the hostess stand.

"I have an appointment with Olivia Blackwood and Celia Saint-Pierre."

"Right this way." The hostess leads me through the dining room toward a private area in the back.

My heart pounds as we approach. This is it - my chance to prove I can handle high-profile events. Leo Blackwood's party could launch my career into the stratosphere. I smooth down my chef's coat and check that not a single curl has escaped my carefully styled bun.

The private conference room door opens to reveal Olivia and Celia seated at a round table, papers spread between them. They both look up as I enter.

"Monica, thank you for coming." Olivia rises, extending her hand. Her presence commands attention, from her perfectly tailored dress to her confident smile. "We've heard good things about your work."

"Thank you for considering me." I shake her hand, then Celia's. "I'm excited to share my vision for Mr. Blackwood's event."

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"Please, have a seat." Celia gestures to the chair across from them. "We're particularly interested in hearing how you'd handle such a high-profile gathering."

I settle into the chair and open my portfolio, laying out sample menus and photos of my previous events. My hands tremble slightly as I arrange everything, but I force them steady.

"For an event of this caliber, I believe in creating an experience, not just a meal." I pull out my proposed menu. "I've designed a progression of courses that tells a story through flavor..."

Olivia leans forward, studying the menu with sharp eyes. Celia nods along as I detail each course, but I can't read their expressions. The stakes feel enormous - this single presentation could change everything for me.

I launch into explaining my signature dish concepts, praying my voice projects the confidence I'm struggling to feel. This has to go well. I need this opportunity more than they could possibly know.

"My centerpiece dish draws from a childhood memory," I explain, pulling out a photograph of my deconstructed chicken and dumplings. "But reimagined through a fine-dining lens. The dumplings are made with duck confit and fresh herbs, served alongside a crystal-clear chicken consommé poured tableside."

Olivia picks up the photo, studying it with keen interest. "The plating is stunning. Tell me more about why you chose this."

"My grandmother taught me to cook, starting with simple comfort foods. She always said food should tell a story." I trace the edge of my portfolio. "Each element here represents part of that journey - from the traditional base to modern techniques. The sauce is infused with preserved lemon, adding brightness while honoring preservation methods she taught me."

Celia jots notes as I speak. "And how would you adapt this concept across a full tasting menu?"

"Each course builds on the last, creating a narrative arc." I flip to my timeline sketches. "We open with amuse-bouches that play with expectations - pimento cheese transformed into delicate spheres, country ham crafted into an airy mousse. The progression moves through reimagined Southern classics before culminating in dessert: a chocolate-bourbon pecan tart with smoked vanilla ice cream."

"Your passion really comes through," Olivia says, leaning back. "How do you see these dishes working for Leo's particular preferences? My husband can be quite picky."

"No kidding," Celia whispers.

"I've researched Mr. Blackwood's previous events. While he appreciates innovation, he values substance over pure spectacle. These dishes deliver both - grounded in tradition but elevated through technique."

The tension in my shoulders eases as they continue asking questions. Their genuine interest emboldens me to elaborate on flavor combinations, plating designs, even my ideas for interactive elements. When Celia inquires about wine pairings, I launch into detailed explanations of how each course complements specific vintages.

"The goal is creating moments of discovery," I say, growing more animated. "Every

bite should reveal something new while feeling somehow familiar. Like coming home to a place you've never been."

"Let's go back to the food for just a second. What drives you to create these particular flavor combinations?" Olivia taps the menu delicately.

"Growing up, my grandmother's kitchen was my sanctuary." I trace the outline of the plated dish in my portfolio. "She taught me that cooking isn't just about following recipes - it's about understanding how ingredients speak to each other. Like this dish here," I point to my signature seafood course. "The brown butter sauce might seem simple, but the key is cooking it until it's exactly one shade away from burning. That's when the nutty notes emerge and transform the entire plate."

"And how do you maintain consistency with such precise timing?" Celia leans forward.

"I developed a system at my previous restaurant. Every sauce gets color-matched to a standardized photo. But more than that, it's about training your senses. The moment that butter hits the perfect point, it releases this specific aroma - like toasted hazelnuts and caramel. My grandmother used to say you have to listen to your food. I thought she was being metaphorical until I realized different ingredients actually make distinct sounds when they're ready."

"Tell us more about your workflow during service," Olivia says with a smile.

"I treat my kitchen like an orchestra. Everyone has their part, but timing is everything. Before each service, I gather my team for what I call 'taste memory.' We sample key components together, discussing the target flavors and textures. It builds a shared vocabulary." I pull out my notebook, showing them my system of prep lists and timeline charts. "These organizational methods I developed after a particularly chaotic night when I was sous chef a couple years ago. We had a full house, two

servers called out sick, and the walk-in died."

"How did you handle that crisis?" Celia asks as her eyebrows furrow together.

"I reorganized the entire menu on the fly, transforming what could have been disasters into new dishes. The partially thawed duck became a tartare. The warming cream meant every table got fresh-churned butter as a starter. My grandmother always said crisis breeds creativity. She used to tell me about the time during a hurricane when she fed thirty people with just what she had in her pantry. That taught me to see challenges as opportunities for innovation."

Olivia and Celia exchange a glance that makes my heart skip. There's something in their expressions - a spark of interest, maybe even excitement - that I haven't seen in previous interviews.

"Your perspective on crisis management is refreshing," Olivia says, gathering her papers. "And your dedication to maintaining standards while innovating... it's exactly what we look for."

"We'll be in touch soon," Celia adds, her warm smile reaching her eyes. "You've given us a lot to consider."

I pack my portfolio with steady hands, though inside I'm trembling with possibility. This feels different from other interviews where I walked away knowing I hadn't quite measured up. The way they studied my dishes, asked follow-up questions, engaged with my concepts - it all points to genuine interest.

"Thank you both for your time." I stand, smoothing my chef's coat. "I look forward to hearing from you."

As I walk through Flavor Fusion's dining room, my steps feel lighter. For the first

time in years, I sense a real chance at breaking free away from my past, away from Benjamin's horrifying influence. No more second-guessing every decision, no more working under chefs who treat me like I'm still that uncertain girl who let someone else dim her light.

Outside, the air fills my lungs with possibility. I pause on the sidewalk, tilting my face toward the sun. My grandmother always said opportunities come to those who prepare for them. I've done the work, pushed through the doubt, refined my skills. Maybe now, finally, it's my time to shine.

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This could be it - my chance to prove to myself and everyone else that I'm more than my past mistakes. That I'm the chef I always knew I could be.

4

HENRY

I swirl the champagne in my glass, watching the bubbles dance as I strategically position myself behind a massive floral arrangement. Mother's latest dinner party is exactly what I expected - a parade of New York's elite congratulating themselves on their success while plotting their next social climb.

"Henry, darling!" Mother's voice carries across the room. I duck further behind the arrangement, nearly knocking over a crystal vase. "Harrison, have you seen Henry? I swear, I thought I saw him over here..."

I down my champagne and snag another from a passing waiter. The food remains untouched on my plate - some pretentious deconstructed dish that I don't have the appetite for.

"Mr. Blackwood, your mother speaks so highly of you." A woman in her fifties corners me, her diamonds catching the light. "My daughter would love to discuss your experience in European markets."

"Fascinating." I scan the room for an escape route. "If you'll excuse me, I need to make a call."

I weave through clusters of guests, their conversations a swarm of name-dropping and passive-aggressive compliments. Someone mentions their new yacht. Another brags about their third vacation home. The artificiality of it all makes my skin crawl.

Mother appears again, this time with a brunette in tow. "Henry, you simply must-"

"Sorry, Mother. Business emergency." I pull out my phone and pretend to read an urgent message.

The dining room feels suffocating. These people, with their rehearsed laughs and calculated networking, represent everything I tried to escape in Europe. A waiter offers more champagne, and I grab two glasses this time.

Through the French doors, I spot the gardens. The temptation to slip away grows stronger with each minute. Mother's matchmaking attempts have become more aggressive since my return - as if parading every eligible socialite in front of me will somehow erase four years of building my own life.

"Did you hear about the Rodgers?" Two women whisper nearby. "Their son married a public school teacher." They shudder as if discussing a tragedy.

I loosen my tie and check my watch. The exit is fifteen steps away. My driver could be here in ten minutes. The thought of freedom beckons, promising escape from this gilded cage of expectations and superficiality.

But Mother will throw a fucking fit if she finds out that I left the party earlier than expected. So, sticking around is what I'll have to do for now, even if it pains me to hear another one of those snobby conversations inside.

I step into the garden, the cool night air a relief from the stifling atmosphere. The meticulously manicured hedges and stone pathways offer temporary sanctuary.

Taking a deep breath, I savor the silence-

"There you are!" Mother hurries down the stone path. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I grip my champagne glass tighter. "Just needed some air."

"Well, you'll never believe who's here." She loops her arm through mine, steering me toward a stone bench. "Caroline Winston - you remember her from the club? She's just returned from finishing her MBA at Stanford. Such a lovely girl, and her family's pharmaceutical company is doing remarkably well."

"Mother-"

"And the Pembrokes brought their daughter Elizabeth. She's running their foundation now. Very philanthropic." She straightens my suit and messes with my tie, her fingers lingering on the Windsor knot. "You know, at your age, your father had already-"

"Been married for three years and was running the company. Yes, I know." The champagne turns bitter on my tongue.

"I just want you to be happy, darling." Her perfectly manicured hand pats my cheek. "And after that... unfortunate business venture in Europe-"

"That 'unfortunate business venture' is now worth eight figures." I pull away from her touch.

"But you could do so much more here, with the right connections, the right wife." She waves toward the house. "Take the Ashworths' daughter. Yale Law, impeccable family..."

I tune out her litany of accomplishments, watching a moth dance around the garden lights. Four years building something of my own, proving I could succeed without the family name, and she still sees it as a youthful rebellion to be corrected. The weight of generations of Blackwoods settles on my shoulders - each one following the same script of marriage, family business, country club memberships, and carefully orchestrated social circles.

"Henry? Are you listening?" Mother's voice cuts through my thoughts, sharp as a knife.

"Of course." I force a smile, the kind I've perfected over years of these conversations. "You were saying something about the Ashworths?"

"Yes, I was, actually! Their daughter is a very nice girl... I've forgotten her name, but believe me, she is a delight! Oh, and have you heard about Isabella Montgomery?" Mother's eyes light up once again. "She's just moved back from London. Her father's firm merged with-"

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"Alright, Mother, I'll think about it. Thanks for keeping me updated." The words slip out before I can stop them - my default response to keep the peace. It's easier than arguing, than explaining for the hundredth time that I don't want my life mapped out according to her social calendar. Four years in Europe taught me there's more to life than strategic marriages and board positions, but some lessons don't translate very well across the Atlantic.

Mother's face brightens like a kid on Christmas morning. She leans in, pressing a kiss to my cheek that leaves a trace of expensive lipstick. "That's all I ask, darling. You know I just want to see you happy." Her hand squeezes my arm. "And I'm not getting any younger. The thought of grandchildren..." She sighs wistfully. "Your children would be absolutely beautiful."

I watch her glide back toward the party, her silk dress catching the garden lights. The truth is, I do want a family someday. The idea of coming home to someone who genuinely cares, of teaching my kids the value of making their own way in the world - it's appealing as hell.

But not like this. Not through some calculated merger of family fortunes disguised as romance. Not with someone who sees me as a means to climb the social ladder or secure their place in Manhattan's elite.

I drain my champagne, letting the empty glass dangle between my fingers. The garden's gotten darker, quieter. Somewhere in the distance, a car horn blares - a reminder that real life exists beyond these manicured hedges and practiced smiles.

The garden's silence reminds me of Leo - he always knew the best hiding spots at

these parties when we were kids. Now he's got it all figured out. Married to Olivia, a little son running around... and they started as a fake relationship too.

I pull out my phone, thumb hovering over Leo's contact. He'd get it. He navigated this same bullshit, turned a business arrangement into real love. His story with Olivia reads like a fucking fairytale - arranged marriage to actual marriage, now with a toddler who's the spitting image of both of them.

But Leo's probably busy. It's late, and he's got that whole 'responsible parent' thing going now. Plus, knowing him, he'd just laugh and tell me to stop overthinking everything.

"Fuck it." I pocket my phone and straighten my jacket. Time to face the wolves.

Back inside, the party's reached that point where everyone's had just enough champagne to get loud. I dodge three separate conversations about hedge funds before Mrs. Paulson corners me. And her perfume assaults me long before I even see her.

"Henry! You must tell me about Paris. I heard the most fascinating story about your venture there!"

I launch into my standard spiel about European markets, watching her eyes glaze over at the technical details. It's a trick I learned years ago - bore them with business talk and they stop trying to set you up with their daughters.

The night drags on. I shake hands, laugh at terrible jokes about the stock market, and pretend to be fascinated by stories of summer homes in the Hamptons. Each conversation feels like a performance, a role I've rehearsed since childhood.

Maybe that's what Leo figured out - how to make this whole circus feel real. How to

find something genuine in all this artifice.

5

MONICA

The produce section at the local grocery store bursts with possibility as I scan the perfectly arranged vegetables. My phone buzzes with another notification, probably another detail about Leo Blackwood's upcoming birthday celebration.

"Girl, you're making me dizzy." Carla trails behind me, pushing the cart while I dart between displays. "We've been here twenty minutes and your basket's still empty."

"This has to be perfect." I scroll through my notes app, cross-referencing my fifth iteration of the menu. "It's not just any birthday party. It's Leo-freaking-Blackwood."

"The tech billionaire?" Carla whistles. "How'd you land that one?"

"I had an interview with Olivia Blackwood and Celia Saint-Pierre. Clearly, they liked what I had to offer." I pick up a butternut squash, testing its weight. "And now I'm catering for VIP guests."

"VIP?" Carla's eyes widen. "You're gonna need help."

"Already on it." I add the squash to my cart and pull up another list. "Got three sous chefs lined up, plus servers. Just need to nail down this menu." I move to the herb section, inhaling the fresh scents. "I still have to finalize the menu. And now I'm thinking of doing a twist on classic comfort foods. Like these mini shepherd's pies with duck confit instead of ground beef. And maybe those black truffle mac and cheese bites that killed at the charity event."

"Those were insane." Carla grabs some fresh thyme. "What about dessert?"

"That's where I'm stuck." I pull out my tablet, showing her my sketches. "Olivia mentioned he loves chocolate and bourbon. I'm thinking of doing these individual chocolate soufflés with a bourbon caramel center, but the timing would be tricky with that many guests."

"What about pre-setting the ramekins?" Carla suggests. "We did something similar at that wedding last summer."

"That could work." I add it to my notes, then grab my checklist for rentals. "Now I just need to figure out plating, staffing schedule, prep timeline, equipment needs..."

"One thing at a time." Carla squeezes my shoulder. "You've got this. Now can we please get what we actually came here for? My dinner service starts in four hours."

"Right, right," I reply, sending her a smile.

As we start shopping, it's inevitable that my mind starts drifting. And worrying. Then, it starts panicking. The weight of responsibility settles on my shoulders like a heavy blanket. My hand trembles as I set down the fresh herbs. What if the food isn't up to their standards? Olivia Blackwood isn't just any client - she's a culinary powerhouse. And Celia Saint-Pierre? Her reputation in the industry is legendary, too. What if I fail them? What if I make them look bad?

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"You okay?" Carla's voice cuts through my spiral. "You've got that look."

"What if I mess this up?" The words tumble out inadvertently. "If I disappoint them... Olivia and Celia will never work with me again. My career will be over before it even starts."

"Stop right there."

But my mind's already drifting to Benjamin's voice, those subtle digs that used to chip away at my confidence. You really think you can handle running your own kitchen? You'll crack under pressure. That's why you need me. I can still see his smug face, the way he'd lean against the counter watching me work, dropping those poisonous little comments that seemed helpful but were actually designed to keep me dependent on him.

"I can see you going there." Carla grabs my shoulders, forcing me to face her. "Whatever that asshole put in your head? It's bullshit. Complete and total bullshit."

"He always said I'd fold under pressure." My voice cracks. "That I wasn't cut out for this level of responsibility. That I needed him to succeed."

"Did you fold when the power went out during that wedding reception?" Carla's eyes lock with mine, fierce and unwavering. "Or when half your staff called out sick at the Williams event? No. You adapted. You crushed it. You fucking owned those disasters and turned them into triumphs while Benjamin was nowhere to be found."

The memories of those triumphs push against Benjamin's echoes, fighting for space

in my mind. For every doubt he planted, there's a moment where I proved him wrong—where I shined without him.

"Olivia and Celia chose you because they saw what I see—a badass chef who turns challenges into opportunities. They don't make mistakes with who they hire." Carla releases my shoulders but keeps her gaze locked on mine. "Benjamin couldn't handle your success, so he tried to dim your light. He wanted you dependent on him because he knew damn well you could outshine him. Don't let him win now."

The produce section comes back into focus, grounding me. The vibrant colors of fresh vegetables, the earthy smell of herbs—this is my world, not his. She's right. I earned this opportunity through late nights, burnt fingers, and a refusal to give up. Benjamin's voice might still haunt me sometimes, slithering in during moments of doubt, but it doesn't get to define my future. Not anymore.

"Now." Carla picks up my tablet, her tone shifting to business. "Tell me more about these bourbon caramel soufflés. They sound fucking amazing, and I want to know exactly how you're planning to blow everyone's minds with them. Matter of fact, tell me about any dish you want to make. Which dish is the one you're most excited about?"

"So I'm thinking of doing these little bites throughout the night." I pull up my sketches on the tablet, showing Carla. "Starting with caviar pearls on brioche, then moving to duck confit spring rolls with plum sauce. For the mains, I want to do lamb lollipops with mint chimichurri, those black truffle mac and cheese bites, and mini lobster pot pies."

My fingers swipe through the images as I envision each dish floating through the party on elegant silver trays.

"Then for the grand finale, those bourbon chocolate soufflés we talked about, paired

with salted caramel macarons and gold-dusted truffles."

"That's some serious fine dining." Carla nods approvingly. "Very on-brand for a billionaire's party."

In my mind, I can already see Leo Blackwood's guests savoring each bite, their eyes lighting up with pleasure. Olivia and Celia exchanging proud looks as the food becomes the talk of the evening. This could be my breakthrough moment, the one that puts my name on the map.

But then it hits me – the familiar tightness in my chest. The voice that sounds too much like Benjamin's. You're reaching too high. Playing with the big leagues when you're barely out of the minors.

My hand trembles as I reach for a bunch of fresh cilantro. The leaves blur before my eyes as memories surface – Benjamin hovering over my shoulder in our old apartment kitchen, critiquing every move, every decision.

No. Not today. I grip the herbs tighter, inhaling their sharp, clean scent. Focus on the present. On the fresh ingredients under my fingers. On Carla's steady presence beside me.

"I need Thai basil, microgreens, and edible flowers." I straighten my spine, pushing my cart forward with purpose. "And those specialty mushrooms from the Asian market across town."

Each ingredient I select is a small victory, a step further from who I used to be. The Benjamin in my head can doubt all he wants – I've got a party to plan for and a future to build.

HENRY

I step into The Sapphire Crown Hotel's grand ballroom, gawking at the impressive interior. The venue drips with opulence - ice sculptures, champagne fountains, and floral arrangements that mystify you.

My cousin Leo stands near the center of the room, surrounded by the usual crowd of tech investors and startup founders. He spots me and breaks into a wide grin.

"There's my favorite cousin." Leo pulls me into a quick hug. "Though you're looking more like a stranger these days. When's the last time you graced us with your presence?"

"Happy birthday, old man." I hand him an envelope. "Though I might need that gift back since you invited Mother to this shindig."

Leo's eyes drift to where Olivia stands across the room, bouncing their son Thomas on her hip while chatting with some guests. "Come on, you know Aunt Catherine would've had my head if I left her out. Besides, she's been oddly cheerful lately."

"That's what worries me." I clear my throat, scanning the room. "When Mother's cheerful, she's usually plotting something."

"Paranoid much?" Leo chuckles, taking a sip of his whiskey. "Maybe she's just happy to see her son settling into the family business finally."

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"I'm her only son, and we both know that's not it." My gaze follows a waiter carrying fresh flutes of champagne, and I fight the urge to grab two—one for each hand. "Four years in Europe wasn't long enough to forget how she operates. The Catherine Blackwood playbook hasn't changed since I was in diapers."

"Speaking of operating..." Leo's voice trails off as he spots Olivia waving him over, Thomas squirming in her arms. "Duty calls. But this conversation isn't over. I want to hear what's really got you looking like you're planning an escape route."

I watch him weave through the crowd toward his wife and son, envying the easy happiness they share. The genuine smile that crosses Leo's face when he takes his son makes something twist in my chest. The room suddenly feels smaller, stuffier, filled with too many expectations and not enough exits. The weight of Mother's gaze from across the room is practically burning a hole in my custom Italian suit.

Why did I agree to come to this in the first place? Ah, yes. To support my cousin. Even if it means I'll have to endure another night of matchmaking attempts by Mother, who really can't help herself at this point. Four goddamn years building something of my own in Europe, and I'm right back where I started—dodging debutantes and fielding questions about when I'll "finally settle down and take my rightful place."

I drift through clusters of fancy dresses and expensive suits, exchanging hollow pleasantries and vacant smiles. The same faces, the same conversations - who's merging with whom, which startup just got funded, whose divorce is making headlines this week.

"Henry, darling!" Amanda Pierce, an old family friend, air-kisses both my cheeks. "You must tell me about Paris. I heard you were doing marvelously there."

"Paris, London, and Prague, actually." I take another sip of champagne, draining the glass faster than I should. "And yes, the business is doing well." Understatement of the fucking year, but I'm not about to launch into profit margins at a party. That's all they can say. My business is doing well. Do they even want to know all the shit I went through to make myself a well-known name?

"Oh, you must meet my daughter. She's just finished her MBA at—"

"Ah, excuse me." I cut her off, spotting a passing waiter like he's my personal savior. "I need a refill." I don't, but I'd rather drink myself into oblivion than be set up with MBA Barbie.

I make my way to the far corner of the ballroom where the catering staff has set up their staging area. Here, at least, there's purpose to the movement. No pretense, just people focused on their work. Something I can respect—something real in this sea of wealth and bullshit small talk.

A woman in chef whites stands at the center of the controlled chaos, her curly hair escaping from beneath her cap. She moves with precision, plating dishes and directing her team with quiet authority. Unlike everyone else in this room, she's not trying to impress anyone. She's just doing her job, and doing it damn well from what I can see.

"Table twelve needs the lamb, Jake. Nya, those garnishes aren't uniform - fix them. Miguel, how are we looking on the risotto?"

Her staff responds instantly to each command, no wasted motion or hesitation. She adjusts a piece of microgreens with tweezers, her steady hands creating edible art on

each plate. When one of her line cooks stumbles with a tray, she's there in an instant, steadying it before anything can fall.

"You've got this," she tells him quietly. "Deep breath. Reset. Start again."

I lean against a pillar, watching as she transforms simple ingredients into stunning presentations. There's something magnetic about her focus, her quiet confidence. No performative shows of authority - just natural leadership that draws respect from her team.

This is the most real thing I've seen all night.

I keep watching the kitchen staff work, finding more entertainment in their synchronized movements than the party behind me. The chef—their leader—has an effortless grace about her. When she tastes a sauce, her eyes close for a split second, like she's having an intimate conversation with the flavors.

A familiar laugh cuts through the crowd. Mother holds court near the center of the room, her arm linked with some young socialite in a silver dress. Perfect posture, calculated smile, designer everything. Mother's type to a T.

"Fuck that," I mutter into my champagne glass. The thought of another setup makes my jaw clench. Mother's been on a mission since I returned from Europe, parading an endless stream of "suitable" women past me like it's a casting call. And I've rejected each one. When is she going to get the hint?

The chef catches my attention again as she steps in to demonstrate a plating technique to one of her cooks. Her hands move with precision, creating a swoosh of sauce that looks like abstract art. She's got paint on her canvas, only her medium is more interesting than anything hanging in Mother's precious galleries.

"Now try it," she tells her cook, stepping back to give him space. When he recreates the design perfectly, her whole face lights up. "That's exactly it."

Mother's voice carries across the room. "Henry simply must meet her. Such a lovely girl, and from an excellent family..."

I press deeper into my corner, finding refuge in watching the kitchen staff's controlled chaos. The chef moves between stations, tasting, adjusting, directing. No pretense. No agenda. Just pure skill and dedication to her craft.

A stark contrast to the marriage market masquerading as my cousin's birthday party. I'd rather spend the evening studying her technique than dodging Mother's latest prospect. Any day of the fucking week.

7

MONICA

Steam rises from multiple pots as I orchestrate the kitchen staff through the organized chaos. Leo's birthday celebration demands perfection - each dish a testament to the caliber of service we provide. My knife glides through colorful bell peppers, the rhythmic chopping a familiar comfort.

"Two minutes on those scallops!" I call out to Miguel at the sauté station. The kitchen hums with energy, plates clinking and burners roaring as we execute Leo's birthday menu with military precision.

My mind races through the remaining prep list. Vegetable brunoise for the amuse-bouche, herb garnish for the fish course, final check on the reduction sauce, plating diagrams to review with the team?—

"Fuck!" Pain shoots through my palm. Crimson blooms across the cutting board, staining the pristine vegetables. The knife clatters against stainless steel as I jerk my hand back. Blood pulses from the wound, hot and insistent.

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"Monica!" Nya appears at my side, first aid kit already in hand. "Let me see."

"I'm fine, I need to finish—" I try to sidestep her, reaching for a towel to wrap around my hand. This is the worst possible timing.

"Stop. Now." Nya's firm grip guides me away from the station, her expression leaving no room for argument. "Someone clean that board and start fresh! Get those vegetables out of here!"

I grit my teeth as she examines the cut, frustration boiling inside me. "This is amateur hour bullshit. I haven't cut myself in years." I watch the controlled chaos of my kitchen continue without me, feeling the weight of every passing second. Leo's birthday dinner won't wait for a stupid knife wound.

"Even Thomas Keller probably nicked himself once or twice." Nya cleans the wound with practiced efficiency. "You're pushing too hard. Take five minutes."

"We don't have five minutes. Leo's party?—"

"Will be perfect because you've planned every detail." She wraps gauze around my palm. "But not if you pass out from stress. You have to trust us. You've given us everything we need to succeed. We'll survive without you for a few minutes."

My shoulders slump as the adrenaline fades. She's right, but that doesn't stop the frustration bubbling in my chest. One stupid mistake could throw off our entire timing.

"Fine. Five minutes." I flex my bandaged hand, testing the movement. "But then I'm back on the line."

"Deal." Nya steers me toward the break room. "Drink water. Breathe. The world won't end if you pause for a moment."

I sink into a chair, anger at myself mixing with exhaustion. Years of building my reputation, and I slip up at one of our biggest events. The cut throbs, a constant reminder of my momentary lapse in focus.

I pick at the edge of the gauze, resisting the urge to unwrap it completely. The cut pulses with each heartbeat, a steady reminder of my stupidity. Through the break room door, I catch whiffs of Miguel's citrus beurre blanc - the perfect accompaniment to those butter-basted scallops.

My team moves with practiced precision, their stations a symphony of sizzling pans and knife work. The menu I crafted pushes boundaries while honoring classic techniques. Deconstructed beef Wellington with a mushroom foam, the pastry transformed into delicate tuiles. A play on Leo's favorite childhood dessert - classic chocolate chip cookies reimagined as an elegant plated affair with tahini caramel and malted milk crumbs. We have so many dishes to prepare, catering to the many varied tastes in attendance tonight.

The bandage catches on my watch as I check the time. Three minutes left of my mandatory break. I flex my fingers, testing the movement. Pain shoots across my palm. Shit. Knife work will be tricky, but I can manage. I'll have to.

I stand up, rolling my shoulders to release the tension. The wound throbs, but I push the discomfort aside. There's still the final sauce to finish, garnishes to place with surgical precision, the timing of each course to orchestrate. My team is incredible, but they need their conductor. And I refuse to let a stupid cut derail Leo's celebration.

The break room door swings open. I straighten, expecting Nya with more lectures about self-care. Instead, a tall stranger in an impeccably tailored suit strides in, his blue eyes landing on my bandaged hand.

"Kitchen battle wound?" His lips quirk into a half-smile.

"More like a reminder that even professionals fuck up." I wiggle my wrapped fingers. "Are you lost? This area's staff only."

"I'm Henry. Leo's cousin." He drops into the chair across from me. "I was looking for the birthday boy, but hiding out here seems more interesting."

"Hiding from what exactly?"

"My mother's attempts to parade eligible socialites in front of me." He smiles. "I'd rather discuss whatever masterpiece you were creating when the knife won its argument."

A laugh escapes before I can stop it. For some reason, I find myself lowering into my seat again. "Bell peppers. Nothing masterful about basic knife work."

"Depends who's wielding the knife. Though maybe not in this case." His eyes dance with mischief.

"Watch it." I point my good hand at him. "I'm still armed and dangerous. Sort of."

"Clearly." He leans forward, elbows on his knees. "So what else are you serving besides rebellious vegetables?"

The genuine interest in his voice draws me in. I find myself describing the menu's progression - the delicate balance of flavors, the seasonal ingredients, the stories

behind each dish. Henry listens intently, asking questions that reveal a surprising knowledge of cuisine.

"You actually know your food." I tilt my head, studying him. "Most people just pretend."

"Four years in Europe. You learn to appreciate real cooking or starve." He shrugs. "Though nothing I've had there compares to what you just described. Even with the slight delay due to pepper-related injuries."

"You're kind of an ass, you know that?"

"I've been told it's part of my charm."

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We share a smile, and something shifts in the air between us. The pretense of casual conversation falls away, replaced by an unexpected warmth.

"It's refreshing," I admit. "Most people treat me like I'm made of glass after seeing me in chef whites. Like I couldn't possibly be both serious about my career and actually enjoy life."

"Their loss. I find competent women who can laugh at themselves incredibly attractive." His gaze holds mine, sending a flutter through my chest.

The air between us crackles with possibility. Henry's blue eyes hold mine, and my breath catches. The cut on my palm forgotten, I lean forward without meaning to, drawn by an energy I can't explain.

"You know," Henry's voice drops lower, "I should probably thank those bell peppers. Getting to meet the chef responsible for tonight's menu is worth enduring my mother's matchmaking schemes."

"Smooth talker." But I'm smiling, caught up in the magnetic pull between us.

His hand slides across the break room table, fingers brushing mine. Electric tingles race up my arm at the contact. "I prefer honest. And honestly? This is the most interesting conversation I've had all evening."

I open my mouth to respond, but a shrill voice cuts through our bubble.

"Henry, darling! Are you here somewhere? I thought I saw you coming this way!"

The voice echoes from the hallway, getting closer. "The Morrisons just arrived with their lovely daughter..."

"Fuck." Henry's head drops forward. "That would be Mother, professional life-ruiner and expert at terrible timing."

The sound of her footsteps grows louder. Henry's fingers tighten around mine for a brief moment before he releases them.

"Quick, hide me under the table." His eyes dance with mischief despite his obvious dread.

"In that expensive suit? I don't think so." I bite back a laugh as footsteps approach the break room door.

"Henry?" The voice is right outside now. "I know you're here somewhere..."

8

HENRY

The break room door swings open without warning. My mother's signature perfume fills the air before I even see her face.

"Henry, darling." She glides in wearing her designer gown, diamonds glittering at her throat. Behind her trails a statuesque blonde in a red dress. Who the hell is this? This isn't the woman she was parading around early. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

"Mother." I get up, glancing at Monica. Her eyes widen slightly at the sudden appearance of my mother. While these two ladies are dressed to the nines, Monica is

in her chef whites. I hope that isn't making her feel some type of way. "I'm a bit occupied at the moment."

"Oh nonsense." Mother waves her hand dismissively. "I want you to meet Lola Sinclair. Her father runs that lovely vineyard in Napa we visited last summer."

Lola extends a manicured hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Henry. Your mother's told me so much about you."

I ignore her outstretched hand. "Mother, this isn't the time. I'm helping?—"

"Lola just finished her MBA at Harvard." Mother barrels on, acting as if Monica isn't even in the room. "She's taking over their international distribution next quarter."

Monica starts to rise from her chair. "I should probably get back to?—"

"No." I catch her wrist gently, mindful of her injured hand. "Please stay." The last thing I need is to be trapped alone with my mother's latest matchmaking attempt.

"Henry." Mother's voice carries that sharp edge I know too well. "Don't be rude. Lola came all this way specifically to meet you."

"I'm sure she did." I keep my grip on Monica's wrist, thumb brushing over her pulse point. "But as you can see, I'm helping with an injury. So unless either of you are secretly medical professionals..."

"Really, darling. The staff can handle their own issues." Mother's gaze finally lands on Monica, dismissing her entirely with a single look.

My jaw clenches. "Mother?—"

"Henry, I'm being serious. Who is this woman, anyway? And why are you treating her as if she's the most important person at your cousin's party? From the looks of it, she's just a chef. Right?"

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"She's my fiancée," I blurt out, which makes all the ladies in this room flinch.

The silence that follows my declaration feels like a physical weight. Monica's wrist tenses under my fingers, and I loosen my grip but don't let go. Mother's face cycles through several expressions - shock, confusion, and finally settling on something between outrage and disbelief.

"I beg your pardon?" Mother's voice comes out strangled.

Lola's perfectly made-up face twists. "You're engaged? To the help?" She spits the last word like poison.

"Watch yourself." Ice coats my words. I know I just met her, but considering how happy she's made me feel during our brief conversation, I won't let someone like Lola Sinclair minimize her.

"This is absurd." Lola shakes her head indignantly as she spins around. "I can't believe you wasted my time, Catherine." The door slams behind her with enough force to rattle the break room's cheap venetian blinds.

"Henry." Mother's lips press into a thin line. "We will discuss this later. At length." She hurries after Lola, but pauses at the door. "And I expect answers. Real ones."

The door closes again, softer this time. I drop Monica's wrist and run a hand through my hair.

"I'm so sorry about that. I didn't mean to drag you into?—"

A snort cuts me off.

Monica's shoulders shake with suppressed laughter. "Fiancée?" Her eyes dance with amusement. "That's what you went with?"

"It was the first thing that came to mind." Heat creeps up my neck and my collar suddenly feels too tight. "I couldn't let her steamroll over you like that. You didn't deserve to be caught in the crossfire of Blackwood family politics."

"So you decided to promote me from 'just a chef' straight to future Mrs. Blackwood?" She raises an eyebrow, those brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "Talk about a career advancement. Do I get dental with that?"

"Look, I panicked, okay?" But her laughter is infectious, and I find myself grinning despite the clusterfuck I've just created. "Mother's been trying to set me up with society princesses for as long as I can remember. You should've seen the last one - brought her own wine critic to dinner. The guy actually spit into a fucking bucket at Eleven Madison Park. We got asked to leave."

"And now you've gone and disappointed poor Lola Sinclair of the Napa Valley Sinclairs." Monica wipes at her eyes, still chuckling. "Your mother looked ready to faint. I thought she might actually clutch her pearls like in those old movies. Does this mean I should start practicing my society laugh? You know—" She demonstrates a delicate, obviously fake titter that somehow makes this whole disaster seem hilarious.

I shake my head, unable to stop grinning at her ability to find humor in this disaster. "Thanks for being such a good sport about all this. Most people would've stormed out after that shitshow."

"Please. Your mother thinking I'm engaged to you is the least of my problems

tonight." Monica reaches into her chef coat pocket and pulls out a sleek business card. "Here. You should probably have my contact info, seeing as we're getting married and all." She hands it over with a wink.

My fingers brush against hers as I take the card. The elegant script reads 'Monica West - Executive Chef' with her phone number and email below. The cardstock is thick, professional - a stark contrast to the playful glint in her eyes.

"I better get back before my team thinks I've abandoned them." She adjusts her chef coat and picks at the bandage on her hand. "Those lamb chops won't plate themselves."

I watch her move toward the door, struck by how she commands attention without even trying. The confidence in her stride, the way her curls escape that messy bun, the flash of her smile as she glances back one last time before disappearing into the hallway.

Looking down at her card between my fingers, I know with absolute certainty that I can't let this be our only interaction. Not just because I've royally fucked myself by claiming she's my fiancée in front of Mother - though that's definitely going to come back to bite me in the ass. No, there's something about Monica West that makes me want to know more. The way she handled Mother's snobbery with grace. How she laughed instead of getting angry. The spark I felt every time our eyes met.

I slip her card into my wallet, right behind my driver's license where I won't lose it. Mother will be hunting me down any minute now, demanding explanations I don't have. But all I can think about is when I'll see Monica again.

The foam in my latte swirls into abstract patterns as I stir, lost in thought about Henry Blackwood's text from this morning. My phone sits face-up on the cafe table, displaying his message: "Need to discuss something important. Meet at Cafe Luna at 2?"

The memory of Leo's birthday party makes me shake my head and grin. The way Henry had blurted out we were engaged to his mother - the sheer panic in his eyes. For someone so polished and put-together, watching him flounder had been oddly endearing.

I check my reflection in the cafe window. My curls are behaving today, thank God, though I had to fight them into submission this morning. The breeze outside sends leaves skittering across the sidewalk.

Those piercing blue eyes of his flash through my mind again. The way his whole face lights up when he smiles. That perfectly tailored suit he wore at the party. I bite my lip, trying to focus on more practical matters. Maybe he needs catering for another event? That would be incredible exposure for my business.

"Get it together, Monica," I mutter into my coffee. "He's way out of your league."

But that doesn't stop me from remembering how his hand felt in mine before his mother barged in on us in the break room, or the way his cologne smelled when he leaned in close. The fake engagement thing should be awkward, but somehow it just makes me laugh. The whole situation is ridiculous - like something out of a rom-com.

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I glance at my watch. 1:55 PM. My stomach does a little flip, which I promptly ignore. This is probably just business. Although a tiny part of me hopes it might be something else...

The bell above the cafe door chimes. Henry strides in, his normally perfect hair slightly disheveled like he's been running his fingers through it. His suit jacket is unbuttoned, tie loose - so unlike his usual polished appearance. Then again, I've only seen the guy once.

"Monica." He slides into the chair across from me. Dark circles ring his eyes, making the blue of his irises even more striking against his tired face. "Thanks for meeting me."

"Of course. Everything okay?" I study him carefully, noticing how his composure seems to be slipping today.

He leans forward, elbows on the table, voice dropping to a near whisper. "Remember how my mother caught us in the break room at Leo's party?"

"You mean when you panicked and told her we were engaged?" I can't help but smirk, though my stomach does a little flip at the memory. "Hard to forget that stellar moment."

"Yeah, about that." He scrubs a hand down his face, fingers lingering at his jaw. "She may have... told everyone. And I mean everyone. The entire New York social circle knows. It's in Page Six."

My coffee cup freezes halfway to my mouth. The liquid sloshes dangerously close to the rim. "What?" The single word comes out as a strangled whisper.

"I know, I know. I fucked up." He pulls out his phone, scrolling through something. "Look."

The headline screams: 'Blackwood Heir to Wed Rising Culinary Star.'

"Jesus." My hands start to shake. "Henry..."

"I have a proposition." He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing mine. "I know this is insane, but... what if we went through with it?"

"Through with what?"

"The engagement. The marriage. All of it." His blue eyes lock onto mine, intense and pleading. "Just temporarily. I'll make it worth your while financially. But if we don't do this, my reputation in the business world is shot. My mother's already calling all her society friends, planning our engagement party..."

The cafe suddenly feels too small, too hot. "You want me to... pretend to marry you?"

"Yes. God, I know how crazy this sounds." He runs both hands through his hair, making it stand up even more. "But I'm desperate here. Please, Monica. I'll give you whatever you want."

I stare at him, my mouth opening and closing like a fish. Of all the things I expected him to say today, this wasn't even in the realm of possibility.

"Please, please listen to me." Henry leans forward, his expression earnest. "My mother's connections run deep in Manhattan's restaurant scene. She sits on multiple

charity boards, knows every food critic worth knowing. That kind of influence could transform your business overnight."

I trace the rim of my coffee cup, considering his words. The possibilities make my heart race - having that kind of backing could save me years of struggling to establish myself. "And what exactly would this arrangement involve?"

"We'd need to keep up appearances for about a year. Attend events together, act like a couple in public." He fidgets with his cufflinks. "I'd set you up with a penthouse in my building, cover all expenses. Plus, I'd invest directly in your business - help you expand, hire staff, whatever you need."

The practical side of my brain catalogs the advantages while my emotional side grapples with the implications. After Benjamin... I swore I'd never let myself be financially dependent on anyone again.

"And after the year?"

"We have an amicable split, cite growing apart or different life goals. By then, your business will be established enough to stand on its own."

I study his face - the earnestness in those blue eyes, the slight tension in his jaw. Despite only knowing him briefly, there's something about Henry that puts me at ease. He's nothing like Benjamin - no underlying current of control or manipulation. Just a guy in a tough spot asking for help.

"This is crazy," I mutter, more to myself than him. But the idea has already taken root. With that kind of backing, I could finally prove to everyone - especially myself - that I have what it takes to succeed.

"Completely insane," Henry agrees with a crooked smile that makes my stomach

flutter. "But sometimes crazy works out, right?"

"I'll... think about it," I say finally, breaking the heavy silence between us. My fingers trace along my coffee cup, its warmth long faded. "This isn't exactly a small decision."

Henry's shoulders relax slightly. "Of course. Take whatever time you need." His hand slides across the table, stopping just short of touching mine. "And Monica? I want you to know - this arrangement would be completely on your terms. No pressure, no expectations."

"What about..." I gesture vaguely between us, memories of Benjamin's possessiveness creeping in uninvited. "Physical stuff?"

"Nothing you're not comfortable with. We'd need to sell it in public - hand-holding, maybe the occasional kiss for photos. But behind closed doors?" He shakes his head. "That's your call. Always."

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The sincerity in his voice chips away at my defenses. Here's this gorgeous, successful man offering me everything I've worked for on a silver platter. The rational part of my brain screams that it's too good to be true. The ambitious part sees endless possibilities.

"And you'd really help with the business?" I hate how small my voice sounds.

"Whatever you need. Capital, connections, equipment." He leans back. "Think of it as an investment in both our futures."

I wrap my arms around myself, weighing options. A year of pretending versus potentially a lifetime of struggling to make it on my own. The choice should be obvious. But after Benjamin...

"This could change everything," I whisper, half to myself. My catering business could become the restaurant I've always dreamed of. No more maxed-out credit cards or sleepless nights wondering how to make rent.

But what if I'm making another massive mistake? Trading one form of dependency for another?

Henry's voice breaks through my spiral. "Hey." His tone is gentle. "You don't have to decide right now. Sleep on it."

I nod, grateful for the out. "Yeah. I should probably do that."

HENRY

The sharp clink of sterling silver against bone china echoes through Mother's dining room as she sets down her fork. Here we go. I've managed to dodge her interrogation through the first course, but the determined gleam in her eye tells me my reprieve is over.

"Henry, darling." She dabs the corner of her mouth with her napkin. "You still haven't told me how you met this... Monica."

I take a slow sip of wine, buying time to recall the story Monica and I crafted. "We met at her restaurant. She's an incredible chef."

"A chef?" Mother's perfectly shaped eyebrows arch. "I wasn't aware you frequented establishments below Michelin star status."

"Her food is exceptional. One bite of her signature dish and I knew I had to meet the genius behind it." The lie flows easily. "When I saw her, it was..." I trail off, letting Mother fill in the blanks with whatever romantic notion she prefers. There's no way she can know that I actually met Monica the very same night I announced she was my fiancée. No fucking way.

"And you never thought to mention her before now?"

"We wanted privacy. To make sure what we had was real before going public."

Mother's lips purse. "How convenient. And her family? What do they do?"

"She's self-made, Mother. Worked her way up through some of the best kitchens in the city." I lean back, crossing my arms. "That's what attracted me to her - her drive, her passion."

"I see." Her tone suggests she doesn't see at all. "And this whirlwind engagement? Surely you understand my concern, Henry. The Blackwood name carries certain expectations."

"I know what I want." I fix her with a steady gaze. "Monica is brilliant, talented, and makes me happier than I've been in years. Isn't that what you've always wanted for me?"

"Of course, darling." She reaches for her wine glass. "But you must admit, this is all rather sudden. I had to hear about my only son's engagement at Leo's birthday party, of all places."

"Well, that wasn't intentional. You came looking for me. Things just happened quickly and we went with the flow. Nothing wrong with that."

"And when do I get to formally meet this woman who's stolen my son's heart?"

"Soon." I force a smile. "We're both just incredibly busy right now with the restaurant and my work."

"Nonsense. I'm hosting a dinner party next weekend. You'll both attend." It's not a request. I can hear it in her tone.

"I'll talk to Monica." I flash a practiced smile, one I've perfected over years of these dinners. "I'm sure we can make it work."

Mother brightens, her shoulders relaxing as she leans forward. "Wonderful. It'll be the perfect opportunity to introduce her to everyone. The Vandermitls will be there, and the Astors. Oh, and Margaret Rothschild - you remember her, don't you? She's been dying to meet your fiancée."

"Christ, Mother." I grip my wine glass tighter. "Seems like all of Manhattan knows about the engagement already."

"Well..." She waves her hand dismissively, a gesture that's driven me crazy since childhood. "You know how these things go. One mentions it at lunch, another at bridge club..."

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"A loose tongue, as always." I drain my glass, signaling Harrison for another.

"Don't be dramatic, darling. People were bound to find out eventually. And really, what did you expect? My only son finally settling down - it's the talk of the season."

"The talk of the season," I mutter. Fucking perfect. What started as a quick solution to Mother's marriage ultimatum has snowballed into a social circus. And now Monica will have to face the wolves in their den. She's doing me a huge favor in accepting this charade. But what if I've just made her life ten times worse?

"Besides," Mother continues, "these things need proper planning. Guest lists for the engagement party, venue selections, not to mention the wedding itself?—"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." I hold up a hand. "Monica and I want to take things at our own pace."

"Really?" She scoffs. "You're already engaged."

The irony of her statement hits me like a punch to the gut. If she only knew how 'slow' things really were - that Monica and I barely know each other beyond our hastily constructed cover story.

"Just... one thing at a time, Mother. The dinner party first."

"And what does Monica think about children?" Mother's voice cuts through my thoughts like a scalpel, precise and painful.

"Jesus, Mother. We haven't even set a date yet." I run a hand through my hair, fighting the urge to get up and leave the room altogether. These dinners always feel like slow torture, especially when she's prodding me like this.

"Well, these things need to be discussed. The Blackwood legacy?—"

"Can wait." I signal Harrison to clear my plates, grateful for the momentary distraction. "Monica's focused on her career right now." And thank God for that—at least one of us has a legitimate passion. Ever since my return to New York City, I haven't felt the same drive I used to feel in Europe. Because now, I have nothing to fight for. Nothing to prove now that I'm established at the top of the social ladder.

"A career in the kitchen." Mother's lips thin until they're practically invisible, her disapproval radiating across the table. "Surely she'll want to step back once you're married. The social obligations alone?—"

"No." The word comes out sharper than intended, echoing against the expensive china. "Her work is important to her. I won't ask her to give that up." I'm surprised by the conviction in my voice—when did I start genuinely defending Monica's dreams?

"But Henry, a chef? What will people say?" She clutches her pearls like they might protect her from the horror of having a daughter-in-law who actually works for a living.

"They'll say whatever the fuck they want. I don't care." I stare her down, daring her to challenge me.

She tilts her head at me and presses her lips into a thin line. "Language, darling." As if that's the real problem here.

I rub my temples. The thought of Monica facing this - the judgment, the whispers, the

raised eyebrows - makes my chest tight. She doesn't deserve this shit storm just because she agreed to help me out of a bind. And yet... there's something about her that makes me think she can handle it. The way her eyes light up when she talks about food, how she commands her kitchen with quiet authority.

"Monica's different, Mother. Special." The words come out before I can stop them, and I realize they're true. Even in our brief time together, I've seen glimpses of someone extraordinary.

"Different how?"

"She's real. Authentic. Not like the society wives you parade in front of me."

Mother studies me over her wine glass. "You sound quite taken with her."

I am. That's the problem. What started as convenience is becoming something else - something that makes my pulse quicken when I think about our next meeting. But I can't rush this. Monica's been through enough with her ex; she's told me snippets about the bastard here and there. She needs time, space to see if what's growing between us is genuine.

"Just... give her a chance." I meet Mother's gaze. "That's all I'm asking."

11

MONICA

The warm glow of Flavor Fusion's elegant lighting bathes the dining room in amber hues. Henry pulls out my chair, his fingers brushing my shoulder as I sit. The gesture, though part of our charade, sends a flutter through my chest.

"I hear the duck confit here is life-changing." Henry leans in, enveloping me in that cologne of his. Hesmellsrich. "Though I'm sure you've got opinions on that, being a chef yourself."

"Olivia's duck confit could make angels weep." I unfold my napkin, catching his eye. "But her seafood risotto? That's where the real magic happens."

The restaurant buzzes with energy - wine glasses clinking, conversations flowing, and servers gliding between tables with practiced grace. Olivia has created something special here, a space where food and atmosphere merge into pure joy.

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"You should see your face when you talk about food." Henry's eyes crinkle at the corners. "It's like watching someone fall in love."

"Maybe I am in love. With proper seasoning and perfect plating, of course." I take a sip of the wine he selected, a crisp Chablis that dances on my tongue.

"Speaking of perfect..." He reaches across the table, adjusting my engagement ring. The gesture, meant for show, feels strangely intimate. "You've got to admit we make this look good."

"Careful there, Mr. Blackwood. Someone might think you're actually enjoying our little arrangement."

"And what if I am?" His voice drops lower, private. "Is that against the rules?"

Before I can answer, our appetizers arrive - a plate of seared scallops with butternut squash purée that makes my chef's heart sing. The conversation flows as easily as the wine, and I find myself forgetting about the pretense that brought us here. Henry's genuine interest in my culinary opinions, his quick wit, and the way he leans in when I speak - it all feels natural, real.

A burst of laughter from a nearby table mingles with the aromatic symphony of herbs and spices wafting from the kitchen. I catch myself relaxing into this moment, into us, even as a small voice in my head reminds me it's all for show.

"Try this." Henry offers me a bite from his plate, and the casual intimacy of the gesture makes my heart skip. Our fingers brush as I accept his fork, and I wonder if

he feels it too - this current of electricity that has nothing to do with our arrangement and everything to do with who we are when we're together.

"Well, if it isn't the lovebirds." Olivia's voice cuts through my wine-induced haze. She stands at our table, radiant in her chef's whites, a knowing smile playing on her lips. "I had to come see this engagement for myself."

Henry's hand finds mine across the table. "The food is incredible, Olivia. That duck confit-

"Oh please, save the compliments for someone who doesn't know you're trying to butter them up." She winks at me. "Though I must say, you two look absolutely perfect together. The way you've been feeding each other bites all evening? I nearly sent my staff on break from the sweetness overload."

Heat explodes across my body. Have we really been that obvious? I mean, that's a good thing, right? We're supposed to be selling this relationship to the whole world.

But it makes my heart flutter to realize other people are, indeed, noticing.

"What can I say?" Henry's thumb traces circles on my palm. "When you're with the right person, everything just flows."

Olivia squeezes my shoulder. "About time someone appreciated Monica properly. The way you look at her? That's not something you can fake."

My stomach drops at the word 'fake.' Because that's what this is supposed to be. But the way Henry's eyes meet mine across the table feels anything but artificial.

"I'll send out the next course myself," Olivia says. "A special for my new favorite couple."

As she disappears, the server brings our main courses. Henry's face lights up at the presentation of his braised short ribs, and something in my chest tightens. He cuts into the meat with appreciation, savoring each bite like it's a revelation.

"This sauce is incredible," he says, gesturing with his fork. "The depth of flavor, the balance..." He stops, catching my expression. "What?"

"Nothing. Just... you actually get it. Most people just eat. You understand."

"I understand you." The words hang between us, heavy with meaning I'm not ready to examine.

I focus on my own plate, a perfectly executed sea bass, but I can't ignore how natural this feels. How his laugh makes the room brighter. How he leans forward when I explain the technique behind Olivia's signature sauce, genuinely interested in every word.

It's becoming harder to remember this is all pretend when every moment feels so real.

The night goes on smoothly, and we eat and laugh and joke with each other as plates are brought and cleared. Eventually, even the dessert plates are cleared, and Henry's hand finds mine again as we walk toward the exit. His touch is warm, steady - everything Benjamin's wasn't.

"Thank you for tonight." I adjust my purse strap with my free hand. "For making it feel..."

"Real?" His eyes catch mine, playfulness gleaming in those baby blues, as well as something deeper.

"Natural." I squeeze his fingers. "You didn't have to learn about braising techniques

just to keep up the conversation."

"Maybe I wanted to." He pulls me closer as we step outside, the night air cool against my warm skin. "Maybe I like watching you light up when you talk about what you love."

A car horn blares in the distance, and my body tenses before I can stop it. For a split second, I'm back there - Benjamin screaming, plates shattering against walls, the sound of my own heartbeat drowning out everything else. Henry must feel the change in my posture because his arm tightens protectively around me, his warmth anchoring me to the present.

"You okay?" he asks quietly, his thumb tracing gentle circles on my shoulder.

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I nod, forcing a smile that becomes more genuine when I look up at him. His blue eyes hold nothing but concern – no judgment, no frustration at my reaction. Just patience.

"Monica?" he asks gently.

"Yeah, just..." The words stick in my throat. How do I explain that even this perfect evening has shadows lurking at its edges? That every time something good happens, a voice in my head whispers it's temporary?

Henry steps in front of me, his expression serious. "Monica, what's going on in that head of yours?"

"Nothing. Everything." I force a laugh. "Just remembering that this is supposed to be pretend."

But that's not it. Not really. I'm remembering Benjamin's last words to me: "You'll never find someone who understands you like I do." And even though I know it was manipulation, even though Henry proves him wrong with every genuine question and careful touch, part of me is waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"Hey." Henry's thumb traces my cheekbone. "Whatever you're thinking about - whoever you're thinking about - they're not here. It's just us."

I lean into his touch, trying to believe him. But I can't shake the feeling that happiness this pure comes with a price. That somewhere in this city, my past is waiting to catch up with me.

HENRY

The crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow across my mother's opulent dining room as Monica and I navigate through clusters of people giving us smiles and waves. Her hand rests in mine, fingers intertwined, and the weight of it feels more natural than I expected.

"Henry, darling!" My mother's voice carries across the room, cutting through the ambient chatter like a diamond through glass. "Come, you must tell the Alexanders how you proposed."

Monica's grip tightens around my fingers, her nails briefly pressing into my skin, but her smile never falters. Not even a twitch. We've rehearsed this story so many times I could recite it in my sleep, perfected every detail down to the exact vintage of champagne I supposedly ordered.

"Actually, I'd love to hear Monica's version." Cassandra Alexander leans forward, her strand of pearls gleaming under the chandelier light, eyes hungry for romantic details. "The bride's perspective is always more romantic."

Monica launches into our carefully crafted tale of a surprise dinner at her restaurant after hours, not missing a single beat. Her voice carries the perfect blend of excitement and affection as she describes how I supposedly got down on one knee between the prep stations, surrounded by candlelight I'd arranged while she was distracted in the walk-in freezer. The women around us sigh collectively, completely fucking sold on our bullshit story. I have to admit, she's damn good at this—maybe even better than me.

"That's our Henry." George Preston, one of my father's old friends, claps my

shoulder. "Always had a flair for the dramatic."

I catch snippets of conversation as we make our rounds. 'Finally settling down.' 'Such a lovely couple.' 'Who would have thought Henry Blackwood would be tamed?' Each comment feeds a growing satisfaction in my chest. For once, the attention isn't about my latest business venture or another disappointed expectation - it's about something that makes these people smile, makes my mother beam with pride.

"Your mother hasn't stopped grinning all evening," Monica whispers as we pause near a window overlooking the garden.

"Neither have I." The words slip out before I can catch them. "You're handling this crowd like a pro."

"Years of customer service." She smooths her dress, a deep blue number that makes her skin glow. "Though I usually deal with hungry patrons, not hungry socialites."

"Trust me, these vultures are always hungry for something."

"Henry!" A group of my mother's friends waves us over. "We need more details about the wedding plans."

Monica's laugh tickles my ear. "Your stage awaits, Mr. Blackwood."

I guide her toward them, riding high on the unexpected pleasure of this charade. Who knew fake engagement could feel this damn good?

We make our way over, mingling and chatting with the many people vying for our attention. As I answer questions about the wedding, Monica gets in her element and starts talking about food. I watch Monica gesturing animatedly to Mrs. Davidson about the proper technique for making authentic French macarons. Her eyes light up

as she describes the delicate balance of temperature and timing, and even this jaded socialite seems genuinely enthralled.

"The secret is in how you fold the mixture," Monica explains. "Too rough and you lose the air that creates those perfect little feet around the edges."

"You must show me sometime, dear." Mrs. Davidson touches Monica's arm. "Henry, your fiancée is absolutely delightful."

My chest tightens at the word 'fiancée.' It rolls off their tongues so easily, and Monica plays the part with such natural grace that sometimes I forget this is all pretend. She's worked her way through half the room, charming everyone from the wine snobs to the food critics with her encyclopedic knowledge of cuisine.

"The '82 Bordeaux pairs beautifully with a properly aged ribeye," she tells Mr. Russo, one of our city's most notorious wine collectors. "But personally, I prefer the complexity of the '86 with beef."

Russo's eyebrows shoot up. "You know your vintages."

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"A chef has to." Monica winks, and I swear the old bastard blushes.

Standing here, watching her work the room, something shifts inside me. This isn't just about appeasing my mother anymore. When Monica laughs at someone's joke, I find myself studying the curve of her neck. When she talks about food, I'm captivated by the passion in her voice.

"Your girl's quite the catch," George Preston mutters, appearing at my elbow with a fresh scotch. "Nothing like that vapid bunch you used to date."

I take a slow sip of my drink, unable to argue. Monica isn't like anyone I've dated before. She's real. Authentic. The kind of woman who can discuss million-dollar business deals one minute and argue about the best way to caramelize onions the next.

Fuck. This is dangerous territory. We have rules, boundaries. This arrangement is supposed to be simple - mutually beneficial and nothing more. But watching her tonight, I'm starting to wonder if I've already crossed a line I can't uncross.

Once the night comes to a close, I guide Monica toward the coat check, our hands still linked. The warmth of her palm against mine has become familiar over these past few days, and that's part of the problem. Everything about this arrangement is starting to feel too comfortable, too real.

"Your mother outdid herself tonight." Monica accepts her wrap from the attendant. "I've never seen so many different types of caviar in one place."

"Trust me, that's restraint for her. You should see what she does for Christmas."

The joke falls flat as I realize I'm already thinking about future events, planning ahead like we'll still be doing this song and dance far into the future. Like this isn't temporary.

We step out into the cool night air. The valets scramble to retrieve my car, but I'm in no rush to end the evening. Monica's perfume drifts on the breeze - something subtle and spicy that makes me want to lean closer.

"You were incredible in there." I turn to face her. "Even had old Russo eating out of your hand."

"Please. That was all about the wine knowledge. Though I think your mother's friend Mrs. Cheney actually wants to hire me as her personal chef."

"Don't you dare. She'd never let you leave."

Monica laughs, and the sound hits me right in the chest. When did her laugh start affecting me like this? When did I start counting the hours between our "appearances" together? This was supposed to be simple - show up at events, play the happy couple, keep my mother off my back about settling down. Instead, I find myself watching her when she's not looking, memorizing the way she moves, the expressions that cross her face.

The valet pulls up with my car, and I help Monica into the passenger seat. As I round the hood to the driver's side, reality crashes down. We're not just fooling my mother and her social circle anymore. I'm fooling myself if I think I can keep treating this like a business arrangement when every touch, every shared laugh, every goddamn moment pulls me deeper into something I never planned for.

The smart move would be to end it now, before either of us gets hurt. But as I slide behind the wheel and catch her smile in the dim light, I know I'm already past that point.

13

MONICA

After ducking through three alleyways and taking a deliberately confusing route, we've finally lost the persistent paparazzi who'd camped outside the restaurant for us. I knew getting fake-engaged with Henry was going to be crazy, but some of this stuff still manages to take my breath away.

"That was some quick thinking back there." Henry's shoulder brushes against mine as we walk, sending a warm tingle down my arm. "Using the kitchen exit."

"Occupational hazard. You learn all the escape routes when you work in restaurants." I toss my hair over my shoulder with a grin. "That, and how to dodge drunk customers on New Year's Eve."

The streetlights cast a warm glow across Henry's features, softening the sharp angles of his jaw. He runs a hand through his dark hair before sinking it into his pocket. I try not to stare at how the light catches in those blue eyes of his. This is fake, remember? Just business.

"Speaking of occupational hazards..." Henry pauses at a crosswalk, his tall frame casting a long shadow across the pavement. He hits the pedestrian button with his knuckle and turns to me with a mischievous smile. "Did I ever tell you about the time I nearly got fired from my first job in Europe?"

"No way. Mr. Perfect Businessman almost got fired?"

"Perfect?" He laughs, a deep sound that reverberates through the empty street. "My father had the same misconception when he was still alive. He wanted me to take over the family business straight out of college. Instead, I fucked off to Europe for four years."

The raw honesty in his voice makes me turn to study his face again. His blue eyes are distant, focused on some memory.

"My mother called every day for the first month. Said I was throwing away my legacy, my responsibility." He kicks a stray pebble. "But that job? Working my way up from nothing? First time I felt like my own person."

"What happened?"

"I accidentally sent an email criticizing our biggest client's taste to the client himself instead of my coworker." His lips quirk up. "Turned out the client appreciated my honesty. Became one of our strongest partnerships."

We turn down a quieter street lined with trees. Their leaves rustle overhead, creating dancing shadows on the pavement.

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"Sometimes I wonder if I'm still that same rebellious kid, you know?" Henry's voice drops lower. "This whole arrangement with us... it's partly to get my mother off my back about settling down. I'm sure you've figured that out by now, seeing the way she acts. She's had my whole life planned since I was born. Marriage, kids, taking over the company..."

The vulnerability in his admission catches me off guard. This isn't the confident, charming Henry I'm used to seeing. This is someone raw and real, fighting against golden handcuffs most people would kill for.

I reach for his hand without thinking, giving it a gentle squeeze. His fingers intertwine with mine, warm and steady.

"Sometimes the hardest expectations to break are the ones from the people who love us," I say softly.

The streetlight above us flickers, casting alternating shadows across Henry's face. We've stopped walking, though I can't remember who stopped first. His hand is still in mine, thumb tracing small circles against my skin.

"Monica." The way he says my name shoots electricity down my spine. He takes a step closer, and I catch the faint scent of his cologne mixed with the crisp nighttime air.

My heart pounds against my ribs. This isn't part of our arrangement. This isn't what we agreed to. But when he lifts his free hand to cup my cheek, I lean into his touch.

"Tell me if you want me to stop," Henry whispers, his breath warm against my lips.

I should say something. Should step back. Should remember all the reasons this is a terrible idea. Instead, I rise on my tiptoes and close the distance between us.

His lips are soft, questioning at first. Then his hand slides to the back of my neck, pulling me closer as the kiss deepens. My fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt, and for a moment, everything else fades away - the fake engagement, the press, our complicated lives.

Benjamin's face flashes through my mind like a bucket of ice water. The last time I let myself fall this hard, I ended up shattered. The memory of his manipulative words, his subtle put-downs, hits me full force.

I pull back, my breath coming in short gasps. Henry's eyes open slowly, concern replacing the heat in his gaze.

"I'm sorry," I manage, taking a small step backward. My hand trembles as I touch my lips. "I just... I can't..."

"Hey." Henry's voice is gentle. He doesn't try to close the distance between us. "You don't have to explain. We can take this as slow as you need."

The understanding in his tone makes my chest ache. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to rebuild the walls that his kiss just crumbled.

"It's not you," I say. "I just have some... history I'm still working through."

"It's alright." Henry's voice stays steady, grounding. "Let's get you home."

We walk in comfortable silence, our footsteps echoing off brownstones. The earlier

kiss lingers between us - not awkward, just... present. Like a door that's been cracked open.

"Actually," Henry clears his throat as we approach his building. "I wanted to show you something."

The doorman tips his hat as we enter the marble lobby. Henry guides me to the elevator, pressing the button for the fifteenth floor instead of his penthouse.

"So, I've been thinking about our arrangement," he says as we ascend. "The press will expect us to live together, being engaged and all. But I know you value your independence."

The elevator doors open to reveal a pristine hallway with only two doors.

"I bought out this entire floor." Henry pulls out a key ring. "This side will be yours - if you want it. Complete privacy, separate entrance, your own kitchen. The press gets their story, you get your space."

He unlocks the door, revealing a stunning apartment with vast windows overlooking the city. The kitchen gleams with professional-grade appliances that make my chef's heart skip.

"Henry, this is..." My throat tightens. The gesture is thoughtful, considerate - everything Benjamin wasn't.

Benjamin would have used living together as another way to control me, to know my every move. But here's Henry, offering me freedom within the constraints of our arrangement.

"You don't have to decide now. You don't even have to give up your old space if you

don't want to." Henry leans against the doorframe, hands in his pockets. "Just think about it. No rush."

I run my fingers along the cool marble countertop, memories flooding back. Benjamin criticizing my cooking, hovering over my shoulder while I worked. Making me doubt every recipe, every technique I'd perfected over years of training. The way he'd slowly chipped away at my confidence until I barely recognized myself in the kitchen that used to be my sanctuary.

But that kiss with Henry earlier today... it felt different. Safe. Electric, but not threatening. Like maybe not every connection has to end in destruction. Like maybe I could actually breathe around someone instead of constantly watching for landmines.

"Thank you," I manage, turning back to Henry, trying to swallow the lump in my throat. "For understanding. For not pushing."

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His smile reaches his eyes, patient and warm. No pressure, no manipulation, no hidden agenda I'll discover later when it's too late. Just possibility. And damn if that isn't the most terrifying and exhilarating thing I've felt in years.

14

HENRY

The crystal chandeliers cast a warm glow across Mother's dining room as scattered conversations fill the air. She's always hosting these damn dinner parties, forcing Monica and I to attend. At least Monica is always a good sport about it, saying it'll be good for our image as a couple.

Monica sits beside me, her fingers occasionally brushing against mine beneath the pristine white tablecloth. The contact sends a jolt through me each time, a welcome distraction from these insufferable circumstances. I catch Margaret Wellington's narrowed gaze from across the table, her lips pursed as she studies our every interaction like a hawk watching prey. Damn vultures, all of them.

"Such a whirlwind romance," Margaret comments, cutting into her beef tenderloin with surgical precision. "I don't recall seeing you two together at any events before the engagement announcement."

"The best things in life catch us by surprise." I rest my hand on Monica's lower back, drawing her closer to me. Her warmth against my palm feels more real than anything else in this room full of fake smiles and calculated conversations.

"Quite." Margaret's smile doesn't reach her eyes, cold as the diamonds hanging from her ears. "Though one might wonder if proper consideration was given to... compatibility."

The implied criticism in her tone makes my jaw clench. These people and their fucking judgments. A few seats down, Richard Prescott nods in agreement, while his wife Jessalyn whispers something in his ear, both stealing glances our way. I've known these people my entire life, yet they're strangers when it comes to what matters.

Monica's shoulders tense beneath my touch. She pushes food around her plate, her earlier vibrant energy dimming under their scrutiny.

"I hear you're planning on opening a restaurant one day, Monica?" Catherine calls out, her voice dripping with false sweetness. "Quite ambitious. The Blackwoods have always been more... traditional in their pursuits."

Before Monica can respond, I lean forward. "And that's exactly what drew me to her. Innovation, talent, drive - qualities any sensible person would recognize as invaluable."

"Henry," Monica whispers, her hand finding mine under the table.

"The restaurant industry is rather volatile," Richard chimes in. "Wouldn't want anything to reflect poorly on the family name."

"The only poor reflection here is judging someone's worth by outdated standards." My voice carries across the table, silencing nearby conversations. "Monica's success in the culinary world speaks for itself. Anyone questioning our relationship might want to examine their own prejudices instead."

Monica squeezes my hand, and I feel her relax slightly against me. The protective surge I feel watching her navigate these sharks in designer clothing surprises me. This might be pretend, but I'll be damned if I let anyone make her feel less than extraordinary.

I push my chair back, the legs scraping against hardwood. "Monica, would you care to join me in the gardens? I could use some fresh air."

"Of course." The relief in her voice is subtle but unmistakable.

I snag two flutes of champagne from a passing server, and we slip through the French doors into the cool evening air. The stone path winds through perfectly manicured hedges and flower beds - another testament to Mother's obsession with appearances.

Monica's curls catch the glow of the garden lights as we find a secluded spot near the small water fountain. "Thank you for what you said in there. But maybe dial back the intensity? Those are your mother's friends after all."

"Fuck 'em." I hand her a glass. "They can all go kick rocks for all I care. Been dealing with their bullshit my whole life."

Her laugh rings out, genuine and unrestrained. It hits different out here, away from the suffocating politeness inside. "You're terrible." She bumps her shoulder against mine. "But I appreciate having someone in my corner."

"They don't know shit about you or what you're capable of." I take a sip of champagne. "Twenty bucks says half of them couldn't boil water without burning it."

"Now that's not fair." Her eyes sparkle with mischief. "I'm sure they have very qualified personal chefs to do that for them."

We share another laugh, and something shifts in the air between us. Out here, away from the performance, it feels easier to breathe. To be real.

"You know what's funny?" Monica swirls her champagne. "I was kind of dreading tonight, but somehow you make these things bearable. We've been going to these events back-to-back-to-back and it gets so tiring at times. I don't know how your mother does it."

"Just bearable? I'm wounded. Here I thought I was the highlight of your evening."

"Don't push it, Blackwood." But she's smiling, and for a moment I forget this is all supposed to be pretend.

Monica falls quiet, her fingers tracing the rim of her champagne glass. The fountain's gentle trickle fills the silence between us. "How do you think things will change? When we actually get married, I mean."

I turn to face her, studying the way the garden lights catch in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

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"Well, you want to do this quick - get married, use the honeymoon as an escape from all..." She gestures toward the house. "This. But being a chef isn't exactly a nine-to-five job. The hours are brutal, unpredictable. Not exactly fitting for a Blackwood wife, according to that crowd in there."

"Hey." I set my glass down on the fountain's edge. "I don't give a shit what they think a 'Blackwood wife' should be. You're a chef. A damn good one. That's who you are."

"Henry-"

"No, listen. I've tasted your food. I've seen how you light up talking about new recipes, about your vision for your restaurant. Anyone trying to take that away from you can go fuck themselves."

Her lips quirk up. "Even your mother?"

"Especially my mother." I run a hand through my hair. "Look, this whole thing might be complicated, but I won't let it derail your career. I want to see you succeed. I mean that."

Monica's smile softens, genuine warmth replacing her earlier uncertainty. "Thank you. That... means a lot."

"You know," I say, trailing my thumb across my lip to wipe away the excess champagne. "Being Mrs. Henry Blackwood comes with some serious perks. Private jets, connections to the best suppliers, prime real estate opportunities. Hell, you wouldn't even need to work those crazy hours if you didn't want to."

Monica's laugh echoes through the garden. "Right, because I'd love nothing more than to join the ladies-who-lunch crowd in there." She gestures toward the penthouse. "My eyes are on the prize, Henry. I've worked too hard to build my reputation in this industry. That future restaurant? The expanded catering business? That's my dream. I'm not giving it up now."

"Good." I can't help but smile at her determination. The way her eyes light up when she talks about her ambitions - it's magnetic. "I don't want you to give it up. Ever."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "No offense, but I half expected you to be like the rest of them in there. You know, expecting your wife to host dinner parties and attend charity galas."

"Please. I've had enough of that shit to last ten lifetimes." I take another sip of champagne. "Watching you crush their expectations is way more entertaining."

"Even if it means making you the talk of the party?" she asks. "People like them have a certain expectation on how life is meant to be lived, and you're breaking all the molds."

"I've done that my entire life," I reply easily. "Doing it one more time isn't going to hurt me."

15

MONICA

My hands tremble as I stand before the altar, facing Henry in his impeccable black tuxedo. The church stretches behind him, packed with New York's biggest players - his family's social circle, business associates, and what feels like half of Manhattan's upper crust.

Despite his mother's objections, we've decided to get married around a month into this fake engagement. And with his level of wealth, we managed to pull together quite a beautiful ceremony in a limited amount of time. It's impressive, but I can't even relish in the moment. Not with so many unfamiliar eyes on us.

I catch Olivia's encouraging smile from her spot in the front pew. She sits next to Leo, their little boy squirming restlessly in his tiny suit between them, tugging at his bow tie. At least I have two friendly faces in this sea of strangers who are sizing me up with calculating eyes, probably wondering how a chef managed to snag one of New York's most eligible bachelors.

"You okay?" Henry whispers, his piercing blue eyes searching mine as the minister drones on about sacred unions and eternal love. The irony isn't lost on me. This whole ceremony, beautiful as it is with cascading white flowers and flickering candles, is built on a foundation of deception.

My voice catches in my throat, heart hammering against my ribs. "I don't know if I can..."

Henry's thumb traces small circles on my palm, the gesture hidden from our audience. His touch is surprisingly calming, grounding me when I feel like I might float away on a tide of panic. "Focus on me. Just us here," he murmurs, his breath warm against my ear.

The minister turns to Henry, his voice echoing through the vaulted ceiling. "Do you, Henry Alexander Blackwood, take Monica Elizabeth West to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." His voice rings clear and confident through the church, steady where mine threatens to shake apart. There's something in the way he says those two simple words—a conviction that makes my stomach flip despite knowing better.

"And do you, Monica Elizabeth West, take Henry Alexander Blackwood to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

My throat tightens. The weight of hundreds of eyes bears down on me. This is crazy. This whole scheme is insane. We can't possibly-

Henry squeezes my hand, drawing my attention back to him. He gives me that crooked smile, the one that makes his eyes crinkle at the corners. The one that's become as familiar as my own reflection these past months.

"I do." The words come out stronger than I expect.

"The rings, please?"

Henry slides the diamond encrusted band onto my finger. His hands are warm, sure, grounding me in this moment. When it's my turn, I manage to get his ring on without dropping it, though my fingers still tremble.

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"By the power vested in me, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Henry cups my face with gentle hands, and I catch a glimpse of something unreadable in his eyes before he leans in. His lips meet mine in a kiss that's soft, sweet, and entirely too convincing for something that's supposed to be fake.

Henry's lips leave mine, and my heart thunders against my ribs as we turn to face the crowd. His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining as we raise our joined hands. The applause thunders through the church, echoing off marble columns and stained glass.

"Ready, Mrs. Blackwood?" Henry's whisper tickles my ear.

I manage a nod, and he guides me down the aisle. Rose petals scatter beneath our feet as we make our way past rows and rows of people. My wedding dress swishes against the carpet, the train trailing behind us like seafoam.

The air hits my warm face as we exit the church. A sleek black limousine idles at the curb, its chrome fixtures gleaming in the afternoon sun. Henry opens the door, helping me gather my dress before I slide inside. The leather seat is cool against my bare shoulders.

Henry settles next to me, loosening his bow tie with a frustrated tug. "Finally. Thought we'd never get through that." His voice carries that hint of rebellion I've come to recognize when he's been forced to perform for high society.

"What's the plan now?" I smooth invisible wrinkles from my dress, feeling the

expensive fabric beneath my fingertips. "For the next two weeks, I mean."

"Think we should lay low. Let the dust settle." He reaches for a bottle of champagne nestled in ice, his strong hands working the foil with practiced ease. "Mother's friends will be watching our every move." The way he says it makes it sound like we're being hunted. And in a way, we are. The paparazzi will be ruthless in getting any angle they can of the newlywed Blackwood couple.

"I still want to cook though." The thought of two weeks away from working makes my skin itch and my fingers twitch. "I need to—" Creating dishes is my therapy, my escape, my everything.

"Your penthouse has a professional-grade kitchen," Henry interrupts, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. He pours two flutes of champagne, the bubbles racing to the surface. "You can cook whatever you want, whenever you want. Consider it yours."

"Really?" I can't keep the excitement from my voice. A professional kitchen all to myself—no line cooks, no rush orders, just pure culinary freedom.

"Really." He hands me a glass, our fingers brushing in a way that sends electricity up my arm. "Though I expect to be your official taste-tester." His smile is dangerous, promising, and makes me wonder just how much of this marriage is still pretend.

The limo glides through Manhattan traffic, carrying us toward our new shared life. Even if it's temporary, even if it's fake, something warm unfurls in my chest at the thought of cooking in that kitchen. Of having a space that's mine, even if just for pretend.

"Just remember," Henry says, swirling the champagne in his glass, "this only needs to last a year. Maybe a bit longer to make it look legitimate." His voice softens. "Then you'll be free to pursue whatever you want. Open that restaurant you've been

dreaming about."

The leather seat creaks as he shifts to face me, his knee brushing against my dress.

"I know this isn't ideal. Playing house, dealing with my mother's social circle..." He takes my hand, his thumb tracing over my new ring. The weight of it still feels foreign, like it belongs to someone else's life. "Thank you, Monica. For doing this. For helping me out of an impossible situation."

I look up at him - at the sharp line of his jaw, those ocean-deep eyes, the way his dark hair falls just so across his forehead. My heart does a stupid little flip in my chest. Damn it. This is business, I remind myself. Just an arrangement between two adults with mutual goals.

"It's fine," I manage, trying to ignore how warm his hand feels against mine, how his touch sends tiny electric currents racing up my arm. "Besides, I get a professional kitchen out of the deal." I attempt a light tone, but my voice comes out breathier than intended. I clear my throat, attempting to regain my composure. "Sub-zero fridge, six-burner stove... that's worth playing fake wife for a year."

His smile - that devastating, crooked smile - makes my stomach tighten. There's something dangerous about the way his lips curve up at one corner, something that makes me forget all the reasons this is strictly business.

"And I get the best chef in New York cooking just for me. I'd say that's a win-win." His voice drops lower, more intimate, as his fingers continue their maddening pattern against my skin.

I lean against the kitchen counter, mesmerized by Monica's fluid movements as she navigates her workspace. Three pots simmer on the stove while she chops vegetables with lightning precision. The aroma of herbs and spices fills the air, making my mouth water.

"You know you don't have to cook enough for an army, right?" I watch her add more ingredients to an already overflowing pot.

"Force of habit." Monica's knife hits the cutting board in quick succession. "In professional kitchens, we're used to large quantities."

But there's tension in her shoulders, and her movements are more rigid than usual. Something's off.

"Hey." I move closer, careful not to disturb her workflow. "What's going on in that head of yours?"

The knife pauses mid-chop. Monica sets it down and grips the edge of the counter. "This whole situation... it's more complicated than I expected."

"The marriage thing?"

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"Yeah." She wipes her hands on her apron. "Your mother called this morning. She wants us to attend some charity gala next week. And yesterday, my old sous chef asked about wedding photos for social media." Her voice rises slightly. "I didn't think we'd have to keep up appearances outside your family circle."

"Fuck what anyone else thinks." I turn her around to face me. "We don't owe explanations to anyone."

"Easy for you to say. You've lived in this world your whole life." Monica gestures at the penthouse around us. "I'm still learning how to be Mrs. Blackwood without tripping over my own feet."

"You're doing fine. Better than fine." I catch her restless hands in mine. "Stop overthinking it. We'll handle each situation as it comes."

"But-"

"No buts. You're already juggling enough with your restaurant plans. Let me worry about the social circus."

Some of the tension leaves her face. "You make it sound so simple."

"Because it is. Now, what exactly are you cooking? It smells incredible."

Monica's smile returns as she stirs one of the pots. "I'm making coq au vin. It's a French dish - chicken braised in wine with mushrooms and pearl onions. Plus some roasted root vegetables on the side."

"Fancy." I lean against the counter, watching her work. "Any special occasion?"

"Just felt like cooking something that takes time." She adjusts the heat under one of the pots. "It's therapeutic, you know? Lets me think."

The kitchen falls quiet except for the gentle bubbling of the cooking food. I take a deep breath, deciding now's as good a time as any for what's been on my mind.

"Listen, about this whole arrangement..."

Monica freezes for a split second before resuming her stirring. "What about it?"

"I want you to know I'm committed to making this work. The fake marriage, the public appearances, all of it."

"Henry, you don't have to-"

"I know I don't have to." I move closer, careful not to crowd her workspace. "But I want to. We've come this far, and honestly? We make a pretty good team."

She sets down her wooden spoon and turns to face me. "The press does seem to love us."

"They eat up every photo op. It's ridiculous." I lean against the counter, watching her work. "That piece in the Times about the 'whirlwind romance between the business heir and the rising culinary star' got more shares than any of our company's press releases this year. My PR team is actually jealous."

"It's all smoke and mirrors though." Monica crosses her arms, her expression turning serious. "You sure you want to keep this up? It's a lot to maintain."

"Absolutely." I don't hesitate with my answer. "Besides, who else would cook me fancy French chicken? My culinary skills stop at microwave dinners and takeout."

A laugh escapes her, breaking the tension. "Is that all I'm good for? Feeding the great Henry Blackwood?"

"That and keeping my mother off my back about settling down. The woman was relentless before you came along." I give her a wink. "I'd say you're invaluable, Mrs. Blackwood. Best fake wife a man could ask for."

Monica's smile fades as she turns back to the stove, her movements becoming mechanical. I've noticed these shifts more lately - moments where she retreats into herself, her usual warmth dimming.

"You okay?" I step closer, giving her space but staying within reach.

She stirs the pot with more force than necessary. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"My old life." She sets the spoon down. "I had an ex-boyfriend named Benjamin. I think I've told you a bit about him before. And he used to tell me I'd never make it as head chef. Said I was too 'emotional' in the kitchen." Her fingers trace along the edge of the counter. "He'd critique everything - my techniques, my plating, even how I held my knife."

My jaw clenches. "Sounds like a real piece of work."

"That's putting it mildly." Monica's voice drops. "He'd wait until we were alone, then pick apart every decision I made. If I got excited about a new recipe, he'd laugh and say I was being naive. When I talked about opening my own place someday, he'd

remind me how many restaurants fail in their first year."

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Heat rises in my chest. "Did he ever-"

"No, nothing physical." She shakes her head. "Just... constant criticism. Little digs that made me doubt myself. I started second-guessing everything, wondering if maybe he was right."

"He wasn't." The words come out sharper than intended.

"I know that now." Monica adjusts the temperature on one of the burners. "Haven't heard from him in a while, thank God. Last I knew, he took a job at some corporate restaurant chain in Jersey."

"Good. Let him stay there." I resist the urge to find out which chain. "You deserve better than that bullshit."

She gives me a small smile. "It's fine. I'm fine. Just sometimes these memories..." She gestures vaguely. "They sneak up on me."

I want to say more, do more, but I recognize that look in her eyes - she's done talking about it for now. Instead, I reach past her to grab two wine glasses from the cabinet.

"How about we open that bottle of Bordeaux? Since you're making fancy French chicken and all."

Her shoulders relax slightly. "That sounds perfect."

I pour two generous glasses of the Bordeaux, handing one to Monica. The deep red

liquid catches the kitchen's warm lighting.

"To us." I raise my glass. "And our mutually beneficial arrangement."

Monica clinks her glass against mine. "To fooling all of New York's elite." She takes a sip, her eyes widening. "This is incredible."

"It should be. Cost more than my first car." I lean back, watching her return to the stove. The way she moves through the kitchen, confident and focused, reminds me how far she's come from that controlling ex of hers.

My mother's getting off my back about marriage is one thing, but Monica's dreams? Those are tangible. Real. The restaurant space in SoHo I've been eyeing would be perfect for her vision - exposed brick walls, high ceilings, that industrial-chic vibe that's so hot right now. And with my connections to the right investors...

"What's that look for?" Monica stirs the coq au vin, eyebrow raised.

"Just thinking about some business opportunities." I take another sip. "You know, being Mrs. Blackwood opens a lot of doors in the restaurant world."

"Henry-"

"I'm serious. You've got the talent. The vision. Now you've got the name recognition too." I set my glass down. "Let me introduce you to some people. Real estate developers, restaurant groups, private investors. No strings attached."

Monica pauses, wooden spoon hovering over the pot. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to. Consider it my way of saying thanks for keeping my mother's marriage crusade at bay." I move closer, inhaling the rich aroma of wine and herbs. "Plus, I get

to be the first investor in what's going to be New York's next big restaurant. It's just good business."

A smile tugs at her lips. "You're impossible, you know that?"

"Impossibly helpful, maybe." I refill our glasses. "To your future restaurant empire."

This time when we toast, her smile reaches her eyes.

17

MONICA

The hustle and bustle of Wilson's Market encapsulates me as I stand in the produce section, scanning the fresh herbs. Tonight's dinner needs to be perfect - I want to show Henry my gratitude for everything he's done so far. He's secured a business meeting with restaurant investors, people who are genuinely interested in hearing my vision. And when he told me the news, the smile that radiated off his face was so beautiful. So genuine.

He's such an attractive man, that fake husband of mine. With his blue eyes and somewhat messy hair and muscled body that I've tried not to think too long about.

My fingers brush over the fragrant basil leaves while I picture his face lighting up at the first bite of my signature pasta dish. But then, a flash of movement catches my eye three aisles over. My hand freezes mid-reach. That particular way of walking, the slight hunch of those shoulders...

No. I'm being paranoid. Benjamin is probably nowhere near this neighborhood. I force myself to focus on selecting the ripest tomatoes, but my hands shake as I place them in the cart.

Another glimpse. This time it's the back of his head - that same messy brown hair. My heart pounds against my ribs. The shopping cart suddenly feels like my only anchor to reality.

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"Just coincidence," I whisper to myself, but my feet won't move. I should finish shopping. I should act normal. Instead, I find myself tracking his movements through gaps in the shelving.

The figure turns down my aisle and my blood runs cold. Those warm brown eyes I once found so charming lock onto mine. Benjamin. Here. Now.

My fingers grip the cart handle until my knuckles ache. The exit feels miles away. The other shoppers fade into blurs of color and movement.

The ghost of his last words to me echoes in my head: "You'll never do better than me, Monica."

But I did do better. I have Henry now. The thought of Henry steadies me for a moment, but Benjamin takes a step in my direction and panic claws up my throat.

"Monica?" His voice carries that same false sweetness that used to make me doubt everything I knew. "What a surprise seeing you here."

My legs won't move. My voice won't work. All I can do is stand there, frozen, as he closes the distance between us with that smile that always meant trouble. Swallowing down the knot in my throat, I manage a forced smile as I try to look for the nearest exit.

"Benjamin, it's... It's been a while." I force my voice to stay steady, professional. But my heart hammers so hard I worry the other shoppers can hear it. My palms are sweating, leaving damp prints on the shopping cart handle.

"Too long." Benjamin steps closer, that familiar cologne hitting my nose—the same scent that used to make me feel safe before it became a warning sign. "You look good. Success suits you."

I grip my cart tighter, using it as a barrier between us. The metal digs into my fingers. "Thank you. I should get going..."

"Come on, Mo. We used to talk for hours." His pet name for me feels like acid on my skin. No one calls me that anymore—I made sure of it after we split. "I've been following your career since we split, y'know. Saw that write-up about your new menu concepts. Pretty impressive stuff."

"I appreciate that." My words come out clipped, robotic. Every cell in my body is screaming at me to run, but my feet remain rooted to the floor. Years of therapy, and I still freeze when he's near.

"Though I gotta say, some of those dishes?" He clicks his tongue. "Bit ambitious. Remember when you tried that soufflé at my place? Total disaster." He laughs, but the memory stings - how he'd mocked my attempts at branching out, always pushing me to stick to "simple" cooking.

"I've grown since then." I start to push my cart forward, but he shifts to block my path.

"Speaking of growth - marriage, huh? Henry Blackwood." The way he says Henry's name makes my skin crawl. "Quite the upgrade from your humble beginnings with me. Though I miss those beginnings, you know? Just us in that tiny kitchen, making basic pasta dishes. You were happier then, weren't you? More... yourself?"

"I need to go."

"We had something real, Monica. None of this fancy pretense." His fingers brush my cart handle, too close to my tight grip. "I've been thinking about us lately. About how good we were together, before you got all these grand ideas in your head. Maybe we could grab coffee? For old times' sake?"

My throat constricts as memories flood back - nights spent doubting my own judgment, mornings waking up to criticism masked as concern. The lights of Wilson's Market suddenly feel too bright, too exposing.

"Benjamin, I'm not interested in coffee." The words come out stronger than I feel. "Or catching up. Or anything else."

"Still so defensive." He steps closer, his cologne overwhelming. It makes me want to gag. "You always did get worked up over nothing. Remember how I'd help calm you down? Get you thinking straight again?"

My hands shake. That's what he'd always say when I tried standing up for myself - that I was overreacting, being dramatic. And I'd believed him. For years, I'd believed him.

"I'm thinking perfectly straight." I force myself to meet his gaze. "I'm married now. Happy. Successful."

"Are you?" His voice drops lower, honeyed with false concern. "Because from what I hear, this marriage was pretty... sudden. Almost like it wasn't real."

Ice shoots through my veins. How could he know? No, he's fishing. That's what he does - throws out hints and watches for reactions.

"You always did rush into things, Mo." He reaches for my arm. "Remember that time you wanted to open your own food truck? Had to talk you down from that disaster."

I jerk away from his touch. "That wasn't talking me down. That was controlling me. Making me doubt myself."

"I was protecting you." His eyes narrow slightly - that familiar look that used to precede his worst moments. "You needed guidance. Structure. Someone to keep you grounded."

"No." The word comes out sharp, cutting through his manipulation. "What I needed was support. What I got was abuse."

He flinches at the word, but I'm done sugar-coating it. Done playing nice.

"I'm Mrs. Blackwood now." I grip my cart handle tighter, drawing strength from the diamond band on my finger - even if it represents a fake marriage, it represents my choice. My freedom. "And I need you to leave me alone."

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I push my cart forward, forcing Benjamin to step aside or get hit. My legs feel like jelly but I force them to move, to carry me away from him. The produce section blurs past as I abandon my shopping, heading straight for the exit.

"Monica, wait!" His voice carries through the store.

My pace quickens. The wheels of my cart squeak against the linoleum floor as I weave between other shoppers. I don't dare look back to see if he's following. The memory of his controlling behavior, his manipulation, crashes over me in waves.

The automatic doors can't open fast enough. I burst into the parking lot, the evening air hitting my face. My hands tremble as I fumble for my keys. Where did I park? Everything looks different now, warped by panic.

Row C. Spot 42. I remember now.

I practically run to my car. I slide into the driver's seat and lock the doors. Only then do I allow myself to look around.

No sign of Benjamin. But that doesn't stop my heart from racing or my breath from coming in short gasps. I grip the steering wheel, trying to ground myself.

How did he find me? The market isn't even in his usual neighborhood. The coincidence feels too convenient, especially with his comments about my marriage to Henry.

I start the engine with shaking hands. The familiar purr does nothing to calm my

nerves. I'm safe now, I know I am, but my body is still taking a moment to catch up. As I pull out of the parking spot, my eyes dart between mirrors, checking every angle. No one follows me out of the lot, but the dread in my stomach remains.

The pasta dinner I'd planned for Henry will have to wait. Right now, I just need to get home. Need to feel safe again. But Benjamin's words echo in my head, poisoning what should have been a simple grocery run with doubt and fear.

18

HENRY

I rip off my tie as I step out of the elevator onto Monica's floor, my briefcase heavy after a long day of meetings. The scent of her cooking usually greets me, but tonight the penthouse is silent and dark. Strange.

"Monica?" My voice echoes through the space as I set down my briefcase and shrug off my suit jacket.

A shape moves on the couch, backlit by the city lights streaming through the windows. Monica sits curled up, a wine glass dangling from her fingers.

"Hey." Her voice comes out soft, distant.

I cross the room and crouch beside her. "What's going on? Why are you sitting here in the dark?"

"Just thinking." She takes another sip of wine. "How were the meetings?"

"Fuck the meetings." I reach for the lamp but she catches my wrist.

"Don't. I like it dark right now."

The city twinkles behind her like scattered diamonds, but her expression remains hidden in shadow. My chest tightens. This isn't like her at all - Monica's usually a force of nature, filling every room with her energy.

"Talk to me." I settle onto the couch beside her. "What's got you drinking alone in the dark?"

"Nothing really. Just one of those days, you know?" She swirls the wine in her glass. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm actually good enough for any of this."

"Any of what?"

"This life. Being Mrs. Blackwood. Running my own restaurant." She lets out a hollow laugh. "Sometimes I feel like I'm just playing pretend and eventually everyone's going to figure it out."

I shift closer, my arm brushing against hers. The vulnerability in her voice hits me like a punch to the gut. "Monica..." I lower myself down to her level, kneeling down next to her. "What happened? Something has you acting this way and I want to know what."

Monica draws a shaky breath. "I wanted to make you that pasta dish you mentioned last week. The one with the fresh herbs and cherry tomatoes."

My heart clenches at the tremor in her voice.

"But when I got to the store..." She sets down her wine glass with an unsteady hand. "Benjamin was there. He just...appeared in the produce section while I was picking out some ingredients."

My jaw tightens at his name. That fucking piece of shit.

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"He started talking about how much he missed me, how we should try again." Her voice cracks. "And he said a bunch of other things, trying to make me reminisce about the past. But I was so frozen and scared..."

My fingers dig into my thighs as I fight to keep my expression neutral, but inside I'm seething. The thought of him anywhere near her makes me want to hunt him down.

"I just... couldn't move. Or think." Monica wraps her arms around herself. "Like I was that same scared girl again. Then I just... left everything there and ran." A sob escapes her. "God, I hate that he still has this power over me."

"Come here." I pull her into my arms, and she collapses against my chest. Her tears soak through my shirt as I hold her close, one hand stroking her back while the other cradles her head.

"I've got you," I murmur into her hair. The need to protect her, to shield her from everything that's hurt her, surges through me. But beneath that protective instinct burns something darker - a possessive rage I've never felt before. The idea of Benjamin trying to worm his way back into her life makes me want to tear him apart.

Monica's fingers clutch my shirt as she cries, and I tighten my hold on her. I won't let that bastard anywhere near her again.

"Let me handle Benjamin." I pull back just enough to look at her face, though the darkness still masks her features. "One conversation with me and he'll never bother you again."

Monica stiffens in my arms. "No. Please, Henry." Her hand grips my forearm. "You don't know what he's capable of. He's ruthless when he feels threatened."

I bite back a harsh laugh. If she only knew the things I'm capable of, the connections I have. Benjamin would be nothing more than an inconvenient memory. But her fear is real, and the last thing she needs is more conflict in her life.

"Okay." I brush my thumb across her cheek, wiping away tears. "We'll stay clear of him. But you're not alone in this anymore."

"Thank you." She exhales, her body relaxing against mine.

"And forget about cooking tonight. That pasta dish can wait." I reach for my phone. "Let me order in. What sounds good?"

"You don't have to-"

"I want to." I scroll through my contacts. "How about that Ethiopian place you love? We could get the whole spread - injera, doro wat, all of it. And that spicy lentil dish you always finish before I get a bite."

A small laugh escapes her. "Misir wat."

"That's the one." I press a kiss to her temple. "Plus some of those honey wine cocktails they do. And sambusas. You can never have too many sambusas."

"That... actually sounds perfect."

I make the call, ordering enough food to feed a small army. When I hang up, Monica's curled closer, her head resting on my shoulder. The tension from earlier has begun to fade from her muscles.

After I'm done placing the order, I set my phone down on the coffee table, settling back into the cushions. Monica shifts with me, staying close, her head still resting against my shoulder. The city lights paint abstract patterns across the floor, and her warmth seeps into my side.

I've held countless business meetings, navigated thorny negotiations, dealt with ruthless competitors. But nothing has ever hit me like seeing her break down tonight. The urge to shield her from harm pulses through my veins, fierce and instinctive.

Her breathing has steadied now, matching the slow rise and fall of my chest. One of her curls brushes against my neck, soft as silk. When was the last time I felt this... content? This connected to someone?

Monica lets out a small sigh, her body melting further into mine. My arm tightens around her shoulders reflexively. She's done so much for me - agreed to this whole charade, dealt with my family's expectations, become the kind of friend I never knew I needed. Someone who calls me on my bullshit but still has my back. Someone who makes me laugh without trying.

But there's something else now, something that stirs when she's this close. The delicate scent of her shampoo fills my lungs. Her fingers absently play with a button on my shirt. Each point of contact sends electricity skating across my skin.

Fuck. I shouldn't be thinking about her like this. She's vulnerable right now, dealing with her asshole ex trying to worm his way back in. The last thing she needs is me complicating things by developing... whatever this is.

And yet.

The way she fits against me feels right in a way I can't explain. Like we've done this a thousand times before. Like we could stay here forever, wrapped in darkness and

each other's warmth.

I close my eyes, trying to sort through the tangle of protectiveness and attraction and genuine affection coursing through me. When did this fake marriage start feeling so real?

19

MONICA

The early morning sun barely peeks over the horizon as I make my way down the quiet street toward Taste of Heaven. The familiar route brings a smile to my face - back to my sanctuary of sizzling pans and aromatic spices after taking time off to deal with this whole fake marriage situation.

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My steps falter as I approach the restaurant's entrance. Something's wrong. Shards of glass glitter on the sidewalk like deadly confetti. My heart pounds as I rush forward, keys jingling in my trembling hands.

"No, no, no..." The front window is completely shattered, jagged pieces still clinging to the frame.

I unlock the door with shaking fingers and step inside. The crunch of glass under my shoes echoes through the empty dining room. Red spray paint mars the cream-colored walls - crude words and symbols that make my blood boil.

"Chef?" Luis, one of our line cooks, appears from the kitchen. His face is ashen. "I just got here and found... this."

Ramona, our hostess, emerges from the back, phone pressed to her ear. "Police are on their way. Jesus, look at the display case."

My gaze follows her gesture to the antique cabinet where we showcase our specialty desserts. The glass front is spider-webbed with cracks, pieces missing where someone took what looks like a bat to it. Inside, our carefully crafted pastries lie in ruins.

"Who would do this?" My voice comes out hoarse as I survey the destruction. Years of building this place's reputation, creating a space where people come to celebrate life's moments, and some asshole decides to destroy it in one night.

Emmanuel, our sous chef, kneels by a pile of broken plates. "Found this by the register." He holds up a brick with a paper wrapped around it.

I snatch it from his hands, unfurling the note. My stomach drops as I read the hateful message scrawled in messy handwriting.

The sound of approaching sirens fills the air as I stand amid the wreckage of my workplace, fury and fear warring inside me. This isn't just random vandalism. Someone targeted us specifically.

My hands crumple the note as memories of Benjamin's past outbursts flash through my mind. The way he'd throw things when angry, how he'd leave threatening messages after our breakup. This has his fingerprints all over it - the senseless destruction, the need to hurt what matters to me.

I straighten my spine. Like hell I'm letting him or anyone else destroy what I've built. Over the past few days, Henry has been reassuring me that I'm much stronger than I used to be. And I shouldn't have to tolerate Benjamin's bullshit anymore.

"Alright team, listen up." I face my staff, who gather around with worried expressions. "This is a setback, but we're not staying down. Emmanuel, grab the industrial brooms from storage. Luis, start documenting everything with photos before we clean. Ramona, call our insurance company."

"What about service tonight?" Luis asks.

"We'll make it work. Board up the window, deep clean everything, and adjust the menu to what we can safely prepare. This kitchen's survived worse."

Red and blue lights flash outside as two police cruisers pull up.

"Actually, change of plans. Ramona, Emmanuel - go talk to the officers. Tell them everything you saw when you arrived." I grab a broom from the supply closet. "Luis, help me start on this glass. We need it cleared before customers show up."

The methodical sweep of broken glass helps calm my racing thoughts. Each push of the broom is an act of defiance. I've worked too hard to let fear or intimidation win.

"We should install cameras," Luis suggests as we work. "Maybe motion sensors too."

"Already making a list." I nod toward my phone on the counter where I've been typing notes between sweeping. "Adding reinforced glass for the windows and display cases. Time to upgrade security across the board."

The pile of glittering shards grows as we clean, like a twisted monument to someone's hatred. But with each piece we collect, my resolve strengthens. Benjamin or whoever else might be behind this clearly doesn't know who they're dealing with.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as I'm directing the cleanup crew. Henry's name flashes on the screen, and for a moment, I consider ignoring it. But something in me wants to hear his voice.

"Hey." My voice wavers despite my attempts to sound steady. Damn it. I wanted to sound stronger than this.

"Monica, what's wrong?" The concern in his tone hits me harder than expected. It's immediate and genuine, like he's already prepared to fix whatever's broken.

I move away from the bustling activity, finding a quiet corner near the kitchen where the sound of sweeping glass doesn't overwhelm my words. "Someone vandalized the restaurant last night. Broke windows, destroyed property..." I swallow hard, fighting back the emotion threatening to crack through my professional facade.

"I'm coming over." It's not a question or an offer—it's a statement of fact.

"No, you don't have to—" I start to protest, the independent part of me kicking in

automatically.

"I'm already grabbing my keys. You're my wife now, even if it's just on paper. Let me help." His voice carries a finality that both irritates and comforts me. I should argue, tell him I've got this handled, but the truth is, I don't want to be alone right now.

That one little word lingers with me. Wife. Mrs. Blackwood. It echoes in my mind as I end the call. I've been treating this marriage like a temporary solution, but standing here in my damaged restaurant, those words take on new meaning.

The Blackwood name carries weight in this city. Real estate empires, business connections, old money influence. And now that power is mine to wield, even if temporarily.

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I walk back to the main dining room, my steps more purposeful. The police are taking statements, my staff is working efficiently, and somewhere out there, Benjamin or whoever did this probably thinks they've won. They expect the same Monica who used to shrink away from confrontation, who'd rather hide than fight.

But that Monica is gone.

"Mrs. Blackwood?" One of the officers approaches with his notepad. "We'd like to ask you a few more questions."

I straighten my shoulders, channeling the confidence I've seen Henry display in difficult situations. "Of course, officer. And while we talk, I'd like to know what additional patrols can be arranged for this area. I'm sure the precinct would want to prevent any further incidents at such a prominent establishment."

The officer's demeanor shifts subtly at my tone - more attentive, less routine. This is what Henry meant about carrying yourself with authority, about not letting others diminish your worth.

I may not have been born into power, but I've earned every bit of success in this restaurant. And now, with the Blackwood name backing me, I have the leverage to protect it. Benjamin's tactics might have worked on the old Monica, but Mrs. Blackwood? She's done being intimidated.

I trace my fingers along the rim of my scotch glass, staring at the thick manila folder Detective Martinez just dropped off. The comprehensive dossier on Benjamin Jenson sits heavy in front of me, a testament to what money and connections can accomplish in just a few days.

"Everything you need to know is in there, Mr. Blackwood. Background checks, financial records, employment history, criminal records—if there was dirt to find, I found it."

"Criminal records?" My attention snaps to the detective's weathered face.

"Nothing major yet, but there's a pattern of complaints from previous employers and a restraining order from another ex-girlfriend that was later dropped." Martinez points to specific tabs in the folder. "I've organized it chronologically. Pay special attention to the last few years."

I flip through the pages, my jaw clenching tighter with each revelation. Benjamin's history unfolds like a roadmap of red flags—jobs left under suspicious circumstances, unpaid debts, and a string of toxic relationships.

"This incident here." Martinez leans over, pointing to a police report. "Bar fight three years ago. He claimed self-defense, but witnesses said he was the aggressor. Charges were dropped when the other guy refused to press charges."

The more I read, the clearer the picture becomes. Benjamin isn't just Monica's troubled ex—he's a ticking time bomb. His bank statements show irregular deposits, suggesting under-the-table work. Multiple addresses in the past year hint at instability.

"What about his current whereabouts?"

"That's where it gets interesting." Martinez pulls out recent surveillance photos. "He's been spotted near Taste Of Heaven three times this week alone, always during off-hours. Never goes in, just watches."

My blood runs cold. The timing matches perfectly with the vandalism at Monica's restaurant.

"There's more," Martinez continues. "He's been making calls to several of Taste of Heaven's suppliers. Can't prove he's trying to sabotage anything, but the pattern is there."

I close the folder, my decision already made. "Keep tabs on him. I want to know every move he makes near that restaurant."

Martinez nods, gathering his things. "I'll keep you updated. And Mr. Blackwood? Be careful with this one. Guys like him—they've got nothing to lose."

I memorize Benjamin's current address from the file. East Harlem. A far cry from the polished streets Monica and I frequent, but exactly where I'd expect to find someone like him.

The drive takes twenty minutes. I park my Aston Martin between a rusted Honda missing its bumper and what appears to be an abandoned delivery van. The building looms ahead—a five-story walk-up with graffiti-covered walls and missing window screens.

A group of teenagers smoking on the stoop eye my tailored suit and watch. I meet their stares head-on, my stride purposeful as I climb the crumbling steps. They scatter, muttering under their breath.

The interior reeks of stale cigarettes and mildew. Paint peels from the walls in long

strips, and the fluorescent lights flicker with an annoying buzz. Third floor, apartment 3C.

Each step up the narrow stairwell echoes. A baby cries somewhere on the second floor. Through thin walls, I hear the cacophony of various TV shows bleeding together.

Benjamin's door stands out—newer than the others, recently replaced. Interesting. The surveillance photos showed him working odd jobs, yet he's spending money on home improvements.

I knock three times, hard enough to make the frame rattle.

Footsteps shuffle behind the door. The lock clicks, and Benjamin Jenson's face appears in the gap—exactly as he looked in the surveillance photos. His easy smile falters when he sees me.

"Can I help you?"

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I plant my foot against the base of the door before he can slam it shut. "We need to talk about Monica."

His expression shifts, that earlier hesitation morphing into something darker. "The hell you want with my girl?"

"She's not your girl. She's my wife." I step forward, forcing him to back up into his apartment. "And you're going to stay away from her restaurant."

Benjamin laughs—a hollow sound that echoes off the bare walls. "Or what? You gonna try to buy me off like you bought her?" He spreads his arms wide. "Look around, rich boy. I got nothing to lose."

"That's where you're wrong." My voice drops lower. "You've got plenty to lose. Your job at the body shop. That deal you've got going with Marco's suppliers. The apartment you just fixed up with money that isn't yours."

His smirk wavers. "You don't know shit."

"I know everything." Heat rises in my chest. "I know about the restraining order Kylie Miller filed. About the 'accident' at your last restaurant job. And I know you've been stalking Monica."

"Stalking?" He snorts. "I'm looking out for her. Making sure she doesn't get caught up with guys like you who just want to use her."

The accusation hits a nerve I didn't know existed. "Use her? I'm trying to protect her

from manipulative bastards who can't handle seeing her succeed without them."

"You don't even know her." Benjamin steps closer, jabbing a finger at my chest. "I was there when she was nothing. When she was just another line cook with big dreams. Where were you?"

My hands curl into fists. "I'm here now. And I see exactly what you are—a coward who can't stand that she's better off without you."

The truth of those words slams into me. Monica isn't just someone I'm pretending to be with anymore. She's become something real, something worth fighting for.

Benjamin's eyes narrow, a predatory gleam reflecting in the dim light. "You think you can just waltz in here and threaten me? I know Monica. I know what makes her tick, what she fears?—"

"If you go near her again—" My voice comes out as a growl.

"What? You'll do what exactly?" He steps closer, trying to use our similar height to his advantage. "Face it, you're just temporary. A distraction. She'll come back to me. She always does."

The thought of Monica returning to this manipulative piece of shit makes my stomach turn. Images flash through my mind—her tension whenever his name comes up, the way she flinches at sudden touches, how her voice gets small when discussing their past.

"The only place you're going is away from her." I advance, forcing him back against the wall. "I've got eyes everywhere. One more incident at her restaurant, one more 'coincidental' appearance, and I'll bury you so deep in legal problems you'll never surface."

"Fuck you and your money." He shoves against my chest. "You think you can protect her? You don't know what she needs protection from."

The threat in his voice sends ice through my veins. This isn't just about sabotaging her business—he wants to hurt her, to break her spirit. The realization hits me like a physical blow.

"Try me." I lean in close, dropping my voice. "Because right now, the only thing standing between you and complete destruction is my restraint. And that's wearing real thin."

Benjamin's facade cracks. For a split second, uncertainty flashes across his face. He steps back, hands raised. "Get away from my apartment before I call the cops."

I hold his gaze, letting him see exactly how serious I am. "Stay away from Monica. This is your only warning."

Walking away is harder than I expected. Every step feels wrong, like I'm leaving a knife unsheathed. The depth of my reaction surprises me—this isn't just about protecting our arrangement anymore. The thought of him hurting Monica, of him even being near her, makes me want to turn around and finish this.

When did she become so important? When did this stop being about appeasing my mother and start being about keeping Monica safe?

21

MONICA

Islice through the fresh herbs with practiced precision while Olivia stirs the reduction sauce and Celia prepares the protein. The kitchen fills with aromatic steam and

sizzling sounds as we work in perfect sync - three chefs who understand the delicate dance of sharing a kitchen space.

"So, Mrs. Blackwood." Olivia shoots me a knowing smile. "How's married life treating you?"

"God, that still sounds weird." I scrape the herbs into a small bowl.

"The fake marriage part or just being called Mrs. Blackwood?" Olivia asks

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"Both," Celia laughs, expertly flipping the pan. "Though I remember feeling the same way when I first started my arrangement with Aston. Now look at me - happily married for real."

"Same here." Olivia tastes the sauce with a small spoon. "Needs more acid. But yeah, Leo and I started as a business arrangement too. Sometimes the best ingredients come together unexpectedly."

I grab a lemon from the fruit bowl. "Here, try this. And I don't know... Henry's different than I expected. In a good way."

"Different how?" Celia plates the first portion with artistic flair.

"I always sorta assumed that super rich guys like him were all the same. Trust fund kids, snobby, rude... But he's nothing like that at all. He's thoughtful, funny..." I trail off, focusing on garnishing the plates. "The other night he brought me takeout at midnight because I mentioned craving dumplings."

"Midnight dumplings?" Olivia raises an eyebrow. "Girl, that man's got it bad already."

"No way, it's just part of the act." But even as I say it, I remember the way Henry's eyes crinkled when he smiled at me over steaming containers of food.

"Honey, I've known Henry for years now." Olivia wipes her hands on her apron. "That boy doesn't do midnight food runs for just anyone. Trust me."

"The thing about fake marriages," Celia adds, "is sometimes they show you what's real before you're ready to see it yourself."

I concentrate on plating, trying to ignore how my heart speeds up at their words. "Can we focus on this reduction sauce instead of my love life?"

"Fine, fine." Olivia laughs. "But don't think you're getting off that easy. Pass me those microgreens - this plate needs height."

"On it, chef," I reply playfully, getting to work on plating as Celia and Olivia watch my technique.

"Speaking of height..." Olivia gestures to my plating with her chin. "How tall is Henry anyway? Six-two?"

"Six-three," I correct automatically, then catch myself as both women exchange knowing looks. "What? It's a normal thing to notice about someone you live with."

Celia pours more wine into our glasses. "Sure it is. Just like noticing how his shoulders fill out those suits, right?"

"Or how blue his eyes are?" Olivia adds with a smirk.

I grab my wine glass. "You two are crazy and imagining things."

We finish the last touches on our collaborative dish - a fusion of French and Southern comfort food that would make any food critic weep. The aromas of herbs, butter, and perfectly seared meat fill the kitchen.

"To friendship." Olivia raises her glass. "And to arrangements that turn into something more."

"To cooking together," Celia adds.

"To good wine and better company." I clink my glass with theirs, the rich red warming my chest.

Olivia settles against the counter. "So... are you starting to feel it? That spark with Henry?"

I trace the rim of my wine glass, thinking about morning coffee conversations that stretch for hours, the way Henry's hand finds the small of my back when we walk together, how his smile makes my stomach flip. "I don't know what I feel."

But I do know. I know it in the quiet moments when he reads beside me on the couch, glasses perched on his nose. I know it when he brings me coffee exactly how I like it without asking. I know it in the way my skin tingles whenever he's close.

"Your face says otherwise." Celia's voice is gentle.

I take another sip of wine instead of answering, but my silence speaks volumes. These women know me too well - they can see right through my attempts at deflection.

"The best recipes," Olivia says, "are the ones that surprise you."

Suddenly, the front door clicks open and Henry strolls in, his dark hair windswept and tie slightly askew. My heart does a little flip - damn him for looking so good even when disheveled.

"Ladies." He nods to Olivia and Celia, then his gaze lands on me. "Monica, could I have a word?"

"Of course she can spare a minute for her husband." Olivia's voice drips with suggestion as she links her arm through Celia's. "We were just leaving anyway. Weren't we, Celia?"

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"Absolutely." Celia grabs her purse. "That new gelato place on Fifth is calling our names."

"Right now? It's almost eleven." I narrow my eyes at their obvious scheme.

"Best time for gelato." Olivia winks at me. "No lines."

They practically sprint to the front door, giggling like teenagers. The door shuts behind them, leaving me alone with Henry in the kitchen. He loosens his tie further until it falls from his neck, and I try not to stare at the exposed hollow of his throat.

"Long day?" I gesture to his rumpled appearance.

"You could say that." He runs a hand through his hair, making it even messier. The motion draws attention to his rolled-up sleeves and forearms. I grab my wine glass, needing something to do with my hands. "I did something you might not be happy about."

I perk a brow. "And what's that?"

"I confronted Benjamin."

The wine glass nearly slips from my fingers. "You what?"

"I paid him a visit at his apartment in East Harlem." Henry's jaw tightens. "After what he did to your restaurant-"

"How did you even know about that?"

"A private detective who owed me a quick favor." Henry's hands clench into fists. "I couldn't just stand by while he tried to destroy everything you've built."

I set down my glass before I actually drop it. "Henry, I can handle Benjamin."

"You shouldn't have to." He steps closer, his presence filling my space. "You're not alone. Not anymore."

"But this isn't your battle to fight." My voice comes out softer than intended.

Henry's fingers brush my arm, leaving trails of electricity in their wake. "Maybe I want it to be."

"Why?"

"Because I care about you, Monica." His blue eyes lock onto mine with an intensity that steals my breath. "More than I should. More than this arrangement calls for."

My heart pounds against my ribs as he moves closer still. His hand slides up to cup my face, thumb tracing my cheekbone.

"You don't have to protect me," I whisper.

"I know I don't have to." His other hand finds my waist, drawing me near until barely an inch separates us. "I want to."

The kitchen suddenly feels too small, too warm. Henry's cologne wraps around me and I'm not sure I can resist these touches anymore. His thumb continues its gentle path across my skin, and I find myself leaning into his touch.

"Benjamin can't hurt you anymore," Henry murmurs. "I won't let him."

The fierce protectiveness in his voice makes my knees weak. This isn't just about our arrangement anymore - hasn't been for a while if I'm honest with myself. The way Henry looks at me now, like I'm something precious he wants to shelter from harm, tells me he feels it too.

22

HENRY

I stand there, inches away from Monica, her eyes searching mine with a mix of vulnerability and desire. We've just crossed a line, spoken words that have changed everything. She doesn't need to feel alone anymore, and I'm here to prove it.

I reach out, cupping her cheek again, feeling the warmth of her dark skin against my palm. Her breath hitches, but she doesn't pull away. Instead, she leans into the touch, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. It's all the invitation I need.

I lean in, capturing her lips with mine. The kiss is gentle at first, a question whispered into the tiny space between us. But when she opens up to me, deepening the kiss, it turns into something else entirely—a promise, a vow.

She tastes like honey and spice, probably a result of the dish she just cooked. Her hands find their way to my chest, gripping my shirt, pulling me closer. I oblige, wrapping my arms around her, feeling her body press against mine.

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The kitchen counter digs into my back, but I barely notice. All my focus is on her, on the way her body fits perfectly against mine, on the soft sounds she makes as I trail kisses down her neck.

I pull away just enough to look into her eyes. They're dark, pupils blown wide with desire. "Tell me to stop, Monica," I murmur, my voice ragged. "Tell me to stop, and I will."

She shakes her head, a small smile playing on her lips. "Don't stop, Henry."

That's all I need to hear. I scoop her up, her legs wrapping around my waist, and carry her to the couch. I lower her down gently, never breaking the kiss. She pulls me down with her, her hands exploring my body, sending shivers down my spine.

I guide her hands above her head, pinning them there with one of mine. Her back arches, pressing her closer to me. I can feel her heart racing, matching the rhythm of my own.

"You're sure about this?" I ask, one last time.

She nods, her eyes never leaving mine. "I'm sure, Henry. I want you."

And with that, I let go of all restraint, giving in to the desire that's been building between us for weeks.

I pull away from our kiss, my breath ragged, eyes locked onto hers. Monica's chest heaves, her lips swollen from our passion. I reach for the hem of her shirt, slowly

pulling it up and over her head, revealing her smooth, dark skin. I can't help but pause, taking her in.

"You're stunning, Monica," I murmur, my voice thick with desire. Her eyes meet mine, vulnerable and sexy. I unclasp her bra, letting it fall away, and I'm rewarded with the sight of her full breasts, brown nipples already hardened with anticipation.

I quickly shed my own shirt, her eager hands helping me. Her fingers trace the lines of my tattoos on my upper shoulder, a secret rebellion against my family's expectations, and I feel a shiver run down my spine. I capture her hands, pinning them behind her back as I dip my head, taking one of her nipples into my mouth. She gasps, arching into me, and I lavish attention on her sensitive flesh before moving to the other, drawing out a soft moan from deep within her.

Releasing her hands, I trail mine down to the waistband of her jeans, unbuttoning them swiftly. She lifts her hips, helping me as I slide them off, leaving her in nothing but a thin scrap of lace. I run my fingers along the edge, teasing her, before slipping my hand inside.

She's wet, so fucking wet, and I growl in approval. "Is this all for me?" I ask, my voice low and demanding. She nods, biting her lip, and I can't help but steal another kiss, my fingers stroking her folds, spreading her wetness.

I find her clit, circling it lightly, making her squirm beneath me. Her hands grasp at my shoulders, her nails digging in as I slip two fingers inside her. She's tight, her walls clamping down on me, and I can't wait any longer.

I withdraw my fingers, bringing them to my mouth, tasting her. Her eyes widen, pupils blown with desire. I undo my belt, pushing my pants and boxers down, freeing my cock. It's hard, aching for her. I stroke myself, teasing her, running the tip along her wetness.

"Henry," she pleads, her voice barely a whisper. I position myself at her entrance, pushing in just slightly, teasing us both. Her eyes flutter closed, her breath hitching. I lean down, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss as I thrust into her, burying myself deep inside her warmth.

I set a steady rhythm, each thrust drawing out a soft gasp from deep within Monica. She wraps her legs around me, pulling me closer, her heels digging into my lower back. The sensation is intoxicating, her body fitting perfectly against mine.

"Henry," she whispers, her voice barely audible, yet filled with a raw intensity that sends shivers down my spine. "You feel so good."

Her words spur me on, and I lean down, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss. I can taste the desire on her, the need that matches my own. I trail my hand down her body, my fingers finding her clit, circling it lightly as I continue to thrust into her.

"Oh, God," she moans, her body arching into mine. "I love this, Henry. I love—" Her words cut off as she gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders. I can feel her tightening around me, her body on the brink.

I increase the pressure on her clit, my thrusts becoming more urgent. Her breath hitches, and then she's crying out, her body convulsing around me as she comes hard. The sight of her, the feel of her, is too much. I thrust into her once more, burying myself deep inside her as I find my own release.

A low groan escapes me as I come, the sensation overwhelming. I collapse against her, my forehead resting on hers as we both struggle to catch our breath. Her arms wrap around me, holding me close, and I can feel the rapid beat of her heart against my chest.

We lie there for a moment, our bodies still joined, our breaths syncing. I can feel the

contentment washing over me, a sense of rightness that I haven't felt in a long time. I press a soft kiss to her lips, feeling a sense of peace settle over me.

"That was... intense," she murmurs, her voice soft and satisfied. I can't help but smile, my fingers tracing idle patterns on her skin.

"Intense is good," I reply, my voice low and filled with satisfaction. I can feel her smile against my neck, her body relaxed and sated beneath me. At this moment, everything feels right. Everything feels perfect. And I don't want to be anywhere else but here, with her.

23

MONICA

I lean back in my chair, watching Henry sip his bourbon across the table. The restaurant hums with quiet conversation and the clink of silverware against fine china. Something about the warm candlelight catching in his eyes makes me feel... safe.

"This place is incredible," I say, running my finger along the rim of my wine glass. "Though I'm definitely critiquing every dish in my head."

Henry laughs. "Professional hazard?"

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"Absolutely. Can't help it." I take a sip of my cabernet. "My first cooking job was at this tiny bistro in Queens. The chef was this terrifying French guy who'd throw entire pans across the kitchen if you overcooked the fish."

"Did you duck?"

"Got real good at it." I smile, remembering. "But he taught me how to make the most perfect hollandaise. Said I had 'the touch' for delicate sauces."

Henry leans forward, genuinely interested. "When did you know you wanted to cook?"

"I was eight. My grandmother let me help with Sunday dinner. I made the cornbread all by myself." The memory warms me. "It was terrible—dry as the Sahara—but everyone ate it anyway."

"That's love."

"It was." I pause, swirling my wine. "I didn't always have people who believed in my cooking dreams."

Henry's expression shifts, a subtle tightening around his eyes. He reaches across the table, his fingers brushing mine. "Their loss."

I set down my wine glass, the words suddenly tumbling out before I can stop them. I don't want him to think that I was some naive girl who fell in love with an abusive asshole against my better judgment. Things weren't bad at first. Not at all. In fact, I

truly believe that I loved that bastard at one point, with my whole soul.

"Benjamin wasn't always cruel." My voice sounds strange to my own ears. "When we first met, he was charming, attentive. He'd surprise me with little gifts—cooking magazines, a special whisk I'd mentioned wanting."

Henry's eyes stay fixed on mine, patient and steady.

"It started small. I'd spend hours perfecting a new recipe, and he'd taste it and say something like, 'It's good, but maybe stick to the basics.' Or he'd laugh when I talked about opening my own place someday." I trace a pattern on the tablecloth. "Called it my 'cute little hobby.' He never really believed in me, and I realize that it's because he wanted to keep me grounded, at his level. He hasn't accomplished much in life, so he didn't like seeing me do things that elevated me above him. If that makes sense."

The memory still stings, like salt in a wound that never fully healed.

"Remember that Queens bistro I talked about? Well, I was really excited about it at first. Like, over the moon about it, but then, he showed up during one of my shifts. Said he wanted to surprise me, but he'd just stand there watching, making me nervous. My boss noticed. Started giving me fewer hours after that which absolutely gutted me."

Henry's jaw tightens, but he remains silent, letting me speak.

"If I stayed late at work, he'd accuse me of sleeping with the sous chef. If I wore makeup, I was 'trying too hard.' If I didn't, I was 'letting myself go.'" I take a shaky breath. "Once, I made dinner for his birthday—spent the entire day on this elaborate meal. He took one bite, pushed his plate away, and ordered pizza."

My fingers curl into my palm.

"The worst part? I started believing him. That I wasn't good enough. That my dreams were stupid." I look up at Henry. "We'd have these explosive fights, and somehow they always ended with me apologizing. For everything. For nothing."

I reach for my wine, needing something to do with my hands.

"After we broke up, I couldn't cook for a few months. Just couldn't find the joy in it anymore. That's what scares me the most about him showing up again. Not what he might do to the restaurant, but what he might take from me. Again."

I watch Henry's face as I speak, searching for signs of judgment or pity. His expression shifts from concern to something deeper—a genuine empathy that makes my chest tighten. His eyes never leave mine, even as I stumble through the ugliest parts of my past. I feel naked, exposed, yet somehow... at ease.

When I finally fall silent, Henry reaches across the table and takes my hand. His touch is warm, steady.

"Monica." The way he says my name makes me look up. "Thank you for telling me."

I swallow hard. "I just... I don't want you thinking I'm some kind of victim. Or that I'm damaged goods."

"Is that what you think I see?" His thumb traces circles on my palm. "Because what I see is someone incredibly strong. Someone who didn't let that asshole steal her passion."

A knot forms in my throat. "He almost did."

"But he didn't." Henry leans forward, his pretty blue eyes transfixing me. "You know what amazes me about you? You could've given up. You could've believed all that

bullshit he fed you. But instead, you're here, creating incredible food, building your career, taking risks."

I feel my eyes burning with unshed tears. "Sometimes I still hear his voice in my head."

"Then we'll just have to be louder." Henry's smile is gentle but fierce. "You're the most fascinating person I've ever met, Monica. And I've traveled all over the world, met all kinds of people."

I laugh softly, blinking back tears. "Now you're just saying that."

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"I'm not." His eyes hold mine, unflinching. "The way your mind works when you talk about food—it's like watching someone speak a language they were born knowing. You light up. It's beautiful."

The word beautiful hangs between us, and for once, I don't question it. I don't look for the hidden agenda or the eventual disappointment. I just let myself believe him.

I take another bite of my perfectly seared scallop, savoring the buttery texture while watching Henry across the table. Something has shifted between us tonight. The air feels different—charged with honesty and understanding.

"You have to try this," Henry says, offering me a bite of his steak. Without thinking, I lean forward and accept it from his fork. The gesture feels intimate, domestic even. Something a real couple would do.

"That's incredible," I murmur, letting the flavors bloom on my tongue. "The chef nailed the temperature."

Henry smiles, and it reaches his eyes in a way that makes my chest tighten. "I've been meaning to ask—what's your signature dish? The one that feels most like you?"

"My jerk chicken with mango-habanero salsa." I smile, thinking about it. "It's spicy but sweet, complex but comforting. Takes time to get right."

"Like you," he says softly.

The candlelight flickers between us, casting shadows that dance across his face. I

realize with startling clarity that this—whatever this is between us—feels more genuine than anything I've experienced before. Even though our marriage is built on convenience and mutual benefit, the connection growing between us is undeniably real.

"This is weird, isn't it?" I gesture between us. "All of this started as this elaborate lie, but sitting here with you now feels like the most honest thing in my life."

Henry sets down his fork, his expression serious. "Maybe that's because it is."

I take a sip of wine to steady myself. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For you to reveal some hidden agenda or for me to mess everything up."

"What if there is no other shoe?" Henry reaches across the table, his fingers brushing mine. "What if this is just us, figuring things out together?"

I look at our hands, his larger one covering mine. Mrs. Blackwood. The name still feels foreign on my tongue, but the way Henry looks at me—like I'm something precious and worth protecting—it feels like home.

24

HENRY

I swirl the amber liquid in my glass, watching it catch the low lighting of the private dining room. The familiar burn of scotch isn't doing much to take the edge off tonight.

"So this asshole actually smashed her restaurant window?" Leo leans forward, his jaw clenched tight.

"Not just the window. Spray-painted the walls with some bullshit about the restaurant's food being garbage." My knuckles turn white around the glass. "Monica's co-workers walked in and found the place trashed. Display case shattered. It's fucking personal."

Aston signals the waiter for another round. "And you're sure it's the ex?"

"Who else would it be? Benjamin's been showing up, trying to get back with her. Telling her he misses what they had." I down the rest of my scotch in one gulp. "What they had was him tearing her down every chance he got. Told her she'd never make it as a chef. Called her dreams stupid. Classic manipulative shit."

Leo's expression darkens. "And now he's escalating."

"I confronted him at his apartment." I accept the fresh glass from the waiter. "Warned him to back off. He just smirked like it was all a game."

"Sue the life out of this guy," Leo says, slamming his glass down. "I've got lawyers who'd take this case pro bono. Destruction of property, harassment, stalking—we'll bury him."

"Leo's right." Aston nods. "Hit him where it hurts. These types only understand consequences."

"Monica's hesitant to escalate things. She's worried it'll make him worse."

"And what happens when vandalism isn't enough anymore?" Leo asks. "This pattern doesn't just stop. Trust me, I've seen it before."

I run a hand through my hair. "That's what keeps me up at night. She finally told me everything. How he'd twist arguments to make her feel crazy. How he'd get jealous if

she talked to other guys. Fuck, she couldn't even hang out with friends without him accusing her of something."

"You care about her," Aston says. It's not a question.

"Yeah." I don't bother denying it. "A lot more than I expected to."

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"Then protect her," Leo says. "Document everything. Security cameras. Restraining order. The works."

"You're stepping into murky territory with this fake marriage, Henry," Aston says, eyeing me over his drink. "Sounds like it's becoming real for you."

I shift in my seat, uncomfortable with how easily he's reading me. "It's complicated."

"Is it?" Aston raises an eyebrow. "Are you falling in love with Monica?"

The question hits like a punch to the gut. I take another sip of scotch, buying time while my thoughts race.

"Love is a strong word," I finally say, my voice rougher than I intended. "We started this as an arrangement. Mutually beneficial. I needed my mother off my back, and she needed financial stability."

"Well, now you're just using that to distract us from the real shit going on," Leo cuts in. "You confronted her psycho ex. You're losing sleep worrying about her safety. You're sitting here with us instead of at some model's penthouse. You must be heading down that path."

I stare at the ice melting in my glass. "I care about her. A lot. More than I've cared about anyone in a long time."

"That's what we're saying." Aston leans forward. "This stopped being fake the moment you decided to step between her and danger. Trust me, I think Leo and I are

the only dudes in this entire city who know exactly what you're going through right now."

"Look," Leo says, his tone softening slightly, "I've known you since we were kids. You don't do this—get involved in other people's messes. You keep things casual. Surface-level."

"Monica's different," I admit. The words feel raw coming out of my throat. "She's been through hell with this asshole, and she's still standing. Still fighting for her dreams. She's talented as fuck, but she doesn't even see it because he spent years convincing her she wasn't good enough."

"And now?" Aston asks.

"Now I want to be the one who reminds her how incredible she is." I run a hand through my hair. "Every damn day if I have to."

Leo exchanges a knowing look with Aston. "Sounds an awful lot like love to me, cousin."

I don't have a comeback for that. Maybe because I'm afraid he's right.

The waiter brings our entrées, and I welcome the distraction. The conversation shifts to safer territory as we dig into our steaks, but not for long.

"You know," Leo says between bites, "Olivia and I started as a business arrangement too."

I raise an eyebrow. "You don't need to tell me that story, Leo. It's already gone down as a legend. What Monica and I have is a bit different."

"Yeah, you needed to get your mother off your back. But it's a fake marriage all the same, is it not?" Leo counters. "Point is, I didn't expect to fall for her. But here we are, years later with a kid."

Aston nods, cutting into his ribeye. "Celia and I weren't much different. Started as a stunt because I got accused of having an affair with one of my dad's investor's wives. Crazy fucking shit. My dad wanted to rip my head off for that, and it wasn't even my fault."

"And now you're disgustingly in love," I mutter.

"Exactly." Aston points his fork at me. "So don't act like you're special because your fake relationship is turning real. It's practically a tradition at this point."

I can't help but laugh at that. "A fucked up tradition."

"But it works." Leo shrugs. "Sometimes the best relationships start when you're not looking for one."

I push food around my plate, appetite fading. "Monica's still dealing with a lot. Benjamin's not just an ex—he's a threat. She's only just started to open up about what she went through."

"So?" Leo challenges. "You think she needs to be completely healed before she can be with someone?"

"No, but?—"

"But nothing," Aston interrupts. "That's not how life works. People don't heal in isolation, then emerge perfect and ready for love. They heal while living, while connecting."

"Since when has Aston Saint-Pierre ever sounded so wise?" I ask with a smirk. "I must be dreaming."

He shrugs. "You missed out on a lot while you were over there in Europe, Blackwood."

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I take a long sip of water, letting his words sink in. "And what if I make it worse? What if I push too hard when she's not ready?"

"That's the risk with any relationship," Leo says quietly. "But from what you've told us, she's strong as hell. Give her some credit."

He's right. Monica's resilience is what drew me to her in the first place.

"Benjamin complicates things," I admit. "As long as he's lurking around, she can't fully move forward."

"So help her deal with him," Aston says simply. "Not by fighting her battles, but by standing beside her while she fights them herself."

I nod slowly, considering their advice. Maybe it's not about waiting for the perfect moment, but about being there through the imperfect ones.

25

MONICA

I wipe my brow with the back of my wrist as I survey the kitchen at Taste of Heaven. The rhythmic chopping of knives against cutting boards and the sizzle of pans create a symphony that normally soothes my soul. Today's special is a fusion dish featuring Caribbean-inspired flavors, and I'm determined to make it perfect.

"Monica, can you taste this sauce?" Nya calls from across the kitchen.

"Coming!" I move toward her station when my phone buzzes in my pocket. Probably Henry checking in. A smile tugs at my lips as I pull it out.

But instead, it's an unknown number.

My thumb hovers over the notification. I shouldn't open it. I know better. But some morbid curiosity—or maybe just habit—makes me tap.

The images load and my stomach plummets. Photos of us. Intimate photos I'd forgotten existed. From back when I thought his possessiveness was passion. When I mistook control for care.

"Remember these, baby? Still have plenty more. Thought your new "husband" might enjoy seeing what he's getting."

The kitchen suddenly feels too hot, too loud. My chest tightens as memories flood back—Benjamin's hands gripping my wrists too tight, his voice in my ear telling me I'd never make it without him.

"Monica? You okay?" Nya's voice seems distant.

I grip the edge of the stainless steel counter, feeling the cool metal against my palms. No. I won't let him do this again. Won't let him pull me back into that dark place where I'm small and afraid.

My fingers tremble as I type: "Delete these immediately. This is harassment."

His response comes quickly: "Don't be like that. We had good times. Henry's just a rebound."

The familiar rush of panic rises in my throat. But something else rises with it—rage.

Pure, clarifying rage.

"This isn't about Henry. It's about you refusing to accept that I've moved on. Delete these photos or I'll contact the police."

I set my phone face-down on the counter and take a deep breath. The kitchen comes back into focus—Nya's concerned face, the scent of caramelizing onions, the weight of the chef's knife in my hand.

"It's nothing," I tell her, forcing steadiness into my voice. "Just an unwelcome blast from the past."

My phone buzzes again, but I don't check it. Benjamin doesn't control me anymore. I pick up my knife and return to my station. My hands are still shaking, but I keep chopping.

I can't focus on the knife in my hand. The blade trembles against the cutting board as Benjamin's message echoes in my mind. Those photos were taken during a weekend getaway—one of those rare good moments when his charm had pulled me back in after a fight. I'd felt beautiful, desired. Now those same images make me feel dirty, exposed.

My body burns with shame. What would Henry think if he saw them? The thought makes my stomach twist into knots.

"Monica, the sauce is reducing too much." Nya's voice breaks through my spiral.

"Shit." I rush to the stove, pulling the pan off the heat. Another mistake. Benjamin always said I'd never make it as a chef—too distracted, too emotional.

No. I refuse to let his voice back into my head.

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I stir the sauce vigorously, but my mind keeps drifting. What if Benjamin sends those photos to Henry? To the restaurant? To my family? The thought of being exposed, of everyone seeing me like that—vulnerable, naive, under Benjamin's control—makes me want to vomit.

Just when I was starting to believe I deserved something good. Just when Henry and I were becoming real.

My phone buzzes yet again, pestering me. I ignore it, but the damage is done. Benjamin has found a way back in—not physically, but into my thoughts. Into my sense of safety.

"Need to use the restroom," I mutter to Nya, who gives me a concerned look.

In the small employee bathroom, I splash cold water on my face and stare at my reflection. The woman looking back at me isn't the same person who let Benjamin dictate her worth. I've built something here—respect, a career, a relationship with a man who sees me.

But the fear remains. What if Henry sees those photos and realizes I'm damaged goods? What if he decides I'm too much trouble? The thought of losing what we've built makes my chest ache.

I grip the edge of the sink. Benjamin might have these photos, but he doesn't have me anymore. I won't let him take my future too.

I splash more cold water on my face, taking a deep breath. The bathroom's

fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows, but I force myself to look directly at my reflection.

"He doesn't own you anymore," I whisper to myself.

My phone keeps buzzing again and again in my pocket, making me want to throw it at the wall. Should I just ignore these messages? Delete, block the number, and hope that Benjamin doesn't send these to anyone else? A small part of me wants to hide the embarrassing truth from Henry. I can deal with this on my own. I always have.

But then, the truth hits me with startling clarity: I care what Henry thinks. Not just about the photos, but about me. About us. The realization sends a wave of vulnerability through me that's both terrifying and freeing.

I've spent so long protecting myself, building walls so high that even I couldn't see over them sometimes. But with Henry, those walls have been crumbling, brick by brick. And now I have a choice—rebuild them stronger than ever, or let him see the mess behind them.

I dry my hands and pull out my phone. Three more messages from Benjamin, each more threatening than the last. My finger hovers over Henry's contact. What would I even say? "Hey, my psycho ex is threatening to send you naked photos of me"?

But I know what happens when secrets fester. They poison everything good, everything real.

I text Henry: "Can we talk tonight? Something's come up with Benjamin."

His response is immediate: "Of course. Are you okay?"

I'm not okay. I'm scared and angry and ashamed. But for the first time, I don't have to

pretend I am.

"Not really. But I will be."

I tuck my phone away and straighten my chef's coat. Benjamin wants me cowering, wants me hiding. He wants to drive a wedge between me and Henry before what we have can fully bloom.

Not this time. This time, I fight back—not alone, but with someone by my side who I'm starting to believe might actually stay there.

26

HENRY

I set my fork down with a clatter against the fine china. The candlelight that had moments ago cast a warm glow across Monica's face now illuminates tears welling in her eyes.

"He did what?" My voice comes out sharp, dangerous.

Monica's hands tremble as she sets her phone face-down on the table. "He texted me photos. Of me. Naked." She swallows hard. "From when we were together."

Blood rushes to my head, pounding in my ears. The perfectly cooked steak before me might as well be cardboard now. I clench my jaw so tight my teeth might crack.

"That fucking piece of shit."

I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the hardwood. My fists ball at my sides as I pace the length of my dining room. The Manhattan skyline outside my penthouse

windows blurs as rage narrows my vision.

This isn't random. This isn't a desperate ex lashing out. This is calculated psychological warfare. Benjamin knows exactly what he's doing—trying to make Monica feel violated, exposed, vulnerable. Trying to poison what we're building together.

"Let me see the texts." I extend my hand.

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Monica hesitates. "Henry, I?—"

"I'm not asking to see the photos, Monica. Just the messages. The timestamps. What he wrote."

She slides her phone across the table. I scroll through the conversation, my stomach turning at Benjamin's words.

"Remember how good we were together? No one will ever know you like I do."

"Does your fancy new man know about these? Or how about these? Wonder what he'd think..."

"I've got more where these came from. Call me."

Each message designed to burrow under her skin, to make her doubt herself, to question us. My knuckles turn white around the phone.

"This ends now." I hand her phone back, my mind racing through options. "This isn't just harassment, Monica. This is criminal. It's revenge porn."

I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself. The last thing Monica needs is to deal with my rage when she's the one who's been violated. I move back to her side, kneeling beside her chair.

"I'm sorry this happened to you. But I need you to know something." I take her hands in mine. "This isn't about you. This is about him trying to control you. He's scared

because he knows he's losing his power over you."

I pace the room, rage still coursing through my veins. The sight of Monica's face—that mix of shame and fear—has awakened something primal in me. A possessiveness I've never felt before.

"I want to fucking kill him," I mutter, more to myself than to her.

But violence isn't the answer. Not when there are smarter ways to destroy a man like Benjamin. I could bury this jackass and I wouldn't even have to lift a finger. Just make a few calculated calls.

I stop pacing and look at Monica. Really look at her. This incredible woman who's fought her way through hell to build something beautiful. Who creates art on a plate. Who makes me laugh. Who kisses me like she means it.

And this piece of shit thinks he can take that away from us?

"No," I say aloud, my voice steady now. "He doesn't get to do this."

I pull my phone from my pocket and dial. "Josiah? It's Henry. I need you to meet me tomorrow morning. Eight sharp. And bring the digital forensics guy you used for the Harrington case." I hang up and turn to Monica. "That was my lawyer. One of the best in the city for cases like this."

Jealousy still burns in my chest, but it's transforming into something more useful—determination. I've spent my life watching my father handle threats to our family with calculated precision. Time to put those lessons to use.

"Here's what's going to happen," I tell her, sitting back down and taking her hands in mine. "We're going to document everything. The vandalism at your restaurant, these

texts, the photos—all of it. We'll get a restraining order first thing tomorrow." I squeeze her hands gently. "And then we're going to make him regret the day he ever thought he could threaten what's mine."

The possessiveness in my voice surprises even me. But it's true. Somewhere between our fake engagement and right now, Monica has become mine. And I've become hers. Not as property, but as something far more valuable—as choice.

I watch Monica's face carefully as she processes what I've just said. Her eyes dart away, a flicker of doubt crossing her features.

"Henry, I appreciate what you're doing, but..." She pulls her hands back slightly. "This is my problem. I don't want you getting caught up in my mess. I don't want you getting in trouble over me."

"Your mess?" I shake my head, moving closer. "Monica, look at me."

When she finally meets my gaze, I see fear there—not just of Benjamin, but of something else. Of letting me in completely.

"We're married now," I say firmly. The words feel right, even though our arrangement started as pretense. "Mrs. Blackwood, remember? That ring on your finger is powerful. It represents the arrangement we have, the bond we share. Even if it wasn't made out of love." That remark stings a little bit.

Her eyes drop to the diamond on her hand, and I place my palm over hers.

"Whatever happens to you happens to me. If someone attacks you, they attack me. That's how this works."

"But you didn't sign up for this," she whispers. "For a psycho ex who won't let go."

"The hell I didn't." I lift her chin with my finger. "I signed up for you. All of you. The incredible chef, the woman who makes me laugh, and yes, the woman with the baggage too. I'm not running from this."

I can see she's torn, wanting to protect me from her past while desperately needing support.

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"Benjamin's counting on you feeling isolated," I continue. "He wants you to handle this alone because he knows you're stronger with people in your corner. With me in your corner."

Her shoulders relax slightly as the truth of my words sinks in.

"I don't want him to hurt you," she admits.

"And I don't want him to hurt you," I counter. "The difference is, I have resources he can only dream of. Let me use them."

I take her face in my hands, my thumbs gently wiping away a tear that's escaped.

"We're in this together. Not because we have to be, but because I choose to be. Because I—" I catch myself, the word "love" hovering dangerously on my lips. Not yet. "Because I care about you. More than I thought possible."

I see Monica's eyes flicker with something—uncertainty, maybe guilt—as she pulls back slightly.

"I didn't think our fake marriage would get this far," she admits quietly. "This isn't what you signed up for. Dealing with my crazy ex, threats, revenge porn..." She shakes her head. "It was supposed to be simple. Appearances at parties, some photos together, getting your mother off your back."

I can't help but laugh, though there's no humor in it. Just the absurdity of how quickly life can change course.

"Fake marriage or not, I'm going to protect you from Benjamin." I shrug like it's the most obvious thing in the world. Because to me, it is. "The certificate might be real, but whether we fell into this for convenience doesn't change what I'm willing to do now."

I move closer, taking her hands in mine again. They're chef's hands—strong, slightly calloused, with a small burn mark on her right index finger. Hands that create beautiful things. Hands that deserve better than to shake with fear.

"Look, I don't give a shit how we got here. The fact is, we're here now. And I don't let people I care about face threats alone."

Her eyes meet mine, searching. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Damn right I do." I squeeze her hands. "Benjamin's playing a game he can't win. He thinks he can intimidate you, scare you back to him. But he's not just dealing with you anymore. He's dealing with us."

I feel her fingers tighten around mine. Something shifts between us—the pretense falling away, replaced by something more solid, more real.

"So what do we do?" she asks, her voice stronger now.

"We fight. We document everything. And we show this asshole that the woman he tried to tear down is now surrounded by people who won't let that happen again."

27

MONICA

Isit next to Henry on my living room couch, our thighs almost touching as we face

my laptop. On screen, Josiah Carter—Henry's lawyer—speaks in a measured tone that somehow manages to be both calming and authoritative. His silver-framed glasses catch the light each time he leans forward to emphasize a point.

"So what we're dealing with here is a clear case of harassment, intimidation, and now distribution of intimate images without consent." Josiah taps his pen against a legal pad. "Mrs. Blackwood, I understand how difficult this must be, but I need you to walk me through the timeline of events."

Mrs. Blackwood. The name still feels foreign on my skin. I glance at Henry, who gives me a reassuring nod.

"It started with him showing up in my life again. He was trying to intimidate me and belittle my marriage." My voice comes out steadier than I expect. "When I rejected his advances, my restaurant was vandalized soon afterwards. And yesterday, the photos."

Henry's hand finds mine, his thumb tracing circles on my palm. The simple gesture grounds me, but also sends a freshwave of guilt crashing through my chest. This man is fighting my battles, using his resources, his connections. All for someone who isn't even really his wife.

"I've saved everything," I continue. "The texts, photos of the damage to the restaurant. I even have security footage from that day."

Josiah nods approvingly. "Excellent. Documentation is crucial. Now, has he made any direct threats?"

"Not in those words. But the message is clear—he wants to ruin what I've built."

"And what I've built with Monica," Henry adds, his voice taking on that hard edge

I've come to recognize when Benjamin is the topic. "This piece of shit needs to understand he can't just?—"

"Henry," Josiah interrupts, "I appreciate your passion, but let's stay focused on building our case."

I squeeze Henry's hand, feeling the tension in his fingers. He's angry for me. Protective of me. The realization sends warmth spreading through my chest, followed immediately by that persistent, nagging guilt.

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"What can we do?" I ask Josiah.

"We file for a restraining order immediately. Then we pursue charges for the vandalism and revenge porn. New York has strong laws against non-consensual pornography." Josiah shuffles some papers. "With the evidence you've collected, we have a solid foundation."

I nod, but my mind drifts to Henry beside me, who's moved mountains to help me face my past. A past that has nothing to do with him. A past he could have easily walked away from.

He doesn't have to do this for me. He doesn't have to do any of this. He could have just let me be—I'm his fake wife!

But he's moving mountains to help me deal with Benjamin. And for that, I'm grateful.

As Josiah continues outlining the legal strategy, I feel a strange calm settling over me. For years, Benjamin had this power—this ability to make me feel small, to make me question my worth. Now we're mapping out a plan to legally keep him away from me. From us.

"The restraining order will be the first step," Josiah explains. "It establishes a legal boundary he can't cross without consequences. Then we'll pursue charges for the vandalism and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images."

"How long will this take?" I ask, my voice steadier than I expected.

"The temporary restraining order can be issued quickly—within days. The permanent order will require a hearing, but with your evidence, I'm confident. The criminal charges may take longer, but they send a clear message."

Henry's hand remains firmly wrapped around mine, his presence solid and unwavering. I never imagined having someone fight alongside me like this. It's strange how quickly our lives have become entangled—what started as a convenient arrangement has evolved into something I can't quite define.

"What about my safety in the meantime?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

"Document everything," Josiah says firmly. "Any contact, any sightings, anything suspicious. We'll include provisions in the restraining order about your workplace and home."

Home. The word hits differently now.

"We've got you covered, Monica," Henry says, his voice low, certain, and undeniably sexy. "You're not facing this alone anymore."

I nod, trying to swallow past the lump in my throat. This fake marriage has become the most real relationship I've had in years. Henry knows more about my demons than anyone, and instead of running, he's standing firm.

The irony isn't lost on me—we entered this arrangement to solve Henry's family problems, but now we're knee-deep in mine. My past and our uncertain present have collided, creating something neither of us planned for.

As our meeting with Josiah draws to a close, I meet Henry's gaze. Something shifts inside me—a new determination replacing the fear that's been my constant companion since Benjamin reappeared in my life.

"Thank you, Josiah," Henry says, closing the laptop. "We appreciate you making time for this on such short notice."

"I'll get the paperwork for the restraining order filed first thing tomorrow," Josiah replies. "In the meantime, continue to document everything and send the evidence my way. And Monica—try to stay somewhere safe if possible."

"She's staying with me," Henry says with absolute certainty, not even glancing my way for confirmation.

After we end the call, the penthouse falls quiet. Henry runs a hand through his hair, his jaw tight with tension. I realize I've been holding my breath and let it out slowly.

"Henry, I—" My voice catches. There's so much I want to say, so many conflicting emotions swirling inside me.

Instead of speaking, I close the distance between us and wrap my arms around him, burying my face against his chest. His heartbeat is strong and steady beneath my cheek. He hesitates for just a moment before his arms encircle me, one hand cradling the back of my head.

"Thank you," I whisper against his shirt. "For everything. For not walking away when this got complicated. For fighting for me."

His arms tighten around me, strong and secure. "I'm not going anywhere, Monica. Not now, not ever."

I pull back just enough to look up at him, needing him to understand what this means to me. "I'm not used to havingsomeone in my corner like this. It's... new territory for me." My voice wavers slightly as memories of Benjamin's constant undermining flash through my mind.

"For me too," he admits, his eyes never leaving mine. There's a vulnerability there I rarely see. "But we're figuring it out together. One day at a time."

I nod, feeling the truth of his words settle between us like a promise. This fake marriage has become something neither of us expected—something real and solid amid the chaos Benjamin has tried to create. Something worth fighting for.

"We're going to get through this," I say, surprising myself with my certainty. My fingers curl into the fabric of his shirt, holding on.

His smile reaches his eyes, crinkling the corners in that way that makes my heart skip. "Damn right we are." He brushes a stray curl from my face, his touch lingering. "Benjamin doesn't stand a fucking chance against us."

28

HENRY

I'm holding Monica close, her body pressed against mine on the couch. The warmth of her breath on my neck, the softness of her in my arms—it's intoxicating. She pulls back slightly, her eyes meeting mine, and something shifts. It's like a spark ignites, and I can't hold back any longer.

I lean in, capturing her lips with a hunger that surprises even me. She responds, her mouth opening to mine, inviting me in. Our kiss deepens, becoming more passionate, more urgent. My hands, which had been gently holding her, now grasp at her with a newfound desperation.

Her body arches against mine as I tug at her clothes, needing to feel more of her. The fabric of her shirt is soft, but it's a barrier I no longer want between us. She gasps into my mouth as I pull at the hem, my knuckles brushing against the smooth skin of her waist.

"Henry," she murmurs, her voice a husky whisper that sends a shiver down my spine. It's not a protest, but an encouragement. She wants this as much as I do.

I trail kisses down her neck, her collarbone, every inch of her skin setting me on fire. Her hands are in my hair, gripping tightly, pulling me closer. I can feel her heart pounding against her chest, matching the rhythm of my own.

Every tug at her clothes reveals more of her, driving me crazy with desire. I want to

touch her, to feel her, to claim her. The room fades away until it's just the two of us, lost in this moment, lost in each other.

Her breath hitches as my fingers trace the line of her waistband, dipping slightly beneath the fabric. She shivers, her eyes never leaving mine. It's a dance, a give and take, a question and an answer. And every response from her tells me she's right there with me, feeling this too.

I tug at Monica's jeans, her hips lifting to help me slide them down her legs. Her eyes, dark and hungry, never leave mine. The room is filled with the soft sound of our ragged breaths, the rustle of fabric as it hits the floor. She lies back, propped up on her elbows, watching me with an intensity that makes my heart pound.

I trail my fingers up her calves, her thighs, her skin soft and warm. Her muscles quiver under my touch, her breath hitching as I hook my fingers into the waistband of her panties. I pause, my eyes flicking up to hers, a silent question. She nods, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

I slide her panties down, revealing her completely. She's stunning, laid out before me like a feast. I lower myself between her legs, my hands gripping her thighs, spreading her open for me. I can see her desire, glistening and inviting. I lean in, inhaling her scent, a musky sweetness that makes my mouth water.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper.

I start slow, a soft kiss on her inner thigh, then another, higher this time. Her body tenses, anticipating. I can feel her heat, see her need. I trail kisses up her thigh, my stubbles scraping against her soft skin, making her squirm. I love seeing her like this, writhing and desperate for me.

When I finally taste her, she gasps, her hands fisting the couch cushions. I groan

against her, her taste exploding in my mouth, sweet and tangy. I explore her with my tongue, long licks that make her hips buck. I find her clit, swollen and sensitive, and circle it, teasing her.

Her moans fill the room, driving me wild. I slide a finger into her, then another, her body clenching around me. She's so tight, so wet. I crook my fingers, finding that spot that makes her cry out. I suck her clit into my mouth, my fingers pumping in and out of her, my other hand gripping her hip, holding her steady.

Her body tenses, her breath coming in short gasps. She's close, I can feel it. I double down, my fingers moving faster, my tongue circling her clit. Her hands find my hair, gripping tightly, pulling me closer. Her hips grind against my mouth, her body seeking release.

"Henry, please," she moans, her voice husky and desperate. Hearing my name on her lips, like a secret, a plea, it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard. I growl against her, the vibrations making her gasp. I want to make her come, to feel her shatter in my arms, to know that I'm the one giving her this pleasure. "Please keep going."

Monica's breath hitches, her body tensing as I swirl my tongue around her clit, my fingers pumping in and out of her. She's close, so fucking close. I can feel it in the way her muscles clench around me, in the desperate grip of her hands in my hair. I double down, sucking her clit into my mouth, my fingers curling inside her, pressing against that spot that drives her wild.

Her orgasm hits her hard. She cries out, her body convulsing, her hips bucking against my mouth. I ride it out with her, my tongue softening, my fingers slowing, drawing out every last wave of her pleasure. Her taste floods my mouth and I lap it up, greedy for every last drop.

I pull back, my breath ragged, my cock rock hard and aching. Monica's sprawled out

before me, her body limp, her chest heaving. Her eyes are glazed, sated, but when they meet mine, there's a spark, a hunger that matches my own.

I stand, my hands going to my belt. I unbuckle it, the clink of the metal filling the room. Her eyes follow my movements, her tongue darting out to wet her lips. Fuck, she's gorgeous. I pop the button on my pants, slide down the zipper, my cock straining against my boxers. I push them down, my cock springing free, thick and heavy.

Her eyes widen, her breath hitching. Yeah, she wants this. She wants me. I lean down, my hands on either side of her, caging her in. Our eyes lock, a silent conversation passing between us. Then, she reaches up, her hand wrapping around my cock, and fuck, it feels so good.

I capture her mouth in a fierce kiss, my body pressing against hers. She guides me to her entrance, her legs wrapping around my waist, pulling me in. I slide into her, a long, slow thrust that has us both moaning. She's so fucking tight, so wet. I can feel her muscles clenching around me, drawing me in deeper.

I start to move, my hips pistoning, my cock driving in and out of her. Our breaths mingle, our moans filling the room. Her nails dig into my back, her heels pressing into my ass, urging me on. I give her what she wants, what we both want, fucking her hard and deep.

The couch creaks beneath us, the scent of sex heavy in the air. Her body moves with mine, meeting each thrust, our rhythm perfect, our connection intense. I can feel every inch of her, every ripple of her muscles, every hitch of her breath. It's intoxicating, addictive. I can't get enough.

I slide my hands under her ass, tilting her hips, changing the angle. She gasps, her eyes flying open, meeting mine. There it is, that spark, that hunger. I hit that spot,

over and over, her body tensing, her breath coming in short gasps. She's close again, so close.

I lean down, capturing her mouth in a fierce kiss. Our tongues tangle, our breaths mingle, our moans echoing in the room. I can feel her orgasm building, her muscles tightening around me, her body tensing. I want to feel her come, to feel her shatter around me. I want to?—

"Fuck!" I yell out, coming hard as her pussy clenches around me just right.

I collapse on Monica, my body slick with sweat, my breath ragged. Her heart races against mine, our chests heaving in sync. She wraps her arms around me, holding me close, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on my back.

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"Thank you," she whispers, her voice soft, barely audible. I can feel her breath against my ear, the warmth of it sending a shiver down my spine.

"For what?" I ask, my voice gentle.

She smiles, a small, tender smile that tugs at my heart. "For everything. For this. For being you."

Her words hit me like a punch to the gut. I'm not used to this, to someone thanking me for just being me. It's always been about what I can do, what I can provide. But Monica, she sees me. She sees the real me.

I lean down, capturing her lips in a soft, gentle kiss. It's a thank you, a you're welcome, and I see you too. She kisses me back, her lips soft, her touch tender. It's a kiss full of promises, full of possibilities.

I roll off her, pulling her into my side. She snuggles up against me, her head on my chest, her arm draped across my stomach. I can feel her breath, the rise and fall of her chest, the beat of her heart. It's intimate, personal. It's real.

Right there, it dawns upon me. Monica is everything I've ever wanted in a woman. Everything and more.

I slump into my car seat, legs aching after a twelve-hour shift at Taste of Heaven. The kitchen was in absolute chaos tonight—two servers called in sick, and we had a surprise visit from a food critic. My feet are screaming for mercy, but somehow, I can't stop smiling.

Because I'm going to see Henry.

"Get it together, Monica," I mutter, flipping down the sun visor to check my reflection in the tiny mirror.

Jesus. My hair's a disaster, frizzy curls escaping in every direction from what used to be a neat bun. I yank the elastic out and shake my hair loose, running my fingers through the tangles. The restaurant's heat and steam have left my face shiny, and there's a smudge of what looks like béarnaise sauce on my cheek.

I grab tissues from the glove compartment and wipe away the day's evidence from my face. Henry's seen me looking worse—covered in flour, sweating over a hot stove—but tonight feels different. Since that last time we were together, something's shifted between us. The fake engagement doesn't feel so fake anymore.

I dig through my purse for my emergency makeup kit, dabbing concealer under my eyes to hide the exhaustion. A touch of mascara, a swipe of tinted lip balm.

"Mrs. Blackwood," I whisper, testing the name on my lips again. It still gives me butterflies, even though it's just for show. Or at least it was supposed to be.

My phone buzzes with a text from Henry: "Coming home?"

I type back quickly: "On my way. Just freshening up."

"You always look perfect to me."

My heart does that stupid little flip it always does when he says things like that. I check my reflection one more time. The woman staring back at me looks happier than she has in years—despite Benjamin, despite the threats, despite everything.

I start the car, suddenly not feeling tired at all. Henry is waiting, and somehow that's all that matters.

I turn out of the restaurant parking lot, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel to the rhythm of the upbeat song on the radio. The night air flows through my cracked window, cooling my skin after hours in the hot kitchen.

The streets are emptier than usual. A blessing after the day I've had. I press down on the accelerator, eager to get to Henry's place—our place, I guess, for now.

A yellow light appears ahead. I ease my foot onto the brake pedal.

Nothing happens.

My car continues forward at the same speed. I press harder.

Still nothing.

"What the hell?" My heart jumps into my throat as I pump the brake pedal frantically. The pedal goes straight to the floor with no resistance. No slowing. No stopping.

The yellow light turns red.

"No, no, no!" I swerve into the turning lane, narrowly missing an SUV entering the intersection. The driver lays on their horn as I blow past.

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My hands get clammy on the steering wheel. Sweat breaks out across my forehead as I scan the road ahead. There's a hill coming up. If I don't slow down now?—

I jerk the emergency brake. The car fishtails, tires screeching against asphalt. For a terrifying moment, I'm certain I'll flip, but somehow I regain control, though the car barely slows.

"Think, Monica, think!" I downshift manually, the engine whining in protest. The speedometer needle finally starts to drop, but not fast enough. I'm still moving too quickly toward the busy street at the bottom of the hill.

This isn't an accident. The image of Benjamin's smirking face flashes through my mind. The photos. The vandalism. And now this.

He's trying to kill me.

A sob catches in my throat as I swerve around a parked car, searching desperately for somewhere safe to crash. The thought is absurd—there's no safe way to crash—but I need to stop this car before I hit someone else.

I yank the wheel hard to the right, aiming for an empty stretch of sidewalk where I'll only hurt myself. The car jumps the curb, tires screeching against concrete. The front end smashes into a light pole with a sickening crunch of metal.

My body lurches forward violently before the seatbelt catches, snapping my head back like a rubber band. Pain explodes through my neck and shoulders as I'm thrown against the seat.

Everything stops.

Steam hisses from the crumpled hood. The airbag deflates against my chest, leaving a burning sensation across my skin. My ears ring, drowning out the world around me.

"Oh my God." The words escape my lips in a whisper. I can't move my neck without shooting pain racing down my spine.

Benjamin did this. He fucking tampered with my brakes.

The timing isn't coincidental. Benjamin's escalating—from harassment to attempted murder. And it's all because I decided to get a restraining order on him.

I try to lift my arm to unbuckle my seatbelt, but my body refuses to cooperate. Tears stream down my face, from pain or shock or both. My vision blurs around the edges.

A face appears at my window—a woman with concerned eyes. She mouths something I can't hear through the glass and my ringing ears. With effort, I press the button to lower the window.

"Are you okay? Can you hear me?" Her voice sounds distant, underwater, like I'm listening through layers of thick glass.

I try to nod, but the movement sends another jolt of pain through my neck, sharp and electric. "I think... my neck..." The words come out slurred and weak, barely audible even to my own ears.

"Don't move," she says firmly, already pulling out her phone with practiced urgency. "I'm calling an ambulance. Just stay still. Don't try to get out."

I sit frozen in my mangled car, staring straight ahead at the crumpled hood. Benjamin

wanted me dead. The reality of it washes over me in waves, each one colder than the last. He wanted me dead because I dared to stand up to him, because I found happiness with someone else. Because I became Mrs. Blackwood instead of staying his punching bag.

The woman stays by my window, talking into her phone while keeping her eyes on me. Her free hand presses against the glass like she's trying to reach through it. "They're coming," she reassures me. "Just a few minutes. Hang in there, honey."

I can't even manage a thank you. My mouth feels stuffed with cotton. I just sit there, stunned, as sirens wail in the distance, growing louder with each passing second. The taste of fear is metallic in my mouth, mixing with what I realize must be blood from where I bit my lip during impact.

What the hell? Is this really my life right now?

30

HENRY

I stare at the pasta sauce splattered across the kitchen counter, a casualty of my attempt at making Monica's favorite dish. The recipe seemed simple enough—garlic, tomatoes, basil—but somehow I've managed to turn it into a crime scene.

"Fuck." I wipe my hands on a dish towel and check my watch again.

She should've been home an hour ago. I grab my phone, no messages. This isn't like her. Monica's always punctual, especially when food is involved. Even my shitty cooking.

I pour myself a whiskey, trying to ignore the knot forming in my gut. The pasta's

gone cold, congealing into a sad, sticky mess. Just like my attempt at being domestic.

My phone buzzes against the marble countertop. Finally. But it's not Monica's name on the screen—it's an unknown number.

"Henry Blackwood speaking."

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"Mr. Blackwood, this is Mercy General Hospital calling about your wife, Monica Blackwood."

The glass slips from my hand, shattering on the floor. My whole body goes cold.

"What happened? Is she okay?" My voice sounds foreign, like it's coming from someone else.

"Your wife was brought into the emergency room following a car accident. She's currently being treated?—"

"I'm on my way." I hang up before they can say another word.

My mind races with horrific possibilities as I grab my keys, nearly tripping over the broken glass. The elevator feels like it's moving in slow motion. I slam my palm against the wall.

"Come on, damn it!"

In the garage, I jump into my car, hands shaking so badly I can barely get the key in the ignition. Traffic laws become suggestions as I weave through the city streets, running red lights, cutting off other drivers.

All I can think about is Monica. Her laugh. The way she rolls her eyes when I say something ridiculous. How she fits perfectly against me when we sleep.

The thought of losing her—of never seeing her smile again—is unbearable. This isn't

just some arrangement anymore. This isn't fake.

I love her. I fucking love her.

And I might never get the chance to tell her.

I grip the steering wheel so tight my knuckles turn white, my mind racing faster than the speedometer as I weave between cars on the road. And then suddenly, the thought hits me. Benjamin. Benjamin, that fucking psychopath. Is he involved somehow? Did he do something to Monica to make her crash her car?

"Son of a bitch." I slam my palm against the wheel. "Son of a goddamn bitch!"

Red lights blur past as I blow through intersections. A horn blares as I cut off some SUV, but I barely register it. All I can see is Monica's face. All I can think about is what that bastard might have done to her.

This isn't just harassment anymore. This isn't just intimidation. If Benjamin tampered with her brakes, this is attempted murder.

My stomach lurches at the thought. I've been playing this all wrong—treating Benjamin like some annoying ex when he's actually a fucking predator. I should have taken this more seriously. I should have done more than hire a lawyer and make threats.

"Please be okay," I whisper, not sure who I'm talking to. "Please, please be okay."

The hospital looms ahead, its emergency lights pulsing against the darkening sky. I screech into the parking lot, tires protesting as I take the turn too fast. I spot an empty space and slam on the brakes, nearly hitting the concrete barrier.

I don't even remember turning off the engine. One second I'm in the car, the next I'm sprinting across the parking lot, dodging ambulances and tired hospital staff heading to their cars.

My heart pounds in my throat as I burst through the sliding doors into the ER waiting room. The antiseptic smell hits me like a wall—sterile, clinical, terrifying. People look up from their phones and magazines, startled by my entrance, but I don't care how I look.

"Monica Blackwood," I gasp at the reception desk, struggling to catch my breath. "My wife. Where is she? Is she okay?"

The receptionist's fingers click against her keyboard, each tap like a hammer to my skull. I grip the edge of the counter, fighting the urge to reach across and shake the answers out of her.

"Mrs. Blackwood is in room 307," she says, glancing up. "Third floor, take a left when you exit the elevator. She's been treated for her injuries and is stable."

Stable. The word should comfort me, but it doesn't. Stable could mean anything. Stable could mean she's barely hanging on. Fuck, I should've been there for her.

"What happened to her? How bad is it?" I demand, leaning over the counter. My voice comes out sharper than intended, but I can't bring myself to care. This is Monica we're talking about.

"The doctor can give you those details, sir." She hands me a visitor badge, unfazed by my intensity. "Just follow the signs to the elevators."

I mumble thanks and take off across the waiting room, dodging a kid playing with toy trucks on the floor. My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to escape. The

elevator feels like a coffin as it climbs, my reflection in the metal doors looking like a ghost—pale, haunted. I don't recognize the desperate man staring back at me.

My mind keeps cycling through worst-case scenarios. What if she's unconscious? What if there's permanent damage? What if this is just the beginning of Benjamin's revenge?

The doors slide open with a cheerful ding that feels obscene given the circumstances. I follow the signs, my footsteps echoing in the quiet hallway. Each room I pass contains someone's nightmare—curtains drawn, machines beeping, lives hanging in balance.

301... 303... 305...

I stop outside 307, my hand frozen on the door handle. There's a pit in my stomach so deep I might never climb out. What will I find on the other side? Will she blame me for not protecting her? Will she even be awake?

I take a deep breath and push the door open.

The room is dim, lit only by the glow of monitors and the slice of hallway light cutting across the floor. The steady beep of machines provides a rhythm to my racing heart as I step inside.

"Monica?" My voice comes out as a whisper.

31

MONICA

I open my eyes to see Henry walking in, his face a mix of concern and relief. My vision's still a little blurry from the tears I didn't realize were falling. The antiseptic smell of the hospital room fills my nostrils, making this nightmare all too real.

"Hey," I manage, my voice raspy and small. The pain medication has dulled most of the physical pain, but can't touch the rage and humiliation burning inside me.

Henry crosses the room in three quick strides, his presence immediately making the sterile space feel safer. He reaches out, his thumb gently wiping away a tear tracking

down my cheek.

"You okay?" he asks.

I almost laugh. Am I okay? My ankle's wrapped in a cast, my car's totaled, and my psycho ex just tried to kill me. But looking at Henry's face—those blue eyes clouded with worry—I can't bring myself to be sarcastic.

"I'm alive," I say instead. "The doctor says it's just a fractured ankle. Could've been a lot worse if I hadn't..." My voice breaks as I remember the split-second decision to swerve into that sidewalk rather than barrel through the intersection when my brakes failed.

Henry pulls a chair close to my bed, sitting down and taking my hand in his. His fingers are warm against my cold ones.

"That motherfucker is done," he says, jaw tight. "I've already called Josiah."

I squeeze his hand, anchoring myself to his strength. "I should've taken it more seriously. The texts, the restaurant... I just didn't think he'd actually?—"

"Don't," Henry cuts me off. "This isn't on you. None of it."

A nurse bustles in to check my vitals, and I fall silent, watching Henry's face. There's something different there now—a hardness I haven't seen before. It should scare me, this intensity, but instead it makes me feel protected in a way I haven't felt in years.

When we're alone again, I whisper, "I'm sorry you got dragged into my mess."

I stare at our intertwined hands, feeling the warmth of Henry's fingers against mine. My body aches, but it's the familiar ache in my chest that threatens to swallow me

whole.

"You shouldn't have to deal with this," I say, pulling my hand away. "This is exactly what I was afraid of."

Henry leans forward. "Monica?—"

"No, listen to me." I shift against the hospital pillows, wincing at the pain shooting through my ankle. "Benjamin isn't going to stop. This isn't just texts or vandalism anymore. He tried to kill me, Henry. Deep down, I knew that there was this dangerous side of him. The one that will stop at nothing to tear me down with him now that I've moved on."

The words hang in the air between us, heavy and undeniable. I watch Henry's face harden again, that protective instinct I've come to recognize.

"I've seen this movie before," I continue, my voice steadier than I feel. "I spent years disappearing into Benjamin's darkness. Losing pieces of myself until I barely recognized the woman in the mirror."

I close my eyes, memories flooding back—the constant walking on eggshells, the gradual isolation from friends, the way he'd twist my words until I doubted my own sanity.

"I can't do that to you. I won't." My throat tightens. "You deserve better than being dragged into my nightmare."

"That's not your decision to make," Henry says, his voice low and firm.

But I can see it now—the strain around his eyes, the tension in his shoulders. This fake engagement has turned into something real, something dangerous. And for

what? So his mother would stop matchmaking? So I could have financial stability?

"I think..." The words feel like glass in my throat. "I think we need to end this. The fake marriage. All of it."

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Henry's face falls, and the pain I see there nearly breaks me. But I've been here before—caring so much for someone that I let them consume me. I won't make that mistake again, and I won't let Henry sacrifice his safety, his peace, for me.

"I'm not worth all this trouble," I whisper, the old insecurities Benjamin planted rising to the surface. "I never was."

I watch Henry's face change as I say the words. Instead of relief, I see something harden in his expression. His jaw tightens, and he shakes his head slowly.

"No," he says, standing up abruptly. The chair scrapes against the hospital floor. "No fucking way."

"Henry—" I try to reach for him, but he steps back.

"This is bullshit, Monica." His voice is intense, enough to make me flinch. "You think I'm just going to walk away because things got hard? Because that psychopath tried to hurt you?"

I blink rapidly, trying to clear the tears forming. "I'm trying to protect you."

"I don't need your protection." He runs a hand through his hair, frustration radiating from him. "What I need is for you to stop pushing me away every time you get scared."

"Henry, please understand?—"

"The drugs are making you think irrationally," he cuts me off, gesturing toward my IV drip. "You've been through trauma. You're in shock. This isn't the time to make decisions about us."

My mouth falls open. "That's not fair. I'm thinking clearly?—"

"Are you?" He steps closer, leaning down until his face is inches from mine. "Because the Monica I know doesn't give up. She doesn't let assholes like Benjamin win."

"I'm not letting him win," I protest, my voice cracking. "I'm being realistic."

Henry straightens up, his eyes never leaving mine. "I'm not giving up on us. Not now. Not when I've finally found something real."

My heart hammers in my chest, the steady beep of the monitor betraying my reaction to his words. "Henry?—"

"I'll be back tomorrow when the medication wears off," he says, already moving toward the door. His jaw is set in that stubborn way I've come to recognize. "And we can talk about how we're going to fight this together. Because I'm not letting go of you that easily, Monica. Not a fucking chance."

Before I can respond, he's gone, the door clicking shut behind him with quiet finality. I stare at the empty space where he stood, stunned by his refusal to walk away. The antiseptic smell of the hospital room feels suddenly overwhelming as his absence hits me.

No one has ever fought to stay in my life before. Not like this. Not with this kind of raw determination that makes my chest ache with something dangerously close to hope.

But if staying with him means that Benjamin is going to keep targeting us, keep escalating his sick obsession with ruining what I have, then I need to make the hard decision. The right decision. Above all else, I want Henry safe—need him safe.

And I'm not sure we can achieve that if he remains my husband, fake or otherwise.

32

HENRY

I pour another three fingers of whiskey, my hands shaking as I bring the glass to my lips. The burn doesn't even register anymore. All I can think about is Monica lying in that hospital bed, bruised and broken, telling me we should end things.

"You need to slow down." Leo's voice cuts through the fog in my brain, sharp and unwelcome.

"Fuck off." I drain the glass and reach for the bottle again, the amber liquid sloshing against the sides. "She wants out, Leo. After everything we've been through."

The penthouse feels too big, too empty. Too goddamn quiet. I can still smell her perfume on the throw pillows, that subtle vanilla scent that used to drive me crazy in all the right ways. Now it's just another reminder of what I'm losing.

Leo snatches the bottle before I can grab it, his reflexes still annoyingly quick. "That's enough, Henry. You're not helping anyone by drowning yourself in Macallan. Least of all Monica."

"Give it back." I lunge for the whiskey, but Leo steps away, holding it out of reach like we're fucking teenagers. My coordination is shot to hell anyway.

"Look at yourself. This isn't you. You're better than this."

I collapse back onto the couch, running my hands through my hair, tugging at the roots. "She thinks she's protecting me. Can you believe that shit? After Benjamin tried to fucking kill her, she's worried about me. About my reputation, my family, my goddamn business."

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"And drinking yourself stupid is your solution?" Leo sets the bottle on a shelf and sits across from me. "You think Monica needs to see you like this when she gets out of the hospital?"

"She doesn't want to see me at all." My voice cracks. "Said our arrangement has gone too far. That I should be with someone who doesn't come with her baggage."

"And you're just accepting that?"

I grab a crystal paperweight from the coffee table and hurl it across the room. It shatters against the wall. "Of course I'm not accepting it! I fucking love her, Leo!"

The words hang in the air between us. It's the first time I've said it out loud.

Leo leans forward. "Then get your shit together. This isn't about your fake marriage anymore. That woman is fighting her own demons, and you're sitting here having a pity party instead of showing her you're worth fighting for."

"She could have died." My voice is barely a whisper now.

"But she didn't. And now she's scared. You want her? Prove you're not going anywhere. But you can't do that wasted."

I pace the living room, my mind clearing with each step. Leo's right—I need to get my shit together.

"Josiah's good, but this isn't just about restraining orders anymore." I grab my phone,

scrolling through my recent calls. "Benjamin tampered with her fucking brakes. That's attempted murder."

Leo nods, his expression grim. "Josiah specializes in corporate law. You need someone who handles criminal cases."

"You know someone?" I ask, already knowing the answer. Leo's network is even more extensive than mine.

"I've got two people in mind. Alexandra Chen—she's a former prosecutor who specializes in domestic violence cases. And Marcus Daniels—he's ruthless, puts criminals away for decades."

I stop pacing. "Call them both. I want options."

"Already texted them." Leo shows me his phone screen. "They'll meet us tomorrow morning."

"What about evidence? The police took photos of the brake lines, but?—"

"I can have my security team document everything," Leo interrupts. "They can work with the NYPD, get surveillance footage from nearby buildings, interview witnesses. Benjamin's not walking away from this."

I sink into the armchair, my head in my hands. "I should have done more after the restaurant vandalism. I knew he was escalating."

"You couldn't have predicted this," Leo says firmly. "But now we know what he's capable of. We're not just protecting Monica's reputation anymore—we're protecting her life."

"I need to see her." The thought of Monica alone in that hospital room, thinking she needs to push me away, makes my chest ache.

"Tomorrow. After we meet with the lawyers." Leo's tone brooks no argument. "You need to show up with a plan, not just promises. She needs to know you're handling this. Henry, we're going to nail this bastard to the wall. He's not just messing with Monica anymore—he's messing with family."

Family. The word hits differently now. Because that's what Monica is to me. Not a convenient arrangement, not a business deal. Family. Mine.

"I want him in prison," I say, my voice steady for the first time tonight. "For a very long time."

"Trust me," Leo says, his eyes cold. "After we're done with him, Benjamin won't see daylight for years."

I pull Leo into a tight hug, clapping him hard on the back. "Thank you for coming over. I don't know what the fuck I would've done if you hadn't shown up."

"You'd have finished that bottle and made some stupid decisions." Leo pulls back, gripping my shoulders. "That's what family's for—stopping you from being a complete dumbass."

I laugh despite myself. "Still looking out for me after all these years."

"Someone has to." Leo's expression softens. "I love you, little cousin. Always have. Always will. When you called, there was no question I'd be here."

The words hit me hard. Leo and I have always been close, but we're not typically the type to get sentimental. The Blackwood men don't do feelings—at least that's what

we were taught.

"I know," I say, my voice rough with emotion. "And I appreciate it more than you know. Seriously."

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Leo drops onto the couch, loosening his tie with a quick tug. "Remember when you were ten and punched that kid at summer camp for stealing my watch? You were this scrawny little shit taking on a kid twice your size. And I was seventeen. I didn't need your little ass doing that for me." His eyes crinkle at the corners, the way they always do when he's remembering something that amuses him.

"Yeah, and I got my ass handed to me as a result." I smile at the memory, rubbing my jaw as if I can still feel the sting from that day. "You jumped in and finished the fight. Broke the kid's nose if I remember right."

"That's us, Henry. I'll always step in when you need me. No questions asked." He claps my shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. "That's never gonna change."

I sink down next to him, suddenly exhausted but clearer-headed than I've been all night. The alcohol's fog is lifting, leaving behind a crystal-clear realization. "I love her, Leo. Not for show, not for convenience. I actually fucking love her." The words feel strange and terrifying coming out of my mouth, but also completely right.

The realization washes over me again, stronger this time. When did it happen? Was it during those late-night conversations about our dreams? Or when she stood up to the whole world, the whole media, with that quiet confidence? Maybe it was watching her in the kitchen, completely in her element, creating something beautiful from nothing.

"I know you do." Leo's voice pulls me back. "I've seen how you look at her. Hell, I knew before you did."

"What am I going to do if she pushes me away for good?"

"You're not going to let her." Leo's tone is matter-of-fact. "You're going to fight for her, the way she's been fighting for herself all these years."

33

MONICA

I glance up at the sound of the door opening, expecting to see another nurse with more paperwork. Instead, Olivia and Celia burst in like a ray of sunshine, arms loaded with what looks like half a farmer's market.

"Girl, what the hell were you thinking?" Celia's voice fills the sterile room as she drops a massive bouquet on my bedside table. "Driving with bad brakes? Are you trying to give us all heart attacks?"

"I didn't exactly want this, y'know," I say, feeling a smile spread across my face despite the dull ache in my ankle and the scrapes on my arms.

Olivia leans down to hug me, careful not to disturb my IV. "We brought you real food. Hospital stuff is garbage."

"Thank God." I eye the containers they're unpacking. "Is that your jerk chicken?"

"With extra spice," Celia confirms. "And Olivia's coconut rice pudding for dessert."

The smell of proper seasoning hits my nostrils, and suddenly I'm ravenous. As they pull up chairs on either side of my bed, the stark hospital room transforms into something warmer, filled with their energy.

"We all miss you and we're glad that you're okay," Olivia says, spooning food onto a plate. "Everyone at Taste of Heaven signed you a card for when you get back to work. No rush, though. Take all the time you need."

I take a bite of the jerk chicken, letting the familiar spices warm me from the inside. These women have been more than culinary colleagues—they've become my family. The thought brings a lump to my throat.

"Okay, what's going on in that head of yours?" Celia asks, leaning forward. "And don't say 'nothing.' Your face is doing that thing it does when you're overthinking."

I set my fork down. "Is it that obvious?"

"Transparent as hell," Olivia confirms.

"I'm scared." The words tumble out before I can stop them. "Benjamin's escalating, and now Henry's caught in the middle of my mess. I keep thinking maybe I should just..." I trail off, unable to finish the thought.

"Should just what? Push Henry away?" Celia's eyes narrow.

"That's exactly why I'm freaking out. Henry doesn't deserve this. He signed up for a fake engagement, not a psycho ex trying to kill me." My voice cracks. "What if Benjamin hurts him too? I couldn't live with myself."

Olivia reaches for my hand. "Monica, you've told us a bit about your past relationship with Benjamin. And to me, it seems like you've spent years believing you had to handle everything alone. That's Benjamin's voice in your head, not yours."

"I know, but?—"

"No buts," Celia interrupts. "That man convinced you that you weren't worth fighting for. And now you've got someone who thinks you are, and you're ready to run?"

Tears well up in my eyes. "I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to let someone in without waiting for everything to fall apart."

"By trusting yourself first," Olivia says softly. "The Monica I know is strong as hell. You rebuilt your life after Benjamin. You're killing it in your career. Why can't you believe you deserve love too?"

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I wipe at my eyes. "Because what if I'm wrong about Henry? What if I'm just seeing what I want to see?"

"Honey," Celia says, "that man looks at you like you hung the damn moon. That's not fake."

Something shifts inside me—a tiny crack in the wall I've built around my heart.

"You're not alone in this," Olivia adds. "Not with Benjamin, not with Henry, not with any of it. We've got you."

I sit with Olivia and Celia's words echoing in my mind as they continue unpacking containers of food. The familiar aromas ground me, reminding me of kitchens where I've always felt most like myself. Most in control.

"You're right," I finally say, straightening up against my pillows. "I've been letting Benjamin dictate my choices even when he's not in the room."

"Damn straight." Celia nods, handing me another napkin. "That man's had real estate in your head rent-free for too long."

I take a deep breath, feeling something shift inside me—like puzzle pieces clicking into place. "I'm tired of being afraid. I'm tired of waiting for the other shoe to drop."

"So what are you going to do about it?" Olivia asks, her eyes fixed on mine.

"Stop running, for one thing." I pick up my fork again, stabbing a piece of chicken

with newfound determination. "Henry deserves better than me pushing him away because I'm scared."

Celia's face breaks into a wide smile. "Now we're talking."

"He loves you, you know," Olivia says quietly. "That's not part of any arrangement or deal you made. The way he looks at you when you're not watching..."

"Girl, that man is gone for you," Celia adds. "And from what I can see, you feel the same way."

Blood rushes to my ears, but I don't deny it. "I do. And that terrifies me."

"Good things should scare you a little," Olivia squeezes my hand. "It means they matter."

I think about Henry—his unwavering support, his fierce protectiveness, the way he makes me feel both safe and exhilarated. The thought of pushing him away now makes my chest ache.

"I don't want him to walk away," I admit softly. "I just don't want him to get hurt because of me."

"That's his choice to make," Celia says firmly. "And from where I'm sitting, he's already made it."

I nod, feeling a new resolve hardening within me. Benjamin may have tampered with my brakes, but I won't let him sabotage my future anymore. I have people in my corner now—not just Olivia and Celia, but Henry too.

And for the first time in years, I'm ready to fight not just for my career or my

independence, but for love too.

I pick at the coconut rice pudding, savoring the sweet comfort it brings. My hospital room feels more like a gathering place now with Olivia and Celia here, their presence chasing away the sterile loneliness.

"By the way," Olivia says, leaning in close, "I overheard Leo on the phone with the lawyers yesterday." She raises an eyebrow meaningfully. "Those Blackwood men are not playing around with Benjamin."

My spoon pauses halfway to my mouth. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they're going to bury him." Olivia's voice is low but firm. "Leo was talking about restraining orders, harassment charges, attempted vehicular homicide—the works. And they've got connections with the DA's office."

"Henry didn't tell me all that," I murmur, feeling a strange mix of relief and apprehension wash over me.

Celia snorts. "Of course he didn't. Your man's trying not to worry you while you're laid up in here." She gestures to my ankle. "But trust me, that family protects their own. And like it or not, Mrs. Blackwood, that includes you now."

Mrs. Blackwood. The name still feels foreign on my tongue, even after all these weeks of pretending. Except it doesn't feel like pretending anymore.

"They've got investigators documenting everything," Olivia continues. "The text messages, the restaurant vandalism, your brake lines—it's all evidence. Leo said they're building an airtight case."

I sink back against my pillows, letting this information settle over me. For years,

Benjamin made me feel powerless, like I was always one step behind him. But now...

"You know what's weird?" I say, setting my pudding aside. "I actually believe Benjamin can't hurt me anymore."

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"Because he can't," Celia says firmly. "Not with the Blackwoods in your corner."

A sense of calm washes over me—not the false security I used to manufacture for myself, but something genuine and solid. For the first time since Benjamin reappeared in my life, I feel truly safe.

"It's more than just legal protection," I say quietly. "It's knowing I'm not facing this alone anymore. That I have people who believe me, who believe in me."

Olivia squeezes my hand. "That's what family does."

Family. The word resonates inside me, filling empty spaces I didn't know existed. The Blackwoods aren't just Henry's relatives anymore—they've become my shield, my advocates, my people.

"I think I'm going to be okay," I whisper, and I mean it.

34

HENRY

I lean against Leo's black Rover, the night air crisp against my face. The parking lot is empty except for our three cars, strategically positioned for what's about to go down.

"You sure this fucker's home?" Aston asks, taking a swig of his beer. His normally polished demeanor has an edge tonight—we all do.

"Followed him myself," Leo says, checking his watch. "Hasn't left since this morning. Guy's holed up in there like he knows what's coming."

I roll the cold bottle between my palms, feeling a strange calm settle over me. After days of gathering evidence—the texts, the brake line tampering, security footage from the restaurant—it's finally happening. The bastard who threatened my wife isn't walking away this time.

"How's Monica holding up?" Aston's voice cuts through my thoughts.

"Better. Still jumpy." I take a long pull from my beer, the bitter taste matching my mood. "She didn't want me here tonight. Said I shouldn't see this. Worried about what I might do."

Leo snorts. "But here you are anyway."

"Damn right. I'm not missing this for the world." My fingers tighten around the bottle. "Nobody fucks with what's mine and walks away unscathed."

The police cruisers pull up without sirens, four officers emerging with purposeful strides. My heart pounds against my ribs as they approach Benjamin's building.

"Think they'll find the tools he used on her car?" Aston asks.

"Don't need to," I say, eyes locked on the third-floor window. "We've got him on camera at the restaurant parking lot. Footage of him buying the tools. The lawyer says it's fucking airtight."

"Blackwood resources, baby." Leo clinks his bottle against mine. "Nobody fucks with family."

Family. The word catches me off guard. When did Monica become family? Somewhere between our fake engagement and real feelings, between her nightmares and my promises, she became everything.

The lights flick on in Benjamin's apartment. Shadows move behind the blinds. I straighten up, every muscle tense.

"Here we go," Leo murmurs.

The front door of the building bursts open. Two officers emerge with Benjamin between them, hands cuffed behind his back. Even from this distance, I can see the rage twisting his face as he scans the street, looking for witnesses to his humiliation.

His eyes find mine across the pavement. Recognition flashes, followed by pure hatred.

I raise my beer in a silent toast.

"That's for her, you piece of shit," I whisper.

Benjamin jerks against the officers' grip, his face contorted with rage. "Get your fucking hands off me! You can't do this!"

I take another swig of beer, savoring the moment. This piece of shit tampered with Monica's brakes. Could've killed her. Now he's getting exactly what he deserves.

"Look at this asshole," Leo quips, leaning against his Rover. "Thinks he's tough."

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Benjamin thrashes harder, managing to spit at one of the officers. Big mistake. The cop's patience snaps like a twig.

"Bring the mask!" he shouts to his partner.

Aston raises his eyebrows. "Oh shit, this is getting good."

I can't help the smile spreading across my face as they wrestle Benjamin to the ground. He bucks and writhes like a caught fish, screaming obscenities that echo through the empty parking lot. It takes three officers to pin him down while the fourth retrieves a white mesh spit mask from the cruiser.

"No! You can't—" Benjamin's protests are muffled as they force the mask over his head.

"Cheers to that." I raise my bottle, clinking it against Leo's and Aston's. The satisfaction flowing through me is better than any alcohol.

"Never fuck with a Blackwood," Leo says, his eyes gleaming with dark amusement.

The cops haul Benjamin to his feet, his dignity in tatters along with his tough-guy act. He looks pathetic now, stumbling between the officers, the mask giving him the appearance of a captured animal.

"Get in the car!" an officer barks, shoving Benjamin's head down as they stuff him into the back seat.

"Think Monica would've enjoyed this show?" Aston asks.

I shake my head, finishing my beer. "Nah. She's too good for this. Too decent."

"Unlike us vindictive bastards," Leo laughs.

Benjamin makes one last attempt to resist, kicking at the door frame. The officers aren't having it. One grabs his legs while another pushes from behind. They fold him into the cruiser like he's nothing more than garbage being taken out.

"Looks like our entertainment for the evening is over, gentlemen," I say, feeling a weight lift from my shoulders.

I crush the empty bottle in my hand as the cruiser disappears around the corner, taking that piece of shit with it. The tension in my shoulders finally starts to unwind.

"That's that," Leo says, tossing his bottle into the nearby recycling bin with perfect aim. "Attempted murder, stalking, harassment, destruction of property. Fucker's going away for a long time."

"How long we talking?" I ask, already calculating the years in my head.

Aston straightens his designer jacket, looking more like a corporate shark than ever. "My buddy at the DA's office says with the evidence we've compiled, they're pushing for maximum sentences across the board. The brake tampering alone is worth seven to ten."

"Add in the prior harassment, the restaurant vandalism, those fucking photos he sent..." Leo counts on his fingers. "We're looking at fifteen, minimum."

A vicious satisfaction spreads through my chest. Fifteen years. Fifteen years of

Monica being able to walk down a street without looking over her shoulder. Fifteen years to build our life together without his shadow hanging over us.

"DA owes me three favors," Aston adds with a smirk. "I'll make sure they don't offer any plea deals. Full prosecution."

"Fuck yeah." I clap Aston on the shoulder, feeling a surge of savage pleasure. "Worth every goddamn penny of those legal fees. I'd pay ten times that to see this through."

Leo checks his phone, scrolling through messages with a predatory smile. "Judge Harriman's on rotation next week. She's tough as nails on domestic cases. Benjamin picked the wrong fucking time to pull this shit. She once gave a guy twelve years for half of what this asshole's done."

The thought of Benjamin rotting in a cell while Monica thrives fills me with a satisfaction I've never felt before. This isn't just about revenge—it's justice. It's protection. It's making sure the woman I love never has to fear again. Every time I remember those photos he sent her, the way he tried to sabotage her career, how he made her constantly look over her shoulder—my blood boils all over again.

"To Benjamin," I raise an imaginary toast, my voice hard as steel. "May he enjoy prison food for the next decade and a half. And may every fucking day feel twice as long."

"To Benjamin," they echo, matching my dark humor, glasses of scotch raised in the air like we're celebrating a business deal instead of a man's downfall. But this is the best deal I've ever made—Monica's safety is non-negotiable.

"You really don't need to do all this," I say, watching Henry fuss with my discharge paperwork. He's been hovering like a helicopter since this morning, barely leaving my side except to grab fresh clothes for me.

"I absolutely do need to do all this." Henry doesn't even look up from the clipboard. His jaw is set in that stubborn way I'm starting to recognize. "The doctor said you need to stay off that ankle for at least two weeks."

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"I know what the doctor said. I was there." I shift on the edge of the hospital bed, wincing as my bruised ribs protest.

Henry immediately abandons the paperwork and is at my side. "What hurts? Should I call the nurse back?"

"I'm fine. Just sore." I squeeze his hand. "Really."

His blue eyes search mine, looking for any sign I'm downplaying my pain. "The car is waiting downstairs. I've already had your prescriptions filled."

A nurse wheels in a wheelchair, and Henry helps me into it despite my protests that I can manage. His hands are gentle but firm on my waist, careful to avoid my injuries.

"Mrs. Blackwood, here are your discharge instructions." The nurse hands me a folder of papers. "And your crutches are in the car as requested, Mr. Blackwood."

It still gives me a little jolt hearing myself called that. Mrs. Blackwood. Fake wife to a man who's becoming increasingly real to me.

Outside, Henry helps me into the back of a sleek black SUV. He slides in beside me, immediately adjusting pillows behind my back and placing a blanket over my legs.

"Henry, I'm not an invalid."

"Humor me." He tucks the blanket around my legs. "I've never had someone I care about get hurt like this before."

The simple admission steals my breath more effectively than my bruised ribs. Someone I care about. The words hang between us.

"I've arranged for a nurse to check on you daily," he continues, "and I've cleared my schedule for the next week."

"You what? Henry, you can't put your life on hold?—"

"Watch me." His hand finds mine, fingers intertwining. "I'm not leaving you alone, Monica. Besides," he adds with a hint of that smile that makes my stomach flip. "Who else is going to make sure you actually follow doctor's orders?"

The city blurs past the car window as we head toward our building. Henry takes my hand in his, giving me a gentle squeeze.

"We got him, Monica." Henry's voice pulls me from my thoughts "Leo, Aston, and I were there when they took Benjamin away."

I turn to face him, my heart suddenly racing. "What? When?"

"A few days ago." Henry's eyes are bright with satisfaction. "The police picked him up at his apartment in East Harlem. Three squad cars. They didn't take any chances."

The image of Benjamin being led away in handcuffs hits me like a physical force. After years of him making me feel powerless, the tables have finally turned.

"You should've seen his face," Henry continues, a hard edge to his voice I rarely hear. "All that smug confidence gone in an instant when they slapped those cuffs on him."

"You three went there? That was dangerous, Henry." Despite my words, gratitude warms me from the inside out.

He shrugs. "We stayed back. Leo called in some favors to make sure we'd know when they were making the arrest. The evidence was overwhelming once the police saw the brake line and matched it with the security footage from the parking lot."

"So it's really over?" My voice sounds small even to my own ears.

Henry shifts closer, his arm sliding around my shoulders. "The DA's office is going to throw the whole book at him. Attempted murder, stalking, harassment, property damage. He's going away for a very long time."

I lean into Henry's warmth, letting the reality sink in. Benjamin can't hurt me anymore. The relief is so intense it brings tears to my eyes.

"Hey," Henry says softly, brushing a tear from my cheek. "It's done. You're safe now."

I nod, unable to speak past the lump in my throat. For the first time in what feels like forever, I believe it might be true.

The car pulls up to our building, and Henry's out before I can even reach for the door handle. He circles around and opens my door, leaning in with an outstretched hand.

"Easy does it," he says, helping me slide across the seat.

I grip his forearm, wincing as I put weight on my good leg. The crutches are awkward, and I'm already dreading the stairs and elevator.

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"I got you," Henry murmurs, his arm steady around my waist. "One step at a time."

The doorman rushes to help, holding the door open wide. "Mrs. Blackwood! We heard what happened. Terrible business."

"Thanks, Frank." I manage a smile despite the pain shooting up my side.

We make slow progress through the lobby. Henry's patience never wavers, matching his pace to mine, stopping whenever I need a moment. The elevator ride is silent, but his hand never leaves the small of my back.

When the doors open, I'm surprised when Henry presses the button for his floor, not mine.

"My penthouse is downstairs," I remind him, confused.

"I think it's about time you move in fully with me," Henry says, his tone gentle but leaving no room for argument. "At least while you heal. You shouldn't be alone right now."

My heart skips. We've maintained separate spaces since the beginning of our arrangement—my floor has been my sanctuary, my escape when things got overwhelming.

"I can manage?—"

"Monica." His voice is soft. "Please. Let me take care of you."

I look up at him, at the concern etched in the lines around his eyes, and something inside me surrenders.

"Okay."

Relief washes over his face. "We'll get whatever you need from downstairs later."

The elevator opens directly into his penthouse. It's familiar territory—I've been here countless times—but it feels different knowing I'll be staying.

"I want to be with you too," I admit quietly as he helps me to the couch. "I'm just not used to letting someone take care of me."

Henry kneels in front of me, carefully arranging pillows under my injured ankle. "Well, get used to it. Because I'm not going anywhere."

Henry helps me settle onto his plush couch, gently lifting my injured ankle onto a pillow. His touch is tender, almost reverent, as he tucks a blanket around my legs. When he sits beside me, there's a tension in his shoulders I haven't seen before.

"Are you comfortable?" he asks, his voice uncharacteristically nervous.

"As comfortable as someone with a sprained ankle and bruised ribs can be." I try to smile, but something in his expression makes my heart flutter.

He takes a deep breath and runs a hand through his hair. "Monica, I need to tell you something."

"Okay..." My pulse quickens.

"This whole situation with Benjamin—" He stops, shaking his head. "No, that's not

right. It started long before that." Henry takes my hand between both of his, his eyes fixed on our intertwined fingers. "When I first suggested this arrangement, I thought it would be simple. Convenient for both of us."

I hold my breath, afraid to interrupt whatever confession is coming.

"But nothing about being with you has been simple." His eyes meet mine, intense and vulnerable. "I've fallen in love with you, Monica. Completely. And these past few days, thinking I could have lost you..." His voice breaks. "It made me realize I can't pretend anymore. This isn't fake for me. It hasn't been for a long time."

The words hang in the air between us. Henry Blackwood loves me. Not as part of our arrangement. Not as a friend. He loves me.

"Say something," he whispers, uncertainty clouding his features.

"I..." My voice fails me as tears spring to my eyes. "I've been so scared to admit it, even to myself."

Hope flickers across his face. "Admit what?"

"That I've fallen for you too." The words rush out, bringing with them an overwhelming sense of relief. "I've been fighting it because I was terrified of being hurt again, of trusting someone again. But you're nothing like him. You've shown me that every day."

Henry's face transforms with joy. He cups my cheek, his thumb gently wiping away a tear. "I love you, Monica West. And I'm not going to hide that anymore."

36

HENRY

I wake up to the smell of bacon and pancakes, confused and half-asleep. Sunlight streams through the blinds, casting warm stripes across the empty side of the bed where Monica should be resting. Fuck. She's supposed to be off her feet.

I bolt upright, grabbing a t-shirt and pulling it over my head as I rush toward the kitchen. The sound of a pan sizzling and soft humming confirms my suspicions.

"What the hell are you doing?" I demand, rounding the corner to find Monica standing at the stove—on one foot—her crutches propped against the counter as she flips pancakes with expert precision. Her fractured ankle is still in its cast, elevated slightly as she balances.

"Good morning to you too, sunshine," she says without turning around, the spatula moving with practiced ease despite her awkward stance.

"Monica, you're supposed to be resting. The doctor said?—"

"The doctor said a lot of things." She pivots carefully, using the counter for support. "But what he didn't say was that I had to stop living my life."

I cross the kitchen in three strides, positioning myself beside her. "You were discharged yesterday. Your ankle is fractured. You could fall and hurt yourself worse."

"Henry, I've been cooking on my feet for twelve-hour shifts since I was twenty-two. I think I can handle making breakfast on one foot." She slides a perfect golden pancake onto a growing stack. "Besides, I was going crazy just lying there."

"That's what Netflix is for," I grumble, but I can't help admiring her stubbornness.

She places a finger against my lips. "Shh. Just sit down and eat. I needed this—to feel normal, to do something with my hands that isn't filling out police reports or looking through old text messages."

The fight drains out of me. I understand needing control when everything else feels chaotic. I move behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist carefully, my chin resting on her shoulder.

"At least let me help, Mrs. Blackwood." I slide my hands down to her hips, steadying her. "Let me take over. You've done the hard part."

"I'm perfectly capable?—"

"I know you are. That's not the point." I reach around her for the spatula. "The point is that I'm here to help, whether you like it or not."

Monica reluctantly surrenders the spatula with a dramatic sigh, but I catch the hint of relief in her eyes. I help her gather her crutches, then take over flipping the remaining pancakes while she supervises from a safer distance.

"The bacon needs to come out in thirty seconds," she instructs. "Not a second longer or it'll be too crisp."

I follow her directions to the letter, plating everything exactly as she specifies—bacon arranged in perfect parallel lines, pancakes stacked with military

precision. Once breakfast is ready, I guide her to the table, my hand at the small of her back, careful not to throw her off balance with the crutches.

"Your dining room awaits, Chef Blackwood," I say, pulling out her chair with a little flourish.

She eases into it with a grimace, propping her injured ankle on the chair I've positioned across from her. I set our plates down and take my seat beside her, close enough that our shoulders almost touch.

"This looks incredible," I say, cutting into the stack of pancakes. The first bite confirms it—fluffy, buttery perfection. "Fuck, Monica. This is amazing. Like, restaurant-quality amazing."

She smiles, a genuine one that reaches her eyes and softens her whole face. "Just pancakes."

"Not just pancakes. Your pancakes." I take another bite, savoring the subtle hint of vanilla and cinnamon. "And has anyone ever told you how goddamn beautiful you are in the morning? Because they should have."

She rolls her eyes, but I notice the slight smile on her lips as she fiddles with her fork. "I'm in pajamas with bedhead and a broken ankle. Hardly cover model material."

"And you're still stunning." I reach over to tuck a stray curl behind her ear. "I mean it. Most beautiful woman I've ever seen, especially like this—no makeup, just you."

"You're ridiculous," she mutters, but she's smiling.

"I'm serious. Beautiful and talented." I gesture to my nearly empty plate. "Where did you learn to cook like this? These aren't restaurant pancakes. These are something

else entirely."

"My grandmother," she says softly. "Sunday mornings were sacred in her house. I learned all her tips and tricks over the years."

I reach for her hand across the table, squeezing gently. "Well, she taught you well."

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I polish off the last bite of pancake, savoring the sweet buttery flavor. "You know what's unfair? You cook better with one functioning leg than most chefs do with all their limbs."

Monica laughs, spearing a piece of bacon. "Cooking isn't about how many limbs you have. It's about knowing your ingredients."

"Is that why you taste-test everything I cook with that skeptical expression?" I raise an eyebrow at her.

"I do not look skeptical!" She tosses her napkin at me.

"You absolutely do. Your left eyebrow goes up like this—" I demonstrate, making an exaggerated face of suspicion. "And then you do this little head tilt, like you're thinking 'bless his heart, he tried.'"

She nearly chokes on her orange juice. "I do not!"

"You absolutely do. Every time I cook for you."

"Maybe because you think salt is a personality trait," she counters, grinning.

I clutch my chest in mock offense. "You wound me, Mrs. Blackwood. Salt is an art form in the culinary world, I'll have you know."

When we finish eating, Monica shifts in her seat, reaching for her crutches. "Let me help with the dishes."

"Absolutely not." I stand quickly, collecting both our plates before she can protest. "You stay right where you are." I stack her silverware on top with a definitive clink.

"Henry, I can at least dry?—"

"Nope." I stack the dishes with practiced efficiency, moving them out of her reach. "Consider the kitchen off-limits until further notice. Doctor's orders."

"That's ridiculous. I'm not an invalid." She sits up straighter, that stubborn gleam in her eyes I've come to recognize all too well.

I turn to face her, hands on my hips. "Did I say you were? No. But you have a broken ankle, and standing at the sink isn't going to help it heal. Besides, I'm perfectly capable of washing a few dishes without burning down the apartment."

She opens her mouth to argue, but I cut her off.

"Just relax. Put on some music, read a book, plot world domination—whatever you want. But the dishes are mine."

Monica sighs dramatically but settles back in her chair. "Fine. But only because you're being so damn stubborn about it. And my ankle is not broken, I'll have you know. It's only fractured."

"Same thing." I grin victoriously, collecting the remaining dishes and carrying them to the sink. As I rinse plates and load the dishwasher, I catch her watching me with a soft smile.

"What?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder.

"Nothing," she says, that smile still playing on her lips. "Just enjoying the view."

MONICA

I stretch my legs as much as I can with this damn cast still on my ankle. Being stuck in bed all day has me wanting to climb the walls, even in Henry's luxurious penthouse with its ridiculously comfortable mattress and thousand-thread-count sheets.

"I'm so fucking bored," I groan, tossing my phone aside after scrolling through the same social media posts for the third time today. The walls of this penthouse are starting to close in on me, no matter how pristine and perfect they are.

Henry looks up from his laptop, those blue eyes catching the afternoon light streaming through the windows. The sun hits him just right, highlighting the sharp angles of his jaw. "Poor baby. Been a whole six hours since you tried to sneak into the kitchen, huh?" His voice carries that teasing tone that both irritates and thrills me.

"I wasn't sneaking. I was getting water." I fold my arms across my chest defensively. "It's not a crime to be thirsty."

"Mmhmm." He closes his laptop with a definitive click and sets it on the nightstand. "You know what the doctor said. Rest." He emphasizes the last word like it's a command, all business-like in that way that reminds me he runs a multi-million dollar company.

"I've rested enough to hibernate for winter." I shift against the pillows, wincing slightly when my ankle twinges. "I need something to do. Anything. I'm dying here, Henry. My brain cells are committing mass suicide from boredom."

Henry's mouth curves into that smile that still makes my stomach flip, the one that's equal parts dangerous and delicious. His eyes darken just enough for me to catch it. "I

can entertain you," he says, his voice dropping an octave lower.

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"Yeah? You gonna read me a bedtime story?" I tease, but my breath catches when he moves closer, his weight shifting the mattress.

"Not exactly what I had in mind." His voice drops lower as he leans in, his lips finding the sensitive spot just below my ear.

"Henry..." His name comes out half-warning, half-plea.

"Just relax." His mouth trails down my neck, leaving a path of heat that spreads through my body. "Let me take care of you."

His fingers slide under my t-shirt, tracing patterns on my skin that make me shiver.

But then his hand moves lower, slipping beneath the waistband of my shorts. His fingers find me already wet, and I can't help the gasp that escapes me when he starts circling my clit.

"Fuck," I whisper, my hips rising instinctively to meet his touch.

"Is this okay?" he murmurs against my neck, his fingers pausing.

I nod, unable to form words as he resumes those slow, deliberate circles. My eyes flutter closed as pleasure builds, hot and insistent.

"You're so beautiful," he says, his voice rough with desire as he watches my reactions. "So fucking perfect."

His fingers move faster, and I grab his arm, not to stop him but to anchor myself as everything inside me tightens and builds.

Henry's fingers slide deeper inside me, making me gasp. The rhythm he sets is maddening—just slow enough to build tension but not fast enough to push me over the edge.

"Please," I whisper, my voice breaking as he adds another finger, stretching me in the most delicious way.

"Please what?" His breath is hot against my ear, his voice rough with desire. "Tell me what you need, Monica."

I buck my hips against his hand, desperate for more friction. "Faster... I need—fuck!"

My words dissolve into a moan as his thumb circles my clit, sending jolts of pleasure through my body. His fingers curl inside me, finding that spot that makes my vision blur.

"Like this?" he asks, knowing damn well what he's doing to me.

"Yes," I pant, clutching at his shoulders. "God, yes."

Henry's mouth finds my neck, teeth grazing my skin before he sucks hard enough to leave a mark. The slight pain mixed with pleasure makes me arch against him, my good leg squirming from the delicious sensation.

His fingers move faster now, his thumb applying just the right pressure to my clit. I'm trembling, teetering on the edge, my body wound so tight I might shatter.

"Henry," I gasp, digging my nails into his back. "Don't stop."

He groans against my neck, the vibration sending another wave of pleasure through me. "I won't. I've got you."

The pressure builds and builds until I can't take it anymore. I'm begging incoherently now, my hips moving desperately against his hand, chasing the release I need so badly.

The pressure inside me finally shatters, and I come apart completely, crying out Henry's name as waves of pleasure crash through me. My body trembles uncontrollably as I clench around his fingers, my release coating his hand. The orgasm feels endless, each aftershock making me gasp and shudder.

"That's it, baby," Henry murmurs, his voice thick with desire. "Let go for me."

When I finally catch my breath, I open my eyes to find him watching me with an intensity that makes my heart race all over again. Without breaking eye contact, he slowly withdraws his fingers and brings them to his mouth. He sucks them clean, his eyes darkening with satisfaction.

"Fuck, you taste incredible," he groans. "Sweet and perfect."

I feel my body flush with heat, but I can't look away. There's something primal about watching him taste me that makes desire pool low in my belly again.

"I'm sorry I can't fuck you properly," he says, leaning down to kiss me softly. "Not with your ankle like this. But I promise, the minute you're healed enough..." His voice trails off as his hand slides up my thigh again.

"The minute I'm healed enough, what?" I challenge, already addicted to his touch. My body hums with anticipation, eager for whatever he's about to promise me.

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He grins, that dangerous smile that makes my heart skip. "The minute you're healed enough, I'm going to make you come so many times you'll forget your own name." His voice drops an octave, rough with desire, and I feel it like a physical caress down my spine.

I reach up to pull him down for a kiss, my fingers threading through his hair. The silky strands wrap around my fingers as I tug him closer. "I'm going to hold you to that promise, Blackwood." My words are breathless against his mouth.

"Count on it, Mrs. Blackwood," he whispers against my lips, the possessiveness in his tone making heat pool between my thighs all over again.

God, I can't get enough of this man. Henry Blackwood has become someone I can't imagine living without. His touch, his voice, the way he looks at me like I'm the only woman in the world—it's intoxicating. Every time he calls me Mrs. Blackwood, something primal and satisfied unfurls inside me, despite how our arrangement began.

And it makes me happy to know that he's all mine. Not just on paper or for show, but in these private moments when there's no one to perform for. Just us, tangled together, making promises with our bodies that our lips haven't quite caught up to yet.

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HENRY

I guide Monica through Flavor Fusion's entrance, my hand resting protectively at the

small of her back. The past few weeks have been a goddamn rollercoaster, but seeing her walk without wincing makes my chest tight in the best way possible.

"Mrs. Blackwood," I whisper in her ear as we approach the hostess stand, loving how her body responds to the title with a slight shiver.

Olivia spots us immediately and rushes over, embracing Monica first.

"Look at you walking without that boot! Thank God." She pulls back, examining Monica from head to toe. "And in those heels? Damn, girl."

"Had to make up for lost time," Monica laughs, doing a little twirl that makes my mouth go dry.

Olivia turns to me with a knowing smirk. "You two are getting the royal treatment tonight. No arguments."

She leads us to the best table in the house—secluded corner, perfect view of the city lights, ambient music just loud enough to provide privacy without shouting.

"I've got a special menu planned," Olivia announces as we sit. "And Leo sent over a bottle of that Japanese whiskey you love, Henry."

"Shit, tell him thanks," I say, watching as a server appears with the bottle and two crystal glasses.

Monica raises an eyebrow. "Pulling out all the stops tonight, huh?"

"Only the best for my wife," I respond, enjoying how the word feels less like a performance now.

The whiskey arrives alongside a stunning plate of appetizers—delicate tuna tartare with wasabi cream, lobster bites with truffle aioli, and something with caviar that looks like it belongs in a museum.

"Olivia said these are all your favorites," Monica says, her eyes sparkling in the candlelight.

I take her hand across the table, running my thumb over her knuckles. "My favorite thing is seeing you happy and healthy."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't pull away. "Smooth talker."

"Only with you." I lift my glass. "To new beginnings."

Monica clinks her glass against mine, her smile genuine and open in a way I rarely saw before. "To us."

I savor the first bite of Wagyu steak, watching Monica's expression as she tastes the truffle risotto. Her eyes close momentarily, and that small smile appears—the one that makes my heart race.

"Olivia outdid herself," she murmurs, taking another bite.

"She knows we've been through hell lately." I reach across the table, brushing my fingers against hers. "You deserve this night."

The weight of the small velvet box in my jacket pocket suddenly feels significant. I've been carrying it around for days, waiting for the perfect moment.

"Speaking of deserving things..." I clear my throat, suddenly nervous. "I've been thinking about us—about this whole arrangement."

Monica's fork pauses halfway to her mouth. "What about it?"

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I take a deep breath and pull out the box, setting it on the table between us. Her eyes widen.

"Henry, what's?—"

"I want this to be real, Monica. All of it." I open the box, revealing a three-carat oval diamond set in platinum with smaller diamonds cascading down the band. "No more pretending. I want you as my wife—for real this time."

Her hand flies to her mouth. "Oh my God."

"The first ring was rushed. This one..." I take it out, holding it between us. "This is what you deserve. Something chosen specifically for you."

Monica's eyes fill with tears as I slip it onto her finger. Perfect fit.

"It's beautiful," she whispers, turning her hand to catch the light. "But are you sure? After everything with Benjamin, the accident?—"

"I've never been more sure of anything." I take both her hands in mine. "I want a real wedding, Monica. Friends, family, the whole thing. I want to stand up in front of everyone and tell them how much I love you."

She stares at the ring, then back at me, a tear sliding down her cheek.

"So what do you say, Monica West? Will you marry me? For real this time?"

I hold my breath as Monica's eyes meet mine. For a split second, I worry I've pushed too far, too fast.

"Yes," she says, her voice breaking with emotion. "Of course I'll marry you, Henry. For real this time."

My heart hammers against my chest as I slide the ring onto her finger. It fits perfectly, like it was always meant to be there. The diamond catches the light, sending prisms dancing across her face.

"It's perfect," she whispers, holding her hand up to admire it.

I lean across the table and kiss her, not giving a damn who's watching. When we break apart, I notice Olivia standing nearby with a knowing smile. She gives me a subtle thumbs up before disappearing back to the kitchen.

"You planned this with her, didn't you?" Monica asks, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin.

"Guilty." I take a sip of whiskey, savoring the warm burn. "I wanted tonight to be special."

"It is." She reaches across the table to take my hand. "I never thought I'd get here—being happy, feeling safe, planning a future with someone who actually sees me."

"I see all of you, Monica. The good, the complicated, all of it."

We return to our meal, but I can't stop staring at her—the way her eyes crinkle when she laughs, how she savors each bite with that little hum of appreciation. I've never felt this kind of contentment before.

Olivia returns carrying a covered silver platter, flanked by two servers with champagne.

"Congratulations are in order, I hear," she announces, setting the platter between us with a flourish. The entire restaurant seems to hold its breath in anticipation.

She removes the cover to reveal an exquisite dessert—a chocolate dome surrounded by fresh berries and edible flowers. The craftsmanship is fucking incredible, even by Olivia's standards. As we watch, she pours warm caramel sauce over the top, the golden liquid cascading down the chocolate surface, melting the dome to reveal two perfect chocolate soufflés inside. The scent of rich chocolate and caramel fills the air between us.

"My special creation for Mr. and Mrs. Blackwood," Olivia says with a wink, her eyes dancing with mischief. "Though technically, you're already that on paper."

Monica squeezes my hand. Her touch sends electricity up my arm. That beautiful smile of hers—the one that still knocks the wind out of me—spreads across her face. "We're making it official—properly this time."

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MONICA

I slide the knife through the peppers with practiced precision, the satisfying sound of the blade hitting the cutting board filling Leo and Olivia's gorgeous kitchen. The diamond on my finger catches the light, still feeling strange and wonderful on my hand.

"Girl, you're gonna blind us with that rock," Celia quips, nudging my shoulder as she stirs the risotto. "Henry didn't hold back."

"Just like his cousin," Olivia adds, gesturing toward Celia with a wooden spoon.

"Remember when Aston proposed? I thought you were gonna need sunglasses just to look at your own hand."

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"Damn right," Celia says with pride. "Our men know better than to come weak with the jewelry game."

I can't help but smile. "I still can't believe it's real. That any of this is real."

Thomas zooms past the kitchen island, his toy airplane making sputtering noises as he weaves between our legs. "Aunt Monica! Watch me fly!"

"I see you, Captain Thomas!" I call after him, sidestepping just in time to avoid a collision with his three-year-old navigation skills.

Through the open archway to the dining room, I catch Henry's eye. He's lounging with Leo and Aston, nursing a whiskey, but his attention is fixed on me. That look still makes my stomach flip, even after everything we've been through.

"So when's the actual wedding?" Olivia asks, pulling a tray of roasted vegetables from the oven. The smell of rosemary and thyme fills the air.

"We're thinking soon," I say, scraping the peppers into a bowl. "Nothing too crazy. Not after the circus we've already been through."

"Bullshit," Celia snorts. "Henry's mama won't let that happen. She's already calling every wedding planner in Manhattan."

"God, don't remind me," I groan, but there's no real annoyance behind it. Even his mother's overwhelming enthusiasm feels like a gift after what we've survived. We've told her that we want a more intimate ceremony—she'll never know that our

relationship started off as a business arrangement. Henry and I are taking that to the grave.

Thomas crashes his plane into my leg. "Boom! Emergency landing on Mount Monica!"

"That's Mrs. Blackwood to you, little man," I say, ruffling his hair.

"Not yet," Olivia corrects, winking at me. "But soon."

I look down at my ring again, then back at Henry. Our eyes lock, and he raises his glass slightly in my direction.

"Soon," I agree, feeling a warmth that has nothing to do with the kitchen heat.

I'm arranging the last of the caramelized Brussels sprouts on the serving platter when Olivia gives me a satisfied nod. We've outdone ourselves tonight—roasted rack of lamb with herb crust, mushroom risotto, seasonal vegetables, and a balsamic reduction that took hours to perfect.

"This looks incredible," I say, wiping my hands on a kitchen towel. "I still can't believe how well our cooking styles mesh."

"That's what happens when you have three incredible chefs in the kitchen at the same time," Olivia says with a wink. "Now let's get this feast to the table before the men start gnawing on the furniture."

Celia grabs the wine bottles—a Bordeaux that Aston brought from his private collection. "Thomas, sweetie, go tell your daddy and the uncles that dinner's ready."

Thomas zooms off, airplane still in hand, and we hear his excited announcement

followed by male laughter from the other room.

"Dinner time! Dinner time!" Thomas chants, leading the parade of men into the dining room.

Olivia carries the lamb to the table while I follow with the risotto. Celia brings up the rear with vegetables and wine. The dining table is already set beautifully—cream linen tablecloth, polished silver, crystal glasses catching the light from the chandelier overhead.

"Ladies, you've outdone yourselves," Leo says, pulling out Olivia's chair for her.

Henry does the same for me, his hand brushing my shoulder as I sit. That simple touch still sends electricity through me. "This looks amazing, babe," he murmurs close to my ear.

We arrange ourselves around the table—each woman beside her man. Thomas sits between Leo and Olivia in his booster seat, still making occasional airplane noises.

Aston uncorks the wine with practiced ease. "This is a 2015 Château Margaux—perfect with lamb."

As the ruby liquid fills our glasses, I feel Henry's hand find mine under the table. His thumb traces small circles on my palm, and I lean slightly against his shoulder.

"To family," Leo proposes, raising his glass.

"To family," we echo, and I realize with a surge of happiness that's exactly what we are.

I'm halfway through my first bite of the perfectly cooked lamb when Olivia taps her

glass with her fork. The crystal makes a delicate ringing sound that cuts through the dinner conversation.

"I'd like to make a toast, too," she announces, standing with her wine glass held high. Her eyes are warm as they find mine and Henry's across the table. "To Monica and Henry," she begins, her smile widening. "You know, it's funny how life works out sometimes. What starts as something... let's say convenient, can turn into the most real thing you've ever experienced."

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My face warms up. I dart a glance at Henry, who squeezes my hand under the table.

"Some of us at this table understand that journey better than most," Olivia continues, sharing a meaningful look with Leo. "When Leo and I first got together, it wasn't exactly a fairytale beginning either."

Celia laughs, nodding. "And Aston and I certainly didn't follow the traditional path."

"But that's what makes your love story so beautiful," Olivia says, raising her glass higher. "Sometimes the best relationships are the ones that surprise us. The ones that start as something else entirely and transform into something precious when we least expect it."

Henry's thumb traces circles on my palm, and I feel a lump forming in my throat.

"So here's to Monica and Henry," Olivia concludes. "May your marriage be as real and beautiful as the love that grew between you. We couldn't be happier to welcome you both into our little family of unexpected happy endings."

"To Monica and Henry!" everyone echoes, glasses clinking around the table.

I take a sip of the rich wine, my eyes meeting Henry's over the rim of my glass. His blue eyes are soft with emotion, and I know he's thinking the same thing I am—how close we came to missing this, how our convenient arrangement transformed into something neither of us saw coming.

"Thank you," I say to Olivia, my voice slightly thick with emotion. "That means more

than you know."

We return to our meal, the conversation flowing easily around us. As I savor a bite of the mushroom risotto, I realize I've never felt more at home than I do right now, surrounded by good food and the family we've built together.

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HENRY

The cheers from our guests surround us as Monica and I stand together, my hand over hers on the knife. The moment feels surreal—this beautiful woman beside me is now my wife. For real. No pretending, no facades, just us and our truth.

"Ready, Mrs. Blackwood?" I whisper against her ear, enjoying how she shivers at the sound of her new name.

"Always, Mr. Blackwood." Her smile could light up the entire reception hall.

We press the knife through the five-tier masterpiece, white fondant giving way to reveal layers of red velvet—Monica's favorite. The crowd erupts in applause as we feed each other the first bite, and I resist the urge to smash it in her face. I'm too fucking happy to risk her wrath today.

Monica's eyes scan the crowd as she chews, her brow furrowing slightly. "Henry, have you seen Celia and Aston? I thought they'd be front and center for this."

I glance around the room, spotting my mother chatting with Leo, Olivia laughing with some of Monica's culinary schoolfriends, but no sign of Celia and Aston. Weird. They were supposed to be here an hour ago.

"They're probably stuck in traffic," I say, squeezing her hand. "You know how the city gets on Saturday afternoons. Construction on every other block."

Monica nods, but I can tell she's disappointed. Celia's been her rock through everything—especially during those final confrontations with Benjamin. And Aston's become like a brother to me since we announced our real engagement.

"Don't worry about it," I add, brushing a crumb from the corner of her mouth. "They'll be here. No way they'd miss this."

"You're right." She leans into me, the soft curves of her body fitting perfectly against mine. "I just want everyone we love to be part of today."

I press my lips to her temple. "They are. Even if they're running late."

I can't take my eyes off Monica as we move through the reception, greeting guests and accepting congratulations. Her smile lights up the entire room, and the way she looks at me—like I'm the only person who matters—makes my chest tighten with emotion.

"You're staring again," she teases, squeezing my hand.

"Can you blame me? Look at you." I pull her closer, breathing in her scent. "Mrs. Blackwood."

She laughs against my chest. "I'm still getting used to that."

We're interrupted by my mother, who swoops in to hug Monica for what must be the twentieth time today. "My beautiful daughter! The ceremony was perfect. Absolute perfection."

While they chat, I scan the room, still wondering about Celia and Aston. That's when I notice Leo across the reception hall, his phone pressed to his ear. His expression shifts from relaxed to concerned in seconds. Something's off.

I watch as he quickly ends the call and makes a beeline for Olivia, who's laughing with a group of guests. He whispers something in her ear, his hand on her lower back, and immediately her smile disappears. They exchange a few words before he guides her away from the crowd, heading toward the exit.

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What the fuck? This isn't like them at all.

"Henry?" Monica's voice pulls me back. "Everything okay?"

I consider mentioning Leo and Olivia's strange departure but decide against it. Whatever's happening, I don't want it casting a shadow over our perfect day.

"Everything's perfect," I say, taking her hand. "Let's go say hello to your old culinary school professor. He's been trying to get your attention for the last ten minutes."

As we walk across the reception hall, I can't help glancing back at the door where Leo and Olivia disappeared. Something's wrong, but right now, my priority is making sure Monica enjoys every moment of our wedding day. Whatever's happening can wait.

I keep my arm wrapped around Monica's waist as we work the room, accepting congratulations and well-wishes from our guests. Despite the nagging concern about Leo and Olivia's abrupt departure, I focus on my wife—my actual wife—and how radiant she looks in her flowing white gown.

"You're doing that thing again," Monica whispers, leaning into me.

"What thing?"

"That overprotective hovering." She smiles up at me. "I'm not going anywhere, Henry."

I press my lips to her forehead. "Can't help it. Still can't believe you're actually mine."

The band transitions to a slower number, and I'm about to lead Monica to the dance floor when I spot Leo pushing through the crowd toward us. His face is ashen, his usual confident stride replaced by something urgent and stiff.

"Shit," I mutter under my breath.

Monica follows my gaze. "What's wrong?"

Before I can answer, Leo reaches us. "Henry, Monica—I need to speak with you both. Now." His voice is tight, controlled, but I detect the strain beneath it.

I guide Monica away from the nearest cluster of guests, finding a quiet corner near the bar. "What's going on? Where's Olivia?"

"She's making calls." Leo runs a hand through his hair, something I've never seen him do. "Look, there's no easy way to say this. Aston and Celia were in an accident on their way here."

Monica's hand tightens around mine. "What? Are they okay?"

Leo's jaw clenches. "Their car went off the road on the highway. From what we know, it flipped and—" He pauses, swallowing hard. "There was a fire. The car was engulfed by the time first responders arrived."

"Jesus Christ," I breathe out, my stomach dropping. "But they got them out, right?"

The silence that follows is deafening.

"Leo?" Monica's voice breaks. "They got them out?"

"We don't know yet. Olivia's on the phone with the hospital now." Leo's eyes are red-rimmed. "I didn't want to tell you, not today of all days, but?—"

"No, you did the right thing," I cut in, pulling Monica closer as I feel her start to tremble against me. Her body feels small and fragile against mine, and a fierce protectiveness surges through me. "Which hospital?"

"Mount Sinai."

Monica looks up at me, her eyes filled with tears, her beautiful face twisted with worry. "Henry, we need to go. Now."

I nod, my mind racing through logistics. Our wedding reception, the guests, the scheduled events—none of that shit matters now. Friends come first. Always. "We'll take my car. Leo, can you?—"

"I'll handle everything here," he says, already understanding, a grim determination in his expression. "Go. I'll make sure everyone knows there's been a family emergency."

As we rush toward the exit, Monica's hand clutched tightly in mine, I can feel her pulse racing as fast as mine. The only thought pounding through my head is whether our friends are dead or alive. The possibility that we might be too late makes my stomach turn to ice. I've never driven to Mount Sinai, but I'm about to break every goddamn speed limit getting there.