

Billionaire's Ex-wife : Craving You Chapter 51

Chapter 51

HAZEL

(FIVE YEARS AGO)

I've never felt such strong resentment towards anyone like I do towards Harrison at this moment. The intensity of my dislike for him surpasses even the aversion I felt for Kelvin when he introduced me to drugs. Exiting the restaurant, I paid no attention to Oscar and his group, and instead, I stepped out into the light drizzle of rain.

Could this day possibly become any worse? It began with an encounter with Mrs. Southwark, followed by the unpleasant encounter with Harrison. Now, I find myself walking through the rain, driven more by a desire to do so rather than any external compulsion.

The situation has reached its lowest point – I've lost my job. I clenched my lips together, struggling to suppress tears that threatened to escape due to a mixture of anger and frustration. I pondered why my life never follows the path I've envisioned. What lies ahead now? My future hinges on Ravel's support. Not only am I unemployed, but I've also lost my place to live. Or perhaps I should consider filling out the uncashed check from my drawer.

Engrossed in contemplation about my life's circumstances, I accidentally collided with someone. Recoiling slightly from the impact, I braced myself for an impending fall. Yet, instead of hitting the cold ground, a warm hand encircled my waist, steadying me.

Assured that I wouldn't end up on the frigid floor, I opened my eyes to see the face of the stranger who had intervened. He gazed back at me, his brow furrowed in genuine concern. "Are you alright? You seemed really lost in your thoughts.

"I apologize... I just wasn't paying attention," I admitted.

As I attempted to move past him, he caught hold of my arm, preventing me from leaving. Leaning down to match my eye level, he studied my expression. "Are you sure you're okay? You look like you're on the verge of breaking down." Suppressing the urge to cry, I bit my lip, but a solitary tear managed to escape.

"Da mn," he murmured softly, "I didn't mean to bring you to tears."

With a bitter chuckle, I brushed away my tears. "No need to apologize, sir. My tears have nothing to do with you."

"Do you want to share what's troubling you?" he inquired, his eyes a blend of concern and curiosity. "You never know, I might have a way to help."

I found it hard to believe his claim. "I lost my job and my place because my boss turned out to be a creepy pe rvert," I muttered, my frustration evident.

"What could you possibly do about that?"

His jaw clenched, his gaze shifting as if he were calculating something. "Did he make unwelcome advances toward you?" he questioned, locking eyes with me once more.

Why am I even discussing this with a stranger? Shouldn't I be talking to Ravel instead? Gathering my thoughts, I gradually extricated my hand from his grasp. "You know what?" I said, my tone more resolute. "Forget it, I can handle things on my own."

"You can't just let him off the hook so easily," he muttered, his tone tense. Confused and slightly wary, I took a step back from him. "I never indicated that I would."

"Then allow me to assist you," he persisted.

"I appreciate your concern, but it's not necessary," I reassured him. "I already have someone willing to help me seek justice." I managed a tight smile.

"Thank you, though. I need to be on my way." I walked past him, and he didn't attempt to stop me or call after me.

Entering Ravel's living room, soaked from the rain, I found him emerging from the kitchen, bare-chested, holding a glass of wine. He paused, his gaze fixed on me as I stood in the center of the room, water dripping from me. "I was just about to give you a call," he said, his voice rough.

I gazed at him, my teeth chattering and my voice raspy, rendering me incapable of forming a coherent sentence. "Hazel?" Ravel closed the distance between us swiftly, his hands gripping my chilled shoulder. A frown etched across his face as he took in my wet attire and shivering form. "What the hell happened? Did you walk all the way here?" Without awaiting my response, he seized my hand and led me into his bedroom. "Get out of those wet clothes, I'll prepare a hot bath for you."

Nodding, I began unbuttoning my shirt while he headed to the bathroom to ready the bath. By the time he returned, I stood completely undressed. His gaze briefly lingered on my bare chest before returning to meet my eyes. "I'll make you something warm to drink," he said, his tone gentle. "Don't stay in the bath too long, we wouldn't want the water to turn cold."

I offered a slight nod in response. He leaned in, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead and then holding my cheeks in his hands. "I'm going to make sure you're warm, and then we'll have a conversation, okay?"

"Yes," I affirmed.

"Good." He pressed a chaste kiss to my lips. "I love you."

"I love you too." We held each other's gaze momentarily before he exited the room.

Afterward, I made my way to the bathroom, taking a bath and allowing the

warmth to seep into my chilled bones. When I emerged, I selected one of his shirts, slipped into it, and ventured out to find him.

Navigating to the kitchen, I discovered him laying out dinner on the island counter. Despite having a formal dining room, we rarely used it. "Did you manage to get the recipe right this time?" I inquired, a playful smile tugging at my lips. The last attempt had been quite the disaster.

He chuckled. "It's edible, if that's what you're wondering."

In just a matter of minutes, Ravel managed to make me forget the troubles of my day. He pulled out a chair for me, silently inviting me to sit, and then pushed a plate my way while pouring wine into a glass. Muttering my gratitude, I began to eat.

He observed me as I ate, his gaze steady, before finally addressing the question that had been on his mind. "Are you planning to share what happened today?"

I let out a sigh, audibly expressing my frustration, and picked up my glass without actually drinking from it. "I got fired, and then I decided to quit."

A furrow formed between his brows, clearly puzzled by my response. "Did you get fired, or did you quit?"

I shrugged and took a gulp of wine. "I would have quit even if I hadn't been fired."

"Alright..." he said slowly, clearly trying to comprehend. "Why? What led to that decision?"

Ravel might lose his cool if I tell him. "Promise me you won't do anything as reckless as confronting Harrison physically."

He suddenly stiffened, leaning forward. "What did he do?" His voice carried a low, dangerous growl.

The memory of that unsettling encounter in the office sent a shiver down my spine. "He forcibly kissed me and tried to touch me," admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

His jaw clenched tightly. "What the hell did you just say?"

Quickly attempting to quell his rising anger, I assured him, "Nothing more happened. I managed to stop him before he could do anything further, and then he fired me."

"What made him think he could do something like that?" His eyes brimmed with anger, making me worry that he might take impulsive actions we'd both regret.

"Ravel," I whispered, sliding off the stool. I walked around the table, creating some distance between him and the island, and then I settled onto his thigh. "I don't want you to go after him. I want to leave it all in the past." He remained silent, his emotions difficult to read. "I'm not planning to return there, I have no reason to."

"You expect me to just let him off the hook?" His tone was conflicted. "I don't want you to entangle yourself in this mess, Ravel," I implored. The last thing I needed was for his reputation to be tarnished by my issues. His mother will hate me the more if happens. "Promise me." His gaze remained locked on me, unable to voice the words I needed to hear. "Ravel?" "Alright," he exhaled in frustration, "I promise not to get involved." Perfect. Maybe now we can shift the conversation to my living arrangements.

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RAVEL

(FIVE YEARS AGO)

I assured Hazel that I wouldn't personally involve myself in Harrison's case, yet I never explicitly prohibited my associates from doing so. When Hazel disclosed the despicable actions of that man, my initial inclination was to confront him at the rather absurd restaurant, give him a thorough thrashing, and then ensure he faces legal consequences. However, due to my commitment to Hazel, I will merely oversee my associates as they administer a thorough beating before arranging for his legal proceedings.

Gently planting a soft kiss on Hazel's forehead as she slept, I rose from the bed and changed into warmer attire to ward off the chill. Hazel retired early, likely due to the wine she had imbibed. While I hadn't anticipated her indulging to such an extent, considering the unfortunate nature of her day, her actions were quite understandable.

Exiting my room, I encountered Raymond, who raised his gaze from his phone as I approached. He leisurely observed my attire before inquiring, "Are you headed out?"

"We are headed out," I corrected him.

Raymond responded with an eye roll. "As your security, Ravel, I wouldn't expect you to venture anywhere without my presence." He stashed his phone away and rose from his seat. "So, where are we off to?"

"Harrison attempted to make advances towards my woman, I conveyed, causing his jaw to tense. The mere idea of that individual daring to kiss Hazel ignited a surge of anger within me.

Raymond pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek, his eyes reflecting my fury. "Wait, did you just say that human hippo tried to lay a hand on Hazel?"

"I didn't stumble over my words," I spat out, frustrated by his attempt to force me to repeat myself. "That wretch believes he can lay hands on Hazel and go on freely wandering the streets of New York."

He swiftly retrieved his jacket. "Let's go pay him a little visit." Whistling nonchalantly, he sauntered out of the living room. "I've been honing my skills

at the gym for a while now. It's quite satisfying to apply them on a living target after such a long time."

And that's precisely why I'm bringing him along. I settled into the passenger seat while allowing him to take the wheel. I was confident the scoundrel would still be at the restaurant since the evening was far from over for him to close up shop for the day.

Raymond expertly maneuvered through the bustling streets of New York, taking his time to reach our destination. Eventually, we arrived at the restaurant, but the sight that greeted me was far from what I had anticipated. The establishment appeared as though a crime had taken place right within its walls.

Raymond lowered the window, extending his head to assess the situation.

"What in the world is happening here?" He retracted his head back into the car. "I can spot the cops. It seems something significant has occurred."

Gathering my sunglasses, I opened the car door, preparing to step out. "I'll go inquire about the situation. A few well-placed questions should unveil the answers I seek.

"Please stay put, Raymond insisted firmly. "It wouldn't be wise for you to be seen in such an environment. I'll approach someone and gather the information we need."

I closed the car door and peered through the window, spotting Hazel's coworker in the distance. "The individual in the blue shirt over there, bring him here. He's an employee here and likely knows what's happening"

"Understood, boss. Raymond exited the vehicle and engaged in conversation with the man. They both returned to the car, with Raymond instructing him to sit in the back seat.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I inquired without looking directly at him,

"What's the situation over there? Why are

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there police everywhere?"

The man leaned forward, his voice carrying a somber tone. "Something really terrible occurred. Mary entered Harrison's office to inform him that she was finishing her shift, only to discover him in a gruesome and horrifying state."

Raymond turned to face the young man squarely. "Could you elaborate on what you mean by 'gruesome state'?"

"He was murdered," the young man disclosed, causing my eyebrows to knit into a deep frown. "His head was brutally smashed with an artifact from his office. It seems the killer also used the same artifact to inflict harm to his balls, and his throat was slashed open. The knife used for the throat wound hasn't been located."

A surge of shock and anger swept over me. Swiveling to address the young

man, I locked my gaze onto his. "And what is your name?"

"Oscar," he promptly replied.

"Any leads on a potential suspect?" I inquired. I would have liked to make him pay for touching my woman before the killer killed him..

"Currently, no one seems to have any information," Oscar lamented, shaking his head while crossing his arms. "It appears the killer might have entered and exited through a window in his office."

I suppose the scoundrel got what was coming to him. He's fortunate to be deceased, considering I had devised a fate even worse than death for him.

"You're free to go."

Oscar nodded, ready to exit the car. Raymond tossed him some money. "Let's keep our presence quiet."

"Absolutely, sir," Oscar affirmed, accepting the cash before departing. We observed him walking away.

Raymond started the car and began to drive. "Why did you give him money?" I questioned.

He glanced at me. "You have no business being here, Ravel," he pointed out.

"Your girlfriend isn't even present; she left work hours ago. You lack a valid reason to be here. No one knows the details of the encounter between her and Harrison earlier, and it's best if it stays that way, particularly since there's no suspect. She might become a subject of suspicion, or worse, you might attract unwanted attention from the police."

He had a point. For Hazel's sake, I would act as if none of this transpired. There's no need to burden her with concerns about this situation.

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RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

Wearing a sleek black tuxedo paired with a matching black tie and a crisp white shirt, I exited my room, only to discover Anne comfortably seated in my living room. Suppressing any hint of annoyance provoked by her unexpected presence, I nonchalantly picked up a glass of scotch that Raymond had kindly poured. "What brings you here, Anne?" I inquired, my irritation bubbling beneath the surface. She was already dressed and should be heading to the venue. Why was she in my suite?

Rising gracefully from her seat, Anne approached me with measured steps. Her voice was calm yet resolute as she explained, "I've come to offer words of encouragement to my son before his momentous day begins. Is that a cause for concern?"

"I hardly require your well-intentioned words to enhance my evening," I

retorted, my tone edged with a hint of defiance. There was only one individual capable of truly brightening my night. "I suggest you take June along with you as you leave for the venue."

Her fleeting smile vanished into thin air. "And why should I take her with me? Isn't she your woman?" Anne's inquiry caught me off guard, causing my brow to arch in surprise.

"You never acknowledged Hazel as my partner during the entire time I dated her and even after I married her. Yet, now you're suddenly deeming June as 'my woman'?" I responded with a mixture of incredulity and suspicion, my narrowed eyes fixed on her. "What's the reason behind this sudden shift?"

With a dismissive shrug, Anne replied in a curt tone, "Perhaps I've chosen to cease battling against your decisions. It might be time to allow you the freedom to pursue your desires."

I found her statement hard to swallow. As I returned the now-empty glass to the countertop, I refrained from raking my fingers through my hair so as not to dishevel its carefully gelled style. "If you're not inclined to take June along with you, – that's acceptable," I conceded, reminding myself that Matthew was more than capable of managing such tasks; it was, after all, one of the reasons for which he was getting paid.

Closing the gap between us, Anne enveloped me in an embrace that I didn't quite reciprocate. "You might find it hard to believe, but I love you so deeply. Truly, I do. I genuinely wish the best for you," she expressed, her sincerity evident in her voice and demeanor.

"Thank you," I replied, extricating myself from the somewhat awkward hug.

"It's time for everyone to make their way. The red carpet is scheduled to commence in about forty minutes, and I need to be there to welcome my guests."

"Of course," Anne agreed, her smile extending warmly toward me. "And do remember to accompany June/The perception is already that the two of you are a couple. Embracing that image would not only project the perfect couple but also enhance your public persona."

Not in the mood for a debate, I yielded to her wishes. "Alright, I'll accompany her," I conceded, offering her the words she longed to hear. Her smile widened appreciatively. "See you at the venue, Anne."

Giving a nod, she exited my suite. I watched her until she was completely out before shifting my attention to Raymond. "Reach out to Matthew and arrange for him to drive June to the venue," I instructed, my voice firm. There was no reason for her to share a ride with me.

"Understood, boss," Raymond acknowledged, stepping away to make the necessary arrangements.

Taking out my phone, I navigated to my favorites and dialed Hazel's number.

Knowing that having an open conversation in public would be challenging, I hoped to at least hear her voice now.

The first two attempts went unanswered, but I wasn't deterred. Opting for one last try, I put the call on speaker mode and reached for another drink. It was at that moment she finally picked up the call. "Hazel? Why haven't you been answering my calls?" I questioned, my tone a mix of concern and frustration.

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"Because you have no reason to be calling her," a familiar male voice responded, interrupting our conversation. "Why are you persistently trying to contact my woman and expecting her to answer your calls?"

My jaw tightened at the sound of his voice. "Are you now screening her calls?" I retorted in a flat tone, a hint of frustration underlying my words. "Quite the gallant approach to treating a lady."

"I'm merely safeguarding her from potential threats," he replied curtly.

"Frankly, I'm not concerned about whatever you might want to convey to her. I trust her completely. However, if you truly need to speak to her, you can do so tonight at the exhibition hall, in the presence of everyone." With that, he abruptly ended the call.

Baffled and taken aback, I stared at my phone in disbelief, contemplating why Hazel would grant him access to her phone. Snatching the device off the countertop, I opted to send a message instead.

"Give me a call when you see this message. XX RAV."

"Sir," Raymond's voice called out, breaking my focus, "the car is ready."

Acknowledging his statement with a nod, I picked up my jacket from the arm of the sofa and made my way out of the suite. Throughout the ride to the venue, Raymond, sensing my less than optimal mood, wisely remained silent. It wasn't until he brought the car to a stop by the stairs leading to the red carpet that he finally turned to me.

Twisting his body to catch my expression, he tilted his head slightly. "Do you think you could manage a smile for the cameras?" he inquired cautiously. My glare was my response. "What? It'll come across as rather odd if you arrive at your own event looking like you were dragged out of bed."

Ignoring his query, I asked pointedly, "Where's June?"

Raymond chuckled. "I'm pretty sure she's lurking around, eagerly waiting for your appearance so she can join you on the red carpet for some photos." I muttered a curse under my breath, prompting another chuckle from him. "Just try not to accidentally push her down the stairs while posing together; that bastard might be keeping an eye out."

With a tense jaw, I shifted my gaze out the window, staring at the swarm of paparazzi poised to capture every moment. "Make sure Hazel stays away from the red carpet until I've finished with June."

"You needn't worry, Ravel. I've already spoken to Tom, and he assured me that Hazel hasn't left her house yet," Raymond assured, though a hint of skepticism played on his expression. "You do realize there's a chance she might not show up, right?"

She will. She promised me that she will, and also she went through last minute details with me. "Raymond, just open the door if you're not going to contribute anything meaningful."

My phone chimed with a notification, and I eagerly reached for it, assuming it was Hazel, only to discover yet another message from the bastard that seemed to shadow my steps.

Raymond's lips curved into a smile, seemingly unaware of the message I had just received. "It's good to see you maintaining your usual demeanor," he remarked with a touch of amusement, opening the car door and stepping out. He moved around to my side and held the door open, prompting the cameras to start flashing as I emerged.

Climbing the stairs and striking a few poses for the eager photographers, I was already engaged in the photoshoot when, just as Raymond had anticipated, June made her entrance seemingly out of thin air. I looped my arm around her waist, our practiced chemistry evident as we posed for the flashing cameras. Strangers, oblivious to the complexities of my life, showered us with compliments about how impeccable we looked together. Their words, though well-intentioned, only served to stoke my frustration.

Amid the flurry of photography, Raymond's voice unexpectedly echoed in my ear through the discreet mic. "Red alert, boss! It appears Tom's information was false. Hazel's car has just arrived. You need to disengage from the red carpet with June!"

As if on instinct, my gaze shifted towards the entrance, my eyes scanning for the approaching vehicle. I didn't have to search for long, as the car in question had just pulled over, making its presence known.

Quilt gnawed at me, and I quickly released my grip from around June's waist. A wave of unease swept over me, as if I could sense Hazel's gaze piercing through the tinted glass of her car. Just as I was about to signal an end to the photo session, June

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surprised me by leaning in and planting a kiss on my lips.

The crowd erupted in excitement, their cameras capturing the unexpected moment from every angle. As the flashes continued, my mind was consumed by thoughts of how Hazel might be feeling if she were witnessing this spectacle or how she would react upon seeing the images splashed all over the internet the following morning.

Despite my efforts to avoid it, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was inevitably

causing her pain. No matter how hard I tried, it seemed I always ended up hurting her.

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HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

Ravel has exquisite taste because how else how can you explain this red dress that hugs my body like a second skin? David has been complimenting the dress, his eyes occasionally wandering to the high slit on the dress that reveals my bronzed thighs. If he knows the dress is from Ravel, I bet he won't like the dress like he does right now.

The first time he complimented the dress, it took everything in Agatha for her not to laugh. She knows about David's dislike for Ravel and that he will lose his mind if he finds that I accepted a gift from him.

The car pulled to a stop next to the stairs covered in red carpet. I was still buried in my phone, trying to respond to Agatha's text about work when David whistled beside me.

"Now that is a sight." He pointed out with a chuckle. Curious to know what he finds amusing, I looked out through the window only to find Ravel posing for pictures with June, his hands wrapped around his waist. As if noticing my gaze, he looked in the direction of my car.

I tried not to grip my phone too hard. As if the sight wasn't painful and annoying enough, June leaned up and placed her lips on Ravel's, kissing him, and he just stood still and let it happen.

David cursed beside me. "I think that show is for you, because I mean, why the f u c k will he stare towards the direction of your car while kissing her?"

Clearing my throat, I tore my gaze away from the kissing couple. "there is no way he could have known this car is mine." This isn't my usual car, I rented a limo for this occasion.

"Then why is he staring at the car?" David asked, countering my claim that Ravel doesn't know that I am the one in this car. "he has no reason to be staring at the car like that if he is oblivious of the occupants of the car."

Grabbing a mirror from the car, I checked my face just to make sure that my makeup is intact. "the same way he has no reason to stare at the car is the same way he has no reason to put up a show for me." Everyone already knows he is dating June, so why would he want to rub it in my face, also last night, he claimed that he wants to fix what is broken between us.

David narrowed his eyes at me. "why does it feel like you are defending him?" Rolling my eyes, I dropped the mirror and turned to him. "I am only saying that

you should refrain from making wild assumptions, hoping that I'll get hurt and think of Ravel as a dou chebag, I already know that he is a dou chebag." He frowned. "That wasn't my intention."

Right. "come on, let's get this over and done with." I tapped on the door once and the security at the other side opened the door. I stepped out with David and he held my hand, a gesture that is expected of him as my date. We stopped for pictures, and as we took pictures, I felt someone's gaze on me. Involuntarily, my eyes scanned my environment until they landed on Ravel who is staring at me from the entrance. My first instinct was to glare at him. He mouthed 'I'm sorry' which made me almost frown, but the consciousness that I am in front of flashing cameras stopped me. I was still engrossed in Ravel when something unexpected happened. David kissed me. My first reaction was shock before it mirrored Ravel's expression. Anger. I almost shoved him away, but for the sake of the papara zzi, I let him do his thing. After what felt like hours to me, David pulled away. I smiled tightly at the camera before letting him lead me away. I turned to the space I once saw Ravel only to find it empty. The moment we were out of public sight, I turned to David. "Can I have a moment with you alone?" I'd hate to embarrass him in public.

He winced slightly as he followed me. I looked around and entered the only room I saw, luckily, it was vacant. David walked in after me and the moment he closed the door, I slapped him hard. "How dare you?" This is the second time he is kissing me without my consent. Maybe because I let the first one slide, he thinks it is okay to repeat it again. "Have lost you your go dda mn mind?"

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"I'm sorry." He apologized, rubbing his cheek that received the impact of the slap, "I admit, I was wrong, I shouldn't have done that."

"Then why did you?" what the heck told him it will be a good idea to do that?

"I noticed Southwark staring and I was angry that he thinks he has the right to feel jealous after kissing another lady." He took a step forward. "I only wanted him to get the taste of his own medicine."

"Ravel is mine to fight David," I informed him in a clipped voice. "I'll appreciate it if you stop thinking that you can swoop in and save the day."

"Hazel, I said I'm _"

"Let me finish," I snapped. "I was going to discuss this with you later, but I can as well say it now so we can avoid further occurrences of what just happened out there." He opened his mouth to speak but I lifted an index finger shutting him up. "the one month that you asked for is already gone David, but I let this go on because I felt guilty about what Ravel did to you, but I think it's time I

gave you my response.”

His eyes widened, panic flashing through them. “You don’t have to give me a response now because you are clearly upset.” He reached forward and grabbed both sides of my arm. “sleep on it and give me your response tomorrow.”

I tried to shrug off his hold but he only tightened it. “My response has nothing to do with what happened out there. This has been on my mind for a very long time.”

“Hazel...”

“I’m sorry David, but no matter how hard I try, I can’t help but see you as a friend.” His eyes turned glassy. “I’m sorry for leading you on all these while, for using you to shield myself against Ravel, but this must stop.”

“I don’t want to,” he whispered, “I don’t want it to stop.” His grip on me hardened and I could a/bruise forming, “I love you” Hazel, you can’t leave me.”

“You are hurting David.”” I cried out. “Let me go.”

The door opened suddenly and Ravel stomped into the room. He snatched David’s hand away from mine, pushed him. back, and slammed his fist into his jaw. David staggered back. “when a lady says you should let her go, you f ucking let her go!”

David laughed hysterically. “what? So I’m the bad guy now?” his angry eye sliced at me and he glared. “I watched you cry yourself to sleep because of him, I consoled you during your darkest moments, and because I love you, I am the enemy?”

“David...” I whispered, unable to utter any other word. Honestly, I understand his plight. It is painful when you love someone who does not understand your love or who is unable to give it back. I took a step toward him, shrugging off Ravel’s hold when he tried to hold me back. “I’m so sorry.”

His glare intensified. “I don’t want to f ucking hear it.” He hissed. “Maybe I shouldn’t have cared.” Cussing under his breath, he walked out of the room.

“Are you okay?” Rayel asked and I ignored him. “Hazel?”

“I am here for the sake of my public image and promotion,” I snapped. “I’ll appreciate it if you stayed the f uck away from me.” I tried to walk past him but he grabbed my arm.

“Is this because of what happened between me and June?”

He is insane. “don’t you think for one minute that my breakup with David is an opportunity for you to come after me.”I spat and his eyes narrowed. “Stay the f uck away from me Ravel or I may really consider that restraining order.”

Dumbfounded by my word, he just stood still and watched me walk away.

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HAZEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

It's been a week since I lost my job, and I'm still uncertain about the path I want to take in life. Ravel kindly suggested supporting my return to school, but the challenge lies in choosing a major that truly resonates with me. It's almost as if nothing has captured my attention so far.

As for the misplaced check, let's not even get started. Upon revisiting the drawer, I realized the check wasn't there anymore. With no other alternative, I had to inform Ravel that the check was lost, prompting him to contact his bank for cancellation. Although he graciously offered to issue a replacement, I declined because I hold a strong sense of integrity. I can't simply reside in his home, enjoy his hospitality, utilize resources, wear high-end clothing, and still expect him to provide me with an open check.

As I strolled down the bustling street, holding a cup of ice cream with Adam following close behind, I couldn't help but appreciate the charm of the surroundings. It was my inaugural experience walking through this particular area on foot. Typically, when I'd visit Ravel, I'd either be in a taxi or he'd chauffeur me around. However, now that I found myself unemployed, I seemed to be exploring the streets quite frequently.

Passing by a storefront, I came to a stop, drawn in by the sight of a man engrossed in his painting. Stationed just outside his shop, I gazed through the glass window, observing him as he meticulously added the final touches to his creation. Describing his painting as majestic would truly be an understatement.

"Would you like to get one?" Adam asked me, his gaze fixed on both me and the captivating painting.

With a thoughtful tilt of my head, I continued to absorb the artwork. "When you gaze at that painting, Adam," I inquired, "what do you perceive?"

Baffled yet intrigued by my question, he directed his attention more intently toward the artwork. "I see an image of a man. gazing at his son with affection." But my interpretation differed. "As I look at it, I discern a sense of yearning." I shared, taking a step closer to the glass pane. "I perceive a man yearning for affection from his son, or perhaps from anyone willing to extend it.' He seems akin to a lost puppy.

Clearing his throat, Adam directed his gaze towards me. "How can you discern that?" he inquired, clearly intrigued by my perception.

"It's in his eyes," I replied with a sense of certainty. The expression in his eyes isn't solely admiration; it conveys a sense of yearning. Feeling a sudden impulse, I decided to pay the artist a visit. Without hesitation, I approached the entrance, pushed the door open, and stepped inside. Meeting the artist's

eyes, I offered an apologetic smile for the interruption.

Setting aside his brush, he rose from his seat. With a welcoming smile, he inquired, "What can I assist you with?" His warm demeanor indicated that my presence was not unwelcome. "I have a variety of paintings that might capture your interest."

I'm not currently in a position to buy any paintings. As much as I'd like to have one, my financial situation doesn't allow for it at the moment. Even with Ravel's card, I don't feel comfortable making indulgent purchases. I offered a compliment to the artwork we had been discussing earlier. "That's a remarkable piece," I praised.

"Thank you," he responded, turning his attention back to the painting. "I've been struggling to decide on a name for it."

"How about 'Longing'?" I suggested. He turned to me inquisitively. I elaborated, "The man's expression clearly conveys his yearning for his son's love. It seems fitting to name it that."

Impressed, a smile crossed his face. "A young lady who understands her art. Quite impressive." His compliment made me blush. "Do you paint?" he inquired.

"No, I haven't," I admitted. "I don't believe I possess that level of talent. While I greatly enjoy admiring others' artworks, I've never really thought about creating one myself. I have an eye for appreciation, but not the skilled hands."

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He shook his head in gentle disagreement. "You'll never truly know until you give it a shot." He selected an empty canvas and positioned it near the window. "If you have a bit of time to spare, why don't you gaze out onto the streets and paint whatever catches your eye or comes to your mind?"

With time on my hands, I found myself with no immediate tasks. Glancing at Adam to secure his approval, he nonchalantly shrugged, indicating that I should go ahead. Settling into a seat, I retrieved a brush and fixed my gaze on the bustling streets outside.

The initial element that seized my attention was the floral boutique situated across from the art shop. The shop's entrance was adorned with daisies, coincidentally my favorite flower. My thoughts turned to Rav and how, if he wasn't allergic to flowers, he might have delighted in gathering them for me from the garden.

Gently stroking the first brushstroke, I steadily worked on my canvas. As I neared completion, I realized that I had inadvertently painted a garden brimming with flowers-daisies dominating the scene over roses. Despite my earnest effort to concentrate, there were noticeable imperfections that might elicit a cringe from anyone viewing the painting for the first time.

Stepping away from the chair, I took a moment to distance myself from my work. Chuckling nervously, I remarked, "I had anticipated the outcome to be considerably better than this." My pout reflected my slight disappointment. Both Adam and the man shared a chuckle at my situation. "Recreating the images in our minds is often more challenging than it seems," the man remarked, and Adam affirmed his statement with a nod. "With proper guidance and training, you have the potential to excel."

Absolutely. "Can I acquire the painting?" I considered giving it to Ravel as a gift since he serves as my inspiration. "I'm more than willing to cover the cost of the canvas and paint used." Recognizing that this is his livelihood, I wasn't expecting him to simply offer it for free.

"You should allow time for it to dry before handling it," the man advised. "How about you provide your address? Once it's fully dried, I can have it delivered to you."

Certainly. I attentively listened as Adam provided Ravel's address to the man. "How much do I owe you for everything?" I inquired, preparing to utilize Ravel's card for the payment.

"It's alright," he declined with a warm smile, "consider it my gift to you."

"Oh..." Taken aback by his generosity, I unconsciously bit my lower lip. "Could I at least know your name?"

"I'm Cayden."

"Thank you, Cayden," I expressed with genuine gratitude, feeling touched by his kind gesture even though we were essentially strangers to each other. "I really appreciate your kindness, especially since we know so little about each other." Acts of kindness like this were rare. We exchanged our farewells before I departed the shop, feeling content that I had ventured in there in the first place.

Disposing of the now-melted ice cream into a nearby bin, I took a quick glance at my wristwatch. "How long do you think it'll take us to get back home?" I inquired.

Adam, too, checked his wristwatch. "Around thirty minutes if we maintain our fastest pace," he responded in an almost robotic manner.

I deeply regretted the decision to leave the car behind, especially now that I was in dire need of a restroom. Scanning my surroundings, my eyes fell upon a convenience store across the street. "Adam," I called out, catching his attention. "We'll need to make a stop over there."

He followed my extended finger to the convenience store. "Do you need to buy something?" he asked.

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"Nope," I replied, the 'p' sound popping in my response. "I need to use the restroom." My urgency was quite clear. Understanding dawned in Adam's

eyes, and without hesitation, he took my hand and guided me across the street.

He accompanied me into the convenience store but stopped near the entrance. "I'll be waiting for you here," he announced.

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I acknowledged his statement with a brisk nod before hurrying toward the restroom. Pushing the door open, a sigh of relief escaped me as I finally found relief.

Emerging from the restroom, I headed to the sink to wash my hands, only to find myself face-to-face with the last person I ever expected to encounter again-Kelvin, my ex-boyfriend who had struggled with drug addiction.

A broad smile crossed Kelvin's face. "Hello, Hazel," he greeted with a wink.

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HAZEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

Are my eyes playing tricks on me? How did this item appear out of nowhere? Looking at him skeptically, I turned the water faucet on to wash my hands.

"Why are you here, Kelvin?" Wait, that might not be the right question to ask at the moment. "How did you manage to find me?"

He gave me a grin, the same youthful grin that I once found endearing, but now it's giving me an eerie feeling. "Is that the question you want to ask your boyfriend, the one you left behind for years?"

What is he even talking about? I quickly grabbed a tissue and dried my hands.

"Let me respond to two points in what you just said. Firstly, you're not my boyfriend; I can't even label you as an ex because what we had back then was far from a healthy relationship." I noticed his frown, though it doesn't affect me. "Secondly, you're the one who deserted me outside the social service home. Don't misunderstand me, though – I'm actually thankful that you left me there." If you hadn't, I might be in jail right now, still trapped in drug addiction.

He maintained that unsettling grin, taking a deliberate step closer while rubbing his nose with his thumb energetically. "Let me take a moment to clarify two things, Hazel. It's important to note that you're still my girlfriend because, as far as I can recall, there was no official breakup between us. Secondly, I need to stress that I didn't abandon you outside the social worker's home due to indifference or neglect. It was a decision made with your safety in mind, the most prudent choice given the circumstances. Taking you to a hospital, while it might have seemed like an option, would have led to far-reaching implications not just for you, but for me and my friends as well."

A throbbing headache is already beginning to take hold. "At this point, you

know what? None of the explanation truly matter. We've both moved on, I'm certain of that. I've found contentment in the current state of my life, just as I hope you have in yours."

"I haven't," he deadpanned, causing my eyebrows to arch. "I haven't moved on, Hazel, and I'm most certainly not content with my life."

I blinked slowly, processing his words. "That seems to be more of a personal struggle," I retorted. Letting out a sigh, I regarded him with a critical gaze.

"Here's a piece of advice for you, Kelvin: break free from the grip of drugs." It's painfully obvious that he's still under their influence. "Try embracing a healthy lifestyle; I promise you'll find it appealing."

A flash of distaste twisted his lips. "Cut the holier-than-thou act, Hazel. You're no better than me."

"It's been five years since I had any illegal substances in my system, Kelvin. I've been maintaining a healthier lifestyle than you," I stated in an even tone.

"Given how frequently you're rubbing your nose, I'd bet my money you had a drag before leaving your house."

He shot me a glare before letting out a bitter chuckle. "I see where this newfound confidence is stemming from." His words caught me off guard, and I raised an eyebrow in curiosity. "It's that wealthy guy you've been following, isn't it?"

What?! How long has this despicable person been observing me? "What wealthy individual are you referring to?" If I don't hasten, Adam will undoubtedly start searching for me. "Listen, I genuinely don't have the time or patience for this." I attempted to maneuver around him, but he effectively blocked my path. "Kindly step aside, Kelvin."

"You'll depart once I've had my say," he growled, his grip on me tightening, hinting at his readiness to physically control the situation.

I glared at him, my gaze an unspoken challenge. "There's a young man specifically entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring my protection from individuals like you. If you don't vacate my path, he'll inevitably enter this space in search of me, and I can guarantee you, the outcome won't be favorable for you."

His jaw tightened with anger. "Does he have knowledge of this?"

Oh, for crying out loud! This day was progressing rather smoothly. "Know what, Kelvin? What exactly should Adam be aware of That I'm trapped in a restroom with my deranged ex-boyfriend?"

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"Do you truly believe I care about your hired guardian?" he sneered. "I'm referring to Southwark, the current wealthy imbecile you're attempting to leech off." He took a deliberate step closer. "Is he aware of your addiction?" A malicious grin tugged at his lips. "Or that you nearly drugged an infant?"

"I was an addict," I corrected through clenched teeth, my voice sharp. "Past tense, Kelvin! It's behind me now. Everyone has a past, and this is mine. So, if you can't contribute something meaningful to this conversation, kindly step away."

He clicked his tongue. "That wasn't a yes, Hazel, so I'll assume you haven't confided in him." Leaning in, he whispered, "If you don't want me to start revealing things, you'd better answer my calls when I ring you."

"When you call?" I repeated, my voice laced with disbelief.

He affirmed with a nod. "I have your number, Hazel, and I'm well aware that you're cohabitating with him. If you choose to ignore my calls, I'll have no option but to drop by that lavish mansion. I'm sure your boyfriend and his family would be quite interested in hearing what I have to share."

Fear knotted in my throat. "Are you attempting to blackmail me, Kelvin?"

"Blackmail?" he chuckled darkly, casually grabbing a fistful of my hair. "Honey, I'm not blackmailing you. I'm simply urging you to answer my calls. When we venture into the realm of blackmail, you'll be well aware." With a mocking gesture, he blew me a kiss and strolled out of the restroom.

Paralyzed with a sense of helplessness, I remained frozen, tears tracing down my cheeks. How on earth was I going to reveal to Ravel that, in our entire year of being together, I had failed to disclose my previous struggle with drug addiction? And the thought of Anne's reaction was equally daunting. My goodness! The repercussions of this revelation on Ravel's public image, if it were to leak, were too overwhelming to contemplate.

"Ms. Blacks?" Adam's voice echoed from the hallway, and I hastily wiped my tears away. "Are you all right? You've been in there longer than usual."

I cleared my throat, attempting to rid my voice of its huskiness. "I'm okay, Adam. I'll be out in a minute." Flicking on the faucet, I washed my face before emerging from the restroom.

He studied my face for a moment, his gaze growing more focused by the second. "Are you certain you're alright, Ms. Blacks?"

I'm far from alright! In fact, I doubt I'll be alright anytime soon. It appears my fairy tale might be on the brink of shattering.

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RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

The unfolding of events that night took an unexpected turn, catching me off guard. Little did I foresee that I would be a witness to Hazel's decisive breakup with David, an intriguing twist considering their undefined status. I couldn't help but find amusement in Hazel's remark that her split from David shouldn't be misconstrued as an open invitation for me to pursue her.

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To be honest, even if Hazel were entangled in a romantic involvement with him, that wouldn't deter my determination to win her over. It's a simple matter of fact – I had never entertained the notion of relinquishing my affections for her.

With a resigned exhale, I massaged my forehead and embarked on a quest to locate June. Eventually, I spotted her in the company of a cluster of influencers, presumably engrossed in plotting yet another vacation escapade. "Pardon the interruption, ladies," I ventured, inserting myself into their exchange. "May I steal her away for a brief moment?"

June's smile stretched wide, her lashes fluttering as she gazed at me. "Ravel adores me so immensely that he finds it impossible to stay apart from me for extended periods."

The other women erupted into giggles, and to facilitate the forthcoming request I had in mind, I granted her this moment. I even took the step of planting a quick peck on her cheek, which prompted a collective swoon from the onlooking ladies. My smile remained affectionate. "If you'll pardon us for a moment."

Seizing June's hand, I guided her towards the balcony, paying no mind to the arriving guests. The event was on the cusp of commencing, and I needed to address this matter swiftly. Once the balcony door was closed, effectively shielding us from the throng, she withdrew her hand from mine and her smile faded. "What's happening, Ravel? Your recent sweetness surely has an underlying reason."

With my hands now tucked into my pockets, I fixed my gaze on her, maintaining a composed demeanor. "It appears you're in the midst of orchestrating yet another vacation."

She responded by rolling her eyes. "Why should that concern you?"

A soft chuckle escaped my lips as I took a deliberate step closer to her. "I wonder, have you informed them about your financial situation?" June didn't have a propensity for saving; she seemed to expend the money I provided as rapidly as it arrived. "Do your friends possess the knowledge that your bank account lacks the resources for yet another holiday?"

Her jaw visibly clenched in anger. "Is this the reason you brought me out here? To subject me to insults?"

"That wasn't intended as an insult, June, merely an observation," I stated matter-of-factly. "I'm more than willing to finance any extravagant excursion you have in mind, provided you adhere to my conditions for tonight."

She regarded me with suspicion. "And what might those conditions be, Ravel?" Her arms folded across her chest. "Let me guess, you're going to ask me to leave."

My actual intentions were quite different. I needed her to remain here so that no one could see her. "Actually, I'm asking you to keep your distance from me throughout the evening. Her glare intensified. "Engage with others tonight, June, and make genuine friendships-ones that can enrich your life once all of this is over."

"Are

you genuinely bringing up our breakup in this moment?" Her words dripped with anger. "Is this some kind of sick joke? What am I to you? A mere toy?"

I suspected she was well aware of the answer to her question. After all, I had never stuck my dick into her, so her perception of being a plaything seemed rather misplaced. She wasn't even an object. "Will you accept the proposition, or do I need to send you back to the hotel without any funds for your vacation?"

She let out a scornful sound. "Why does it feel like I'm left with no choice but to agree to your preposterous demand?"

"Using your intellect, you might come to the realization that you're left without much choice, given your penchant for

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spending my money," I replied, a touch of wryness in my tone.

A sly smirk crept onto her lips as she advanced a step. To any observers, our appearance suggested a content couple on the brink of a kiss. Yet, they remained oblivious to the undercurrents, unaware that we were perhaps contemplating something less romantic-such as potentially pushing each other off this very balcony. "Is that a complaint, Ravel?" Her words dripped with insinuation. "Could it be that your financial state is gradually dwindling?" Engaging in a discussion about my business matters with her seemed utterly pointless. "So, are you accepting the offer or not?"

"In addition to the vacation, I have another condition. If you agree, I promise to stay out of your way until I return to New York, she countered, attempting to negotiate.

Playing the role of a shrewd businesswoman wasn't exactly her strong suit. Humoring her attempt at bargaining, I blinked at her. "What exactly are you asking for?"

Her response almost elicited a chuckle from me. "I aspire to establish my own fashion line, and I'm proposing that you sponsor it," she stated matter-of-factly. "Not only do I require your financial backing, but I also recognize the need for your network connections to facilitate my networking."

It was utterly amusing. Letting out a chuckle, I pressed my lips together. "You want to venture into the world of fashion?" I inquired, seeking clarification, and

she affirmed it with a nod. "You believe you possess what it takes to successfully run a fashion line?"

She raised an eyebrow in response. "Well, if Hazel could effectively manage an art gallery, why shouldn't I be capable of overseeing a fashion line?"

Rubbing my stubbled chin, I pretended to contemplate her statement. "Hmm, I suppose one reason might be that Hazel actually attended an art school for a year and gained a deep understanding of the art world."

"F*** you, Ravel!"

A chuckle escaped my lips. "You know what, let's forget I even asked. I'll have Matthew escort you back." I began to turn away, but she swiftly caught my hand. "What is it?" I retorted.

"

"I accept your offer," she muttered. "Just ensure that you fulfill your end of the deal and sponsor the trip."

"I don't make promises lightly," I affirmed.

"Yet you still divorced your wife," she taunted. "Didn't you vow to love her until death parted you?"

My glare was sharp. "Who said I broke that promise?" I shot back, and her jaw visibly dropped. "Just keep in mind that you need to keep your distance from me tonight." With that, I turned and strode into the hallway, arriving just in time for the

event to commence.

Scanning the crowd, my eyes locked onto Hazel, seated in her designated spot. Making my way towards her, I claimed the seat beside her, instructing Rose to guide the original occupant of the seat to my place.

She regarded me with surprise. "What brings you here?" Her question hung in the air, but I only responded with a grin. "Aren't you supposed to be seated with June?"

"I'd prefer to spend my evening with you," I replied with a smile. "And what about David?"

A slight frown tugged at her features. "He's already gone."

"Lucky me," I muttered, prompting a glare from her. A hearty chuckle escaped me. "What's the matter?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're aware I heard you, right?"

Frankly, I didn't care. His departure only offered me a better chance to be around her. With Rose and the team attending to the models, I watched as the lights dimmed, signaling the start of the event.

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Elenor gracefully glided down the runway, adorned with my exquisite creation around her neck, ears, and wrist. Hazel's captivated gaze followed her every move, while I found myself equally captivated by Hazel.

How could one person exude such beauty and perfection? It's hard to fathom that I once allowed her to slip away.

"This is stunning, Ravel," she praised, a genuine smile on her lips.

"Yes," I murmured softly, "truly stunning."

My breathy tone caught her attention, causing her to turn and meet my gaze.

A shy smile played on her lips. "I was actually referring to the jewelry, Ravel."

"And I'm speaking about you," I whispered, my gaze locked onto her. "I've actually crafted a piece of jewelry for you."

She arched an eyebrow. "Really? Which model is wearing it?"

Returning my attention to the models, I replied, "I would never allow anyone else to wear a piece that was created exclusively for you." Sensing her eyes on me, I turned to meet her gaze. "You'll receive it on your birthday next week."

A smile graced her features, crinkling the corners of her eyes. "I'm looking forward to seeing it, Ravel."

Encouraged by her happiness, I decided to take a chance. "I'll be leaving Seattle next week. How about dinner tomorrow?"

She held my gaze for a moment, then nodded, a genuine smile on her lips. "I'd love that."

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HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

Today, David didn't show up for work. I was almost going to call him, but then Agatha told me he'd called the office earlier to say he's not feeling well. But I know he's not really sick. I know this because I'm the reason he's not here. It's not his body that's unwell, it's his heart that's hurt.

So, I took my phone and sent him a text. I really hope we can figure this out and go back to being good friends. XX. Hazel' Just like I thought, I didn't get a reply to my text.

After a couple of hours of working, I heard a sound from my phone, like a little beep. I quickly picked it up, thinking it could be David texting me back. But, actually, it was a message from Ravel.

I'm really excited to see you tonight, Hazel. I'm looking forward to having dinner with you, Love, RAV

"Excuse me, ma'am," Agatha's voice came from the doorway. I put down my phone and turned to her. "There's a delivery of flowers for you." She came in, struggling a little with a big bunch of daisies,

I got up and walked over to her, giving her a hand with a smaller box she had.

"Do you know who these flowers are from?" I asked her, curious. She shook her head, not sure about the answer. She placed the bunch of flowers on the

couch, and I carefully looked through them, hoping to find a card. After a bit of searching, I found it and opened it quickly.

‘My allergies to flowers won’t stop me from getting them for you!

My heart was in a flutter. During my time dating Ravel and throughout our marriage, he never got me flowers due to his serious allergy. I never pushed him to give me flowers, understanding how bad his allergy reactions could be. “Could they be from David?” Agatha’s voice brought me back, reminding me that she was still there in the room with me. “They’re really beautiful,” she added with a compliment. “You’re smiling so much, I have a feeling they might be from him.”

I didn’t feel it was my place to reveal that whatever connection I had with David was now over. Letting out a sigh, I picked up the bouquet and walked it over to a vase. “These aren’t from David. You can go back to your office now,” I said, indicating that she could leave.

Understanding my hint, she gave a slight nod and exited my office. As I settled back into my seat, I found myself pondering the complex state of my life. In the past, I was confident that I was making the right choices, but that conviction doesn’t hold true anymore. No matter how I analyze the situation, I can’t ignore the fact that I’m tangled in a web of lies and deceit that ensnares those around me.

I initially misled David by giving him the impression that there might be potential for a deeper connection between us. And now, I’m preparing to go on a date with Ravel, all the while concealing a crucial truth from him. The extent of my duplicity becomes even clearer when I acknowledge that I went as far as relocating his daughter to a different town just to ensure he remains oblivious.

How can I face him while avoiding any mention of his daughter? I’m genuinely striving to set things right, but the presence of June in his life throws everything into question. What if I do reveal the truth about his daughter, and he chooses to reconcile with her? The mere thought of that possibility raises the unsettling prospect of him departing with my daughter as well.

Wait, what am I even thinking, Hazel? He hasn’t left her to begin with. He invited me for a date, with her in plain view across the room.

Just then, the intercom buzzed by my side, and I pressed the answer button. Agatha’s voice filled the room. “Ma’am, Ms. Southwark is here to see you.”

“Elenor. Please have her come in.” I cleared my throat, making an effort to mask any worry or troubles that might have been evident on my face. Within moments, Elenor walked into my office, wearing a relaxed expression that turned into a bright smile when she spotted me. “Hello, superstar,” I greeted, rising from my seat to join her on the sofa. “You looked absolutely

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stunning last night.”

Her grin transformed into a slightly smug smirk. “I know, right?” She glanced towards the bouquet on the vase. “Beautiful flowers. A present from David?”

My gaze involuntarily shifted towards the flowers. “No, actually, they’re a gift from your brother.”

She chuckled. “I’m aware. I helped him choose them since he can’t be around flowers.”

Her words left me puzzled, and I furrowed my brows in confusion. “If you already knew they were from Ravel, why did you ask if they were from David?”

She shrugged, crossing her ankles casually. “I wasn’t sure if you’d be comfortable acknowledging that the flowers are from Ravel. I wanted to let you decide.”

Sometimes, Elenor’s actions leave me wondering if I truly understand what’s going on in her mind. “Next time, when you’re aware of something, just let me know straightforwardly. It’s better than making me uneasy by revealing your knowledge after I’ve already talked about it.”

She nodded in acknowledgment. “Got it.” She got up from the sofa and strolled over to the mini bar, picking up a drink for herself. “So, for the first time in three years, I reached out to my brother to have drinks tonight in celebration of the successful exhibition. But he declined, saying he already has plans for the evening. That’s why I’m here, asking you and David to join me for drinks.”

Ouch. “I’m sorry, Elen.”

She chuckled, settling back into her seat with a bottle of whiskey and a glass. “Are you turning me down too?”

“I can’t join you because the plan Ravel has is with me. And David can’t join you either because... well, he’s not too happy with me right now.”

She raised an eyebrow with curiosity. “He kisses you last night and then he’s mad at you this morning?” She rolled her eyes and leaned forward, placing the bottle on the table. “What a true gentleman.”

David’s frustration is warranted,” I admitted. “I ended things with him last night, so he has every right to be angry.”

“You broke things off with him?” She asked, her eyes widening in surprise. “Is my brother already working some kind of magic?”

“The breakup has nothing to do with Ravel.”

Elenor’s smile grew broader. “Got it.” Her enthusiastic reaction prompted me to roll my eyes.

“I’m just relieved that you and my brother are trying to sort things out. Even if things don’t go back to how they were, at least you won’t have to feel

awkward when you run into each other.”

My phone buzzed on the table, drawing my attention away from Elenor. I muttered an apology and walked over to my desk, picking up the phone. My calm expression shifted into a slight frown as I saw Monica’s name, David’s mother, on the screen. Glancing nervously at Elenor, who appeared unaware of any tension, I answered the call with a shaky finger, hoping it wasn’t my daughter calling.

“Hello?” I greeted cautiously.

“Is this Daisy’s mom?” came an unfamiliar voice.

I furrowed my brows at the strange voice. “Yes, who’s this?” I inquired, wondering why this person had Monica’s phone. Panic spiked within me. “Is Daisy alright?” I added, my voice trembling a bit.

“Yes, your daughter is safe,” the unfamiliar voice reassured me. “Monica was taken to the hospital this morning, and we haven’t been able to reach her son. Your daughter has been with me, and I need you to come here.”

“Monica collapsed?” I asked, my concern deepening.

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“Yes.”

Oh no! I’m on my way,” I responded urgently.

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RAVEL

78%

PRESENT TIME

Today’s a leisurely day, intentionally so. I’ve decided to keep business at bay while I’m away from New York, entrusting all calls to Rose. Raymond is right here with me, embracing the laziness. He’s casually browsing through TV channels, searching for something interesting to watch. When his quest proves futile, he lets out a groan and tosses the remote onto the adjacent couch.

I glance up from my phone, my gaze meeting his momentarily. A chuckle escapes me as I observe his expression of frustration. “Feeling that bored?” Given how he was up on his feet throughout the night, I figured he’d relish this downtime.

“Why exactly have we found ourselves confined to this rather uneventful room?” he groaned, dramatically sprawling across the expanse of the sofa.

“Lazy days, in all their glory, don’t necessarily have to equate to being locked in this space. We could, in theory, explore the option of making a brief stop at the nearby bar. Just a thought, you know.”

With a chuckle, I continued my leisurely perusal through Hazel’s latest Instagram pictures. “If your restlessness has reached such monumental

heights, you could consider spending time with Elenor. I'd be willing to wager that her appreciation for your presence would surpass mine at this point."

"F uck off," he grumbled, swiping up his phone in a slightly irked manner.

Still thoroughly entertained by his flair for the dramatic, I couldn't help but let out a few more chuckles as the door to my room was unexpectedly flung open, ushering Elenor into the space with her characteristic graceful stride. "I find myself filled with regret for having arranged my flight for tomorrow afternoon. Boredom has truly taken hold of me in its clutches."

"Ever heard of knocking before barging into someone's room?" I inquired, playfully tucking my phone away for a moment. to jest with her. "One of these days, you might just catch me completely naked."

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She let out a scoff. "And what thrilling sight would that be?" she quipped, settling herself onto the bed and slipping off her heels. "I'm quite certain that Raymond's is substantially bigger and larger than yours."

I nearly choked on my drink, caught completely off guard. "What the heck, Elenor? There are boundaries, you know. Discussing your brother's di ck is beyond the pale."

I shot a disgruntled look at Raymond, who was chuckling softly. "Don't go encouraging her."

He raised his hands in a gesture of innocence. "Wasn't planning to," he denied, his amusement evident.

Directing my focus back to Elenor, I plucked one of her earrings from the bed and casually deposited it on the bedside drawer. "Aren't there any friends you could be gallivanting around with?" I remarked with a playful edge, keeping in mind her reputation as a party enthusiast. It's hard to believe she wouldn't have anyone to hang out with. "Or have they all chosen to desert you due to your rather vexing attitude?"

In response, she nonchalantly flashed her middle finger at me. "The only friend I possess in Seattle happens to be Hazel, and she abandoned me for your sake," she disclosed, her tone carrying a mix of annoyance and candidness. Her admission prompted a grip to spread across my face. "She practically bolted from her office not too long ago because either Monica or Daisy got injured."

Raymond, curious about the details, chimed in. "So, which one of them got hurt?" he inquired, joining our ongoing conversation. "Monica or Daisy?"

Elenor's response was a nonchalant shrug. "First, she asked about Daisy's condition, and then she mentioned that Monica had collapsed. She leaned forward and deftly stole my drink. "You might want to ring her up and find out what's going on. Hazel seemed really worried, and she shut down any conversation when I tried to ask."

"I'll give her a call later," I decided, believing it wise to grant her some time to assess the situation before reaching out.

Seeming unfazed by whether or not I made the call, Elenor shrugged indifferently. "On a brighter note," she declared,

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capturing my attention with her announcement. I arched a curious brow at her. "Hazel broke up with David."

"I'm already in the loop about that," I responded with a deadpan tone. "I happened to be there when it all unfolded."

Elenor's lips formed an "o" shape. "I'm actually relieved she ended things with him," she pondered aloud. "There's something about that guy that just sets me off." She shifted her body to face me, her posture engaged. "So, what exactly led you to pummel him in that parking lot?"

The mere thought of him makes my blood boil, and I find myself yearning to go back in time and deliver a thorough beating. "He spewed some trash about Hazel that I couldn't stomach," I replied, the idea of him even remotely close to Hazel's life triggering an intense protective instinct. The mental image of her on his bed could easily drive me to do irrational things.

"As I suspected," she muttered, a knowing tone in her voice. "Hazel's the only one who can rile you up like that." She rolled off the bed and scooped up her shoes from the floor. "I'm hoping my dislike for him is just a figment of my imagination."

"Perhaps it's because you secretly yearn for us to reconcile."

As she fastened her shoe straps, Elenor let out a dismissive scoff. "I couldn't care less who Hazel ends up with, as long as she's happy. Don't think for a second I wouldn't happily stand by her side as a bridesmaid if she chose to marry someone else."

"Damn you, Elenor," I shot back, frustration evident in my words. Raymond couldn't help but chuckle, finding amusement in our ongoing exchange.

"You're my sister, which should mean you're automatically on my side."

"Feel free to keep living in that fantasy," she taunted, a mocking tone in her voice. "And for the record, I thought you were adopted."

Raymond burst into laughter, unable to contain his amusement. "Watching you two bicker like this never gets old. It's oddly refreshing," he commented, clearly entertained by our dynamic.

Elenor stood up. "I'm thrilled that you find our interactions entertaining," she said with a dry tone. "Considering your current state of unemployment, care to join me for a visit to the bar?"

Raymond's lips compressed, the gears in his mind visibly turning as he contemplated how to decline her proposition. His feelings for her were unmistakable, though he seemed to be suppressing them out of respect for

Anne's presence. "Just accompany her, Raymond. There's no need to be so hesitant," I urged, sensing the internal struggle within him.

He let out a scoff, shooting me an irritated glare. "My duty is to ensure your safety, a task that becomes impossible if I'm at a bar, playing guardian to an adult-sized adolescent."

Elenor retorted sharply, "Screw you."

"Don't disparage my sister when I'm around, Raymond. You may be my friend, but she's my younger sibling, and I'll always stand by her. ALWAYS."

He gave a nod, avoiding my eyes. "I apologize, sir."

Elenor let out a sigh. "You could have made your point without using the word 'baby'," she remarked, standing before a full-length mirror to adjust her hair.

"He referred to me as a teenager, and you labeled me a baby. Which one do you think I'd prefer?"

And once again, she's taking his side. It's not the first instance where I've sided with Elenor against Raymond, only for her to ultimately side with him, casting me as the antagonist. "Whatever, Elenor... whatever,"

She shrugged, seemingly unbothered. "Are you joining me or not?"

Raymond shifted his attention back to his phone. "I've already made it clear that I won't be going with you."

"Fine," she blew a playful kiss in my direction and sauntered toward the door.

"Just remember, my plan for the night involves finding someone to spend the evening with. You could've been that person, but you opted to be a coward who fears my mother." With that, she left the room, closing the door with a resounding slam.

Chapter 59

Raymond's jaw clenched, but he remained seated. Frustrated with his demeanor, I grabbed a pillow and hurled it at him. "You know you want to go after her," I remarked, irritation evident. He gazed at me, then at the closed door. "Forget about Anne's influence. Don't make a choice you'll come to regret."

He leapt off the sofa, swiftly pocketing his phone, and dashed after Elenor.

"That's more like it," I mused. Finally alone with my thoughts, I resolved to call Hazel. On the first attempt, she didn't answer, but I kept dialing until she finally picked up.

"Ravel," she spoke softly, her tone indicating that it wasn't the most opportune time for a call. "Can I reach out to you later? It's not the best time."

Her tone of concern immediately set off alarm bells within me. Sitting up, I searched for my car keys, preparing to head over to her. "Is everything alright?" Her worry was triggering my own. "Is Daisy okay?"

She inhaled sharply. "What did you just mention?"

I repeated my question. "I asked if Daisy is alright."

“How did you come to know about her?” she asked, her voice shaky. What was she talking about? “What do you mean? Daisy?”
“Yes. How did you find out about Daisy?” her breathless inquiry came through the line.

Chapter 60

RAVEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

The moment Hazel and Adam entered the living room, a sense of uncase washed over me. Hazel tried to downplay the situation with a faint smile, but it was clear something was amiss. I turned to Adam, my concern evident. “What on earth happened? Why does she appear this way?” Hazel looked as though tears had welled up in her eyes. I entrusted him with the task of ensuring her safety, and her current state suggested he hadn’t fulfilled that duty. “Are you going to explain, or should I demand an answer more forcefully?” Hazel intervened, stepping in to shield him from my frustration. “You know, you could just ask me directly what happened. I’m right here in front of you, you know.”

I gazed at her intently, my hands cradling her face gently. “That forced smile you offered when you entered the room makes me suspect you have no intention of sharing what’s troubling you.” My attention shifted momentarily to Adam, my tone unwavering. “If I have to ask again, the consequences won’t be limited to my patience alone; your job will also be on the line.”

Hazel had my focus as I addressed her again. “What’s troubling you?” She looked uncomfortable, hesitating to answer, so I directed my attention to Adam for his account of the situation.

“She mentioned an urgent restroom need, so we stopped at a convenient store for her to use their facilities, he explained. “I waited by the entrance, but she took longer than expected inside. When I grew concerned and knocked on the door, she assured me she was fine. However, she emerged looking the way she does now. I’ve asked her multiple times, but she insists nothing happened in there.”

Observing Hazel’s expression closely, it was evident that something was bothering her. “Did you check the restroom?” I inquired, wanting to make sure all angles were considered.

“Yes, sir,” Adam confirmed. “But there was no one else present with her.” As Hazel gently pulled at my arm, her voice a soft plea, “It’s not a big deal, Ravel. Let’s not blow this out of proportion”

I decided to grant her the time she needed to deal with whatever was on her mind but we will have a long needed conversation afterwards.. With a nod towards Adam, I directed, “You may go.” He offered a respectful nod before

exiting the room.

Hazel let out a sigh, finally opening up. "I didn't say anything earlier because Adam was here," she began, her words drawing my attention. Was Adam somehow making her uneasy? "The truth is, I unexpectedly got my period while in the restroom. I didn't have any tampons with me, and I couldn't ask Adam to fetch one for me."

That doesn't make sense. "Why? It is part of his job to be at your beck and call."

She glared at me. "I can't have him buy tampons for me." Flapping her hands in the sky in exasperation, she walked over to the sofa. "To cut the whole story short, I got frustrated while using the pocket tissue in my purse, and I was still trying to

who gather myself when Adam knocked on the door."

I arched a brow while watching her sit down. "If you used those tiny tissues, don't you think you should head to the bathroom to take care of yourself instead of trying to relax."

Her eyes widened as realization dawned on her. "I'm sorry, Ravel. I really didn't want to end up staining your white sofa."

I dismissed the issue with a wave of my hand. "Who cares about the sofas? They can be replaced." Making my way to the kitchen, I began preparing something cold for her. "I'm more concerned about your comfort."

Her smile lit up, and she batted her eyelashes playfully, "I love you, Ravel." Chuckling, I responded, "I love you more." Nodding towards the stairs, I suggested, "Now, off you go."

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Chapter 60

With a blown kiss, she dashed up the staircase, leaving me standing there, a silly grin on my face, unable to contain my boundless happiness.

With Christmas just a month away, an unusual sense of anticipation had settled in me. This marked the first time in my adult life that I was genuinely looking forward to the holiday season. As the door to my office swung open, Elenor entered with a teasing grin. "Well, well, if it isn't Mr. Christmas Spirit," she quipped, taking a seat on the sofa. "Someone's got some holiday excitement."

I rolled my eyes playfully and settled beside her. "Let's not blow this out of proportion."

Tilting her head, she smirked knowingly. "You're practically on your knees begging me to spend Christmas in New York, even though you're well aware I'd rather be in Paris." She leaned in, her curiosity piqued. "What's going on?" I took a deep breath, "I'm planning to propose to Hazel on Christmas Eve."

We had been together for a year, and I was ready to take the next step and make her my wife. To be honest, though, I'm gripped by the fear that she might leave me.

Hazel's behavior has taken a peculiar turn in recent weeks. Ever since she came back from that stroll with Adam, there's been an air of suspicion surrounding her actions.

Initially, she claimed to have her period, but two weeks later, she was menstruating, which I noticed despite her attempts to hide it. Despite my awareness, I chose not to confront her about it, feigning ignorance.

Another sign of her secrecy surfaced when she placed a password on her phone. Previously, her phone had been accessible to me without any hindrance, but now things had changed. I decided not to question her about it, respecting her privacy and acknowledging her right to make choices concerning her phone.

Another development came in the form of secretive phone calls Hazel had been making and receiving. I inquired about these calls multiple times, only to be told that they were random spam calls – a recurring excuse.

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Additionally, her movements had become more mysterious. Questioning her about where she had been sneaking off to, she explained that she had been visiting the art dealer who had let her paint her first artwork and even helped her bring it home.

Strangely, I had even gone to the extent of calling from the man's shop, yet she still insisted she was there when she obviously wasn't.

Despite these puzzling behaviors, my determination remained steadfast: I wanted to escort her down the aisle. The thought of another man sweeping her away was unbearable to me.

"New Year's Eve would have been a perfect proposal moment, bluely. Why opt for Christmas Eve instead?" Elenor questioned curiously.

I clarified my choice, "I have a January wedding in mind."

Her brow furrowed, seemingly concerned. "What's with the urgency? Is she planning to leave?"

The truth is, I do fear she might, and that's why a January wedding is my preference. "I don't need to explain every detail, Elenor," I retorted defensively. "Just understand that I'm planning to propose on Christmas Eve and I want a wedding in January." I held onto the hope that Hazel would want the same too.