



Her Obedience (Ruin & Gold #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: My father's sins belong to him now. And so do I.

Five years ago, I ran. Built a life of my own.

A flower shop. Friends. Freedom.

I thought I escaped the Everett name.

I was wrong.

Gage Blackwood has been watching me.

Pulling the strings of my so-called independence like a man toying with a puppet.

Now he wants what was promised to him.

Me.

And he doesn't just want my obedience.

He wants my body.

My mind.

My submission.

I'd rather set my world on fire than let him control me again.

But the problem is...

Part of me doesn't want to run.

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My hands move with practiced precision, weaving stems of ranunculus between sprays of eucalyptus. My fingers, stained slightly green and smelling of earth, work quickly as I glance at the clock.

"Sandra, did the Calico Imports delivery arrive yet?" I call out, pinching a spray of baby's breath into place.

"Not yet," my assistant replies, appearing in the doorway with an iPad in hand. "They just texted. Running twenty minutes late, but they swear the imported anemones will be worth the wait."

I nod, tucking a loose strand of copper hair behind my ear. "They better be. The Harrington wedding won't wait."

I step back to assess the arrangement before me—an explosion of whites and creams with touches of dusty blue, destined for the head table at the most expensive wedding I've ever been commissioned to design.

The Harrington account had come to me three months ago, a referral from another satisfied client.

It represents everything I've worked toward these last five years: high-profile clients who seek out Wildflower not because of the Everett family name, but because of my reputation for artistic vision and meticulous attention to detail.

A flash of black metal catches my eye through the front window—a sleek sedan idling across the street, tinted windows like dark mirrors reflecting the afternoon sun.

"Sandra," I call, not taking my eyes off the vehicle. "That car outside—how long has it been there?"

She glances up from her tablet, peering through the glass. "Oh, that one? At least twenty minutes. Actually..." She frowns. "That's at least the third time I've seen it this week. Same spot, same time of day."

"Probably just someone waiting for pickup," I murmur, but unease prickles along my spine. The car is expensive—luxury expensive. Not the kind of vehicle that lingers in our neighborhood without purpose.

As if sensing my attention, the engine purrs to life. The sedan pulls away smoothly, disappearing around the corner before I can make out the license plate.

"Weird," Sandra says, already returning to her work.

But I continue staring at the window longer than necessary, that feeling of being watched lingering.

My phone buzzes for the fourth time this hour, the car forgotten. Sandra raises an eyebrow. "Your dad again?"

"Probably." I don't bother checking. "Just let it go to voicemail."

Five years of ignored calls haven't deterred William Everett. If anything, his persistence has only grown stronger since I left home. Left isn't quite right—escaped is more accurate.

"If it's urgent, he could always send a carrier pigeon," I mutter, selecting a perfect alabaster rose and inspecting it for blemishes. "Or, you know, respect my boundaries and stop calling."

Sandra's smile is sympathetic. At twenty-three, she's three years younger than me, fresh out of business school, and unfailingly efficient. She's been with Wildflower for nearly a year now, and I sometimes wonder what I'd do without her.

"The Wallace order is prepped for delivery at two," Sandra says, scrolling through her iPad. "The Anderson funeral pieces are ready to go out. Oh, and the Robinson consultation is at four, not three—she called to push it back."

"Perfect." I straighten, surveying my creation with a critical eye. The arrangement will also be the centerpiece for a charity gala hosted by one of the city's wealthiest families.

"It's beautiful," Sandra offers, setting a fresh cup of coffee beside my workstation.

"It needs something..." I reach for a single dark dahlia, nearly black in the center, and position it off-center. "There."

The contrast is subtle but striking—a single note of darkness amid all that pristine light. Just enough edge to make the arrangement interesting. My work often reflects my sensibilities that way; I can't abide bland perfection.

The shop door chimes, and Sandra slips away to greet the customer.

I allow myself a moment of satisfaction.

This space—my creation, my sanctuary—feels as far from the Everett family mansion as possible.

The exposed brick walls, the reclaimed wood shelving, the scent of fresh flowers mingling with coffee from the shop next door.

Nothing like the sterile perfection my mother demands, or the oppressive grandeur my father insists upon.

I found this location five years ago, just after my twenty-first birthday.

The building had been in rough shape then, a former hardware store with outdated wiring and a leaking roof.

But the rent had been within my budget, just barely, and the owner had been willing to let me make improvements in exchange for a five-year lease.

I'd poured everything into it—my savings, my inheritance from my grandmother, and countless hours of sweat equity. Tearing out drop ceilings to expose original beams, stripping decades of paint from brick walls, installing the vintage-inspired lighting that now casts a warm glow over my workspace.

Wildflower had opened with little fanfare.

No write-ups in the local papers, no flashy grand opening.

I wanted it that way, needed to build something on my own terms, without the Everett name opening doors or creating expectations.

The first year had been lean—wedding consultations that didn't convert to bookings, retail sales that barely covered my supplies, nights spent sleeping on the futon in my office because I couldn't afford both rent for the shop and an apartment.

But I'd made it work. Built a clientele one arrangement at a time.

Developed relationships with local restaurants and hotels.

Positioned myself as an artisan rather than merely a florist, creating pieces that were sculptural and unexpected.

Now, five years in, Wildflower is solvent, respected, and—most importantly—mine alone.

The delivery door buzzes, and I move quickly to answer it. The Calico Imports driver hands over three boxes, which I carry to my work table.

"Finally," I murmur, opening the first box to reveal rows of pristine white anemones, their centers inky black and perfect. I lift one to examine it, pleased with the quality.

Sandra returns from the front of the shop. "Mrs. Delaney wants another arrangement for her dinner party tomorrow night. I told her we could do something with the leftover hydrangeas and those new hellebores."

"Good call," I say, already envisioning the design. "Put it on the schedule for early morning. I'll handle it myself."

The envelope lies on my desk when I return from helping with a walk-in customer. Cream-colored, heavy paper, with the Everett family crest embossed in gold. Familiar and unwelcome.

"This came by courier," Sandra explains. "Special delivery."

I stare at the envelope, keeping my expression neutral. "Thanks."

I wait until I'm alone to open it. Inside, a formal invitation on thick card stock:

The Everett Family cordially invites you to celebrate the engagement of Violet Elizabeth Everett to Charles William Montgomery III

I set it down, a hollow feeling expanding in my chest. Violet, my younger sister by two years, engaged to the heir of Montgomery Industries. My father must be ecstatic about the merger possibilities. Because that's what marriages are in our world—corporate mergers with flesh and blood collateral.

That's what my own engagement would have been, if I hadn't left.

My phone rings again. This time, it's my mother's number. I silence it, sliding the phone under a stack of order forms.

My sixteenth birthday party was an elaborate and impersonal affair.

I remember my father introducing me to business associates, his hand heavy on my shoulder.

"My eldest daughter, Penelope Arabella Everett.

" The way his fingers pressed harder when I tried to excuse myself.

The way he laughed when introducing me to the son of a business partner.

"These two have a lot in common," he'd said, with a meaning I hadn't understood then.

The memory brings with it a tightening in my chest and the slight acceleration of my heart rate. Even now, years later, thoughts of my father can trigger a fight-or-flight response that I've learned to manage but never fully suppress.

I pick up the invitation again, tracing the embossed crest with my fingertip.

Poor Violet. Always the dutiful daughter, the perfect princess, raised to believe that

her greatest achievement would be a strategic marriage.

I tried to maintain a relationship with my sister after leaving, but Violet's loyalty to our parents made it impossible.

Our occasional text exchanges are superficial, laden with unspoken resentments on both sides.

I check the date—two weeks from Saturday.

The fact that I've been invited at all is something of a surprise.

Probably my mother's doing, a gesture toward family unity that my father would tolerate for appearance's sake.

The Everetts never air our dirty laundry publicly; my departure had been explained away as "our eldest pursuing her passion for botany and design. "

I place the invitation in my desk drawer, unwilling to make a decision about attending yet. The thought of returning to that house, of facing my father across a room filled with society's elite, makes my stomach clench. But Violet... despite everything, she's still my sister.

The shop phone rings, pulling me back to the present. Sandra answers it, then covers the receiver with her hand. "It's the Morgan account. They want to increase their weekly delivery by another arrangement."

"Tell them that's fine," I say, trying to place the name. Morgan. A newer client, someone who orders fresh arrangements for their office weekly, always paying promptly and generously. "Ask if they have any preferences for the additional arrangement."

Sandra nods, returning to the call. "Yes, Mr. Victor... Of course... The usual address... Certainly."

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She hangs up, making a note in our order system. "He said designer's choice for the new arrangement, but they'd like something with darker elements. Burgundies and deep purples."

"Interesting," I muse. Most corporate clients prefer neutral, inoffensive arrangements—whites, greens, maybe a touch of blue. "What's the delivery address again?"

Sandra checks her screen. "Morgan Enterprises, 1200 Harbor Tower, attention: Executive Floor."

I nod, filing the information away. Harbor Tower houses some of the city's most prestigious firms—old money, serious power. The kind of businesses my father has always aspired to do business with.

"I'll take care of it personally," I decide. "I've been wanting to experiment with those black calla lilies anyway."

The rest of the afternoon passes in a flurry of activity.

A mother and daughter come in to discuss flowers for a sweet sixteen party.

A local restaurant owner stops by to adjust his standing order.

I finish the Harrington centerpieces and supervise their loading for delivery, while Sandra processes new inventory and updates our social media accounts.

At five-thirty, with the day's deliveries completed and the prep work set for tomorrow, I begin closing the store. The routine is second nature now—tallying the register, updating the order book, setting aside spent flowers for the compost bin that a local urban farm collects weekly.

"You still meeting your friends tonight?" Sandra asks, shrugging into her jacket.

"Yeah, eight o'clock at The Hollow." I smile. "Five years of Wildflower deserves at least one celebratory cocktail."

"More than one, I'd say." Sandra pauses at the door. "Hey, I meant to ask—did you order new business cards? I found a box on my desk this morning."

I frown. "No, we still have plenty from the last order."

"That's what I thought. These are different though—new design, heavier paper." She pulls a card from her bag. "Really nice, actually."

I take the card, immediately noticing the difference.

The stock is premium, the printing embossed with a subtle texture.

The design is elegant—a simplified line drawing of wildflowers with the shop name and contact information beneath.

It looks expensive, the kind of stationery I might have aspired to but couldn't currently justify.

"I didn't order these," I say slowly. "Where did you say you found them?"

"On my desk this morning. I assumed they were a surprise for the anniversary."

An uneasy feeling creeps along my spine. "Was anything else out of place? Any sign someone had been in the shop?"

Sandra thinks for a moment, then shakes her head. "Everything seemed normal. The alarm was set when I arrived."

I turn the card over. On the back, in small, elegant type, is a message I hadn't noticed at first:

Congratulations on five years of remarkable growth.

No signature. Nothing to indicate who left them, or how they got into a locked shop.

"Maybe it was one of the delivery guys?" Sandra suggests. "Or that new cleaning service?"

"Maybe," I agree, though I don't believe it. The cleaning crew has a key, but they only come on Sundays when the shop is closed. Delivery drivers never go beyond the back workroom.

"Should I use them?" Sandra asks. "They're much nicer than our current ones."

I hesitate. I want to say no, to throw them away on principle. But they are beautiful, exactly the kind of elevated branding I've been wanting for Wildflower.

"Let's hold off for now," I decide. "I want to figure out where they came from first."

When Sandra has gone, I lock the front door and move through the shop, checking windows and reviewing the day's security footage on the small monitor behind the counter. Nothing unusual appears—just the normal rhythm of customers and deliveries.

I slip the mysterious business card into my wallet, telling myself I'll investigate tomorrow. Tonight is for celebration, not paranoia.

My apartment is ten blocks from the shop, a third-floor walk-up in a converted warehouse building.

Smaller than I'd like, with temperamental plumbing and noisy neighbors, but the rent is reasonable and the location ideal.

The space is entirely mine, decorated with vintage finds and plants that thrive under my care.

I shower quickly, letting hot water sluice away the day's tensions. I change into black jeans and a silky green top that brings out the emerald in my eyes, apply minimal makeup, and twist my copper hair into a messy updo that looks deliberate rather than harried.

My phone buzzes again as I'm sliding into my boots.

Poppy, please call me. It's important. - Dad

I delete it without replying. I walked away from that world, from the expectations, from the suffocating control.

The Hollow is crowded when I arrive, Friday night energy in full swing.

I spot my friends at a high-top near the bar—Mia, my former roommate and now a sous chef at a restaurant downtown; Dylan, a graphic designer who created Wildflower's logo and website; and Tara, who teaches art at a local high school.

"There she is!" Mia calls out, raising a glass. "The flower queen herself!"

I grin, squeezing through the crowd to join them. A bottle of champagne waits in an ice bucket, and Dylan pours me a glass as soon as I sit down.

"To Wildflower," he proposes, lifting his glass. "Five years of making the world more beautiful, one petal at a time."

"To Poppy," Tara adds.

We clink glasses, and I feel a wave of gratitude wash over me. These people—who have supported me through the lean times, who have celebrated every small victory—are my real family.

"I can't believe it's been five years," I say, taking a sip of champagne. The bubbles tickle my nose, bright and effervescent. "Sometimes it feels like I just opened yesterday, and sometimes it feels like I've been doing this my whole life."

"Remember when you were sleeping on that nasty futon in the back office?" Mia laughs. "And eating nothing but ramen and Red Bull?"

"God, yes." I grimace at the memory. "And that winter when the heat kept going out, and I had to keep the flowers alive with space heaters."

"While wearing three pairs of socks and that hideous parka," Dylan adds.

"Hey, that parka saved my life!"

We reminisce about the early days, about my first big wedding commission, about the time a famous singer had wandered into the shop and ordered twenty arrangements for a surprise party.

"Seriously though," Tara says, when we've ordered a second round of drinks and a

plate of appetizers. "What you've built is amazing, Poppy. Not just the business, but the life. You should be proud."

I feel a warmth that isn't just from the champagne. "I am. It hasn't always been easy, but it's been worth it."

I don't elaborate on what "it" is—leaving my family, walking away from wealth and connections, building something from nothing.

They know my story, or at least the broad strokes of it.

Privileged girl from a controlling family who walked away from it all to start over.

I've never shared all the details, never fully explained what drove me to make such a clean break.

"So what's next?" Dylan asks. "World domination? Wildflower franchises in every major city?"

I laugh. "Hardly. I'm thinking about expanding the workshop space, maybe bringing on another designer. The wedding business is picking up, and I can't keep doing it all myself."

"Smart," Mia nods. "But don't grow too fast. Remember what happened to that bakery on Seventh? Expanded to three locations and went bankrupt in six months."

"Trust me, I'm being careful." I take another sip of my drink. "I like being a small, specialized business. Quality over quantity."

The conversation shifts to other topics—Mia's new boyfriend, a gallery showing Tara is preparing for, Dylan's frustrations with a difficult client. I relax into the moment,

letting the stress of the day fade away.

It isn't until I excuse myself to use the restroom that I notice the man at the bar.

Tall, expensively dressed, watching me with an intensity that makes my skin prickle.

When our eyes meet, he doesn't look away, doesn't pretend he hasn't been staring.

Instead, he raises his glass slightly, a gesture that isn't quite a toast but definitely an acknowledgment.

I look away quickly, threading through the crowd to the back of the bar. When I emerge from the restroom a few minutes later, the man is gone.

Back at the table, I try to rejoin the conversation, but find my attention drifting. I scan the room several times, looking for the stranger, but don't see him again.

"You okay?" Tara asks, touching my arm. "You seem distracted."

"I'm fine," I assure her. "Just tired, I think. It's been a long week."

But as the night progresses, I can't shake the feeling of being watched. A prickling awareness at the back of my neck, a heightened sensitivity to movements in my peripheral vision.

By eleven, the second bottle of champagne is empty, and I make my excuses. Despite my friends' protests, I insist on walking home alone—it's a straight shot through well-lit streets, and I've done it countless times before.

The night air is crisp, clearing the slight fog of alcohol from my mind. I walk briskly, heels clicking on the pavement, keys clutched in my fist in the way my self-defense

instructor taught me years ago.

Halfway home, I hear a car slow beside me. A black SUV with tinted windows, crawling along at walking pace. I quicken my steps, heart hammering. The SUV maintains its pace, staying alongside me for half a block before accelerating away.

I watch it disappear around a corner, trying to calm my racing pulse. Just a coincidence, I tell myself. Probably someone looking for an address, or a rideshare driver confused about a pickup location.

But as I climb the stairs to my apartment, I can't shake the sense of unease.

My phone buzzes again as I'm unlocking my door. Unknown number.

Happy anniversary, Penelope.

No one calls me Penelope anymore. No one except my father.

I delete the message and enter my apartment, double-checking the locks behind me. The space feels different somehow—not obviously disturbed, but not quite right either. As if someone has moved through it recently, adjusting things by millimeters.

I check the windows, the closets, even under the bed, finding nothing out of place. Still, I prop a chair under my doorknob before climbing into bed, a precaution I haven't taken since my first nights in this apartment.

As I lie in the darkness, my mind returns to the invitation in my desk drawer. To Violet's engagement. To my father's persistent calls. To the mysterious business cards and the text message from an unknown number.

The freedom I've built is worth more than anything the Everett family fortune could

offer. I remind myself of that as many times as necessary. I've fought too hard, come too far, to allow doubt or fear to undermine what I've created.

Tomorrow, I will change the locks on the shop. Install a new security system in my apartment. Take precautions while maintaining my independence.

I turn on my side, pulling the covers up to my chin. As sleep finally claims me, I don't notice the blinking light on the smoke detector above my bed.

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I notice it on Monday morning—a black SUV parked across the street from Wildflower. The same vehicle I'd glimpsed following me on Friday night. Its windows are tinted dark, making it impossible to see who sits behind the wheel, but the sensation of being watched crawls across my skin like insects.

When Sandra arrives at eight-thirty, I'm already on my third cup of coffee, arranging white lilies for the Robinson wedding consultation.

"You're here early," she says, hanging her jacket on the coat rack. "Everything okay?"

I force a smile. "Just getting a head start. The Harrington wedding is this weekend, and we still have the Robinson consultation and three corporate deliveries today."

Sandra glances at the dark circles under my eyes but doesn't comment. Instead, she boots up the shop computer and begins sorting through emails.

"The Morgan account sent a thank-you note," she says. "Apparently, the arrangements we delivered last week were 'exactly what they were looking for.' They've requested another special delivery for tomorrow—they specified dark elements again, with a preference for black dahlias if we have them."

"We do," I confirm, my mind only half on the conversation. I keep glancing out the window at the SUV. It hasn't moved in the forty minutes I've been watching. "Who is this Morgan client, anyway? Have we ever met them in person?"

Sandra shakes her head. "All communications have been through their assistant. A Mr. Victor."

The name tickles something in my memory, but I can't place it. "Look up their company information, would you? I'm curious about what they do."

While Sandra taps at the keyboard, I return to the lilies, but my focus is shattered. The weekend had been unsettling in ways I couldn't quite articulate. I'd changed the locks on the shop as planned, installed a new security system in my apartment, and spent most of Saturday jumping at shadows.

And then there had been the dream—vivid and disturbing. My father's voice, cold and precise: "You've always been willful, Penelope. But never forget who you belong to." I'd woken in a cold sweat, sheets twisted around my legs like restraints.

"That's odd," Sandra says, frowning at her screen. "There's almost nothing online about Morgan Enterprises. Just a business registration with the state, listing an address at Harbor Tower. No website, no social media presence."

"What's the registration date?"

Sandra clicks a few more times. "It was formed... five years ago."

I freeze, a lily stem halfway into the arrangement. Five years. The exact length of time since I'd opened Wildflower.

"Who's listed as the principal?"

Sandra squints at the screen. "A holding company called Blackwood Investments."

The name means nothing to me, but the coincidence of the timing sets off warning bells. I'm about to ask her to dig deeper when the shop door chimes.

A delivery man enters, carrying a red envelope.

"Delivery for Penelope Arabella Everett," he announces, looking around expectantly.

My birth name, not the one I use professionally, not the name on my shop license. I step forward.

"That's me," I say, keeping my voice level despite the unease rippling through me.

The man hands me the envelope. "Signature required." He extends a digital pad.

I sign, watching as he nods and exits without another word. The envelope is thick, expensive stock, the color of fresh blood. No return address, no postage—hand-delivered.

"Secret admirer?" Sandra asks, eyebrows raised.

"Doubtful," I mutter, sliding my finger under the flap.

Inside is a single card, black with silver lettering:

Congratulations on five successful years of independence, Penelope. Time to come home now.

No signature. Nothing else in the envelope.

I stare at the message, the card trembling slightly in my hands.

"Poppy? You've gone white." Sandra moves closer, concern evident in her voice.

"What is it?"

I tuck the card back into its envelope. "Nothing. Just... family stuff."

I don't elaborate, and Sandra doesn't push. It's one of the things I appreciate most about her—she respects boundaries without taking offense.

The morning passes in a blur of arrangements and consultations. By noon, the black SUV has disappeared, but my unease lingers. During a break, I call the security company that monitors the shop and request a review of the weekend footage. They promise to send it over by end of day.

At two, I deliver the arrangements to Morgan Enterprises personally, determined to get a glimpse of this mysterious client.

Harbor Tower is intimidating—sixty floors of gleaming glass and steel, security guards checking IDs at every entrance, elevators that require key cards for access to the upper floors.

"Delivery for Morgan Enterprises," I tell the guard at the desk. "Executive floor."

The guard studies me for a moment, then picks up a phone. "Flower delivery for Morgan Enterprises," he says, then waits, listening. "Yes, sir. Right away."

He hangs up and gestures to a side elevator. "They'll meet you on fifty-eight."

The executive elevator is lined with mirrors, offering me endless reflections of my own tension. The arrangements in my arms look almost funereal—black dahlias and calla lilies set against deep purple anemones and trailing vines. Beautiful, but with an unmistakable darkness.

When the doors open on fifty-eight, a man waits. Tall, broad-shouldered, with a military bearing despite his tailored suit.

"Miss Everett," he says, the name an unmistakable choice rather than a mistake that

makes me swallow hard. "Thank you for delivering these personally. I'm Victor, Mr. Blackwood's head of security."

Blackwood. Not Morgan. My pulse skips.

"I was under the impression the account was for Morgan Enterprises," I say, keeping my voice even.

Victor doesn't miss a beat. "Morgan Enterprises is a subsidiary. Mr. Blackwood prefers to handle some acquisitions discreetly. He asked me to extend his personal thanks for your exceptional work."

He lifts the arrangements from my arms with smooth efficiency, like this is any ordinary business exchange.

"These will be placed in the conference room for this afternoon's meeting."

A pin on his lapel catches the light—a stylized black bird of prey. I follow his movement and notice the same emblem etched discreetly into the wall behind him, just below the words *Morgan Enterprises* in brushed steel.

Of course. A shell. A mask. One I've been decorating with dahlias and calla lilies.

"Then please thank Mr. Blackwood for his continued patronage," I say, injecting polite detachment into my voice. "We appreciate loyal clients."

Victor nods, already turning toward a sleek hallway that likely leads to the private offices. "There is a car waiting to take you back to your shop."

I manage a tight smile. "That's not necessary. I'll walk." The thought of getting into a car chosen by these people makes my skin crawl.

"As you wish." Victor presses the elevator button. "Have a pleasant afternoon, Miss Everett."

The doors close, and I lean against the wall, heart hammering. Not a coincidence. None of this is coincidence.

When I return to Wildflower, the black SUV is back, parked in exactly the same spot. A message, clearly meant to be seen.

Sandra looks up from the counter. "Everything okay with the delivery?"

"Fine," I lie. "Just the usual corporate client."

I retreat to my office, closing the door behind me. My hand shakes slightly as I pull out my phone. I need answers, and I can only think of one person who might have them.

I call my sister.

Violet answers on the third ring. "Poppy? Is something wrong?" She sounds genuinely surprised.

"I got your invitation," I say, skipping pleasantries. "Congratulations."

A hesitation. "Thank you. I wasn't sure you'd call."

"I need to ask you something, Vi. It's important." I take a deep breath. "Do you know anyone named Blackwood? Or any company called Blackwood Investments?"

The silence stretches so long I think she's hung up. Then, her voice comes through, lowered to a whisper: "Where did you hear that name?"

A chill runs through me. "So you do know it."

"Poppy, listen to me." Violet's voice is urgent now, frightened. "Stay away from anything to do with that name. Don't ask questions about it. Especially not to Dad."

"Why? Who are they?"

Another pause. "I can't talk about this on the phone. But please, promise me you'll be careful. And..." She hesitates again. "Maybe you should come to the engagement party after all. We need to talk in person."

Before I can respond, she hangs up.

I stare at my phone, unease crystallizing into fear. Whatever is happening, my sister knows something—and it frightens her enough that she won't speak freely.

I spend the remainder of the afternoon in a haze of worry, absently completing arrangements while my mind races. By closing time, I've made a decision. I'll attend Violet's engagement party. Face my family. Demand answers.

The black SUV remains across the street as I lock up, Sandra having left an hour earlier. I stare directly at its tinted windows before turning and walking deliberately toward home. Let them follow. Let them watch. I'm done running scared.

My apartment feels foreign when I arrive, as if the space has been altered in subtle ways while I was gone. Nothing obvious—just the creeping sense that someone has been here, touched my things, examined my life.

I check the new security system. No alerts, no signs of forced entry. Yet the feeling persists.

I shower quickly, then throw together a simple dinner.

As I eat, I pull out my laptop and search for "Blackwood Investments.

" The results are sparse—a privately held company with diverse holdings, primarily real estate and technology firms. The CEO and founder is listed as Gage Blackwood, but there are no photos, no interviews, nothing to indicate who this person actually is.

I search deeper, trying variations of the name, but find little more. It's as if someone has deliberately scrubbed the internet of meaningful information.

Finally, I try "Gage Blackwood + William Everett"—my father's name.

A single result appears: a society photograph from twelve years ago. My father, younger but just as stern, shaking hands with a tall man whose face is turned away from the camera. The caption reads: "William Everett (left) concludes negotiations with Blackwood Industries representative."

I stare at the image, trying to make out the other man's features, but the angle makes it impossible. All I can see is dark hair, broad shoulders, and an expensive suit.

My phone buzzes with a text from an unknown number:

The invitation still stands. Your sister would appreciate your presence.

I stare at the message, fear mingling with anger. I block the number, then shut down my laptop. Enough research for one night.

Sleep evades me. I toss and turn, fragments of memories surfacing like debris after a storm—my father's coded conversations, whispered arguments between my parents, the way certain names would silence a room when mentioned at family gatherings.

Around two a.m., I give up on sleep entirely. I move to the window, peeking through the blinds to the street below.

The black SUV is there, engine off, a silent sentinel.

Enough.

I grab my phone and take several photographs of the vehicle, including a clear shot of the license plate. Then I send these images to my sister, my closest friends, and my lawyer, with a simple message:

If anything happens to me, this vehicle and whoever's inside it are responsible.

It's a small gesture of defiance, but it gives me enough peace of mind to finally fall into a restless sleep.

The next morning, I arrive at Wildflower to find another red envelope tucked into the mail slot. Same heavy stock, same absence of postage or return address. I open it with steady hands, refusing to show fear even with no one watching.

Inside, a black card identical to yesterday's:

The past always catches up, Penelope. You can return willingly, or we can collect you. Your choice.

The threat is no longer veiled. I tuck the card into my pocket just as Sandra arrives, forcing a smile as she greets me.

Throughout the day, I find myself watching the door, jumping at every customer entrance. The black SUV remains parked across the street, a constant reminder of unseen eyes.

By evening, determination has replaced fear. I will attend Violet's engagement party, confront my father and I will reclaim control of my life.

As I lock up, my phone buzzes with a text from my sister:

Be careful coming to the party. Some guests are dangerous.

I stare at the message, then at the black SUV still watching from across the street. Whoever is inside raises a hand in a mocking wave.

I raise my middle finger in response, then turn and walk away, spine straight, head high. Let them come. I've built my life once from nothing; I can do it again if necessary.

But I won't go quietly. A game has begun. I just wish someone would tell me the rules.

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I spend more time than I should selecting what to wear to Violet's engagement party.

After trying on and discarding four different outfits, I settle on a forest green silk dress that brings out my eyes but isn't flashy enough to draw unnecessary attention.

The goal is to blend in, gather information, and leave as quickly as possible.

My copper hair falls in loose waves around my shoulders, and I apply just enough makeup to look polished.

The woman staring back at me from the mirror looks composed, controlled—nothing like the churning anxiety I feel inside.

I practice my neutral expression, the one I perfected during countless society functions as a teenager.

Reveal nothing. Feel nothing. Escape as soon as possible.

The black SUV remains stationed across the street as I leave my apartment building.

I ignore it pointedly, getting into my rideshare once it arrives.

The driver makes casual conversation about the weather as we head toward the wealthy enclave where my parents' sprawling estate occupies two manicured acres.

As we approach the iron gates, memories flood back—the countless parties where I stood beside my father like an ornament, the stifling expectations, the day I finally

walked away. I push these thoughts aside as the car slows to join the line of luxury vehicles waiting to enter.

A security guard with a clipboard approaches. "Name?"

"Penelope Everett," I reply, the formal name feeling strange on my tongue after years of being Poppy Knight professionally.

He checks his list, nods, and waves us through. I pay the driver and step out, immediately aware of eyes tracking my movement. The mansion looms ahead, windows ablaze with light, classical music drifting across the immaculate lawn.

A staff member checks invitations at the entrance. I hand him the red envelope from my purse.

"Miss Everett," he says with a slight bow. "Welcome home."

The grand foyer gleams with polished marble and crystal chandeliers. Chicago's elite mill about in designer finery, champagne flutes in hand, fake laughter reverberating off high ceilings. I accept a glass from a passing waiter, using it more as a shield than a beverage.

"Poppy!"

My sister appears from the crowd, resplendent in a pale blue gown that complements her blonde hair and fair complexion. She's always been the delicate one, the perfect princess. Even now, there's something fragile about her smile as she embraces me.

"You came," she whispers, genuine surprise in her voice. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Your text made it sound important," I reply, stepping back to study her face. "You

look beautiful, Vi."

"Thank you." Her eyes dart around the room nervously. "We can't talk here. Not now. Too many eyes." She squeezes my hand. "Just... be careful tonight. Some of the guests aren't what they seem."

Before I can ask what she means, she's pulled away by her fiancé, Charles Montgomery III—tall, generically handsome, with old money written in every line of his posture. Exactly the kind of man our father would approve of for his youngest daughter.

I weave through the crowd, nodding at familiar faces but avoiding lengthy conversations. My mother finds me near the bar, her practiced smile never reaching her eyes.

"Penelope, darling. What a surprise." She air-kisses my cheek, her perfume expensive and understated. "I'm so glad you could join us for your sister's special night."

"Wouldn't miss it," I lie smoothly. "Violet looks radiant."

"Doesn't she?" My mother glances toward where Violet stands with her fiancé. "The Montgomerys are an excellent family. Charles will provide well for her."

I bite back a retort. "I'm sure he will."

"Your father would like a word before you leave," she adds, her tone making it clear this isn't a request.

"Of course," I respond, the perfect dutiful daughter for just a moment. My mother nods, satisfied, and glides away to greet other guests.

I spend the next hour circulating through the party, making pleasant small talk with people I barely remember, all while watching for my father. I find him eventually in his study, speaking with a group of business associates. When he sees me in the doorway, he excuses himself and approaches.

William Everett looks much the same as he did five years ago—silver-streaked dark hair, immaculate suit, the confident bearing of a man used to having his orders obeyed without question. His smile doesn't reach his eyes, much like my mother's.

"Penelope." He kisses my cheek, his cologne expensive and familiar. "I'm glad you decided to join us."

"It's Violet's engagement," I say simply. "I wanted to be here for her."

"Yes, well." He gestures for me to join him at the windows overlooking the garden. "You've been missed at family functions."

"Have I?" The words come out sharper than intended.

His expression hardens momentarily before smoothing back into practiced pleasantness. "Your little... adventure has gone on long enough, don't you think? You've proven your point. It's time to come home."

"My shop isn't an adventure, Father. It's my business. My life."

"A phase," he dismisses. "Playing with flowers when you could be helping run Everett Enterprises."

"I'm not playing at anything." I keep my voice level despite my rising anger. "Wildflower is successful, and it's mine. I built it without your money or connections."

Amusement flickers across his face. "If that's what you need to believe." He sips his drink. "Nevertheless, there are family matters that require your attention. Obligations that can't be ignored indefinitely."

"I have no obligations to this family beyond what I choose to give." I set down my barely-touched champagne. "I should rejoin the party. Congratulate Violet properly."

He catches my arm as I turn to leave, his grip just tight enough to convey authority. "This conversation isn't finished, Penelope. There are things you don't understand yet—arrangements that were made long ago."

"Let go of my arm." My voice is quiet but firm.

Something in my tone must register, because he releases me immediately. "We'll speak again soon," he says, the words carrying weight beyond their surface meaning.

I walk away without responding, my heart hammering in my chest. Five years away, and nothing has changed. He still believes he owns me, still thinks he can bend me to his will.

The rest of the party passes in a blur of faces and conversations I won't remember tomorrow.

By ten-thirty, I've decided I've fulfilled my familial obligation and discreetly call for a rideshare.

Whatever Violet wants to tell me, I'll learn some other time. I'm done for the night.

While waiting for the car to arrive, I step onto an empty side terrace for some fresh air.

"Running away again, Penelope?"

I turn to find a man watching me from the shadows.

He steps forward into the light, and I recognize him immediately from the charity gala photo I found online—Gage Blackwood.

In person, he's taller than I expected, broad-shouldered in an impeccably tailored suit that emphasizes his athletic build.

Dark hair, cut short and styled perfectly.

Strong jaw, straight nose, and eyes so intensely blue they're almost unsettling.

"I'm not running," I reply, straightening my spine. "I'm leaving. There's a difference."

His lips curve in a slight smile. "Is there? I suppose it depends on whether you're moving toward something or away from it."

"I don't believe we've been introduced," I say, though I know exactly who he is.

"Gage Blackwood." He extends a hand, which I reluctantly take. His grip is warm and firm, lingering a second longer than necessary. "I've admired your work at Wildflower. You have a gift for creating beauty from fragile things."

"Thank you. I appreciate your business."

"I appreciate beauty in all its forms." His gaze is direct, assessing. "You've built something impressive these past five years."

"You seem to know a lot about me, Mr. Blackwood."

"Gage, please." He moves to stand beside me at the balustrade, close enough that I can smell his cologne— something woodsy and expensive. "And yes, I make it my business to know about things that interest me."

"And I interest you?" I keep my voice neutral despite the warning bells ringing in my head.

"More than you know." He glances at his watch, an understated piece that probably costs more than my annual rent. "Your car will be here soon. You should be careful. Chicago can be dangerous after dark."

My phone buzzes with a notification that my rideshare is approaching. "I can take care of myself."

"I'm sure you believe that." His tone isn't condescending, just matter-of-fact. "Nevertheless, safety is an illusion we allow ourselves to maintain sanity. The truth is, we're all vulnerable—even those who think they've carved out independence."

I frown, trying to decipher his cryptic words. "Is that a threat, Mr. Blackwood?"

"A observation." He steps back, creating distance between us. "We'll speak again soon, Penelope. Perhaps somewhere less... performative."

Before I can respond, he walks away, disappearing into the crowd inside. I stand frozen, processing the encounter. His words weren't overtly threatening, but the underlying message was clear: he knows me, has been watching me, and believes our paths are destined to cross again.

My phone buzzes again—my ride has arrived. I gather my purse and make my way to the front of the house, deliberately avoiding eye contact with anyone who might delay my departure. The night air is cool against my flushed skin as I climb into the waiting

car.

"Heading home?" the driver asks cheerfully.

"Yes, please." I give him my address, then lean back against the seat, suddenly exhausted. The tension of the evening—seeing my family, the cryptic conversations—has drained me.

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Twenty minutes later, the driver pulls up to a convenience store. "Sorry, this is as close as I can get. There's road work blocking your street."

I glance out the window, recognizing the 24-hour store about a block from my apartment. "This is fine, thank you."

The store is harshly lit and empty except for a bored cashier scrolling through his phone.

I wander the aisles, suddenly craving comfort food—something sweet and completely devoid of nutritional value.

I select a pint of ice cream, a chocolate bar, and some chips, the kind of indulgence that would have horrified my calorie-counting mother.

"Long night?" the cashier asks as he rings up my purchases.

"You could say that." I pay and take the plastic bag, the weight of my emotional armor slipping now that I'm away from my family's orbit.

Outside, the street is quiet. Most of the shops are closed, their windows dark. I check my phone—just past eleven. The walk home is short, just a block to go. I've made this walk countless times, even later than this.

I'm halfway there when I hear footsteps behind me. I quicken my pace, pulse accelerating. The footsteps speed up too. I reach for my phone, ready to call for help, when a man steps out from an alley ahead of me.

"Hey there, pretty lady." His voice is rough, his stance predatory. "Out kinda late, aren't you?"

I stop, assessing my options. He's between me and my apartment, blocking my path home. Behind me, the footsteps are getting closer.

"I'm just heading home," I say firmly. "Please let me pass."

He smiles, revealing yellowed teeth. "Sure thing. Just hand over your purse and that fancy necklace first."

My hand goes to my throat, where my grandmother's pendant hangs on a silver chain—the one thing I took from my old life when I left. "No."

His expression hardens. "Don't be stupid, bitch. Give me your stuff, or I'll take it."

He lunges forward, grabbing for my purse. I swing the plastic bag containing my ice cream, hitting him in the face. He stumbles back, cursing, then comes at me again, this time with real anger. I scream, hoping someone will hear, but the street remains empty.

His hand closes around my throat, shoving me backward into the brick wall of a building. The pendant digs painfully into my skin as he squeezes. I claw at his hand, panic rising as my airway constricts.

"Should've just given it up," he growls, his breath hot against my face.

The crack of the gunshot is deafening in the quiet street. For a moment, nothing happens—then the pressure on my throat disappears as the man's eyes widen in shock. He crumples forward, and I barely manage to step aside as he falls to the ground.

Blood splatters across my face and dress, hot and metallic. I stare in horror at the growing pool beneath his head, at the neat hole where the bullet entered his skull.

"Fucking amateurs." The voice comes from behind me. "Doesn't know whose territory he's in."

I turn slowly, still pressed against the wall. Three men stand there—two with guns drawn, one speaking into a communication device at his wrist. They're dressed in dark suits, professional and anonymous. One of them I recognize as Victor, the man from Morgan Enterprises. From Blackwood's company.

"Miss Everett," Victor says, his voice calm as if we're meeting for coffee rather than standing over a dead body. "Are you injured?"

I can't answer. Can't move. My mind struggles to process what just happened. A man attacked me, and now he's dead, his blood cooling on the pavement and drying on my skin.

"She's in shock," one of the other men says. "We need to move before someone calls in the gunshot."

Victor approaches me cautiously, hands visible to show he's not a threat. "Miss Everett, we need to leave the area. Mr. Blackwood sent us to ensure your safety."

When I don't respond, he gestures to one of his companions, who approaches with a handkerchief. The man gently wipes some of the blood from my face, his touch impersonal but not unkind.

"Scene needs cleaning," Victor says into his communication device. "One subject down. Package secure but in shock."

Package. Me. I'm the package.

The realization penetrates the fog in my mind, but I still can't speak, can't move. My body has disconnected from my brain, survival instincts shutting down all but the most basic functions.

Victor says something else, but his words don't register. The world has narrowed to the body on the ground, the sticky feeling of blood drying on my skin, the surreal knowledge that I've just witnessed a man being murdered—possibly because of me.

Someone guides me toward a vehicle—the black SUV that's been following me for weeks. I don't resist. Don't speak. Don't think. I simply allow myself to be placed in the back seat, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

The door closes with a soft thud, sealing me in darkness. The vehicle pulls away smoothly, leaving behind a dead man and all semblance of the normal life I thought I'd built.

Through the fog of shock, I register movement outside the windows—streets giving way to a highway, then to a private road winding through dense trees.

We pass through gates with armed guards, then continue up a long driveway to a modern mansion of stone and glass, floodlights illuminating well maintained grounds.

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The vehicle rolls to a stop in front of imposing double doors. My mind feels disconnected from my body, still processing the horror of what I've just witnessed. The man's body crumpling to the pavement. The blood—so much blood—splattered across my dress, my skin.

"Miss Everett." Victor's voice breaks through my fog. "We've arrived."

I don't move. Can't move. My limbs feel leaden, my thoughts fragmented. Victor opens my door and waits patiently, then sighs when I remain frozen.

"She's still in shock," he tells someone I can't see. "Should I?—"

"I'll handle it."

The new voice is deep, authoritative. Familiar. Gage Blackwood appears at the door of the SUV, his tall frame blocking the security lights. He's changed from his formal attire into dark slacks and a charcoal sweater that clings to his broad shoulders.

"Penelope." His voice is gentler now, almost kind. "You're safe here. No one will harm you."

I want to laugh at the absurdity of his statement. Safe? A man was just killed in front of me. His blood is drying on my skin, my dress. And now I'm at some remote estate with the man who's been having me followed for weeks.

When I still don't respond, Gage leans in and unbuckles my seatbelt. His movements are careful, deliberate, as if I'm a wounded animal that might startle.

"I'm going to help you inside now," he says. "You need to get cleaned up and rest."

He slides an arm behind my back, another under my knees, and lifts me from the vehicle with surprising ease. My body finally reacts, tensing against his hold.

"Don't," I whisper, the first word I've spoken since the attack.

He pauses, looking down at me. "You can walk if you prefer."

I nod stiffly, and he sets me down, keeping a steadying hand at my elbow.

My legs tremble, but they hold my weight.

I follow him numbly through the enormous doorway and into a soaring entrance hall of marble and glass.

Indirect lighting casts a warm glow over modern furnishings that probably cost more than my shop's annual revenue.

A woman in her sixties appears, her gray hair pulled back in a neat bun, her expression professional but kind. "The blue guest suite is prepared, Mr. Blackwood."

"Thank you, Mrs. Henderson." Gage guides me toward a sweeping staircase. "Please have tea sent up, and perhaps something stronger. Also, Miss Everett will need fresh clothing."

"Of course, sir." She eyes the blood on my dress with concern but asks no questions.

I should run. Should demand answers, call the police, scream. Instead, I follow Gage mechanically up the stairs, down a hallway lined with what appear to be original works of art, and into a suite that's larger than my entire apartment.

"The bathroom is through there," he says, gesturing to a door. "Everything you need should be provided. Mrs. Henderson will bring you something to change into."

I stand motionless in the center of the room, unable to process simple instructions. Gage sighs, then gently guides me to sit on the edge of the bed.

"The man who attacked you," he says, crouching to meet my eyes, "was a common criminal. His death, while regrettable, was necessary to ensure your safety. My men were following protocol."

Protocol. As if murder is just another item on a corporate checklist.

I find my voice, though it sounds distant even to my own ears. "You had me followed."

"Yes." No denial, no excuses. "For your protection."

"The black SUV. The business cards. The text messages." My voice strengthens as anger begins to cut through the shock. "That was all you?"

"My organization, yes."

My hands clench into fists. "Why? What do you want from me?"

He stands, creating distance between us. "That's a longer conversation, one we'll have when you're more... composed." He moves toward the door. "Get cleaned up. Rest. We'll talk in the morning."

"No!" I find myself on my feet, trembling with anger rather than fear now. "You don't get to decide when we talk. You've had me stalked for weeks. A man just died in front of me. I want answers now."

Gage studies me, his expression unreadable. "Very well. Clean up first. I'll wait."

Before I can argue further, there's a knock at the door. Mrs. Henderson enters with a tray of tea and what looks like brandy, followed by another woman carrying folded clothing.

"These should fit," Mrs. Henderson says, setting the clothing on the bed. "The bathroom has everything else you might need. Ring if you require anything more."

They withdraw silently, leaving me alone with Gage again. He pours a measure of amber liquid into a crystal glass and offers it to me.

"It will help with the shock," he says when I don't take it.

I finally accept the glass, downing the liquid in one burning swallow. The heat spreads through my chest, dulling the edge of my panic.

"Shower," Gage says. "Change. Then we'll talk."

I know I should continue demanding answers, but the blood on my skin has begun to itch, a constant reminder of death. I take the clothing and retreat to the bathroom, locking the door behind me.

The bathroom is lavish—white marble, brushed gold fixtures, a shower large enough for four people. I strip off my ruined dress, dropping it to the floor in a heap of silk and blood. The hot water stings my skin, but I welcome the pain, scrubbing until no trace of the evening's horror remains.

When I finally emerge, wrapped in a plush robe provided, the clothing Mrs. Henderson brought waits on the counter—simple black pants, a soft cashmere sweater, and underwear that somehow fits perfectly.

I dress quickly, avoiding my reflection in the mirror.

I don't want to see the haunted look in my eyes.

Gage waits in the sitting area of the suite, standing at the window overlooking manicured grounds illuminated by security lighting. He turns when I enter, his gaze assessing but not intrusive.

"Better?" he asks.

"No." I remain standing, arms crossed protectively over my chest. "Nothing about this situation is 'better.'"

He gestures to an armchair. "Please, sit."

"I'll stand."

A slight smile touches his lips, almost admiring. "As you wish." He pours more brandy into my empty glass and extends it.

This time I accept it without hesitation, taking a smaller sip than before. The warmth steadies me, allows me to focus.

"Start talking," I say. "Why have you been following me?"

Gage doesn't answer immediately. Instead, he studies me with those piercing blue eyes, as if measuring my capacity for truth.

"Your father and I have an arrangement," he finally says. "One that involves you."

Cold dread pools in my stomach. "What kind of arrangement?"

"A marriage arrangement." His voice is matter-of-fact, devoid of emotion. "Formalized when you were sixteen, to be fulfilled when you turned twenty-six."

The room spins slightly. I grip the back of a chair to steady myself. "That's ridiculous. This isn't the Middle Ages. You can't arrange marriages like—like business deals."

"And yet, it happened." He remains perfectly calm. "Your father needed something from me ten years ago. I required something in return. You were the agreed-upon payment."

A hysterical laugh escapes me. "And you expect me to just accept this? To marry a stranger because my father made some deal?"

"Not a stranger." Gage steps closer, his presence filling the room. "I've been monitoring your life for years, Penelope. Your education, your friendships, your business... None of it has been a mystery to me."

The implications of his statement hit me like a physical blow. "You've been watching me since I was sixteen?"

"Not personally, at first. My organization kept tabs on your development, your potential. When you left your family, we increased surveillance."

"That's—that's stalking. It's illegal. It's?—"

"It's protection," he interrupts. "The world is dangerous for a woman alone, especially one with your background and connections. Tonight proved that."

I shake my head, disbelieving. "The man tonight was a random mugger."

Gage's expression flickers with something I can't quite identify. "Was he?"

The question hangs in the air between us, loaded with implication. My mind races back through the attack—how the man had appeared so suddenly, how he'd specifically mentioned my necklace rather than just demanding my purse, how quickly Blackwood's men had responded.

"You staged it," I whisper, the realization washing over me like ice water. "The whole thing was orchestrated."

Gage doesn't confirm or deny, which is confirmation enough.

"Why?" My voice breaks on the word. "To what end?"

"To bring you here." He moves to the window again, giving me space. "Your father has been increasingly... insistent about completing our arrangement. The timeline had to be accelerated."

"So you traumatized me? Had someone pretend to attack me, then killed them to—what? Make me feel indebted to you?"

His shoulders stiffen slightly. "That wasn't the plan. The man wasn't supposed to be eliminated, merely subdued. Victor made a judgment call when the situation escalated."

"A judgment call." I drain my glass, welcoming the burn. "You're talking about a human life."

"I'm talking about your safety," Gage counters, turning to face me again. "The details of tonight's operation are regrettable, but the outcome remains the same. You're here now, where you belong."

"I don't belong here," I snap. "I belong in my apartment, in my shop—the life I built

for myself."

A cold smile flickers across his face. "Did you? Build it yourself?"

Something in his tone makes my stomach clench. "What do you mean?"

"Wildflower. Your apartment. Your so-called independence.

" He approaches slowly, like a predator stalking prey.

"How do you think you secured such prime retail space at twenty-one, with no credit history and limited funds?

How did you obtain business licenses so quickly?

Why did your landlord approve extensive renovations on a five-year lease? "

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I shake my head, unwilling to follow his implication. "I saved. I planned. I worked hard."

"Yes, you did," he acknowledges. "But none of that would have mattered without my intervention."

"You're lying." But even as I say it, doubt creeps in. The business space had come together suspiciously easily. The apartment had been available exactly when I needed it. Sandra had appeared with perfect qualifications just as I'd begun thinking about hiring help.

Gage moves to a desk in the corner, opens a drawer, and withdraws a folder. "Your father worried when you ran away. He came to me, concerned about your safety, your future. I agreed to provide both—at a distance, allowing you the illusion of independence you so desperately craved."

He holds out the folder. When I don't take it, he places it on the coffee table between us.

"Everything is documented," he says quietly. "The shell corporation that owns your building. The payments to expedite permits. The background checks on every employee and major client. We even subsidized your grandmother's inheritance to ensure you had adequate startup capital."

My knees give out, and I sink into the nearest chair. "No."

"Your freedom was an illusion we allowed you, nothing more."

The words strike like physical blows. I open the folder with trembling hands, finding lease agreements, bank statements, security reports—all bearing unfamiliar company names that trace back to Blackwood Investments.

"Why?" I whisper. "Why the elaborate charade? Why not just?"

"Force you?" He sits across from me, his posture relaxed despite the tension between us. "I wanted you willing, Penelope. Forcing a woman into marriage creates a prisoner, not a wife."

"And yet, here I am. Brought by force to your home."

"Circumstances changed." His voice hardens slightly. "Your father's patience ran out. He wants our arrangement concluded before Violet's wedding—a double celebration for the Everett family."

I close the folder, unable to look at the evidence of my fabricated freedom any longer. "You keep saying 'arrangement.' What exactly did my father get in exchange for selling his daughter?"

Gage studies me for a long moment. "Your father's company was facing criminal charges ten years ago—fraud, embezzlement, tax evasion. Evidence that would have destroyed not just Everett Enterprises, but your family's reputation, your sister's future... everything."

"And you had this evidence?"

He nods. "I acquired it specifically to leverage against William. His criminal activities had begun affecting my own interests."

"So instead of turning him in, you—what? Blackmailed him into giving you his

daughter?"

"I offered an alternative," Gage corrects. "Financial restructuring, legal protection, and eventually, a formal alliance through marriage. Your father agreed readily. He seemed to think I was doing him a favor, taking you off his hands."

The casual cruelty of the statement makes me flinch. "And what do you get out of this arrangement, Mr. Blackwood?"

His gaze becomes more intense, almost predatory. "A wife from an appropriate social background. Legitimacy in certain circles where my own family name carries... different connotations. And you, specifically—intelligent, resilient, beautiful."

"You don't know me," I argue, though the fight is draining from my voice.

"I know you better than anyone," he counters.

"Better than your friends, your sister, perhaps even better than you know yourself.

" He leans forward, elbows on his knees.

"I know you wake at 5 AM most mornings to arrange flowers in the quiet before the shop opens.

I know you take your coffee black with a single sugar.

I know you keep a journal hidden beneath the floorboard under your bed, where you write your true thoughts, your fears, your dreams."

Each revelation feels like an invasion, peeling back layers of privacy I'd thought protected. "Stop."

He continues as if I hadn't spoken. "I know you've had three lovers since leaving home—all brief relationships you ended before they became serious.

I know you send anonymous donations to the women's shelter on Michigan Avenue every month.

I know you visit the Art Institute when you're stressed, always lingering longest in front of Monet's water lilies. "

"Stop it!" I rise to my feet, hands clenched at my sides. "You don't get to claim intimacy through surveillance. That's not knowing someone—that's stalking them."

Gage stands as well, his height allowing him to look down at me. "Call it what you will. The fact remains—your life as you knew it is over, Penelope. The sooner you accept that reality, the easier this transition will be."

"Transition?" I laugh bitterly. "Is that what we're calling kidnapping now?"

"You weren't kidnapped. You were protected from a dangerous situation and brought to safety."

"Semantics." I walk to the door, testing the handle. Locked, of course. "Let me leave, and I won't press charges."

He actually smiles at that—a small, almost pitying expression.

"Press charges against whom? Your father, who signed the legal documents?

My security team, who saved you from an attacker?

Me, for providing you with shelter after a traumatic event?

" He shakes his head. "Even if you could find a sympathetic ear in law enforcement—which you won't—there's nothing illegal about our arrangement. "

"Forced marriage is illegal," I insist.

"No one is forcing you to marry me, Penelope."

I stare at him incredulously. "You've locked me in a room in your home after staging a violent attack to get me here!"

"I've provided secure accommodations following a traumatic incident," he corrects smoothly. "The door is locked for your safety, not your imprisonment. As for marriage..." He shrugs elegantly. "You have options."

"What options?"

"Marry me willingly, and your life continues much as before—your shop, your creative work, your independence within defined parameters.

Refuse..." His expression hardens. "Refuse, and I withdraw all financial support from Wildflower, expose the subsidies that have kept you afloat these five years, and allow your father's legal troubles to resume—troubles that will inevitably entangle you as his daughter and likely heir. "

My stomach drops. "You'd destroy everything I've built."

"I'd stop protecting what you mistakenly believed you built alone," he corrects. "The distinction matters, Penelope."

The room suddenly feels too small, the air too thin. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold together the pieces of my life that seem to be crumbling around me.

"I'll give you two weeks," Gage continues, his voice softening slightly. "Time to process this change, to review your options, to come to terms with your new reality."

"And if I still refuse?"

His expression shows nothing but calm certainty. "You won't. You're practical beneath your rebellious exterior. You'll choose the path that preserves what matters most to you."

He moves to the door, producing a key from his pocket. "Rest now. We'll continue this discussion tomorrow, when you're more... amenable to reason."

"I'll never be amenable to this," I say, but my voice lacks conviction even to my own ears.

Gage pauses in the doorway, studying me with those unsettling blue eyes. "I don't need your love, Penelope," he says quietly. "But I will have your obedience."

The door closes behind him, the lock engaging with a soft click that somehow sounds like finality.

I stand frozen in the center of the room, my mind racing. Outside the window, security lights illuminate grounds surrounded by high walls. Beyond those walls lies my shop, my apartment, my friends—the life I thought I'd built but apparently never truly owned.

And beneath it all, the most disturbing realization—that Gage Blackwood has been watching me for years, learning my habits, my preferences, my weaknesses. Preparing for this moment when he would finally claim what he believes is rightfully his.

Claim me.

I curl onto my side, still fully dressed, and stare at the moonlight casting patterns on the wall.

Sleep will not come easily tonight—not with my mind replaying every moment of the past five years, searching for the signs I missed, the strings I didn't see, the cage I never realized was being built around me, bar by invisible bar.

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M orning arrives with cruel clarity. I've slept perhaps two hours, my mind refusing to quiet despite exhaustion.

The room—my prison—is bathed in soft light filtering through sheer curtains.

Everything is tasteful, expensive, and utterly impersonal, like a luxury hotel suite designed to please everyone and reflect no one.

I sit up, running a hand through tangled hair. My ruined dress is gone from the bathroom floor, removed while I slept by unseen staff. The violation of my space while unconscious sends a fresh wave of anger through me.

A knock at the door precedes Mrs. Henderson's entrance. She carries a breakfast tray, her expression professional but not unkind.

"Good morning, Miss Everett. I've brought some breakfast and fresh clothing." She sets the tray on a small table by the window. "Mr. Blackwood requests your presence in his study at ten o'clock."

I glance at the clock—8:30 AM. "And if I refuse?"

Mrs. Henderson's expression doesn't change. "That would be your choice, of course. Though I believe there are matters regarding your family that require discussion."

My family. The arrangement. The deal my father made using me as currency.

"Fine." I don't bother hiding my bitterness. "Tell Mr. Blackwood I'll be there."

"Very good." She moves to the closet, which now contains several outfits in what appears to be my size. "These should fit. If there's anything else you require, please use the house phone by the bed."

After she leaves, I force myself to eat despite my lack of appetite. The food is excellent—fresh fruit, yogurt, warm pastries—but tastes like ash in my mouth. I shower again, trying to wash away the lingering feeling of violation from last night's revelations.

The clothing provided is simple but expensive—dark jeans, a cream sweater, leather ankle boots. Everything fits perfectly, another reminder of how thoroughly I've been studied like a specimen under glass.

At precisely 9:55, I leave the guest suite. The door is unlocked now, though I suspect that's more about Gage's confidence in the security of his estate than any real freedom on my part. A staff member waits in the hallway, ready to escort me.

"This way, Miss Everett."

I follow in silence, taking mental notes of the layout.

The mansion is enormous—modern architecture blending seamlessly with classic elements, floor-to-ceiling windows offering views of manicured grounds and distant forest. Security cameras are discreetly placed at regular intervals.

No obvious escape routes present themselves.

The staff member stops at a set of double doors, knocks once, then opens them without waiting for a response.

"Miss Everett, sir."

Gage's study is exactly what I would expect—a vast space dominated by a wall of windows overlooking the estate grounds, bookshelves lined with leather-bound volumes, and a massive desk of polished wood. He sits behind it, reviewing documents, but rises when I enter.

"Penelope. Thank you for coming." As if I had a choice. "Please, sit."

I remain standing just inside the doorway. "You mentioned my family."

His lips quirk in what might be amusement at my defiance. "I did. Your father will be joining us shortly."

"My father?" The news catches me off guard. "He's coming here?"

"He's already here." Gage gestures to the seating area near the windows. "He arrived an hour ago. I thought it best if we spoke privately first."

I reluctantly move to the indicated chair, perching on its edge. "What is there to discuss that wasn't covered last night?"

"Your father believes you require... convincing about our arrangement." Gage sits across from me, his posture relaxed but alert. "I disagree. I think you simply need complete information to make a rational decision."

"There is no rational decision to be made about forced marriage."

"Again, no one is forcing you." His tone remains conversational, as if we're discussing a business merger rather than my life. "You have options, limited though they may be."

"Limited by your design," I counter.

He inclines his head, acknowledging the point.

"Life is defined by constraints, Penelope.

True freedom is an illusion—we're all bound by circumstances of birth, social conventions, legal frameworks, economic realities.

The difference is whether we recognize those constraints and work within them, or waste energy fighting against immovable objects. "

"Philosophy doesn't change the fact that you're holding me here against my will."

"I'm providing sanctuary after a traumatic event." That smooth correction again, reframing my captivity as protection. "And offering you a future with considerably more autonomy than most women in your position would receive."

Before I can respond, the door opens again. My father strides in, impeccably dressed in a charcoal suit, his expression a mixture of impatience and disapproval when his eyes land on me.

"Penelope." No warmth, just acknowledgment. "I see you're being difficult, as usual."

I stand, facing him directly. "Difficult? That's what you call objecting to being sold like property?"

"Don't be dramatic." He moves to the bar cart, pouring himself a measure of scotch despite the early hour. "This arrangement has been in place for a decade. Your... escapade these past five years was merely a delay of the inevitable."

"William." Gage's voice carries a subtle warning. "Perhaps we should focus on explaining the situation fully, rather than assigning blame."

My father waves his hand dismissively. "She knows the situation. She's just being stubborn."

"Actually," I interject, "I know very little beyond what Mr. Blackwood told me last night—that you traded me to cover up your crimes."

My father's face darkens. "Watch your tone, young lady. This 'trade,' as you so crudely put it, preserved our family name, your sister's future, and your own standard of living."

"At the cost of my autonomy and choice."

"Your choice," he sneers, "would have been to run away at the first opportunity—oh wait, that's exactly what you did, without a thought for the consequences to anyone but yourself."

Gage clears his throat. "Perhaps we should focus on the present, rather than rehashing old grievances."

My father turns to him. "I told you she would be difficult. We should proceed as planned, with or without her willing participation."

I feel the blood drain from my face. "What does that mean?"

Gage's expression hardens slightly as he looks at my father. "It means nothing. That's not how this will proceed." He turns to me, his tone more measured. "Your father is understandably eager to conclude our agreement, but I've made it clear that I prefer your willing participation."

"Willing participation under duress isn't willing," I argue.

"Semantics again." My father drains his glass. "The fact remains, Penelope, that your little experiment with independence is over. The marriage will proceed as agreed. The only question is whether you'll be sensible about it or continue this pointless rebellion."

"William." Gage's voice has an edge now. "That's enough."

Something in his tone makes my father pause. For all his bluster, there's a deference in his posture when he addresses Gage—the subtle shift of a man accustomed to power acknowledging someone with more of it.

"I merely want to ensure my daughter understands the gravity of the situation," my father says, more subdued now.

"She's intelligent enough to grasp it without your... elaboration." Gage moves to his desk, retrieving a folder. "Perhaps we should discuss the specifics of the financial arrangements. Penelope deserves to understand exactly what's at stake."

My father looks uncomfortable. "Is that necessary? The details are?—"

"Essential," Gage finishes firmly. "If you expect her cooperation, she deserves complete transparency."

He hands me the folder. Inside are financial statements, legal documents, and what appears to be evidence of fraud on a massive scale—all tied to Everett Enterprises.

"Ten years ago," Gage explains, "your father's company was on the verge of collapse. Not merely bankruptcy, but criminal charges that would have sent him to prison for decades."

I flip through the documents, understanding enough to recognize the severity. Tax

evasion. Embezzlement. Fraud across multiple states and international boundaries.

"I approached your father with an alternative to prosecution," Gage continues. "Financial restructuring, legal protection, and a merger of families through marriage—specifically, to you, once you reached an appropriate age."

"Why me?" I look up from the damning evidence. "Why not Violet?"

My father shifts uncomfortably. "Violet was already promised to the Montgomery family. A long-standing arrangement between our families."

"So I was the spare," I say bitterly. "The one you could trade away without disrupting your precious social connections."

"You were always difficult, always questioning everything," my father snaps. "Violet understood her responsibilities to the family name. You were too busy playing rebel to appreciate the opportunities your position afforded you."

"Opportunities?" I laugh harshly. "Like being sold to cover your crimes?"

"Enough." Gage's command silences us both. "What's done is done. The question now is how we proceed."

I close the folder, unable to stomach any more evidence of my father's corruption. "And I still have a choice in this?"

"To an extent," Gage acknowledges. "As I explained last night, you can agree to the marriage, maintaining a version of your current life with certain... adjustments. Or you can refuse, in which case the legal protection extended to your father would be withdrawn."

"You'd go to prison," I tell my father, not bothering to hide my satisfaction at the prospect.

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"Not just me." My father's smile is cold. "These documents implicate several executives who've since moved on—including your mother's brother. The scandal would destroy multiple families, including your precious sister's engagement to Charles Montgomery."

"The Montgomery family would withdraw from any connection to scandal," Gage confirms. "Your sister's future would be... significantly altered."

I stand, pacing to the window. Outside, the estate grounds stretch toward distant security fencing. A beautiful prison.

"So my choices are marry a stranger who's been stalking me for years, or destroy my extended family, my sister's happiness, and watch my father go to prison." I turn back to face them. "Some choice."

"Most choices in life come with constraints," Gage says simply. "This one is merely more explicit than most."

My father checks his watch impatiently. "We've wasted enough time on explanations. Penelope, you will accept this arrangement like the adult you claim to be. The wedding will take place before Violet's, as Mr. Blackwood and I have agreed."

"And if I refuse?" I challenge.

"Then you force my hand." Gage's expression remains impassive. "I withdraw legal protection from your father and return you to exactly the position you would have been in five years ago—except now, with a public scandal attached to your name."

I stare at him, searching for any sign of compassion or doubt. There is none. Just calm certainty and the unwavering belief in his right to determine my future.

"You're both despicable," I say quietly.

My father scoffs. "Always so dramatic. You're being offered marriage to one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the country. Most women would be grateful."

"Most women aren't being traded like cattle to cover their father's crimes."

Gage rises, moving to stand by the window near me.

"I understand your anger, Penelope. But consider this from another perspective.

Your life these past five years—the independence you've valued, the business you've built—none of it would have been possible without the protection I've provided.

Even your rebellion has been enabled by the very arrangement you're now rejecting. "

The cruel irony isn't lost on me. The freedom I've cherished has been an illusion all along, a gilded cage with invisible bars.

"How can I possibly trust anything about this situation?" I ask, my voice low. "How can I believe that whatever 'choice' I make won't just be another manipulation?"

"Because I've never lied to you," Gage replies simply. "I've monitored you, yes. Protected you from a distance. But I've never misrepresented my intentions or the reality of our situation."

My father snorts derisively. "This is absurd. She doesn't need coddling or explanations. She needs to fulfill her obligation to this family."

"William." Gage's voice carries a definite warning now. "Remember your position in this arrangement."

Something in his tone makes my father pale slightly. He sets down his empty glass with a sharp click. "Fine. Handle it your way. But the timeline stands. The wedding happens before Violet's."

He stalks toward the door, pausing beside me. "For once in your life, Penelope, think of someone besides yourself." Then he's gone, the door closing firmly behind him.

I remain by the window, arms wrapped protectively around myself. "He acts like I'm the villain in this scenario."

"Your father sees the world through a very specific lens," Gage observes. "One where family obligation outweighs individual desire, and where appearances matter more than ethics."

"And how do you see the world, Mr. Blackwood?" I turn to face him. "Through what lens do you justify stalking and emotional blackmail?"

He considers the question seriously. "I see it through the lens of necessity. Of taking what's mine when it's offered. Of protecting investments."

"Is that what I am to you? An investment?"

His gaze is unsettlingly direct. "Initially, yes. A strategic acquisition with potential value beyond the immediate advantage of having leverage over your father."

"And now?"

Something shifts in his expression—a momentary softening, quickly masked. "Now,

you're a complication I hadn't anticipated. Your resilience, your independence... they're admirable qualities, even if inconvenient to my plans."

"Yet you still intend to force this marriage."

"I intend to honor an agreement made in good faith," he corrects. "And to give you time to adjust to the reality of your situation."

I turn away, unable to bear his unwavering certainty. "How generous."

"More generous than your father would prefer," Gage says dryly. "He advocated for a more... expedient approach."

A chill runs through me at the implication. "Meaning?"

"Meaning he suggested we proceed immediately, without this period of adjustment I'm offering."

"And why didn't you?" I challenge. "If I'm merely an investment, why bother with my consent at all?"

Gage is silent for a long moment. When he finally speaks, his voice is quieter, almost reflective. "Because a marriage built entirely on coercion creates a prisoner, not a partner. And contrary to what you may believe, Penelope, I don't want a prisoner."

"What do you want, then?"

"A wife who understands her position. Who recognizes the benefits of our arrangement as well as its constraints. Who brings her intelligence and strength to our partnership rather than wasting it on futile resistance."

"That's not going to happen," I say firmly.

He smiles slightly. "We'll see. You have two weeks to consider your options before I expect an answer."

"And in the meantime? Am I a prisoner here?"

"You're a protected guest." That careful reframing again. "You're welcome to explore the grounds, use the facilities. There's a garden I think you might appreciate—the previous owner was something of a botanist."

"But I can't leave."

"Not at present, no. The situation with your attacker requires caution. We need to ensure no further threats exist."

The convenient fiction of the staged attack continues to serve his purpose. I don't bother challenging it.

"What about my shop? My employees?"

"Sandra has been informed that you're taking a personal leave due to a family emergency. The Morgan account has increased its orders to offset any financial impact of your absence."

Of course. The Morgan account—his shell company. Another strand in the web he's woven around my life.

"You've thought of everything," I say bitterly.

"Planning is essential in any significant venture." He moves back to his desk, a subtle

dismissal. "Mrs. Henderson will show you the grounds whenever you're ready. I have meetings for most of the day, but we'll dine together this evening."

"And if I refuse dinner?"

His expression remains neutral. "That would be your choice. Though isolation rarely improves difficult situations."

I walk to the door, pausing with my hand on the handle. "You think you know me, Mr. Blackwood. You've studied me like a specimen, tracked my movements, compiled data points. But you don't know me at all."

"Perhaps not entirely," he concedes. "But I know enough to recognize that you're practical beneath your passionate exterior. You'll make the rational choice, Penelope. In time."

I leave without responding, finding Mrs. Henderson waiting discreetly in the hallway.

"Would you care to see the grounds now, Miss Everett?" she asks politely.

"No." My voice cracks slightly. "I'd like to return to my room."

"Of course." She leads the way without comment, her professional demeanor giving no hint of judgment or pity.

Back in my luxurious cage, I sink onto the edge of the bed. The morning's revelations swirl in my mind—my father's callous disregard, the extent of Gage's manipulation, the impossible choice before me.

The door isn't locked this time. A small concession that changes nothing about my fundamental situation. I'm trapped not by physical barriers but by the elaborate web

of consequences Gage has constructed around me.

I cross to the window, pressing my palm against the cool glass. In the distance, beyond the pristine lawns and security fencing, lies the city—my shop, my apartment, my friends. The life I built that was never truly mine.

I had believed I'd escaped that control, built something that was truly mine. Now I know better. I've simply exchanged one controller for another, more subtle one.

The tears come without warning—hot, angry tears that blur my vision and burn my cheeks. I don't try to stop them.

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The garden is beautiful, I have to admit.

Late afternoon sun filters through ancient oak trees, dappling stone pathways with golden light.

Beds of exotic flowers create a riot of color against meticulously trimmed hedges.

A small pond reflects the sky, water lilies floating on its surface like tiny perfect worlds.

After hours of pacing my room, the walls had begun to close in. Pride had kept me from accepting Mrs. Henderson's repeated offers to show me the grounds, but practicality eventually won out. If I'm to find any way out of this situation, I need to understand my surroundings.

"This section was designed by the original owner's wife," Mrs. Henderson explains as we walk along a curved path. "Mr. Blackwood has maintained her vision while adding modern elements."

I nod politely, studying the layout of the estate rather than admiring the plantings.

The main house sits at the center of approximately twenty acres, surrounded by formal gardens that give way to more natural landscaping toward the perimeter.

A high stone wall topped with discreet security measures encircles the entire property.

Guards patrol at regular intervals, their movements carefully choreographed to appear casual while maintaining complete surveillance.

No obvious weaknesses present themselves. No easy escape.

"The conservatory is Mr. Blackwood's particular project," Mrs. Henderson continues, gesturing toward a gleaming glass structure at the far end of the formal garden. "He finds it relaxing after difficult days."

I try to imagine Gage Blackwood—cold, calculating, manipulative—finding peace among flowers. The image doesn't reconcile with the man who's systematically dismantled my independence.

"How long have you worked for Mr. Blackwood?" I ask, searching for any information that might prove useful.

"Nearly fifteen years now," she answers without hesitation. "Since his father passed and he took over the family interests."

"And what were those interests, exactly?"

Mrs. Henderson's expression gives nothing away. "Mr. Blackwood oversees diverse holdings across multiple industries. I'm sure he'd be happy to discuss them with you directly."

Another dead end. Every staff member I've encountered has been politely unhelpful, clearly loyal to their employer and unwilling to provide any useful information.

We continue walking, passing a tennis court, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and what appears to be a small art gallery housed in a separate building. Everything is immaculate, expensive, and utterly impersonal—like a luxury resort rather than a

home.

"This path leads to Mr. Blackwood's private wing," Mrs. Henderson explains, indicating a stone walkway bordered by cypress trees. "The remaining buildings are maintenance facilities and staff quarters."

I make mental notes of each location, constructing a map in my mind. Knowledge is power, limited though that power might be in my current situation.

"And the security system?" I ask casually. "I noticed cameras throughout the property."

"State of the art," she confirms. "Mr. Blackwood values privacy and safety above all else."

I bite back a retort about whose privacy and safety he truly values. Instead, I change tactics. "Does Mr. Blackwood entertain often?"

"Occasionally. Business associates primarily, though he hosts a formal charity gala each spring."

"And does he... bring women here?" The question is uncomfortable but potentially valuable. If he has a pattern with other women, it might reveal weaknesses in his approach.

Mrs. Henderson studies me for a moment, her expression softening slightly. "Mr. Blackwood is a private man, Miss Everett. His personal life is his own affair. But I will say that you are the first woman he has invited to stay at the main residence in the ten years I've managed this household."

The information is unexpected and disturbing in equal measure. What makes me

different from whatever other women might have passed through his life? What role does he truly envision for me beyond the marriage arrangement with my father?

"I'm not a guest," I remind her, my voice hardening. "Guests can leave when they choose."

Her expression remains neutral. "As I understand it, your situation is temporary while security concerns are addressed."

The convenient fiction again. I don't bother challenging it.

We complete our circuit of the grounds as the sun begins to set, casting long shadows across the manicured lawns. Mrs. Henderson checks her watch discreetly.

"Dinner will be served at seven in the small dining room. Mr. Blackwood asked me to remind you that your attendance is requested but not required."

The illusion of choice again. "I'll consider it."

"Very good, Miss Everett. Would you like to return to your room now, or continue exploring on your own?"

I glance around the garden, considering my options. "I think I'll stay out a bit longer. The fresh air is... helpful."

"Of course. Someone will be available at the main entrance when you're ready to return inside." Her meaning is clear—I'm free to roam the grounds, but my movements will be monitored.

When Mrs. Henderson has departed, I find a stone bench beneath a flowering magnolia and sit, finally allowing myself a moment of true reflection.

The situation is even more dire than I initially understood.

The documents Gage showed me this morning confirm that my father's crimes were extensive and well-documented.

If exposed, they would not only send him to prison but destroy multiple families through association—including Violet's future with the Montgomerys.

And Wildflower—my beloved shop, the business I poured my heart into—was never truly mine. The revelation cuts deeper than I expected. Every major client, every fortuitous break, every "lucky coincidence" that helped establish my reputation... all orchestrated by Gage Blackwood from a distance.

I can't even claim that I built my client list through talent alone, knowing now that his influence likely guided key accounts my way. The Morgan account was merely the most obvious example.

What remains that is truly mine? My skill with flowers? My aesthetic vision? Are even these aspects of myself somehow tainted by his invisible influence?

I press my palms against my eyes, fighting the hot sting of tears. Self-pity solves nothing. I need to think clearly, logically, if I'm to find any way through this labyrinth.

The facts, stripped of emotion, are these:

Gage Blackwood controls my fate through legal and financial means.

Refusing his marriage proposal would destroy my family, my business, and potentially my sister's future.

The estate is essentially a fortress, with no obvious means of escape.

Even if I could escape, I have nowhere truly safe to go, no resources that aren't ultimately under his control.

The rational choice, as Gage predicted, is clear: accept the arrangement, preserve what I can, and look for leverage once I understand the full scope of his operations and vulnerabilities.

But acceptance feels like surrender, like betraying the independent woman I've fought to become.

A shadow falls across me, and I look up to find Gage himself standing a few feet away. He's changed from his business attire into dark slacks and a grey sweater that softens his imposing presence without diminishing it.

"May I join you?" he asks, his tone suggesting it's an actual request rather than a command.

I shrug, moving slightly to make room on the bench. He sits beside me, leaving a respectful distance between us.

"Mrs. Henderson mentioned you've been exploring the grounds," he says, his gaze fixed on the distant mountains rather than on me. "I hope you found them satisfactory."

"The garden is beautiful," I admit. "Though I imagine the walls and security cameras somewhat diminish the sense of tranquility."

A slight smile curves his lips. "Security and beauty aren't mutually exclusive concepts, Penelope. One often enables the other."

"Is that your justification for keeping me here? That you're somehow protecting me?"

He turns to face me, his expression serious. "I am protecting you. The world contains genuine threats—not just the staged incident that brought you here, but real dangers that someone of your background and connections faces daily."

"Dangers you've conveniently defined and that only you can shield me from," I counter.

"Your skepticism is understandable." He leans back slightly, studying my profile. "I thought perhaps we could speak more informally here instead."

I resist the urge to move further away. "What is there to discuss that wasn't covered this morning?"

"Your immediate concerns, for one. You mentioned your shop, your employees. I understand Wildflower is important to you, regardless of who ultimately owns the building or provides financial backing."

The reminder stings. "It's more than important. It's mine—the one thing I created myself."

"And it will remain yours," he says, surprising me. "I have no interest in dismantling what you've built, regardless of how our personal situation resolves."

I turn to face him, suspicious. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that while I expect your agreement to our arrangement, I don't intend to strip you of your identity or passion. Wildflower continues, with you at its helm, whether you become my wife or not."

The offer is unexpected. "Why?"

He considers the question carefully. "Because destroying something you love would create resentment that serves no purpose. Because your talent should not be wasted. Because I respect what you've accomplished, even if I facilitated certain aspects of it."

"How generous of you," I say, unable to keep the bitterness from my voice.

"It's not generosity, Penelope. It's pragmatism. Happy wives make better partners than resentful prisoners."

"I'll never be happy with this arrangement."

"Perhaps not initially," he concedes. "But contentment often grows from acceptance of reality."

"Is that how you see marriage?"

The question seems to genuinely interest him. "In many ways, yes. Two individuals with separate desires and goals finding the most efficient compromise to achieve mutual benefit."

"There's nothing mutual about our situation," I point out. "You hold all the power."

"Currently, perhaps." His gaze is steady, assessing. "But power dynamics shift over time. You're intelligent, resourceful, and determined. Those qualities don't disappear simply because you find yourself at a disadvantage."

I study him, trying to understand his angle. "Are you suggesting I might eventually gain leverage over you?"

"Relationships evolve and your perception of powerlessness may be more temporary than you currently believe." He rises from the bench, extending a hand to help me up. "Shall we walk? The sunset view from the western terrace is worth seeing."

I ignore his offered hand, standing on my own. "Why are you doing this?"

He drops his hand, accepting my rejection without comment. "My purpose is to help you adjust to your new reality with minimal trauma. To begin creating whatever relationship is possible between us, given the circumstances."

"A relationship requires consent," I remind him. "Something notably absent from our arrangement."

"You have more choice than you acknowledge, Penelope." He begins walking along the garden path, slow enough that I can easily keep pace without feeling led. "You're choosing your family's welfare over your immediate freedom."

"A choice between a rock and a hard place is hardly a choice at all."

"Few choices in life are without significant constraints or consequences." He gestures toward a path leading to a stone terrace overlooking the valley below. "The western view."

I follow, partly out of curiosity and partly because continuing the conversation feels more productive than returning to my isolation. The terrace offers a stunning panorama of mountains bathed in the golden light of sunset, the valley below transitioning from day to evening.

"Beautiful," I murmur despite myself.

"Yes." But when I glance over, he's watching me, not the sunset. Something in his gaze makes my pulse quicken—not fear, exactly, but awareness of something unpredictable beneath his controlled exterior.

"Tell me what you want," he says suddenly.

I blink, caught off guard by the direct question. "What I want? Freedom. To return to my life. To never have heard the name Blackwood."

"Beyond that," he presses. "If our arrangement proceeds—which we both know it will—what would make it tolerable for you? What would you require to find some measure of contentment?"

The question is so unexpected that I answer honestly. "Control over my own

schedule. Continuation of my business without interference. No pretense of romantic feelings or physical intimacy. A clear understanding that this is a business arrangement, nothing more."

He considers my terms without visible reaction. "The first two are easily granted. The third and fourth are... negotiable."

A chill runs through me. "Meaning?"

"Meaning that while I won't demand physical intimacy immediately, I do expect it. We will be married, Penelope, in every legal and practical sense. Continuing your business, maintaining your creative independence—these are concessions I'm willing to make. Permanent celibacy is not."

The blunt statement hangs between us, heavy with implication. "You can't force?—"

"Penelope." His interruption is sharp, almost angry. "I expect your eventual willingness, not your submission to force. There's a significant difference."

"And if that willingness never materializes?"

He studies me for a long moment. "Then we would have an unfulfilled contract, with consequences neither of us desires. But I don't believe that will be the case."

His confidence infuriates me. "You don't know me as well as you think you do."

"Perhaps not," he concedes. "But I know human nature. Given enough time, even arranged marriages often develop genuine attachment."

"Is that what you want?"

The question seems to catch him slightly off guard. "I want a partnership with clearly understood expectations and mutual benefits. Whether that includes emotional attachment is... secondary. Anything else?" he asks, returning to my list of requirements.

I consider what else might make this prison more bearable. "Information. Complete transparency about your expectations and the full scope of your agreement with my father. No more surprises or revelations designed to manipulate me."

He nods slowly. "Reasonable, within certain limitations. Some aspects of my business require discretion for legal and security reasons."

"The illegal parts, you mean."

A slight smile touches his lips. "The sensitive parts. Not all that requires discretion is illegal, Penelope."

The sun has nearly disappeared behind the mountains, painting the sky in dramatic streaks of orange and purple. In this light, with the valley spread below us, I can almost forget the circumstances that brought me here.

Almost.

"Why me?" I ask abruptly. "Out of all the women you could have chosen or arranged to marry, why select someone who clearly doesn't want the position?"

Gage is quiet for a long moment, his expression thoughtful. When he finally speaks, his voice is softer than I've heard before.

"When your father first suggested the arrangement, it was purely tactical—a means of securing his compliance and gaining certain social advantages through connection to

the Everett name.

But as I learned more about you over the years, watched you create something from nothing after leaving your family.

.." He pauses, choosing his words carefully.

"Your determination impressed me. Your resilience.

Your refusal to be defined by circumstances or expectations. "

"Those are precisely the qualities that make me unsuitable for an arranged marriage," I point out.

"On the contrary," he counters. "They're exactly what I need in a partner. Not blind compliance or decorative presence, but intelligence, strength, and adaptability."

"For what purpose?"

His expression closes slightly, the brief glimpse of openness disappearing. "That's part of the longer conversation we'll have as our arrangement progresses."

The evasive answer heightens my suspicion. "More secrets, Mr. Blackwood?"

"Strategic information, shared when appropriate." He checks his watch. "Dinner will be served soon, if you've reconsidered joining me."

The abrupt shift in topic signals the end of his transparency, limited though it was. I shake my head. "I think I'll eat in my room tonight. I have a lot to process."

He accepts this without argument. "Of course. I'll have something sent up." He

gestures toward the main house. "Shall I escort you back?"

"I can find my way."

He nods, maintaining the illusion that I have choices, control. "Tomorrow, perhaps you'd like to see the conservatory. I have several rare orchid species that might interest you, given your professional background."

The invitation is clearly an attempt to normalize our situation, to establish a routine that includes civil interaction.

Part of me wants to refuse outright, to maintain clear opposition to his control.

But the rational part recognizes that building rapport, gathering information, and searching for leverage requires engagement.

"Perhaps," I say noncommittally.

"Good night, then, Penelope." He remains on the terrace as I walk away, his tall figure silhouetted against the darkening sky.

I follow the path back to the main house, where a staff member waits to escort me to my room.

The meal that arrives shortly after is exquisite—roasted salmon with fresh vegetables, crusty bread, and a glass of white wine.

I eat mechanically, barely tasting the food, my mind replaying the conversation with Gage.

His willingness to preserve Wildflower is significant—the first real concession in

what has otherwise been a completely one-sided power dynamic. And his unexpected honesty about expecting physical intimacy eventually, while disturbing, provides valuable insight into his expectations.

Two weeks, he said. Two weeks to "accept the inevitable" and agree to his terms. Two weeks to find some alternative that doesn't destroy everything and everyone I care about.

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I 'm released from my golden cage the following morning. After a tense breakfast with Gage—during which he outlines a schedule for the coming week that maintains the pretense that I'm a guest rather than a prisoner—he announces that I can return to my apartment and shop "to settle my affairs."

"Victor will drive you," he says, watching my reaction over the rim of his coffee cup. "You'll have three days to organize your business, pack essential belongings, and prepare for a more extended stay here."

"Three days," I repeat, struggling to keep my voice neutral despite the surge of hope at even this temporary freedom. "And I suppose I'll be under surveillance the entire time?"

"Victor will maintain a discreet distance," Gage confirms without apology. "For your safety, of course."

The fiction continues, both of us aware of its falsity. "Of course."

"I expect you back here on Friday evening for dinner." His tone makes it clear this isn't a request. "We have matters to discuss regarding the timeline of our arrangement."

I resist the urge to argue that three days is insufficient to "settle my affairs"—that dismantling a life takes longer than a weekend. Instead, I nod, already calculating how to use this unexpected opportunity.

"Will my father be joining us for this discussion?"

Something like distaste flickers across Gage's expression. "No. William's role in this arrangement is essentially complete."

The statement surprises me. "I thought this was primarily about your agreement with him."

"The initial arrangement was," Gage concedes. "The implementation is between you and me alone."

An hour later, I'm in the back of a luxury SUV—not the black surveillance vehicle I've come to dread, but a silver Range Rover with tinted windows. Victor drives in silence, his broad shoulders and military bearing somehow more intimidating in casual clothing than in his formal suit.

"The rules are simple, Miss Everett," he says as we approach the city.

"You may visit your apartment and your shop.

You may speak with your employees about business matters.

You may not discuss your situation with friends or family.

You may not attempt to leave the city or evade surveillance. Doing so would have... consequences."

"For me or for those I care about?" I ask, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Both." No elaboration necessary.

The threat hangs in the air as we drive through familiar streets. When we reach my apartment building, Victor parks but makes no move to exit the vehicle.

"I'll wait here," he says. "Take whatever time you need to pack essentials. I'll accompany you to your shop afterward."

The illusion of privacy. Of normal life resuming. I know better.

My apartment feels both familiar and foreign when I unlock the door.

Everything is exactly as I left it just days ago, yet something feels off—the subtle wrongness that comes from knowing unseen eyes have examined your most private spaces.

The journal Gage mentioned, hidden beneath my floorboard, confirms my suspicion when I check it—the pages are aligned slightly differently than my usual careful placement.

I pack methodically, selecting clothing suitable for an extended captivity—practical items. Then practical considerations: my laptop, chargers, toiletries, the few pieces of jewelry with sentimental value, including my grandmother's pendant.

As I move through familiar routines, reality shifts beneath me like unstable ground.

This apartment, which I fought so hard to afford, to furnish with carefully selected pieces that reflect my taste rather than my family's expectations—none of it was truly mine.

The reasonable rent, the convenient location, the responsive building management—all orchestrated to create the illusion of independence while keeping me exactly where Gage wanted me.

I sit heavily on the edge of my bed, fighting a wave of disorientation. How much of my life has been manipulated from a distance? Which friends are genuine, which

introduced into my circle strategically? Is Sandra truly the efficient assistant I believed, or another plant reporting my every move?

The questions spiral endlessly, threatening to paralyze me. I force them aside, focusing on practical considerations. Three days of relative freedom. Three days to assess my options, contact potential allies, perhaps find some leverage.

I finish packing, then systematically check my apartment for surveillance devices.

I find three—a camera disguised as a smoke detector in my bedroom, another hidden in a decorative clock in the living room, and a listening device tucked behind an outlet in the kitchen.

I leave them in place. Knowledge is power, even when that power is severely constrained.

Victor waits patiently when I exit the building. We drive to Wildflower in silence, tension humming beneath the surface.

Sandra looks up in surprise when I enter, her face lighting with relief. "Poppy! Thank goodness. I was so worried when that man said you had a family emergency."

I force a smile, acutely aware of Victor's presence just outside the door. "It's complicated. I'm back for a few days to get things organized."

Her eyes flick to the window, where Victor stands with his back to us, seemingly casual but obviously on guard. "Is everything okay? You look... different."

"I'm fine," I lie. "Just some family business to handle. Let's go over the books and upcoming orders. I need to make sure everything's covered while I'm away."

We retreat to my office, where I close the door and turn on the small radio I keep on a shelf—background noise to mask our conversation from potential listening devices. Even so, I keep my voice low.

"Sandra, I need to know something, and I need complete honesty." I meet her eyes directly. "Who hired you?"

She blinks, confusion evident. "You did. Last year, remember? I responded to your ad on the university job board."

"And before that? Any connections to Blackwood Investments? Or any unusual instructions regarding reporting on my activities?"

Her confusion deepens. "Blackwood? I don't know what that is. Poppy, what's going on? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Either she's an excellent actress or she's genuinely unaware of Gage's influence. I study her expression, looking for any sign of deception, and find only concern.

"I might be," I admit cautiously. "But I can't discuss it right now. Just... if anyone asks about me, about the shop, about anything unusual, tell me immediately. Okay?"

She nods, clearly worried but not pushing for explanations I can't safely give. "Of course. Whatever you need."

We spend the next several hours reviewing the order book, discussing upcoming client meetings, and ensuring Sandra can handle operations in my absence. I'm acutely aware of Victor's periodic checks through the front window, his watchful presence a constant reminder of my limited freedom.

By late afternoon, I've handled the most pressing business matters and am sorting

through mail that accumulated during my absence.

A thick cream envelope catches my attention—formal correspondence from my bank.

Inside, I find a notification that one of my business accounts has been frozen pending review.

"Sandra, did anyone from the bank call while I was gone?"

She shakes her head. "Not that I'm aware of. Is something wrong?"

"Just a formality to clear up," I say, though dread pools in my stomach. The timing is too convenient to be coincidence.

I check the other accounts through my banking app, finding two more frozen, leaving only the small emergency fund I keep separately for immediate operating expenses.

A message from my primary supplier appears moments later—they're "regretfully unable to fulfill" my standing order for next week due to "inventory constraints. "

The systematic dismantling has begun.

I call the bank immediately, only to be transferred between departments before finally reaching someone who informs me that the account freeze requires "management review" that cannot be expedited. The supplier similarly offers apologies but no solutions when I call them.

By closing time, three more messages have arrived—my commercial landlord "needs to discuss lease terms," my delivery service has "scheduling conflicts" with our regular arrangement, and my website suddenly shows "technical difficulties" despite functioning perfectly days ago.

The message is clear: Gage is demonstrating his power, showing how easily he can dismantle the business I've built if I don't comply with his demands.

I send Sandra home with reassurances I don't feel, waiting until she's gone before properly searching the shop for surveillance devices.

I find five, more advanced than those in my apartment—cameras with clear views of the front and back entrances, the main workspace, my office, and the storage area.

The thoroughness of the surveillance is chilling.

Victor appears in the doorway as I'm finishing. "Ready to go, Miss Everett?"

I nod, gathering my purse and locking the shop with a sense of finality I can't shake. As we drive to my apartment, my phone buzzes with an email notification—another client canceling a major order with vague apologies.

That night, I sit at my kitchen table with a legal pad, listing every aspect of my business that's been affected in just one day: frozen accounts, canceled orders, supplier issues, technical problems, potential lease concerns.

The pattern is clear and devastating. Without Gage's intervention, Wildflower will collapse within weeks, perhaps days.

I check my personal bank accounts, finding them similarly restricted. Even my emergency cash—several thousand dollars kept in a hidden safe in my closet—has mysteriously vanished, replaced with a note in elegant handwriting: "Safety isn't found in cash, Penelope."

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The violation is absolute. My home, my business, my finances—all compromised, all under his control.

I sleep fitfully, waking repeatedly to check the locks on my doors and windows, though I know such precautions are meaningless against the power arrayed against me.

Morning brings more evidence of Gage's reach—my cell phone service is suddenly "experiencing technical difficulties," limiting me to emergency calls only.

My internet connection slows to a crawl, then fails entirely.

The isolation is deliberate, cutting me off from potential support systems one by one.

I spend the day at Wildflower, addressing what issues I can despite the increasing restrictions.

Two employees call in their resignations without explanation.

Another major client cancels. The company that maintains our refrigeration systems reports they can't schedule maintenance for at least a month.

By evening, exhaustion and anger have formed a hard knot in my chest. I return to my apartment to find the electricity out—a "localized outage" affecting only my unit, according to the apologetic building manager.

I shower in cold water by the light of my phone flashlight, then sit in darkness,

considering my dwindling options.

The third day brings the final blows. My primary bank account is closed entirely, the modest balance transferred to an unknown location.

The commercial landlord calls to inform me that the building has been sold to a new owner who won't be renewing leases when they expire—including Wildflower's, which suddenly shows an end date three months away rather than the two years remaining I expected.

I search my office frantically, finding the original lease documents missing from my files. In their place is a different contract with my signature—one I never remember signing—specifying the shorter term with clauses allowing early termination under specific conditions.

The forgery is flawless, indistinguishable from my actual signature.

By afternoon, the systematic dismantling of my life is nearly complete. Sandra watches with increasing concern as I handle crisis after crisis, making excuses I know sound hollow.

"Poppy," she says finally, "what's really happening? This isn't normal business fluctuation. It's like everything's falling apart at once."

I can't tell her the truth—can't risk Gage taking action against her too. "Just a perfect storm of bad timing," I say, the lie bitter on my tongue. "I'll sort it out."

But we both know I won't. Or, rather I can't.

When Victor arrives to collect me, earlier than expected on this final day, his expression is unreadable as always.

"Mr. Blackwood has requested you return to the estate immediately," he says, not bothering with the pretense that I have a choice. "There's been a change of plans."

"What change?" I ask, gathering my purse with shaking hands.

"He'll explain when we arrive."

The drive passes in tense silence. I stare out the window at the city streets, at normal people living normal lives, unaware that invisible hands can rewrite reality at will for those who cross the wrong powerful men.

At my apartment, I collect my packed bags while Victor waits in the living room.

In the bathroom, hidden from surveillance by the closed door, I make a decision.

I still have my checkbook, despite the closed accounts.

I write checks for sizable amounts to Sandra and each of my employees, backdating them to before the accounts were frozen.

Perhaps they'll clear; perhaps they won't. But I have to try something to protect those caught in the crossfire of Gage's demonstration of power.

I hide the checks in my purse, then make one final, desperate move.

I retrieve my emergency phone—a basic prepaid model kept for true crises, unknown to anyone, including my father—from its hiding place inside a hollowed-out book.

I power it on long enough to send identical text messages to my closest friends:

If anything happens to me, Gage Blackwood is responsible. Don't trust official

explanations.

I add his address and the little I know about him, then power off the phone and tuck it deep in my bag. A futile gesture, perhaps, but it's something—a breadcrumb trail should the worst happen.

Victor watches impassively as I take a final look around my apartment—the first place that was truly mine, or so I believed. "Ready, Miss Everett?"

I nod, unable to trust my voice. The drive to Gage's estate feels like a funeral procession, marking the death of the independent woman I thought I was.

As we approach the gates, my phone buzzes with notifications—suddenly working again now that I'm returning to my cage. I check the screen to find my bank accounts restored, suppliers confirming orders, clients reinstating their business. The demonstration is complete; the message received.

Gage waits in the entrance hall when we arrive, his expression unreadable. "Welcome back, Penelope. I trust your time in the city was... illuminating."

The understatement would be laughable if it weren't so cruel. "You made your point."

"Did I?" He gestures for me to follow him to his study. "And what point would that be?"

"That you control everything. That my independence was always an illusion." My voice remains steady despite the rage and despair churning beneath the surface. "That you can destroy everything I've built with a few phone calls."

"Not quite everything." He closes the study door behind us, offering me a seat that I refuse. "I demonstrated that your business operates within a framework of support

and protection that can be withdrawn. But the talent, the vision that built Wildflower—those remain entirely yours."

"Cold comfort when you've frozen my accounts and threatened my lease."

"Temporary measures," he says dismissively. "Already reversed, as you've likely noticed. I merely needed you to understand the practical realities of our situation."

"The reality that you're a ruthless manipulator who thinks nothing of destroying livelihoods to make a point?"

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes—the first genuine emotion I've provoked. "The reality that actions have consequences, Penelope. That freedom is never absolute but exists within systems of constraint. That your choices affect others beyond yourself."

He moves to the bar cart, pouring two drinks without asking if I want one. "I dislike heavy-handed demonstrations," he continues, his voice cooler now. "But you left me little choice with your continued delusions of escape."

"My employees did nothing to deserve being caught in your power games," I say, accepting the drink despite myself, needing something to steady my nerves.

"Your employees have been generously compensated for any inconvenience," he replies.

"The checks you wrote from closed accounts have been honored as a gesture of goodwill."

The rest of your belongings from your apartment will be delivered tomorrow.

Wildflower will continue operations under Sandra's interim management, with you maintaining creative control remotely. "

The thoroughness of his information confirms what I already knew—nothing I did escaped his notice, not even the desperate checks written in a bathroom I believed private.

"You've thought of everything," I say bitterly.

"That's my responsibility in this arrangement—to anticipate complications and resolve them efficiently." He sips his drink, studying me over the rim of his glass. "Your responsibility is simpler: accept reality and adapt to it productively."

"And if I refuse? If I fight this arrangement with everything I have?"

His expression doesn't change, but his voice lowers slightly. "Then you force more drastic demonstrations of the consequences of non-compliance. Your friends. Your sister's engagement. Your father's freedom. All vulnerable in different ways."

The threat is clear despite its careful phrasing. I drain my glass, welcoming the burn of alcohol. "So here we are. You've demolished my escape routes, isolated me from support, and threatened everyone I care about. What now, Mr. Blackwood? What's the next step in your carefully orchestrated plan?"

He sets down his glass. "Dinner. A conversation about arrangements. And then, assuming we reach agreement on basic terms, planning for our engagement announcement next week."

"So soon?"

"Your father is anxious to conclude our arrangement before Violet's wedding. I see

no reason for delay, now that you understand your position."

I laugh, the sound brittle and humorless. "My position as a prisoner in a gilded cage? Forgive me if I need more than three days to 'understand' that reality."

"Your position," he corrects calmly, "as my future wife, with all the privileges and responsibilities that entails. Including significant influence over how this arrangement proceeds—provided you approach it rationally rather than emotionally."

I turn away, unable to bear his calculating gaze any longer. Through the window, I can see the gardens where we walked just days ago, beautiful and serene despite representing the boundaries of my new prison.

"I'll agree to proceed with the engagement announcement," I say finally, the words like ashes in my mouth. "But I want my terms in writing. Legally binding."

A slight smile curves his lips—satisfaction at having broken my resistance so quickly. "Of course. I'll have the documents prepared tomorrow. We can discuss specifics over dinner."

I move toward the door, desperate to escape his presence, to find some private corner where I can process the complete collapse of my independence.

"One more thing, Penelope." His voice stops me with my hand on the doorknob. "The emergency phone in your bag—the one you used to send warnings about me to your friends. I'd like it now, please."

Of course he knows about that too. My final, desperate attempt at creating a safety net, rendered useless before it could even begin.

I remove the phone from my bag and place it on his desk without a word.

"Thank you for your cooperation," he says, as if I've willingly surrendered it rather than being caught in yet another futile attempt at resistance. "I believe you'll find that cooperation makes our arrangement considerably more pleasant for everyone involved."

I leave without responding, retreating to my assigned suite where I finally allow myself to break down. The tears come in harsh, silent sobs that rack my body—grief for the life I thought I'd built, rage at the manipulation I never detected, fear for the future I can no longer control.

When the storm of emotion finally subsides, I make my way to the bathroom, and run the shower hot enough to create steam, then write on the fogged mirror with my fingertip:

I will escape this.

I scrub my skin raw in the shower.

The words disappear as the steam dissipates, leaving no trace of my private promise. But I've made it nonetheless, committed it to memory if not to record. Gage Blackwood believes he's broken my resistance, channeled it into the framework he's created.

He's wrong.

I may have to play along, may have to smile and nod and sign his documents. But I will never surrender. Never accept this cage, no matter how gilded.

I wipe the mirror clean and prepare for dinner.

The game has only just begun.

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I hadn't planned to run so soon. The past week at Gage's estate had been a careful performance—accepting his terms with apparent resignation, reviewing prenuptial documents with feigned interest, even allowing him to place an obscenely large diamond on my finger during a coldly efficient "proposal" witnessed only by his attorney.

I'd smiled at appropriate moments, asked reasonable questions about my continued involvement with Wildflower, and given every indication that I was adjusting to my new reality.

All while watching, waiting, planning.

The opportunity had come unexpectedly. A rare gap in surveillance during a staff shift change, a kitchen door temporarily unlocked while deliveries were accepted, and the groundskeeper's vehicle left running while he hauled bags of mulch from the storage shed.

I'd moved without hesitation, slipping through the momentary blind spot and driving off before anyone realized I was gone.

The station is nearly empty—just a homeless man sleeping on a bench, a young couple with backpacks whispering together, and an elderly woman knitting despite the hour.

The ticket agent dozes behind his glass partition.

No one pays attention to a woman in nondescript clothing, baseball cap pulled low

over copper hair hastily dyed brown in a gas station bathroom.

The departure board shows my bus arriving on time.

Twenty more minutes of freedom, then hours on the road.

How long before his resources locate me?

Hours? Days? I've left my phone, credit cards, and anything else traceable behind.

The only connection to my former life is my grandmother's pendant, tucked beneath my shirt, impossible to abandon despite the risk.

The station's automatic doors slide open, and my heart stops.

Gage Blackwood enters, scanning the sparse crowd with predatory focus. Alone—no security team, no Victor, just him in dark jeans and a black sweater that somehow makes him more intimidating than his usual suits. His eyes lock on mine immediately, as if he'd known exactly where to find me.

I don't run. There's nowhere to go, and the futility of further escape settles over me like a physical weight. How did he find me so quickly? How did he know which station, which departure time?

He approaches slowly, hands visible, expression unreadable. The few other travelers give him a wide berth, instinctively recognizing a dangerous presence.

"Penelope." He stops a few feet away, voice low enough that only I can hear. "Are we really doing this again?"

I grip my bag tighter. "How did you find me?"

"You're wearing a two-million-dollar engagement ring with a GPS tracker embedded in the setting," he replies, his tone conversational despite the circumstances. "Did you think I wouldn't take precautions?"

The ring. Of course. I'd considered removing it, but feared that might trigger immediate alarms. Instead, I'd planned to sell it at the first opportunity after putting sufficient distance between us.

Too late now.

"Get up," he says quietly. "We're leaving."

"And if I refuse? Make a scene? Call for help?" The desperate options of someone with nothing left to lose.

Something like disappointment crosses his face. "You won't. You're smarter than that." He glances meaningfully at the elderly woman, the young couple, the sleeping homeless man. "Innocent bystanders don't deserve to be collateral damage in our private disagreement."

The threat is clear despite its subtle delivery. I rise slowly, clutching my bag like a shield.

"My car is outside," he continues in that same quiet, controlled voice. "Let's avoid unnecessary drama."

I follow him through the station doors into the pre-dawn darkness, acutely aware of how completely I've failed. Less than twelve hours of freedom, ended not by his security team but by Gage himself, calmly retrieving his wayward property.

A sleek black Aston Martin idles at the curb—no driver, no security detail. He opens

the passenger door, waiting for me to enter.

"Where's Victor?" I ask, stalling. "Your security team?"

"This is a private matter between us," he replies. "Get in, Penelope."

I slide into the leather seat, inhaling the scent of expensive upholstery and his subtle cologne.

He closes the door with finality and walks around to the driver's side.

When he starts the engine, the powerful rumble matches the storm building in my chest—rage, humiliation, and underneath it all, fear.

Not of physical harm, but of what comes next.

Of how he'll respond to this act of defiance.

We drive in silence through empty streets, the city still sleeping. I expect us to head toward his estate, but instead, he takes a route I don't recognize.

"Where are we going?" I finally ask when the silence becomes unbearable.

"Somewhere we can talk without interruption." His hands rest casually on the steering wheel, his profile illuminated by dashboard lights. "You've created quite a disruption with this little adventure."

"That was the point."

His mouth quirks in what might be amusement. "Was it? Because from where I sit, all you've accomplished is embarrassing yourself and inconveniencing me. The outcome

remains unchanged."

"If I'm such an inconvenience, why not let me go? Find someone more compliant for your arrangement."

He glances at me briefly. "We've covered this ground, Penelope. You know why."

"Because you never relinquish what you consider yours." The bitterness in my voice surprises even me.

"Because I honor my commitments," he corrects. "And because, despite this childish escape attempt, you remain the most suitable candidate for the position."

"The position of prisoner?"

"Of wife." His tone hardens slightly. "A role with considerably more agency than you seem willing to acknowledge."

We fall silent again as he navigates onto a highway heading east, away from both the city and his estate.

As the sky lightens with approaching dawn, I realize how thoroughly I've miscalculated.

Not just the practicalities of escape—the timing, the methodology—but Gage himself.

I'd expected him to send security, to delegate my retrieval to employees.

Instead, he's handled it personally, suggesting this matters more to him than I'd realized.

Information to consider. Leverage, perhaps, though how to use it remains unclear.

After nearly an hour of driving, he exits onto a narrow road winding through dense forest. Eventually, we reach a small clearing with a cabin—rustic but well-maintained, with a wide porch overlooking a lake just visible through the trees.

"Your safe house?" I ask as he parks beside the structure.

"My personal retreat," he corrects. "No staff, no security systems, no carefully maintained image. Just a place to think."

The revelation is unexpected—Gage Blackwood, with his empire of glass and steel, his perfectly controlled environments, retreating to simplicity when privacy allows.

He unlocks the cabin door, gesturing for me to enter ahead of him. The interior is surprisingly modest—open-plan living area with comfortable furniture, a stone fireplace, kitchen along one wall. Large windows showcase the lake view, now visible in early morning light.

"You must be hungry," he says, moving toward the kitchen. "I'll make coffee."

The domesticity of the gesture is jarring after the tension of my capture. I remain standing near the door, bag still clutched in my hand, watching as he moves with unexpected familiarity through the small kitchen.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask finally.

He glances up from measuring coffee grounds. "Because we need to have a conversation that can't happen at the estate, where every word is potentially overheard by staff."

"What kind of conversation?"

"An honest one." He starts the coffee maker, then turns to face me fully. "Why don't you sit down? Your escape attempt has failed. Standing by the door like a cornered animal won't change that reality."

Reluctantly, I move to the couch, perching on its edge, still unwilling to relax in his presence. He finishes preparing coffee, then brings two mugs to the seating area, placing one on the coffee table within my reach before taking a chair opposite me.

"You don't get to leave, Penelope," he says without preamble. "Not now, not ever. The sooner you accept that fundamental reality, the easier this will be for both of us."

The bluntness of his statement hits like a physical blow. "You can't own another person."

"I don't want to own you. I want to marry you, as agreed with your father a decade ago." He sips his coffee, studying me over the rim. "Your continued resistance wastes both our time and energy that could be better directed toward building a functional partnership."

"There can be no 'partnership' without choice," I argue. "What you're describing is captivity."

"Is it?" He sets down his mug. "Let's discuss what captivity truly means."

You'll have financial resources exceeding anything you've known.

Freedom to continue your creative work. Influence within certain spheres that you currently can't access.

Protection that you clearly need, given your naïve approach to escape. "

"Gilded chains are still chains."

"Poetic, but inaccurate." His voice remains calm, reasonable, as if we're discussing a business merger rather than my freedom. "All lives operate within constraints, Penelope. The difference is whether those constraints are acknowledged or ignored, worked within or fought against."

"You've eliminated all my choices except this."

"I've clarified the options and their consequences," he corrects. "You still have choices—they simply carry costs you find unacceptable."

I laugh bitterly. "Such generosity."

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"It is generous, compared to alternatives." His gaze hardens. "Your father would have you drugged and compliant for a quick ceremony followed by permanent residence in a private facility, with public statements about your 'unfortunate nervous condition.' A few phone calls would make that happen."

A chill runs through me at the casual way he describes what would effectively be imprisonment and forced medication. "And you're the hero for offering a more humane captivity?"

"I'm the pragmatist offering a sustainable arrangement with mutual benefits.

" He leans forward, elbows on knees. "Your performance this past week was impressive, Penelope.

The cooperative fiancée, gradually accepting her situation.

If you hadn't mapped the surveillance blind spots so methodically, I might have believed it. "

My breath catches. He knew. All along, he knew I was planning escape.

"You monitored my activities in your office."

"Of course." He almost smiles. "I knew you were planning something. I simply wasn't certain of the timing or methodology."

"So you let me run, knowing you could track the ring." The realization burns like

acid. Even my rebellion was permitted, controlled.

"I wanted to see what you would do," he admits. "How you would approach escape, what resources you would leverage, how far you were willing to go. Information that helps me understand you better."

"I'm not a psychology experiment."

"No, you're my future wife. Understanding how your mind works is essential to building a marriage."

I stare at him, trying to reconcile his cold calculation with the hint of genuine curiosity in his expression. "You could have stopped me before I left the estate."

"I could have," he agrees. "But then we wouldn't be having this conversation. We wouldn't have established with absolute clarity that escape attempts are futile."

He rises, moving to the windows overlooking the lake. Morning sunlight creates a halo effect around his tall figure, a visual reminder of the power imbalance between us.

"So what happens now?" I ask, dreading the answer. "Increased security? Restricted movement? Some form of punishment for my disobedience?"

He turns, studying me with that unsettling intensity. "Now we adapt our arrangement to reflect reality. You've demonstrated that you cannot yet be trusted with conditional freedom. Until that changes, your movements will be more closely monitored, your access to potential escape routes eliminated."

"A shorter leash for the unruly pet," I say bitterly.

"Temporary restrictions for the untrustworthy partner," he corrects. "The duration and severity depend entirely on your choices going forward."

He returns to his seat, his posture relaxed despite the tension between us. "I don't enjoy restricting your freedom, Penelope. It creates inefficiency and resentment that serve neither of us. But I will do what's necessary to maintain our arrangement."

"Why?" The question bursts from me, frustration overriding caution. "Why this insistence on me specifically? There must be dozens of women with appropriate social backgrounds who would willingly accept your proposal. Why continue this battle when you could have a willing partner?"

"Because the alternative candidates lack what you possess in abundance."

"Which is?"

"Spirit," he says simply with a shrug. "Intelligence.

Resilience. The qualities that drove you to escape your father's control, build a business from nothing, and attempt a genuinely impressive escape from my security.

The same qualities that will make you an exceptional partner once properly directed.
"

"You want to break me," I realize. "To take those qualities and bend them to your purposes."

"Not break," he corrects. "Channel. There's a significant difference."

He rises again, moving to refill his coffee cup. "There's another factor you haven't considered."

"What's that?"

"I've invested a decade in this arrangement. Protecting your father from prosecution, monitoring your development, creating the conditions for you to prove your capabilities independently. That investment deserves return."

The coldly transactional framing sends a chill through me. "So I'm what—a long-term stock option finally paying dividends?"

"A strategic acquisition with value beyond immediate financial return." He returns to his seat, expression thoughtful. "Though I admit, there are additional factors I didn't anticipate when the arrangement was first made."

"Such as?"

He studies me for a long moment, as if deciding how much to reveal.

"I find myself... interested in you, Penelope.

Not merely as an acquisition or a contract fulfillment, but as an individual.

Your reactions. Your adaptations. The way you process challenges and setbacks. It's... unusual in my experience."

The admission unsettles me more than his earlier threats.

"Interest doesn't justify captivity," I say quietly.

"No," he agrees unexpectedly. "But the legal agreement with your father does. My interest merely makes the arrangement more personally satisfying than I initially anticipated."

He checks his watch, then rises. "We should return to the estate. Your absence has likely been noted by now, and I prefer to control the narrative rather than allow speculation."

"What will you tell them?"

"That we had an early breakfast meeting to discuss wedding arrangements." He extends a hand to help me up, which I pointedly ignore. "Details of your escape attempt will remain between us. No one else needs to know."

I stand on my own, maintaining what little independence remains available to me. "Why would you protect me from that humiliation?"

"Because public humiliation serves no purpose except to create resentment," he says practically. "And because I respect the intelligence and resourcefulness your attempt demonstrated, even while ensuring it doesn't succeed."

He moves toward the door, clearly expecting me to follow. I remain rooted in place, one final act of defiance.

"What if I refuse to go back?"

He turns, expression suddenly weary. "Then you force an unpleasant scene that changes nothing about the ultimate outcome. I will carry you to the car if necessary, Penelope. But I would prefer not to begin our public relationship with such a display."

The quiet certainty in his voice, the absolute confidence that he will prevail regardless of my resistance, finally breaks something inside me. Not surrender—never that—but recognition of the futility of immediate physical defiance.

I walk to the door without another word, preceding him to the waiting car. The morning has fully arrived now, sunlight dancing across the lake's surface. Beautiful and unreachable, like the freedom I've lost.

The drive back to the estate passes in silence.

He's right about one thing: I am resilient. This setback won't be my last word.

As we approach the estate gates, Gage finally breaks the silence. "Your father will be informed that your escape attempt was unsuccessful. I suggest you prepare for his reaction, which will likely be less measured than mine."

"When is he coming?"

"This evening. He's bringing the final wedding plans for review."

My stomach clenches at the accelerated timeline. "I thought we had weeks still."

"That was before your escape attempt suggested the need for a more expedited schedule."

The gates open silently, admitting us to the manicured grounds of my beautiful prison. Staff members visible near the entrance quickly make themselves scarce as we approach, confirming my suspicion that my absence was indeed noticed.

Gage parks near the main entrance, turning to me before I can exit.

"One more thing, Penelope. The next time you attempt escape—and we both know there will be a next time—remember that I will always find you.

Always. The only variable is how uncomfortable the retrieval process becomes for

those caught in the crossfire. "

I step from the car without responding, spine straight, expression carefully neutral as I enter the mansion.

The game continues, with higher stakes and fewer options.

But not zero options. Never that.

I ascend the stairs to my suite, aware of Gage's eyes tracking my movement, of the subtle shift in staff demeanor confirming that everyone knows something significant has occurred, even if they don't know exactly what.

In my room, I find fresh flowers on the bedside table—black dahlias.

I move to the window, gazing out at the beautiful grounds that form the boundaries of my world now.

Gage Blackwood will never willingly release me. His determination has been tested and proven unshakeable.

Which means my only path forward is to make him believe he's won. To surrender so completely, so convincingly, that his vigilance eventually relaxes. Days, weeks, months of performance—whatever it takes to create an opportunity for a more carefully planned escape.

I remove the engagement ring, studying the massive diamond that concealed the tracking device that led to my capture. Such an obvious precaution in hindsight. How many other safeguards has he built into my cage that I haven't yet detected?

I slip the ring back on, accepting its weight as part of my current reality.

He's won this round. But the game is far from over.

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The silk dress slides against my skin like a whisper, soft and cool.

Marta, the personal maid assigned to me following my failed escape, fastens the hidden buttons with practiced efficiency.

The garment is exquisite—deep emerald that complements my copper hair and fair complexion, cut to flatter without being overtly seductive.

One of a dozen delivered this morning, each more elegant than anything I've ever owned.

"Beautiful, Miss Everett," Marta murmurs, stepping back to assess her work. "The color suits you perfectly."

I study my reflection in the full-length mirror.

The woman staring back looks like a stranger—polished, refined, every inch the future Mrs. Blackwood.

My hair has been styled in loose waves, my makeup applied with subtle expertise.

Even my nails have been shaped and polished in a delicate neutral shade.

"Mr. Blackwood mentioned you'll be dining with his business associates this evening," Marta continues, arranging jewelry on the vanity. "He suggested these for tonight."

She opens a velvet box to reveal an emerald and diamond necklace with matching earrings. The stones catch the light, throwing fractured rainbows across the ceiling. Not costume pieces—real emeralds, worth more than I've earned in five years of running Wildflower.

"I prefer my own necklace," I say, touching the silver pendant at my throat—my grandmother's, the one tangible connection to my life before.

Marta hesitates. "Mr. Blackwood was quite specific, Miss. For formal occasions, he expects?—"

"It's fine, Marta." I remove my pendant, slipping it into the vanity drawer. "The emeralds are lovely."

She fastens the necklace, adjusting it to lie perfectly against my collarbone. The weight is unfamiliar, like the elegant prison I now inhabit.

Two weeks have passed since my failed escape attempt.

Fourteen days of increased surveillance, restricted movement, and performances carefully crafted to suggest gradual acceptance of my situation.

I attend meals with Gage, review wedding plans with designers and coordinators, speak politely with staff members who monitor my every movement.

I've even begun arranging flowers again in the conservatory, using the skills that once defined my independence to decorate my captivity.

The irony isn't lost on me.

My father's reaction to my escape attempt had been predictably brutal—cold fury

barely contained by Gage's presence, threats of institutionalization and forced medication should I "embarrass the family" again.

He'd left that evening with the date for my wedding to Gage moved up to just six weeks away, a timeline designed to ensure my compliance through sheer lack of opportunity for resistance.

Tonight marks my first formal introduction to Gage's business associates—men and women who will eventually become part of my social circle as Mrs. Blackwood. Another step in the normalization of my captivity, another performance to maintain.

"Mr. Blackwood asked me to remind you that guests will begin arriving at seven," Marta says, gathering discarded clothing. "He'll meet you in the library at quarter to."

"Thank you, Marta." I slip on the diamond-and-emerald earrings, completing the transformation. "That will be all for now."

When she's gone, I allow my shoulders to drop, the perfect posture momentarily abandoned when no one is watching. These brief moments of genuine expression have become precious—tiny rebellions in a life of carefully maintained facade.

I move to the window overlooking the gardens.

My suite has been relocated to Gage's wing of the mansion following my escape attempt—ostensibly a sign of my elevated status as his fiancée, but practically a means of keeping me under closer surveillance.

The new rooms are larger, more luxurious, but the windows don't open and the doors automatically alert security when used.

A gilded cage within a fortress.

I've learned much during these two weeks of captivity.

The daily routine of the estate—staff rotations, security patterns, Gage's schedule.

The layout of buildings I previously hadn't explored.

The hierarchy among employees, their loyalties and potential vulnerabilities.

I gather this information methodically, storing it away for future use.

The library doors are open when I arrive at precisely 6:45.

Gage stands at the fireplace, reviewing documents with such focus he doesn't immediately notice my entrance.

He's impeccable as always—tailored tuxedo emphasizing his height and athletic build, dark hair perfectly styled, expression controlled even in what he believes is private.

I take a moment to study him unobserved.

These glimpses of Gage unaware have become valuable opportunities to understand the man beneath the mask.

I've cataloged his small tells—the slight narrowing of his eyes when displeased, the almost imperceptible relaxation of his shoulders when satisfied, the way his left hand occasionally flexes when he's controlling stronger emotion.

"Penelope." He looks up, setting aside his papers. "Punctual as always."

His gaze travels over me, assessing rather than leering, noting my appearance with

the same attention he gives business reports. "The emeralds suit you."

"Thank you." I move further into the room, maintaining distance.

"Tonight's dinner includes six guests," he says, offering me a single sheet of paper with names and brief biographies.

"Keaton Phillips and his wife Diana—banking, old Chicago money.

Malcolm and Louise Wei—technology investments, new wealth but significant influence.

Judge James Harrison and his daughter Caroline—she's recently divorced and re-entering society. "

I review the information, understanding the subtext. These aren't merely dinner guests but strategic relationships being cultivated. "What's my role this evening?"

"Charming, intelligent companion. Nothing more complicated for your first formal appearance." He adjusts his cufflinks—platinum with small black stones. "These people will eventually form part of our social circle. First impressions matter."

"I understand." I fold the paper, committing the information to memory. "Any topics to avoid?"

"Politics, religion, and my father." His expression remains neutral, but that tell—the slight flexing of his left hand—suggests the last subject carries particular weight.

"Otherwise, you may contribute to conversation as you see fit.

You're educated and articulate—I trust your judgment on appropriate topics. "

The compliment, delivered like an objective assessment, is part of his current strategy. Small recognitions of my value, acknowledgments of my intelligence and capabilities, all while maintaining absolute control of my circumstances. Psychological manipulation at its most refined.

"Our engagement will be the primary topic of interest," he continues. "The official story is that we met through mutual business connections, developed a relationship privately over several months, and recently decided to formalize our commitment."

"A romantic fiction," I observe, unable to entirely suppress my bitterness.

"A simplified narrative for public consumption," he corrects. "The details of private arrangements remain private."

A knock at the door precedes Mrs. Henderson's appearance. "Mr. Phillips and Mrs. Phillips have arrived, sir."

"Thank you. We'll greet them in the foyer." Gage turns to me, extending his arm. "Shall we?"

I place my hand on his forearm, my grip light but present—exactly as I've observed countless society wives do at similar functions. The perfect fiancée, ready to perform her role in this elaborate fiction.

The evening progresses like a carefully orchestrated ballet. I smile at appropriate moments, ask thoughtful questions about guests' interests, laugh softly at mild jokes. When conversation turns to our engagement, I allow Gage to lead while contributing details that support our fictional romance.

"Gage was quite persistent," I tell Diana Phillips over aperitifs, my tone gently teasing. "I was focused on my business and not looking for a relationship, but he can

be very persuasive."

Gage's hand settles at the small of my back, a possessive gesture disguised as affection. "Penelope is being generous. The truth is, I pursued her rather shamelessly once I recognized her value."

The irony of this statement—the single honest thing he's said all evening— isn't lost on me.

Dinner continues the performance—exquisite food served on antique china, vintage wines poured into crystal.

I navigate conversation with practiced ease, drawing on years of society functions from my former life as an Everett.

The guests respond well, particularly Judge Harrison, who seems genuinely interested in my background in floral design.

"You must see Penelope's work in the conservatory," Gage tells them as dessert is served. "She has a remarkable gift for composition and color."

"I'd love a tour," Caroline Harrison says, her interest seemingly genuine. "I've always admired people with artistic talent."

"Perhaps next time," Gage replies smoothly. "It's best viewed in daylight."

I recognize the deflection for what it is—limiting my private interaction with guests who might provide connections outside his control.

After dinner, the men retreat to Gage's study for brandy while the women move to the drawing room. It's an archaic tradition that I find laughably regressive, but I follow

without comment.

"How are you adapting to Chicago?" Louise Wei asks once we're settled with coffee.

"Gage mentioned you were based in New York previously."

Another fiction in our carefully constructed narrative—erasing my five years at Wildflower to prevent uncomfortable questions about the suddenness of our engagement.

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"The transition has been surprisingly smooth," I reply, the lie flowing easily. "Though I miss certain aspects of New York's creative community."

"I imagine it's quite a change, moving into Gage's world," Diana Phillips comments, her tone suggesting layers of meaning. "He's always been rather... particular about his privacy."

"That's one way to describe it," Caroline Harrison adds with a knowing smile. "I remember when he brought Eliza Winters to the Symphony Gala last year. She lasted exactly one social season before mysteriously disappearing from the calendar."

My pulse quickens at this unguarded reference to Gage's previous relationship—information he's carefully avoided sharing. "Eliza Winters?"

Diana glances toward the door, lowering her voice slightly. "A political consultant with connections to Washington. Everyone assumed it was heading toward engagement, then suddenly she was gone and Gage was attending functions alone again. Until you appeared."

"How interesting," I murmur, filing this information away. "Gage rarely discusses his past relationships."

"Men never do," Louise says with a dismissive wave. "Especially men like Gage Blackwood, who compartmentalize their lives so effectively. I'm sure Malcolm has entire chapters of his past I know nothing about, and we've been married fifteen years."

The conversation shifts to other topics, but my mind remains fixed on this new information. Eliza Winters—a name to investigate.

When the men rejoin us, I notice Gage's slightly heightened color, the barely perceptible tension in his shoulders. Something in the study didn't go as planned.

The evening concludes with polite farewells, promises of future gatherings, the social ritual complete. When the last guest departs, Gage's public persona shifts subtly—the charming host replaced by the controlled, calculating man I've come to know in private.

"You performed well," he says as we return to the library, his version of praise. "Judge Harrison was particularly impressed."

"He seemed a decent man." I remove the emerald earrings, the weight suddenly intolerable. "His daughter mentioned someone named Eliza Winters. A previous relationship of yours, apparently."

I watch for his reaction, testing whether this subject triggers the same response as mentions of his father. His expression stays neutral, but his left hand flexes slightly.

"Caroline Harrison talks too much," he remarks, pouring himself a scotch. "Eliza was a brief connection that didn't develop further. Hardly relevant to our situation."

"Did she also have a 'simplified narrative for public consumption'?"

His gaze sharpens at my tone. "Careful, Penelope. Your performance this evening was impressive, but don't mistake social success for expanded boundaries."

"I'm simply curious about your previous women," I reply, maintaining an innocent expression. "If I'm to play my role convincingly, understanding precedent seems

useful."

He studies me for a moment, assessing my true motivation. "Eliza Winters was a business associate who briefly became more. When our personal connection proved incompatible with professional objectives, we returned to appropriate distance."

"Just a normal relationship that ended naturally," I suggest, the skepticism evident in my voice.

"As normal as any relationship in my position can be." He sips his scotch, watching me over the rim of his glass. "Does it bother you, Penelope? The thought of previous women in my life?"

"Why would it?" I remove the heavy emerald necklace, setting it on the desk. "Ours isn't a romantic connection. Your past is irrelevant."

"Yet you're clearly interested in Eliza."

"I'm interested in patterns," I correct. "In understanding how you operate, how you manage relationships, what happened to those who came before me."

His expression shifts toward amusement. "Looking for escape routes through my romantic history?"

I don't deny the accusation. We've moved beyond such pretenses.

"You should get some rest," he says, changing the subject. "Tomorrow's schedule includes a meeting with the wedding planner at ten, followed by the doctor's appointment at one."

The reminder of tomorrow's "health assessment" sends a chill through me.

Dr. Fielding—Gage's personal physician—will conduct a comprehensive examination, ostensibly to ensure my well-being before the wedding.

The unspoken purpose, which Gage hasn't bothered to disguise, is to confirm I'm not pregnant from any previous relationship.

"Is the medical examination really necessary?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Yes." No elaboration, no justification. Simply another requirement of my captivity.

I nod, continuing the performance of compliance. "Then I'll bid you goodnight."

"One moment." He crosses to his desk, removing a small box from the drawer. "I noticed you prefer simpler jewelry for daily wear. Perhaps these will be more to your taste than the emeralds."

The box contains diamond stud earrings—elegant but understated, closer to my actual preference than the gems I wore tonight. The gesture is calculated, of course—another demonstration that he studies my preferences, anticipates my needs. Psychological manipulation disguised as thoughtfulness.

"Thank you," I say, taking the box without further comment. "Goodnight, Gage."

"Goodnight, Penelope."

A security guard waits in the hallway to escort me to my suite—another reminder that despite the evening's social facade, I remain a prisoner. In my rooms, Marta has laid out nightclothes and turned down the bed, the perfect service for the elegant captivity.

Once alone, I move through my evening routine mechanically, mind racing with new

information from the dinner.

I check systematically for new surveillance devices—a habit formed since discovering the extent of monitoring in my previous suite. Finding none beyond the existing cameras, I prepare for bed, maintaining the appearance of routine while my mind continues its constant calculation.

The silk nightgown is another gift from Gage—expensive, tasteful. I slide between sheets with a thread count higher than I've slept in in years, surrounded by luxury while stripped of freedom.

Sleep eludes me. I stare at the ceiling, mapping our progress toward the wedding date.

Six weeks has become four, each day bringing me closer to the permanent codification of my captivity.

The prenuptial agreement waits for my signature—hundreds of pages of legal language that essentially state I'll have nothing if I leave, everything if Gage dies.

An incentive for endurance, perhaps.

My thoughts betrays me with unbidden images: Gage's hand at the small of my back, the intensity of his gaze when he thinks I'm not looking, the undeniable physical presence of him when we're alone together.

Not attraction—I refuse to name it that. Simply awareness, the biological recognition of a physically imposing male in close proximity. Nothing more. Nothing that undermines my determination to escape this gilded prison.

Dawn breaks before I find real rest. When Marta arrives with breakfast, I'm already

showered and dressed in clothing chosen to project cooperation. The day's performance begins anew—wedding planner at ten, doctor at one, another step toward the inevitable.

Except I refuse to believe it's inevitable. Somewhere in this meticulous facade, this careful prison, exists a weakness I haven't yet identified. Gage Blackwood is brilliant, thorough, and controlling—but he's also human. And humans make mistakes.

I will find his. I must.

The wedding planner arrives precisely at ten—Isabella Romano, a severe woman with impeccable credentials and a portfolio of society weddings that apparently justifies her astronomical fee.

She treats me with the practiced deference of someone who believes I've chosen this match rather than being forced into it.

"Mr. Blackwood mentioned you have experience with floral design," she says as we review reception options. "While we'll use Valhalla Flowers for the primary arrangements, he thought you might want to create personal touches for certain elements."

The name stops me cold. Valhalla Flowers—the high-end design studio owned by Marcus Valhalla, my primary competitor and occasional nemesis in the Chicago floral scene. The deliberate slight can only be my father's doing; Gage is too strategic for such petty cruelty.

"I would prefer to handle all floral elements myself," I say, keeping my voice steady. "It's my area of expertise, after all."

Isabella's smile is professionally sympathetic. "Mr. Blackwood and your father have

already contracted with Valhalla. The arrangements are quite spectacular—I can show you the preliminary designs."

Of course they have. Another small humiliation, another reminder of my powerlessness in this arrangement. I force a smile, continuing the performance.

"I'm sure they'll be lovely," I lie. "But I would still like to create personal elements—my bouquet, at minimum."

"I'll discuss it with Mr. Blackwood," she promises, making a note that I'm certain will disappear as soon as she leaves.

We continue reviewing details for an event I've had no real part in planning—venue (Blackwood Estate), guests (three hundred of Chicago's elite plus family), menu (elaborate and expensive), music (string quartet followed by twelve-piece orchestra).

A society spectacle designed to cement the fiction of our relationship while publicly binding me to Gage Blackwood before I can find escape.

Dr. Fielding arrives promptly at one—a distinguished man in his sixties with the discreet manner of someone accustomed to handling sensitive medical matters for the wealthy.

He sets up in a suite converted to a temporary examination room, complete with state-of-the-art equipment that would impress a hospital administrator.

"Miss Everett," he greets me formally. "Mr. Blackwood has requested a comprehensive health assessment as we approach your wedding. Standard procedure for my high-profile patients planning families."

The presumption—that I will be bearing Blackwood heirs—hangs unspoken between

us.

I submit to the examination with outward calm, answering questions truthfully while maintaining emotional distance.

Yes, I'm in good health. No, no significant medical history.

Yes, regular menstrual cycles. No, no current sexual partners.

The thoroughness of the examination borders on invasive—blood drawn for extensive testing, gynecological exam conducted with clinical efficiency, detailed questions about reproductive history that make the purpose unmistakable.

I am being assessed as breeding stock, my physical suitability for producing heirs evaluated with the same attention Gage gives to business acquisitions.

When Dr. Fielding completes his examination, his manner remains professionally neutral. "Everything appears excellent, Miss Everett. Pending lab results, I see no concerns regarding your health or fertility."

The relief in his voice suggests this outcome wasn't guaranteed—that had he found issues with my "fertility," my position in Gage's household might have changed dramatically. Another layer of this arrangement that treats me as property rather than person.

"When will Mr. Blackwood receive the results?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

"I'll provide a complete report by tomorrow morning." No pretense of patient confidentiality, no acknowledgment of the ethical breach. In Gage Blackwood's world, standard protections don't apply.

After the doctor departs, I return to my suite, emotionally drained by the day's performances—cooperative fiancée with the wedding planner, compliant patient with the doctor.

The facade grows more difficult to maintain as wedding preparations accelerate, as the reality of my situation becomes increasingly concrete.

I stand at the window, watching rain begin to fall across the estate grounds. The glass is cool against my forehead, the outside world blurred by water and distance. Beyond these walls the world proceeds without me.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. I compose my expression before answering.

Gage stands in the hallway, umbrella dripping onto marble flooring. "Get changed," he says without preamble. "We're going out."

The unexpected statement catches me off guard. "Out?"

"Dinner in the city. Business associates who couldn't attend last night. Wear something appropriate for Asteria."

Asteria—Chicago's most exclusive restaurant, impossible to book without significant connections. A public appearance, then. The continuation of our social introduction as a couple.

"Of course," I say, maintaining the performance. "I'll be ready in twenty minutes."

He nods, turning to leave before pausing. "Dr. Fielding mentioned you were... cooperative. I appreciate that."

"The examination was unnecessary," I say, allowing a hint of genuine feeling to surface. "I have no relevant medical history that would affect our arrangement."

"The examination was essential," he corrects. "Health complications would require adjustments to our timeline and expectations. I don't enter contracts without due diligence, Penelope."

Contracts. Always the transactional framing. I nod, not trusting myself to respond without revealing the depth of my revulsion.

"Twenty minutes," he reminds me, then departs.

I dress quickly, selecting a midnight blue dress that balances elegance with appropriate modesty for a business dinner. The diamond studs he gave me last night replace the emeralds—a small choice that maintains the illusion of agency.

As I apply lipstick, I study my reflection, searching for signs of the woman I was just weeks ago. She's still there. Subdued but not vanquished. Waiting, watching, planning.

I take a deep breath, straightening my spine. The game continues, the stakes increasing with each passing day.

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A steria glitters like a jewel box—crystal chandeliers casting prismatic light across polished surfaces, the quiet hum of Chicago's elite engaging in careful conversation designed to reveal nothing while suggesting everything.

I sit beside Gage at a prime table overlooking the river, the city's nightscape spread before us like an offering.

"Kelvin Zhang approaches from your left," Gage murmurs, his lips barely moving. "Technology investments, potential partner for the Singapore expansion. His wife Adelaide is an art collector with connections to the museum board."

I nod imperceptibly. I've drawn on years of society training from my former life.

"Gage Blackwood!" A distinguished Asian man in his fifties approaches, his elegantly dressed wife at his side. "Finally emerging from your fortress to join civilized society."

Gage rises, shaking the man's hand with practiced warmth. "Kelvin. Merely waiting for the right company."

His hand settles at the small of my back as he introduces me, a gesture disguised as affection. "Penelope Everett, my fiancée. Penelope, Kelvin and Adelaide Zhang."

"A pleasure," I offer with a practiced smile. "Gage mentioned your art collection, Mrs. Zhang. I'd love to hear about your recent acquisitions."

Adelaide brightens, clearly pleased to discuss her passion.

The conversation flows easily—art leading to design, design to my background in florals, florals to aesthetic philosophy.

I navigate topics with careful precision, revealing enough to seem genuine while avoiding anything that might contradict our fabricated history.

Throughout dinner, I observe Gage with the men, noting how differently he operates in business settings versus our private interactions.

Here, he allows hints of charm to surface—calculated displays of humor, strategic concessions that make others feel valued, a masterful orchestration of egos and interests.

"Your fiancée is delightful," Adelaide tells Gage during dessert. "Such a refreshing combination of aesthetic sensitivity and practical intelligence. Where have you been hiding her?"

"Penelope has been focused on her career in New York," he replies smoothly, the practiced fiction rolling off his tongue. "We've kept our relationship private while navigating the complexities of merging our lives."

"Well, I'm thrilled you've finally found someone worthy of bringing into the fold," she continues, patting my hand with genuine warmth. "After that business with Eliza, we were beginning to worry."

Gage's expression doesn't change, but I note the slight tensing of his shoulders.

"Eliza and I had different priorities," he says diplomatically. "Penelope and I share fundamental values."

Shared values. I refrain from snorting and instead smile and sip my wine.

The evening concludes with promises of future engagements, contact information exchanged, the social infrastructure of our public fiction further solidified. In the car returning to the estate, Gage reviews the evening's successes.

"Zhang is interested in the Singapore project," he notes, scrolling through messages on his phone. "Your conversation with Adelaide about Japanese minimalism was particularly effective—they recently acquired a significant collection from Kyoto."

"I wasn't aware I was responsible for business development during dinner," I observe, removing my earrings.

"Everything is business development, Penelope. Social connections merely provide more pleasant contexts than conference rooms." He glances up from his phone. "You performed exceptionally well. The Zhangs were impressed, as were the Kowalskis and Senator Morrison."

The careful praise—always framed as performance assessment rather than genuine appreciation. Always reminding me of my role in his strategic operations.

"Adelaide mentioned Eliza again," I note casually. "That's twice in two days that her name has surfaced. She seems to have made quite an impression on your social circle."

His expression doesn't change, but his hand stills on his phone. "Eliza attended several social functions during our brief connection. People remember what they choose to remember."

"And what should I remember about your 'brief connection'?" I press. "Since it seems to be common knowledge I'm expected to possess."

He studies me for a moment. "Eliza Winters was a political consultant I met through

mutual connections.

We had a relationship that lasted approximately four months before concluding amicably when our professional paths diverged.

She subsequently accepted a position in Washington. There's nothing more to remember."

The precision of the statement suggests careful editing.

"And was she also kept under surveillance? Tracked? Monitored?" The questions slip out before I can censor them.

Gage's expression hardens slightly. "Eliza's circumstances were entirely different from yours, Penelope. She wasn't part of a formal arrangement. She wasn't attempting to escape legal obligations. The comparison is irrelevant."

"Yet it seems to be the comparison everyone makes," I observe. "Perhaps because they don't know the truth of our 'connection'."

"No one knows the complete truth of any connection," he replies, his voice cooling to professional detachment. "Public narratives serve their purpose. Private realities serve theirs."

We lapse into silence for the remainder of the drive. When we arrive at the estate, Gage walks me to my suite as has become our routine—the perfect gentleman escorting his fiancée, for the benefit of any watching staff.

At my door, he pauses. "The doctor's preliminary report arrived during dinner. You're in excellent health, as expected."

The clinical assessment, delivered like a business update. I resist the urge to ask if I've passed inspection.

"Good night, Gage." I open my door, ready to escape the performance.

"One more thing." He removes an envelope from his jacket. "Your sister's wedding invitation arrived today. I've arranged for us to attend together, of course."

Violet's wedding. I'd almost forgotten my sister's approaching nuptials to Charles Montgomery III—the society wedding of the season, occurring just weeks before my own arranged ceremony.

"When?" I ask, taking the heavy cream envelope.

"Three weeks from Saturday. I've cleared my schedule." He studies my reaction. "I thought you'd want to be present for your sister's celebration, despite the complexities of your family situation."

"Thank you," I say, meaning it despite myself. "I would like to attend."

He nods, apparently satisfied with my response. "Good night, Penelope."

When he's gone, I open the invitation—heavy card stock, elaborate calligraphy, the full society production expected of a Montgomery-Everett union.

How will she see me now? The sister who escaped, only to be recaptured and displayed like a trophy on Gage Blackwood's arm? Will she recognize my captivity beneath the facade of compliance? Would she help if she did?

I prepare for bed mechanically.

Sleep eludes me, as it often does now. I stare at the ceiling.

Morning brings a change in routine. Instead of Marta with breakfast, Gage himself knocks at precisely eight o'clock.

"Get dressed for riding," he says without preamble. "Casual, practical clothing. We leave in twenty minutes."

The unexpected directive momentarily disrupts my performance. "Riding?"

"Horses," he clarifies, as if I might have misunderstood. "I have business at the southern property this morning. You'll accompany me."

Not a request—never that. I nod, maintaining the appearance of compliance while mentally calculating the significance of this small extension of my boundaries.

Twenty minutes later, I meet him at the stables—a facility I'd observed from a distance but never visited. Eight immaculate stalls house magnificent animals, tended by staff who clearly know their business. Gage stands with a tall black Thoroughbred, speaking quietly to the head groom.

"This is Athena," he says as I approach, gesturing to a chestnut mare being prepared nearby. "She's experienced but responsive. You've ridden before?"

"Yes." I stroke the mare's neck, appreciating her quiet intelligence. "English and Western, though it's been several years."

He nods, apparently satisfied with this information. "We'll take the southern trail. The property extends approximately four miles in that direction, ending at the river boundary. The business matter shouldn't take long."

I mount with practiced ease—another skill from my former life as an Everett, where equestrian abilities were considered essential for proper society daughters. The familiar movements come back quickly, my body remembering what my mind had filed away as irrelevant.

We ride in silence through the maintained grounds that give way to more natural landscape—old-growth forest interspersed with meadows, a stream cutting through occasionally.

Despite the circumstances, I find myself enjoying the physical freedom, the rhythmic movement, the fresh air after weeks of indoor confinement.

Gage rides slightly ahead, his posture perfect, his control of the powerful Thoroughbred seemingly effortless.

"You ride well," he observes, glancing back as we navigate a narrow trail. "Your father mentioned you competed as a teenager."

"Hunter-jumper circuit, until I was seventeen." I guide Athena around a fallen branch. "Another society daughter requirement, like French and piano."

"You were ranked regionally," he continues, revealing yet again the depth of his research into my past. "Qualified for national competition before abruptly withdrawing."

The memory surfaces unexpectedly—my father's rage when I'd announced my intention to attend art school rather than the business program he'd selected, his punishment being withdrawal from the equestrian competitions that had provided my only genuine joy.

"My father had different priorities for my education," I say simply.

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Gage nods, accepting the explanation without pressing further. We continue riding for nearly an hour, cresting a hill to reveal a stunning view of the river valley below, morning mist still clinging to distant bluffs.

"The southern boundary," Gage indicates with a gesture that encompasses the panoramic vista. "Blackwood land ends at the river."

We dismount near a small cabin overlooking the valley. Unlike the rustic retreat where he took me after my escape attempt, this structure is clearly functional rather than residential—solar panels on the roof, satellite equipment, reinforced doors with electronic locks.

"Wait here," Gage says, securing our horses to a hitching post. "This won't take long."

He enters the cabin using both key card and biometric scan, leaving me alone in the clearing.

I consider the moment—the first time I've been without direct supervision since my capture.

The temptation to run flashes briefly. Running where?

Four miles of Blackwood land between me and the nearest boundary, unfamiliar terrain, no resources, no plan.

Another impulsive escape would end exactly as the first did, with recapture and

increased restrictions.

Gage emerges fifteen minutes later, tucking a small electronic device into his jacket pocket. "Equipment check complete," he says, offering no further explanation as he unties the horses. "We'll take the eastern trail back—different terrain, but equally scenic."

The return journey follows a path along the river before cutting back through denser forest toward the main estate. As we ride, Gage points out natural features, historical markers, boundaries of the property.

"You know this land intimately," I observe during a brief rest beside a small waterfall. "Did you grow up here?"

"No," he says finally. "I acquired the estate after my father's death. My childhood home was... less expansive."

"Where did you grow up?"

"South side. Industrial district that's since been redeveloped. Nothing remains of it now."

We return to the stables by mid-afternoon, the exercise having produced a physical satisfaction I hadn't expected. As grooms take the horses, Gage checks his watch.

"I have conference calls for the remainder of the day," he says, returning to his usual business demeanor. "Dinner will be at seven in the small dining room. Isabella has final wedding details to review, so she'll join us."

The wedding. Always returning to the central reality, the approaching ceremony that will formalize my cage.

I nod.

"Thank you for the ride," I say. "It was... refreshing to be outside the estate boundaries."

He looks satisfied at what he perceives as gradual acceptance of my situation. "You'll find that cooperation expands your boundaries, Penelope. Resistance contracts them."

The underlying message is clear: behave, and the cage will grow larger. Continue fighting, and it will shrink accordingly. Behavioral conditioning at its most sophisticated.

I return to my suite to shower and change, my mind processing the morning's experiences.

Dinner with Isabella proves exactly as expected—wedding details presented as if for my approval while actually already decided. Cake flavors, floral arrangements, musical selections—all ostensibly requiring my input while clearly already finalized.

"The guest list requires final approval," Isabella says, sliding a leather portfolio across the table. "Mr. Blackwood has made preliminary selections, but suggested you might want to add personal connections."

I open the portfolio to find three hundred names—Chicago's elite, business associates, political connections. A society spectacle designed to announce Gage Blackwood's acquisition of an appropriate wife rather than celebrate any genuine union.

"My shop assistant, Sandra Miller," I say, testing the boundaries of this supposed input. "And a few friends—Mia Chen, Dylan Porter, Tara Williams."

Gage nods slightly, permission granted for these small additions to his carefully curated list. "Anyone else?"

I consider mentioning colleagues from the floral community but decide against it.

"That's sufficient," I reply, closing the portfolio. "The remaining arrangements seem... comprehensive."

Isabella beams, clearly relieved by my apparent cooperation. "Excellent! With these final approvals, everything is on schedule for May 15th."

The date hangs in the air between us—thirty-two days away.

After Isabella departs, Gage remains at the table, studying me with that assessing gaze of his.

"You seem more... settled today," he observes, sipping his wine. "The riding was beneficial, I think."

"Physical activity usually is," I reply neutrally. "Especially after weeks of confinement."

"Not confinement," he corrects automatically. "This is an adjustment period. A necessary phase following your escape attempt."

The semantic distinction without practical difference—another hallmark of how Gage frames my captivity.

"Will we attend other events before Violet's wedding?" I ask instead, shifting to practical matters. "I assume our engagement requires public appearances."

"Several," he confirms. "The Children's Hospital Gala next weekend.

The Symphony benefit the following Tuesday.

A dinner with the mayor's economic advisory committee.

"He studies me over his wine glass. "You'll continue to have appropriate clothing and accessories provided. Marta will assist with preparation."

The details of my performance, laid out like a business itinerary. I nod, accepting the schedule.

"And Wildflower?" I ask. "When may I check on operations?"

"Sandra continues to manage day-to-day activities successfully," he replies smoothly. "You'll receive weekly reports, as arranged. Physical visits remain impractical given current circumstances."

"Perhaps virtual oversight?" I suggest. "Video conferences with Sandra to discuss design decisions, client consultations?"

He considers this, weighing the potential risks against my apparent compliance these past weeks. "Limited video consultation might be arranged, with appropriate security measures."

A small victory, hard-won through weeks of performance.

"Thank you. It would help ensure consistency in the creative direction."

Later, alone in my suite, I stand before the window overlooking the darkened gardens. I was beginning to hate the view.

He believes he's succeeding—that my performance of gradual acceptance reflects adjustment.

I turn from the window, moving to the small desk where I've begun keeping a journal—a record of wedding preparations, I'm not stupid enough to keep anything incriminating inside of it but it's another tool to make it look like he's won.

I close the journal, carefully replacing it.

The game has only begun.

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The formal dining room gleams with polished silver and crystal, candles casting flickering shadows across damask tablecloths and the carefully composed faces of Chicago's elite. I sit at Gage's right hand, playing my role with practiced precision.

It's our third private dinner party this week, this one featuring Judge Harrison and his recently divorced daughter Caroline, the Zhangs from last week's restaurant outing, and two new couples being cultivated for business reasons—the Athertons (banking) and the Donovans (real estate).

The conversation flows with practiced ease, touching on safe topics—art exhibitions, charity functions, market trends carefully divorced from political implications.

I contribute appropriately, drawing on both my society upbringing and my genuine knowledge of design principles. The performance has become almost automatic now—five weeks into captivity, the mask slips on with disturbing ease.

"Penelope was just telling me about the floral concept for your wedding," Caroline says during dessert, her expression genuinely interested. "The combination of traditional architecture with more organic arrangements sounds absolutely stunning."

I smile. "We wanted something that balances structure and natural beauty," I reply, the practiced line emerging smoothly.

"Much like marriage itself," Judge Harrison observes with paternal wisdom that makes my stomach clench. "The framework of commitment supporting the organic growth of connection."

"Beautifully put, James," Gage responds, his hand settling briefly on mine—a possessive gesture disguised as affection.

"You make a striking couple," Adelaide Zhang comments, her assessment encompassing both our physical appearance and apparent compatibility. "Some matches seem inevitable in retrospect, don't they? As if all paths would eventually lead to this connection."

If only she knew the literal truth of her metaphorical observation.

"Inevitability requires perspective," I offer. "What seems predetermined from one vantage point might appear quite different from another."

Gage's fingers tighten slightly around his wine glass.

"Speaking of perspective," he redirects smoothly, "Malcolm mentioned you've recently acquired Hayashi's latest installation piece. I'd be interested in hearing how it transforms within different lighting conditions."

Later, when our guests have departed and staff clear the remains of dinner, Gage leads me to the library for our customary post-event review. The routine has become established over weeks.

"Judge Harrison continues to be impressed," he observes, pouring two brandies without asking my preference. "His support for the Harbor Point development will be valuable given the zoning complications."

I accept the crystal snifter, the ritual now familiar. "Caroline seemed particularly interested in wedding details. Is her recent divorce relevant to your business interests, or merely coincidental?"

He raises an eyebrow at my directness. "Caroline's legal practice specializes in corporate acquisitions. Her personal circumstances are irrelevant to our professional connection."

"Yet you seated her beside me rather than with the Athertons, despite their shared financial focus," I note, testing my growing understanding of his strategic orchestration. "And encouraged discussion of wedding preparations rather than legal matters."

A slight smile curves his lips. "You're developing an eye for social strategy, Penelope. A valuable skill for your future role."

"Your comment about 'structural arrangements' was unnecessary," I say after a moment, choosing direct address rather than evasion.

"The comment wasn't for their benefit," he replies calmly. "It was a reminder for you, after your philosophical observation about perspective. Public events aren't the place for veiled expressions of discontent, however cleverly phrased."

I study him over the rim of my glass, noting subtle differences in his demeanor tonight—a slight tension in his shoulders, a marginally shorter fuse for my boundary-testing.

"Something's bothering you," I observe. "Beyond my minor conversational deviation."

He looks up sharply, genuinely surprised by my perception.

"Business complications," he says after a moment. "Nothing that affects our arrangements."

"Our wedding is in three weeks," I remind him, the date a constant shadow over my existence. "Many arrangements would be affected by significant business disruption."

His expression hardens. "The wedding proceeds as planned, regardless of other considerations. The timeline is non-negotiable."

"Violet's wedding is this weekend," I say, changing direction. "Have arrangements been finalized for our attendance?"

"Yes." He moves to his desk, retrieving an envelope that he hands to me. "We'll depart Saturday morning at nine. The ceremony is at two, followed by reception at the Langham. We'll stay overnight, returning Sunday afternoon."

I open the envelope to find details of the arrangements—confirmation at the Peninsula Hotel rather than the Langham where the reception will be held, driver schedules, security protocols.

"Will I be permitted to speak with my sister privately?" I ask, the question direct rather than circumspect.

"Supervised interaction will be permitted," he replies with equal directness. "Your father has been informed of appropriate conversational boundaries."

"She's getting married. I should be able to congratulate her without supervision."

"Your history of escape attempts necessitates precautions," he counters, unmoved. "Particularly at an event with hundreds of attendees, many unknown to my security team."

The reminder of my failed bus station attempt. I suppress frustration.

"I understand the necessity for security," I say carefully. "But limiting my interaction with my sister on her wedding day seems unnecessarily punitive. I've been cooperative for weeks now."

He studies me, weighing the request against perceived risks. "You may have fifteen minutes with Violet before the ceremony, in her preparation suite. Victor will maintain visual contact but will allow conversational privacy if your behavior remains appropriate."

A concession, however small.

"Thank you. I appreciate the consideration."

He drains his brandy, setting the glass aside with finality. "I have calls to Asia in thirty minutes. Security will escort you to your suite."

In my suite, Marta has laid out nightclothes and turned down the bed. I dismiss her with practiced courtesy, waiting until the door closes before allowing my performance to slip.

I retrieve the journal, making my daily entry for the evening. A knock at the door interrupts my writing. I close the journal quickly, returning it to its place before answering.

Victor stands in the hallway, face impassive as always. "Mr. Blackwood requested these be delivered immediately." He extends a velvet box, waiting for me to accept it before departing without further explanation.

Inside the box lies a diamond and sapphire bracelet, exquisitely crafted, clearly antique rather than newly purchased. No note accompanies it, no explanation for the unexpected gift.

I set the box on my vanity without trying on the bracelet, unwilling to accept the gesture's implied exchange—beautiful objects as compensation for lost freedom.

Morning brings a change in routine—breakfast in the conservatory rather than my suite, Gage joining me rather than conducting early business.

"Final arrangements for Violet's wedding have been confirmed," he says, reviewing reports on his tablet while I add honey to tea. "Your dress fittings are scheduled for this afternoon. The blue Valentino, I believe."

The casual reference to clothing I've never seen, decisions made without my input—another reminder of my decorative rather than participatory role. I nod, noticing the slight edge in his tone suggesting ongoing business complications.

"Is something wrong?" I ask.

He glances up, momentarily surprised by the question. "Market fluctuations affecting several investments. Nothing that concerns you."

"Concerns that affect you necessarily affect me," I observe, pushing slightly. "Particularly as wedding preparations finalize."

He sets down his tablet, studying me with that assessing gaze I've come to recognize—calculating how much to reveal, weighing strategic value of information against potential risks.

"There are factions that would prefer our arrangement not proceed," he says finally, the admission surprisingly candid. "Financial pressure being applied through various channels, regulatory attention being directed toward specific holdings."

"My father's competitors?"

"Among others." He sips his coffee, expression controlled but tension evident in his shoulders. "Certain interests believed they had claim to the Everett connection. Our arrangement disrupted long-standing expectations."

"The Montgomerys?" I guess, connecting to Violet's imminent marriage.

A slight nod confirms my assessment. "Charles Montgomery Senior had expected multiple connections between our families. Your sister's marriage, while valuable, represented only partial fulfillment of anticipated arrangements."

Understanding blooms with chilling clarity—I had been intended for the Montgomery family as well, perhaps for Charles's younger brother James, cementing business alliances through multiple marriages.

My departure five years ago had disrupted these plans.

Gage's arrangement with my father had derailed them permanently.

"And now they apply pressure to prevent our wedding," I conclude. "Hence the accelerated timeline, the increased security, the non-negotiable schedule."

"Precisely." His expression suggests mild approval of my analysis. "The Montgomery influence extends through multiple regulatory bodies, financial institutions, and political connections. Delay provides opportunity for interference."

"Will there be complications at Violet's wedding?" I ask, the concern genuine.

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"Security has been enhanced appropriately," he replies, returning to his tablet. "Your interaction with the Montgomery family will be carefully managed to prevent unnecessary friction."

"I'll need to know which Montgomerys to avoid," I say. "Beyond Charles Senior, who considers themselves personally affected by our arrangement?"

He glances up, that brief expression of approval returning.

"James Montgomery primarily. He had certain expectations regarding your eventual return to family obligations.

His mother, Margaret, similarly invested in the potential connection.

Charles Senior maintains professional distance despite personal disappointment. "

James Montgomery—the younger brother I'd met perhaps twice at society functions, a Harvard business school graduate with his father's ambition and significantly less restraint, according to society gossip.

"I'll maintain appropriate distance," I promise, the cooperation genuine since conflict at Violet's wedding was one of the last things I would want.

He nods, apparently satisfied with my response. "The bracelet suits you," he observes, gesturing to my wrist where I've indeed worn the sapphire piece, a decision to demonstrate acceptance.

"It's beautiful," I acknowledge, neither effusive nor rejecting. "Antique, I believe?"

"Mid-nineteenth century. French craftsmanship." He returns to his tablet, the brief personal exchange concluded with characteristic efficiency. "Your dress fittings begin at one. I have meetings until dinner."

The dismissal is familiar. I finish my tea, the morning sunlight streaming through conservatory glass.

The day proceeds with wedding preparation activities—fittings for the blue Valentino Gage, hair and makeup trials, reviews of jewelry options beyond the sapphire bracelet.

I cooperate.

By evening, preparations complete and Gage still occupied with business matters, I retreat to the garden for relative solitude.

Spring has fully arrived, flowering trees creating canopies of white and pink blossoms, perennial beds emerging with careful planning evident in color progressions and textural contrasts.

I sit on a stone bench near the koi pond, watching fish navigate their beautiful prison—a metaphor too obvious to ignore. Like them, I swim within boundaries not of my choosing, observed and maintained as decorative property rather than autonomous being.

"Miss Everett."

The voice startles me from contemplation. Victor stands several paces away, his expression professionally neutral as always.

"Mr. Blackwood requests your presence in his study immediately."

I follow Victor through the garden and into the mansion, maintaining a composed exterior.

Gage isn't alone when I enter the study. A distinguished older man in an impeccable suit stands at the window, turning as I enter. Something in his features—the particular angle of jaw, the set of shoulders—triggers immediate recognition despite never having met him before.

Gage's father. Or rather, someone so closely related that the resemblance cannot be coincidental.

"Penelope," Gage says, his voice carrying unusual tension beneath its controlled surface. "Allow me to introduce my uncle, Richard Blackwood. He's arrived unexpectedly from London."

Richard Blackwood approaches with practiced charm, taking my hand with old-world courtesy. "My dear, forgive the intrusion. When I heard my nephew had finally decided to formalize a family connection, I couldn't resist seeing for myself the woman who accomplished what so many others attempted."

"Mr. Blackwood. What a surprise to meet Gage's family. He rarely mentions relatives."

Richard laughs. "No doubt. My nephew has always preferred operating independently, keeping family at a convenient distance unless specifically required."

"My uncle has business in Chicago this week," Gage interject. "He'll be staying at the Peninsula rather than here at the estate."

"Will you be attending our wedding, Mr. Blackwood?" I ask.

"Richard, please." He smiles. "And yes, I wouldn't miss my only nephew's marriage. Though the invitation arrived surprisingly late, considering the significance of the occasion."

"Last-minute international travel can be challenging," I observe. "How long will you be in Chicago?"

"Through the wedding, at minimum." Richard accepts the drink Gage offers with practiced ease. "Perhaps longer, depending on how certain business matters resolve."

"Penelope has had a full day of wedding preparations," Gage says, the subtle dismissal clear in his tone. "Perhaps we should continue this conversation tomorrow, when everyone is refreshed."

Richard smiles, seemingly unperturbed by his nephew's attempt to end the interaction. "Of course. I'm sure we'll have ample opportunity to become acquainted before the ceremony. Perhaps you might join me for lunch tomorrow, Penelope? I'd love to hear more about your background in floral design."

The invitation might result in restricted freedoms if mishandled.

"That would be lovely," I reply before Gage can intervene, taking calculated risk. "Though my schedule is quite full with wedding preparations."

"I'm sure Gage can spare you for an hour or two," Richard says smoothly, the presumption deliberate. "Family connections should be nurtured, particularly before such significant occasions."

Gage's expression remains controlled, but the tension in his shoulders increases

noticeably. "I'll have Victor arrange transportation," he says after a pointed pause. "Assuming Peninsula at noon?"

"Perfect." Richard finishes his drink, setting the glass aside with practiced ease. "I won't keep you any longer this evening. The car service is waiting."

He takes my hand again, the gesture courtly rather than condescending. "A pleasure meeting you, Penelope. I look forward to our conversation tomorrow."

When he's gone, the study remains silent for long moments. I wait, observing Gage.

"My uncle's visit was unexpected," he says finally, moving to refill his glass. "His attendance at Violet's wedding would be inappropriate. I'll arrange alternative activities for Saturday."

"He seems interested in establishing a connection before our wedding," I observe neutrally.

"Richard's interests rarely align with their apparent objectives." Gage's tone carries unusual edge, the control slightly frayed by his uncle's appearance. "Tomorrow's lunch will proceed as arranged."

"I understand," I say simply. "Will that be all for this evening?"

He studies me. "The sapphire bracelet would be appropriate for tomorrow's lunch. More subtle than the emeralds, better suited to daytime engagement."

"Of course," I agree. "Good night, Gage."

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The darkness swallows me whole. I'm running down an alley that stretches endlessly before me, my lungs burning with each desperate breath.

Footsteps echo behind me, gaining ground no matter how fast I push myself.

The weight of fear presses against my chest, making each inhale more painful than the last.

"Just hand over your necklace," a voice growls from the shadows. "And no one gets hurt."

But I know it's a lie. I know what comes next.

I spin around, facing my pursuer, but instead of the mugger, it's Victor standing there, his expression cold and calculating as he raises a gun.

"Nothing personal, Miss Everett," he says, the barrel gleaming in the dim light. "Just business."

The crack of the gunshot jolts through me, but there's no pain. Instead, I watch as a man crumples to the ground before me, blood pooling around his head like a grotesque halo. I can feel the warm spray across my face, taste the metallic tang on my lips.

"Package secured," Victor says into his wrist communication device, his voice distant and professional. "Bringing her in now."

Hands reach for me from all directions, faceless men in black suits dragging me toward a waiting vehicle. I try to scream, but no sound comes out. I struggle against their grip, but my limbs are leaden, useless.

And then Gage is there, watching from a distance, his face impassive as I'm bundled into the back of the SUV.

"You've always been mine," his voice echoes, though his lips don't move. "You just didn't know it yet."

The darkness closes in, suffocating, inescapable ? —

I wake with a scream tearing from my throat, bolting upright in bed with my heart hammering against my ribs. Sweat plasters my nightgown to my skin, and I can't stop shaking. The room swims around me, reality and nightmare blurring together until I can't distinguish one from the other.

My hands fly to my face, half-expecting to find blood there. Finding only tears, I gulp in air, trying to ground myself in the present.

A soft knock at the door makes me flinch.

"Penelope?" Gage's voice, low and concerned, filters through the heavy wood. "Are you all right?"

I can't answer, still trapped in the lingering tendrils of terror. The door opens slowly, and Gage appears in the doorway, silhouetted against the dim light from the hallway. He's wearing sleep pants and a t-shirt, his hair mussed, looking more human than I've ever seen him.

"I heard you scream," he says, remaining at the threshold, watching me with an

expression I can't quite read in the darkness.

"I'm fine," I manage, my voice cracking in betrayal. "Just a dream."

He steps into the room but doesn't approach the bed. "About the mugging."

It's not a question. He knows exactly what haunts my sleep.

"Among other things," I say, pulling my knees to my chest, creating a barrier between us.

"May I turn on the lamp?" he asks, surprising me with the request for permission when he usually takes whatever he wants.

I nod, and soft light blooms from the bedside table, casting the room in gentle shadows. Gage looks different in this light, less the controlled businessman and more... something else. Something almost approachable.

"Would you prefer I call Marta?" he asks.

"No." The answer comes quickly, surprising even me. "No need to wake her."

He nods, then moves to the chair near the window, sitting down rather than invading my space. His posture is relaxed, non-threatening.

"Nightmares are the mind's way of processing trauma," he says after a moment. "There's no weakness in experiencing them."

I stare at him, caught off guard by the absence of mockery I'd expected. "Is that your professional opinion, Mr. Blackwood?"

A hint of a smile touches his lips. "No. Just personal experience."

The admission hangs between us, unexpectedly intimate.

"You have nightmares?" I find myself asking, curiosity momentarily overriding caution.

He studies me for a long moment. "Yes," he says finally. "Less frequently now than in my youth, but they never truly disappear."

"What are they about?" The question slips out before I can stop myself.

His gaze shifts to the window, where moonlight casts silver patterns through the glass. "Various things. Childhood memories, mostly. My father was not... gentle with failure."

The careful phrasing tells me more than a detailed explanation might have. I remember the documents mentioning that Gage had taken over the family business after his father's death, the way he tenses whenever the man is mentioned.

"My nightmare was about the mugging," I admit, the confession easier in this strange, suspended moment between night and morning. "Except in the dream, I knew it was staged. I knew what was coming, but couldn't stop it."

"The mind reconstructs events with the benefit of hindsight," he says, his tone almost gentle. "Inserting current knowledge into past experiences."

"Is that supposed to make it better? Knowing it was all orchestrated? That a man died as part of your... plot?" I can't keep the bitterness from my voice.

"No," he says simply. "Nothing makes that better. The operation went wrong. Victor

exceeded his instructions. It wasn't supposed to happen that way."

I watch him, searching for signs of deception, finding none. "Then how was it supposed to happen?"

"A frightening but ultimately harmless encounter. Enough to justify bringing you here, but without bloodshed." He meets my gaze directly. "I don't expect you to believe that, but it's the truth."

Strangely, I do believe him. Not because I trust him, but because the cold efficiency I've come to know in Gage Blackwood wouldn't include unnecessary violence. It would be... inefficient.

"That doesn't change where we are now," I say.

"No, it doesn't." He leans back in the chair, his expression thoughtful. "When I was a child, after the worst nights, my mother would sit with me until I fell asleep again. Just her presence was enough to keep the shadows at bay."

The image is startlingly human—Gage as a frightened child, his mother standing guard against invisible demons. I try to reconcile it with the controlled, calculating man before me and find I can't quite bridge the gap.

"Where is she now? Your mother?" I ask.

"Gone," he says, the single word heavy with meaning. "When I was fourteen."

Another piece of the puzzle that is Gage Blackwood falls into place—the loss of his buffer against a harsh father, the boy forced to grow up too quickly in a world without gentleness.

We sit in silence for a while, the atmosphere between us shifting into something I don't quite understand. Not friendship, certainly not affection, but perhaps a fragile truce built on shared vulnerability.

"Would you like me to leave?" he asks eventually, making no move to rise.

I should say yes. Should maintain the emotional distance that keeps me focused on eventual escape. Instead, I find myself shaking my head.

"No," I whisper. "Stay. Just... stay there." I gesture to the chair, establishing boundaries even in this moment of weakness.

He nods, settling more comfortably. "I'll stay until you fall asleep."

I lie back against the pillows, pulling the covers up to my chin. The remnants of the nightmare still hover at the edges of my consciousness, but they seem less threatening with another person in the room, even if that person is the architect of my captivity.

"I used to have nightmares about my father," I find myself saying, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "About disappointing him. About never being good enough, no matter how hard I tried."

"William Everett is a man who thrives on the inadequacy of others," Gage observes. "It's how he maintains control."

"Is that so different from you?" The question emerges sharp-edged, my momentary vulnerability giving way to renewed awareness of our fundamental dynamic.

"I prefer competence to inadequacy," he replies, seemingly unbothered by the comparison. "Your strengths were what interested me, Penelope. Not your weaknesses."

"Yet here I am, caged by your authority, my independence stripped away."

"Temporarily constrained," he corrects, the familiar reframing that never changes the fundamental reality. "Until trust is established."

I turn my head to look at him, finding his gaze steady on mine. "Will that ever happen? Really?"

He considers the question with unexpected seriousness. "I believe so. Not through force, but through time and shared experience. Through moments like this one."

The raw honesty in his voice catches me off guard. For the first time, I glimpse what might be genuine belief behind his words—that he truly sees our future unfolding toward some kind of functional partnership, that this isn't merely about possession but about something more complex.

I close my eyes, suddenly exhausted. "I don't want to argue philosophy tonight."

"Then we won't," he says simply. "Rest, Penelope. I'll be here."

The surreal quality of the moment settles over me like a blanket—Gage Blackwood, who orchestrated my capture and controls my every waking hour, now standing guard against the nightmares he indirectly created.

The contradictions should keep me awake, but instead, I find myself drifting, my body surrendering to exhaustion even as my mind continues to puzzle over the enigma sitting across the room.

The last thing I remember before sleep claims me is the sound of his breathing, steady and calm in the quiet room, and the strange realization that for the first time since my capture, I feel almost safe.

When I wake in the morning, he's gone, the chair empty, the room bathed in early sunlight. Only the faint impression on the cushion suggests he was ever there at all, that the night's strange intimacy wasn't just another dream.

But on the bedside table sits a small origami bird, folded from heavy cream paper, its wings poised as if for flight. I pick it up, turning it in my fingers, wondering at its meaning. A peace offering? A reminder of constrained freedom? Another manipulation?

The game continues, but the board has subtly changed.

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The conservatory breathes with life—humid air thick with the scent of blooming orchids, ferns unfurling in the diffused sunlight, the quiet burble of water features creating an atmosphere of manufactured serenity.

I've claimed this space as my own over the past weeks, spending hours arranging flowers in the quiet mornings, finding purpose in creation despite my captivity.

My fingers work with practiced precision, weaving delicate sprays of baby's breath between dramatic black calla lilies. The contrast pleases me—innocence and darkness coexisting in strange harmony. Like my situation, perhaps. The irony isn't lost on me.

Richard Blackwood's unexpected visit had disrupted the careful routine Gage and I had established.

Lunch with him yesterday had been revealing—not for what he said directly, but for the undercurrents beneath polite conversation.

I'd learned more about Gage's family dynamics in one hour with his uncle than in all the weeks of my captivity.

"Gage's father was a formidable man," Richard had said, watching me over the rim of his wine glass. "Brilliant in business, lacking in paternal instinct. My brother saw children as extensions of legacy rather than individuals to nurture."

"That must have been difficult for Gage," I'd offered carefully.

Richard's smile hadn't reached his eyes. "Difficult circumstances forge exceptional

people, don't they? My nephew learned early to rely on himself, to view relationships through the lens of utility rather than sentiment."

The conversation had circled Gage's childhood without directly addressing it—hints of violence, of protection offered to his mother, of a household ruled by fear rather than affection. Richard had masterfully implied without stating, suggesting without confirming.

"He values your independence, you know," Richard had said as lunch concluded. "Others might have seen your spirit as an obstacle to overcome. Gage sees it as an asset to acquire."

I set down my garden shears, studying the arrangement before me. Nearly complete, needing just one final element. I select a perfect white rose, placing it at the center of the composition—a focal point of purity amid the surrounding darkness.

"Beautiful."

I startle at the voice, so absorbed in my work I hadn't noticed Gage's entrance. He stands in the doorway, watching me with that intense focus that has become familiar. Today he wears casual clothing—dark jeans and a gray sweater that softens his usual imposing presence without diminishing it.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," he says, moving into the conservatory. "Mrs. Henderson mentioned you'd been here since dawn."

I gesture toward the arrangement. "Creating helps me think."

"And what are you thinking about so intently this morning?" He stops a respectful distance away, observation rather than intrusion.

"Your uncle," I answer honestly, seeing no benefit in evasion. "He's quite different from you."

Gage looks annoyed. "Richard excels at making impressions. Not all of them accurate."

"He spoke of your father." I watch carefully for his reaction, testing boundaries in this moment of relative privacy.

Gage's left hand flexes slightly—that tell I've cataloged indicating stronger emotion beneath his controlled exterior. "My father is not a topic for discussion, Penelope."

"Even between future spouses?" I press, surprising myself with my boldness.

His gaze sharpens. "Especially between us. Some subjects serve no purpose except to create unnecessary friction."

I return to my flowers, adjusting the position of a calla lily. "Friction seems inevitable in our arrangement, regardless of conversation topics."

"Only if you persist in viewing our situation as adversarial rather than collaborative." He moves closer now, studying my creation with genuine interest. "You have remarkable talent. The balance of elements, the tension between contrasting forms—it's quite striking."

"Thank you." The compliment catches me off guard, seeming genuinely appreciative rather than merely strategic.

He circles the arrangement slowly, his trained eye analyzing the composition. "The white rose is an interesting choice as a focal point," he observes. "Innocence surrounded by darkness."

"Or purity persisting despite its environment," I counter.

A slight smile touches his lips. "Perspective determines interpretation, as always."

We fall into silence that isn't entirely uncomfortable. I continue making minor adjustments to the arrangement while Gage observes, his presence less intrusive than I might have expected. When I finish, I step back to assess the final result.

"Satisfied?" he asks.

"Mostly," I admit. "Creativity is always a compromise between vision and execution."

"A philosophical approach to flower arranging."

"Everything is philosophy when freedom is limited," I reply, unable to resist the subtle jab.

Rather than showing irritation, he seems almost amused by my persistence. "Even in captivity, the mind remains free to create. To find meaning in constraint."

"Poetic justification for imprisonment."

"Realistic assessment of universal conditions," he counters. "All lives operate within constraints, Penelope. The difference lies in recognizing them rather than fighting against immovable boundaries."

I begin cleaning my workspace, gathering scattered stems and leaves. "Is that how you justify what you've done?"

"I don't need justification." His voice remains even, matter-of-fact. "I entered a

business arrangement with your father that happens to include marriage. The legal and ethical frameworks surrounding such arrangements may be complex, but they are entirely legitimate."

"Ethics that conveniently align with your objectives."

"As opposed to ethics that would condemn me while failing to improve your situation?" He moves to help me clear the workspace, the domestic gesture incongruous with our conversation. "Moral outrage without a practical alternative offers nothing but emotional satisfaction, Penelope."

I find myself unable to form an immediate response. Instead, I focus on completing my cleanup, maintaining physical activity while organizing my thoughts.

"The arrangement for Violet's wedding is nearly complete," I say, changing topics. "I should deliver it to her preparation suite personally."

"Victor will accompany you," he agrees, the concession coming more easily than I'd anticipated. "Fifteen minutes of private conversation, as agreed."

I nod, relieved that this small mercy remains intact despite Richard's disruptive presence. "Thank you."

"Your compliance these past weeks has not gone unnoticed," he says, studying me with that assessing gaze.

We work in companionable silence for several minutes, placing tools in their proper storage, disposing of plant waste, preparing containers for the next day's work. The domestic rhythm feels almost normal, a dangerous illusion of partnership rather than captivity.

"My uncle mentioned your lunch was productive," Gage says finally, breaking the silence. "He found you 'refreshingly direct' compared to his usual social interactions."

"He was surprisingly forthcoming about your childhood," I reply, watching for reaction. "Though more through implication than direct statement."

That tell again—the slight flexing of his hand. "Richard has always excelled at saying much while revealing little. Whatever picture he painted is likely distorted by his own agenda."

"Which is?"

"Complex and primarily self-serving." Gage leans against the workbench, his posture more relaxed than usual.

"He mentioned your mother," I venture cautiously. "That you protected her."

Gage goes still, his expression hardening into something dangerous. For a moment, I fear I've pushed too far, crossed some invisible boundary that will result in renewed restrictions.

"My mother is not a topic for discussion," he says finally, voice controlled but with an undercurrent of genuine emotion. "With anyone. Including Richard."

I nod, accepting this boundary as something different from his usual strategic limitations. This feels personal rather than tactical—perhaps the most genuine response I've witnessed from him.

"I apologize," I say quietly. "I didn't mean to intrude on private matters."

He studies me for a long moment, as if assessing the sincerity of my apology.

Whatever he sees appears to satisfy him, because his expression softens marginally.

"You're working with the black dahlias tomorrow?" he asks, deliberately changing the subject.

"Yes. They're reaching peak bloom." I accept the conversational shift, recognizing the olive branch for what it is. "I'm planning an arrangement for the front entryway."

"I look forward to seeing it." He straightens, professional distance returning to his posture. "I have meetings for the remainder of the day. We'll review final details for Violet's wedding at dinner."

I nod, expecting him to depart immediately as is his usual practice when concluding an interaction. Instead, he remains for a moment, seeming almost hesitant—an unprecedented break in his typically decisive movements.

"The flowers you arranged last week," he says finally. "The ones for the dining room. They lasted longer than expected. Mrs. Henderson commented on their remarkable resilience."

The comment surprises me. "Proper cutting techniques and water treatments extend bloom life significantly," I explain. "It's a matter of understanding what each variety needs to thrive despite being separated from its natural environment."

"Adaptation to changed circumstances," he observes. "A valuable skill in many contexts."

Before I can respond, he reaches out unexpectedly, his fingers gently brushing a strand of copper hair from my face. The touch is light, almost tender—I freeze in surprise.

"You had a leaf," he explains, showing me the small green fragment on his fingertip.

Our eyes meet, and the atmosphere between us shifts—a current of awareness that transcends our carefully maintained roles of captor and captive. His gaze drops briefly to my lips, and I find myself unable to move, caught in a moment.

Without warning, he leans forward and presses his lips to mine.

The kiss is gentle, questioning rather than demanding, entirely unlike the forceful possession I might have expected.

My body responds before my mind can intervene—an involuntary softening, a traitorous warmth spreading through my veins.

The contact lasts only seconds before I regain control, pulling back sharply and striking out without conscious thought. My palm connects with his cheek in a resounding slap that echoes through the conservatory.

Gage doesn't react with anger as I expect. He simply takes a step back, his expression unreadable as he accepts the rejection without retaliation.

"I apologize," he says formally, the brief moment of vulnerability already concealed behind his usual controlled facade. "That was presumptuous."

My hand tingles from the impact, my pulse racing with confusion and unwanted awareness. "Don't touch me like that again," I manage, hating the slight tremor in my voice.

He nods once, accepting the boundary without argument. "Dinner at seven," he says simply, then turns and walks away, leaving me trembling among the flowers.

When he's gone, I press my fingers to my lips, trying to understand my own reaction.

The hatred I feel is directed not at him in this moment, but at myself—at the brief but undeniable response my body had to his touch.

The physiological betrayal feels more threatening than any restriction he's placed upon me.

This is dangerous territory—far more perilous than surveillance systems or locked doors. If my body begins to respond to him, to find comfort or pleasure in his presence, how long before my mind begins to rationalize, to adapt, to accept?

I turn back to my flowers, forcing my hands to steady as I make final adjustments to the arrangement. The white rose at the center seems to mock me now—purity surrounded by darkness, innocence gradually corrupted by its environment.

No. I refuse that narrative. My body may react, but my will remains my own.

I straighten my spine, deliberately wiping all trace of his touch from my lips.

It won't work. I won't allow it to work.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

The thunder rumbles in the distance, an approaching storm matching my turbulent mood.

I stand at the window of Gage's office, watching dark clouds roll across the horizon, heavy with the promise of rain. Behind me, Gage works at his desk, the steady click of his keyboard providing counterpoint to the growing atmospheric tension.

Three days have passed since the kiss in the conservatory.

Three days of careful avoidance, of conversations limited to necessary topics, of maintaining physical distance whenever possible.

We attended Violet's wedding together yesterday—the perfect engaged couple in public, silent strangers in private.

The wedding itself had been exactly as expected—opulent, meticulously orchestrated, a society spectacle rather than genuine celebration.

Violet had looked beautiful and trapped, her smile never quite reaching her eyes as she pledged herself to Charles Montgomery III beside the altar of St. Margaret's Cathedral.

"You're quiet," Gage observes without looking up from his work. "Still processing your sister's wedding?"

I continue staring at the approaching storm. "Wondering if she feels as captive as I do."

"Your sister's arrangement differs significantly from ours," he replies, his tone matter-of-fact. "The Montgomerys have cultivated that connection since Violet was a child. She's been prepared for her role, accepts its parameters."

"Acceptance born of lifelong conditioning isn't genuine choice."

"Few choices in life are entirely free of external influence or constraint." His keyboard falls silent as he gives me his full attention. "You may find that perspective unsatisfying, I realize. But it remains reality regardless."

I turn from the window to face him directly, my patience for his justifications thoroughly exhausted. "I didn't come here to debate abstract concepts of free will. I came to discuss practical matters."

"Which would be?"

"The prenuptial agreement. The wedding date. My continued imprisonment in this house." I move toward his desk, intentionally invading the space he considers his domain. "You promised transparency regarding our arrangement. I've demonstrated sufficient compliance to earn that much."

Gage leans back in his chair, studying me with that assessing gaze I've come to recognize. "Your compliance has been performative rather than genuine. We both know that."

"And your transparency has been selective rather than complete," I counter. "We both know that too."

A slight smile touches his lips, almost appreciative of my directness. "Very well. Which aspect of our arrangement requires immediate clarification?"

"The legal framework. I want to review the complete prenuptial agreement, not just the summary your attorneys provided."

"That can be arranged," he says easily, making a note on his tablet. "The documents will be delivered this evening."

"I want to consult with independent legal counsel before signing."

His expression hardens slightly. "That won't be possible. The sensitive nature of certain clauses precludes outside review."

"Then I won't sign."

"Then you won't marry me," he replies calmly. "And your father's legal protection will be withdrawn, with consequences we've already thoroughly discussed."

We stare at each other across the desk, the fundamental reality of our situation stark between us. No matter what small concessions he might grant, the core dynamic remains unchanged—I am here because the alternative consequences are unacceptable.

Lightning flashes outside, illuminating the office in stark white light. Thunder follows almost immediately, the storm no longer approaching but arrived in full force.

Rain begins to lash against the windows, driven by increasing wind.

"Your father called this morning," Gage says, changing the subject with deliberate precision. "He's displeased with certain arrangements for our wedding. Specifically, your insistence on creating your own bridal bouquet rather than using Valhalla's designs."

"My bouquet is the one element of this farce I should control," I reply, irritation flaring at my father's continued interference. "Flowers are my profession, my passion. Even prisoners on death row get a last meal of their choosing."

"Dramatic comparisons don't strengthen your position, Penelope." His tone remains even, unaffected by my growing anger. "I've already informed William that floral decisions remain your domain. The matter is settled."

The unexpected support catches me off guard. "Thank you," I say automatically, then immediately regret showing gratitude for what should be a basic right.

Gage returns to his work, apparently considering the conversation concluded.

I remain standing, frustration building at his ability to control not just my physical circumstances but the very flow of our interactions.

"The kiss," I say abruptly, the words escaping before I can reconsider. "Was that another strategic move to break my resistance?"

His fingers freeze above the keyboard, his expression shifting to something more guarded. "No."

"No explanation? Just 'no'?"

"The kiss was not strategic," he clarifies, his voice cooler now. "It was impulsive. A mistake in judgment that won't be repeated."

"You don't make impulsive mistakes," I challenge, moving closer to his desk. "Every action serves your objectives. Every interaction advances your agenda."

"You overestimate my calculation and underestimate human nature," he replies,

rising from his chair as if unwilling to continue this conversation at a physical disadvantage. "Even the most disciplined minds have moments of impulse."

"And what impulse led you to kiss your prisoner?" I press, deliberately provocative. "Possession? Control? Or simply boredom with your usual games?"

His expression darkens, that dangerous edge I've glimpsed occasionally now more visible beneath his controlled exterior. "You're not a prisoner, Penelope. You're my fiancée."

"Fiancée implies consent," I argue, voice rising to match the storm's intensity outside. "What you have is ownership, purchased from my father like medieval property transfer."

"If you insist on viewing yourself as property, that's your choice." His voice remains controlled despite the increasing tension. "I've offered partnership. You refuse to see beyond your resentment."

"Partnership requires equal power," I snap, my carefully maintained facade finally cracking under accumulated pressure. "What we have is captor and captive, disguised in pretty language to ease your conscience."

"My conscience requires no easing," he replies coldly. "I entered a legitimate business arrangement with your father. The terms were clear. The legal framework sound. Your emotional response to those facts doesn't change their fundamental validity."

"Then why kiss me?" I demand, stepping closer, invading his personal space in deliberate challenge. "If this is merely business, why introduce physical intimacy? Why complicate a transaction with unwanted contact?"

Something flashes in his eyes—frustration, perhaps, or something deeper I can't quite identify. "Because despite your determined resistance to reality, we will be married in two weeks. Physical intimacy will eventually be expected."

"Expected but not guaranteed," I correct sharply. "The prenup may legally bind me to this house, but you can't force me to share your bed."

His expression hardens. "I would never force you. Coercion isn't necessary when time and proximity inevitably create connection. Human beings adapt, Penelope. Even the most resistant eventually seek comfort in their circumstances."

"Stockholm Syndrome isn't consent," I say, my voice dropping dangerously low. "It's psychological survival."

"And clinging to anger that changes nothing isn't freedom," he counters. "It's self-imposed suffering."

I laugh bitterly. "Now we reach the truth. You're frustrated that I won't give up. You want my compliance. My surrender."

"What I want," he says with dangerous precision, "is for you to stop fighting battles you cannot win and focus your considerable intelligence on making the best out of the circumstances."

"What you want," I correct, pushing further into dangerous territory, "is to break me without leaving visible marks. To reshape me into the perfect wife who values your occasional kindness."

Lightning flashes again, the storm directly overhead now, thunder cracking almost simultaneously. Rain pounds against the windows with increasing fury, nature's violence providing backdrop to our escalating confrontation.

"You know nothing about what I want," Gage says, his control fraying visibly now. "You've constructed a convenient villain in your mind, assigning me motivations that justify your continued defiance."

"Then tell me what you want!" I challenge, my voice rising almost to a shout. "Plain language about your actual intentions for this farce of a marriage."

"I want partnership with a woman whose intelligence and strength match my own," he replies, his voice remaining controlled despite the intensity of his words.

"I want legitimate alliance with a family name that opens doors my own cannot, despite my financial success.

I want children who combine the best qualities of both bloodlines. I want?—"

"Bloodlines?" I interrupt, latching onto the revealing word. "You make it sound like horse breeding. Genetic selection for optimal offspring. Is that how your father viewed marriage? As a stud arrangement for producing superior heirs?"

His left hand flexes, indicating I've struck a nerve. "My father is irrelevant to this discussion."

"Is he?" I press harder, deliberately targeting the vulnerability I'd glimpsed. "Your uncle suggested otherwise. He implied your father's approach to family has shaped your entire understanding of relationships."

"Richard speaks on matters he barely comprehends," Gage says, tension evident in every line of his body now. "My father's parenting has no bearing on our arrangement."

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"Except it shaped the man who believes purchasing a wife is acceptable," I continue, pushing toward the breaking point I sense approaching. "The man who keeps me prisoner while calling it protection. The man who?—"

"Enough." The word cracks like the thunder outside, Gage's control finally slipping. "My father was a violent alcoholic who terrorized my mother and treated me as property to be molded through force. Is that what you wanted to hear, Penelope? Does that satisfy you?"

The raw emotion in his voice stops me cold.

"Your uncle said you protected your mother," I say more quietly, testing whether this moment of authenticity might continue. "That you intervened despite the danger to yourself."

Gage turns away abruptly, moving to the window where the storm continues its assault on the estate grounds. "My interventions were inadequate," he says after a long moment, his voice tight with suppressed emotion. "Until they weren't."

The implications of those four words hang in the silence between us.

"Your father is dead," I state rather than ask.

"Yes." His profile is hard against the storm-darkened window. "Heart failure, officially."

The quiet admission rocks through me. I study his rigid posture, the controlled

tension evident even in this moment of unexpected vulnerability.

"How old were you?" I ask, my approach gentler now despite my earlier anger.

"Eighteen." He doesn't elaborate further, his gaze fixed on the violent weather outside.

The silence stretches between us, filled only by the storm's continued assault. I remain where I am, uncertain how to navigate this unexpected territory—authentic emotion rather than strategic interaction.

Without warning, Gage turns from the window and crosses to a small side table where crystal decanters stand in orderly arrangement. He pours himself a measure of amber liquid, downing it in a single swallow before pouring another.

"My mother died six months later," he says suddenly, his back still to me.

"The official cause was pneumonia. The reality was that she'd lost the will to live once the immediate threat was removed.

Years of terror had hollowed her from inside, leaving nothing but a fragile shell when freedom finally came. "

He turns to face me, his expression more open than I've ever seen it. "So yes, Penelope, I understand captivity. I understand the psychological impact of controlled movement, of strategic fear, of power imbalance that cannot be overcome through direct confrontation."

I stare at him, thrown completely off balance by this unexpected revelation. "Then how can you justify?—"

"Because our situations are entirely different," he interrupts, voice hardening again. "You are not being beaten. You are not being terrorized. You are being held to a legal agreement made in good faith between consenting parties."

"I never consented," I remind him, though my voice lacks its earlier heat.

"Your father acted as your legal representative, as is his right under multiple contractual frameworks." He drains his second drink, setting the glass down with controlled precision. "The ethical complexity doesn't change the legal validity."

I move to the window, needing physical distance to process this shift in our interaction. The storm continues unabated, trees bending under fierce wind, rain sheeting across manicured grounds now turning to small rivers and pools.

"Your father used you as collateral," I say finally, turning back to face him. "Mine used me as currency. Neither considered us as people deserving agency in decisions affecting our entire lives."

Gage's expression flickers with recognition. For a brief moment, I glimpse vulnerability beneath his carefully constructed armor.

"The difference," he says after a long pause, "is that I'm offering you partnership, not subjugation through violence. Your father would have drugged you into compliance if I permitted it."

The storm reaches crescendo outside, a particularly violent lightning strike followed immediately by thunder that seems to shake the very foundation of the house. The lights flicker once, twice, then stabilize as backup systems engage seamlessly.

Gage moves suddenly, crossing to his desk and slamming his fist down with unexpected violence. The heavy wooden surface absorbs the impact, but several

items jump from the force—a pen rolling to the floor, papers scattering slightly.

The physical display startles me, so different from his usual controlled demeanor. I take an instinctive step back, uncertainty replacing anger as primary emotion.

"I won't become my father," he says, voice low and intense.

"I won't use violence to control. I won't create terror.

" He looks up, meeting my gaze directly.

"But I will maintain this arrangement, Penelope.

I will honor the agreement with your father.

I will marry you as scheduled, regardless of your continued resistance. "

The raw determination in his voice carries absolute conviction.

"Are you done pretending you're not mine?" he asks, his voice dropping to dangerous softness. "Because I'm tired of pretending I don't already own every part of you."

"I'll never be yours," I say, but the declaration lacks conviction.

Gage straightens, control returning to his posture as the momentary emotional break recedes.

"Willingness is a spectrum rather than absolute state," he observes, his philosophical distance reasserting itself.

"You'll change your mind. The storm is intensifying," he notes with a change of

subject, glancing toward the window.

"The meteorological service predicts potential flooding along the river boundary.

I need to check security protocols for the southern property. "

The abrupt shift to practical matters creates conversational whiplash, but I recognize it as his method of regaining equilibrium after unexpected emotional display.

"Of course," I say, accepting the subject change. "I should let you work."

I move toward the door, my mind still processing the revelations and intensity of our confrontation. Before I can exit, his voice stops me.

"Penelope." He waits until I turn back to face him. "The prenuptial documents will be delivered to your suite this evening, as promised. You'll have three days to review before signing is required."

I nod.

"And the kiss won't be repeated without your explicit permission," he adds, his tone neutral but his gaze intense. "Physical boundaries will be respected until our wedding night, after which negotiation may be required."

"Thank you for the temporary consideration," I reply, unable to entirely suppress the sarcasm in my tone.

His expression doesn't change.

I leave without further comment, closing the door quietly behind me. In the hallway, I pause, breathless from the emotional intensity of the confrontation.

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The garden pavilion gleams in late afternoon sunlight, white marble columns wrapped with climbing roses—a perfect pastoral fantasy conjured from Gage's limitless resources.

I sit at a wrought iron table covered in fabric swatches, cake samples, and detailed itineraries, surrounded by the machinery of wedding planning grinding relentlessly toward the date circled in red on every calendar in the mansion: two weeks from Saturday.

I nod mechanically, playing my role in this elaborate production while my mind remains fixed on the prenuptial agreement delivered to my suite three nights ago.

"Miss Everett?" Isabella's voice breaks through my contemplation. "The guest seating? You mentioned wanting to review the arrangements?"

"Yes," I respond, focusing on the seating chart she extends. "My friends should be placed together, away from my father's associates."

The sound of approaching footsteps draws my attention. My mother appears on the garden path, her slender figure impeccably dressed as always, her expression a careful mask of polite interest that reveals nothing of her true thoughts.

"Mother," I say, rising from my seat with ingrained politeness rather than genuine warmth. "I didn't know you were visiting today."

"William thought I might be helpful with the final arrangements." She air-kisses my cheek, her perfume expensive and familiar. "Isabella, darling, would you mind giving

us a moment? Family matters."

Isabella retreats with professional discretion, leaving me alone with the woman who stood by silently throughout my childhood while my father shaped our family through force of will and strategic manipulation.

"You look tired, Penelope." My mother sits gracefully, assessing me with a practiced eye.

"The stress of wedding planning, I imagine.

Though you seem to be leaving most decisions to professionals, which is wise.

Your sister insisted on managing every detail herself and was quite overwrought by the end. "

"Violet always did try too hard to please everyone," I observe, pouring tea from the silver service left by staff earlier. "How is she? Have you heard from her since the honeymoon?"

"They're extending their stay in the Maldives another week.

" She accepts the teacup with a nod. "And how are you finding your situation?

" she asks, her voice lowered slightly though we're clearly alone.

"Gage Blackwood has a certain reputation in some circles.

Effective in business, but not known for. .. warmth."

I study her carefully, searching for genuine concern beneath social pleasantries. "My

situation is what Father arranged," I reply neutrally. "Mr. Blackwood has been precisely what one might expect, given the circumstances."

A flicker of something—regret? discomfort?—crosses her face before the polished mask returns. "Your father did what was necessary for the family. The arrangement with the Blackwoods prevented significant consequences that would have affected all of us, including you and your sister."

"So I've been repeatedly informed," I say, unable to entirely suppress the bitterness in my tone.

My mother sips her tea, gaze shifting to the elaborate pavilion being constructed at the far end of the garden. "The ceremony site is lovely. Understated elegance rather than ostentatious display. Mr. Blackwood has excellent taste."

"The taste was Isabella's," I correct. "Gage merely approves expenses."

"Nevertheless." She sets down her cup with practiced precision. "You might have fared worse, Penelope. There were other potential arrangements your father considered before the Blackwood option presented itself."

I lean forward, suddenly alert. "What other arrangements?"

She hesitates, clearly weighing discretion against disclosure.

"Several possibilities were explored when you turned twenty-one.

The Montgomerys initially expressed interest in a double connection—both their sons married to Everett daughters.

When you... departed... negotiations shifted to alternative candidates. "

"Who else?" I press, hungry for information that might provide context, leverage, understanding of my current situation.

"Martin Sullivan's youngest son," she replies after a moment. "The Russian consortium your father was courting for the Eastern expansion. And briefly, an arrangement with Judge Harrison's nephew, though that fell through when certain legal complications arose."

The casual way she lists these men—these potential owners who might have been assigned to me had circumstances unfolded differently—sends ice through my veins. Not just Gage, but any number of men might have pursued me, claimed me, owing to arrangements I never consented to.

"And you accepted this," I say quietly. "That your daughters could be traded like commodities to benefit Father's business interests."

Her expression hardens slightly. "I accepted the realities of the world we inhabit, Penelope. Women in our position have always made strategic marriages. My own was arranged by my father after the Sullivan merger fell through."

The revelation shouldn't surprise me, yet somehow it does. I've never heard her speak of her own marriage in these terms before.

"Did you ever regret it?" I ask, the question emerging before I can reconsider. "Marrying Father because it was arranged rather than chosen?"

"Regret serves no purpose when alternatives don't exist," she says finally. "I built a life within what was available to me. As will you."

"Mrs. Everett!" Isabella's voice breaks our momentary connection as she hurries back along the garden path. "Mr. Blackwood mentioned you wanted to review the place

settings before final approval. I have the samples in my car."

My mother rises, social mask firmly back in place. "Of course, Isabella. Proper presentation is essential." She glances back at me. "We'll continue our conversation another time, Penelope. Perhaps at the final dress fitting on Thursday."

I watch her follow Isabella toward the house, her slender figure the perfect picture of society wifehood—elegant, appropriate, contained within boundaries established by men. Is this my future?

I rise, abandoning the wedding preparations to walk toward the southern edge of the property.

Guards track my progress discreetly, maintaining prescribed distance while ensuring I remain within authorized boundaries.

The pavilion where the wedding ceremony will take place looms ahead, workers constructing elaborate floral arbors under the direction of Marcus Valhalla himself, imported from New York to ensure perfect execution.

He spots me approaching and excuses himself from his team, moving to intercept me with professional courtesy masking obvious curiosity.

"Miss Everett," he greets me, extending his hand. "A pleasure to finally meet in person after hearing so much about your work."

I accept the handshake automatically, years of social training overriding personal feelings. "Mr. Valhalla. Your reputation precedes you as well."

"Your father mentioned you might have opinions regarding the ceremonial arrangements," he says, gesture encompassing the elaborate structures taking shape

around us. "Though Mr. Blackwood assured me I had complete creative discretion."

Another subtle reminder of my position, my lack of true agency in this arrangement.

"I'm creating my own bouquet," I say. "The rest is yours to design as contracted."

Marcus studies me with undisguised curiosity. "An unusual choice for a bride in your position. Most women with your resources would prefer to remain hands-off, especially with the ceremony so near."

"I'm a floral designer myself, Mr. Valhalla," I remind him, unable to disguise my irritation. "Flowers are my profession, not merely decorative elements."

"Of course," he backtracks smoothly. "Wildflower has quite the reputation for innovative arrangements. Small but distinctive."

The condescension in his tone is subtle but unmistakable—his operation employs dozens across multiple locations, while mine occupies a single storefront with two employees.

"Would you like to review the structural concepts?" he offers, gesturing toward elaborate design boards nearby. "Mr. Blackwood approved the final vision last week, but modifications might still be possible for certain elements."

"That won't be necessary," I decline, unwilling to participate in this particular humiliation. "I'm sure your work will be exemplary."

I turn to leave, but his voice stops me. "Miss Everett—I hope you don't consider this inappropriate, but I've always admired your centerpiece design from the Goldberg wedding last spring."

The unexpected professional acknowledgment catches me off guard. "Thank you. That was a challenging commission."

"I heard rumors you might be expanding Wildflower's operations before your... engagement." He carefully phrases. "The industry would benefit from your continued creative input, regardless of your new position."

Before I can respond, a familiar voice interrupts. "Mr. Valhalla. I see you've met my fiancée."

Gage approaches from the main house, his expression pleasant but eyes watchful as he assesses our interaction. He wears a charcoal suit despite the informal garden setting, every inch the controlling executive.

"Mr. Blackwood," Marcus responds with immediate deference. "I was just complimenting Miss Everett on her previous design work. Her reputation in the industry is quite impressive."

"Indeed," Gage agrees, his hand settling at the small of my back. "Penelope's talent is exceptional. One reason I've ensured Wildflower continues operations despite our impending marriage."

The proprietary tone—claiming credit for "allowing" my business to exist—sends heat flaring through me.

"I should return to the preparation meetings," I say, glancing toward the main house. "Isabella and my mother are reviewing place settings."

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"Actually," Gage counters smoothly, "your mother has departed. An appointment with her interior designer couldn't be rescheduled." He turns to Marcus with practiced social grace. "You'll excuse us, Mr. Valhalla? There are wedding matters requiring private discussion."

Marcus withdraws with professional efficiency, leaving me alone with Gage amid partially constructed wedding scenery—a fitting metaphor for our situation.

"Your mother seemed distressed," Gage observes once we're alone. "Your conversation must have contributed to it."

"She was sharing historical context I found illuminating," I reply carefully. "Apparently I was nearly traded to several other potential husbands despite your arrangement with my father."

Gage looks satisfied at having secured the arrangement himself. "William explored multiple options before our agreement was finalized. The Montgomerys were particularly persistent."

"So I learned," I say.

His gaze is steady, unapologetic. "The wedding date approaches rapidly. Isabella mentioned you've been less than engaged with certain decisions requiring your input."

"I've made decisions where my input actually matters," I respond. "The rest seems predetermined regardless of my preferences."

"Your preferences have been incorporated where necessary," he counters.

A staff member approaches before I can respond, maintaining respectful distance until acknowledged. "Mr. Blackwood, the conference call with Tokyo has been rescheduled for six this evening. Mr. Chen apologizes for the change."

Gage nods dismissal, turning back to me once we're alone again. "The wedding invitation distribution completes tomorrow. Three hundred formal announcements to Chicago's elite, business associates, and select political connections."

The number strikes me suddenly—three hundred witnesses to my captivity disguised as celebration.

"So many guests for an arrangement that's essentially a business merger," I observe bitterly.

"I've scheduled a visit to Wildflower tomorrow afternoon," he continues, consulting his phone calendar. "You'll have two hours with Sandra to review operations, supervised by Victor naturally. The business appears to be thriving under interim management."

The unexpected concession momentarily disarms me. "Thank you," I say, genuine gratitude mixing uncomfortably with resentment that such permission is required at all.

"Your continued cooperation warrants appropriate recognition," he says, the subtle reinforcement of our power dynamic unmistakable despite the surface generosity. "The prenuptial agreement requires your signature by tomorrow evening. Legal counsel will be available to answer questions."

"Legal counsel chosen by you," I clarify. "Not independent representation."

"The sensitive nature of certain clauses precludes truly independent review," he confirms without apology. "However, Mr. Geller is a respected attorney with ethical obligations that extend beyond his client relationship with me."

I resist the urge to argue further, recognizing the futility of challenging arrangements already finalized. "What time should I be ready for the Wildflower visit?"

"One o'clock. Victor will drive you directly, allowing arrival during Sandra's lunch break to minimize staff interaction. Two hours on-site, returning by three-thirty for the final meeting with the caterers."

I nod in acceptance.

"Is there anything else you require for the Wildflower visit?" he asks, his tone shifting slightly toward something almost considerate. "Materials from your suite, perhaps, or specific items currently at the shop?"

The unexpected consideration, however limited, creates momentary dissonance. "My design notebook in the upper desk drawer," I reply after brief consideration. "And perhaps my personal scissors from the conservatory equipment."

"I'll have them ready for tomorrow," he promises, glancing at his watch. "I have calls until dinner. We'll review the Tokyo discussion over the meal, as the project may have implications for our honeymoon scheduling."

The casual reference to "honeymoon" sends an involuntary shiver through me—the physical aspect of our arrangement that remains carefully undiscussed since the kiss in the conservatory.

"One more thing," Gage adds, his expression shifting toward something more serious. "Your father will attend the prenuptial signing tomorrow evening."

"I understand," I say simply.

He studies me for a moment longer, then nods farewell and turns toward the house, leaving me alone amid the half-constructed trappings of our approaching wedding.

I remain in the garden until sunset, watching workers dismantle equipment for the day, the wedding pavilion taking shape piece by careful piece. Two weeks from Saturday, I will stand beneath that structure and speak vows I don't mean to a man who purchased me through arrangement with my father.

I turn toward the house as darkness settles over the garden, the weight of the diamond ring on my finger a constant reminder of the countdown underway.

The wedding date looms ever closer.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

The offices of Westley, Geller & Associates occupy the forty-second floor of a gleaming tower in downtown Chicago, floor-to-ceiling windows offering panoramic views of Lake Michigan.

I sit in a tastefully appointed conference room, a stack of documents nearly three inches thick placed before me on the polished mahogany table.

Lawrence Geller—silver-haired, impeccably dressed, with the carefully neutral expression of a man who has facilitated countless morally ambiguous arrangements—sits across from me, while Gage occupies the head of the table, scrolling through messages on his phone with apparent disinterest in the proceedings.

"These are the final prenuptial documents for your review, Miss Everett," Geller explains, his voice carrying the practiced cadence of someone who has delivered this speech many times. "Mr. Blackwood has already signed where indicated. Your signatures are required on the tabbed pages."

"Perhaps Mr. Geller could summarize the key provisions," Gage suggests without looking up from his phone. "For clarity."

Geller nods, folding his hands atop the document.

"The agreement is comprehensive but follows standard formats for high-net-worth individuals.

In essence, Miss Everett, you waive claims to Mr. Blackwood's existing assets and business holdings in the event of divorce.

However, you receive a settlement of five million dollars for each year of marriage, capped at fifty million after ten years. "

"And if Gage dies while we're married?" I ask, the question emerging more bluntly than intended.

Geller's expression doesn't change. "In that event, you would receive twenty percent of Mr. Blackwood's personal estate, estimated currently at approximately four hundred million dollars, as well as lifetime income from a trust established for any children of the marriage."

"And Wildflower? My business?"

"Remains entirely yours regardless of marital status," Geller confirms. "Mr. Blackwood has specifically excluded your business from matrimonial property, guaranteeing your continued control irrespective of future circumstances."

I turn to a tabbed page, scanning provisions regarding children—their education, healthcare, custody arrangements in case of divorce. All meticulously planned, as if our theoretical offspring are business assets requiring careful management.

"There are non-disclosure provisions on pages 87 through 112," Geller continues. "Standard confidentiality regarding Mr. Blackwood's business operations, personal matters, and family history. Violation of these provisions would nullify financial settlements."

Of course. Can't have the purchased wife revealing family secrets.

The door opens, and my father enters without knocking, his presence immediately dominating the room. "Has she signed yet?" he asks Gage directly, not bothering to acknowledge me.

"We're reviewing provisions," Gage replies, finally setting down his phone. "Ensuring clarity before finalization."

My father makes an impatient sound, taking a seat without invitation. "The agreement was finalized weeks ago. This meeting is a formality, not a negotiation."

"Nevertheless," Gage says, his tone cooling slightly, "Penelope deserves to understand what she's signing."

The unexpected support catches me off guard. I continue turning pages, finding a section that makes me pause. "This indicates I must reside at the Blackwood Estate for a minimum of three hundred days per year. I'm essentially prohibited from independent travel or separate residence."

"A reasonable provision ensuring marital cohesion," my father dismisses. "Standard in arrangements of this nature."

"It's controlling and excessive," I counter, looking directly at Gage. "Most marriages don't require legal provisions dictating physical presence."

Gage studies me for a moment. "The provision can be modified to allow travel with advance notification and appropriate security measures. Two hundred and fifty days minimum residence seems reasonable."

The minor concession is meaningless in practical terms—I remain a prisoner with slightly longer permission slips—but the willingness to adjust terms at all is unexpected.

"Page 143 requires my signature," I note, finding another concerning section. "This waives my right to contest any security measures Gage deems necessary, including surveillance, restricted communication, and limited access to certain resources."

"Again, standard provisions," Geller interjects smoothly. "Mr. Blackwood's position necessitates comprehensive security protocols. This merely confirms your acknowledgment of those requirements."

"It's imprisonment disguised as protection," I say flatly.

My father slams his hand on the table. "Enough dramatics, Penelope. You'll sign the agreement as written. Your childish resistance has already delayed this arrangement beyond acceptable timelines."

"William." Gage's voice cuts through my father's outburst with quiet authority. "Your presence was requested for witness signature, not commentary on the proceedings."

My father's face flushes with anger, but surprisingly, he falls silent. The dynamic between them continues to intrigue me—my father clearly deferring to Gage despite his normal dominance in all situations.

I continue reading, finding a section regarding my professional activities.

"Page 217 specifies that any expansion of Wildflower requires your written approval," I tell Gage, unable to keep the resentment from my voice.

"Including new locations, service offerings, or significant client acquisitions. "

"A reasonable provision ensuring business activities don't conflict with security considerations," Gage replies. "Though I'm open to establishing agreed-upon parameters that would streamline approval for certain categories of expansion."

"How generous," I murmur sarcastically, turning another page.

The room falls silent as I continue reading, the only sound the occasional rustle of

paper and my father's impatient sighs.

I find provisions regarding marital relations—the document carefully avoids explicit sexual requirements while using phrases like "reasonable expectations of physical intimacy" and "good faith efforts toward procreation" that leave little doubt about the expected nature of our relationship.

"Page 286," I say after nearly an hour of reading. "This section requires me to 'present myself appropriately for all public appearances, maintaining standards befitting the Blackwood name.' Who determines what's 'appropriate'?"

"Within reason, I do," Gage answers directly. "Public appearances impact business relationships and strategic alliances. Appropriate presentation is simply good business."

"So I'm to be a decorative accessory with no personal style or expression."

"You're to be a partner whose appearance reflects mutual interests rather than individual impulses," he corrects. "The provision doesn't dictate day-to-day private choices, only public-facing presentation."

My father checks his watch with obvious impatience. "This review has extended well beyond reasonable timeframes. The wedding date approaches, and numerous arrangements remain pending. Penelope should sign now."

"I haven't finished reading," I reply, not looking up from the document.

"Reading changes nothing about the outcome," my father says dismissively. "Your signature is required regardless of your opinion on specific provisions."

"Nevertheless, she'll read as much as she wishes before signing," Gage states with

that same quiet authority that somehow silences my father more effectively than shouting ever could.

I continue reading for another forty minutes, finding provisions regarding everything from medical decisions to approved social connections to protocols for family holidays. My entire existence mapped out in legal language, my cage constructed of paragraphs and subclauses.

Finally, I close the document, looking directly at Gage. "If I refuse to sign, what happens?"

"You know the answer to that question," he replies evenly. "Your father's legal protection would be withdrawn. Criminal charges would proceed. Wildflower would lose its operational support and location. Your sister's marriage would face complications from the resulting scandal."

"This is ridiculous," my father interrupts. "She has no choice but to sign. This performative resistance wastes everyone's time."

Gage ignores him, his gaze steady on mine. "The prenuptial agreement provides security and clarity, Penelope. The alternative benefits no one, yourself included."

I stare at the document, the physical manifestation of my captivity, the legal framework disguising ownership as marriage. Pages of provisions and requirements, of restrictions and expectations, all wrapped in language of partnership that means nothing when one party cannot walk away.

"Do you have a pen?" I ask finally.

Geller produces a heavy fountain pen, placing it beside the document. "Initial the bottom of each page, then sign where indicated by the tabs."

I take the pen, its weight substantial in my hand. "No changes to any provisions? No negotiation at all?"

"The time for negotiation has passed," my father snaps. "Sign the document, Penelope."

Gage studies me for a long moment. "The residence requirement will be reduced to two hundred and fifty days as discussed. The business expansion approval process will include predetermined parameters for certain categories of growth. Those amendments can be formalized in an addendum."

Minimal concessions that change nothing fundamental about my situation, yet the willingness to adjust any terms at all seems significant in context.

I begin initialing pages, the repetitive motion almost meditative. Page after page of legal language, each one another bar in my gilded cage. When I reach the signature pages, I pause, pen hovering above the line.

"Once signed, this document is legally binding," Geller reminds me unnecessarily. "Your signature represents informed consent to all provisions contained herein."

Informed consent. As if anything about this arrangement involves genuine choice or consent.

I sign my name on the first indicated line—Penelope Arabella Everett—the familiar loops and curves of my signature a strange contrast to the sterile legal document beneath. I continue signing where indicated, each signature another lock clicking into place around my life.

When I finish the final signature, I set down the pen and look directly at Gage. "I will never forgive you."

He meets my gaze without flinching. "I don't need your forgiveness, Penelope. Only your compliance."

My father rises, straightening his jacket with an expression of satisfied completion. "That concludes this matter. I'll expect confirmation of the remaining wedding arrangements by Monday."

"My office will send updates as scheduled," Gage replies, his tone professionally neutral. "Victor will see you out, William."

As if summoned by his name, Victor appears at the door, ready to escort my father from the conference room. My father departs without a backward glance, his purpose accomplished, his daughter's future secured as a business asset rather than an independent being.

Geller efficiently gathers the signed documents, placing them in a leather portfolio. "I'll have copies prepared for your records, Miss Everett. The originals will be secured in our vault."

"Thank you, Lawrence," Gage says, the dismissal clear in his tone. "That will be all for today."

When Geller departs, I remain seated, suddenly exhausted by the hours of reading legal provisions designed to contain every aspect of my existence.

"The prenuptial agreement protects you as well," Gage says after a moment of silence. "Financial security regardless of future circumstances. Professional independence within reasonable parameters. Clear expectations rather than unpredictable demands."

"A beautiful description of captivity," I reply, too drained for anger. "Clear

expectations for my cage dimensions."

He studies me, his expression thoughtful rather than triumphant. "You signed with a steady hand, Penelope. No hesitation on the final pages. Whatever emotional resistance you maintain, your practical mind has accepted reality."

"My practical mind recognizes the absence of viable alternatives," I correct. "Acceptance implies agreement with the underlying premise."

"A semantic distinction without practical difference." He rises, gathering his phone and tablet. "Our engagement is formalized with tonight's signing. The wedding proceeds in thirteen days, with final preparations accelerating accordingly."

I stand as well, needing physical movement to offset the emotional numbness spreading through me. "What happens now?"

"Dinner at Astor Club with Judge Harrison and his daughter. A public appearance celebrating our recent engagement." He checks his watch. "The car departs in ninety minutes. Marta has prepared appropriate attire in your suite."

Of course, straight to public performance as the delighted fiancée.

"And if I prefer to remain at the estate tonight?"

His expression softens marginally. "Tonight's appearance is optional if you genuinely need time to process. The Harrisons would understand a rescheduled engagement."

The unexpected flexibility catches me off guard. "I thought every public appearance was mandatory. Part of our 'arrangement.'"

"Most are," he confirms. "But mental wellbeing factors into effective partnership. If

you require private processing time, that's a reasonable accommodation."

We leave the conference room together, walking in silence to the elevator that will return us to the ground floor where Victor waits with the car.

As we descend, I watch Chicago's skyline through the glass elevator walls, the city seemingly remote from my current reality despite its physical proximity.

"Thirteen days," I say quietly, more to myself than to Gage.

"Yes," he confirms. "Thirteen days until our wedding."

The elevator reaches the ground floor, doors opening to reveal the building's marble lobby. Gage places his hand at the small of my back as we cross toward the exit where Victor waits beside the car.

I've signed away my independence with steady hands and clear eyes.

Thirteen days to prepare for whatever comes next.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

Days blend together after signing the prenuptial agreement, the mansion's rhythms becoming a fog through which I move without fully engaging.

I attend fittings for my wedding dress—ivory silk with delicate beading, objectively beautiful though I view it with detachment.

I review final floral arrangements, approve menu selections, and stand for jewelry consultations.

I speak when spoken to, nod when expected, sign documents placed before me, all while feeling increasingly disconnected from my own body.

Eleven days until the wedding becomes nine, then seven, the countdown proceeding with mechanical precision while I retreat further inside myself.

"You've barely touched your breakfast," Marta observes on a rain-streaked morning, concern evident in her usually professional demeanor. "Should I have the kitchen prepare something different, Miss Everett?"

I stare at the untouched eggs and fresh fruit, having forgotten they were even there. "No, thank you. I'm just not hungry this morning."

"You weren't hungry yesterday either," she notes, removing the tray with practiced efficiency. "Or the day before. Mr. Blackwood has asked to be informed of your wellbeing."

Of course he has. My body is now his investment, my health a business concern like

any other asset requiring maintenance.

"I'm fine," I say automatically. "Just wedding preparations consuming my appetite."

Marta doesn't believe me—her expression makes that clear—but she nods and withdraws, leaving me alone in my suite. I move to the window, watching raindrops trace patterns down the glass, each following an inevitable path determined by forces beyond its control.

The garden below stands empty, usually bustling staff kept inside by the downpour.

Wedding preparations continue regardless, the pavilion now covered with temporary structures protecting elaborate floral installations from the weather.

The empty chairs waiting for guests, the ceremonial arch where vows will be exchanged, the reception tables with perfect place settings—all proceed toward completion without requiring my presence or input.

I've stopped fighting. Stopped arguing. Stopped challenging Gage's authority or questioning arrangements.

The prenuptial signing broke something in me, the physical manifestation of my captivity too concrete to deny.

What's the point of resistance when every aspect of my future has been documented in triplicate, signed and notarized, locked in a vault with copies distributed to relevant parties?

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts. Not Marta's usual discrete tap, but something more authoritative.

"Come in," I call, not turning from the window.

"Penelope."

Gage's voice. I turn slowly, finding him standing just inside the doorway, dressed casually in dark slacks and a charcoal sweater. His expression carries something I haven't seen before—concern, perhaps, or uncertainty.

"You missed yesterday's menu tasting," he says, stepping further into the room. "And the final review with the orchestra. Isabella mentioned you've been difficult to reach for decisions requiring your input."

I shrug slightly. "The chef knows his business. The orchestra will play what they play. My presence changes nothing about the outcomes."

He studies me, his usual calculating assessment now mixed with something else. "You've lost weight. Marta reports minimal food consumption for several days."

"I'm not hungry."

"You're not sleeping either, according to household staff. Lights in your suite remain on throughout the night."

I turn back to the window, watching the steady rain. "Is my insomnia interfering with wedding preparations?"

He doesn't respond immediately, and I hear him move further into the room, stopping several feet behind me. "Your physical wellbeing concerns me, Penelope."

"How touching," I murmur, the words lacking their usual bite. I simply don't have the energy for sarcasm anymore.

"Look at me," he says quietly.

I don't move, continuing to stare at the rain.

"Penelope." His voice carries unexpected gentleness. "Please look at me."

Something in his tone penetrates my fog. I turn slowly, meeting his gaze without really seeing him.

He frowns, studying me with growing concern. "This isn't what I wanted."

"No?" I ask tonelessly. "I've stopped fighting. Stopped arguing. Signed your documents. Attend your events. Stand where I'm told, wear what's selected, speak the approved phrases. Isn't that precisely what you required?"

"I wanted partnership with a woman of intelligence and spirit," he says, stepping closer. "Not a hollow performance from someone sleepwalking through her existence."

A distant part of me recognizes the irony of his complaint. This very outcome was what I had warned him about—breaking my will would destroy the very qualities he claimed to value. But even that recognition feels remote because it just didn't matter anymore.

"You get what you paid for," I reply flatly.

He reaches out suddenly, taking my hand in his. I let him, feeling nothing at the contact beyond distant awareness of his warmth against my cold fingers.

"Your hands are freezing," he says, genuine concern crossing his features. "How long have you been standing at this window?"

I consider the question, realizing I have no idea. Time has become increasingly meaningless, hours blending into one another without clear distinction. "I don't know."

His frown deepens. "This isn't acceptable, Penelope."

"What isn't? My failure to pretend? I'm sorry I'm not performing to standard."

He turns away, pacing the length of my suite with uncharacteristic restlessness. "This situation isn't productive for either of us."

"Productive," I echo. Another business assessment, measuring my value against expected returns. "Perhaps you should return me for a refund. Clearly the merchandise is defective."

He stops pacing, turning to face me with unexpected intensity. "Enough. This self-destructive spiral benefits no one, least of all yourself."

"Benefits," I murmur. "Tell me, what benefits should I expect from our arrangement? What advantages justify my captivity?"

"Financial security. Social position. Protection from your father's misguided control. Professional continuation of your business. Future children with every advantage?—"

"Stop," I interrupt, the mention of children finally penetrating my emotional distance. "Don't speak of children as if they're another business asset to be acquired and managed."

He studies me for a moment. "Children would be loved, Penelope. Whatever you believe about my capacity for emotion, I wouldn't repeat my father's failures with my own offspring."

The statement carries unexpected vulnerability, catching me off guard. Before I can respond, he continues:

"This current state is unsustainable. You require intervention."

Alarm flickers through my fog. "What kind of intervention?"

"I'm bringing in Dr. Fielding this afternoon," he says, reaching for his phone. "Your physical decline warrants medical attention."

"No." The word emerges sharper than anything I've said in days. "No doctors with their convenient diagnoses and prescribed drugs."

He pauses, watching my sudden animation with interest. "Your objection is noted but overruled. Your health supersedes your preferences at this point."

"My health is fine," I insist, moving away from the window for the first time. "I'm not ill. Surely even you can understand the emotional impact of signing away one's freedom."

"Processing doesn't involve physical deterioration," he counters, though he returns his phone to his pocket.

Your father has already suggested pharmaceutical approaches to ensure appropriate behavior through the wedding and beyond.

I've resisted that path, but continued deterioration leaves fewer options. "

The threat of medication sends a chill through me that penetrates even my emotional withdrawal. My father would indeed have me drugged into smiling submission if given the opportunity.

"Fine," I concede. "I'll eat. I'll sleep. I'll speak in complete sentences."

"It's a beginning," he says, apparently satisfied with even this minimal concession. "Join me for lunch in the conservatory. One hour."

When he's gone, I sink onto the edge of the bed, temporary energy fading as quickly as it appeared. Marta returns thirty minutes later, drawing a bath without being asked, laying out fresh clothing with quiet efficiency.

"Mr. Blackwood mentioned you'll be joining him for lunch," she says, her tone carefully neutral. "Would you like assistance with your hair?"

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, barely recognizing the hollow-eyed woman staring back. My copper hair hangs limp and dull, my skin pale from lack of proper nutrition, dark circles emphasizing the emptiness in my gaze.

"Yes," I say finally. "Thank you, Marta."

The small kindness in her expression nearly breaks me.

I turn away quickly, focusing on the practical tasks of washing, dressing, making myself presentable.

By the time I've finished, I look more like myself on the surface, though the emptiness remains beneath the carefully applied makeup and styled hair.

The conservatory glows with diffused light despite the continued rain, glass walls amplifying what little sunshine breaks through the clouds. Gage waits beside a small table set for lunch, rising when I enter. His expression reveals nothing of his thoughts as he assesses my improved appearance.

"You look better," he says simply, holding a chair for me.

I sit, noting the simple meal prepared—soup, bread, fruit without excessive richness that might overwhelm a system accustomed to minimal intake. A surprisingly thoughtful selection.

"I still don't have much appetite," I warn him, unfolding my napkin with mechanical politeness.

"Eat what you can," he replies, taking his own seat.

We eat in silence for several minutes, the quiet broken only by the sound of rain against the glass ceiling. Finally, I speak.

"Seven days," I say.

He glances up. "Until the wedding. Yes."

"What happens after?"

He considers the question, setting down his spoon.

"Practically speaking, we depart for a two-week honeymoon in the Paris.

Privately secluded villa, staff minimized for discretion.

Upon return, we begin establishing regular routines—your continued work with Wildflower, my business operations, gradual integration of separate activities into shared life. "

I manage a few more spoonfuls of soup, the first real sustenance I've consumed in

days. "And physical expectations? The prenup mentioned 'reasonable intimacy' with particularly vague language."

"Physical intimacy will develop at an appropriate pace following the wedding. I have no interest in unwilling participation, Penelope."

"Yet you expect it eventually. Thank you for lunch," I say changing the subject before giving him a chance to respond.

"Penelope," he calls as I turn to leave. "Dr. Fielding remains available should your condition not improve."

The warning is clear—perform adequately or face medical intervention.

That evening, I force myself to eat a small dinner, to prepare properly for sleep, to maintain at least the appearance of functionality. When I finally lie in bed, staring at the ceiling as has become my habit, I'm surprised when exhaustion actually pulls me toward unconsciousness.

Just before sleep claims me, I become aware of a presence in the room.

Opening heavy eyelids, I find Gage seated in the chair near the window, illuminated only by moonlight breaking through the clouds.

He doesn't speak, doesn't approach, simply maintains quiet vigil as if guarding against the demons that have kept me awake for days.

I should feel violated by his uninvited presence, should demand he leave my private space. Instead, I feel only a strange relief that I'm not alone with my thoughts for the first time in days.

"You don't need to stay," I murmur, voice thick with approaching sleep.

"I know," he replies softly. "Sleep, Penelope. I'll be here."

The simple statement carries unexpected comfort, though I'd never admit it aloud. I close my eyes, surrendering to exhaustion, dimly aware of his continued presence as consciousness fades.

When I wake hours later, he's gone, the chair empty, the room bathed in early morning light. For the first time in days, I've slept through the night without interruption.

A note rests on the bedside table, Gage's precise handwriting unmistakable:

Progress, not perfection. One day at a time. -G

I stare at the note, trying to reconcile this small kindness with the man who orchestrated my captivity, who maintains my gilded cage with meticulous attention.

Seven days until the wedding. Seven days to rebuild enough strength to face whatever comes next.

I rise from bed, moving to the window where rain has finally given way to timid sunshine. The garden below hums with renewed activity, staff making up for weather delays, wedding preparations proceeding with military precision.

Seven days.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

" A little higher on the left, please."

I stand perfectly still as two tailors make final adjustments to my wedding gown, their fingers moving with practiced precision around the bodice.

The dress is objectively stunning—ivory silk with hand-embroidered beading that catches the light with every breath, a tasteful train that will trail elegantly down the aisle, custom-designed to complement my copper hair and fair complexion.

Three days until the wedding. Three days until I walk down the aisle toward Gage Blackwood, speak vows I don't mean, and legally formalize my captivity.

"What do you think, Miss Everett?" the head seamstress asks, stepping back to assess her work. "Is the fit to your liking?"

I study my reflection in the three-way mirror without expression. The woman staring back is beautiful in an ethereal, untouchable way—polished and perfect and utterly empty. "The fit is fine."

"Just 'fine'?" Isabella interjects from her position near the window, tablet in hand as always. "Angelique has created a masterpiece, Penelope. This gown is exclusive couture that brides would kill for."

"It's exquisite," I amend, giving the seamstress the response she deserves for her evident skill. "The beadwork is remarkable."

Angelique beams, professional pride momentarily overriding concern about my

obvious detachment. "We've incorporated the pearl accents Mr. Blackwood requested. They complement the silk perfectly."

Of course Gage had input on my wedding dress. Another detail selected and approved, another aspect of my presentation carefully managed.

The door opens, and my mother glides in, immaculate as always in a pale blue suit that likely cost more than most people's monthly salary. Her critical gaze scans the dress, my posture, the room's arrangements in one comprehensive sweep.

"The neckline is perfection," she declares, circling me like a curator assessing a new acquisition. "Much more appropriate than the original sketch. And the train length is precisely correct for the venue."

"Mrs. Everett was concerned about the silhouette," Isabella explains to me, "but Mr. Blackwood insisted on retaining your preference for the modified A-line."

I'd forgotten expressing a preference about the dress silhouette weeks ago, back when I still believed my input might matter.

"You'll need the diamond earrings with this," my mother continues, touching the bare lobe of my ear. "The ones your father had made for your twenty-first birthday. The teardrop settings will balance the neckline."

"They've already been selected for the ceremony," Isabella confirms, consulting her tablet. "Mr. Blackwood approved the full jewelry suite yesterday."

My mother nods, satisfied. "Violet will be devastated to miss your final fitting. She and Charles extended their honeymoon through next week."

Convenient timing. I wonder if that was her choice or a decision made by others.

"That's fine," I say. "She's seen the sketches."

The seamstress completes her pinning, making a final note about a minute adjustment to the hemline. "We'll have the finished gown delivered tomorrow evening. The veil is already complete."

I step carefully from the pedestal as they help me out of the dress, leaving me in the silk slip I wore underneath. My mother dismisses the tailors and Isabella with a practiced gesture, waiting until the door closes behind them before turning to me with a critical eye.

"You're still too thin," she observes without preamble. "The dress fits perfectly, but your collarbones are more prominent than they should be. Are you eating properly?"

"I eat," I reply, reaching for my robe. "The chef keeps precise records for Gage's review."

She frowns at my flat tone. "This detachment isn't becoming, Penelope. You're marrying one of Chicago's most influential men. Many women would consider that a victory."

"Many women aren't being traded to cover their father's crimes," I counter, tying the robe's sash with precise movements.

"We've discussed this already." She sighs, settling onto the small settee near the window. "The arrangement with the Blackwoods protected this family from catastrophe. Your cooperation ensures continued stability for all of us, including Violet."

"My cooperation was never in question," I remind her. "Only my enthusiasm."

"Enthusiasm can be cultivated," she says pragmatically. "I wasn't initially enthusiastic about your father, yet we've built a successful marriage."

I study her carefully, searching for signs of genuine belief in her words. "Is that what you call it? Successful?"

She looks stricken. "Success has many definitions, Penelope. Gage Blackwood offers significant advantages beyond what your father achieved. He's younger, more controlled, less prone to public indiscretion."

"High praise indeed," I murmur. "Less publicly humiliating than Father."

"He's also," she continues, ignoring my sarcasm, "more inclined toward building a genuine relationship with you."

"Partnership with limited agency isn't partnership at all."

She rises, smoothing her skirt with practiced precision. "All marriages have boundaries, Penelope. All partnerships involve compromise. Your inflexible idealism serves no purpose."

"Is that what you told yourself when Father came home drunk and raging? That your compromise served a purpose?"

Her hand strikes before I register her movement, the slap resounding in the quiet room. I don't flinch, don't raise my hand to the stinging cheek, simply meet her gaze steadily.

"I apologize," she says after a moment, her composure returning like a mask sliding back into place. "That was unwarranted. Wedding preparations create tension for everyone involved."

"Indeed," I reply, voice steady despite the burning in my eyes. "So many details to manage when transferring human property."

She sighs, retrieving her purse from the side table. "I had hoped to have a constructive conversation about your marriage. Clearly that's not possible today."

"Clearly."

"Your hair and makeup trial is scheduled for two o'clock," she reminds me as she moves toward the door. "Please be punctual. The team has limited availability."

When she's gone, I remain standing in the center of the room, mind strangely calm despite everything.

I dress methodically, selecting simple clothing for the hours before my next scheduled appointment.

Three days until the wedding, each hour blocked and organized with meticulous precision by Isabella's team.

Hair trials, makeup consultations, final fittings, seating arrangement reviews, menu confirmations—the machinery of the event grinding forward.

My suite has become wedding central, constantly invaded by various specialists and consultants. The only space that remains truly mine is the conservatory during early morning hours.

The previous evening, Gage had unexpectedly visited while I worked with the flowers, silently observing my selection of blooms for several minutes before speaking.

"Not using any black dahlias?" he'd asked, noting the white and pale blue flowers I'd selected.

"No," I'd replied, trimming a stem with precise cuts. "They wouldn't photograph well with the dress."

He'd nodded, accepting my practical explanation without pressing for the deeper truth—that I couldn't bear to include the dark blooms, couldn't allow them to touch my skin during the ceremony that would formalize my captivity.

"The bouquet is smaller than I expected," he'd observed, moving closer to examine my work.

"It's not finished. The final design will be appropriately scaled." I'd continued working, refusing to be distracted by his presence.

He'd watched for several more minutes, then departed without further comment. White roses for endurance. Thistle for independence and strength. Ivy for resilience. Small personal meanings woven into the arrangement I would carry down the aisle.

Now, as I walk through the quiet mansion toward the kitchen, I pass staff members preparing for the influx of wedding guests expected to begin arriving tomorrow.

Additional security teams coordinate with Victor near the main entrance, reviewing protocols for the high-profile attendees.

Florists from Valhalla consult with housekeeping about placement of arrangements being delivered throughout the day.

In the kitchen, I find Mrs. Henderson overseeing the preparation of lunch, her efficiency managing the controlled chaos of multiple culinary teams working

simultaneously.

"Miss Everett," she greets me with practiced warmth. "You're just in time. I was about to send a tray to your suite."

"I thought I'd eat here today," I reply, suddenly unwilling to return to the wedding command center my rooms have become. "If that's not inconvenient."

"Of course not." She gestures toward a small table in the corner where staff sometimes take their breaks. "I'll have something brought right over."

I sit at the simple wooden table, watching the kitchen's rhythmic activity with detached interest.

Mrs. Henderson places a bowl of soup before me, along with fresh bread and a small salad. "Eat what you can manage," she says, her tone more maternal than her usual professional distance. "You'll need your strength for the coming days."

I nod, accepting the food. Since my spiral and Gage's intervention four days ago, I've made consistent effort to maintain basic physical health, recognizing that self-destruction serves no one.

"The guest rooms are prepared for early arrivals," Mrs. Henderson continues, sitting opposite me with her own cup of tea. "Mr. Blackwood's uncle arrived this morning and has been settled in the east wing, as requested."

Richard Blackwood's presence creates mixed emotions—wariness at his unpredictable influence over Gage, but also curiosity about the family dynamics he inadvertently reveals through casual comments.

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"Thank you," I say, taking a spoonful of soup—butternut squash with subtle spices, gentle on the stomach. "Has Gage returned from his morning meetings?"

"Not yet. He's expected by three for the final security briefing." Mrs. Henderson studies me over her teacup, her expression unreadable. "The wedding guests begin arriving tomorrow afternoon. The rehearsal dinner is scheduled for seven."

I nod, continuing to eat.

"Miss Everett," Mrs. Henderson says after a moment of silence, her voice lower despite the kitchen's ambient noise. "May I speak candidly?"

I look up, surprised by the unusual request from someone who maintains professional boundaries with religious dedication. "Of course."

"I've served the Blackwood family for nearly twenty years," she begins, setting down her teacup. "I was here during Mr. Blackwood's father's time, and I've witnessed the changes since Gage assumed control of both the estate and the family interests."

I listen without interrupting, curious where this was heading.

"The differences between father and son are significant," she continues carefully. "Edward Blackwood ruled through fear and unpredictability. Gage governs through calculation and strategic certainty. Both methods achieve control, but from very different foundations."

"Why are you telling me this?" I ask when she pauses.

She studies me for a long moment, seeming to weigh her words carefully. "Because understanding that may help you navigate what comes next. Gage observed his father's methods and consciously constructed alternatives. He witnessed the destruction that volatile control created."

"Still control," I observe. "Still confinement."

"Yes," she agrees surprisingly. "Edward's household never knew what might trigger rage or retribution. Gage's household always knows exactly where the lines are drawn."

"Thank you for the perspective," I say, genuinely appreciative. "It's helpful to understand."

Mrs. Henderson nods, rising from the table as a staff member approaches with questions about wine selections. "The hair stylists have arrived early," she informs me before turning away. "They're setting up in the east salon rather than your suite."

I finish my soup, having consumed perhaps half of what she gave me.

The east salon has been transformed into a professional styling suite, with specialized lighting, multiple mirrors, and an array of products that would rival a high-end salon. Two stylists and a makeup artist wait with practiced smiles, portfolios ready for my review.

"Miss Everett," the lead stylist greets me with professional enthusiasm. "I'm Marcos, and this is my team—Sophia and Vincent. We're thrilled to be working with you for your special day."

"We have several options based on the preliminary consultation," Marcos continues, opening a portfolio of elegant updos and sophisticated styles. "Mr. Blackwood

specified that your copper hair should remain the focal point, so we've designed accordingly."

Of course Gage's preferences were noted and incorporated into every decision. I review the options without comment, selecting an elegant but relatively simple design that will complement the dress without requiring painful pins or excessive products.

"Excellent choice," Marcos approves, beginning to work with my hair immediately. "This will highlight your natural color while maintaining classical lines appropriate for the ceremony."

I sit motionless as they begin the trial, applying products, curling sections, pinning and unpinning as they refine the design. The physical sensation of their hands in my hair is almost soothing, the methodical process requiring nothing from me beyond passive presence.

"You have beautiful bone structure," Vincent comments as he begins applying foundation for the makeup trial. "We'll enhance your natural features with a palette that compliments both your coloring and the floral arrangements."

Isabella enters as they work, tablet in hand as always. "The jewelry will be delivered tomorrow morning for final coordination," she informs me, checking items off her endless list. "Would you prefer to keep it in your suite or have it secured in the main vault until the ceremony?"

"The vault," I reply, careful not to move my head as Marcos works. "I have no need to review it beforehand."

She nods, making a note. "The final guest count stands at two hundred and ninety-seven. Four last-minute additions from the governor's office, but two cancellations from your father's list."

The numbers wash over me without impact—hundreds of witnesses to a ceremony that means nothing to me. People who will smile and toast and admire.

"The south gardens have been tented as a precaution, though the weather forecast remains favorable," Isabella continues. "Mr. Blackwood upgraded the champagne for the toast to vintage Dom Pérignon, with standard Veuve Clicquot for general service."

I listen without commenting, allowing the details to flow around me like water around a stone. None of it matters—not the champagne selection, not the tent precautions, not the exact shade of eyeshadow being applied to my lids.

"Perfect," Marcos declares after nearly two hours of work, stepping back to assess the completed look. "Sophia, the diamond hairpins will be placed here and here for the ceremony, correct?"

"Yes, with the veil anchor positioned centrally," she confirms, making notes in their portfolio. "The entire arrangement is designed for easy transition between ceremony and reception."

Isabella studies the final result. "The hair height balances the neckline perfectly. Mr. Blackwood will be pleased with the approach."

Of course. Gage's approval remains the ultimate metric for every decision, every selection, every detail.

Vincent applies a final touch of setting powder. "All done, Miss Everett. What do you think?"

I study my reflection without expression. The woman in the mirror looks like a stranger—perfectly coiffed, expertly made up, every feature enhanced to

photographic perfection. Beautiful in a distant, untouchable way.

"It's suitable," I say finally. "Thank you for your expertise."

Marcos looks momentarily uncertain, clearly having expected more enthusiastic approval after hours of meticulous work. "We can make adjustments if there's anything specific you'd prefer differently," he offers.

"No adjustments necessary," I assure him, rising from the chair. "This is fine."

Isabella dismisses the styling team with practiced efficiency, waiting until they've packed their equipment before turning to me with unusual hesitation.

"There's one more item requiring your attention today," she says, consulting her tablet. "The marriage license requires your signature before the ceremony. Mr. Blackwood has scheduled a private meeting with the official at four o'clock in his study."

I nod, accepting the inevitable with the same detachment that has carried me through recent days.

"I'll be there," I assure her. "Is there anything else requiring my input today?"

"That's all for scheduled appointments," she confirms. "Though Mr. Blackwood mentioned he wished to speak with you privately after dinner this evening. Something about final arrangements for the honeymoon departure."

I nod again, already turning toward the door. "I'll be in the conservatory until four if anyone needs me."

The conservatory offers temporary sanctuary, its humid air and abundant greenery

creating a space that feels removed from the wedding preparation consuming the rest of the estate. My bouquet sits in a specialized holder, nearly complete but still requiring final elements to balance the composition.

I work methodically, selecting blooms with precise attention, trimming stems with practiced skill.

"It's beautiful."

I turn to find Gage standing in the doorway, his expression unreadable as he studies my work. He's dressed more formally than usual—dark suit perfectly tailored, likely having come directly from business meetings in the city.

"Thank you," I reply, returning my attention to the flowers. "It's nearly finished."

He enters the conservatory, moving to stand beside me without touching. "The white roses are an interesting choice."

"Sometimes tradition serves a purpose," I say, positioning a spray of baby's breath with careful precision.

"Indeed." He watches my hands work for several moments, neither offering assistance nor attempting to direct my choices. "The styling team reported successful trials. Isabella showed me photographs."

Of course she did. Nothing proceeds without his assessment and approval.

"The design is appropriate for the occasion," I confirm, reaching for a final white rose. "As is the makeup palette."

"You look troubled," he observes unexpectedly. "More distant today than in recent

days."

I glance up, surprised by the perception. "The countdown has shifted from days to hours. Final preparations tend to focus the mind."

"Focus or fragment it?" he asks.

I don't respond immediately. "Neither," I say finally. "Merely clarify reality."

He studies me for a moment longer, then changes the subject with practiced ease. "The marriage license official will arrive at four. A simple procedure requiring signatures and witnesses."

"I've been informed."

"Your father will not be present," he adds, the information delivered neutrally though the decision itself feels significant. "I've arranged for Richard and Mrs. Henderson to serve as witnesses instead."

The deliberate exclusion of my father from this final legal step surprises me. "Why?"

"William's presence introduces unnecessary tension," Gage replies pragmatically. "The legal requirements specify only that signatures be witnessed by adults of sound mind. Your father's absence serves practical purposes."

I return to my flowers, adding a final sprig of ivy to represent resilience.

"There," I say, stepping back to assess the completed bouquet. "Finished."

Gage studies the arrangement with genuine appreciation. "Elegant without being ostentatious. Balanced without being rigid."

The unexpectedly thoughtful assessment catches me off guard. "Thank you."

"Your business will continue," he says, seeming to follow my unspoken thought. "Wildflower remains yours to direct, regardless of other changes."

"It's not the same," I remind him, referencing the prenuptial restrictions.

"Within reasonable considerations," he corrects with subtle distinction. "Creative direction remains entirely yours."

We stand in silence for a moment, the completed bouquet between us like a physical manifestation of approaching ceremony. Three days has become less than seventy-two hours—time moving with relentless precision toward the inevitable.

"I should prepare for the license signing," I say finally, placing the bouquet in its specialized container where it will remain fresh until the ceremony.

Gage nods, stepping back to allow me space. "After dinner," he says as I move toward the door, "we should discuss your preferences for the honeymoon. Matters that require consideration before departure."

The honeymoon. Two weeks alone with him in a private villa. I push the thought away, unable to process that reality quite yet.

"Of course," I agree, maintaining outward composure while internal uncertainty builds. "After dinner."

Three days until the wedding. Seventy hours until I become Mrs. Blackwood.

The name feels foreign even in thought.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

The morning of my wedding day dawns with mocking perfection—clear blue skies, gentle breeze, temperature mild enough for comfort but warm enough for the outdoor ceremony. Nature itself conspires to create the ideal backdrop for this elaborate charade.

I stand at my bedroom window, watching staff make final adjustments to the pavilion that has transformed the south garden.

White marble columns wrapped with climbing roses form an elegant framework, the structure gleaming in morning sunlight.

Beneath it, rows of white chairs await guests, their pristine surfaces already adorned with small floral arrangements secured with ivory ribbon.

The ceremonial arch where vows will be exchanged stands at the focal point, Marcus Valhalla himself directing assistants as they attach final blooms to its framework.

Beyond the pavilion, reception tables with perfect place settings stretch across the lawn, each centered with elaborate arrangements that follow the strict white and pale blue color scheme Gage approved.

The south gardens have been tented with gossamer fabric that ripples gently in the breeze—a precaution against weather that seems unlikely to intrude on Gage Blackwood's meticulously planned event.

"Miss Everett?" Marta's voice breaks my reverie. "The hair and makeup team has arrived. They're setting up in the adjoining suite."

I turn from the window, nodding my acknowledgment. The machinery of this day has been set in motion, its momentum now unstoppable.

"Please inform them I'll be there in fifteen minutes," I reply, voice steady despite the turmoil beneath. "I'd like a few moments alone first."

Marta hesitates, clearly weighing her instructions against my request. "Of course," she finally concedes. "Fifteen minutes. I'll let them know."

When she's gone, I return to the window, cataloging details of the production below.

Workers adjusting the height of floral arrangements along the processional path.

Security personnel in formal attire that barely disguises their vigilance, positioned strategically throughout the grounds.

Mrs. Henderson conferring with catering staff near the champagne pavilion, where vintage Dom Pérignon awaits in precisely chilled containers.

Everything perfect. Everything controlled. Everything expressing Gage Blackwood's power and precision.

My wedding dress hangs on a specialized form near the closet—ivory silk catching morning light, hand-embroidered beading creating subtle patterns across the bodice and trailing down the elegant train.

Beside it, the veil waits on its own stand, gossamer light and edged with delicate lace.

The ensemble cost more than many people earn in a year, a physical manifestation of Gage's wealth deployed to create the perfect image.

I touch the fabric briefly, considering again how beautiful the garment truly is. Gage's taste is impeccable—the design neither trendy nor overly traditional, balanced perfectly between classic elegance and contemporary sensibility.

A knock at the door signals the end of my solitude. I take a deep breath, straightening my shoulders and arranging my features into the neutral mask I've perfected these past weeks.

"Come in," I call.

Isabella enters, tablet in hand as always, her expression professionally enthusiastic. "It's going to be perfect," she declares without preamble. "The weather is cooperating beautifully, the flowers are exceptional, and the first guests will begin arriving in approximately three hours."

I nod, accepting her assessment without comment.

"The schedule is precisely timed," she continues, consulting her ever-present tablet.

"Hair and makeup will take two hours. Dressing with final adjustments, forty-five minutes.

Photography of preparation, twenty minutes.

Your entrance is scheduled for exactly two o'clock, with the ceremony lasting twenty-eight minutes according to the officiant's confirmed timing. "

The day measured in minutes, each activity allocated its precise duration. My transition from Penelope Everett to Mrs. Blackwood quantified with stopwatch precision.

"Has Gage approved the final arrangements?" I ask, knowing the answer but seeking confirmation nonetheless.

"Mr. Blackwood conducted a final inspection at dawn," Isabella confirms. "Everything meets his specifications exactly."

Of course it does. Nothing in Gage Blackwood's world falls short of expectations, especially not the ceremony formalizing his acquisition of a wife.

"Then we should proceed," I say, moving toward the adjoining suite where beautification awaits. "We wouldn't want to disrupt the schedule."

The next hours pass in a blur of activity.

Marcos and his team transform me into the bride Gage envisioned—hair arranged in the approved style, makeup enhancing without overwhelming, skin prepped and polished to photographic perfection.

I sit motionless through it all, a mannequin being prepared for display.

"You're the calmest bride I've ever worked with," Sophia comments as she secures another section of copper hair. "Most women are either crying with happiness or nervous wrecks by this point."

I say nothing, offering only a slight smile that reveals nothing of my thoughts.

By noon, I've been transformed. The woman in the mirror looks ethereal, perfect, untouchable. A living artwork rather than a person with thoughts and feelings.

"Time for the dress," Isabella announces, consulting her schedule with religious devotion. "Angelique is waiting in the dressing room."

The process of being dressed requires three assistants—one holding the gown, one managing the train, one fastening the dozens of covered buttons that track up my spine. The weight of silk settles around me, the bodice fitted precisely to my measurements despite recent weight fluctuations.

"Perfection," Angelique declares, stepping back to assess her creation. "Not a single adjustment needed."

The veil comes last, secured with diamond pins that catch light with every slight movement. When fully assembled, I stand before the full-length mirror, studying the final result with detached objectivity.

The bride who stares back is undeniably beautiful—copper hair gleaming beneath gossamer veil, ivory silk complementing fair skin, emerald eyes emphasized by expert makeup. A vision straight from bridal magazines, lacking only the requisite joyful smile to complete the fantasy.

"Mr. Blackwood will be speechless," Isabella pronounces, genuine appreciation in her voice as she circles me. "Truly breathtaking, Penelope."

A knock at the door interrupts the moment of assessment. Mrs. Henderson enters after Isabella's acknowledgment, her expression softer than usual.

"Miss Everett, your bouquet has been delivered from the conservatory," she says, presenting the arrangement I created days ago—white roses for endurance, thistle for independence, ivy for resilience, all bound with silk ribbon that matches the dress precisely.

I accept it with gloved hands, the familiar weight grounding me momentarily in the reality of my skills, my profession, the one aspect of this spectacle I truly controlled.

"Thank you, Mrs. Henderson."

"The guests are arriving," she informs Isabella. "Mr. Blackwood asked me to confirm the final preparation timing."

"We're perfectly on schedule," Isabella assures her. "Miss Everett will be ready for the procession at precisely one fifty-five."

Mrs. Henderson nods, then turns to me with uncharacteristic hesitation. "If I might have a moment alone with the bride?"

Isabella consults her tablet, frowning slightly. "We have the photographer arriving in seven minutes for preparation documentation."

"Five minutes," Mrs. Henderson insists with quiet authority that even Isabella doesn't challenge. "I'll ensure she's ready for photography afterward."

When the room clears, Mrs. Henderson approaches me with genuine warmth in her expression. "You look beautiful," she says simply. "But that's not why I wanted a moment of your time."

She reaches into her pocket, withdrawing a small velvet pouch.

"This belonged to Mr. Blackwood's mother," she explains, opening the pouch to reveal a delicate silver bracelet with a single small sapphire.

"She asked me to keep it safe before she passed, to give to the woman her son eventually married. "

I stare at the bracelet, unexpected emotion rising at this connection to Gage's mother—the woman who suffered under his father's cruelty, who protected her son as

best she could, who died shortly after gaining freedom.

"She would be pleased to know it's with you," Mrs. Henderson continues, offering the bracelet. "Though we never discussed her son's future wife directly, I believe she would approve of your strength."

I extend my wrist wordlessly, allowing her to fasten the delicate chain beneath the edge of my glove, hidden from view but present nonetheless.

"Thank you," I say, voice barely above a whisper.

"I'll send the photographer in," she replies, professional demeanor returning. "Five minutes until scheduled documentation."

When she's gone, I touch the hidden bracelet beneath my glove. A connection to a woman who understood captivity, who protected her son, who ultimately lost herself to years of control and fear. The parallel isn't lost on me.

The photographer enters without knocking, assistant trailing behind with equipment bags. "Beautiful light in here," he declares without preamble. "Let's start with some classic bride preparation shots before the ceremony."

I assume the positions directed, holding my bouquet at the precise angle requested, turning my face to catch light in the manner specified, shifting my train to create the elegant cascade desired. Performance without emotion, technical execution of requirements.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

At precisely one fifty, Isabella returns with my escort—not my father as tradition would dictate, but Richard Blackwood. Gage's final pointed exclusion of the man who traded his daughter.

"Penelope," Richard greets me, genuine appreciation in his assessment. "Absolutely stunning. My nephew is a fortunate man indeed."

I accept his extended arm, bouquet held at the perfect angle against ivory silk. "Thank you for escorting me," I say, the practiced phrase emerging with appropriate gratitude.

"The honor is mine," he replies with smooth courtesy. "Though I must admit, I'm merely a substitute for what should have been your father's role. Gage was quite insistent about William's removal from this particular moment."

We move toward the garden entrance where the processional will begin, Isabella conferring with ceremony coordinators via headset, confirming final positions and timing.

Through open doors, I can see the assembled guests—nearly three hundred of Chicago's elite seated in precise rows, heads turning occasionally to watch for the bride's appearance.

The string quartet plays softly, creating elegant background music that will transition to the processional at exactly two o'clock.

At the end of the white carpet stretching between rows of seated guests, Gage stands

beneath the flower-adorned arch, his tall figure impeccable in formal attire that emphasizes his imposing physicality.

"Two minutes," Isabella murmurs, checking her tablet one final time. "Places, everyone."

Richard positions himself beside me, arm extended at the perfect angle for my hand. "Ready, my dear?"

I nod, unable to form words as reality crystallizes in this final moment before transformation. In two minutes, I will walk toward Gage Blackwood. In thirty minutes, I will become his wife. In hours, I will be entirely his property in every legal sense.

The music shifts, the quartet beginning the processional piece selected months ago. Isabella gives a final nod, and the doors open fully to reveal the garden transformed into wedding fantasy.

"That's our cue," Richard murmurs, taking the first step forward.

I move beside him, steps measured and precise as rehearsed.

The guests rise in unison, faces turning to watch my procession down the aisle.

Cameras capture each moment—professional photographers positioned strategically throughout the space, guests lifting phones discreetly despite requests for unplugged ceremony experience.

The walk feels endless and instantaneous simultaneously, reality blurring at the edges as I move steadily toward Gage's waiting figure. His expression remains controlled, though something in his eyes shifts as I approach—satisfaction perhaps, or

appreciation of the visual perfection I present.

When I reach him, Richard places my hand in Gage's with formal precision, the symbolic transfer of possession enacted with society elegance.

"Dearly beloved," the officiant begins, voice carrying clearly across the hushed gathering. "We are assembled here today to witness the union of Penelope Arabella Everett and Gage Alexander Blackwood in holy matrimony."

The words wash over me as I stand perfectly still, bouquet held at the prescribed angle, expression serene despite the internal emptiness expanding with each passing moment. Gage's hand remains wrapped around mine, warm and solid and inescapable.

Vows are exchanged—traditional phrases spoken in clear voices, promises of love and fidelity that mean nothing in the context of our arrangement. Rings are presented—platinum bands sliding onto fingers with symbolic permanence.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the officiant declares after precisely twenty-eight minutes. "Mr. Blackwood, you may kiss your bride."

Gage turns to me, lifting the delicate veil with practiced hands. His expression is unreadable to the audience, though I detect something in his eyes—possession certainly, but something more complex beneath it.

His kiss is gentle, appropriate for public viewing, neither demanding nor perfunctory. My lips neither respond nor reject, accepting the contact without engagement.

Applause erupts around us as we turn to face the assembled guests, formally presented as Mr. and Mrs. Blackwood for the first time. Gage's hand settles at the small of my back as we begin our processional back down the aisle.

The reception proceeds according to schedule—cocktails on the east terrace, formal dinner beneath the enormous tent erected over the south lawn, speeches and toasts from approved speakers, first dance choreographed to appear romantic without requiring excessive physical contact.

Through it all, I perform flawlessly—smiling at appropriate moments, accepting congratulations with gracious words, placing my hand in Gage's when social convention requires. The perfect society wife making her debut performance.

"You've exceeded expectations," Gage murmurs during a brief moment alone between formal photographs and cake cutting. "Everyone is thoroughly convinced of our ideal match."

"Performance has always been part of society requirements," I reply quietly. "My mother trained me well."

His expression shifts slightly, something almost like regret flickering briefly before controlled neutrality returns. "The cake cutting is scheduled for nine fifteen. After that, we can make our departure without disrupting remaining festivities."

I nod, accepting the timeline without comment. The honeymoon awaits—two weeks alone with my new husband in an isolated villa. The physical consummation of our arrangement drawing nearer with each passing hour.

At precisely ten o'clock, we make our formal departure—guests forming lines to shower us with flower petals as we walk to the waiting car. I've changed from wedding gown to traveling attire, a cream-colored dress with matching jacket that transitions elegantly from ceremony to departure.

Gage hands me into the car with practiced courtesy, closing the door before walking around to join me. As we pull away from the illuminated estate, cheers and well-

wishes fading behind us, silence falls between us.

I stare out the window, watching familiar grounds recede into darkness. Mrs. Blackwood now, legally and irrevocably. The ceremony complete, the performance delivered flawlessly, the arrangement formalized before hundreds of witnesses.

"You were perfect today," Gage says finally, breaking the silence as we approach the private airfield where his plane waits. "Every detail executed precisely as planned."

I turn to him, meeting his gaze directly for the first time since our vows. "I never said yes," I say quietly.

His expression doesn't change. "You didn't have to."

I hold his gaze for a moment longer, then turn back to the window, watching darkness envelop the car as we drive toward whatever comes next.

The ceremony is complete. The cage door has closed.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 7:05 am

The private jet touches down at Charles de Gaulle with barely a tremor, the descent as smooth and controlled as the man who owns it. I gaze out the window as Paris materializes through wisps of morning fog, the city of light appearing almost ethereal in the distance.

My wedding ring feels impossibly heavy on my finger, the weight disproportionate to its physical mass. I performed my role flawlessly.

And now we're here. Paris.

"We'll be escorted through a private terminal," Gage informs me as the plane taxis toward a separate hangar away from the main terminals. "No customs lines or baggage claim. The car is waiting to take us directly to the hotel."

I nod, having expected nothing less. Gage Blackwood moves through the world with an efficiency most can only imagine, obstacles removed before they materialize, convenience arranged with the precision of military operations.

He studies me with that assessing gaze I've grown accustomed to over the past weeks. "You're quiet this morning."

"Just tired," I reply, the partial truth easier than articulating the storm of emotions that has kept me withdrawn since the ceremony. "The flight was long."

"You barely slept," he observes, confirming my suspicion that he monitors me even when pretending to rest. "We can delay our plans if you prefer to rest."

"What plans?" I ask, genuinely curious despite myself. Gage has kept our itinerary private revealing next to nothing.

"Dinner reservations this evening at L'Ambroisie," he says. "Though there's no obligation if you prefer delivery service tonight."

The unexpected consideration—offering choice rather than dictating schedule—feels significant, though I'm wary of reading too much into small mercies.

"I'd like to see Paris," I say finally. "I've never been before."

Something like satisfaction crosses his expression. "Then we'll keep the reservation."

The flight attendant appears, informing us we're clear to disembark. Gage rises with fluid grace, extending his hand to help me from my seat—a gesture I accept automatically.

His hand is warm against mine, the brief contact sending an unwelcome awareness through my body.

I've grown increasingly conscious of these physical reactions—my body's betrayal of my mind's continued resistance.

The private terminal processes our arrival with efficiency—passport formalities handled by staff while we wait in a luxurious lounge, luggage transferred directly to the waiting vehicle.

Within thirty minutes of landing, we're seated in the back of a sleek Mercedes, Paris unfolding around us as we glide toward the city center.

The City of Light awakening to morning routines, cafés opening their doors,

merchants arranging displays.

Under different circumstances, I might have pressed my face to the glass like an excited tourist, eagerly absorbing the beauty of a city I've visited only once before, briefly, during a college study program.

Instead, I watch with measured interest, maintaining emotional distance even from the city's undeniable beauty. The driver navigates through increasingly exclusive neighborhoods before turning onto a private drive hidden behind ornate gates that open at our approach.

The villa reveals itself gradually—a nineteenth-century mansion of pale stone and elegant proportions, set within manicured gardens that provide both beauty and privacy.

Not the towering modern structure I'd expected from Gage's aesthetic preferences, but something with history, with substance, with roots deeper than contemporary wealth.

"The property has been in the Blackwood portfolio for nearly thirty years," Gage explains as we approach. "My mother preferred it to more modern accommodations in the city center."

The reference to his mother—rare in our conversations—catches my attention more than the property itself. Before I can decide whether to acknowledge it, the car stops at the entrance where a small staff contingent waits with practiced welcome.

"Monsieur Blackwood, Madame," the apparent head of household greets us with formal warmth. "Welcome to Villa Lumière. We are honored to receive you."

Gage responds in flawless French, introducing me with proper formality before inquiring about arrangements. The conversation flows around me as I follow them

into the villa's entrance hall—a soaring space of marble floors, elegant moldings, and a sweeping staircase that curves toward upper floors.

"Your suite has been prepared as requested," the housekeeper explains, switching to English for my benefit. "Breakfast awaits in the morning room whenever you wish to refresh yourselves."

"Thank you, Madame Rousseau," Gage replies. "We'll take breakfast in thirty minutes, after we've had a chance to settle."

The staff withdraw with practiced discretion, leaving us alone in the entrance hall. Gage turns to me, his expression unreadable as always.

"Our suite is on the second floor, overlooking the garden," he says. "The entire east wing has been arranged for our privacy."

I follow him up the staircase, taking in the villa's details with appreciation—original artwork on walls, antique furnishings that speak of genuine provenance rather than decorated acquisitions, fresh flowers strategically placed.

The suite proves to be a collection of connected rooms rather than a single space—a sitting room opening to a massive bedroom and adjoining bathroom.

"Our room is through there," Gage indicates a doorway to the right. "I've taken the liberty of having your luggage unpacked. If anything is missing or arranged incorrectly, Madame Rousseau can adjust as needed."

I move toward the indicated door, pausing with my hand on the knob. "Thank you," I say, the words emerging from social training rather than genuine sentiment.

He nods acknowledgment. "We'll meet in the sitting room in twenty minutes for

breakfast, if that suits your needs."

"That's fine," I agree, opening the door to discover a bedroom of understated luxury—pale blue walls, elegant furnishings, French doors opening to a private balcony overlooking immaculate gardens.

My clothing has indeed been unpacked, arranged in built-in wardrobes with careful attention to category and color.

I wash my face and brush my teeth. The woman in the mirror looks composed if distant.

When I return to the sitting room, Gage waits near French doors that open onto a stone terrace. He's changed into fresh clothing—casual by his standards, though still impeccably tailored. He turns at my entrance, studying me with that assessing gaze.

"The morning room is this way," he says, opening a door that leads to a light-filled space where breakfast has been arranged on a table positioned to capture views of both garden and distant Paris skyline.

We eat in companionable silence—fresh pastries, fruit, coffee that reminds me what the beverage is supposed to taste like. Despite everything, my appetite has returned after the stress-induced reduction of recent weeks, my body demanding sustenance.

"The villa and grounds are entirely at your disposal," Gage says as we finish. "Security is maintained discretely—the perimeter walls and entrance gate are monitored continuously, but staff have been instructed to maintain maximum privacy within the property boundaries."

Another beautiful prison.

"Are we expected to make public appearances?" I ask, the question practical rather than challenging.

"Not during the first week," he replies.

"I've arranged for complete privacy to allow adjustment to the time difference and new surroundings.

The second week includes several carefully selected engagements—dinner at a private club, an evening at the opera, perhaps an appearance at a gallery opening if you're interested in art. "

I nod without comment.

"There's a library on the main floor that might interest you," he continues. "And the gardens include several sitting areas designed for privacy and contemplation."

"Thank you," I say, rising from the table. "I think I'll explore the gardens this morning, if that's acceptable."

"Of course." He remains seated, reaching for his tablet that has appeared beside his place setting. "I have several calls to make despite being officially unavailable. Business matters that couldn't be delegated. Please feel free to explore as you wish."

The gardens prove to be a revelation—not merely decorative spaces but carefully designed rooms without walls, each with distinct character and purpose.

A rose garden that transitions to a more naturalistic woodland area, then to a formal parterre with geometric precision, finally opening to a hidden pond surrounded by weeping willows.

I find a stone bench beneath one of the willows, sitting to watch light play across water disturbed only by occasional fish movements. The beauty is undeniable, the tranquility almost enough to ease the constant tension that has become my companion.

Hours pass as I explore further, discovering hidden statuary, a small greenhouse filled with exotic specimens, a kitchen garden that likely supplies the house with fresh herbs and vegetables. Throughout my wanderings, I sense rather than see security personnel maintaining discreet distance.

When I return to the villa in late afternoon, I find Gage in the library—a magnificent space of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, comfortable leather chairs, and windows that cast golden light across ancient rugs.

"You found the gardens agreeable?" he asks, setting aside documents he'd been reviewing.

"They're beautiful," I acknowledge honestly. "Clearly designed by someone who understood both horticulture and human nature."

"My mother," he says unexpectedly. "She redesigned them after we acquired the property. The original gardens had fallen into disrepair."

"She had remarkable vision," I offer cautiously. "The transition between formal and naturalistic spaces shows genuine artistic sensitivity."

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His expression softens slightly. "She found peace in creating beauty," he says after a moment. "It was her way of imposing order on circumstances beyond her control."

The parallel to my own use of floral design isn't lost on me, though I choose not to highlight it. "Did she spend much time here?" I ask instead.

"As much as was permitted," he replies, the careful phrasing revealing more than perhaps intended. "This villa was her preferred residence during her final years."

I absorb this information silently, recognizing it as significant though not yet understanding exactly how. "Thank you for sharing that," I say finally.

He nods, returning to his usual controlled demeanor. "Dinner will be served at seven, either in the formal dining room or on the terrace if you prefer the evening air."

"The terrace would be lovely," I reply, responding to the offered choice with genuine preference rather than passive acceptance.

"I'll inform Madame Rousseau," he says, rising from his chair. "If you'll excuse me, I have one final call before we transition to evening."

Alone in the library, I browse shelves that contain an impressive collection spanning centuries and languages.

Many volumes show signs of actual reading rather than decorative acquisition—cracked spines, occasional pencil notations in margins, the subtle evidence of books that serve purpose beyond appearance.

I select a volume of poetry—Rilke in the original German with facing-page French translations—and settle into a window seat overlooking the front gardens. The combination of beautiful language and beautiful surroundings creates temporary respite from constant awareness of my situation.

Dinner passes in a fog of expensive wine and gourmet food I barely taste.

Conversation remains carefully neutral—observations about the villa, the journey, the Parisian skyline visible from the terrace.

Gage watches me with that assessing gaze I've grown accustomed to, measuring my compliance, my adaptation, my surrender.

When we finish, he stands, extending his hand. "Shall we retire? The time difference is significant."

The inevitable moment has arrived. I place my hand in his, allowing him to lead me back to our suite. Inside, the bedroom has been prepared for night—lights dimmed, sheets turned down, the space transformed into a romantic setting that mocks the reality of our arrangement.

"I'll give you privacy to prepare for bed," he says, his tone neutral but his meaning clear.

In the bathroom, I stare at my reflection, barely recognizing the woman looking back at me. I've been dressed in an ivory silk nightgown—another item selected without my input, delivered to the villa ahead of our arrival. It skims my body like water, the material so fine it's nearly transparent.

When I emerge, Gage stands at the window, silhouetted against the Parisian night. He's changed into black silk pajama pants, his chest bare, revealing the lean muscle

of a man who maintains physical discipline as rigidly as he controls his business empire.

"You're beautiful," he says simply, eyes tracking my movement as I hover uncertainly near the bathroom door.

"Let's not pretend this is anything but what it is," I reply, voice steadier than I feel. "A transaction. A business arrangement with physical requirements."

He looks slightly disappointed.

"Come here, Penelope," he says, voice dropping to a tone that sends an involuntary shiver down my spine.

I remain where I am, clinging to this final moment of defiance. "And if I refuse?"

"You won't." The confidence in his tone infuriates me, especially because he's right. What purpose would refusal serve now? The ceremony is complete, the papers signed, the cage door firmly locked.

I cross the room slowly, stopping just out of reach. "Is this where you claim your property, Mr. Blackwood?"

His hand moves with surprising speed, catching my wrist and pulling me against him in one fluid motion. "My wife," he corrects, his other hand sliding to the nape of my neck. "Legally bound. Publicly acknowledged. Mine in every way that matters."

Before I can respond, his mouth claims mine in a kiss unlike our previous encounters—demanding, possessive, brooking no resistance. His tongue parts my lips, taking rather than asking, exploring with a thoroughness that leaves me breathless when he finally pulls back.

"Your body knows what your mind refuses to accept," he murmurs, his hand moving from my neck down my spine, pressing me more firmly against him. The hard length of him is evident even through the layers of silk between us.

"Physical response isn't consent," I manage, hating the breathlessness in my voice.

"No," he agrees surprisingly. "But the prenuptial agreement you signed is. Reasonable expectation of marital relations, remember?"

The cold reminder of legal documents in this moment is so quintessentially Gage—practical, strategic, emotionless despite his evident desire.

His hands move to my shoulders, pushing the thin straps of the nightgown down my arms. The silk slides like water, pooling at my feet, leaving me naked and exposed beneath his gaze.

"Perfect," he says, voice roughened with desire as his eyes travel over my body with proprietary appreciation. His fingertips trace a path from my collarbone down between my breasts, barely touching yet leaving fire in their wake. "Even more exquisite than I imagined."

I fight the urge to cover myself, refusing to show the vulnerability he's surely looking for, even as my nipples harden under his scrutiny. "Get it over with, then."

Something dangerous flashes in his eyes.

Without warning, he sweeps me into his arms and carries me to the bed, depositing me in the center with surprising gentleness before covering my body with his.

The weight of him presses me into the mattress, his skin hot against mine, the silk of his pants doing nothing to disguise his substantial arousal.

"This isn't something to 'get over with,' Penelope," he says, his thigh sliding between mine, creating delicious friction against my core. "This is something to savor. To remember."

His mouth finds mine again as his hands begin to explore—tracing the curve of my breast, thumbs circling but never quite touching my aching nipples, mapping the dip of my waist, the flare of my hip.

I tell myself I won't respond, won't give him the satisfaction of my surrender.

But my treacherous body has other ideas, nerve endings firing at his expert touch, heat pooling between my legs against my will.

When his thumb finally brushes across my nipple, then pinches lightly, an involuntary gasp escapes me. He smiles against my mouth, clearly pleased with the reaction as he rolls the hardened peak between his fingers.

"Your body doesn't lie," he murmurs, his lips trailing down my neck to capture my other nipple between his teeth, tugging just enough to send sparks of pleasure-pain racing through me. "No matter what defiance you maintain in your mind, your body is honest about what it wants."

I turn my face away, unwilling to watch my own surrender. He immediately catches my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze, the blue of his eyes nearly swallowed by dilated pupils.

"No," he says firmly. "You don't get to pretend this isn't happening. I want to see your eyes when you come apart for me. I want to watch pleasure overtake that stubborn resistance."

"I hate you," I whisper, the words lacking conviction even to my own ears as heat

spreads through my veins.

"Hate and desire aren't mutually exclusive," he replies, shifting to position himself between my thighs, the silk of his pants sliding tantalizingly against my sensitive skin. "In fact, they often amplify each other."

His hands capture my wrists, drawing them above my head and pinning them there with one large hand. The position arches my back, pressing my breasts more prominently against his chest, emphasizing my vulnerability in a way that sends another unwelcome surge of arousal through me.

"You're mine now," he says, his free hand moving between our bodies, finding the center of my desire with unerring precision.

"Legally. Physically." His fingers slide through the evidence of my body's betrayal, gathering the wetness there before circling the sensitive bundle of nerves in a way that draws an unwilling moan from my throat.

"Say it, Penelope. I need to hear you acknowledge who you belong to. "

"Never," I manage, though the word breaks on a gasp as his fingers continue their relentless assault on my senses, circling, pressing, retreating only to advance again with more intensity.

His mouth moves to my throat, teeth grazing sensitive skin, then soothing with his tongue. "Say it," he demands again, fingers sliding inside me now, curling to find a spot that makes my hips buck involuntarily and sends sparks of pleasure shooting through my nervous system.

I bite my lip, determined to deny him this victory at least, even as my hips lift involuntarily into his touch, seeking more of the exquisite sensation he's creating. My

inner walls clench around his invading fingers, hungry for more.

"So stubborn," he murmurs, adding another finger, stretching me deliciously as his thumb continues circling my clit with devastating precision. "But your body knows the truth. It's already surrendering to me."

He's right, damn him. Despite every effort to remain unmoved, my body responds to his skilled touch with embarrassing eagerness. Tension coils tighter and tighter in my core, building toward a release I simultaneously crave and resent.

"Stop fighting it," he commands, watching my face with intense focus as his fingers move faster, deeper. "Let go. Show me what I already know—that I can make you come apart whenever I choose."

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The combination of his words, his touch, and the weight of his body pinning me to the bed proves too much.

Release crashes through me in waves of unwanted pleasure, my back arching as my body surrenders completely to his control, inner muscles pulsing around his fingers as a cry tears from my throat.

"Tell me you want this," he says, his voice strained with desire but controlled. "I need to hear it."

"I want this," I admit, the honesty of my body impossible to deny in this moment. "Please."

Before the aftershocks have subsided, he releases my wrists to shed his pants in one fluid movement, revealing his impressive arousal.

He positions himself at my entrance, the thick head of his cock pressing against me, demanding entry.

With one powerful thrust, he fills me completely, drawing a gasp from my lungs at the sudden stretch and fullness.

"There," he says, voice strained with desire but still controlled as he seats himself fully inside me. "Perfect."

He begins to move with measured strokes, establishing a rhythm designed to rebuild the pleasure he's already forced upon me. His hands grip my thighs, spreading them

wider, angling my hips to take him deeper with each thrust.

"You're mine," he says again, punctuating the statement with a particularly deep thrust that hits a spot inside me that makes me cry out.

"My wife. My woman." His pace increases, driving harder, deeper, the sound of our bodies coming together filling the room.

"Mine to protect. Mine to pleasure. Mine to keep. "

To my horror, I feel myself responding again, my body welcoming his invasion, inner muscles clenching around him in a way that draws a groan from deep in his chest. Each thrust sends waves of pleasure radiating outward, building toward another peak I can't resist.

"Say it," he demands, his control beginning to fray at the edges as his movements become more urgent. "Tell me who you belong to."

I shake my head, clinging to this last vestige of defiance even as my body betrays me completely, hips rising to meet his thrusts, seeking more of the pleasure I don't want to acknowledge. My legs wrap around his waist of their own accord, pulling him deeper.

His hand releases my hip, moving instead to my throat—not squeezing, just resting there with gentle pressure, a reminder of his physical dominance. The other slides between us, finding my over-sensitized clit and pressing down in tight circles.

"Say. It." Each word punctuated with a thrust that hits something deep inside me, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my system, pushing me relentlessly toward another climax.

"Yours," I finally whisper, the admission torn from me against my will as pleasure spirals beyond my control. "I'm yours."

Something flares in his eyes—triumph, satisfaction, possession. "Again," he demands, increasing his pace, his hand tightening slightly at my throat as the other continues its merciless assault on my clit.

"I'm yours," I repeat, louder this time, the words coinciding with another wave of pleasure building toward crescendo. My nails dig into his shoulders, leaving marks of my own as my body arches beneath him.

"Mine," he confirms, driving into me with renewed intensity, his control finally shattering. "My wife. My Penelope."

The second climax hits with even greater force than the first, my body arching beneath him as pleasure explodes outward from my core, muscles clamping around him in rhythmic pulses.

The intensity of my release triggers his own—with a final, powerful thrust, he stills deep inside me, his body shuddering as he finds completion, filling me with his warmth.

For several long moments, we remain connected, his weight supported on his forearms to avoid crushing me, our breathing gradually slowing, heartbeats returning to normal rhythm. His lips find mine in a kiss that's surprisingly gentle, almost tender in its exploration.

When he finally withdraws, rolling to lie beside me, I feel hollow in more ways than one. Empty physically, emotionally drained, mentally exhausted from the conflict between my body's surrender and my mind's continued resistance.

Tears well unexpectedly, streaming silently down my temples into my hair. I turn away, unwilling to let him see this final vulnerability, this ultimate admission of defeat.

His hand catches my shoulder, preventing escape. "No," he says quietly. "Don't turn from me."

"Haven't you taken enough?" I ask, voice breaking despite my effort to maintain control.

Instead of answering, he pulls me against him, my back to his chest, arms encircling me completely. One large hand splays across my stomach, the other curves around my breast, thumb lazily circling the sensitive nipple. Even now, spent and satisfied, he maintains possession.

"Sleep," he murmurs against my hair, his lips brushing my neck in a gesture that feels almost affectionate.

I lie awake long after his breathing has deepened into sleep, tears drying on my cheeks, body still humming with the aftereffects of unwanted pleasure.

The physical intimacy had been undeniably satisfying—Gage clearly knows how to please a woman, how to coax response from reluctant flesh, how to make a body sing even when the mind rebels.

It's that very competence that terrifies me most. If my body surrenders so completely to his touch, how long before my mind follows? How many nights of this exquisite torture before I begin to crave it, to anticipate it, to genuinely desire the man who stole my freedom?

His arms tighten around me even in sleep, as if sensing my turmoil, ensuring I remain

exactly where he wants me—pressed against him, contained within his embrace, prisoner of both his body and my own traitorous responses.

I stare into the darkness, the weight of his wedding ring pressing against my skin where his hand rests possessively on my breast, a constant reminder of the chains I now wear—invisible, intangible, but no less binding than steel.

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M orning light filters through gauzy curtains when I wake, my body sore in places I'd forgotten existed. For a moment, I'm disoriented—the unfamiliar ceiling, the weight of an arm draped possessively across my waist, the scent of expensive sheets mingling with the lingering musk of sex.

Paris. The villa. My wedding night.

I shift slightly, testing the range of movement allowed by Gage's unconscious embrace. Even in sleep, he maintains control, his body curved around mine like a living cage.

His breathing changes subtly, a nearly imperceptible shift that tells me he's awake before he moves. His hand slides upward, fingers splaying across my ribcage just beneath my breast.

"Good morning, wife," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep as his lips brush against my shoulder.

I don't respond, not trusting my voice. The mental clarity of morning brings renewed awareness of my situation—of what happened last night, of the surrender he extracted from my unwilling body.

"Still pretending?" he asks, amusement evident as his hand moves higher to cup my breast, thumb circling my nipple until it hardens against his touch. "After the way you came apart for me last night?"

"Don't," I whisper, the word lacking conviction even to my own ears.

"Don't what?" His mouth traces a path along my shoulder to my neck, teeth grazing sensitive skin before biting down just hard enough to make me gasp. "Don't remind you how your body responded to mine? Don't touch what's legally and rightfully mine?"

Before I can answer, he shifts suddenly, moving down my body with predatory grace. The sheets are pulled away with one swift motion, exposing me completely to the cool morning air and his hungry gaze.

"What are you doing?" I ask, pushing up onto my elbows.

His hands grip my thighs, spreading them wide with casual strength, his thumbs digging into the soft flesh near my core. "Having breakfast," he says, his voice dropping to a dangerous timbre that sends unwanted heat flooding between my legs.

I barely have time to process his meaning before his mouth is on me—hot, demanding, possessive. His tongue parts my folds with a long, deliberate stroke that makes my back arch off the bed involuntarily. My hands fly to his hair, torn between pushing him away and pulling him closer.

"Fuck," he growls against my sensitive flesh, the vibration sending shockwaves through my core. "So wet already. Your body knows who it belongs to, even when your mind resists."

His technique is devastating—broad strokes alternating with focused attention on my clit, sucking the sensitive bundle of nerves into his mouth before flicking his tongue against it with relentless precision.

My thighs begin to tremble, my breathing ragged as pleasure builds with frightening intensity.

"Look at me," he commands, pulling back just enough to make me whimper at the loss. "I want to see your eyes when I make you come with my mouth."

Despite myself, I meet his gaze—those intense blue eyes watching me from between my thighs, his expression dark with possession. The sight of him there, powerful and controlled even in this submissive position, sends a fresh rush of wetness that he acknowledges with an appreciative groan.

"Say my name," he demands before his tongue darts out to circle my clit. One long finger slides inside me, curling to find that spot that makes my vision blur. Then a second finger joins the first, stretching me, preparing me.

I bite my lip, determined to maintain this small rebellion. His response is immediate—a sharp nip to my inner thigh that makes me cry out, followed by a soothing lap of his tongue over the slight sting.

"My name, Penelope," he insists, his fingers pumping inside me with deliberate precision while his thumb replaces his tongue on my clit. "Let me hear who's making you feel this way."

"Gage," I whisper, my voice breaking as pleasure coils tighter.

"Louder," he demands, increasing the pressure, adding a third finger that creates a delicious fullness. His mouth returns to my clit, sucking hard while his fingers thrust deeper.

"Gage!" His name tears from my throat as release crashes through me, my body convulsing around his fingers, my hands fisting in his hair as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me.

Before I've recovered, he's moving up my body, positioning himself between my

thighs.

His cock, thick and heavy, slides through my soaked folds, coating himself in my arousal.

Without warning, he thrusts inside—one powerful stroke that fills me completely, stretching me to the point of exquisite pain.

"Christ, you're tight," he hisses through clenched teeth, holding himself still for just a moment as my body adjusts to his considerable size. "So perfect. So made for me."

Then he begins to move, setting a punishing rhythm that steals what little breath I've regained. One hand pins both my wrists above my head while the other grips my hip hard enough to bruise, angling me perfectly to receive each devastating thrust.

"Mine," he growls, driving into me with increasing force. "Every. Fucking. Inch." Each word punctuated with a thrust that hits something deep inside me, sending shockwaves of pleasure radiating outward from where we're joined.

"I'm going to fill this perfect cunt with my cum," he says, voice rough with exertion and desire. "Watch your belly swell with my child. See you heavy with my heir. Mark you as mine inside and out."

The words should horrify me—this final claim, this ultimate possession. Instead, my treacherous body responds with a clenching intensity that draws a guttural groan from deep in his chest.

"You like that idea," he observes, slowing his pace to grind himself against me, the base of his cock creating delicious friction against my still-sensitive clit. "Your pussy gets tighter every time I talk about breeding you. Filling you with my seed. Making you pregnant with my child."

"No," I deny weakly, even as my hips rise to meet his thrusts, seeking more, deeper, harder.

"Liar," he says, almost fondly. His hand releases my wrists to slide beneath me, gripping my ass to lift me higher. "Your body knows what it wants. What it needs. What it was made for."

He shifts suddenly, flipping us so I'm straddling him, his cock still buried impossibly deep inside me. His hands grip my waist, lifting me before pulling me down hard onto his length.

"Ride me," he commands, his eyes dark with lust as they rake over my body. "Show me how much you want my cum."

I should resist, should refuse this active participation in my own surrender.

Instead, I find myself moving, rising and falling on his thick length, my hands bracing against his chest for leverage.

The new position allows me to take him even deeper, hitting places inside me that send sparks of pleasure shooting up my spine.

"That's it," he encourages, one hand moving to where we're joined, his thumb finding my clit with unerring precision. "Take what's yours. Take all of me."

His other hand reaches for my breast, pinching my nipple just hard enough to send a jolt of pleasure-pain straight to my core.

The dual stimulation—his cock stretching me to my limits, his thumb circling my clit, his fingers tugging at my nipple—builds a pressure inside me that threatens to shatter me completely.

"I can feel how close you are," he says, his voice strained with the effort of maintaining control. "Your pussy's squeezing me like a vise. So fucking perfect. Made to take my cock. Made to carry my children."

These possessive declarations, combined with the relentless stimulation from everywhere his body touches mine, push me toward a second climax that builds with terrifying intensity.

When it breaks, it's even more powerful than the first—waves of pleasure so overwhelming that I throw my head back, a scream tearing from my throat as my entire body convulses around him.

With a final, shuddering push, he sinks into me fully, his body taut as warmth floods deep inside, marking the moment with trembling intensity. I can feel him pulsing, hot and thick, filling me with each spurt of his release.

"Take it all," he groans, grinding me against him to ensure his seed stays deep inside. "Every last drop. Going to keep you full of my cum until you're swollen with my child."

The sensation of his release, combined with his filthy words, prolongs my own pleasure—aftershocks rippling through my inner muscles as I collapse against his chest, completely spent.

For several long moments, we remain locked together, both breathing heavily, sweat-slicked skin sliding against skin. His arms wrap around me, keeping me pressed against him, his cock still half-hard inside me.

When he finally allows me to roll to the side, I expect him to release me. Instead, he pulls me against his chest, one hand possessively cupping my breast, the other sliding down to rest on my lower abdomen.

"Good morning," he says again, as if we'd just exchanged routine pleasantries rather than engaged in the most primal claiming possible. His hand strokes my stomach in slow circles, like he's already imagining it rounded with his child.

I remain silent, mind struggling to reconcile the intensity of physical pleasure with the emotional turmoil beneath it. My body feels thoroughly used, utterly satisfied in ways I've never experienced, while my thoughts race with confusion and reluctant awareness.

"Hungry?" he asks after a moment, his tone conversational, though his hand remains possessively on my stomach. "Madame Rousseau prepares an excellent breakfast."

The ordinariness of the question, the domestic normality it implies after what just transpired between us, finally breaks through my disorientation.

"Is that really what you want to talk about right now?" I ask, voice still rough from screaming his name. "Breakfast preferences?"

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His hand slides lower again, fingers dipping between my thighs to find the evidence of our coupling—his release mixed with my own wetness.

"Would you prefer to discuss how eagerly your body took mine?

How tightly you gripped me when I talked about putting a baby inside you?

How your thighs are still trembling from coming on my cock? "

Heat rushes to my face at his explicit description. "Stop."

"Reality makes you uncomfortable," he observes, not unkindly, as his fingers continue their gentle exploration. "But reality is what we have, Penelope. A marriage consummated thoroughly and enthusiastically, despite your mind's continued resistance."

"There was nothing enthusiastic about it," I lie, unable to meet his gaze.

"No?" His hand slides between us, fingers dipping between my thighs to find the evidence of my body's betrayal. "This suggests otherwise."

I push his hand away, finally extracting myself from his embrace to sit on the edge of the bed, back to him, suddenly acutely aware of my nakedness.

"I'll take breakfast on the terrace," I say stiffly, reaching for the robe draped across a nearby chair.

His hand on my shoulder stops me. "No hiding," he says firmly. "Not between us. Not anymore."

I turn to face him, finding his expression serious despite the intimacy we've just shared. "What exactly do you want from me, Gage? Beyond the obvious physical demands."

"Honesty," he replies without hesitation. "Acknowledge what exists between us, even if you resist it."

"What exists is a legal arrangement and physical compatibility," I say carefully. "Don't mistake one for the other."

"For now," he says finally, rising from the bed in one fluid movement. "The terrace, then. Thirty minutes?"

I nod, watching as he walks naked to the adjoining bathroom, completely unselfconscious in his magnificent physicality. When the door closes behind him, I release a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

The robe feels like armor when I finally pull it around my body—thin silk providing illusion of protection rather than actual coverage. I move to the window, looking out over Parisian gardens now bathed in full morning light.

My body thrums with lingering satisfaction, nerve endings still sensitive from his attentions. Whatever resistance my mind maintains, my physical response to Gage is undeniable—a chemistry that transcends the circumstances of our arrangement.

This, perhaps, is the most dangerous aspect of my captivity—not the legal bonds or physical restrictions, but the pleasure he can extract from my unwilling body. The possibility that, given enough time, the line between coercion and desire might blur

beyond recognition.

Breakfast on the terrace feels surreal—fresh croissants, perfect coffee, fragrant flowers in crystal vases—all the trappings of honeymoon romance without the underlying emotional connection such displays typically represent.

Gage sits across from me, hair still damp from his shower, dressed casually in linen pants and a white shirt that emphasizes his tan. He reads news on his tablet while sipping coffee, the picture of domestic normality.

"The weather is ideal for exploring the city," he observes, setting aside the device to focus on me. "If you're interested."

The offer of leaving the villa takes me by surprise. "I thought we were confined to the property for the first week."

"Not confined," he corrects smoothly. "Privacy was arranged for your comfort, not to restrict movement. We can certainly venture out if you wish."

I consider the potential freedom, however limited, of exploring Paris rather than remaining within these beautiful walls. "I would like that," I admit.

He nods, apparently pleased by my answer. "We'll leave after breakfast. Any specific sights you'd like to visit?"

"The Musée de l'Orangerie," I say without hesitation, having long wanted to see Monet's water lilies in their oval galleries. "If possible."

"Of course." He makes a note on his phone. "I'll have the car brought around at ten."

We finish breakfast in relative silence, the tension between us neither exactly

comfortable nor overtly hostile. When I rise to return to our suite and dress for the day, he catches my wrist gently.

"One request," he says, his thumb tracing circles on my pulse point. "Shower with me first."

It's not really a request, despite the phrasing. We both know this.

"All right," I agree, watching his eyes darken at my consent.

The bathroom is a marvel of marble and glass, the shower large enough for four people, with multiple heads and bench seating along one wall. Steam fills the space as Gage adjusts the temperature, the glass walls already beginning to fog.

He helps me out of the robe with deliberate movements, his eyes trailing over my body with unabashed appreciation.

"You're exquisite," he says simply, hands skimming my sides before turning me toward the shower.

Inside, warm water cascades from multiple directions, enveloping us in a private world of steam and sensation. Gage takes his time washing me, hands gliding soap-slicked across every inch of skin, paying special attention to places still sensitive from our earlier activities.

When his fingers slip between my thighs, I gasp despite myself, my body responding instantly to his touch.

"Still so responsive," he murmurs against my ear, pressing me against the cool tile wall. "So ready for me."

What follows is another claiming—less gentle than before, more urgent. My hands brace against marble as he takes me from behind, one arm wrapped around my waist to hold me steady against his forceful thrusts, the other hand working between my legs to ensure my pleasure.

Water cascades over us, washing away evidence of previous encounters only to create new ones. His groans echo off tile walls as my body welcomes him, accepts him, responds to him with embarrassing eagerness.

When we finally emerge, skin flushed from hot water and exertion, I feel marked by him in ways that transcend the visible. My reflection in the steamed mirror shows a woman I barely recognize—hair darkened by water, eyes bright with lingering pleasure, lips swollen from his kisses.

This is the woman the world will see today—Gage Blackwood's wife, physically satisfied if emotionally conflicted, moving through Paris on his arm as if she belongs there.

Paris unfolds around us like a dream—golden light on ancient buildings, narrow streets opening to unexpected vistas, the Seine flowing languidly beneath historic bridges. In the back of Gage's luxury car, I watch the city pass by the window, conscious of his hand resting casually on my knee.

"We'll start with l'Orangerie as requested," he says, checking his watch. "I've arranged private access before regular opening hours."

Of course he has. Nothing is impossible when you're Gage Blackwood—no door remains closed, no schedule can't be adjusted, no rules apply that he doesn't choose to acknowledge.

The museum is indeed empty when we arrive, a nervous curator greeting us at a side

entrance with effusive welcome. Gage responds in flawless French, introducing me as his wife with casual possession that sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine.

"This way, Madame Blackwood," the curator says, switching to English for my benefit.

The name still feels foreign—a label applied to a person I don't fully recognize. I follow without comment, aware of Gage's hand at the small of my back, guiding me through empty galleries toward the oval rooms housing Monet's masterpieces.

When we enter the first room, I stop involuntarily, breath catching at the immersive beauty of the enormous canvases. Water lilies stretch across curved walls, surrounding us completely, drawing the eye into painted depths that seem to continue infinitely.

For the first time since our arrival in Paris, I forget my circumstances completely—forget the legal bindings, the physical claims, the uncertain future. Art has always affected me deeply, and these paintings more than most, their tranquil beauty a balm to troubled minds.

I move slowly around the room, absorbing each panel, each subtle variation in color and texture. Gage remains a few paces behind, allowing me this moment of genuine appreciation without interruption.

"They're even more beautiful than I imagined," I say finally, unaware I've spoken aloud until Gage responds.

"The curved walls were Monet's idea," he says, stepping closer. "He wanted viewers surrounded by the paintings, immersed completely in his vision of serenity."

I glance at him, surprised by both the information and the evident appreciation in his

voice. "You're familiar with his work?"

"My mother was an admirer," he explains. "She had several smaller Monet pieces in her personal collection."

This glimpse of Gage's background—of the woman who shaped him before her untimely death—catches me off guard. It's the third mention of his mother since our arrival in Paris, all without my prompting. Significant, though I'm not yet sure how.

We move to the second oval room, equally breathtaking in different hues. Here, Gage stands beside me rather than behind, our shoulders nearly touching as we observe the paintings together.

"What do you see in them?" he asks unexpectedly.

I consider the question honestly. "Peace," I say finally. "A moment of perfect stillness captured forever. The artist's vision of paradise preserved for others to experience."

He nods thoughtfully. "My mother said something similar. That Monet painted not just water lilies, but the silence between heartbeats."

The poetic description surprises me, revealing a sensitivity I wouldn't have associated with the calculated businessman I've come to know.

"She sounds like a remarkable woman," I offer carefully.

"She was," he agrees, his expression softening momentarily before returning to its usual controlled neutrality. "We should continue if you want to see the Jeu de Paume before lunch."

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The spell breaks, reality reasserting itself. I am still his wife by arrangement, still bound by legal documents and physical possession. This moment of shared appreciation changes nothing fundamental about our situation.

Yet as we move through Paris together, from museum to gallery, from historic church to hidden courtyard, I find myself observing him with new awareness.

Gage moves through the world with confident authority, yet there's genuine appreciation in his interaction with art and architecture.

He speaks knowledgeably about history and culture, revealing an education far broader than purely business-focused.

At lunch in a small bistro hidden from tourist paths, he watches me with evident pleasure as I taste wines selected specifically to pair with each course.

"You enjoy seeing me appreciate things," I observe during a momentary lull in conversation.

"I enjoy seeing you experience pleasure," he corrects, his gaze direct. "In all its forms."

Heat rises to my face at the deliberate double meaning. "Is that what this tour is about? Providing pleasure to make me more compliant?"

His expression hardens slightly. "Do you truly believe everything I do has manipulative intent? That I can't simply want to show my wife a city I appreciate?"

"I believe you acquired a wife through manipulation and coercion," I reply quietly.
"So yes, I question the motivation behind subsequent actions."

He studies me for a long moment. "Fair enough," he concedes unexpectedly.

"Consider this, then—I want you to associate pleasure with our marriage.

Physical, aesthetic, intellectual pleasure.

Not solely to make you compliant, though that's certainly convenient, but because a marriage based entirely on obligation becomes tedious for both parties. "

The frank admission is oddly refreshing after weeks of careful phrases and strategic interactions. "At least you're honest about it."

"I've never lied to you, Penelope," he says, signaling for the check. "Withheld information, certainly. Operated strategically, of course. But never outright lied."

I consider this as we leave the restaurant, his hand settling at the small of my back with possessiveness. The distinction matters to him, I realize—this adherence to technical truth while manipulating circumstances to his advantage.

The afternoon continues our exploration of Paris, though with a more intimate understanding between us now. When his hand brushes mine, when his gaze lingers, when his voice drops to that timbre that sends shivers along my spine—I recognize the deliberate seduction for what it is.

And despite everything, I respond. My body leans into his touch, my pulse quickens at his proximity, my mind catalogues the breadth of his shoulders beneath tailored linen and the strength of his hands as they guide me through crowded streets.

By the time we return to the villa in early evening, physical awareness thrums between us like electrical current. Inside the entrance hall, he doesn't bother with pretense, pulling me against him as soon as the door closes.

"I've wanted you all day," he murmurs against my neck, hands already working at the buttons of my dress. "Watching you move through the city, knowing what's beneath these clothes, remembering how you feel around me."

I should resist. Should maintain some semblance of emotional distance even as my body surrenders. Instead, I find my hands reaching for him, unfastening his shirt with fingers that tremble slightly with urgency.

We don't make it to the bedroom. The entrance hall floor is marble, cool against my back as he takes me there, both still half-clothed in our hurry to connect. It's rough, urgent, primal—his control fraying as he drives into me with powerful thrusts that send me sliding against polished stone.

"Mine," he growls, hands pinning my wrists above my head. "Say it, Penelope. I need to hear it."

"Yours," I gasp, no longer certain if the admission is purely physical or something more complex. "I'm yours, Gage."

His response is a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl, his movements becoming even more forceful, more demanding. When release claims us both, it's with an intensity that leaves me trembling, boneless against the cool floor.

Later, in our bed, he holds me with unexpected gentleness as twilight filters through gauzy curtains. His fingers trace patterns on my bare shoulder, his breathing steady against my back.

"What happens when we return to Chicago?" I ask finally, the question that's lingered beneath today's explorations.

His arms tighten slightly around me. "Our life begins."

The confidence should infuriate me.

"You're thinking too much," he observes, fingers brushing hair from my face.

"It's what I do," I reply.

"I know." He leans forward, pressing his lips to my forehead in a gesture almost tender. "It's one of many things I find fascinating about you."

Before I can respond to this unexpected admission, he shifts position, rolling me beneath him once more. "But right now," he continues, voice dropping to that timbre that sends heat pooling low in my abdomen, "I'd prefer you focus on feeling rather than thinking."

His mouth claims mine, ending conversation in favor of sensation. My body responds instantly, eagerly, to his skilled touch—arms winding around his neck, legs parting to welcome him between them.

For now, I allow myself this escape—this surrender to physical pleasure that temporarily quiets the conflict in my mind.

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The Chicago skyline materializes through the airplane window, familiar skyscrapers reaching toward clouds tinged pink with approaching sunset. After two weeks in Paris, the city looks simultaneously foreign and achingly familiar, like a dream half-remembered upon waking.

I sit beside Gage in the private jet, hands folded in my lap, wedding ring catching the fading light.

My body bears invisible marks from our honeymoon—places claimed and reclaimed daily, sometimes hourly, by the man who now legally owns me.

The man who spent fourteen days methodically dismantling my resistance through relentless physical pleasure.

"Home," Gage says, his hand settling over mine with casual possession.

The word carries weight I can't quite process. Home had been my apartment above Wildflower, the shop I built, the life I created. Now home is wherever Gage Blackwood decides to place me.

"The staff has prepared the east wing suite for us," he continues, scrolling through messages on his tablet. "You'll find your personal items have been transferred from your previous rooms."

I nod, the gesture automatic now. Two weeks of Paris have taught me the value of strategically chosen battles, of conserving energy rather than wasting it on futile resistance.

"Your first official appearance as Mrs. Blackwood is scheduled for Friday," he adds, setting aside the tablet to focus on me. "The Children's Hospital fundraiser. Black tie, significant press coverage."

"I remember," I say, maintaining the neutral tone I've perfected.

He studies me with that assessing gaze, searching for cracks in the compliant facade I've constructed. "You've been... oddly compliant since Paris."

The observation carries unstated question. I meet his gaze directly, revealing nothing. "I'm practical, as you've often noted."

His lips curve slightly. "Indeed."

The plane touches down with barely a tremor, the pilot's voice announcing our arrival through the cabin speakers. Within minutes, we're transferring to the waiting car, Victor opening doors with practiced efficiency, staff loading luggage under his watchful direction.

Chicago flows past the window as we drive toward the estate.

The estate appears exactly as we left it, manicured perfection maintained by invisible hands. Mrs. Henderson waits at the entrance, warmth in her greeting as she welcomes us home, informs us dinner will be served at seven, asks if we require anything after our journey.

Gage's hand settles at the small of my back as we climb the stairs—that familiar possessive gesture now so routine I barely register it. The east wing suite proves larger than my previous accommodations, decorated in subtle shades of blue and cream.

My clothing hangs in walk-in closets, organized by type and color. My toiletries rest on marble counters in the bathroom. My grandmother's pendant sits in a velvet-lined drawer of the jewelry box on the dressing table.

Everything arranged with meticulous attention, everything selected and placed according to Gage's specifications.

"Does the arrangement suit you?" Gage asks, watching me survey the space that will now be our shared domain.

"It's beautiful," I reply honestly. The suite is objectively stunning, its luxury beyond anything I might have selected for myself but tasteful rather than ostentatious.

"Your studio has been prepared in the south conservatory," he adds, moving to open doors that reveal a spacious balcony overlooking the gardens. "Supplies delivered yesterday, workspace arranged according to specifications from your previous setup."

The consideration catches me off-guard despite similar gestures throughout our honeymoon.

"Thank you," I say, the words emerging with unexpected sincerity.

His lips curved in that dangerous almost-smile. "I do try, wife."

Wife. The word still felt foreign, a role I'd been forced into but was now performing with increasing conviction.

"Paris changed nothing," I said, needing to remind us both of reality even as my body leaned toward his.

"Didn't it?" His hand came up to cup my face, thumb tracing my lower lip. "Your

body seems to disagree."

Before I could form a retort, his mouth captured mine in a kiss that held nothing back. Gone was the calculated restraint he'd shown in the early days of our arrangement. This was pure possession, hungry and demanding.

My hands flew to his shoulders, whether to push him away or pull him closer, I couldn't say. But when his tongue slid against mine, tasting of the champagne we'd shared on the private jet, my fingers curled into the expensive fabric of his suit.

"I've been thinking about this since we boarded the plane," he growled against my lips, hands sliding down to grip my hips. "About getting you home, about claiming what's mine."

"I'm not—" I began, the familiar protest dying as his teeth scraped the sensitive skin of my neck.

"Not what?" His voice was dangerously soft as his fingers worked the buttons of my blouse. "Not mine? Your body knows better, Penelope."

My head fell back against the wall as his mouth traced a burning path along my collarbone. "We already had sex today," I managed.

"I don't care." The words brooked no argument. "I want you again. Now."

His hands pushed my blouse from my shoulders, leaving me in the lace bra he'd selected in Paris—black, delicate, barely containing my breasts. The cool air against my heated skin made me shiver, but not nearly as much as the intensity in his gaze as he took in the sight of me.

"Perfect," he murmured, one finger tracing the edge of lace, dipping beneath to brush

against my nipple. "Every inch of you. Mine to touch. Mine to taste."

My breath caught as he unhooked the bra with practiced ease, letting it fall to the marble floor. His mouth replaced his fingers, hot and demanding against my sensitive skin. I couldn't stop the moan that escaped my lips or the way my back arched, pressing me more firmly against him.

"Tell me what you want," he demanded, hands sliding up my thighs, bunching my skirt around my waist. "I want to hear you say it."

"You know what I want," I whispered, unwilling to give him the satisfaction of begging.

His fingers traced the edge of my panties, teasing but not giving me what we both knew I needed. "Say it, Penelope."

"Touch me," I finally gasped, hating my weakness but unable to resist. "Please."

The victorious gleam in his eyes should have infuriated me. Instead, it sent another wave of heat through my core. He hooked his fingers in the delicate lace of my underwear and tore—the sound of ripping fabric echoing in the silent bedroom.

"I'll buy you more," he said dismissively when I gasped in surprise.

Then his fingers were where I needed them, sliding through the evidence of my arousal with confident precision. My head fell back against the wall again as he worked me with deliberate strokes, building tension with practiced skill.

"So wet for me already," he observed, voice rough with desire. "So ready to take my cock. Tell me, wife—is this the response of a woman who doesn't want what I'm giving her?"

I couldn't answer, couldn't form words as his fingers circled my clit with devastating accuracy. My hips moved of their own accord, seeking more pressure, more friction.

"Answer me," he demanded, slowing his movements to an agonizing tease.

"No," I admitted through clenched teeth. "You know it's not."

His smile was triumphant as he slid two fingers inside me, curling them to hit that spot that made my vision blur. "See? Honesty isn't so difficult."

I might have hated him in that moment if my body hadn't been so desperately craving his. The sound of his zipper lowering sent another rush of wetness between my thighs, my inner muscles clenching in anticipation.

In one swift movement, he lifted me, pinning me against the wall with his body. My legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, the position opening me completely to him.

"Look at me," he commanded as he positioned himself at my entrance. "I want to see your eyes when I take what's mine."

I forced my gaze to his, defiance mingling with desire. The head of his cock teased my sensitive flesh, thick and hot and promising pleasure I'd come to crave despite myself.

"Say you want this," he demanded, pushing just slightly inside, enough to make me gasp but not enough to satisfy.

"I want this," I whispered, the admission torn from somewhere deep inside me. "I want you."

With a growl of satisfaction, he thrust forward, filling me completely in one powerful stroke. My nails dug into his shoulders, the sensation of fullness overwhelming.

"Christ, you're perfect," he groaned, withdrawing almost completely before slamming back in. "Made for me. Made to take me."

His pace was relentless, each thrust driving me higher, the angle ensuring he hit that spot inside me that made stars explode behind my eyelids. The wall behind me was cool against my heated skin, a stark contrast to the burning heat where our bodies joined.

"Mine," he growled with each thrust, the word a possession and a promise. "Say it, Penelope. Tell me who you belong to."

I tried to resist, to hold onto some shred of defiance, but my body betrayed me utterly. "Yours," I gasped as pleasure coiled tighter in my core. "I'm yours, Gage."

His rhythm faltered at my admission, his control fraying. One hand slid between us, finding my clit with unerring precision, circling in time with his thrusts.

"Come for me," he demanded, voice strained with the effort of maintaining control. "Let me feel you fall apart around my cock."

The combination of his words, his touch, and the relentless pressure inside me pushed me over the edge. Release crashed through me like a tidal wave, my body clenching around him, waves of pleasure so intense I cried out his name.

He slams into me one last time, muscles locking as thick, hot release pours into me, each pulse sending a jolt through my core.

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For several long moments, we remained locked together, both breathing heavily, sweat-slicked skin sliding against skin. He kept me pinned against the wall, still inside me, unwilling to break the connection.

When he finally lifted his head to look at me, something unreadable flickered in his eyes. His hand came up to brush hair from my face with surprising gentleness.

"Welcome home, wife," he murmured, voice roughened by exertion but carrying an undercurrent I couldn't quite identify.

I said nothing, words impossible in the aftermath of such complete surrender.

Afterward, as we shower together in the enormous marble bathroom, his hands soap my body with proprietary thoroughness. "You're quiet," he observes, fingers massaging shampoo into my hair.

"Just processing the transition," I reply, the partial truth easier than articulating the complex emotions swirling beneath the surface.

"From Paris to Chicago?"

"From honeymoon to reality."

His hands pause briefly, then resume their rhythmic motion. "The distinction isn't as significant as you imagine," he says after a moment.

I say nothing, allowing hot water to cascade over us, washing away evidence of our

latest encounter.

Dinner passes in polite conversation about practical matters—schedules for the coming weeks, social obligations, business commitments that will occasionally require Gage's presence elsewhere. I listen, respond appropriately, play my role with practiced precision.

The next days establish our new routine.

Mornings begin with Gage claiming my body before business claims his attention.

Days find me in the conservatory studio, arranging flowers with the same skill that once defined my independence, now merely a pastime within gilded confinement.

Evenings bring social engagements or private dinners, followed inevitably by further physical surrender in our shared bed.

I perform perfectly in every setting—the appropriate wife at business functions, the gracious hostess at private gatherings, the responsive partner in our marriage bed. I speak when expected, smile at appropriate moments, fulfill every requirement of my position with flawless execution.

Gage watches, gradually relaxing as days become weeks with no sign of resistance. Security measures ease slightly.

"You've exceeded expectations," Gage observes one evening as we prepare for the Children's Hospital fundraiser—the first major public appearance since our return from Paris.

He stands behind me at the dressing table, watching as I fasten diamond earrings that complement the midnight blue gown selected for the occasion.

"Everyone is genuinely impressed by your adaptation. "

I meet his gaze in the mirror. "I'm nothing if not practical."

His hands settle on my shoulders, thumbs tracing slow circles at the base of my neck. "You're many things beyond practical, Penelope," he corrects, voice carrying that edge that still sends unwelcome heat through my veins. "Intelligent. Resilient. Exquisite."

Before I can respond, his lips press against the sensitive spot behind my ear, tongue tracing a path that makes me shiver despite myself. "Unfortunately," he murmurs against my skin, "we don't have time to explore those qualities further if we're to arrive at the event on schedule."

The fundraiser proves exactly as anticipated—expensive champagne, strategic networking thinly disguised as philanthropy, Chicago's elite performing carefully choreographed social rituals.

I move through it all with practiced grace, my hand resting on Gage's arm, my smile perfectly calibrated for each interaction.

"Mrs. Blackwood," Judge Harrison greets me with genuine warmth, his daughter Caroline beside him. "You're positively glowing. Marriage clearly agrees with you."

"Thank you, Judge," I reply, the practiced phrase emerging smoothly. "Gage and I are still adjusting to post-honeymoon reality, but Paris was magical."

"I can imagine," Caroline says, her gaze sliding appreciatively over my husband's tall form. "And how are you finding married life? Everything you expected?"

Gage's hand settles at the small of my back. "Penelope has transitioned seamlessly,"

he answers before I can formulate response. "As if she was always meant for the position."

The phrasing sends a chill through me despite the crowded ballroom's warmth. Position. Not partnership, not relationship—position. Like a chess piece placed precisely where the player intended.

"If you'll excuse us," Gage continues, nodding to the Harrisons, "the governor has just arrived. A matter requiring brief discussion."

I follow his lead across the ballroom, accepting fresh champagne from a passing waiter, scanning the crowd with careful attention. Recognition pulses suddenly—Malcolm Wei, the technology investor from our dinner party, deep in conversation with the mayor near the silent auction displays.

"I should review the auction items," I say, touching Gage's arm lightly. "Appropriate support for the cause."

He nods, attention already shifting to the governor's approaching figure. "The Monet sketch is genuine, if you're interested," he says. "Third display from the left."

I move toward the auction displays, champagne glass in hand, smiling at appropriate intervals as acquaintances nod recognition in passing.

The Monet sketch is indeed exquisite—a preliminary study for the water lilies that captivated me in Paris.

The opening bid already exceeds what Wildflower earned in its best month.

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

I turn to find Caroline Harrison beside me, her own glass nearly empty. "Extraordinary," I agree. "The technique evident even in preliminary form."

"I meant your necklace," she clarifies, gesturing toward the sapphires at my throat—another gift from Gage, delivered this morning. "Though the sketch is lovely too. Gage's taste is impeccable, as always."

"Thank you," I say, fingers rising automatically to touch the stones. "It was a recent gift."

"He was always generous with Eliza as well," she observes, the casual mention of Gage's previous relationship carrying deliberate weight. "Though nothing quite so... permanent as marriage."

Before I can formulate appropriate response, a commotion near the entrance draws attention—flashbulbs popping as some celebrity arrival creates a momentary stir. Caroline turns toward the disturbance, champagne sloshing slightly in her glass.

"Excuse me," I murmur, setting my own glass on a nearby table. "Powder room."

She nods distractedly, already moving toward the entrance to investigate the disruption. I walk in the opposite direction, toward ladies' lounges located near the ballroom's service entrance.

The bathroom is surprisingly empty when I push through the heavy door—no attendant offering hand towels, no society women refreshing lipstick or exchanging gossip. Just gleaming marble, soft lighting, and silence.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. The woman looking back wears sapphires at her throat that catch the light with every breath.

Her copper hair has been styled into an elegant updo that took Marta an hour to perfect.

Her emerald silk gown was selected by Gage himself to "complement both the jewels and her coloring. "

Mrs. Blackwood, Chicago society's newest acquisition.

I grip the counter's edge, suddenly dizzy with a realization that hits me like a physical blow.

I'm alone.

Truly alone for the first time in weeks. No security hovering in my peripheral vision. No Gage with his hand at the small of my back. No Marta monitoring my movements under the guise of assistance.

Just me, for this brief, unexpected moment.

I'm alone and I know this venue. The Palmer House Charity Gala uses the same layout each year.

I attended twice during my former life as an Everett daughter.

I remember the service corridor beyond these restrooms that leads to the kitchens.

The employee exit that opens to the alley where delivery trucks park.

My heart pounds against my ribs, blood rushing in my ears.

I hadn't planned this. Hadn't even considered it tonight.

For weeks I've played my role perfectly, convinced Gage I've accepted my fate.

His security has gradually relaxed, Victor taking a rare night off—family emergency that required Gage's reluctant permission.

The opportunity unfolds before me like a map to freedom.

Without conscious decision, my fingers move to the sapphire necklace, unhooking the clasp with practiced ease. The matching earrings follow. I stare at them in my palm—gaudy symbols of ownership that could fund months of anonymity if pawned correctly.

I slide the engagement ring—that beautiful prison with its embedded tracker—from my finger, placing it deliberately beside the sink. The wedding band follows, a dull platinum clink against marble.

My wrap can pass as a dress if belted properly. The silk gown is too distinctive—I can't be seen in it once I leave. Working quickly, I twist my hair into a tight bun, securing it with pins I remove from the more elaborate style.

A final glance in the mirror. I look different enough. Not invisible, but not obviously Mrs. Blackwood either.

I crack the bathroom door, peering out to confirm the hallway remains empty.

Two quick steps take me to the service corridor.

I walk with purpose, shoulders back, expression neutral but determined.

A kitchen worker passes, barely glancing my way—society ladies often wander where they shouldn't, demanding and imperious.

The service exit appears ahead, illuminated by a red emergency light. I push through into night air thick with urban summer heat and kitchen exhaust.

The alley opens to a side street where, miraculously, a taxi idles as a hotel worker loads luggage for another fare. I approach quickly, wrap pulled tight around my shoulders.

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"Excuse me," I call to the driver. "Are you available after this drop-off?"

He glances up, assessing my evening wear and confident tone. "Twenty minutes, back here?"

"I need to leave now," I say, opening my clutch to flash the sapphires. "I'll pay extra."

His eyes widen at the glimpse of jewelry. "Where to?"

"Bus station," I reply, sliding into the backseat. "Greyhound."

As we pull away, I don't look back at the glittering hotel hosting my husband and three hundred of Chicago's elite. My absence won't be noticed immediately—Gage has been in deep conversation with the mayor and developers, pleased with my apparent acceptance of my role these past weeks.

The bus to New York leaves in twenty minutes, with stops in Indianapolis, Louisville, Cincinnati before continuing east. I pay cash, keeping my wrap tightly closed over my makeshift dress. One advantage of bus travel—anonymity that airports with their ID requirements can't provide.

In the grimy terminal bathroom, I transform myself further. The silk gown gets folded into a tight bundle and stuffed into a garbage bin. My wrap, belted with the decorative sash from the gown, becomes a simple black dress. I scrub makeup from my face with rough paper towels.

The woman who boards the bus looks nothing like Mrs. Blackwood.

The Greyhound pulls away from the station at 11:42 PM, exactly as scheduled. I press my forehead against cool glass, watching Chicago's skyline recede into darkness, heart hammering against my ribs. This is really happening. I'm really leaving.

But leaving what, exactly? The question gnaws at me as state lines blur past my window.

Leaving a prison, yes – but also leaving comfort, security, and a passion that still haunts my dreams despite my waking resistance.

Leaving a man who owns me completely but looks at me with something that sometimes resembles genuine admiration.

Am I running from captivity, or from the terrifying realization that parts of me have begun to accept it? To crave it? The question keeps me awake as other passengers doze around me, their soft snores a counterpoint to my racing thoughts.

For six hours, I barely breathe. Indianapolis appears through early morning fog – the second scheduled stop on the long route to New York. Passengers disembark for a thirty-minute break, stretching legs and seeking caffeine.

The convenience store across from the bus station offers overpriced coffee and packaged pastries. I purchase both, calculating remaining funds with obsessive precision. The cashier barely glances at me – just another traveler passing through.

Outside, morning light casts long shadows across the parking lot. Twenty minutes until the bus departs again. I sip bitter coffee, scanning surroundings with the hypervigilance of prey.

That's when I see it – a black Aston Martin idling at the far end of the lot.

My coffee slips from nerveless fingers, splashing across cracked concrete. No. Not possible. Not this quickly.

I turn to flee back toward the station, but he's already there, materializing from the shadows between buildings. Gage, still in evening clothes, bow tie undone, stubble darkening his jaw. His eyes burn with an intensity that freezes me mid-step.

"Going somewhere?" His voice is dangerously soft.

I back away, glancing desperately toward the station where my bus waits. "How did you?—"

Before I can finish, he's closed the distance between us, one hand gripping my upper arm, the other at my waist as he pulls me into the narrow alley between the convenience store and adjacent building.

"Did you really think I wouldn't find you?" His breath fans hot against my ear as he presses me against rough brick. "That I'd let you go?"

"Let me go," I demand, pushing against his chest, though we both know it's futile. "I don't belong to you."

"Don't you?" His hand slides to my throat, not squeezing, just resting there – a reminder of his physical dominance. "Tell me, Penelope. Where exactly were you running to? Who were you planning to be?"

The questions hit with unexpected force. Who was I planning to be? The terrifying truth is I don't know anymore.

"It doesn't matter," I whisper. "Anywhere but your cage."

"My cage?" His laugh lacks humor. "You mean our home? Our life?"

His mouth crashes down on mine, stealing breath and protests alike. The kiss is punishing, possessive – all teeth and tongue, claiming rather than seducing. I tell myself I'm resisting, but my body betrays me as always, my lips parting, my tongue meeting his with equal fervor.

His hands are everywhere – in my hair, gripping my waist, sliding down to cup my ass through the thin fabric of my makeshift dress. When he pulls back, we're both breathing hard, desire and fury mingling in the scant space between us.

"You're mine," he growls, spinning me to face the wall. The rough brick scrapes my palms as I brace against it. "I'll remind you exactly who you belong to."

His hand slides up the back of my thigh, discovering my lack of underwear with a sharp inhale. "No panties, Mrs. Blackwood? Were you hoping to catch someone's attention on that bus?"

"Fuck you," I gasp as his fingers move higher, sliding through slick folds that betray my body's response to his dominance.

"Already wet for me," he observes, voice dropping to that dangerous tone that makes my knees weak. "Even as you're running away, your body knows who it belongs to."

Two fingers thrust inside me without warning, curling to find that spot that makes my vision blur. My forehead presses against cool brick as I bite my lip to keep from crying out.

"Someone could see us," I protest weakly, even as my hips rock back against his invading fingers.

"Let them." The sound of his belt unbuckling sends a thrill of anticipation racing down my spine. "Let them see exactly what happens when you try to leave me."

He withdraws his fingers, replacing them with the thick head of his cock, teasing my entrance with maddening restraint. "Tell me who you belong to."

Pride wars with desperate need. "No one," I manage, though my body contradicts me, pressing back, seeking more.

His response is swift – one powerful thrust that buries him to the hilt, stretching me completely, drawing a cry I can't suppress. One large hand clamps over my mouth, muffling sounds that might attract attention.

"Wrong answer," he whispers against my ear, withdrawing almost completely before slamming back in. "Try again."

The brutal pace he sets leaves no room for thought, only sensation. Each thrust drives me harder against the wall, the friction of rough brick through thin fabric adding painful counterpoint to the pleasure building between my legs.

His free hand snakes around to find my clit, circling with devastating precision. "Who do you belong to, Penelope?"

"You," I gasp against his palm, shame and arousal twining into an emotion I can't name. "You, Gage."

"That's right." His fingers increase their pace, matching the relentless rhythm of his cock as it drives into me. "Mine. Every. Fucking. Inch."

The dual stimulation—his cock stretching me to my limits, his fingers working my clit with expert knowledge of exactly how to break me—pushes me toward an edge

I've tried desperately to resist.

"You don't get to leave," he growls, biting down on my earlobe hard enough to sting.

"You don't get to run from this. From us. From me ."

My body tightens around him, inner walls clenching as release approaches with humiliating speed. I hate that he can do this to me—reduce me to desperate need with such effortless skill—yet I can't fight the rising tide of pleasure.

"Come," he commands, voice strained with his own approaching climax. "Come on my cock while I remind you exactly who owns this perfect body."

The orgasm hits like violence—waves of pleasure so intense they border on pain, radiating outward from where we're joined. My scream is muffled by his hand, but I feel the vibration of it through my entire body as I convulse around him.

He drives into me one last time, deep and claiming, holding me flush as his release pulses inside, sealing his mark with every throb. His teeth sink into the juncture of my neck and shoulder, claiming me in the most primal way possible.

For endless moments, we remain locked together, both trembling in the aftermath. Reality seeps back slowly—the discomfort of brick against my chest, the distant sounds of the bus station, the cooling stickiness between my thighs.

As Gage withdraws, I feel empty in more ways than physical. He turns me gently to face him, his expression smoothing back into controlled neutrality despite the evidence of our encounter.

"Why did you run?" he asks, voice softer now as he tucks himself away, straightens his clothing.

The question pierces deeper than his physical claiming. Why did I run? Because I should want freedom. Because a woman with dignity wouldn't accept what I've accepted. Because I'm terrified by how easily my body submits to his. Because I'm more frightened by how my mind has begun to follow.

"I don't know who I am anymore," I admit, the truth spilling out before I can stop it. "I don't know if I'm still me, or just what you've made me."

His thumb traces my lower lip, gentle now where he was forceful before.

"You're still you, Penelope." His hand moves to cup my cheek. "The difference is you're also mine."

As reality reasserts itself, as Gage helps straighten my makeshift dress with surprisingly tender movements, the terrible truth crystallizes with painful clarity: I don't know who I am without him anymore. Freedom has become a theoretical concept rather than practical reality.

"The car is waiting," he says, voice returning to its usual controlled cadence. "We're going back to Chicago."

I follow him across the parking lot, legs still trembling from both pleasure and revelation. The bus to New York departs without me.

Freedom was always an illusion.

The Aston Martin purrs through the night, devouring miles of highway back toward Chicago. I lean my head against the cool window, watching raindrops race across the glass—each one disappearing as quickly as it forms, like my attempts at freedom.

Gage drives in silence, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, jaw clenched with

the remnants of his fury. The space between us crackles with unspoken words and the lingering scent of what happened in that alley.

I taste salt and realize tears are streaming down my face. Not the dramatic, heaving sobs of Hollywood heroines, but the quiet, devastating kind that come when something inside you has fundamentally broken.

"Why are you crying?" Gage asks, his voice unnervingly gentle now that victory is secured.

I don't answer immediately, watching the highway lights blur through my tears. What could I possibly say? That I'm mourning the woman I used to be? That I hate how my body betrays me, how it craves his touch even as my mind screams for freedom?

"Look at me, Penelope."

I keep my gaze fixed on the darkness beyond the window. "There's nothing left to say."

"There's everything to say." His hand reaches for mine, but I jerk away.

"Don't." The word holds all the venom I can muster. "Don't pretend this is anything but what it is."

He falls silent again, and I close my eyes, desperate to escape into momentary darkness. But even there, I see him—feel him—the phantom sensation of his hands on my skin, his mouth claiming mine, the pleasure I never wanted to feel.

"I hate you," I whisper, the words falling between us like broken glass.

"I know."

His calm acceptance only fuels the fire burning inside me. "You've taken everything from me—my freedom, my business, my dignity. And now..." My voice breaks. "Now you've even taken my resistance."

Rain beats harder against the windshield, mirroring the storm raging inside me.

"I hate that I respond to you," I continue, the confession tearing from somewhere deep and wounded. "I hate that my body betrays me every time you touch me. I hate that sometimes, I forget to hate you at all."

Gage pulls the car to the shoulder without warning, killing the engine. In the sudden silence, my breathing sounds harsh and ragged. He turns to face me, those blue eyes seeing far too much.

"I don't need your love, Penelope," he says quietly. "Just your presence."

A broken laugh escapes me, the sound raw and painful. "You have both," I whisper, the admission costing me everything I have left. "And I hate myself for it."

His hand reaches out, gently wiping tears from my cheek. I should pull away. I should slap him. I should scream until my throat is raw.

Instead, I close my eyes and lean into his touch, surrendering to the truth I've been fighting since Paris: the cage isn't just around me anymore—it's inside me too.

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The first hint of something wrong comes with my father's voice—a roar of fury echoing through the mansion's marble hallways. I'm in the conservatory arranging black dahlias, their dark petals like velvet beneath my fingertips, when the sound reaches me.

"Where is she? Where's my daughter?"

I freeze, scissors suspended mid-cut. It's been three weeks since my failed escape attempt in Indianapolis, three weeks of settling into a routine that I've stopped actively fighting. Three weeks of Gage's watchful gaze gradually softening as I perform my role with increasing conviction.

Mrs. Henderson appears at the conservatory entrance, her usually composed face tight with concern. "Miss Everett—Mr. Blackwood requests you remain here. Your father has arrived unexpectedly and is... quite agitated."

Before I can respond, my father's voice bellows again, closer now. "Penelope! Show yourself!"

"I'll handle this," I say, setting down my scissors with deliberate calm. "It's fine, Mrs. Henderson."

She hesitates, clearly conflicted between my assurance and Gage's instructions. "Mr. Blackwood was very clear?—"

The decision is made for us as my father storms into the conservatory, his face flushed with rage, Victor and another security guard following close behind but not

yet restraining him.

"There you are," he snarls, advancing toward me. "The obedient little wife, playing with flowers while you humiliate our family name."

I straighten my spine, facing him directly. "Hello, Father. I wasn't aware we had an appointment."

"Appointment?" He laughs, the sound brittle and dangerous. "I don't need an appointment to see my own daughter, especially when she's becoming the talk of Chicago society."

Victor steps forward. "Mr. Everett, I must insist you lower your voice and maintain appropriate distance."

My father ignores him completely, focus locked on me. "Do you have any idea what you've done? The Montgomery connection was decades in the making. Your little elopement with Blackwood has set our family back years in negotiations."

"Elopement?" I repeat, genuinely confused. "We had a wedding with three hundred guests. You were there."

"A wedding you tried to run from!" His voice rises again, spittle flying from his lips. "James Montgomery Senior approached me at the club yesterday. Said his sources confirmed you were caught trying to flee your husband at some godforsaken bus station in Indiana."

The blood drains from my face. I hadn't realized that information had spread beyond Gage and his security team.

"The Montgomerys are reconsidering the alliance with Violet," he continues, stepping

closer. "Your selfishness threatens everything I've built."

"That's enough." Gage's voice cuts through the conservatory, calm but carrying unmistakable authority. He stands in the doorway, impeccable in a charcoal suit despite the early hour, his expression controlled but eyes dangerously cold. "This conversation is over, William."

My father whirls toward him. "You. You can't even control your own wife. What kind of man?—"

"My marriage is not your concern," Gage interrupts, moving to stand between us. "And you're no longer welcome on this property."

My father's face contorts with rage. "She's my daughter!"

"She's my wife," Gage counters, voice dropping to that dangerous tone I've come to recognize. "And you've just forfeited any visitation privileges you might have retained."

"You arrogant bastard." My father lunges forward suddenly, shoving past Gage to grab my arm with bruising force. "This isn't over, Penelope. Your disobedience has consequences."

Before I can react, his other hand swings up, connecting with my cheek in a stinging slap that snaps my head sideways. The shock of it freezes me in place, taste of copper flooding my mouth where my teeth cut the inside of my cheek.

What happens next blurs in my memory—Gage's controlled demeanor shattering as he grabs my father by the throat, slamming him against the nearest wall with enough force to rattle the glass panels of the conservatory.

Victor and the second guard moving swiftly to restrain rather than separate, following some unspoken protocol that suggests this reaction was anticipated.

"You will never touch her again." Gage's voice is barely recognizable, a primal growl that raises the hair on my arms. His forearm presses against my father's windpipe, not quite cutting off air but making breathing a conscious effort.

"You will never speak to her again. You exist in this city solely by my tolerance, William. Remember that."

My father's face purples, eyes bulging as he claws ineffectively at Gage's arm. For a terrible moment, I think Gage might actually kill him.

"Gage," I say quietly, the word emerging as barely more than a whisper.

It's enough. His head turns slightly toward me, though his grip doesn't loosen.

"Not here," I continue, voice steadier now. "Not like this."

His expression takes on a calculative look. With deliberate control, he releases my father, stepping back as Victor and the guard move in to secure him.

"Remove him from the property," Gage instructs, straightening his cuffs with precise movements. "Full restriction protocol. No exceptions."

My father, still gasping for air, manages to spit out one final threat as they drag him toward the door. "This isn't over, Penelope. You'll regret choosing him over family."

When they're gone, silence falls over the conservatory. I stand perfectly still, one hand rising unconsciously to touch my cheek where the skin still burns from the impact.

Gage crosses to me in three long strides, his fingers gentle as they tilt my face toward the light, examining the mark that's surely reddening already.

"Ice," he says, the word clipped. "And the doctor should examine you."

"It's just a slap," I reply, surprised by the steadiness in my voice. "I've had worse."

His expression darkens at the implication. "That's not a comfort, Penelope."

Before I can respond, Mrs. Henderson appears with an ice pack wrapped in a soft cloth. Gage takes it, pressing it gently against my cheek.

"I've already called Dr. Fielding," she informs us. "He'll be here within the hour."

"That's not necessary," I begin, but Gage's expression silences my protest.

"It is," he says firmly. "Not just for the slap. Your quarterly examination was scheduled for this week anyway."

I'd forgotten about that—the regular health checks stipulated in our arrangement, monitoring my physical condition like maintenance for valuable property.

"Fine," I concede, taking the ice pack from his hand to hold it myself. "I'll see the doctor. But I'm perfectly all right."

His gaze searches mine, looking for something I can't identify. "This won't happen again," he promises, voice low and certain. "He will never have access to you again."

The protective declaration should feel like another form of possession, another man claiming authority over my interactions. Instead, it sends an unexpected wave of relief through me.

"Thank you," I say simply.

He looks surprised at my genuine gratitude. Before he can respond, his phone buzzes with what is clearly an urgent message.

"Security protocols," he explains, checking the screen. "I need to ensure the perimeter adjustments are implemented correctly. Will you be all right for a few minutes?"

I nod, still holding the ice against my cheek. "Go. I'm fine."

He hesitates, then presses his lips briefly to my forehead—a gesture so unexpectedly gentle it catches me off guard. "I'll return before the doctor arrives."

When he's gone, I sink onto the nearest bench, suddenly exhausted. The confrontation with my father has left me shaken in ways I hadn't anticipated. Not from fear—I've endured his rage before—but from the realization that Gage's protection felt like safety rather than another form of control.

Dr. Fielding arrives precisely on schedule, his professional demeanor unchanged since my pre-wedding examination. He sets his bag on the dining room table that's been cleared for his use, withdrawing instruments with practiced efficiency.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he greets me formally. "I understand there was an incident this morning."

"A minor one," I reply, removing the ice pack to reveal what I'm sure is visible bruising now. "Nothing serious."

He examines my cheek with clinical detachment, checking for fractures or deeper tissue damage before pronouncing it a superficial injury that will heal without intervention.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to proceed with your scheduled examination," he says, opening his medical bag wider. "It's been approximately three months since your last complete assessment."

The routine is familiar now—blood pressure, heart rate, basic reflexes. He draws blood for the standard panel of tests, makes notes about my weight (slightly increased since Paris), and asks clinical questions about my general health.

"Any changes in your menstrual cycle?" he asks, not looking up from his notepad.

I pause, mentally calculating dates. "It's late," I realize aloud. "About two weeks now."

This catches his attention. He glances up, setting aside his pen. "Are you typically regular?"

"Yes." The implications of the question hit me suddenly. "But that's not unusual with stress, and there's been plenty of that recently."

He nods noncommittally. "Any nausea? Breast tenderness? Unusual fatigue?"

I think back over recent days—the morning queasiness I'd attributed to anxiety, the exhaustion that seemed natural given emotional circumstances.

"Some," I admit. "But nothing significant."

Dr. Fielding reaches into his bag and withdraws a small plastic cup. "I'd like to perform a pregnancy test as part of your examination. Standard procedure given the circumstances."

The clinical phrasing doesn't disguise the significance of his request. I take the cup

with suddenly unsteady hands, following his directions to the nearby bathroom.

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When I return, he conducts the test with efficient movements, adding drops of my sample to a small device that looks more sophisticated than the drugstore tests I've seen in advertisements.

"This will take a few minutes," he says, setting a timer. "In the meantime, let's continue with the examination."

I comply mechanically, responding to questions about sleep patterns and nutrition while my mind races ahead to possibilities I've refused to consider until now.

Gage's words from our honeymoon echo in my memory: "Going to keep you full of my cum until you're swollen with my child." The deliberate crudeness had seemed like just another aspect of his possession at the time. Now those words take on new significance.

The timer beeps, drawing my attention back to the present. Dr. Fielding checks the test result, his expression professionally neutral.

"Mrs. Blackwood," he says, looking up to meet my gaze directly. "The test is positive. You're pregnant."

The words land like physical blows, rearranging reality around me even as I sit perfectly still.

"How... how far along?" My voice sounds distant to my own ears.

"Based on your reported last menstrual period, approximately six weeks," he answers,

making notes in my file. "Likely conceived during your honeymoon in Paris. I'll want to schedule an ultrasound to confirm dating, but the timing aligns with your wedding."

Paris. The memories flood back—Gage claiming me repeatedly in every room of the villa, his possession total and uncompromising. His deliberate refusal to use protection, his explicit statements about wanting to see me carrying his child.

"Does Mr. Blackwood know?" Dr. Fielding asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I shake my head. "No. I didn't suspect myself until just now."

"I'll prepare a complete report for him as usual," he says, returning instruments to his bag. "But perhaps you'd prefer to deliver this particular news personally."

The suggestion surprises me—a small kindness, allowing me to share this life-altering information myself rather than having it delivered through clinical channels.

"Yes," I agree quietly. "I would."

Dr. Fielding completes his examination, providing prenatal vitamins and basic instructions for early pregnancy care. Throughout his clinical explanation, my mind remains fixed on a single, transformative reality:

I'm carrying Gage Blackwood's child.

When the doctor leaves, I remain seated at the dining table, hands resting on my still-flat abdomen.

Everything has changed in the space of a single sentence.

The body I've begun to accept as no longer entirely my own now shelters another life—a life created from both of us, innocent of the arrangement that brought us together.

Gage finds me there an hour later, still sitting in contemplative silence.

"The security protocols have been updated," he says, loosening his tie as he enters. "Your father will never get that close again." He pauses, noticing my expression. "What did the doctor say?"

I look up, meeting his gaze directly. "I'm pregnant."

For once, I witness Gage Blackwood genuinely surprised. He goes completely still, his usually controlled expression revealing naked shock.

"Pregnant," he repeats, the word emerging with unusual softness.

"Six weeks," I confirm. "Paris."

He moves toward me slowly, as if approaching a wild animal that might flee. When he reaches me, he kneels beside my chair, one hand covering mine where it rests against my abdomen.

"You're carrying my child," he says, voice filled with wonder I've never heard from him before.

"Yes."

His free hand rises to cup my face, thumb gently stroking the bruise left by my father's attack. "No one will ever hurt you again," he promises, the words carrying weight beyond physical protection. "Either of you."

The abstract concept of escape that has lingered in the back of my mind these past weeks suddenly seems not just impractical but undesirable.

Where would I go? What kind of life could I provide for this child alone, constantly looking over my shoulder, depriving them of stability and resources? Would I really want to separate this child from their father, regardless of how our relationship began?

"I need to process this," I tell him honestly. "It changes everything."

He nods, still kneeling beside me. "Take whatever time you need. Whatever you require—doctors, specialists, accommodations—you only need to ask."

The offer is genuine, I realize. For the first time, I hold something Gage truly values beyond mere possession.

In the days that follow, I find myself transformed by knowledge that grows inside me. My mornings begin with quiet nausea that passes by mid-day. My body, always sensitive to Gage's touch, now responds with even greater intensity—a biological reaction to the hormones surging through my system.

One week after the doctor's confirmation, I enter Gage's study without knocking, a folder tucked under my arm.

He looks up from his desk, surprise evident at my unannounced arrival. "Penelope. Is everything all right?"

"Fine," I assure him, approaching his desk with newfound confidence. "I've been thinking about the nursery."

His expression shifts from concern to something softer, more vulnerable. "The

nursery?"

I open the folder, spreading sketches across his desk—designs I've been working on privately in the conservatory studio. "The east wing has that connecting room with southern exposure. Perfect light, and close enough to hear the baby when they wake."

Gage studies the drawings, fingers trailing over pencil lines that show a carefully considered space—not overly gendered, designed for both functionality and beauty.

"These are remarkable," he says finally, looking up to meet my gaze. "You've put significant thought into this."

"It's our child," I reply simply. "They deserve a beautiful beginning."

His expression softens. "Our child," he repeats, the possessive pronoun now encompassing something beyond just me. "Yes, they do."

That evening, I remove my wedding and engagement rings from the jewelry box where I've stored them since our return from Indianapolis. Though I've worn them for public appearances, in private I've maintained this small rebellion—bare fingers as minimal protest.

When I slide them back onto my finger, the weight feels different now—less like shackles and more like anchors, grounding me in a reality I'm choosing to accept.

Gage notices immediately when I join him for dinner, his gaze fixing on my hand as I reach for my water glass. He says nothing, but satisfaction radiates from him like physical heat.

"I've arranged for the top maternal specialist in Chicago to join your care team," he informs me between courses. "Dr. Elizabeth Chen. She'll coordinate with Dr.

Fielding."

"Thank you," I say, genuinely appreciative of his thoroughness. "When will I meet her?"

"Next week, if that suits your schedule." The deference to my preferences is new—a subtle shift in our dynamic since the pregnancy announcement.

"That's fine." I hesitate, then add: "I'd like to visit Wildflower tomorrow. Check on operations, review upcoming orders. If that's acceptable."

I watch him consider the request, weighing freedom against protection in this new context.

"Victor will drive you," he says finally. "Four hours should be sufficient?"

"Yes." The small victory sends disproportionate satisfaction through me. "Thank you."

He studies me over the rim of his wine glass. "Pregnancy agrees with you," he observes. "You're glowing."

The observation might once have felt like another form of possession. Now, I accept it with a slight smile. "I'm feeling better. The morning sickness is less severe."

"I'm glad." His tone carries genuine concern rather than mere propriety. "Is there anything else you need? Anything that would make you more comfortable?"

The question opens possibilities I haven't considered.

"Actually, yes," I say after a moment's thought.

"I'd like to resume regular communication with Sandra about Wildflower operations.

Not just occasional visits, but real involvement in decision-making.

The business is still mine, according to our agreement. "

He nods without hesitation. "Of course. I'll have IT set up secure channels on your laptop tomorrow. Video conferencing, collaborative software, whatever you require."

The ease of his agreement catches me by surprise. "Thank you."

"Your continued creative engagement benefits everyone," he says pragmatically. "Particularly now, when your physical presence at the shop may become less practical as your pregnancy progresses."

The controlled businessman remains, I realize, practical considerations never far from his mind. Yet something has shifted since the pregnancy announcement—his possession now extended to include protection, provision, accommodation in ways I hadn't anticipated.

The following day, Victor drives me to Wildflower with minimal security theater. No additional vehicles, no visible earpieces or constant communication checks. Just a discreet presence maintaining appropriate distance as I reconnect with the business I built.

Sandra's delight at my unexpected visit is genuine, though her eyes widen slightly at the sight of my wedding ring catching light as I gesture.

"The store looks amazing," I tell her, admiring new display configurations and seasonal arrangements. "You've done incredible work."

"Just following your vision," she demurs, though pride shines through her modest response. "The Montgomery wedding brought in three new corporate accounts. Apparently, the mother of the bride was very impressed with our work."

The irony doesn't escape me—my sister's wedding to the family my father accused me of betraying has benefited my business.

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We spend hours reviewing books, discussing design directions for upcoming events, planning inventory for seasonal transitions. For these precious hours, I'm simply Poppy again—the florist, the creative, the businesswoman.

When it's time to leave, I feel genuinely refreshed rather than resentful of restrictions. Victor waits patiently by the car, checking his watch without comment when I emerge a few minutes past our agreed departure time.

"One more stop before we head back," I tell him, sliding into the back seat. "The shopping district on North Michigan Avenue."

He nods, pulling into traffic without questioning my request. The additional stop falls within acceptable parameters, it seems.

At the upscale baby boutique, I select several books on pregnancy and early childhood development, along with a small stuffed rabbit made of organic cotton—my first tangible acknowledgment of the life growing inside me.

On our way back to the estate, we pass the bus station—the same terminal where my first escape attempt began months ago, before my marriage. Victor tenses slightly as we approach, clearly anticipating potential complications.

"Pull over, please," I request quietly.

After a momentary hesitation, he complies, guiding the car to the curb across from the station entrance. "Mrs. Blackwood?"

"Just for a moment," I assure him, already opening my door. "I won't be long."

He exits the driver's side quickly, maintaining appropriate distance as I cross the street toward the station. Inside, nothing has changed—the same worn benches, the same electronic departure board listing destinations across the country.

I stand before it, watching city names scroll past. New York. Los Angeles. Miami. Phoenix. Places I once imagined might offer freedom from the cage I now voluntarily inhabit.

A woman approaches the ticket counter, purchasing passage to Denver with cash. The transaction is simple, anonymous. I could do the same right now—buy a ticket, board a bus, disappear before Victor could stop me.

My hand drifts unconsciously to my still-flat abdomen, protective despite the pregnancy being too early to show. Everything has changed in ways I never anticipated. The freedom I once desperately sought now seems hollow compared to the responsibility growing inside me.

Is this Stockholm syndrome—this gradual acceptance of my captor's values, this reframing of captivity as protection? Or is it something deeper, more genuine—a fundamental shift in perspective brought about by impending motherhood?

I turn away from the departure board, walking back toward the entrance where Victor waits, outwardly calm though tension radiates from his posture.

"Ready to go home?" he asks, the question carrying weight beyond its simple words.

"Yes," I reply, surprising myself with how true it feels. "I am."

As we drive away from the station, I watch it recede in the side mirror until it

disappears from view—a symbol of possibilities I'm consciously setting aside. Not permanently, perhaps, but deliberately, with clear understanding of my choice.

Back at the estate, Gage waits in his study, pretending absorption in work though the tension in his shoulders reveals his awareness of exactly where I've been.

"The shopping district had some lovely boutiques," I say, placing the books and stuffed rabbit on his desk. "I thought we might start a collection."

He lifts the small toy, examining it with surprising gentleness before meeting my gaze.

"Victor mentioned your other stop," he says carefully.

"Yes." I don't pretend ignorance about the bus station. "I needed to see it again."

"And what did you see?" His question carries layers of meaning, probing for insight into my mindset, my intentions.

I consider my answer carefully. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"It doesn't matter?" The question emerges casually, but the intensity of his gaze betrays its importance.

"No." The word emerges with quiet certainty. "Not anymore."

He sets down the rabbit, crossing to where I stand. His hands frame my face with unexpected gentleness, thumbs tracing my cheekbones as he studies me with that penetrating intensity I've come to know so well.

"Is this surrender, Penelope?" he asks, voice dropping to that intimate timbre that still

sends unwelcome heat through my veins.

I consider the question honestly, searching my own complex emotions for truth among tangled motivations.

"Not surrender," I say finally. "A different choice than I might have made before, but mine nonetheless."

He searches my expression for signs of deception, finding none. "For the child?"

"Partly," I acknowledge. "But not entirely."

This admission—that my changing feelings extend beyond maternal protection to something more complex, more personal—shifts something between us. He pulls me against him, arms encircling me with possessive tenderness.

"Whatever your reasons," he murmurs against my hair, "whatever name you give this change, know that I will protect you both with everything I possess."

The distinction matters, I realize.

That night, as Gage sleeps beside me, his hand resting possessively over my abdomen even in unconsciousness, I stare at the ceiling and consider the strange journey that has brought me here. From desperate captive to reluctant wife to expectant mother.

Is this surrender? Is it Stockholm syndrome? Or is it simply adaptation to a reality I can't change?

The answer eludes me.

In the darkness, I place my hand over Gage's where it rests against my abdomen. His

fingers shift in sleep, intertwining with mine in unconscious possession.

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The morning sickness has finally subsided, replaced by an energy I haven't felt in months.

I stand before the full-length mirror in our bedroom, studying my reflection with new eyes.

At twelve weeks pregnant, there's the faintest curve to my abdomen—barely visible but unmistakably there. Proof of the life growing inside me.

I dress carefully—a silk blouse that skims my changing body, tailored pants that make me feel powerful, not just pretty arm candy. Today isn't about playing the obedient wife. Today, I reclaim my voice.

Gage sits at his desk in the study when I enter without knocking, reviewing what appears to be acquisition documents. He looks up, that assessing gaze I've grown so accustomed to softening when it lands on me.

"You look beautiful this morning," he says, setting aside his papers. "How are you feeling?"

"Better." I move to the chair across from his desk but don't sit. "We need to talk."

Something in my tone alerts him. His posture straightens slightly, that controlled businessman emerging. "Of course. What's on your mind?"

I take a breath, centering myself. "I want to renegotiate our arrangement."

The words hang between us. Gage's expression doesn't change, but I catch the slight narrowing of his eyes.

"Renegotiate," he repeats carefully. "In what way?"

"Real autonomy. Not the illusion you've been providing.

" I move closer to his desk, my hands resting on its polished surface.

"I want to run Wildflower from the office three days a week.

I want to travel for business when necessary.

I want to see my friends without security hovering.

I want access to my own money without approval. "

He leans back in his chair, studying me with that penetrating intensity. "These are significant changes from our current arrangement."

"They are." I meet his gaze steadily. "But circumstances have changed, haven't they?"

His eyes drop briefly to my abdomen, where his child grows. "The pregnancy doesn't alter the fundamental nature of our marriage, Penelope."

"Doesn't it?" I lean forward, pressing my advantage. "Because I think it changes everything. Your child deserves a mother who isn't a prisoner. Who has agency, dignity, independence within the marriage rather than existing as your beautiful possession."

"You're not a prisoner?—"

"Gage." My voice cuts through his practiced deflection. "We're past the pretty euphemisms. I've been your captive, however gilded the cage. But this child changes the dynamic. I won't raise them to see this as normal."

"What exactly are you proposing?"

I straighten, feeling more like myself than I have in months.

"Freedom to run my business as I see fit.

Social independence—I can see friends, attend events, make plans without asking permission.

Financial autonomy over my personal accounts.

The right to travel for business or pleasure, with reasonable security but not surveillance. "

"And in return?"

The question catches me off-guard. I'd expected resistance, argument, perhaps even anger. Not negotiation.

"In return?" I repeat.

"What do I receive for these concessions? What assurance do I have that you won't use this freedom to disappear with my child?"

The directness of his concern surprises me with its honesty. No pretense about love or partnership—just the practical man who's never learned to trust.

"You have my word," I say simply.

He smiles at that. "Forgive me, but given your history of escape attempts, your word requires... reinforcement."

Heat flares in my chest. "Then what would you require?"

He's quiet for a long moment, fingers steeped as he considers.

"A formal agreement. Legal documentation of the new terms, including financial penalties for breach of contract.

Continued residence at the estate. Joint custody arrangements should the marriage end.

And..." He pauses, something almost vulnerable crossing his features.

"Your acknowledgment that you're choosing this life, not simply accepting it under duress. "

The last requirement stops me cold. He wants me to admit that I've begun to want him. To choose him.

I move around his desk slowly, noting how his eyes track my movement. When I reach him, I place my hands on the arms of his chair, leaning down until our faces are inches apart.

"And if I don't like these terms?" I ask, voice dropping to barely above a whisper.

His hand comes up to cup my face, thumb tracing my lower lip. "Then we continue as we are. Comfortable, secure, predictable. But you'll always wonder what freedom might have felt like."

The touch sends unwelcome heat through me, but I don't pull away. "You're so

certain of my feelings," I murmur, letting my lips brush his ear. "But what about yours? What do you get from this arrangement beyond ownership?"

His sharp intake of breath tells me I've hit something true. "What do you think I get?"

I pull back to study his face, seeing past the controlled mask to something more vulnerable beneath. "I think you're as trapped as I am. You've never had anyone choose you without something behind it. You want me to want you, not just submit to you."

"And do you?" he asks, voice roughened. "Want me?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with months of history, resistance, and unwilling attraction. I could lie. Instead, I tell him the truth.

"Yes." The admission costs me, but it's liberating too. "I hate that I want you. I hate how my body responds to you. I hate that you've made me crave things I never knew existed. But yes, I want you."

His pupils dilate at my words, hand tightening slightly on my face. "Then we have a foundation for renegotiation."

"Do we?"

He nods slowly. "I trust you to choose what's best for our child. And I believe you've come to understand that what's best for them includes their father."

He's right, though I'll never tell him so directly. The child growing inside me deserves better than a father who's only a memory or a stranger who visits on weekends.

"Fine," I say, straightening to my full height. "Draw up the papers. But I want my lawyer to review them."

"Agreed." He reaches for his phone, presumably to call his legal team. "Though there's one more condition."

I raise an eyebrow. "Which is?"

His hand slides to the back of my neck, pulling me down until his lips brush mine. "Tonight, we celebrate the new arrangement. Properly."

The kiss that follows is different from his usual claiming—softer, more questioning, as if seeking permission rather than taking what he considers his. When I respond, parting my lips to allow him deeper access, his groan vibrates against my mouth.

"Is that a yes to my condition?" he murmurs against my lips.

"That depends," I reply, surprising myself with my boldness. "Are you prepared what you're getting yourself into?"

His smile is dangerous. "Try me."

The legal paperwork takes three hours to draft and review.

I read every clause carefully, making modifications, demanding clarifications.

My independent lawyer—a fierce woman named Rebecca Torres who specializes in exactly these kinds of complex domestic arrangements—negotiates terms that would have seemed impossible months ago.

When we finally sign the documents, I feel like I'm taking my first real breath in months.

"So," Gage says, setting aside his pen, "how does freedom feel?"

"Beautiful," I answer honestly.

The moment the lawyer's footsteps fade down the hallway, the air between us crackles with electricity. We stare at each other across the desk, the signed papers scattered between us like a bridge we've just crossed.

"We're done pretending," I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Completely done," he agrees, his eyes dark with hunger.

I move first, sweeping the documents aside as I lean across the desk toward him. He meets me halfway, his mouth crashing against mine with desperate intensity. The kiss is hungry, claiming, months of tension finally unleashed.

His hands tangle in my hair as he pulls me further across the desk, papers crinkling beneath me. I can taste the victory on his lips, the satisfaction of finally having me exactly where he wants me—not just physically present, but choosing to be here.

"I can't wait until tonight," he growls against my mouth, his control finally snapping. "I need you now."

He circles the desk with predatory grace, and before I can react, he's lifting me, setting me on the edge of the polished surface. His hands work frantically at my blouse, buttons scattering as he strips it away.

"Gage," I gasp, but any protest dies when his mouth finds my throat, teeth grazing the sensitive skin there.

"Say you want this," he demands, hands cupping my breasts through my bra. "Tell me you're not just agreeing to our arrangement—tell me you want me."

"I want you," I breathe, arching into his touch. "God help me, I want you so much it

terrifies me."

The confession unleashes something primal in him. He tears my bra away, his mouth immediately closing over one sensitive peak while his hands push my skirt up around my waist.

"Fucking perfect," he groans against my skin. "Every inch of you."

His fingers find the edge of my panties, and instead of removing them gently, he tears them away completely. The sound of ripping lace makes me gasp, heat flooding through me at his desperate need.

"I'll buy you more," he says roughly, echoing words from months ago. But this time, there's reverence beneath the dominance.

He drops to his knees between my spread thighs, and the sight of this powerful man kneeling before me sends liquid fire through my veins. His hands grip my hips, holding me steady as he looks up at me with eyes dark as midnight.

"Mine," he says simply, then his tongue is on me, broad strokes that have me crying out within seconds.

I fall back against the desk, papers rustling beneath me as he works me with devastating skill. His tongue circles my clit with precision before delving deeper, fucking me with long strokes that make my thighs tremble.

"God, Gage," I moan, my hands fisting in his hair. "Don't stop."

"Never," he growls against my slick flesh. "I'll never stop making you feel this way."

He slides two fingers inside me, curling them to hit that spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids. His mouth continues its assault on my clit, sucking and licking

until I'm writhing beneath him.

"Come for me," he commands, his voice vibrating against my core. "Let me taste your pleasure, Penelope."

The orgasm crashes through me with violent intensity, my back arching off the desk as I cry his name. He doesn't stop, working me through every pulse, every aftershock, until I'm boneless and gasping.

Before I can recover, he's standing, turning me roughly until I'm bent over the desk, my hands braced against the polished wood. I hear the rasp of his zipper, feel the heat of him pressing against my entrance.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asks, voice strained with barely controlled need. "To drive me so fucking crazy I can't think straight?"

"Yes," I gasp, pushing back against him. "I want all of you. Every part."

He enters me in one powerful thrust, filling me completely, stretching me to my limits. We both groan at the exquisite sensation—he at my tightness, me at the feeling of being so thoroughly claimed.

"Christ, you feel incredible," he breathes, stilling for a moment to let us both adjust. "So tight. So perfect."

Then he begins to move, setting a punishing rhythm that has me crying out with each thrust. His hands grip my hips, angling me to take him deeper, to feel every inch of his possession.

"Mine," he growls, one hand sliding up my spine to grip my hair. "Say it, Penelope. Tell me who you belong to."

"Yours," I gasp, the admission torn from me as pleasure builds with frightening intensity. "I'm yours, Gage. Completely."

His pace increases, driving into me with desperate need. The sound of our bodies joining fills the office, primal and raw. I can feel my climax building, coiling tight in my core.

"I need to see your face," he says suddenly, withdrawing from me despite my whimper of protest.

He lifts me again, this time positioning me to face him as he sits in his chair, pulling me down to straddle his lap. The new position lets me sink onto him slowly, taking him inch by incredible inch.

"There," he breathes, hands gripping my hips as I begin to move. "Now I can see everything. Every expression. Every moment of pleasure."

I ride him with increasing intensity, my hands braced on his shoulders as I chase the release building between us. This position gives me control, and I use it, rolling my hips in ways that have us both gasping.

"Look at me," he demands when my eyes flutter closed. "I want to see you come apart. I want to watch you choose me."

I meet his gaze, seeing the hunger there, the possessiveness, but also something deeper—vulnerability, need, the desperate desire to be wanted for himself rather than his power.

"I choose you," I whisper, leaning down to kiss him as I move faster, harder. "I choose this. I choose us."

The words shatter his control. His hands tighten on my hips, helping me move as he

thrusts up into me with increasing desperation. When my orgasm hits, it's with devastating force, my inner muscles clenching around him rhythmically.

"Fuck, yes," he groans, the sensation of my climax triggering his own. "Take it all. Take everything."

He buries himself deep as he comes, filling me with his release while his mouth claims mine in a kiss that tastes of possession and promise.

Afterward, we remain connected, both breathing hard, skin slick with sweat. His forehead rests against mine, and for a moment, the powerful businessman is gone, replaced by something more human, more vulnerable.

"So," I say eventually, my voice still shaky. "How does it feel to have a partner instead of property?"

His arms tighten around me. "Terrifying," he admits quietly. "And perfect."