

Chapter 89

The doors parted to both sides as Hazel sauntered into the welcome lounge, orange hair pulled up in a high ponytail with eyes that shone with health, thanks to the antidote that was tucked in her bra.

Her pink lips curled into the congenial smile Sush so often saw, but there was a glint - a flicker of knowingness in those eyes she used to trust so much, and Sush wondered if the glint had always been there, or had it just revealed itself now?

Hazel skipped at her last step and hopped in front of Sush, saluting. "Reporting for duty, Chief!"

She never saluted, not even as a joke. And the slight over-emphasis of her title was a dead - but intentional - giveaway.

Cutting the crap and getting to the point, Sush said, "Whatever it is, Hazel, we'll find out. And we won't rest until we do."

The glint from before got slightly more visible, the tilt of her lips no longer carried warmth because it felt like the mask hiding that sly grin was being peeled back. The most satisfying thing for Hazel was that it was being peeled back by herself, on her terms. In a voice that did not match her demeanor - one that her gossipy self always used, one that most found welcoming, she said, "I hope so, Chief. I don't know what we'll do without you. We need all the help we can get to find the culprits."

A deep rumble of a suppressed growl came from Greg, which was where Hazel's sights went to next, and she revealed more masked layers. Pride exuded from her being at her success in bamboozling the sharpest tool in the lycan shed. Her late best friend was right - the duke wasn't as brilliant as they made him out to be.

After giving him a moment to see the real her, her layers came back on. "Your Grace, how have you been? Oh, it's so nice to see you taking care of Sush. I knew there was a spark between you two! You're both so cute together, like a big ball of love just waiting to explode into little love fragments for the babies."

Sush's chest began rising and falling more prominently. Her eyes didn't just emanate betrayal and determination, but anger as well. "You know about it," Sush muttered, realization dawning on her. The word *explode* wasn't picked by accident. When Hazel took off her mask for another two long seconds, Sush got her answer: Hazel knew something about the explosion that took her mother away.

The deputy chuckled lightheartedly and replied, "Our tenure forces us to know a lot of things, Sush. You gotta be more specific."

"My mother," Sush spat in a low utterance through gritted teeth and burning eyes.

Hazel shrugged. "I haven't met her but I'm sure she's nice."

"She's dead, Hazel. She's been dead for years."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Hazel feigned devastation.

"No." Sush took a step forward like she was going to tear out Hazel's throat. "You knew she was dead. You've known it for years. You never let it slip. You've even told people on my behalf when they asked, back when we were trainees. You know more than you're letting on. What else do you know?" Sush demanded, voice raising with each word. She might have gotten better at keeping her cool when it came to other things, but she was nowhere near calm when her mother was brought up.

Unaffected by her chief's murderous energy since she carried her own, Hazel pursed her lips and shrugged again. "Sorry I can't be of help. Maybe try asking your Pop? Oh, wait. You don't know who he is. Maybe

revisit your time with your mother? Get some clues or something? Funny thing about parents, though: they try to hide so much from us kids but there are just some things that cannot be hidden, you know? Things in plain sight." On that note, she turned to her wrist watch with an arm that was raised unnecessarily higher than usual - above eye level - when she said, "Welp, I gotta go. Got systems and files to look through and I only have six hours. I'll call to check up on you later. Safe drive back!"

She sauntered away and hopped into an empty elevator, commenting in passing, "Whoo, sure miss this elevator." That was the recently repaired and replaced elevator that Sush and Greg were stuck in, the one that could've taken Sush's life had Greg not been there.

Sadistic bitch, Sush thought.

A tug at her waist made her stop trying to burn the elevator with her glare, and the deep voice that was now her source of comfort reverberated through her ears, "Let's head back. We'll start cracking her riddles and take things from there."

Letting him drag her away, Sush couldn't deny the heaviness that set foot in her heart. She took a good look around, not knowing whether she'd be able to see the walls that needed a new coating and the desks that lost their shine over the years. Her ears perked at the sound of aged air-conditioners, recording the low hum and saving it, in case she didn't get to hear it again. The moment she took her first step out, she broke from within.

For so many years, this place had been home. She arrived with an agenda, jumped through hoops with only one goal in mind and it wasn't a noble one. But somewhere along the way, she must have gotten enraptured with the work, seen the potential and tested the possibilities that she began putting - not just her mind - but her soul into everything she did. Funny how it took this experience - one that could snatch all

this away from her in the next few hours or weeks - to make her realize how cruel fate could still be despite the scars that tainted one's past: her passion lay in a place governed by people that took her mother.

Her eyes burned with tears, and she refused to reach for them until she was in the car. She picked up the pace, and Greg kept up without issues, his thumb on her waist drawing circles, aware that it wasn't helping much but didn't know what else to offer her but his silence until they were in his vehicle.

About ten steps away, Greg slid his free hand into his pants pocket, only to realize he didn't have the keys. Heaving a frustrated exhale at himself while pulling Sush to a halt when they were two steps away from the car, he had her face him and she'd already begun rubbing her tears on one side when Greg's gentle stroke reached for the stream on the other. "Sush, she and everyone else involved will pay for this, I promise you. And now, for the embarrassing part - I think I dropped my keys in Valor's office. Can you wait here while I go get them? It'll take less than a minute." He could speed using the emergency stairs, beats waiting for the elevator.

"No, I..." her eyes went back to the building. "I want to wait inside." She'd get to see, smell and hear everything one last time.

"Come." His hand returned to her lower back and they took about twenty steps before a forceful impact threw them far from the parking lot and toward the lounge, with Sush securely held in Greg's embrace as his back faced the source of the impact. The deafening blast banged their eardrums and the accompanied seismic waves reverberated through their heads, making it hard to get up.

Greg turned Sush to face him, thumbs brushing over her face to feel for any scratches as her features scrunched in discomfort. "Sush, are you okay? Can you hear me?" he hollered in wide-eyed franticness. "Sush!" He gave her a gentle shake.

Sush delivered weakened punches to his arms as she groaned, "My hearing is fine. Stop... shaking me, Greg. God!"

"Oh, thank goddess," he breathed in relief, and pulled her back into his chest, planting a kiss on the top of her head as he apologized, hiding her from the hunters who'd just arrived for work and were rushing toward them, some of whom had already called the emergency line.

Patterson and Kenji arrived, took in the scene, and shared horrified gazes with everyone on site.

Greg finally turned around to assess the damage. His car was gone - combusted parts of it fell all over the place, radiant flames of orange and yellow attracted an audience, especially when some of the exploded parts fell on both hunters and mavericks screaming for help. The mavericks got out quicker, jumped around shouting curses and trying to shake off the scalds and burns while waiting for themselves to heal as the unaffected ones went to the hunters, shifted and burned their hands to lift the parts just to get them out.

Greg's onyx eyes scanned his surroundings, and when he looked toward the sixth floor window, he locked eyes with a very displeased Traffic Cone watching with crossed arms, whose hair morbidly matched the flames of the crime scene.

As Greg reminded himself to reward Desmond for telling him ten times over to never get a keyless car, he swore to Goddess and Satan that he was going to make the Traffic Cone's death his most legendary kill yet.

Chapter Comments

