

Excerpt from Wife for A While, a billionaire marriage of convenience romance novel.

Chapter Seventeen

Benton

Timing is everything.

I stumbled from the car right as Jolene was coming around the side of the house. What was she doing? Just strolling around? Great. Just what I wanted. The look on her face was one of mild amusement, mixed with pity. The pity was understandable. I looked pitiable. But that didn't make it easier to stand. No man wants a woman to look at him with pity. Especially not a woman like Jolene, who might just be his equal - if not his better.

"I take it you didn't get up early to go to church," she said, lips pursed slightly, amusement still dancing in her eyes.

"It was a late mass," I said. I could hear the croak of my own voice. Jolene's eyes darkened, her brows furrowing for a moment.

"Did you sleep..."

She seemed to force herself into silence. And then she forced a smile. Clearly, she wanted to put last night behind us. What a goddamn saint. It just made me feel worse.

"Never mind," she said. "You do remember that we're meeting your parents in an hour?"

"What were you going to ask?"

Her nostrils flared.

"I said never mind," she said. "It's none of my business."

She wanted to know if I'd slept with someone. I hadn't. I'd slept on Lars' yacht, which is where last night's party ended. Not that I remembered it ending, or how we got to the yacht.

"Why isn't it any of your business?" I pressed. I was miserable, and I guess I wanted to share it. She was already frustrated, and I was pressing her.

"Because I'm just someone living in your house, wearing your wedding ring, and about to meet your parents," she said, throwing her hands up. "But I'm not entitled to the nosiness any of those things usually allow."

"I didn't sleep with anyone," I said, walking past her into the foyer. "I know that's what you want to know. Next time, just ask. I don't plan on hiding things from you. We're making this work as a team."

She watched me, but didn't respond. I had to shower and change and try to pull myself together before lunch. She already looked beautiful, setting the bar high.

Forty-five minutes later, she still looked beautiful. Wearing a crisp white skirt and gray blazer, pearls in her ears, hair framing her face, she looked like springtime. The ride to the country club was short and mostly silent; I knew she was nervous. Who wouldn't be?

"It'll be fine," I said, offering her what little solace I could. She turned to me with a smile.

"I know," she said.

"It's alright to be nervous."

"I know that, too," she laughed. "They're just people, though. Parents or not, they're just people."

I opened my mouth to say something, but closed it when I realized I had nothing to say about that. She was right, after all. They were *just people*.

Though I didn't quite feel that way when I escorted her into the dining room, one arm on her lower back, savoring the contact even after last night ensured that it would only ever be superficial. My parents sat at their usual table beside the window, my mother wearing her usual frown, my father looking on with his usual disinterest. They rose as we approached, but we didn't even get to shaking hands and introductions before my mother made things uncomfortable.

"So," my mother said, her eyes flashing as she scoured Jolene like a fashion designer about to reject a model for gaining a few pounds. "This is the lucky girl who's donning your grandmother's ring."

Fuck my ass. Did Jolene notice what my mother's tone implied? It might be hard to, since she was meeting my parents for the first time. But I read a novel in my mother's pursed lips and the crinkling of her brow's feet.

"This is the *woman*," I said firmly, wrapping an arm around Jolene's waist. Her slight jump didn't escape me any more than my mother's subtle disapproval. Jolene looked up at me, her lips slightly wet, her eyes wide. I winked, trying to put her at ease. She looked back at Mom and smiled.

"Charmed," she said. Inside, I smirked. Where had she picked *that* up? It was good. Very old school. My father shook her hand, silent, as was his wont.

"Let's sit," I said, pulling out Jolene's chair, taking her hand as she lowered into it. She kept looking at me like I was nude, wearing a rainbow wig, and riding a unicycle through the dining room; I guess she expected something very different after last night's scene. Only when the women had taken their seats did Dad and I join them.

"What a lovely restaurant," Jolene remarked. "The crystal is very beautiful."

"It's cheap," my mother sniffed, picking up her water glass. "Can't you tell?"

"Jaquelyn..." my father grumbled, looking at the menu, offering little in the way of assistance.

"I'm afraid I don't know much about fine crystal," Jolene said. "I suppose I ought to, as a wedding planner, but most of my clients prefer to spend their whole budget on the dress. Not too much left over for the table settings."

She was impressive. I loved it. That word, *loved*, lingered heavily at the base of my brain. It was a foreign word, to me. It felt uncomfortable in my thoughts. But I loved lots of things; booze and coke and fast cars and Cornish hens and James Joyce. I could love Jolene's ability to hold her own in the same way, couldn't I?

It didn't mean I loved *her*.

While I was dissecting the semantics of my own thoughts, I'd missed a new line of questioning from my mother.

"...very convenient. I don't suppose budget will be an issue with *your* wedding."

Jolene's smile wasn't cracking. Amazing.

"If I could marry Benton in a shoebox, I would," she said, clearly lying through her teeth. Playing her part beautifully. "It's *his* idea to go all out."

"That's right," I said, offering my belated support. Again, I reached for her. This time, I grabbed her hand. She dropped her eyes as I squeezed. Her palm was cold and wet. I rubbed it with my thumb. I could feel her almost pulling her hand away, and then the gentle relaxation of

her shoulder as she let me comfort her. Something strange was happening. I wished I wasn't so hungover, so I could have a better idea of what it was.

My mother was looking at our hands, too. My father was still looking at the menu. The server arrived promptly, and took our orders. My mother wanted a sidecar, my father a Manhattan. It was early enough for a mimosa, and Jolene and I each ordered one. Booze, I hoped, would cure all that ailed this party.

"Well, I hope you're prepared for a large guest list," Mom said. "The Spencer family is both large and sociable. I expect the groom's side of the church will be packed full. Do you have much family?"

"No," Jolene said. "Not really. Just friends who might as well be family."

"Shame," Mom said. "Family is so *very* important. Right, Gerard? Why, I've always felt that one can learn more from a person's family than anything they're willing to tell you upfront."

"Uh-huh," Dad grunted.

"Mom..." I wanted to end this before it started.

"Jolene, dear, I really hope you don't find me intrusive. It's just that Benton is my oldest son, and of course I feel a mother's obligation to ensure his success and happiness."

"Of course," Jolene said, and for the first time I could hear the bite of tension in her voice. "But I'm not sure I'm following you on the family thing. For some people, perhaps, family speaks to their character. But not everyone. Surely, you're aware that many people bear little resemblance to the rest of their family. There are clearly enough differences between you, ma'am, and your sons, for you to know that."

Thank God for quick service. The drinks arrived, cutting through the charged air. I couldn't get over my fiancée's boldness. The challenge in her words was hidden, but it was real as the orange juice in my drink.

"Benton and Lars are perfect representations of the Spencer name," Mom breathed. "What you don't learn from nurture, you learn from nature. Jolene, would you say that your family is reputable?"

"As I said, Jaquelyn..."

"Mrs. Spencer," my mother corrected.

"Come on, Mom," I shot back. "She'll be your daughter-in-law soon enough. Why don't you make her feel a little more part of the family?"

My mother opened her mouth to retort, but Jolene took control once more.

"I don't have any blood family anymore," she pointed out. "But *I* am reputable. That's all that matters."

"The catfish looks good," Dad said.

"Gerard, you can't eat that, there's pistachios," Mom said quickly before turning back to Jolene. "I was merely asking, dear. I'll admit, I was curious about you. I did the slightest bit of research. I assume you know more than me about your father's incarceration. Care to enlighten us?"

Jolene's hands shook.

"Mom, this is *not*..."

"What about the pork shoulder?" Dad asked.

"Dad!"

"...or your mother's? Both arrested on drug charges, right? Together? That's quite an urban love story, if you ask me..."

“Shut *up*, Mother,” I seethed. “This is my *fiancée*. I will not allow you to talk to her that way. One more word and we’re leaving.”

“If you leave, you leave *everything*,” Mom said. “I won’t allow you to flush our family name in some desperate attempt to spite me. I told you to find a *bride*, not a welfare case.”

“Excuse me,” Jolene suddenly said. “But for someone who cares so much about reputation, you’re certainly tarnishing your own, Jacquelyn. It’s not exactly politically correct to attack your son’s true love for her upbringing. And since we’re talking about politically correct, how about we get right down to the problem here. Are you so upset about my family, or my tax bracket? Because if my father was arrested for embezzlement, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“I don’t care about being politically correct, I care about...”

“Rags to riches stories sell *incredibly* well,” Jolene went on, denying my mother the chance to retort. “Even better when you add in a wicked, prejudiced mother-in-law. One call and I can have our faces plastered across every news stand in the country. *Billionaire Bitch Trashes True Love*. Like the sound of that?”

“I think I’ll have the catfish after all, I’m sure they’ll be able to make it without pistachios,” Dad said, putting his menu down. He looked around the table, taking in our tableau of rage. “Discussing politics, are we?”

“Your son has brought an ungrateful wench into the generous arms of our family,” Mom said, not taking her eyes off Jolene.

“Actually, Dad, your *wife* has insulted my *fiancée* for the last time. We’re leaving. Enjoy the catfish.”

“Jacquelyn...?” Dad was confused, as usual.

“You’re not going anywhere! You will sit here, and we will find a solution to this problem!” Mom said, seething, shaking, rage making the mole next to her ear turn red. I was on my feet already, and had one hand on Jolene’s shoulder. She didn’t have tears in her eyes. It was amazing. She just looked at my mother with contempt - and, amazingly, that same pity she’d had in her eyes that morning.

“There is no problem to find a solution to,” I snapped. “You will apologize to my bride, you will welcome her into our family, and you will tell her that grandma’s ring looks especially beautiful on her finger.”

“Sit. Down. Benton.”

“Come on, Jolene,” I said, grabbing her hand this time. But she resisted. Dad was looking at the menu again.

“Wait,” she said, releasing a huge breath of air and closing her eyes. “I don’t want...this is ridiculous. Jacquelyn, what do you want for your son? A good woman, who will make him a reputable man? Whether you believe it or not, that’s me. Maybe you’re not used to looking another woman in the eyes, but that’s what you’re doing right now. Poor or not, I’m every inch the woman you want him to marry. Trust me. I have integrity, and I have respect. Something you seem to lack. But I’ll forgive it, if you’ll agree to drop this bullshit and pretend to be happy for your son.”

She turned her brown eyes up to mine, her nostrils quivering slightly but the rest of her face still.

“You want to marry me. And I want to marry you.”

She looked at Dad.

“And you want the catfish.”

Dad, looking mildly shocked and a little bit amused, nodded. Slowly, I caved to the gravity of her hand in mine, lowering into my seat.

"We can all get what we want," she said. "If we just admit what we all know. Jacquelyn, your son needs me. There isn't another woman on this earth who can make a decent man out of him. Every other woman has failed. Right, Benton?"

Where was she getting this? Not just the words but the balls? The ability to ignore my mother's pure bitchiness?

"Right, love," I said.

"I'm marrying him, whether he gets the inheritance or not," she said, turning back to Jacquelyn one last time. "If you cut him off - if you cut *us* off - I'll find a way to support us until Benton can find a job. So, Jacquelyn, this is that truth I was talking about: we're going to be one big happy family. Like it or not, you're looking at your new daughter-in-law. Now, I can be your ally, or I can be your enemy. And that, *Mom*, is the only choice you have in the matter."

My mother looked like she was trying to turn Jolene into stone with her stare. Dad was looking at everything over the top of the menu, like a man hiding in a foxhole. I was, simply put, floored. Finally, my mother coughed. She picked up the menu.

"Get the pork shoulder, Gerard," she said. "I'll get the catfish, and you can have a bite or two without the pistachios."

And just like that, the matter was resolved. Jolene looked at me. I expected triumph. I expected the victor's pride. Instead, I saw just how close she was to shattering.

"Order me the chicken," she said, words thick and wet. "I have to use the restroom."

"Order her the chicken," I said to my parents when she was halfway to the bathroom. "I've got to go deal with what you've done. No wonder I'm so fucked up, with a royal bitch of a mother and a total tit of a father."

They couldn't do anything but look on as I rose and followed Jolene's trail to the back of the restaurant. She needed me. For once, I cared enough to be there for someone who wasn't me. And for once, the strangeness of that didn't even register with me.

Chapter Eighteen

Jolene

Of all the times that Benton could have acted like a human being in the month I'd known him, this was exactly the one time I wasn't happy about it.

I wanted him to stay at that damn table with his parents and leave me alone to recover in the bathroom. I'd gone to bat for him, and then some, coming up with all that stuff off the top of my head to convince Mr. and Mrs. Spencer that I loved their son. The least he could do was let me cry in private.

But dammit, he decided it was suddenly time to show a smidgen of empathy, and two seconds after I locked the bathroom door, he was knocking on the other side.

"Open up," he said. "Jolene, I need to talk to you."

No, he didn't. He needed to give me five minutes to get all these tears out of my system, scream away all my anger, and fix my make-up. He needed to go back and throw his drink in his mothers' wrinkled old bird-nosed face. He needed to let me out of this whole crazy agreement, and let me go back to my life, where no one ever spoke to me like I was a dog pissing on their antique Persian rug.

"I don't think so," I said, holding back the tears until he left. I didn't cry in front of people. Never had. Not once. I didn't even like talking to people when I cried, because you can hear it in my voice.

For a second, I thought he got the picture. I thought he left. And then he spoke again.

"Please."

Had he ever said that word before? I couldn't remember. But judging by the way he said it, it wasn't a regular part of his vocabulary. Something in the word stuck in my ear. The strain of him forcing it out. I reached for the door and opened it, just a crack.

"I want to be alone," I said, willing those tears to give me just a few more seconds. Just long enough to convince him I was fine, would be fine, if he would just leave.

"Why?" He demanded.

"I'm using the bathroom! I have to...use it," I said, the lie so obvious it was laughable.

"No, you don't," he said.

"How would you know?" I challenged. This was ridiculous. I was a full-grown woman. I was entitled to privacy when I wanted it. *Especially* in a bathroom. He put a hand on the door and pushed, in a way I'm sure he thought was gentle. But his version of *gently* wasn't very gentle at all, and before I could put the necessary force into pushing back, the door was opening a few more inches. Enough for him to step closer, almost inside.

I looked up at him, wanting to scream, wanting to push him away, wanting to just cry already. The tears weren't waiting. He couldn't see me cry. But I was going to explode if I didn't let them out.

And when they finally came, it wasn't because I *let* them - it's because I couldn't stop them.

I don't know how it happened, on a second-by-second basis. But somehow I ended up in his arms. I ended up wrapped in his strong, toned arms, my face pressed to his suit, mascara smudging his white shirt. I wound up with my nose too stuffed to smell his cologne, my tears dampening his tie. His chin on top of my head, the door closed between us, and locked once more. He walked me forward, towards the couch that sat across from the sink. Leave it to rich people to put a red velvet couch in their bathroom, but I sure was grateful for it.

“You shouldn’t have had to deal with that,” Benton said, rubbing my back. “My mother is...”

“...a total bitch!” I cried, feeling a little bit better when he pulled away and grinned.

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Benton...I...”

His grin faltered as he took in my grim countenance. The tears were slowing, but not wholly stopping.

“I can’t do this,” I squeaked. “I can’t...with her...anything...”

Verbal skills were failing me. But my point came across as Benton’s eyebrows knit together, and he grimaced, shaking his head.

“Nonsense,” he said. “This was a fluke. It’ll never happen again, Jolene. I promise, I’ll never let it happen again.”

“How can you promise that? This has been a bad idea since the start...a disaster...we can’t make this work. It won’t *work*, Benton.”

“Yes, it will,” he said, eyes firing up. “I’ll make it work.”

“You can’t! The world isn’t your oyster! You don’t just get everything you want, okay?”

Suddenly, he grabbed my chin, holding it firmly in his fingers. My skin sparked at the point of contact, and all the way down. I heard my own breath sucking in, my eyes drying immediately even as my mouth watered. I swallowed hard, willing it away, this sudden and inappropriate reaction.

“This isn’t about what I want,” he growled. “This is about you. And what you want. All you have to do is say you want this, and I’ll make it work. I’ll fight for this.”

What, exactly, were we talking about now? The fake marriage or...something else? He’d have to fight pretty damn hard if he wanted to convince me that there was anything between us except money. Except when he held me like that, when he looked at me like that, when he said those words that felt so real...

“I mean it. It’s not about what I want. But for the record...”

His eyes travelled over my face, landing on my lips. Pale blue pools of determination. His tongue rolled across his lips even as he stared at mine.

“I want this very, very much.”

He kissed me the way I always knew he would. Like I was his to kiss. And in my fevered state, I let him. Surrendering to his warmth, his insistent tongue. He took my mouth slowly, exploring the tip of my tongue with his, tickling the roof of my mouth. Moaning, I let him press me back into the couch, his body covering mine.

My blood thrummed at the pace of his hands rolling up my arm, into my hair, tangling in my curls. One hand framed the back of my neck, held me tight so I could feel everything he was doing to me, every delicious movement of his tongue, every protective pulse of his biceps pressed against my arms.

When I remembered that I had control over my body, that I wasn’t just a product of pleasure created in the moment he kissed me, I kissed him back. Tasted the orange juice and wine on his lips. Raked my hands up his blazer and curled my fingers around the starched fabric of his shirt, pulling him even closer.

Nothing mattered. Not his mother out there. Not the wedding ring on my finger. Not the tear stains on my cheeks, not the drugs still in his system, not the fancy cars or palatial estate or all the trappings of wealth he hid behind. All that mattered was my heart beating so hard it could

outpace a sprinter, and the taste of him, and the sudden sweep of safety I felt now that he was finally - finally - holding me.

"Oh," I gasped as he pulled away. His lips sucked at mine until the last possible moment, and then he paused, his nose pressed to mine, his eyes betraying a wonder and a want I felt all the way to my bones. The same way I felt. "Oh."

And then I slapped him.

It surprised me almost as much as it surprised him. But how *dare* he kiss me like that? How dare he say things like that, then kiss me? Like he had a right to? Like he'd earned it?

He didn't. He was an ass. He'd let me go the night before, and he'd dragged me to this damn lunch without warning me about his mother. He was a womanizing ass. So what if he gave my rabbit a nice place to live, and was paying for my best friend's son to go to school, and was stupidly handsome and really funny and very nice when he wanted to be?

So what if he sounded like he meant it – if he kissed me like he meant it?

He held his reddening cheek in his hand. I watched for any reaction, and one came, very slowly. It was a smile. Boy, Benton sure did know how to keep me on my toes.

"Come back out there, Jolie," he said, smiling and shaking his head. "She can't hurt you. She never could, but she definitely can't now. Maybe you don't want to hear it, maybe you don't want to know it, but I've got you. Alright? I mean, holy shit, you took care of yourself out there, but you have to know...I've got you."

Benton. Always talking about what he had. What he owned. But for once, that wasn't what he meant. My inhale was shaky. But my exhale was strong. I closed my tingling lips and nodded.

Rising, he offered me his hand. I looked at it, incredulous. He really never gave it a rest, did he?

"No more kissing," he said. "Though I do wish you'd reconsider your stance on that. You're a halfway decent kisser."

If he wasn't smiling the way he was, I would have been offended. As it stood, I was just surprised by how coolly he took that slap. Like it hadn't happened at all. Feeling a little guilty about it, I took his hand. He pulled hard enough to bring me against his chest. Turned me until I could see us in the mirror.

"Fuck, Jolene. Look at you," he said, whispering in my ear. "How could that old bitch ever hurt you?"

I smiled, then. And pulling to the side so I could look up at him, I wiped at my cheeks. He really could be alright, when he made the effort. If he made the effort more often, I could see how kissing him might become a regular thing.

That was a big 'if'.

"Do you kiss your mama with that mouth?" I joked.

"No," he said, and drew down once more, lips inches from mine - so close, so promising, that I went stiff all over. It wasn't fair, the way he played tug-of-war with my emotions. They weren't his to play with! It wasn't fair that he should be so utterly desirable. Less than a minute, and I was itching to feel his lips again. "Just you."

But he pulled away. I relaxed. I still needed to clean up a bit, my make-up smudged and spilled by tears. He waited, leaning against the door, watching me work, watching me in the mirror. And then we left together, ignoring the look the busboy sent our way. This time, when he wrapped his arm around my waist, it wasn't for show. Something big had changed. And I would bet money everyone in that room knew it.

