

Billionaire's Ex-wife : Craving You Chapter 61

Chapter 61

HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

When Ravel inquired about Daisy's well-being, a rush of emotions flooded me, accompanied by a barrage of questions. Had the moment I dreaded finally arrived? Although I had rehearsed numerous scenarios for discussing Daisy with Ravel, my mind seemed to have gone blank at this crucial juncture.

Breathlessly, I managed to ask, "How did you come to know about her?"

His response was almost nonchalant, as if knowing about her was entirely commonplace for him. "What do you mean?" he queried. "Daisy?"

"Yes, Daisy," I reiterated, my heart racing. The urgency to understand how he had come to know about her overshadowed me. "How did you find out about Daisy?"

Time was of the essence, and I needed his reply to quell my spiraling thoughts. "Who informed you about her?" I pressed, certain that neither David nor Agatha would reveal her existence to him without my consent.

"Elenor was present when you mentioned Monica or Daisy collapsing, and then you hurriedly left your office without giving her any context," Ravel recounted, seemingly unaware of the situation. Feeling a weight lift off my chest, I lowered myself onto a nearby seat in the hospital corridor.

"Monica is David's mother, and she experienced a collapse earlier today," I clarified, hoping to satisfy his curiosity and divert his attention from Daisy. My intention was for the topic to fade away naturally.

Concern filled Ravel's voice as he inquired, "Is she alright? It's not a grave situation, is it?"

With the things the neighbors who saw her explained, I guess it is pretty serious. "When she collapsed, she hit her head on the floor which made her crack her skull. They've been in the operating room and I am yet to hear from the doctor." Nor David. I told Agatha to give him a call, and if he doesn't answer, she should go over to his place and inform him of what happened since we weren't able to reach him on the phone.

"Do you need me to come over?" he offered.

I glanced over at a sleeping Daisy beside me. "That won't be necessary. David is already having a bad day, it is not advisable to have you around him right now. It will only end up elevating his frustration.

"Okay." With the way he responded, it was obvious he didn't give a shit about David's emotions. He is only agreeing because I said so. "Just give me a call if you need me and I'll come running,"

Daisy stirred in her sleep and I smiled sadly. "Thank you, Ravel, I keep that in

mind.” I heard advancing footsteps before David arrived. “I’ll talk to you later Ravel.” disconnecting the call, I pocketed my phone and rose to my full height. “For someone whose mother was seriously injured, you sure took your time to get here.”

“I had a flat tire on my way here.” He grumbled, walking past me to sit down on the empty seat. “What are the doctors saying?”

“I don’t know. She has been in there with them since I arrived, but the neighbors said she cracked her skull when she hit the hard floor.” I sat down next to him. “Didn’t you see my calls and my texts?”

Sighing, he relaxed back and tilted his head upwards, folding his hands. “This isn’t the right time to talk about our relationship problem Hazel.”

I glared at him. “I wasn’t talking about that. I meant my texts about what happened to your mother.” I deadpanned. “Why didn’t you call me back to find out what’s going on with her?”

“I am here, aren’t I?” he retorted angrily. “I am upset with you Hazel, so I will appreciate it if you let me deal with this alone.” He went as far as shutting his eyes, an indication that the conversation is over.

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Frowning, I leaned forward. “What do you mean by that?”

He opened his eyes again and pinned me with a glare. “What I am saying is that I want you to leave!” my frown deepened. “I don’t want you here Hazel, how difficult is that for you to understand?”

He is hurting; I can see it in his eyes. His mother’s condition is getting to him, which is why I am not going to take his words to heart. “I am not leaving David, no matter how many times you tell me to leave, I am never leaving your side until your mother gets better.”

He scoffed. “Suit yourself, but don’t expect me to give you any audience or acknowledge you in any way.”

Biting my lips, I turned to Robert. “I know you don’t know much about babies, but can you please take Daisy back to Monica’s and keep an eye on her for me.” I don’t know why it is taking Daisy’s nanny a long time to get back from her leave. Maybe I should consider finding another one.

“sure thing ma’am.” He walked over to the series of connected seats and picked up Daisy into his arms before turning to walk away. “Robert?” he paused and turned around. “Why did I receive the call of what happened from the neighbors and not from you?”

“Mrs. Monica told me to quickly grab some milk for Daisy at the store.” He explained. “I wasn’t exactly at home when it happened.”

Monica sending him on an errand is justifiable, but I can’t help but wonder what if something had happened after Monica collapsed. What if someone

came and took my daughter away? "It's fine, go ahead." He bowed slightly before walking away.

David stayed true to his words. He didn't even glance in my direction until three hours later when the doctors walked out of the operating room. He jumped up from his seat when he saw them approaching. "How is my mother?" The female doctor smiled warmly at him. "She is out of danger," she assured him. "she is getting transferred to her ward, so you both should be able to see her soon."

For the first time in seven hours, I exhaled with relief. "Thank you, Doctor, we really appreciate your effort." She gave us a nod before walking away with a series of nurses trailing behind her.

As we were waiting for either of the nurses to tell us which room Monica was transferred to, my stomach grumbled. David turned and stared at me. "Have you had lunch yet?" he grumbled.

M U V Y Z

"Not yet," I mumbled, not wanting to say more so I wouldn't anger him. "I was too worried about Monica that I forgot to grab something."

"Go stay with Monica while I go get you something to eat."

That's not right. "It's fine. You can go be with her while I go find something to eat myself." He needs to be with his mother and I refuse to take that away from him.

Smacking his lips, he searched his pocket for his wallet. "Don't be stubborn Hazel. Go in there and wait for me. You are not familiar with this place and I do not want to come in search of you."

I tried not to scoff. "Are you saying I'll get lost?"

"You have every tendency, don't you think so?" his teasing tone made me smile. At least we are moving past the constant angry face. I'll be right back. Just text me the ward number when they finally give her a room."

"Sure." I watched him walk away. It didn't take long, a nurse appeared and directed me to Monica's room. When I walked in, I was surprised to find her awake. "Was she awake all through?"

"She is slightly awake. She is under anesthetic, so she is only half awake right now." The nurse explained. "There is every probability that she will be talking a lot. You can either engage her or ignore her."

"Okay, thank you." She nodded, turned away, and walk away. I sat down on the sofa and stared at Monica.

She looked around with a confused expression and when her gaze landed on me, her frown deepened. "I want to see my

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son." She muttered.

“David?” I smiled at her. “He is coming. David just stepped out to get something.”
She shook her head. “Not David.” She mumbled. “David is not my son.”

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HAZEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

For the past few weeks, I’ve been trapped in an emotional abyss. Kelvin seems determined to inflict anguish upon me, relentlessly siphoning the essence of my being until I’m hollow. I’ve attempted multiple times to confide in Ravel about my ordeal, yet each endeavor has ended in frustration. Every instance I’m faced with his presence, my resolve crumbles.

Who could possibly desire a romantic relationship with an individual who once battled addiction? Someone who was perilously close to causing harm to an innocent infant? A mere baby. When I departed that town, I believed I was shedding my past, only to realize that it had resurfaced, embodied by my former partner.

Unbeknownst to me, he had captured images of me during my moments of drug use. Now, those pictures serve as a potent tool for blackmail. It began gradually, with demands for a few hundred dollars, an amount I could easily procure from my account. Then, the extortion escalated to thousands of dollars, leading me to withdraw from Ravel’s account, praying he wouldn’t question the purpose, which isn’t like him.

Although Kelvin’s silence has persisted for three weeks, a sense lingers that he’ll return for more, a prospect that fills me with dread. What will occur when he requests a sum I cannot readily provide? My aspirations and hopes with Ravel might transform into the very thing I fear most—mere dreams.

“Are you okay?” Ravel asked from across the table.

I blinked slowly, raising my gaze to meet his, a pang of guilt hitting me for unintentionally getting lost in a date that he had clearly put a lot of effort into planning. “I’m okay,” I murmured, attempting a smile that felt more strained than sincere.

Ravel’s brows furrowed with evident concern, his hand reaching out to gently grasp mine. “Hazel, something’s bothering you. I can sense it, and it’s written all over your face.”

It came as no surprise that he had noticed my deviation from my usual self. Just yesterday, I fumbled and broke a glass in his presence due to my phone ringing, only to later discover it was Elenor calling. I felt utterly foolish. Letting out a sigh, I picked up my wine glass, taking a sip before I spoke, “I assure you, Rav, I’m fine. No need to concern yourself over something that isn’t even real.”

Despite my reassurance, his frown persisted. "Did my mother say anything that is crazy? Adam said she met up with you last week. Is that what this is about?"

Anne visited me last week at Cayden's shop and just like the last time, she offered me yet another money to stay away from his son, and for a minute, I was tempted to accept it, not because I really want to stay away from Rav, but because I need money to pay that leach off.

"Hazel!" Rav called out again, and I blinked rapidly, realizing that I have zoned out again. "Are you really not going to talk to me about what's bothering you?" his eyes searched my gaze. "What exactly did Anne tell you?"

I chuckled. Anne is the least of my problem right now. "She offered me money to stay away from you," I revealed. "You don't have to worry about that Rav, this is not her first time and I am sure it won't be her last.

Ravel's lips tightened. "the next time she offers you money, take it and get yourself something pretty since she has so much money to waste."

Amused by his idea, I chuckled. "I will not disrespect our relationship like that." Besides I do not want to make the mistake of depending on her money to pay off Kelvin. "I appreciate your sense of humor, but I will have to pass on the offer."

Leaning back on his seat, Ravel folded his hands and stared at me. "I know Anne isn't what's bothering you. This behavior of yours started after your walk with Adam. Are you going to tell me what really happened that day?"

Trying not to let my emotions show, I locked it away and lied to his face. "I already told you what happened that day Rav." Squinting my eyes, I observed him closely. "Do you think I lied to you?"

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He held my gaze for a while, his gaze growing more intense by the minute. I tried maintaining his gaze, but it became so intense for me that I had to look away. "Stop staring at me like that Rav," I grumbled, "I am not hiding from you, so you aren't going to find anything by staring at me like that."

Finally shifting his gaze, his jaw clenched as he reached forward and grabbed his wine glass. "Is there someone else?"

His question caught me by surprise. My lashes fluttered rapidly. "What did you just ask me?" grinding his teeth, he kept mute, allowing me time to answer the question. "Are you honestly asking me if I am cheating on you?"

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Ravel leaned forward and pinned me with his gaze again. "Having an interest in someone else doesn't necessarily mean that you cheated," he tilted his head, "or have cheated yet."

Is he insinuating that there is a possibility that I will cheat in the future? I tried my best not to feel offended but I failed. "There is no one else Ravel," I hissed, "and insinuating that I may have feelings for someone else is classified as

cheating!”

With his frustration mirroring mine, he ran his fingers through his hair. “Then talk to me, Hazel! I need to understand the reason for the change in your attitude and behavior.”

Will he still love me so fiercely if he finds out what I did in the past? “I just told you that everything is fine.” Suddenly feeling tired and emotionally drained, I stood up and grabbed my purse. “I want to leave Ravel.”

He glared at me. “Would you rather leave than address the issue between us?”

“There is no issue between us.” I insisted with clenched teeth. I promise to handle the problem before it has the chance to affect him or our relationship. ‘I want to go, Ravel, I am really tired.’

Sighing dejectedly, he stood to his feet and grabbed his jacket. Before I had the chance to walk away, his hand circled my waist and he pulled me closer to himself. “I am sorry.” He whispered, his forehead almost leaning on mine, and his lips dangerously grazing mine. “I shouldn’t have indirectly insinuated that you were cheating on me.”

How can I not fall deeply for this man? Taking the first step, I kissed him softly, feeling the warmth of his love. His hand circled my waist as he deepened the kiss, nibbling and sucking on my lower lips. Slow and sensual, we poured out the words. that we couldn’t say at the moment.

my

Breathless, I pulled away and smiled warmly at him. “No matter what Ravel, never doubt that I love you, or question love for you.” I reached forward and cupped his cheeks, wondering what I did to deserve a man like him. “I love you, Ravel.”

His eyes danced around, searching mine. “I love you so much that the thought of you with another scares me.” He placed a chaste kiss on my forehead. “It’s two days to Christmas, let’s get through the days with more love.”

Nodding, I let him pull me into a hug. “I hate fighting with you,” I mumbled.

He chuckled. “What if I tell you that it turns me on?”

I slapped his chest playfully. “per vert!”

Unfazed, he shrugged. “You love this pe rv erted fellow.”

That right. I love him so much that I won’t let anything hurt him.

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HAZEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

One day before Christmas, I got a text from Kelvin. He asked me to meet him at the amusement park an hour before my scheduled date with Ravel. Ravel had planned a special dinner for us, expressing his desire to spend Christmas

Eve with me before being with his family. Our plan was to hang out until after midnight.

Ravel seemed to be taking this date very seriously. The dress he sent over exuded excellence and sophistication. It was a black, long gown that fit my body perfectly, almost becoming one with my skin when I tried it on. Along with the dress, there was a card informing me that a makeup artist and hair stylist would be arriving by nine in the evening, right before my meeting with Kelvin at ten.

“Who exactly are you meeting this late?” Adam’s curious voice questioned from behind me.

Caught in a bind, I found myself unable to slip away or evade as I usually did. Ravel had, for some reason, upped the number of security personnel in the estate, creating an environment where leaving without attracting attention had become practically impossible. “I’m actually meeting up with a friend,” I managed to fib, though a lump of unease formed in my throat at the mere thought of referring to Kelvin as a friend. “I promise you, it’s not going to take/much time.”

A soft ping from my phone diverted my attention – a text had arrived from Kelvin. ‘WHY IS THAT DA MN SECURITY WITH YOU HAZEL? ARE YOU TRYING TO SET ME UP? YOU KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES OF WHAT HAPPEN IF I SHOULD GO MISSING FOR TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.’

I couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at his unexpected concern. It was surprising to discover that Kelvin, who often exuded confidence, had his own fear. Battling a snuffle brought on by the cold Christmas air, I repositioned my jacket and settled down on a nearby bench. My fingers danced across the screen as I composed my response, ‘RAVEL HAS AMPED UP THE SECURITY MEASURES AT THE MANOR, LEAVING ME WITH NO CHANCE TO DISCREETLY SLIP AWAY. HE BELIEVES I’M HERE TO MEET A FRIEND, SO YOU CAN PUT YOUR WORRIES TO REST.

A few minutes later, he appeared in the park, donning a snuggler hat and concealing his identity with a face mask over his nose. Adam’s eyes locked onto him, a mixture of curiosity and suspicion playing across his expression, yet he refrained from speaking out. I redirected my attention to Adam, requesting, “Could you possibly take a step back and grant us a bit of privacy?”

Adam’s eyebrows furrowed, displaying his discontent with my request. “I apologize, ma’am, but I can’t comply with that. My responsibility is to ensure your safety, and I won’t be able to fulfill that duty from a distance.”

Suppressing my anxiety, I rolled my eyes in an attempt to hide my apprehension. “He’s a friend of mine, Adam,” I fibbed once more, my voice steady. “He means no harm. Besides, I only asked you to move a bit away,

not to leave the amusement park. His furrowed expression remained unchanged. "I'm aware of the gun concealed under your jacket/Adam," I conveyed

"I'm aware that detail with Kelvin in mind, just in case he attempted anything untoward. "If he makes any suspicious move, you can take the shot from that distance."

His jaw clenched tightly as he locked an intense gaze onto Kelvin. "Take off the mask. If I'm going to step back like you want, I need to see his face!

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Turning to Kelvin, I raised an eyebrow, shifting the decision onto his shoulders. The choice was his now if he wanted this rendezvous to proceed, the mask had to come off. He hesitated, then reluctantly removed the mask, offering a strained smile to Adam, who maintained his stoic demeanor. At last, Adam stepped back a few paces, providing us the much-needed privacy. Kelvin's voice carried an underlying anger as he spoke, "The risk I just took comes with a price." He struggled to mask his frustration, attempting to keep his emotions from surfacing on his face. "I never intended for anyone except you to see my face."

A scoff escaped me. "And I never wanted to lay eyes on you again, but I suppose life doesn't grant all our desires." My arms folded defensively, my gaze sharpening as it bore into him. I felt a sense of reassurance with Adam backing me up. "What do you want, Kelvin? I have pressing matters to attend to."

Blowing warm breath into his hands, he swayed slightly on his feet. "I'm looking for money," he stated matter-of-factly.

My eyes rolled in exasperation. "Isn't that your consistent request?" I couldn't help but hiss. "So, what's the figure this time?" Each time it seemed to increase, and I was growing tired of it. "What's your demand this time, Kelvin?"

A grin stretched across his face. "Getting straight to business, I like that," he remarked, his infuriating tone earning another eye roll from me. "Today's tab runs a little north of half a million dollars." He winked provocatively. "I'm giving you the range to choose from: it could be six hundred, seven, eight, nine, or a cool million."

Taken aback by his audacious demand, I blinked rapidly at him before a laugh involuntarily escaped my lips. "Do you have any idea what's in my bank account, for you to casually ask for nearly a million dollars?" I couldn't help but find the situation a bit absurd.

He shrugged, an air of nonchalance about him. "You're with Ravel Southwark, after all. You can surely manage it without much trouble." His grin stretched

wide. "Just deliver some mind-blowing sex, and the money will be at your disposal."

"oh really?" still in utter disbelief, I shook my head. I am so done with this. He is going to keep coming back for more and I can't have that. I know exactly what to do to handle the situation. The news will only hurt Ravel if we are together. If the news of our breakup gets out there before the pictures of me doing drugs, the public will praise him for doing the right thing by leaving me, and that will have a less negative impact on his public image.

"Hazel?" Kelvin called me out of my thought. "you clearly stated earlier that you have somewhere important to be, why are you wasting both our time by keeping mute?"

"That's because you are not the only one who has something to say." I spat. "do you know why I agreed to meet with you? Because I have news for you too, which should be all over the internet soon." His brows crinkled. "I broke up with Ravel this morning."

Kelvin laughed mockingly. "and you expect me to believe that?"

I simply shrugged, feigning indifference. "it doesn't matter what you chose to believe, that doesn't change the fact that I have indeed broken up with him." telling him that the news is about to be published will make him feel at a disadvantage. That way, he won't frettingly consider uploading the pictures immediately because he believes he is already late.

I know for a fact that he will upload it, but it will give me time to break up with Ravel and talk to a journalist about the breakup before he releases the pictures.

"You claim to have broken up with him yet you move around with his security." He pointed out with a snare. "I am not that gullible Hazel."

I can see the panic in his eyes. He trying so hard not to believe me. "You mean Adam? He is still following me because he was ordered by Ravel to make sure I don't leave the house with anything that doesn't belong to me, and that important thing I told you I had to get back to is packing. I was actually packing my stuff before I received your text."

He cursed under his breath. "You are going to get jailed for doing drugs."

I arched a brow at him. "and you think I will be the only one?" I took a step towards him. "be rest assured that I will be taking you and your friends with me." When his frown deepened, I knew I was winning. "Go ahead Kelvin, release the photos, I don't give a fuck anymore."

He took an angry step towards me and my glare sharpened. "I dare you Kelvin, take another step towards me. Adam has a licensed gun, and he won't go to jail for trying to defend an innocent girl from a raging nutjob."

"This isn't over!" he spat.

I know it isn't because I am about to break Ravel's heart and equally mine.

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RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

Hazel had to cancel our dinner plans that evening as she felt the need to be with David and his mother. While it initially disappointed me, I respected her decision and embraced it wholeheartedly. The following morning, I made an attempt to reach her by phone, hoping to catch a moment with her before my departure to New York. Regrettably, my call remained unanswered.

With my keys in hand, I drove to her workplace, only to be greeted by her secretary, Agatha. She informed me that Hazel was still away in David's hometown and wouldn't be able to make it to the office that day. Left with no other option, I opted for a text message, expressing that I would be out of reach for a while as I was about to embark on a flight back home.

Back at the hotel, I found myself repeatedly glancing at my phone, eagerly awaiting a message from her end. However, the wait turned out to be in vain as my phone screen remained devoid of any notifications. As noon approached, I completed the check-out process and made my way back to the bustling streets of New York.

Later that evening, she finally reached out to me, extending her apologies for the silence that had left me hanging. Although she chose not to delve into the reasons behind the unanswered messages and calls, I opted to release any frustration and forgive her. After all, my love for her didn't preclude her from having the autonomy to manage her communication.

The memories of my past mistakes loomed, the moments of mistreatment and the painful image of me beside June in bed were indelible. Yet, in the face of all these undeniable facts, her genuine smiles in my direction remained a precious gift- one that I vowed never to treat lightly.

Elenor reclined, propping her legs onto my desk, a tumbler of vodka cradled in her hand. "So, let me get this straight," she mused, her gaze fixed on me.

"You're suggesting a private party for her right here in New York, and you expect me to coax her into coming?"

-I let out a sigh, feeling a twinge of frustration at having to repeat myself.

"Elenor, I've gone over this multiple times already.

What more can I possibly say to make you grasp the concept?"

She regarded me over the rim of her glass, her tone taking on a rasp. "There's one aspect you've failed to explain," she rasped, her curiosity piqued. "What gives you the audacity to assume you can just summon her down here?" A glare exchanged between us, and at moments like these, I couldn't help but question whose allegiance she truly held. "She might have plans for her birthday, and you want me to sweep in and disrupt them? Why?" A scoff escaped her lips, followed by a pointed remark, "because you've got a little

surprise party of your own planned?"

Why in the world did fate saddle me with this particular breed of human as my sister? Dealing with anyone more infuriating than Elenor seems impossible.

"Could you possibly be any more exasperating?" I couldn't help snapping.

"Will you lend a hand, or should I just assume that's far beyond your capabilities?" I retorted, my patience wearing thin. "I'd much rather have her celebrate her birthday with me rather than with David."

A fleeting chortle escaped Elenor. "Fine, I'll assist you, but there's a condition," she declared, her tone laced with a note of negotiation. "You'll need to make your private jet available."

My glare intensified as a surge of frustration coursed through me. "There's a reason it's called a surprise, Elenor. If she spots you using my jet, she's going to sniff out that something's afoot."

She shot me a piercing glare in return. "I'm not resorting to a commercial airline just to do you a favor," she grumbled. "If you want me to head over to Seattle, you'll have to release your jet for my use."

"Why not use the Southwark family jet?" I suggested, my reluctance stemming from a desire to ensure the surprise wasn't inadvertently spoiled due to the use of my own jet. After all, I had no international travel plans to hinder its availability.

—Elenor's response was resolute. "I won't be asking Mom for anything, so that's off the table. I'm not going to beg her for the jet, and you shouldn't either."

Exasperation gnawed at me, mingling with a begrudging resignation. "Fine," I huffed, finally yielding to her stance. "You can

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have the jet, but please, just don't mess things up for me."

A self-satisfied smile played on her lips, a clear indication of her triumph.

Tilting her head back, she polished off the contents of her glass. "Alright, spill the plan," she urged, curiosity glinting in her eyes. "What's the game plan?"

I kept it straightforward. "I've rented a penthouse. Your task is simply to get her there. That's all you need to do."

"Hmm," she hummed, setting down her glass and intertwining her fingers thoughtfully. "What's the guest list looking like? I hope you're not foolish enough to include David, right?"

I couldn't help but react to that notion. "Do I appear idiotic to you?" I retorted, incredulous. Her nonchalant shrug seemed to suggest that she considered the idea plausible. The urge to strangle her was strong at that moment.

"Just you, me, Raymond, and Adam, fresh from his military service," I informed her, wanting to keep the gathering small and intimate.

She offered a sly compliment. "That's a tight-knit group. Can I talk you into

adding male strippers to the mix?"

My eyebrow arched at her suggestion. "I thought you and Raymond were back together?" I inquired pointedly, recalling his pursuit of her that day in Seattle. It seemed like they were willing to disregard public opinion.

"Raymond's nothing but a coward," Elenor spat out vehemently, her tone dripping with frustration that revealed her growing weariness of chasing after him. "Can you even believe that he carried me to my hotel room, locked us both inside, and pocketed the key? I was stark naked right in front of him and the guy didn't even bat an eye."

My frown deepened, feeling a bit uncomfortable with the level of detail she was sharing. "I think you're oversharing, Elenor," I interjected, wishing that perhaps my sister could maintain a bit more of a filter on certain subjects. Normal siblings tend to keep their sexual lives separate, but I suppose our dynamic is anything but normal.

She rolled her eyes dismissively. "Whatever." Pushing herself to her feet, she stretched languidly. "We've got three days till her birthday, so I'll head to Seattle a day in advance. That way, she won't grow suspicious of anything."

I shrugged casually and opened my laptop, focusing on my work. "Do as you wish," I said nonchalantly.

Her response was swift and laden with implications. "Oh, it's not about what I wish. It's about what's happening, and since I'm flying out tomorrow, you better have that jet prepped." She swung her purse over her shoulder, moving gracefully toward the exit.

"Elenor," I called after her, prompting her to pause just short of the door.

"Remember, keep it hush-hush. I don't want anyone, not even David, catching wind that she'll be here in New York." We don't know who the bastard is, and it could just be anyone. Until we find him or her, we have to be extremely careful.

She nodded in agreement and turned to leave. Just as her hand was about to grasp the doorknob, the door swung open, revealing Raymond on the other side. Their gazes locked, freezing them in a tense moment. Time seemed to stretch as they stared at each other, until Elenor finally broke eye contact and walked away, leaving Raymond standing in the doorway.

Raymond entered my office, taking a seat on the sofa as he settled in. "Our suspicion seems to be off the mark," he mused, setting his tablet aside. I did some digging on Kelvin, and he's still very much where he should be. It's practically impossible for him to have orchestrated that."

I cursed under my breath. I had secretly hoped that the blame could be placed on Kelvin, allowing me to bring this issue to a close. "Keep surveillance on him regardless, and let's not halt our investigation," I instructed, my frustration evident.

"Understood, boss." He picked up his tablet and woke the screen. "I've been delving into the world of professional hackers and trackers, and I think I've found a potential lead." He pointed to an image on the screen. "This individual right here. He's currently in Italy working on a job and is expected to return to New York next month."

Shit. "Next month is a long time. Triple his payment and have him come down here tomorrow."

Raymond shook his head. "Hyde is principled. He doesn't only do his job for money. He's not going to leave Italy until he is done with his job, and if you piss him off, he'll reject your job offer no matter the price."

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"So what do you suggest we do?"

He relaxed back. "We wait. That's the only thing we can do at the moment."

Waiting. I seem to be doing a lot of that lately. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I blinked at Raymond. "What's your deal with Elenor?"

His face tightened instantly. "I don't understand what you mean by that boss."

I glared hard. "I think you do Raymond. I honestly do not like butting into people's private affairs, but she's my sister, and I happen to care quite a lot."

"Boss_"

I lifted a hand, shutting him up. "I am going to talk, and you're going to listen,"

I stated factly and he nodded. "If you're not going to stop being a coward and take her seriously, let her go. Stop playing with her emotions."

"Ravel, I really_"

"I do not want to hear your excuse, Raymond," I interjected. I've listened to that long enough. "If you're not going to take her seriously, then let her go." Or I'll be forced to act.

Chapter 65

HAZEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

I knew I owed Ravel a date, whether or not I was contemplating ending things with him. I quickly apologized to the makeup artist and stylist for the delay, urging them to work swiftly since I didn't want to keep Ravel waiting any longer than necessary.

In just under an hour, my makeup was completed and my hair styled. Slipping into the dress Ravel had given me and adorning myself with the diamond set he'd gifted me on my last birthday, I felt a twinge of nostalgia. There had been a point when I had considered selling this set to alleviate some financial strain, particularly when Kelvin's financial demands had grown insistent.

A light knock sounded on my door, followed by Adam's entrance. "The car is ready," he informed me.

Nodding in response to Adam, I slung my purse over my shoulder and left the room. I should have been excited; spending time with Ravel usually brought a sense of excitement, but tonight, the impending news of our breakup hung heavily over me. Maybe after the dinner, I would muster the courage to convey my intentions to end our relationship.

Settling into the car, I leaned back and closed my eyes, attempting to calm my racing thoughts. Whenever I glanced up, I noticed Adam's gaze on me through the rearview mirror. He likely wondered about Kelvin, but I had no obligation to provide an explanation to him.

As the car pulled up at a hotel, Adam emerged, opening the door for me and ensuring I didn't step on my dress. Stepping out, I moved toward the hotel's entrance. However, Adam took hold of my hand and steered me toward a different wing of the building.

Baffled, I looked back at the parked car. "Where are we going?" I queried, my confusion evident.

"To where Mr. Southwark is," came Adam's curt reply. His words left me speechless as I obediently trailed behind him. The path led us to a dimly lit structure adjacent to the hotel. Slowly, his hand released mine, leaving me in the darkness.

Panic began to gnaw at me. "Adam!" I called out, my voice trembling.

Fumbling in my purse, I searched for my phone's flashlight. But before I could retrieve it, a spotlight suddenly burst to life, illuminating a man poised at a piano. I stared, a mixture of curiosity and surprise swirling within me. The man's fingers began to dance on the piano keys, producing soft, melodic tunes.

As he played the first stanza of 'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran, the music came to a gentle halt. Then, another spotlight illuminated Ravel. And then, another light revealed Elenor, followed by Raymond, Adam, and several unfamiliar faces. They held letters that, when read together, spelled out the words, "Will You Marry Me?"

My eyes widened in a mix of shock and disbelief, unshed tears shimmering as I watched Ravel approach me with a nervous smile. "What's happening?" I silently mouthed, utterly taken aback by this unexpected turn of events. How did things evolve to this point?

Coming to a stop before me, Ravel gently took my hand in his, his expression a blend of nervousness and earnestness. "Hazel," he whispered, his voice carrying a tender weight. "From the very first day I crossed paths with you in that hallway, my life has been transformed by your love, bringing me endless joy and laughter." His azure eyes danced with affection and admiration as

they locked onto mine. "You've become my constant thought, my eternal desire to be in your presence. When you moved in with me, returning home to you became my most cherished wish."

He moistened his lips nervously, his words quivering with sincerity. "I don't want this to end, Hazel. I yearn to lie beside you in bed for eternity, to wake up each day with your face as my first sight until my last breath." His figure slowly sank to one knee, his vulnerability laid bare. "Hazel Brown, would you do me the honor of making me the happiest man alive by saying yes to spending forever with me?"

A surge of desire to say yes coursed through me. The thought of a future with Ravel, building a life together, having children, and growing old side by side, had always been my aspiration. Yet, the shadow of my past loomed large, threatening to sabotage everything. I tore my gaze away from him, glancing at the faces surrounding us.

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Elenor appeared genuinely joyful, Raymond seemed to hold onto a glimmer of hope, Adam's pride was evident for having played a role in orchestrating this surprise, while the other unfamiliar faces bore a mixture of envy and happiness, perhaps yearning for a similar moment. Anne, of course, was absent. If her own son didn't care enough to bring her here, why should I?

Finally, I shifted my gaze back to Ravel. With all those eyes on us, it didn't feel like I could utter a negative answer. But why should I say no? There was every reason to embrace happiness, not just for him, but for myself as well. It was time to let him decide whether my past was a deal-breaker or something he was willing to look beyond.

Moistening my lips, I nodded, a quiet affirmation. "Yes," I breathed, lifting my hand to display the fingers that would soon carry the ring. "Let's face the future together, Ravel." A broad smile lit up his face as he slid the ring onto my finger. Standing, he enveloped me in his arms and pressed his lips tenderly against mine.

The gathering erupted in a chorus of cheers, coos, and playful whistles. Disregarding the attention, I entwined my arms around Ravel's neck and deepened the kiss, intent on sealing this moment with the intensity of my emotions.

After what seemed like an eternity, we eased away from the kiss to catch our breath. Ravel's forehead rested gently against mine, and an uncontainable smile spread across my face. "When did you start planning all of this?" I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

His grin was infectious. "I've been thinking about marrying you for quite a while now, but I began planning this surprise about a month ago."

The joyous atmosphere embraced us, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of happiness. There was, however, the pressing matter of discussing Kelvin with him. For now, I needed to reach out to Kelvin and halt any potentially damaging information from being published. Ravel needed to hear it from me first.

"Congratulations, girl!" Elenor's exuberant voice rang out as she enveloped me in a warm hug. "You two are going to have the most gorgeous babies." She had mentioned she was going to spend her vacation in Paris. "Weren't you supposed to be traveling?" I inquired.

Elenor nonchalantly shrugged. "I'll do whatever it takes to make Bluey happy and to spike Anne's blood pressure." We shared a chuckle, appreciating her dark humor. Congratulatory words followed once Elenor released me from the embrace.

Ravel handed me a glass, and together we raised a toast to new beginnings and an eternal future. As the music began playing and the food was served, Elenor claimed the dance floor, while Ravel excused himself briefly to attend to some phone calls. Elenor had already uploaded the news to her Instagram account, setting the internet abuzz.

Seizing the moment, I excused myself from the festivities and retreated to a quieter corner to call Kelvin. He answered on the second ring. "You crazy bitch!" he snapped in response. "You said you ended things with him. So what's this engagement news all about?"

My hand clenched into a fist, my frustration evident. "He proposed, and I couldn't refuse," I responded tersely. "Please don't publish the photos. I'll get the money to you soon."

Kelvin's chuckle carried a sly edge. "You must be naive to think I'd settle for the same amount. You're in a much more vulnerable position now, Hazel, which is why I'm asking for two million dollars."

My eyes widened in disbelief. "Kelvin, you can't be serious. Two million is excessive!"

He scoffed dismissively. "Perhaps it's a bit much for Southwark's girlfriend, but it's definitely not excessive for Southwark's future wife. You've got a fortnight to come up with the money, or I'll be approaching the next newspaper outlet. I'll be waiting for your call." The call ended abruptly, leaving me speechless and my heart racing.

Just how insatiably greedy could Kelvin be? Demanding two million dollars, money he didn't earn or deserve? I refused to be extorted by him, no matter the circumstances.

"Hazel?" Ravel's voice cut through my thoughts. "Why are you out here?" Putting on a smile, I turned to face him. "The music was getting to be a bit

overwhelming, and I was starting to develop a headache. So, I stepped away from the noise.”

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His nod was thoughtful. “Who were you on the phone with?”

Feigning innocence, I asked, “Who are you talking about?”

He gave me a pointed look. “I saw you on the phone. Everyone you know is inside. Who could you possibly be calling?”

This was the moment. I took a deep breath. “Kelvin,” I whispered.

Chapter 66

RAVEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

Hazel had mentioned that we would have an extensive conversation about Kelvin once we returned to the penthouse. Perhaps she was finally prepared to share with me the reasons behind her recent behavior, the motives that underlie her actions.

After an evening of dining, dancing, and engaging in conversation, the hour had grown late, well past two in the morning. Hazel’s repeated yawns were clear signs of her exhaustion, and I didn’t want to keep her standing any longer than necessary. Therefore, I decided it was best for us to call it a night and retire.

Gently wrapping my arm around her waist, I placed a delicate kiss on Hazel’s neck. “Shall we call it a night?” I whispered softly into her ear.

She nodded, stifling yet another yawn. “I’ll go say goodbye to Elenor, and then we can head out.” I observed as she made her way across the room, seemingly dragging her feet, towards where Elenor was engrossed in taking shots with a group of girls. I wasn’t even sure who those girls were; Elenor had organized their presence herself.

Just as I turned my attention back to the scene, Adam approached me. I slid my hands into my pockets, blinking slowly as I focused on him. “What is it, Adam?” I asked.

His expression was serious as he spoke. “Boss, I thought you should know that Ms. Hazel met up with a man she referred to as a friend. But something seemed off; she appeared tense throughout their conversation.”

My brow furrowed in concern. “Did you manage to get his name?” I inquired, my focus narrowing on the situation.

Adam winced slightly. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t get his name. But I saw his face clearly, and I can definitely identify him if I see him again,” he assured me, attempting to rectify his oversight.

Frustration gnawed at me. “His face won’t be of much use if we don’t have a name,” I replied curtly. Could it be the Kelvin she was planning to discuss with

me later? As my gaze shifted back towards Hazel's approach, I spotted her walking toward us. "We'll continue this conversation later," I informed Adam, receiving a sharp nod in return as he moved away.

Hazel reached for her purse on the table, giving me a soft smile. Despite her attempt to appear cheerful, a tinge of unease was evident in her eyes. "What were you and Adam discussing?" she inquired as we made our way toward my car.

My thoughts were spinning, trying to understand what was going on with Hazel. I couldn't let myself believe that she had cheated on me. "We were discussing the need to enhance your security measures," I fabricated, my voice steady. "Given the news Elenor posted, the papara zzi and potential threats might start hounding you."

I courteously held the car door open for her until she was seated before I rounded the vehicle and settled into the driver's seat. "Is that really necessary?" she questioned, expressing doubt about the heightened security. "The decision is final," Vasserted firmly, my tone resolute. "Your safety isn't up for negotiation. You'll grow accustomed to their presence over time." The remainder of the drive back to the penthouse transpired in silence, and I observed Hazel as she eventually drifted off to sleep in the car.

Bringing the car to a stop in the parking lot, I switched off the engine, unfastened my seatbelt, and turned to gaze at Hazel, who was now peacefully asleep. My heart swelled with a mixture of affection and concern. I was deeply in love with her, to the point that I might even forgive her if she had cheated on me, but I was resolute in making sure that whoever he was wouldn't be able to freely walk the streets of New York.

Lost in admiring her beauty, I was caught off guard when her eyes fluttered open. Our eyes locked, and a soft smile tugged at her lips as she rubbed her hands over her face, drawing attention to the ring that now adorned her finger. I couldn't help but grin at the sight. "You look absolutely beautiful," I complimented genuinely.

Hazel let out a gentle laugh. "Well, I just hope I wasn't snoring too loudly," she quipped, her gaze briefly shifting to the window. "When did we arrive back home?"

"It's been just a few minutes since we arrived," I replied. "You appeared so peaceful while sleeping that I didn't want to disturb you."

She yawned and reached for her bag, undoing her seatbelt. "I did mention that we needed to talk," she pointed out with a hint of amusement, "so eventually, I knew I'd have to wake up." She opened the car door and stepped out, and I followed suit, placing a hand on her waist as we made our way into the house. Once inside the living room, Hazel dropped onto the sofa, kicked off her shoes, and then stood up once more, making her way to the mini bar. I

observed her closely as she picked up a bottle of vodka and took a swig straight from it. The sight was unexpected, and I couldn't help but raise an eyebrow in surprise.

Seeing Hazel exhibit such behavior was entirely out of character, especially outside of a party atmosphere. Concerned, I called her name softly and left the sofa to join her at the bar. "Hazel," I began gently, "if discussing what's on your mind proves to be too difficult, you don't have to do it."

She took another swig from the bottle and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. "Not addressing this issue will not only jeopardize our relationship and possibly our marriage, but it could also tarnish your public image."

I studied her closely, my heart pounding with a mix of apprehension and curiosity. "Is this connected to the man you met earlier?" I asked, and her eyes widened in surprise. "Adam told me," I continued, "so I know about it. Is he the reason you're resorting to alcohol? Did you cheat on me with him?"

The words left my mouth, a knot of worry tightening in my chest.

She glared at me, her gaze intense. "I've told you before, Ravel, I'll never cheat on you," she retorted firmly. She removed the pins from her hair, allowing her locks to cascade around her shoulders. "Hell will freeze over before that happens"

If she hadn't cheated, then perhaps the situation wasn't as dire as she believed it to be. I moved closer to her, placing my hands on her waist, and then lifted her to sit on the edge of the bar counter. I stood between her legs, looking into her eyes with reassurance. "Talk to me," I urged gently. "We'll find a way to work through it together."

Her eyes

blinked, now glistening with unshed tears. The same beautiful eyes that had captured my heart. She whispered softly, her voice laced with vulnerability, "I'm afraid that you'll leave me, Ravel. I'm afraid that you won't want me anymore."

"Nothing," I assured her with utmost sincerity, "absolutely nothing will ever make me stop wanting you." Drawing nearer, I planted a tender kiss on her lips. "I don't think you realize just how profoundly I love you."

Hazel's lips were slightly moist from nervousness as she licked them, struggling to articulate her thoughts. Seeing her hesitation, I decided to gently guide the conversation. "You mentioned wanting to talk about Kelvin. Is he the same man you met earlier tonight?" I asked, and she nodded in response.

"Can you tell me more about your history with him?"

With a deep breath, she began to reveal her truth. "I'm currently being blackmailed by Kelvin due to my past," she disclosed, her voice tinged with emotion. My brow furrowed, puzzled by the revelation. "I was a drug addict,

Rav,” she continued, her voice quivering with vulnerability, “and I nearly caused the death of a baby.”

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RAVEL

FIVE YEARS AGO

Hazel’s words struck me like a bolt of lightning, freezing me in shock. I had braced myself for a serious conversation, but this revelation was far beyond what I had expected. Blinking rapidly, I instinctively placed both hands on her hips, drawing her closer as if to anchor myself. The scent of her perfume filled the air, and my heart raced as I tried to process the gravity of her words.

“Hazel,” I began, my voice filled with a mix of concern and confusion, “I’m going to need you to explain this to me.”

The weight of the moment seemed to hang heavily between us. My mind raced to comprehend the situation. “What is Kelvin blackmailing you with?” I inquired, trying to grasp the facts of the matter. “And what do you mean by ‘almost killed a baby’?”

Tears shimmered in her eyes as they flickered over my face, and her voice trembled as she spoke. “You already hate me,” she whispered, her trembling hand attempting to wipe away the tears that spilled down her cheeks.

I gently caught her hand in mid-air, pressing a soft kiss to her inner wrist before using my thumb to wipe away her tears. “Hazel, I could never hate you,” I assured her, my voice tender. “And I’m not here to pass judgment. I just want to understand what you’re going through.” I caught another tear as it welled in her eye, my touch gentle and comforting. “Please, take your time and explain everything to me.”

As she began to speak, her voice trembled, and I listened intently, my gaze focused on her. “I was once addicted to cocaine,” she confessed, her eyes avoiding mine. “I met him when I was a teenager, and he introduced me to his friends who were into drugs. I got caught up with them and started abusing cocaine.”

Seeing how difficult this was for her, I walked over to the fridge, opened it, and grabbed a bottle of water. While alcohol might be a tempting escape, I knew it wouldn’t help in this situation. “Here,” I said, uncapping the bottle and extending it to her, “take a drink, and then continue. I’m here to listen.”

She gulped down the entire bottle of water, and I took it from her, giving her a reassuring nod to continue. Her voice quivered as she shared her painful past. “My foster parents left me in charge of their one-year-old baby. I invited Kelvin over, and he brought drugs with him. It started as a sort of twisted fun, but things spiraled out of control as we got high.” She paused, her eyes filled with

regret. "The baby began crying incessantly, and it infuriated me. I wanted her to stop, to be quiet, and Kelvin suggested giving her drugs to calm her down. We almost went through with it, but luckily her parents returned and caught me in the act." She sighed heavily. "The next day, I was sent back to the social worker, and they didn't reveal what had really happened."

I clenched my jaw, a mix of anger and concern bubbling within me. "Is he blackmailing you with the threat of revealing what happened with the baby?" My voice was low, my eyes locked on hers.

She shook her head. "There's no evidence to support that claim," she responded. Running her hand wearily down her face, she moistened her lips, a clear sign of her anxiety. "He's obtained compromising pictures of me during moments of drug use, and he's using them as leverage to blackmail me into paying him two million dollars."

A scowl formed on my face as I processed the situation. "f ucking ba stard," I muttered under my breath. If only I can wrap my fingers round his neck right now. I couldn't help but think that all of this had its origins on the day she had innocently took a walk Adam. "Has he asked for money from you before, or is this the first time?" I posed the question even though I

Adam. was well aware of the answer; I simply needed her to confirm it.

Her voice dropped as she replied, "No." A sense of shame lingered in her mumbled admission. "I've already emptied my personal account to meet his demands, and I even withdrew a significant sum from your account, but he's relentless in his demands for more."

The revelation left me incredulous that she had been facing this ordeal all by herself. "Why didn't you confide in me?" The words slipped from my lips laden with a mix of concern and hurt. Wasn't our relationship built on trust, on the understanding that we'd share our burdens? "Aren't we supposed to be each other's confidants?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured, her voice barely audible. Regret colored her words as they hung in the air. Her recent behavior

suddenly made sense; the nervousness, the tension-it all stemmed from this hidden struggle. "I was just so scared," she admitted, her vulnerability shining through. The past weeks had revealed glimpses of her unease, like an intricate puzzle now coming together. "I was terrified of the impact those pictures could have on your reputation. I was afraid you might not want me anymore, especially after finding out about my past mistakes, like the incident with the baby."

I held her face gently, my thumb caressing her cheek as a wave of tenderness washed over me. "You were a young, lost soul trying to find your way," I reassured her, my voice carrying unwavering support. The crux of the matter was that she had emerged victorious from her battle against drugs. "You

faced down those demons, Hazel, and you emerged triumphant.”

Biting her inner lips, she blinked rapidly to keep the tears in. “I’m sorry for keeping it from you.” She apologized. “I’m really sorry Rav.”

I pulled her into a hug, kissing her neckline lightly. “It’s fine Hazel. It’s normal to be afraid to lose something or someone who you love.” I kissed her again.

“Be rest assured that this isn’t going to disrupt what we have.” She pulled away and stared at me. “I love you too much to let your past end us.”

“This is going to affect your image negatively Ravel.” She sniffed. “I don’t like the idea of you risking everything you for just because of me.”

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Just? She is worth more to me than anything. “Nothing will go wrong,” I assured her. I am Ravel Southwark, there is nothing I cannot handle. “Things won’t get to that point.” I’ll have to handle the situation from now onwards.

“How long do you have to provide the money?”

“Two weeks.”

My jaw clenched. “That ba stard gave you two weeks to provide two million dollars?” I will enjoy tormenting that fool. I will his past make his existence nothing but a pitiful excuse. “I’m going to need everything about him from you. His last name, life, everything.”

She nodded meekly. “You should be careful while dealing with him, he can be a crazy f ucker.” She advised, “I didn’t think he was capable of dumping me when I overdosed until he did it.”

My brows jumped to my hairline. “He ditched you when you overdosed?”

I nodded. “Right outside the social worker building.”

That ba stard keeps giving me more reasons to go after him. “I don’t have to be careful around him, he should be the one scared of me.” I stopped playing dirty in my college days, and I don’t mind going back to that version of me.

“Rav,” She whispered, cupping my cheeks, “Don’t do anything that will land you in trouble or something that we both will regret in the future.”

Unable to help it, I leaned forward and kissed her. “Blackmail is an offense punishable by law and he f ucking broke it.” He’s going to be in jail even before he gets to release the pictures.

“So is doing drugs.” Her lips wobbled. “I don’t want to go jail Rav.”

“Not while I still breath? I insisted vehemently. “You’re going to be my bride, my wife, and the mothers of my kids and we won’t be doing any of those behind bars.”

“I’m really sorry for pulling this on you Ravel.” She apologized for the umpteenth time. “I’m really sorry.”

Grinning just to lighten the situation, I winked at her. “I’m definitely going to f uck up in my husband duties in the future, I really hope you’ll be as forgiving.” She chuckled. “As long as you don’t cheat on me.”

"That's never going to happen." I asserted quickly. "No other woman attracts me other than you." My phone vibrated in my pocket. "Just focus on the wedding planning while I handle Kelvin." That fool will be sorry for hurting my woman.

Chapter 68

ELENOR

PRESENT TIME

Ravel did more than I expected. Not only did he arrange for the private jet but also ensured luxurious accommodations tailored perfectly to my preferences. The suite he selected for me exuded elegance and sophistication. Amidst the process of gathering my belongings, an unexpected interruption came in the form of the doorbell's melodious chime.

Intrigued yet puzzled by the late-hour caller, I momentarily halted my packing to approach the door. With a touch of reluctance, I engaged the intercom, my anticipation waning rapidly as my eyes met an unwanted figure on the other side. The mere sight of my uninvited guest caused my mood to plummet.

The soft voice that followed held a mix of entreaty and familiarity, as Anne's gentle words reached my ears through the intercom. "Elenor, open the door. I'm well aware you're inside."

Perplexed by her sudden appearance, I begrudgingly permitted Anne's entry, retreating to my bedroom to continue packing. A few minutes later, she joined me, her presence an unwelcome intrusion. "Why are you in my house, Anne?" I questioned, my attempt at evasion evident in my tone. Hadn't I gone to great lengths to avoid her?

Her gaze briefly flicked to my half-packed suitcase before returning to meet my eyes. In an almost monotonous tone, she pointed out, "Today is Friday." Her words hung in the air for a moment, pregnant with unspoken implications. I turned to her, my confusion etched across my features as I blinked slowly. "And?" I replied, a hint of skepticism coloring my voice.

"Family dinner," she elucidated, her explanation falling flat. "You missed the Friday family dinner. I want to know why, especially when you're here in the city."

Was she truly serious? Frustration surged within me, a red dress slipping from my grasp to land angrily on the bed. Folding my arms across my chest, I leveled a glare at her. "Family dinner?" I scoffed, a bitter edge to my chuckle. "Let's not pretend it's a 'family dinner' when Ravel abandoned that tradition ages ago!"

"Ravel's absence shouldn't dictate your choices," Anne challenged, her words laced with a hint of defiance.

A bitter laugh escaped me, laden with resentment. "Ravel's absence should

have been a wake-up call for me,” I retorted, the words dripping with bitterness. “You label it as a ‘family dinner,’ yet Ravel hasn’t graced that occasion with his presence with his wife since that incident. You even forbade Raymond from attending, as if erasing his existence was the solution.”

“Raymond isn’t family!” Her voice snapped, sharp and uncompromising. My frustration surged to the surface, my desperation echoing in my cry. “He grew up with us!” I exclaimed, my agitation nearing its breaking point. “I love him, and you’re fully aware of that! He could have been family if you hadn’t forced him to promise to stay away from me, using his father’s life as leverage!”

“Elenor!” Anne’s voice rang out, a mix of exasperation and reproach, yet it couldn’t drown out the turmoil that had been festering for far too long.

“I remained oblivious to what transpired back then,” I admitted in a hushed voice, my emotions laid bare. “I couldn’t comprehend why he suddenly distanced himself from me, until I accidentally overheard you reminding him of that promise just last week.”

She took a tentative step towards me, a glimmer of vulnerability in her expression. But my gaze remained fixed and intense, a glaring testament to my lingering resentment. “For all your actions, Anne—your attempts to manipulate me into a contractual marriage, your near destruction of Ravel’s marriage—I never harbored as much animosity towards you as I did last week. Never before have I questioned the cosmic irony that made you my mother.”

Her fingers fiddled nervously with the pearl necklace adorning her neck, a visible sign of her unease. “Elenor, I did what I believed was in your best interest,” she pleaded, her voice tinged with desperation. “Raymond isn’t the suitable match for you. He has nothing substantial to offer.”

My fists clenched at my sides, a surge of anger coursing through me. “You made decisions based on your insatiable greed for more wealth,” I seethed, my voice trembling with intensity. Stepping towards her, I pinned her with an accusatory glare. “You’re completely oblivious when it comes to recognizing genuine character, Anne. Your judgment of people rests solely on the depth of their pockets!”

Her voice raised, a bellow of frustration breaking free. “Raymond is your brother’s security!” she shouted back, her eyes blazing with conviction.

“That’s his professional responsibility, Anne!” My voice cracked as I cried out, frustration and passion intermingled. “Just like Ravel oversees a jewelry empire and I manage a cosmetics line. It’s his job! At the end of the day, we’re all contributing the same thing—money!”

Her open palm connected with my cheek in a stinging slap, the impact resonating through me. Pain flared across my skin, both physical and emotional. “Don’t you dare belittle your brother’s contributions by comparing

them to Raymond's! It's an insult to him!" She hissed vehemently, her words heavy with reprimand.

Tears welled up as I gingerly rubbed my stinging cheek, allowing the salty trails to trace their way down. "If you weren't my mother, that slap would have been returned," I admitted, my voice quivering. A mixture of shock and uncertainty flashed in her widened eyes. "Do you feel no disgust for yourself, Anne?"

Her tone turned stern, a warning etched in her words. "Don't address me with such disrespect. Remember, I am still your mother."

"A mother who was absent on the day her son became engaged to the woman he adores," I countered, my voice gaining strength. "You were intentionally not included in the invitation, and it was a close call even for the wedding." I wiped my tears away with a fierce swipe, my gaze unwaveringly fixed on her. "And just so you're aware, Ravel deeply regrets having you at that wedding."

"Shut your mouth this instant!" she snapped, her patience dwindling.

"No! It's your mouth that should be shut!" I shot back, a culmination of frustration and resentment fueling my words. "I'm exhausted from trying to find any redeeming qualities in you, Anne." Inhaling a deep breath, I marched towards the door and swung it open. "Leave my house."

Her gaze narrowed in disbelief. "Are you seriously asking me to leave your house?"

Unmoved by the mixture of rage and frustration etched across her features, I met her gaze without flinching. "If you don't exit of your own volition, I won't hesitate to instruct security to escort you out."

A surge of anger tightened her lips, a visible sign of her displeasure. "I'm going to allow you some time to come to your senses, and then we'll engage in a civilized conversation." With those words, she turned and exited the room.

"Anne!" I called after her, halting her departure. She paused, her head tilting slightly as she afforded me her attention. "Don't bother expecting me at the so-called Friday family dinners any longer. I won't be gracing them with my presence." With a finality that echoed in my words, I slammed the door shut in her face.

**

The following morning, I embarked on my journey to Seattle. Upon my arrival, I chose not to make an immediate visit to Hazel's office. Instead, I dedicated my time to some shopping and acquiring a thoughtful gift for her, all while indulging in

my list. some sun exposure to tan my skin. By late afternoon, I had efficiently checked off these tasks from

With hunger pangs gnawing at me and an undeniable yearning for ice cream, I prioritized an early dinner before seeking out the sweet treat. My plan was straightforward: satisfy my appetite and then savor a delightful ice cream dessert before eventually making my way to Hazel's. If circumstances didn't allow for our meeting today, there was always the option of doing so tomorrow-after all, tomorrow held the pivotal task of convincing her to journey to New York.

Having executed my dinner plans as intended, I leisurely ambled over to an ice cream parlor that had been enthusiastically recommended by one of the restaurant's staff members. The commendation certainly held true, considering the lengthy line that greeted me upon arrival. It seemed this establishment's popularity was well-deserved, a fact that became evident as I joined the queue of eager patrons.

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wait in the ice cream line became more prolonged, I took a seat that was conveniently provided. Amidst my patience, my attention was captured by a little girl, also queuing for ice cream. Strangely, her appearance struck a chord within me, reminiscent of what I imagined Ravel's future daughter might look like. The resemblance between her and Ravel was uncanny, a remarkable likeness that drew my focus.

The girl's gaze darted around, her eyes seemingly searching for someone. In a burst of excitement, she waved and exclaimed, "Mummy!" Her declaration piqued my curiosity, and I followed her line of sight, which led me to none other than Hazel.

Despite her attempt at concealment with a face mask, I recognized Hazel with ease. Shock reverberated through me, causing me to blink rapidly as I watched her lift the child into her arms, placing a loving kiss on the girl's cheek before returning to her phone call. "I stepped out to get ice cream for Daisy," she explained, her voice carrying the affection of a doting parent. "I should be heading home shortly."

The name "Daisy" triggered a memory, linking it to the moment Hazel had inquired if Daisy was okay. It was becoming evident that this Daisy was indeed Ravel's daughter. But the question that gnawed at me was how such a significant revelation had been kept hidden from the media, from Ravel himself, and particularly from me. While I understood Hazel's anger towards Ravel, my support for her had never wavered.

Summoning my resolve, I rose from my seat and took deliberate steps towards her. "Hazel?" I called out, the name hanging in the air like a question

mark. She spun around at the sound of my voice, her eyes widening in astonishment.

Recognition dawned in her gaze as she spoke my name in return. "Elenor?"

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PRESENT TIME

As Elenor's unmistakable voice reached my ears, I desperately wished that my mind was playing tricks on me. However, as I slowly turned around, the harsh reality sneered at me, a cruel jest. Before me stood Elenor, an unexpected sight that widened my eyes in disbelief.

Suppressing the lump that had formed in my throat, I managed to murmur, "Elenor?" My steps faltered as I tentatively approached her, the mission for ice cream completely abandoned. "What are you doing here?"

Her gaze oscillated between Daisy and me, her lips parting and closing as if struggling to find the right words. "Hazel," she whispered, her voice barely audible, "What's happening? Is that..."

I couldn't engage in this conversation here and now. I mustered my resolve and implored, "Could we find a more private place to talk? Maybe at my place?"

A bitter chuckle escaped her lips. "So, now that I've stumbled upon the secret you've been keeping, you suddenly want to invite me to your house?" With a nod, she reached for her purse resting on a nearby table. "Fine, I'll tag along. I'm genuinely curious to hear your explanation."

My lips were caught in a nervous bite as I motioned towards my car. Without a word, she trailed behind me, her gaze observant as I secured Daisy in her baby seat. Sliding into the passenger seat, she folded her hands and fixed her stare ahead, offering no conversation as I navigated the route to my apartment.

Upon arrival, I handed Daisy over to her nanny, who had returned to work the previous day. Then, I guided Elenor towards my office, a soundproof haven in case her emotions got the best of her. Gesturing to the sofa, I offered, "Please have a seat, Elenor. Allow me the opportunity to explain."

Her lips pursed with a sigh, she sank onto the sofa. "Could I have something strong? Whiskey, vodka, anything?" she requested. Acknowledging her need, I made my way to the bar, retrieving a bottle of vodka and a glass. Handing them to her, she filled the glass and downed it in a single gulp. Her voice dropped to a whisper as she uttered, "I have one question for you, Hazel. Is that little girl Ravel's?"

I met her gaze and responded, "Yes, she is." Taking a place on the opposite end of the sofa, I continued, "She's nearly three

now.”

A pained expression flitted across Elenor’s face. “But why?” she finally uttered.

Elenor’s single question acted as a key, unlocking a floodgate of past pain. As the first tears escaped down my cheeks, I struggled to find my voice. “In the beginning, I felt he didn’t deserve to know,” I began, my voice trembling. “Not after I found him in our bed with June,” I continued, watching her eyes widen in disbelief. “Not after he made me feel worthless, not after he handed me divorce papers on the anniversary of our wedding.”

Leaning forward, she rested her elbows on her knees, clearly taken aback.

“He cheated with June, right in your marital bed?” Her words carried a mix of astonishment and anger. In response, I nodded, unable to find any more words. “What a

amix despicable jerk! How can he continue to be with her after all he’s done?”

“From anger,” I continued, my voice quivering, “fear took over. I was terrified he might try to take her away from me.” Licking my lips, I shifted my gaze to my intertwined fingers. “I was afraid I lacked the resources to fight a custody battle in court. That’s why I worked tirelessly, pushing myself to make enough money. Eventually I made the money but then, I realized we didn’t need him to complicate our lives, especially considering he’s still with his mistress.”

Elenor ran her hands down her face, her sigh carrying a mix of understanding and frustration. “I get your situation, Hazel. I truly understand why you took the path you did. But what I can’t wrap my head around is why you kept her a secret from me too.” Her brows furrowed as she continued, “I was never your enemy, or did you see me as one?”

I met her gaze with sincerity, my voice gentle but resolute. “Elenor, I trust you. It’s not about trusting you as a person, but rather your loyalty to him.” Despite her apparent disdain for his actions, he was still her brother. “I couldn’t risk you being

unable to keep it hidden from him for so long.”

She took another gulp of her drink, her eyes moving restlessly. “Do you grasp the gravity of what you’ve done?” Her gaze wandered, a flicker of emotion passing through her eyes. “You’ve severed the connection between father and child, aunt and niece, and even grandmother and grandchild.” A sudden scoff escaped her lips, accompanied by a bitter twist of her expression. “Well, scratch that last part. Anne doesn’t deserve to be a part of this baby’s life.”

“I wish I could say I’m sorry for hiding her from you all, but I’m not.” I wiped my tears, not caring if I smudged my makeup since I was already at home. “If I told the world about her, I’m certain my life wouldn’t have been what it is right now.”

“I agree with you,” she concurred, “but that doesn’t mean this isn’t f ucked up.”

She scrubbed her hands down her face again. "I thought you and Ravel were fixing things?"

Fixing things is far-fetched. "We are trying to fix our past, to stop considering each other as enemies, but I have no intention of walking down the aisle with Ravel again."

"I don't think my brother knows that." She muttered, "He is already picking his groomsmen." We both chuckled at the joke. "So what's your plan?" She asked in a serious tone, her previous amused demeanor disappearing. "You certainly aren't thinking of keeping this from him forever."

Where am I even going to start from? "I need more time." I need to come to terms with the fact that I might end up sharing custody of my daughter.

"And I'm going to give you just that." She assured me, "But don't expect me to keep shut for too long." She smiled sadly. "I may be pissed at Ravel, but he's still my brother and I can't keep such big news from him."

Exhaling shakily, I nodded. "Thank you." Time is all I need, and as long as she gives me that, I'll find a way to approach this topic with Ravel. "I really appreciate the fact that you are this understanding."

"I know how much my brother hurt you." She mused, reaching forward to grab my hand, "I saw how much you tried to save your marriage. If I were in your shoes, I'm certain I would have done the same."

I offered her a weak smile, already emotionally spent. "Do you think he'll want to take her away from me?"

Tilting her head, she blinked slowly, slightly lost in thought. "I don't know what went wrong between you and Ravel, and I know you might find what I'm about to say absurd, but my brother still loves you, and because he's still in love with you, he won't do anything to hurt you. Taking Daisy away from you will hurt you, and I don't think he'll do that."

This is something that confuses me with Ravel now. It's as if the Ravel I fell in love with in the past is slowly returning and it irks me that he didn't make that effort when our marriage was crashing, instead he chose the arms of another woman. "What are you doing in Seattle?" I asked, changing the topic. She left just a week ago.

"I got an ad job after my surgery and I just couldn't refuse."

My nose crinkled. "You got surgery?" I asked, bewildered by the news. "How come the internet said nothing about it?"

She grinned. "I pulled out some ribs to get a tinier waist." My eyes subconsciously went to her waist and to be honest, I didn't see any difference. "I don't want them to know I did something to my waist, so it's on a hush-hush."

"Wow.." I mean, what should I say to something like this?

"You're the only one who knows aside doctor."

my

Something doesn't just add up. "If you underwent surgery last week, that means your wound is still fresh and you're still under medication. Why are you consuming alcoholic drinks like that?"

She shrugged. "I'm never one to follow rules."

"Even one that could endanger your life?"

She winked in response. "Back to Daisy. You should tell my brother before I do. I think it's best if he hears it from you and not someone else."

2

One thing is certain, I have limited time, and my life is about to change.

Chapter 70

HAZEL

FOUR YEARS AGO.

Happy New Year!

Organizing a wedding in just a month's time has proven to be an incredibly demanding endeavor. Navigating through a myriad of tasks with our wedding planner has left me feeling not just physically fatigued, but mentally drained beyond measure. As the countdown to the wedding enters the mere three-week mark, I find myself on the cusp of my final wedding dress fitting, a moment that seems surreal and fleeting.

Curiously, it appears that Ravel, my partner in this grand affair, maintains an almost serene disposition in contrast to the whirlwind of stress that engulfs me. The lion's share of responsibilities seems to have found a home on my shoulders, extending from the meticulous cake tasting to the selection of napkin colors. In this whirlpool of arrangements, I am eternally grateful for the presence of Elenor, whose kindness and assistance have been nothing short of a saving grace. Without her, I dare not contemplate how I might have navigated these overwhelming tasks.

Dedicating her entire January by rearranging her schedule, she stood by my side unfailingly, accompanying me to every corner and stepping in where my presence was impossible to spare. I don't lay any blame on Ravel for his absence during these moments, as his attention has been utterly consumed by his work and Kelvin, his seemingly enigmatic concern.

The topic of Kelvin rarely finds its way into our conversations, a subject Ravel treats with an air of deliberate detachment, urging me consistently to dismiss any worries concerning that particular individual. It was only on one occasion that Ravel opened up about Kelvin, seeking from me every morsel of information within my grasp, down to the intricate details of his social circle. This I provided without hesitation, driven by an unwavering desire to

contribute in any manner possible.

Merely a week remains until the deadline Kelvin set for me to produce the money. His latest text serves as both a reminder and a menacing threat, making it unequivocally clear that no extension will be granted under any circumstances. Admittedly, the prospect of those compromising photos being exposed to the world is an unnerving one. Yet, despite this fear, I am resolved to place my trust in Ravel and his ability to navigate the situation.

Balancing the bag containing the facial products recommended by my makeup artist for achieving that perfect bridal glow, I clutch my phone firmly in the other hand. In the midst of this, I engage in a conversation with Elenor, deliberating over the choice of bouquet.

"We've settled on artificial flowers," I reiterate to Elenor, a decisive note in my voice. Our choice stems from the genuine desire to prevent any chance of my soon-to-be husband experiencing an allergic reaction on our special day.

"Every detail, right down to my bouquet, will feature artificial blooms. Not a single real flower will grace our presence, ensuring a day devoid of any potential mishaps for both myself and Ravel."

"Absolutely, the florist is already aware," Elenor reassured me. "Daisies, right?"

"Yes, daisies," I affirmed, knowing that Ravel's flower allergies had made him indifferent to floral preferences. With no particular fondness for any flower, I had chosen daisies as our floral motif.

As we continued discussing the arrangements, I directed Elenor's attention to a different matter. "Don't forget to check on your bridesmaid dress before you leave the vicinity. We need to ensure the adjustments have been rectified."

Elenor nodded in agreement. "Yes, I've got it covered. I'm heading to the dress shop right after this florist meeting."

The topic then took a slightly different turn as frustration crept into Elenor's voice. "Why on earth isn't my brother pitching in more?" she exclaimed. "If I can put my work on hold for a whole month due to the wedding, he should be capable of doing the same."

Neither Elenor nor Anne were informed about Kelvin's blackmail and the associated chaos, which explained their lack of awareness regarding Ravel's current preoccupations. The issue of Kelvin directly affects Ravel's financial commitments. "He needs to continue working in order to manage the ongoing debit alerts."

Elenor's response was marked by a dismissive scoff. "Believe me, even if Ravel chose to marry you every week without lifting

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another finger, the wealth of 'Bluey' is substantial enough to sustain your children, their children, and generations to come."

As the elevator arrived at its destination, I stepped out and proceeded toward the entrance, where Adam struggled with a shopping bag. A pang of sympathy surged within me, even though I had offered to help and been met with a polite refusal. "Leave my fiancé be, Elenor," I chimed in with a light-hearted tone. "I'd rather spare him from undue stress right before the wedding."

Elenor's laughter bubbled forth. "The stress you're putting yourself through might just gift you some pre-wedding pimples, you know."

My attention shifted involuntarily to the bag I carried, a silent acknowledgment of her prediction. "I've got a remedy prepared for that," I admitted. I opened the door and entered the living room, only to come to a sudden stop as my gaze fell upon the unexpected scene that lay before me. The room seemed to freeze as my eyes darted back and forth between the men present.

"I'll get back to you, Elenor," I managed to say, my voice carrying a mix of disbelief and tension.

"Make sure you do. Your insights on the dress are still needed. And don't forget about your appointment tomorrow. Love you, girl!"

"Love you too, Elenor. Take care." The call ended, and I slowly returned my phone to my purse, all the while keeping my gaze locked onto Ravel, my heart racing with a blend of emotions.

A

smug smile curved across his lips as he spoke, exuding an air of arrogance.

"You wrapped things up quite swiftly today," he remarked, his hands extending with a gesture that beckoned me closer. Setting the bag down on an ornate table, I complied and made my way over to him, almost settling onto the sofa before his grip pulled me onto his thigh instead.

"Did you manage to gather all you required?" he inquired, his voice carrying a nonchalant tone.

Suppressing my inner turmoil, I managed to respond, keeping my composure intact. "Yes, I obtained everything I needed," I confirmed. My gaze shifted to the presence of the unexpected visitor in the room. "But why is Kelvin here?" I questioned, my words loaded with a mix of curiosity and concern.

"We're currently discussing his potential jail time and how he might cooperate to secure a lesser sentence, all while maintaining his silence to avoid a more severe punishment," Ravel explained matter-of-factly.

My confusion still lingered, and my grip on Ravel involuntarily tightened. "Wait, did you bring him here to pay him off?" I asked, my words laced with uncertainty.

Ravel's chuckle filled the air. "I invited him here to extend one final opportunity before executing my plan," he clarified. His gaze shifted beyond me, directed at Kelvin. "His friends have already agreed to testify in court, pinning the

blame on him in order to safeguard themselves. They're prepared to affirm that you were coerced by him in those incriminating photos to take those drugs." Ravel's grin broadened. "Blackmail might just be the least of his worries leading to his jail time."