

Billionaire's Ex-wife : Craving You Chapter 31

Chapter 31

RAVEL

(PRESENT TIME)

Since my return from Seattle, sleep has eluded me completely. It all started with a heated exchange with Hazel, which lingered in my mind long into the night. And as if that wasn't enough, my encounter with David added to the turmoil, leaving me restless. Eventually, I decided to escape the situation and headed straight to New York the next morning.

To my surprise, when I reached my office in New York, Rose was already there, waiting with a fresh suit, having anticipated my arrival. Grateful for the thoughtfulness, I quickly changed into the new outfit and delved into work without wasting any time. Hours stretched into the night, and I found myself tirelessly working until the clock struck two am.

The incessant noise of my alarm and ringing cell phone, now both ignored, was grating on my nerves. Feeling exasperated, I buried my face into the pillow, attempting to drown out the persistent interruptions. At this point, it seemed like any possibility of a peaceful slumber was a distant dream.

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Exhausted and irritated by the early morning disturbance, I groaned into my pillow, cursing the time – barely five o'clock! All I wanted was a mere three hours of peaceful sleep. Reluctantly, I reached for the phone, swiped to answer the call, and pressed it to my ear, muttering a sleepy "Southwark."

To my surprise, it was Rose on the line, and confusion clouded my just-awakened mind. We had only met a few hours ago, so what could be so urgent to warrant such an early call? My patience wearing thin, I asked impatiently, "Someone better be dying, Rose! Why the hell are you calling me this early?"

Her voice trembled with urgency as she replied, "We have a problem, sir! You need to go online immediately. There's a crazy video circulating, and it's not good at all."

Suddenly wide awake, all traces of sleep evaporated from my eyes. I sat up in bed, the gravity of the situation sinking in. Whatever was happening demanded my immediate attention.

My heart raced in my chest as I grabbed my tablet, hastily navigating to the internet. My finger trembled with anxiety as I searched for the news, fearing the worst. To my immense relief, I didn't find the dreaded video I had expected. Instead, it was a video of me relentlessly hitting David.

Taking a deep breath, I realized I'd rather face the consequences of this video than the other possibility. With a heavy sigh, I refocused my attention on

Rose, who had been frantically explaining on the other end of the phone. "When was this uploaded?" I inquired urgently.

"Thirty minutes ago!" Rose exclaimed, her voice filled with disbelief. "And it's already garnered over ten million views! I can't believe the speed it's spreading!"

I placed the call on loudspeaker and dropped the phone on the bed while I focused on my tablet, playing the uploaded video. It showed the intense moment when I pinned David to the concrete floor and delivered blows relentlessly.

I clicked on the comments and reviews to gauge the audience's reaction.

"What's the negative response rate?" I asked.

"Over seventy percent," she replied with frustration evident in her voice. "This is going to have a detrimental impact on the exhibition."

Raymond tried to warn me about this. "What are the social media team and strategists doing?" I inquired, desperate for a solution. That bastard told me he fights dirty; I guess he wasn't joking. Unfortunately, hitting David's finances wasn't an option due to his connection with Hazel. "Can they fix this?"

"They're working on it and they assured me that they'll fix this." She sounds so unsure of what she's saying. If really they are doing something about this, I shouldn't even be able to access this video.

"I want that video taken down," I hissed, my annoyance palpable. I paid my social media team handsomely precisely to handle situations like this promptly, and their sluggishness was unacceptable.

"Tell Jasper I'm going back online in the next five minutes," I instructed firmly, "And when I do, that video better not be anywhere in sight."

Rose's tired sigh resonated through the phone as she tried to explain the situation. "They've been doing their best, sir. It seems like whoever uploaded the video is intentionally targeting you" She snapped at someone in the background before continuing, "Within thirty minutes, Jasper and his team have taken down the video ten times, only for it to be re-uploaded. ten times."

Frustration boiled within me, realizing that the uploader had ulterior motives to make the video go viral. "That da mn bastard!" I seethed, pondering various ways to retaliate against David. However, I knew any actions against him would indirectly affect Hazel, which only added to my annoyance, As Rose kept talking, her voice bringing me back to the current situation, she suggested, "You'll need a press conference to address this before it escalates further. I'll send you the speech before you leave for work."

Acknowledging the need for damage control, I agreed, "Keep me updated on the situation at the office." This ordeal was far from over, and I had to stay vigilant to protect my reputation and business interests.

"Yes sir." She muttered right before I disconnected the call.

Feeling overwhelmed, I ended the call with Rose and just as I thought I could have a moment to myself, Anne's name popped up on my screen. Not wanting to deal with her complaints, I declined the call, and instead, I decided to seek solace in liquor.

In the living room, I found Raymond anxiously pacing while on a call, clearly trying to handle the situation to protect the exhibition. He noticed me behind him and stopped abruptly. "I need positive reviews," he snapped into the receiver, "I don't care how many fake accounts you create, just defend him!" Raymond disconnected the call and angrily tossed the phone onto the sofa. The weight of the situation was evident on his face, mirroring my own emotions. It was clear we were both grappling with the magnitude of the problem, and the pressure to salvage my reputation for the sake of the company and exhibition was immense.

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RAVEL

(PRESENT TIME)

With a weary gaze fixed on him, I slowly poured myself a glass of whiskey, trying to ease the tension in the room. "You should calm down. You know, Jasper and his team are more than capable of resolving this situation," I assured him, reaching for an extra glass and filling it as well, inviting him to join me for a drink.

He swaggered over and downed the contents of the glass in one swift motion, his face contorting as the fiery liquid went down his throat. "Why are you so unfazed by all this?" he rasped, clearly agitated.

Leaning back, a faint smile played on my lips as I took a seat on the long stool. "I am Ravel Southwark, and a mere video of me handling a troublesome individual won't shake my business," I replied confidently, my eyes fixed on the swirling whiskey in my glass. "We've faced drug cases in the past and emerged unscathed; a video of me disciplining someone who deserved it won't do much harm either."

He raised an eyebrow, seemingly unconvinced. "Have you even looked at the comments and reviews?" he asked, almost challenging my confidence.

Taking another sip of whiskey, I explained, "The real reason I want that video gone is because of Hazel." Raymond looked puzzled, prompting me to elaborate further. "You see, Hazel is dating one of her employees, but the media doesn't know

the e about it. If that video of her ex-husband beating the employee surfaces, it won't bode well for her. The papara zzi will be all over her, and you know how much she despises that kind of attention."

Raymond's frustration boiled over, and he clenched his fists in anger. "It's unbelievable how he claims to love her and yet puts her through all this unnecessary stress. Going public with their relationship will only invite relentless hounding from the papara zzi," he exclaimed, clearly upset by the situation.

My teeth clicked in frustration as my mind raced with thoughts. "I underestimated this guy; he's far more cunning than I thought. He's capitalizing on this situation to gain positive publicity for himself, while also ensuring Hazel is publicly tied to him and tarnishing any chance of me being on good terms with her."

Raymond shook his head in disbelief, "So he's completely disregarding Hazel's feelings and desires in all of this? It's all about furthering his own agenda."

"Exactly," I affirmed, my frustration evident. "He sees me as a threat to his relationship with Hazel, and he's willing to do anything to assert his dominance. I must find a way to handle him without causing any harm to Hazel in the process."

As my phone vibrated in my pocket, I swiftly answered the call, opting to use the speaker when I noticed it was Rose on the line. "What's the update?" I inquired cagerly, hoping she had a solution to our predicament.

"I just had a conversation with Mrs. Anne, and she has a brilliant idea to handle this situation," Rose responded calmly, her voice exuding confidence in her plan. "We can work with the existing rumors and reshape the narrative. Everyone already believes that you divorced Ms. Hazel due to her infidelity. So, we can spin this story as that of a billionaire who is still deeply in love with his wife. The public will see you as the sympathetic figure, hurt by the fact that she shamelessly started dating the person she cheated on you with, which eventually led to that heated confrontation."

As the suggestion reached my ears, an overwhelming surge of frustration engulfed me, causing my jaw to clench involuntarily. "This is beyond ridiculous," I exclaimed, unable to conceal my disapproval in the slightest. However, Rose remained steadfast in her approach, maintaining her gentle tone as she continued to advocate for her idea. "Please, sir, just hear me out. This strategy has the potential to evoke empathy and garner widespread support from the public. It's precisely what we need in these challenging times. By shifting the focus away from the negative aspects of the situation, we can cast you in a more favorable light"

In a tone that brooked no argument, I asserted, "There's absolutely no truth to any rumors about my wife's fidelity, and I won't entertain or suggest otherwise." Rose seemed cautious in her response, but I made it abundantly clear that I wouldn't tolerate any further insinuations. "Hazel's public image

must remain untarnished, and if I encounter any false narratives circulating online, you will be held accountable, Rose. Do we understand each other?"

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Her response was a meek "Yes, sir," and I swiftly ended the call, unwilling to entertain any more misguided ideas/

Above all else, my top priority had always been to protect Hazel. I held steadfast to the belief that compromising her integrity for the sake of public relations was out of the question.

Every action I had taken thus far was driven by my commitment to safeguard her from any harm, and that unwavering dedication remained steadfast.

Raymond, who had silently listened to the entire conversation, settled on a stool and directed his attention towards me. Clearing his throat, he spoke up, instantly capturing my focus. "You might hate me for what I'm about to say," he mumbled, and I shot him a fierce glare. "I think Mrs. Anne's suggestion isn't such a bad idea."

Glaring at him, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Have you lost your narrow mind?"

"No," he asserted firmly. "You've always been the one to make sacrifices in your relationship with Hazel. How about you let her take the hit just this once?"

I felt a surge of anger rising within me. This was beyond absurd. "You may be close to me, Raymond, but not so close that you cannot be replaced."

His jaw clenched in response, but I intentionally ignored it. "If you ever agree to anything that might hurt Hazel, I will stop considering you as a friend."

"Rave_ "

"Get out of my face!" I snapped, and he reluctantly stood up from the stool.

"Now!" I emphasized, not willing to entertain any more of his misguided suggestions.

Chapter 33

RAVEL

(FIVE YEARS AGO)

Regret consumed me for consenting to Elenor's idea of taking Hazel on a shopping spree. Although the expenditure wasn't my concern, I was deeply troubled by the dresses Elenor chose for Hazel. Finally, after much persuasion, Hazel accepted my invitation to spend the weekend at my luxurious penthouse, giving me the rare opportunity to witness her change into her dress for the party.

I like the fact that she's getting along with Elenor. One can only hope that Anne won't be so difficult, not that her approval means sh it to me anyways. I love Hazel, and I don't need anyone's approval on whether or not I can date

her.

Anne already made Elenor's love life miserable because she cares about what Anne has to say, and Raymond seems to care too. If only they'll learn to ignore her, only then will they enjoy their relationship.

Initially, I found it fascinating to observe the skilled makeup artist and stylist I had arranged for, meticulously working on her hair and makeup. However, my excitement quickly turned to shock as Hazel emerged from the dressing room in a shockingly short, backless dress that left me momentarily breathless.

With a sigh, I rose from the bed and walked over to Hazel, standing beside her in front of the mirror. My hand gently traced the exposed skin of her back, voicing my concern, "Either you want me as your companion for the party, or you intend to distract me from my work tonight."

Hazel playfully chuckled, interpreting my words as a sign of approval. "I'm guessing you like the dress," she said with a mischievous glint in her eyes. Leaning in to place a tender kiss on her neckline, I inhaled her enchanting fragrance. "I adore everything you wear," I confessed, "but I wish I could have the exclusive privilege of admiring it."

The mere thought of other men casting their eyes upon her long legs filled me with an unreasonable sense of jealousy. "You drive me crazy, Hazel," I admitted, struggling to contain my emotions.

Her words filled me with warmth as Hazel replied, "It's mutual, baby." She turned to face me, enveloping her hands around my neck and leaned in for a passionate kiss. "You have no idea how crazy you make me feel when I see you in a sharp tuxedo or a dashing three-piece suit," she admitted with a playful grin.

Feeling emboldened, my hands found their place on her backside, and I teased her, "Definitely not as crazy as you drove me when I saw you in this mesmerizing dress." My left hand traced the length of her outfit seductively. "I might consider letting you leave the house, but only on the condition that you promise not to bend over all night," I whispered teasingly, reveling in our intimate banter.

Her laughter echoed through the room, a melodic sound that had quickly become my favorite. "I believe I can manage that," she murmured, playfully planting gentle kisses on my lips. "Anything is better than enduring your men hovering around me all night."

Oh, there's no doubt about it. Raymond will be keeping them company throughout the evening. "Have I mentioned how absolutely breathtaking you look?" I complimented.

She nibbled on her lip, batting her eyelashes at me coyly. "I believe you might have overlooked mentioning that," she teased. However, her attention was momentarily diverted as her phone rang on the bed. "Ah, I believe that's

Eleanor calling. I should have reached there by now.”

As I released her from the embrace, I planted another tender kiss on her lips. “Just a friendly reminder, try not to bend over too much, and please avoid getting too drunk,” I said playfully. She responded with a sweet giggle. As she left the room, I settled back onto the bed, picking up my laptop to resume work.

Later, while I was in a deep slumber, I managed to hear the faint sound of my ringtone. Blinking away the drowsiness, I

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reached for my phone and answered the call. “Yes, Raymond, what is it?” I asked, trying to shake off the sleepiness from my voice.

“I believe it’s best for you to come and handle your lady,” he mentioned with a slight lisp, his concern evident. “She seems to be completely inebriated with your sister, and I can’t leave Elenor alone with these unfamiliar faces.” He directed a sharp command at someone nearby. “Honestly, it’s like dealing with a bunch of hormonal teenagers.”

Hormonal teenagers? I groaned inwardly as I glanced at the alarm clock, wincing at the late hour – it was three in the morning! How could she be getting drunk at this time? I quickly grabbed a pair of pants and a hoodie before making my way out of the room.

This morning, I entrusted the driving duties to Steven, a security personnel I rarely used, because Raymond was busy ensuring Hazel was kept away from those questionable guys. Frankly, I feared I might end up strangling them if they tried anything funny with her.

After a tiresome forty-five-minute drive, I finally arrived at Elenor’s house, and the sheer level of noise emanating from her place made me wonder why her neighbors hadn’t called the cops yet. As I stepped into the apartment, my jaw clenched in surprise at the overwhelming number of males in attendance.

Elenor didn’t mention anything about inviting such a large crowd of guys. My eyes caught sight of Raymond on what appeared to be a makeshift stage, reprimanding a lady who was wildly dancing on a table while other men cheered her on. The scene was chaotic, to say the least.

Due to the dim light, I wasn’t able to make out the female’s face right until she bent her ass, the very ass I specifically told her not to bend over. Can any one explain why my woman is bending her ass over for men?

Chapter 34

RAVEL

(FIVE YEARS AGO)

Approaching them with determined steps, I paid little attention to Raymond’s

acknowledgment and effortlessly lifted my woman, playfully setting her on my shoulder. Her infectious laughter filled the air, and in the spirit of the moment, I playfully gave her a light tap on the rear-the very rear I had possessively told her not to bend.

"Behold, that's my man she slurred playfully, raising her head and pushing a mass of hair away from her face. "Isn't he a bundle of joy? Her intoxicated friends burst into laughter, clearly in on the playful banter. "And let me tell you, his rear end is quite the sight, and I have the privilege to admire it whenever I please!"

Continuing without hesitation, I led her straight to my car, confident that Raymond would take care of Elenor, who could be quite a handful when intoxicated. I knew Raymond had a good handle on handling her.

Once inside the car, Steven started the engine just as I secured Hazel's seatbelt. Despite her tipsy state, Hazel greeted me with an infectious, wide smile. "Hellooo handsome! You've got such a pretty face!"

I couldn't help but find her adorable at that moment, making it hard to stay upset with her. "Well, your face isn't exactly at its most beautiful right now, and your lips may not be so kissable," I replied with a teasing tone, noticing the strong scent of alcohol around her. "I did warn you not to bend over, didn't I?" I added with a mixture of amusement, knowing that she might not remember our playful conversation later due to her intoxication.

She grinned mischievously, whispering suggestively, "I can bend over for you." Her attempt at looking alluring by licking her smudged lips only intensified the sensual atmosphere.

Feeling the arousal creep in, I cursed inwardly, determined not to give in to temptation while she was under the influence. "Well address this when you're sober," I declared firmly, resisting the urge to give in to her playful advances. Suddenly, she gagged and covered her mouth with her hand. Concern washed over me as I furrowed my brows. "Are you okay? Do you need to throw up?" I asked, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable or mess up the car. Her well-being was my priority in that moment.

She gently shook her head, her delicate features revealing a mixture of amusement and reluctance. "I don't feel like throwing up, but I must admit, I have the urge to kiss you," she confessed with a playful glint in her eyes. Grinning, I teasingly declined her proposition, realizing that it might not be the most opportune moment for an affectionate gesture. "Let's hold off on that for now, I chuckled, hoping to spare us both from any potential discomfort. I'd rather the doesn't throw up in my mouth.

In an effort to ease her discomfort, I suggested, "Why don't you just take it easy until we reach home? That way, you can rest and feel better in familiar surroundings"

As we finally arrived home, Hazel had already succumbed to deep slumber, accompanied by loud, adorable snores. Amused by her endearing sleep sounds, I couldn't resist capturing the moment on my phone through a short video, solely for playful teasing and future tants.

Upon reaching the parking lot, Steven halted the car and kindly offered to carry Hazel inside. However, I politely declined his gesture, choosing to handle it myself. I wanted to assert my role and protectiveness over my partner when I'm around, making it dear that no one else should be touching her.

With great care, I lifted Hazel in my arms and carried her to our bedroom. Tenderly, I took off her heels, carefully unfastened her dress, and gently removed her accessories. Wanting her to feel comfortable, I fetched a face wipe and softly wiped off her makeup, making sure to be attentive to every detail.

Finally, I tucked her in under the warm duvet, ensuring she was cozily settled before quietly leaving the room, allowing her to rest undisturbed

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Feeling appreciative of the leisurely Sunday morning, I rose from the bed earlier than intended due to Hazel's state of being drunk and asleep. As I made my way to the kitchen, I took the decision to give our chef the day off, planning to personally prepare a comforting hangover soup and a fitting breakfast for her.

Choosing to start with salads and bacon, I retrieved fresh vegetables from the fridge, diligently washing and dicing them. In the midst of my culinary efforts, I heard the gentle sound of footsteps descending the stairs. Anticipating Hazel's awakening, I kept my focus fixed on the doorway until she finally appeared before me.

"Good morning," I warmly greeted her, offering a gentle morning kiss. Playfully, I inquired about her hangover level, asking, "From one to ten, how bad is your hangover?"

With a hint of humor, she replied, "Twenty." I couldn't help but chuckle at her candid response. As she plopped herself onto a kitchen stool, resting her elbows on the table with a groan, she lamented the decision to take numerous shots with Elenor. "I shouldn't have taken so many shots with Elenor."

Serving her a comforting plate of hangover soup, I advised, "Remember, when it comes to Elenor and alcohol, it's best to proceed with caution. Her high tolerance can be deceiving, leading others to overindulge as well."

Relishing the soothing spoonfuls of hangover soup, Hazel looked up at me and inquired, "How did I get home?" Taking a seat across from her with my coffee in hand, I couldn't help but be surprised by her memory lapse.

"You don't remember anything from last night?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. Leaning forward, I gently placed my cup on the table to emphasize the timing of her return. "Or should I say early this morning?" I added, hoping to jog her memory.

Hazel's lips turned into a sheepish smile as she bit them, a hint of worry in her eyes. "Please tell me I didn't do something stupid," she implored, seeking reassurance.

Unable to resist her charm, I found it difficult to stay angry at her. "You certainly knew how to entertain the audience," I teasingly remarked, "You shook your ass for the audience who were willing to watch."

Hazel pinched her eyes shut, her cheeks blushing with embarrassment. "I'm sorry for doing that one thing you told me not to do."

Despite trying to suppress my grin, I couldn't help but let it show. "If you genuinely want to earn my forgiveness," I proposed, "then you'll have to accompany me to a family dinner on Friday."

Surprised, she almost choked on her soup, seeking confirmation, "You want to take me to your family dinner?" Her astonishment was evident.

My heart felt warm as I replied, "Yes, I want to introduce you to my mother, Because I intend making you my wife."

Chapter 35

HAZEL

(PRESENT TIME)

The internet has erupted with commotion, and my emotions are mirroring the chaos. When David didn't show up for work this morning, I should have known something was wrong with him.

Regrettably, I fell for his lies about having the flu and feeling too weak to get out of bed.

In truth, Ravel must have beaten him brutally, leaving David with a bruised face and in immense pain. He likely avoided work to spare me from witnessing the aftermath of his altercation with Ravel. It's heartbreaking to think that despite his suffering, David still cared enough about me to shield me from the gruesome reality.

I can't help but blame myself for this unfortunate turn of events. If only I hadn't agreed to his one-month proposal, maybe things would have been different or if I hadn't misled Elenor into believing I had a boyfriend or if I hadn't provoked Ravel with my words, perhaps this whole situation could have been avoided. Now, I'm left grappling with the consequences of my choices, wishing I had acted differently.

As I stared intently at David, whom I had administered sleeping pills to in order to relieve his pain, my emotions swirled like a tempest, my fist clenching

tightly with a simmering anger. That despicable bastard would not escape the consequences of his actions, regardless of his wealth and influence.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed on the bed, interrupting my thoughts. Careful not to disturb David, I quietly left the room and closed the door behind me. In an attempt to maintain silence, I tiptoed my way to the living room to answer the call. "Agatha?" I spoke into the phone, curious to know why she's calling.

"I know I'm about to sound unprofessional," she rasped, taking me by surprise with her words, "but I need to be for you to see the situation of things."

Thirsty and agitated, I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and gulped it down, eager to get this conversation over with. "Just go ahead and say what you need to say," My emotional state was too unsettled to pay much attention to what Agatha had to say.

"Where the hell are you?" She snapped, her sharp tone and her use of profanity catching me off guard. "Are you at David's place?"

I returned to the living room and slumped onto the sofa. "What's the big deal?" I retorted, my frustration evident.

Agatha's voice tightened with irritation. "Don't you understand? You assured me this morning that there was nothing between you and David, yet you've managed to get caught by the paparazzi while visiting his house."

With my eyes tightly shut, I massaged my temples in an attempt to ease the throbbing headache. "It's not a big deal to be photographed while visiting his house," I explained, my voice tinged with frustration. "My friend was brutally beaten by my ex-husband, and I felt compelled to visit and check on him. I can't just abandon him."

Agatha's response was thoughtful yet pointed. "By going alone to David's house, you inadvertently confirmed the speculation," she mused. "They're only speculating that Southwark attacked him out of jealousy because they believe you two are dating. Your actions unintentionally lend credence to their assumptions."

years of "Do I strike you as someone who gives a damn about what the paparazzi or the press spew out?" After all these working together, she knows full well what irks me and what doesn't. "Those very gossipmongers and paparazzi once spread rumors that I was the one cheating on my ex-husband, leading to our divorce, when in reality, it was the opposite _"

"Southwark cheated on you?" Agatha gasped.

Regret immediately washed over me.

"That's not the focus here," I emphasized, hoping she wouldn't blab to others,

"All I'm trying to convey is that if I didn't give a damn about their nonsense back then, why should I care about it now?"

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"Back then, you were a pregnant divorcée trying to juggle school and

motherhood, but now you're a successful businesswoman and a mother," she argued vehemently, "You should care!"

I could feel a headache coming on. "I'll have to call you back, Agatha. I'm too stressed for this conversation right now."

"Wait!" She blurted out, stopping me from ending the call. "I have a good solution for this problem. You just have to choose an option that suits you best."

She should have led with this. "Alright, let's hear what you have to say,"

"It's either you make a statement or have a press conference, telling them that David isn't your boyfriend and you aren't the reason those two men fought, or you give the press something else to focus on."

Intrigued, I questioned her further. "Which is?"

"Tell them Southwark was the one who cheated and give them the name of who he cheated with. Provide a picture if possible, then sit back and watch the heat be on them."

"Hold it right there," I snapped at Agatha. I despise Ravel, but that doesn't mean I want to hurt him. "What I just confided in you, I haven't shared with a soul yet. If I hear this information anywhere else, I'll know it's coming from you, Agatha, and I'm warning you, you'll lose your job if it gets out there."

"Who are you?" Agatha muttered. "A man hurt you real bad, and now you have the opportunity to hurt him back, yet you refuse."

The truth is, hurting him back won't make the world a better place, and I detest anything that brings more attention to me. I've said what I have to say, Agatha."

She remarked, "I'm going to ask you a question, and I want you to be honest with your response."

I hesitated, feeling a bit uneasy. "What is it?"

"Do you still love your ex-husband?" she asked bluntly.

I want to scream "no!" I want to shout from the top of my lungs that the only emotion I feel for that man is hatred, but the words refuse to come out. "That's a silly question, Agatha," I respond instead, "David is awake," I lie, "I have to go." Disconnecting the call, I exhale heavily.

Once upon a time, Ravel stood by me when the world was against me. He fought with his family for my sake, and the first time I saw Ravel cry was because of me, about a year after our marriage.

Let's just say this is my sacrifice for him... we are finally even.

Chapter 36

HAZEL

(PRESENT TIME)

I had to stay with David until dinner time so I can fix him dinner. After dinner, I

told him not to show his grace around the office until he's actually better. Walking me to my car, David grabbed my hand when I was about to open your door. "I'm sorry for the unwanted attention I'm bringing to you." I smiled stiffly at him. "You want to tell me what really happened there?" David's demeanor shifted, and he nervously licked his lips, hesitating to recount the distressing encounter. "I suppose he discovered my intentions to court you," he admitted, wincing at the memory. With a heavy sigh, he gazed past me, lost in thought. "Once you had departed, I decided to leave as well, so I headed to the parking lot. Unfortunately, that's where he cornered me, accompanied by his security. He confronted me, hurling threats and demands to stay away from you. When I stood my ground and refused, he resorted to physical violence, striking me."

As I absorbed the distressing account, I couldn't help but question his response. "But why didn't you defend yourself?" I asked, blinking rapidly, trying to comprehend the situation fully. "Were you concerned about facing a lawsuit from Ravel?"

David's voice carried a mix of frustration and helplessness as he replied, "If only the CCTV in the parking lot was functional, you could have witnessed the entire incident yourself." He continued, "Raymond's security aimed a gun at him, warning me not to retaliate to any of Ravel's blows."

My eyes widened in shock and disbelief. "Raymond pointed a gun at you?" I exclaimed, appalled by the extreme measures taken. That's utterly ruthless and heartless, even for someone as fiercely loyal to Ravel as he is. I paused for a moment, then asked, "Do you know when the CCTV malfunctioned? Having a video of the incident would have been crucial evidence to confront Ravel and put him in his place."

"When I mentioned it was faulty, I actually meant it had been tampered with," David explained, and I couldn't help but narrow my eyes in suspicion. "After the confrontation, I rushed to the media house, only to discover that the recording was incomplete."

I couldn't help but connect the dots. "Are you suggesting that Ravel is the one responsible?" I asked, and David's response was ambiguous, neither confirming nor denying it. I couldn't shake off the feeling that he had come here with the intention of confronting David. How did he even know David is the guy I pretended to be dating? I never mentioned any name to Elenor. Pushing the thought aside, I decided to address the matter later. "Don't worry about Ravel; focus on your recovery. I'll deal with him myself."

Curious about my plans, David inquired, "What do you intend on doing?" David shouldn't bother himself with that. "I'll call you tomorrow morning to check up on you," I reassured him, giving him a hug before getting into my car and driving off.

A few minutes later, my phone rang, and I frowned slightly upon seeing Elenor's name on the screen. Is she calling to beg on her brother's behalf again, as usual? I hesitated for a moment before answering, "Elen?"

"Hi... Hazel... how are you doing?" Elenor's voice sounded uncertain.

Glancing at the papara zzi car following me, I responded with a deadpan tone, "Great."

Elenor winced, sensing the sharp edge in my tone. "I'm sorry about what happened between my brother and your boyfriend," she apologized earnestly.

"I'll make an effort to talk to Ravel and get the real story of what truly happened in that parking lot."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "He left David in a helpless state, that's what happened," I retorted, my frustration with Ravel evident. "The audacity of that man! Tell your brother he needs to call and apologize to David before I completely lose my composure."

Attempting to mediate, Elenor softly murmured, "You need to calm down, Hazel. I may not know your boyfriend, but I

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understand my brother all too well."

My brows furrowed as I tried to comprehend Elenor's perspective. "Are you suggesting that David is to blame for this?" I asked, feeling defensive.

Elenor tried to clarify, "All I'm saying is that you've known Ravel longer than you know this David guy. You and Ravel were together for a year and married for two years. You should know he doesn't react unless provoked."

I couldn't fathom what David could have possibly said to warrant such a reaction from Ravel. Elenor's biased defense of her brother was apparent.

"I'm currently driving, Elen. I'll have to call you back," I said, ending the call before she could respond.

Just as I hung up, my phone started ringing again. I glanced at the screen and saw Agatha's name. "I'm driving, Agatha."

"I think you should pull over and listen to the news!" Agatha's urgent tone caught my attention. "Those people just declared war, and I'm not going to sit back and watch them ruin your career!"

"I'll call you back," I replied, ending the call. Worried, I pulled over, quickly grabbed my tablet, and went online find out what was happening.

I stumbled upon an article from a verified source, although the author chose to remain anonymous. According to the article, the fight between David and Ravel erupted when Ravel discovered that I had returned to the man with whom I cheated on him two years ago.

Just like before, social media was now filled with hurtful and derogatory comments, labeling me a shameless whore. The onslaught of negativity threatened to tarnish my career and reputation, leaving me feeling

overwhelmed and vulnerable.

Am I about to lose everything I've worked so hard for, for a man who is not even worth it?

Chapter 37

HAZEL

(PRESENT TIME)

My heart swelled with a burning fury like never before. The intensity of my hatred for the Southwark family was beyond measure, propelling me to consider actions I never dreamt of. But I knew I had to confront Ravel first, to hear his side of the story about the rampant rumors flooding the internet. He owed me an explanation, for he was well aware that I had never betrayed him. There was no cheating involved; instead, I was the one who discovered him in the arms of that dark-haired woman he shamelessly flaunted.

As soon as the plane touched down, I wasted no time. Swiftly, I stepped out, flagged a taxi, and directed it straight to Ravel's office. What surprised me was the lack of opposition from his usually vigilant security personnel.

Undeterred, I marched into the building, acknowledging the familiar faces I encountered while dismissing the ones I didn't recognize.

The emotions swirling within me were palpable as I approached Ravel's secretary. With an air of courtesy, I gently placed my purse on her desk and leaned forward, ensuring my presence was undeniable. "Kindly inform your boss that Ms. Blacks. has arrived to see him," I stated assertively, my eyes locked onto hers.

Her diplomatic smile couldn't hide the tension as she promptly picked up the intercom and conveyed my message to Ravel. After a brief conversation, she gestured towards the closed door, indicating that Mr. Southwark was prepared to receive me.

There was no turning back now; he had no choice but to face me. Grateful for the secretary's assistance, I stepped into Ravel's office, my face a portrait of unyielding anger. I wasn't there to mask my emotions; on the contrary, I intended to let him see the depth of my disappointment and frustration not only with him but with his entire lineage.

As I approached Ravel's office, he rose from his seat with an exaggerated grin, calling out, "Hazel, how I've missed seeing your face in my office!" His overly cheerful demeanor only fueled my anger.

Without hesitation, I delivered an unexpected and resounding slap to his right cheek. The force of the slap caused his head to jerk to the side. "It's Ms. Blacks to you," I retorted sharply, my voice seething with fury. "And how dare you smile at me after attempting to ruin my career!"

Rubbing his cheek with one hand, he flexed his jaw, trying to regain

composure. "Always remember that you are the only one who can lay a finger on me and get away with it," he said, his tone a mix of bravado and pain. But I was undeterred; my anger was not to be contained.

I couldn't help but scoff at his response. "Should I be grateful for that?" I retorted, frustration brimming in my voice. If only my eyes had the power to kill, this bastard would be long gone by now. "Unlike David, I have no qualms about dragging your sorry ass to court!"

Ravel's chuckle only added fuel to the fire. "I'm certain of one thing, honey," he said, gesturing to an empty seat. "My ass is far from useless. Why don't you have a seat, so we can discuss matters like civilized adults?"

The audacity of his request infuriated me further. "Oh, now you want to be civilized, Ravel?!" I exclaimed, my anger palpable. "You came into my parking lot, brutally assaulted my boyfriend, and threatened him with a gun. And you dare to talk about being civilized?"

He frowned, attempting to downplay the situation. "Intimidate him with a gun?" he chuckled. "I don't carry guns Hazel, and you know that."

around,

"You might not, but Raymond does," I shot back, unyielding in my determination to expose his cunning ass.

With a frustrated sigh, he made an audacious suggestion, gesturing towards the seat. "Either take a seat, or I'll kiss you into compliance," he said, seemingly trying to assert control. Part of me doubted he would actually try that, but I didn't want to provoke him further by testing my luck.

Reluctantly, I lowered myself into the chair, crossing my legs and shooting him a fierce glare. "I have a lot to say to you, Ravel," I began, my voice filled with determination. "And I hope you'll have the decency to keep your mouth shut and pay immense attention." He responded with a smile, but I refused to let it sway me.

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"First and foremost," I continued firmly, "I want you to call David and apologize to him. Beg him not to take this to court." The ball was in his court now, and I intended to hold him accountable for his actions.

His smile vanished, but I remained resolute and unaffected. "Secondly," I continued sternly, "I demand that you retract that utterly useless statement you released and issue a public apology to me. Otherwise, I will not hesitate to pursue a defamation of character lawsuit against you."

Ravel seemed somewhat taken aback, scratching his brows as he leaned forward. "So, we're addressing the issues in numerical order?" he asked, attempting to regain some control. I responded with a slow blink, my face betraying no emotions. "First and foremost," he said firmly, "I am not going to apologize to that bastard for defending my wife."

I swiftly corrected him, my tone unwavering. "Ex-wife," I asserted, ensuring he understood the reality of our situation.

Ravel's jaw visibly clenched at my words, revealing his pent-up emotions.

"Honestly, Hazel, I despise the idea that another man believes he has the right to call you his, but if you're going to put me through that heartache, it better be for someone who truly deserves you."

I'm not surprised he did not agree to this. Ravel was not one to easily say "sorry" to anyone who wasn't family. Nevertheless, I stood my ground, firmly asserting, "Who I choose to date is none of your business, Ravel. Just as I had no say in who you cheated with, you have no right to dictate my choices in any way."

"That will be a topic for another day." He muttered. "Moving to the second request, 'I'm sorry, Hazel, but I don't know what you're talking about. I've been busy all day trying to handle the scandal that ba stard forced me into, so I haven't had the time to go online.'"

Chapter 38

HAZEL

(PRESENT TIME)

As the frown on my face slowly dissipated, I couldn't help but consider the possibility that Ravel might not be behind the released statement after all.

"You didn't put that statement online?" I questioned, wanting to clarify the situation. Ravel had never been one to lie, and he wasn't the type to shy away from owning his actions.

"What statement?" he asked, reaching for his tablet to check the news. As he browsed, I observed closely, and when he found what he was looking for, he cursed quietly. "This is messed up, Hazel, but I had no part in it," he asserted. Despite his apparent surprise, his apology didn't ease my frustration.

"Someone on your team, or even in your family, released that statement, Ravel," I said firmly, making my stance clear. "I want it corrected immediately, and a public apology issued, or I will f ucking sue your a ss." The need for accountability was paramount, and I was determined to ensure my reputation was restored.

He stared at me silently for few seconds then suddeny smiled. "I don't know what gets to me the most, how beautiful you look when angry, or how se xy you look when spitting out profanities." "You've lost it." I hissed, unwilling to entertain his inappropriate remarks.

Ignoring my response, he nonchalantly shrugged, "That's what happens when you miss someone so much that you can't help but be excited when you finally see them." His cavalier attitude didn't sit well with me.

Dropping the tablet, he picked up his phone, dialed a number, and barked into

the receiver, "Get into my office this minute!"

As the door to Ravel's office swung open, Rose hurriedly entered, her face displaying evident confusion and concern. "Is everything alright, sir?" she inquired, clearly uncertain about the situation.

Ravel pushed his phone toward her, exasperated. "What the hell did I tell you about releasing this?" he demanded, his frustration evident. Rose hesitated for a moment, her eyes scanning the contents of the phone, realizing the gravity of the situation. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't fire you this minute."

As Rose read the news online, her brow furrowed in increasing confusion.

"Sir, this wasn't me," she insisted, looking nervously at Ravel, seemingly hoping for support from me. However, I remained indifferent, focusing solely on my own agenda to resolve the issue at hand.

"I have no idea about this, sir," Rose reiterated, trying to plead her innocence. Ravel, clearly agitated, seemed determined to hold someone accountable.

"And that's precisely why I should fire you," he snapped back at her. "who did this say this idea was from again?"

"Mrs. Anne," Rose replied, causing me to roll my eyes in exasperation. It was no surprise that Anne would be involved in such a matter. "I swear to you, sir, I told her that you didn't want it to be released," Rose defended herself, seeking to shift the blame onto Anne.

The realization that Rose believed Mrs. Anne's words without any skepticism tested my self-control. I refrained from scoffing, although I couldn't help but feel frustrated by her gullibility. Anne had been the source of much pain in my life, and her deceitful actions were not to be taken lightly. That woman told me that she was okay with me getting married to Ravel and the next day she destroyed my wedding dress few hours to the wedding.

"You believed my mother's words?" Ravel asked incredulously, running his fingers through his hair in frustration. Waving her off, he ordered her to leave his office and find a way to rectify the situation by taking down the damaging statement.

As Rose hurriedly headed for the door, Ravel called her back, prompting her to halt and turn around. "Yes, sir," she responded, trying to keep her composure despite her evident discomfort.

"I'll be having an emergency press conference this afternoon," Ravel informed her, "Give the best news stations a call and have them show up in the conference room."

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Rose's curiosity got the better of her as she looked briefly at me before returning her attention to Ravel. "Can I know what the conference is about, so the team can prepare for it, possibly write a speech for you?" she inquired,

wanting to be fully prepared for the event.

I'm curious to know what the conference will be about too. Honestly, within seventy two hours, I've received surprise videos and messages online. "It's only right to tell your team before publicly making any announcement."

I couldn't help but agree with Rose's suggestion that it was essential to inform the team before making any public announcements. Public relations played a crucial role in managing such situations, and proper preparation could make a significant difference.

Ravel's gaze shifted from Rose to me, his piercing eyes locking onto mine with intensity. "I think it's high time everyone knows who the cheating partner truly is," he declared firmly.

Ravel's declaration caught me off guard, and I couldn't help but react with a mixture of frustration and disbelief. "What are you talking about, Ravel?" I retorted, not wanting him to play the hero or take the blame solely upon himself. I had hoped for a resolution that didn't involve him putting his reputation at risk.

Crossing his arms, he maintained eye contact, a determined look in his eyes. "You've taken too much heat from our break-up," he explained, "and it's time I face the consequences of my actions."

I couldn't help but scoff at his stance. "Don't be foolish, Ravel," I urged, trying to reason with him. "There are other ways to resolve this without you putting your head on the line. Have you considered the impact this revelation could have on your exhibition?"

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he observed my reactions. "She came here to scold me and ended up looking for a solution," he mused, earning a glare from me. "Now I see why David is scared." "What is that suppose to mean?" "It means I know you still feel flutters when I stare intently at you." I felt flutters in my stomach.

Chapter 39

(FIVE YEARS AGO)

RAVEL

I've been dating Hazel for seven months now, and I believe I'm ready to go public with her, to show her to my mum, and also to think about taking her to the cathedral. Today is the normal Friday family dinner ritual in the Southwark family and I'm taking Hazel along with me today.

Dressed in a simple black dress, I must say she looks breathtaking. I've said this before and I'll say it again, he looks breathtaking in everything she wears. She noticed me staring and smiled shyly. "how do I look?"

"Breathtakingly beautiful." I'm one lucky bastard to have her in my life. "I love you, Hazel." So fucking much that I can't imagine living without her. "Don't

ever leave me, Hazel, I don't think I can survive it." I know what Anne can do and I know just how piercing her words can be.

Hazel closed the distance between us and circled her hands around my neck, standing on her tiptoes, she kissed me tenderly. I returned with the same pace. Without being told, I know this woman loves me so damn much. She finally pulled back, her eyes dancing around my face. "I love you too Ravel, and you're kind of stuck with me." She grinned at me. "It's kind of difficult to get rid of me."

I don't think she realizes how much hope I have in those words. "remember your words when you listen to Anne speak." Her brows furrowed and I couldn't resist bending down to steal a kiss. "I'll try my best to protect you from her, but then I'll not be with you all the time and she'll cease every reason to make you give up and leave."

She smiled tightly, trying to reduce the tension in the room. "Your mother can't be as bad as you and Elenor describe her."

"She's worst than we narrate her to be, that I can assure you." She isn't the first girl I introduced to Anne and she successfully made them change their mind about the relationship. I didn't care much back then, mostly because I wasn't s invested in the relationship either.

Hazel stared at her wristwatch before hurriedly grabbing her purse. "We are going to be late for the dinner if we don't leave now." Agreeing with her, I grabbed her hand and led her out of the bedroom.

Raymond walked out of the kitchen with a bottle of water, fully dressed for dinner. He whistled when he took notice of Hazel. "You look lovely Ms Blacks."

Hazel smiled shyly. "thank you Raymond, and please, I've told you countless times to call me Hazel."

I chuckled, kissing her temple. "You will have to learn to ignore Raymond because he'll continue calling you Ms. Blacks as long as it gets to you."

Raymond led the way as we all walked out of the manor.

Raymond pulled over at the familiar parking lot of the Southwark manor. Hazel reached to open her door, but I quickly grabbed her hand, stopping her from leaving. She stared at me quizzically. "I need you to relax," I whispered in her ear, placing a featherlight kiss on her neck. "I can feel how tense you are." Exhaling shakily, she tried to force herself to relax. "I'm meeting your mum, Ravel, of course, I'll be human."

I rolled my eyes. "She's human." I reminded her, in case she has forgotten. "If eventually you somehow manage to feel intimidated by her, always remember that you both have the same heart shape and the same color of blood flowing in your veins."

She giggled. "Very funny." Her sarcasm did not go amiss. "Your sister is waving at us." She pointed out, "And it seems?" Her eyes widened as her words trailed off. "I think your mother is equally waiting for us next to your sister."

Her nervousness made me consider canceling the dinner plans. "You're going to take a deep breath and relax or I'll get the key from Raymond and drive us out of here to a place where you are most comfortable."

"I'm fine Ravel," she smiled reassuringly at me. "Come on, let's go. It's disrespectful to keep her waiting."

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Nodding, I opened the door, got out of the car, rounded it, and helped her with the door. I felt two pairs of eyes on me as I intertwined my fingers with that of Hazel.

I led her to the porch, stopping in front of Anne. "Mum, this is Hazel, Hazel Blacks."

Hazel plastered the biggest smile she could muster at the moment. "A lovely evening Mrs. Southwark." She greeted. "You have a good home."

Anne slowly took in her dressing. "Saint Laurent." She pointed out, referring to her dress, "I love it." Walking over to me, she pulled me into a hug and kissed my right cheek. "Where are your shoes from young lady, it's a very rare collection."

Hazel stared at her feet and chuckled nervously. "I don't know, Ravel bought them."

Chortling, Anne shook her head. "Of course he did. I bet you don't even know who made those shoes."

Elenor rolled her eyes. "You can't blame a for not being able to keep up with all these designers." She walked over and pulled Hazel into a hug. "It's lovely to see you again."

Anne cleared her throat. "Come on everyone, dinner is getting cold." She walked in first and we all followed suit.

At the table, I sat next to Hazel with Raymond sitting directly across me. I took notice of how Elenor and Raymond ignored each other, probably because Anne is silently yet carefully observing everyone.

"So," Anne rasped, breaking the silence, "What do you do for a living?" She chuckled as though she made a joke. "My son finds it difficult to discuss his girlfriends with me."

"That's because you tend to ask about things that don't matter," I responded, stopping Hazel from answering, not because I'm ashamed of what she does, but because it's none of Anne's fucking business.

Anne smiled tightly at me. "If you're not going to tell me what she does for a living, can you at least tell me who her family is?" She turned to Hazel, "Who

are your family dear?”

“I actually lost my parents at a very little age, so I grew up with different foster parents.”

The small smile on Anne’s lips slowly disappeared. “In other words, this relationship isn’t going to benefit my family in any way, am I right?”

“I’m so_”

“Don’t you dare apologize to her,” I warned Hazel whilst glaring at Anne. “We came here to have dinner and we’re not going to keep to that, I’ll leave with my woman.”

Squinting her eyes, Anne slowly rose to her feet. She grabbed her wine glass and abruptly emptied the content of the glass of Hazel’s face.

Everybody gasped at her sudden action. Jumping to my feet, I tried to round the table to get to her but Hazel grabbed my forearm. I glanced at her and she shook her head, silently telling me not to engage in a verbal fight with Anne. When have I ever listened? “I’m going to say this once and for all, the next time you try this sh it again will be the last time I’ll show up for this family dinner.

“Are you insane?” She hissed. “Why are you constantly trying to disgrace this daily family by picking up beggars from the streets of New York?”

“Mum!” Elenor chastised.

“Shut your mouth this minute!” Anne bellowed at her, “Before I make you lose your tongue. How will this family move forward if he constantly keeps picking the lowest of them all?”

That’s it! I’m done with this dinner. Grabbing Hazel’s hand, I pulled her up.

“Grab your purse, we’re leaving.”

“Get out!” Anne snapped. “I’d rather have this dinner come to an end than dine with another gold-diggingbitch!”

Chapter 40

HAZEL

(PRESENT TIME)

I found myself reluctantly agreeing to a dinner date with Ravel, unsure of what his intentions were. It had been a week since the press conference where he admitted that he cheated on me and not the other way round. Ravel can be stubborn which is why I’m not surprised that he went ahead with the press conference even after my advice. I didn’t know why he wanted to meet me, but a part of me was curious to see what he had to say, besides, I feel he deserves a dinner with me after what he just did.

As I arrived at the restaurant, my heart raced with a mix of nerves and anticipation. Ravel was already there, sitting at a corner table with a warm smile on his face. It was a smile that once made my heart sk ip a beat, but

now, I couldn't trust its sincerity.

"Good to see you," he greeted me as I approached the table. "You look stunning, as always." His compliments had a way of disarming me, but I reminded myself to remain cautious.

"Thank you," I replied with a small smile. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

He hesitated for a moment, as if choosing his words carefully. "I wanted to talk about David," he began. "I've seen the way he treats you, and I can't help but worry about you. He doesn't deserve someone as amazing as you, Hazel."

I raised an eyebrow, not expecting him to bring up David. "You've been spying on me?" I asked with a hint of annoyance.

He chuckled nervously. "Not exactly," he said. "But I can't help but notice things. It's hard not to when I still care about you."

I sighed, feeling a mix of frustration and nostalgia. "Ravel, we're not together anymore," I reminded him firmly. "My relationship with David is none of your concern."

"I know," he said, his gaze intense. "But I can't help but worry. I don't want to see you get hurt."

I softened slightly, realizing that he might genuinely be concerned. "I appreciate your concern, but I can take care of myself," I replied. "David and I have our ups and downs, like any couple, but I'm not ready to give up on our relationship just because things are challenging right now."

"I understand," he said, nodding slowly. "But I can't shake the feeling that he's not the right person for you."

I frowned, feeling conflicted. Ravel had a way of getting under my skin, and his words still held power over me. "Why are you telling me all this now?" I asked, trying to understand his motives.

He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine. "Because I miss you," he admitted softly. "I miss us, Hazel. I can't help but wonder if we made a mistake by breaking up."

My jaw clenched. "If you want this dinner to continue, you'll have to stop talking about the possibility of us getting back together."

Ravel nodded reluctantly. "I'm sorry for bringing it up."

As we continued our dinner conversation, engrossed in our own world of emotions and uncertainties, I didn't notice the arrival of an unexpected visitor until it was too late. Ravel's mother, Mrs. Anne, stood there with an astonished expression on her face, her eyes fixed on us at the corner table.

"Hazel, what on earth are you doing here?" she demanded, her tone laced with disdain and disapproval. Her unexpected appearance caught me off guard, and I felt a flush of embarrassment rise to my cheeks.

Ravel glanced at his mother, a mix of annoyance and determination crossing

his features. "Mother, please, not now," he urged, trying to shield me from her judgment.

Mrs. Anne paid no heed to her son's request, and her eyes never left me. "I thought we made it clear that you should stay

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away from my son," she said coldly. "You are nothing but trouble, and he deserves better than you."

Her words stung, and I felt my composure waver. "Mrs. Anne, I understand your concerns," I replied, trying to maintain my poise. "But Ravel and I are adults, and we can make our own choices."

"You're nothing more than a distraction," she sneered, her voice carrying a hint of venom. "You'll only drag him down, and I won't let that happen."

Ravel's patience seemed to wane as he couldn't bear to see me humiliated.

"Mother, enough," he said firmly, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"Hazel is not a distraction, and she's certainly not dragging me down. I care about her, and I won't let you insult her."

Mrs. Anne seemed taken aback by Ravel's defiance, but she quickly regained her composure. "You're making a big mistake, Ravel," she warned, her voice cold and resolute. "She's not right for you."

"I'll be the judge of that," Ravel retorted, his voice unwavering.

The tension between mother and son was palpable, and I felt like an unwelcome intruder in their family feud. Sensing the awkwardness, I decided to intervene.

"Mrs. Anne, I respect your opinion, but Ravel and I need to figure things out on our own," I said firmly, trying to convey my determination. "We'll take responsibility for our choices." I'm no longer that young lady she intimidated years back.

Mrs. Anne's icy stare remained fixed on me, but she said nothing more. With a last disdainful glance, she turned and walked away, leaving us in a cloud of tension.

Ravel let out a sigh of frustration, and I reached out to hold his hand, offering a small smile. "Thank you for standing up for me," I said quietly. He has always been like that, which was one of the reason I loved him and tried to fight for our marriage.

I couldn't shake off the awkwardness of Mrs. Anne's unexpected appearance which made me feel uncomfortable. "I think it's getting late," I said, my voice soft yet determined. "I should probably head home."

Ravel looked disappointed but understood my need to leave. "Of course," he replied, trying to hide his disappointment. "Let me walk you to your car."

As we made our way out of the restaurant, the cool night air did little to ease the tension between us. We walked in silence, each lost in our own thoughts.

When we finally reached my car, Ravel turned to face me, a conflicted expression on his face.

"I don't want this night to end," he admitted, taking a step closer to me.

"It has to," I replied, trying to keep my emotions in check. If I don't leave, I meant begin to feel things I'm not suppose to feel. "it's for the best. I need to get back to Seattle tomorrow morning and you have work tomorrow too."

Before I could react, Ravel leaned in, attempting to kiss me. My instincts took over, and without thinking, I brought my hand up, delivering a sharp slap across his cheek.

"What was that for?" he exclaimed, holding his cheek in shock.

"I told you, Ravel," said firmly, my voice tinged with anger and hurt. "don't try to bring any emotion or our past into this dinner. You can't just kiss me and expect everything to be fine."

His expression softened as he realized his mistake. "I'm sorry," he said, his voice filled with regret. "I didn't mean to push you. It's just... I can't help how I feel."

Maybe I shouldn't have showed up. "Goodnight Ravel." I got into my car and drove away