

Billionaire's Ex-wife : Craving You Chapter 71

Chapter 71

HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

I was roused from my slumber by a gentle thud, and as I slowly blinked my eyes open, a yawn escaping me, I found David standing there, a cake in his hands. Beside him, Daisy's face was a picture of delight, her grin infectious as she toddled unsteadily towards the bed. Her anticipation to see me was so palpable that I couldn't help but break into a smile myself.

"Happy birthday, Hazel," David's voice sang out as he set the cake down on the bed. "Make a wish and blow out the candle."

My gaze shifted from David to my precious Daisy, and in that moment, I fervently wished that when I eventually revealed her existence to Ravel, she wouldn't be taken away from me. With a steady exhale, I leaned over and extinguished the candle's flame, Daisy's clapping mingling with David's encouragement.

"Come here," I beckoned, my arms reaching out. I scooped Daisy up and pulled her close, showering her face with kisses that elicited joyous giggles that seemed to fill the room.

"Here," David murmured, his voice gentle, "I brought you a gift." With careful hands, he produced a small box from his pocket, unveiling a stunning bracelet as he opened it. "Give me your hand." I extended my hand as he requested, watching as he delicately fastened the bracelet around my wrist.

"It's truly beautiful," I cooed, my eyes fixed on the intricate design. "Thank you." His smile was warm and genuine, a silent acknowledgement of his affection.

As I continued to admire the bracelet, a glint caught my eye-my name was intricately engraved on the clasp. My curiosity piqued, I inquired, "Did you have this customized?"

David nodded, his eyes conveying a depth of sentiment. "I wanted to give you something that felt truly special for your birthday." At that moment, Daisy stretched out her tiny hands towards him, her eyes seeking his attention. With practiced ease, he scooped her up and settled her on his lap, their bond evident in the way he held her.

"I truly love this, David," I admitted, my words infused with genuine appreciation. "It's rare, unique, and undeniably beautiful. Thank you."

A glimmer of something crossed his eyes as he responded, "If you feel that way about it, then don't ever take it off." His words carried a weight that slightly furrowed my brows in confusion. "If you can't hold onto my heart, at least hold onto

that.”

There was a twinge of guilt within me for not reciprocating his romantic feelings, but I knew it was better to be honest than to lead him on. “Alright,” I agreed, a note of sincerity in my voice. “I promise, I won’t take it off.” His smile was both understanding and appreciative, a silent recognition of my response. “Thank you, David,” I continued, a touch of emotion in my words. “I didn’t expect to have such a wide smile on my birthday today.”

Curiosity etched his features as he questioned, “Why did you think today would be any different? Every year, I make sure to bring out your widest smile on your birthday.”

“Hazel found out about Daisy yesterday,” I disclosed, and his eyes widened in surprise. “I didn’t even realize she was in Seattle, so I took Daisy out for ice cream. Coincidentally, she was there getting ice cream too, and she caught me.”

His reaction was a mix of concern and tension. “This is not good,” he muttered, his voice tense. “What did Elenor say? Do you think she’ll inform her brother?”

With a heavy sigh, I directed my gaze toward my daughter. “She’s giving me a chance to break the news to Ravel myself. But she made it clear that if I fail to do so, she’s prepared to tell him on her own.”

Frustration danced across his features as he mused, “I’d really like to use a few choice words right now.” He gently cupped Daisy’s rosy cheeks, a tender gesture that elicited a chuckle from me. “But for Daisy’s sake, I’ll refrain.” I couldn’t help but

1/3

smile. “So, are you truly going to tell him?”

“Yeah,” I acknowledged, my resolve solidifying. “I believe it’s time to tell him anyway. Perhaps the next time I see him, I’ll reveal everything about her.”

A concerned frown creased his brow. “Do you want me to be there with you?” I appreciated his concern but shook my head, politely declining his offer. “I think I need to have this conversation alone with him.” I wanted to assure him that I wasn’t concerned about Ravel reacting violently.

“Thank you for offering, though,” I added sincerely.

David got to his feet, lifting Daisy into his arms. “We’ll give you some space so you can freshen up, get dressed, and join us for breakfast.” I nodded in agreement, watching as he moved towards the door. Just before leaving, he paused and turned back to face me. “Do you have any plans for the rest of the day?”

“Yeah, I promised Elenor that I’d be having lunch with her today,” I explained, recalling her request from the previous day. She had earnestly asked me to join her for lunch, insisting on treating me to a birthday meal.

David nodded thoughtfully. "Could you spare your dinner time for me, then?" A smile formed on my lips. "Of course," I agreed. With that, he turned and left my room.

True to her word, Elenor arrived promptly for lunch. She entered the restaurant just as gracefully as I had. We indulged in a bottle of wine before placing our lunch orders. Mid-conversation, she reached into her bag and retrieved a small box, sliding it towards me. "Happy birthday."

I felt a surge of gratitude. "Thank you." Leaning forward, I carefully opened the box to find a delicate necklace nestled within. "This is truly beautiful, Elenor. I appreciate it."

She offered a warm smile, her eyes naturally drawn to the bracelet adorning my wrist. "Nice bracelet," she complimented.

My attention followed hers, and I couldn't help but smile as I admired it once again. "It's actually a gift from David," I shared, my voice full of appreciation. "Isn't it beautiful?" I looked back up at her.

"Mhm, it really is," she agreed. Our lunch arrived, and as we enjoyed our meal, our conversation meandered through various topics. I was relieved that she didn't bring up the sensitive subjects of Ravel or Daisy. Despite my curiosity about what was happening with her and Raymond, I decided against asking.

Mid-conversation, her phone buzzed on the table, and she picked it up, her expression shifting into a frown as she looked at the caller ID. She rose from her seat, ready to excuse herself. "I'm sorry, but I need to take this," she explained.

I quickly nodded in understanding as she prepared to take the call, but my concern intensified when she took an unsteady step, almost colliding with the table. Reacting instinctively, I shot up from my seat, narrowly avoiding toppling a wine glass in my haste to catch her. "Are you alright?" I asked urgently, worry evident in my voice.

Her breath seemed labored as she struggled to respond. "I think it's infected," she finally managed to say, her discomfort palpable.

Confusion and concern twisted my features. "Infected? What's infected?"

Gently guiding her back into her seat, I tried to make her comfortable. "Elenor, please talk to me. Should I call an ambulance?"

She winced, hissing through her teeth as the pain hit her. "My surgery wound," she explained, her voice strained. "I'm afraid it might be infected. The pain has been intense since yesterday, but I foolishly brushed it off."

The gravity of the situation hit me like a ton of bricks. "This is serious! I'm calling an ambulance," I declared, reaching for my phone urgently.

However, she grabbed my hand, her expression pleading. "I don't want the media to find out," she whispered, her desperation clear. "Calling an

ambulance will inevitably draw unwanted attention.”

2/3

“Does it really matter?” I asked, my concern evident. “What should I do?

Ignoring this could lead to serious consequences.

You could even die...”

In response, she cried out in pain, her anguish unmistakable. “Get me back to New York,” she implored, her voice strained.

I blinked in surprise, taken aback by her request. “You can’t possibly travel in this condition,” I protested, worried about her well-being.

With a mixture of vulnerability and determination, she revealed, “I flew here in Ravel’s private jet. We could use that to return.”

My mind whirled, trying to process the situation. “We?” I echoed, my thoughts racing to catch up.

She nodded, her eyes pleading. “Please, I can’t trust anyone else not to reveal my condition to the press. Just take me to my new apartment in New York, and you can be on your way.”

The unexpected turn of events left me slightly disoriented. “Alright,” I conceded, realizing the urgency of the situation, “We need to contact the pilot first.” She pointed to her phone, and I handed it to her before stepping away to call David.

I fibbed to him, explaining that I’d be home later than expected. I couldn’t divulge the true reason for my departure without revealing Elenor’s surgery.

“The jet is ready,” she informed me as I returned.

Nodding in acknowledgment, I gathered both our purses and gently assisted her into the car, making sure she was secure with her seatbelt. Taking the wheel, I navigated us to the airport. My thoughts raced as I considered the implications of this impromptu trip to New York.

With a mix of worry, I drove, my fingers tightly gripping the steering wheel.

I really hope she will be okay.

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SEND GIFT

COMMENT

Chapter 72

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

Earlier, Elenor reached out to me, expressing her inability to provide an immediate update. Although her message was slightly cryptic, I opted not to probe further, having full confidence in her capabilities. She gave me reassurance, mentioning that her chauffeur, Sebastian, would keep me

informed about her whereabouts alongside Hazel.

Approximately an hour ago, my phone buzzed with a message from Sebastian. He conveyed that Elenor had successfully arrived at the airport in the company of Hazel. Just moments ago, another text popped up, notifying me that they had entered the elevator and were en route. The room's lights had been dimmed, and everyone stood in anticipation, maintaining absolute stillness to preserve the element of surprise.

Amidst the silence, the distinct beeping of the keypad reverberated as the lock code was attempted. The door slowly swung open, and footsteps cautiously traversed into the obscurity of the room. Even before the illumination returned, a harmonious chorus of the birthday song resonated as a unified surprise for Hazel.

Caught off guard, Hazel stood with eyes widened, her gaze fixed on the spectacle unfolding before her. Every person present, including Elenor, joyfully joined in singing the celebratory tune. Only when the song concluded did I step forward, holding a petite cake that contrasted with the extravagant confection resting on the table. In a hushed tone, I greeted her, "Happy birthday, Hazel," and raised the cake, presenting her with the candle to extinguish.

While still seemingly rendered speechless, she bent slightly and blew out the candles, a moment that spurred cheers and applause from the gathered group. Emboldened, I decided to press my luck, handing the cake over to Raymond before enveloping Hazel in an affectionate embrace. She reciprocated, her fingers finding solace as they encircled my waist.

Elenor's dramatic throat-clearing finally managed to draw me away from Hazel's embrace. Elenor stepped in, embracing Hazel in her turn. "You really gave me quite a scare, Elenor," Hazel remarked with a chuckle, her words carrying a mix of relief and jest, "I was fervently hoping you wouldn't meet your demise before the doctor arrived."

Elenor responded with a giggle. "Perhaps I should explore acting as a potential new business venture."

With my hand gently resting on the curve of Hazel's back, I guided her deeper into the room. She shared warm hugs with Raymond and broke into a wide grin upon spotting Adam. It was a significant moment, as this marked the first occasion she had laid eyes on Adam since their divorce, especially since he had promptly departed for military service right afterward.

"I have a surprise for you," I whispered into her ear, my voice laden with anticipation. Holding her hand, I guided her into one of the rooms. She settled onto the bed, and as she did, I slipped into the closet to retrieve the gift.

"Is this place yours?" she inquired, her gaze sweeping over the room with appreciation.

"It's not mine," I replied, gently placing the velvet box on the bed beside her. In truth, it was hers—a penthouse I had purchased for her, originally intended as a birthday gift. Circumstances, however, forced my hand, and we divorced before her special day.

"Did you rent it just for my birthday?" she asked, a hint of disbelief evident in her voice.

With a slight tilt of my head, I pondered how to respond most effectively.

"More like I borrowed it," I finally admitted, taking a seat beside her on the bed. I reached for her hand, intertwining our fingers, and explained, "I didn't pay a penny for using it, and I'll be returning it to the owner soon."

A soft smile played on her lips as she mused, "I should find more friends who are willing to casually lend out their penthouses."

If only she knew the complete truth. My attention shifted to the velvet box nearby, and I urged, "Go ahead and open it."

Her attempt to withdraw her hand from my grip triggered an unconscious tightening of my hold. "Ravel," she mumbled, avoiding my gaze, "I need both hands to open the box."

Realizing my slip, I released her hand quickly. "Of course, my apologies," I responded, acknowledging my blunder. In a bid to diffuse any awkwardness, I offered a light chuckle.

Her smile softened, and her attention shifted to the velvet box. As she opened it, a gasp of awe escaped her lips upon discovering the exquisite beauty resting within. I had invested a year of effort into crafting that piece. "This is truly beautiful, Ravel," she whispered, her gaze seemingly captured by the mesmerizing jewelry set.

A sense of contentment welled within me. "I'm delighted you like it." With gentle movements, I lifted the necklace from the box. "Could you turn around for me, Hazel?" I requested. Slowly, she obliged, her back now facing me. Gently gathering her hair, I swept the strands to one side, exposing the nape of her neck. My resistance waned, and I leaned in, pressing a tender kiss against her skin.

An immediate tensing of her body was perceptible, though her lips remained sealed.

With careful precision, I secured the all-diamond necklace around her neck, my fingers adeptly fastening the clasp. My hands then settled on her shoulders, gently pivoting her to face me. Hazel's gaze remained locked onto mine, a subtle parting of her lips hinting at the underlying tension.

My attention involuntarily dropped to her lips, the memory of their taste and the desire to experience it again resurfacing vividly. As my hand rested on her shoulder, its motion gradually ascended, my fingers tenderly curving around her neck, pulling her gradually nearer.

A slow inhale on my part met her exhale, my thumb instinctively tracing the rhythm of her pulse. "I've missed you, Hazel," I breathed out, my words a mere whisper that triggered an escalation in her breath. Summoning every ounce of courage, I decided to play my final card. Leaning in, I closed the distance, pressing my lips against hers in a kiss, a fusion of emotions encapsulated in that one daring act.

Remaining perfectly still, I allowed Hazel the space to make her decision, to withdraw or reciprocate. Astonishingly, she held her ground, a silent agreement to allow this connection. Neither of us moved for a moment, a delicate equilibrium hanging in the balance.

Gradually, our lips began to move in sync, a tentative rhythm forming between us. The kiss was a gentle dance, an unspoken exchange of feelings that transcended verbal expression, a testament to the depth of longing we had for each other. My grip on her neck grew firmer as the kiss deepened, and a telltale moan escaped her lips, melding with the connection we shared.

Hazel's moan was intoxicating, a raw affirmation of desire. With a lustful growl resonating within me, I pulled her even closer, any consideration for the delicate jewelry momentarily forgotten. The feel of her hands encircling my neck fueled my passion, her teeth teasingly tugging at my lower lip, a tantalizing blend of yearning and restraint.

My hands were about to feel the curve of her breast when her phone suddenly rang, snapping her out of the sexual haze between us. She pulled away, blinked rapidly before reaching for her phone. "Hello, David?"

"Yeah, the dinner date is still on," her words rumbled, causing my eyebrows to furrow. How could she contemplate going on a date with another man immediately after sharing such a passionate kiss with me? "Let's schedule it for the two in the morning," she suggested, a hint of urgency in her tone, "I'm dealing with something that's going to delay me." A brief pause followed.

"Alright, then. I'll see you in the morning." And with that, she ended the call. Driven by a surge of jealousy and desperation, I blurted out without restraint, "Stay the night." My words hung in the air, pregnant with unspoken implications. "I won't do anything you're not comfortable with, but please, just stay."

Returning the necklace to the box, she closed it and clutched it before rising to her feet. "I'm sorry, Ravel, but I really have to leave," she said, her voice tinged with a mix of regret and finality.

Glancing at the wall clock, I noted, "It's nearly eight in the evening."

Her

response came measured, as if calculating her next move. "If I head out now, I should be back home before three," she stated, her grip on the box steady.

"Thank you for the gift and the surprise party, I genuinely appreciate it." With

those words, she began to walk out of the room.

I followed in her wake, my determination to ensure her safe departure unwavering. “At least let me drop you off at the airport,” I offered, my voice carrying a mix of insistence and concern.

Chapter 72

Elenor’s voice interjected, seemingly from out of nowhere. “I’ll handle that,” she said firmly. “I have something important to discuss with her.” An exasperated glare from me was met with an unconcerned shrug from my sister. “You’ll see her again, Ravel,” Elenor assured, her words laced with a sense of promise that she definitely knew not how to fulfill.

Hazel bid her farewell and departed from the room. Positioned by the floor-length glass window, I observed the unfolding scene outside. She and Elenor were embroiled in what appeared to be a fervent exchange, their body language betraying the intensity of their conversation. Eventually, Hazel’s frustration boiled over, and she stormed towards the waiting car, slamming the door shut in her wake.

As the car pulled away from the driveway, Elenor remained behind, a decision that left me both perplexed and intrigued.

Didn’t she say she was going with her to the airport?

Chapter 73

HAZEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

Kelvin’s arrest for a slew of heinous crimes – drugs, rape, blackmail, and even murder – has guaranteed his absence from society for the foreseeable future. It’s astonishing how my name managed to remain untarnished in the drug case, despite the undeniable evidence of my involvement caught on tape. As I reflect on this, especially with my impending wedding just a week away, I can’t help but view it as an unexpected pre-wedding gift – the liberation from the shackles of fear that Kelvin’s reign of terror instilled. It’s a gift everyone would cherish, without a doubt.

Parking my car gracefully by the side of Ravel’s office driveway, I emerged from the vehicle, reveling in the day’s joy. Today, I find myself behind the wheel, a departure from my usual routine, as happiness courses through my veins. Having borrowed one of Ravel’s luxurious cars, I led the way while Adam dutifully followed behind, a silent sentinel of security.

Entering the elevator, I took a moment to compose myself, smoothing my hair with delicate gestures, my anticipation palpable as I waited for the familiar ping of the elevator’s arrival. As the doors opened, I stepped out gracefully and confidently, striding toward Ravel’s office. Remarkably, his secretary didn’t attempt to halt my progress this time, a fact that did not go unnoticed.

Ravel's attention was swiftly drawn from his laptop as the door announced my arrival. His face illuminated with a bright smile, he rose from his desk and moved to greet me with a warm embrace. I placed a tender kiss on the pulse point of his neck, my affection for him evident. "I've missed you, Rav," I whispered, though the passage of time had been minimal – only a few hours had passed since I last saw him. In truth, we had even woken up together earlier this morning.

Ravel's lips met mine in a tender kiss before he released me and guided me over to the plush black sofa. With a gentle smile, he remarked, "I'm well aware of how much you missed me, but I'm sure your visit isn't just about expressing that."

Acknowledging his understanding of my busy schedule with wedding preparations, I shifted the conversation's tone. "I came across the news about Kelvin," I noted, my expression more solemn.

Ravel's response was casual, almost dismissive. "Shouldn't we be celebrating?" he suggested, as if Kelvin's downfall was a cause for rejoicing. Well, it is.

However, my desire to comprehend the situation prompted me to press further. "We will celebrate, no doubt, but first, I want to understand what transpired." I leaned into a more serious stance. "You had a hand in his arrest, didn't you?" I inquired, seeking the truth. Ravel's response was a nonchalant shrug, leaving me frustrated. I folded my arms, forming a subtle pout, hoping that my expression might coax him into sharing more. "Could you at least enlighten me on why he didn't expose the incriminating pictures of me to the authorities?"

"Why don't you allow me to handle that matter?" Ravel responded cryptically, sidestepping a direct explanation. He shifted gears by asking about my recent wedding gown fitting experience, attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction.

Persisting with my inquiry, I reverted back to the pressing topic. "I need to know what happened to Kelvin," I stressed, my determination unwavering. "He held me hostage through blackmail for months, Rav. I deserve to understand the truth – why didn't he implicate me?"

Ravel's gaze was intense, as if he were weighing the pros and cons of revealing the information. Rising from my seat, I joined him on the sofa, settling onto his lap. His arms encircled my waist, drawing me close. "He maintained his silence and handed over those incriminating pictures to me in exchange for freedom," he finally divulged.

My eyebrows knitted together in confusion. "Freedom? He hardly seems free at the moment," I remarked dryly, struggling to wrap my head around the situation.

Ravel's revelation finally came to light. "He's not the sole perpetrator in the murder," he disclosed. "His younger sister was equally complicit, and he used her as leverage. In exchange for her immunity, he surrendered those pictures and pledged his silence. With substantial evidence against his sister, I'm confident he won't pose a threat to you anymore."

I let out a breath, the pieces falling into place. "So, in essence, you're leveraging his vulnerability against him," I summarized, realizing that Ravel had essentially turned the tables on Kelvin using the same tactics.

Leaning in, Ravel pressed a gentle, chaste kiss to my forehead. "Blackmailing a blackmailer," he stated with a wry smile, his logic sound. "Had he not targeted you, I wouldn't have countered with this strategy. Consider it his own karma catching up with him."

I reminded myself not to feel sympathy for Kelvin, as he deserved the consequences he faced. "I apologize for the added stress," I murmured, my fingers lightly smoothing over the nearly imperceptible dark circles under his eyes. "Dealing with Kelvin must have been quite taxing."

Ravel's grin was infectious, revealing his handsome right cheek dimple.

"There's no stress that comes from you, Hazel. Besides, I must admit, confronting him was rather satisfying," he admitted, his eyes gleaming mischievously.

Understanding my need to leave, I slid off his thigh and playfully blew him a kiss, snatching up my purse in the process. "I'm off to do some cake tasting. Elenor will be meeting me there, so I better get a move on."

Rising from his seat, Ravel declared his intention to accompany me. "I'll join you," he decided, moving towards his jacket. "I've been a bit detached from the wedding planning."

I shook my head, appreciating his gesture. "Ravel, you were engrossed with your laptop when I arrived," I reminded him gently. "Don't worry about the cake. Focus on your work, I've got this." It was clear that he had his hands full and I was perfectly fine handling the cake tasting on my own.

"I can always catch up on work later," he persisted, determined to be more involved. "I should contribute beyond just fitting into my tux," he added with a chuckle, his smile infectious. "I see how stressed you are because you are handling everything."

I laughed softly, seeing through his intentions. "You're the one who seems more stressed now," I pointed out, a hint of truth in my words. Approaching him, I traced my fingers over his abdominal muscles and pulled him closer.

"Let's not add to the stress you're already carrying, Rav. Besides, Elenor and I have plans for a spa day after the cake tasting."

He let out a defeated sigh. "Can I at least drive you there?"

With a playful grin, I shook my head and dangled my car key in front of him. "I came in my own car. Thanks for the offer though." One more kiss sealed our interaction before I made my way out of his office, ready to handle the next task on my list.

I am ecstatic to the extent that I feel like screaming at the top of my lungs. Maybe because I'm now a free woman or maybe married next week.

because I'm gettin

The elevator pinged, indicating our arrival at the parking lot. With the same energy and excitement, I got off the elevator only to be greeted with the face of the last person I expected to see today. Mustering a smile, I walked up to her. "Mrs. Southwark, it's lovely to see you."

"Are you Mocking me?" She hissed at me. "It is indeed lovely for you to see the face of a Southwark, but there is nothing lovely about seeing your face."

Adam took a step forward, ready to intervene, but I shook my head, stopping him. "I see you're still upset about me getting married to your son

"Upset?" She snarled, "You Insult What I feel by attributing it to just being upset. I despise your very existence,Hazel."

"And that of your son?" I asked and she frowned. "Do you despise your son's existence too?"

"Have you finally lost it?" She snapped and I shrugged. "Ravel is one of the best things that has happened to me."

"Then for his sake, pretend to be happy for him, for us," I requested of her.

"You are going to lose your son if you keep this up Anne."

"That's Impossible." She spat.

Tilting my head, I stared at her with amusement. "Is it that you haven't noticed it yet or you've decided not to notice it? I had

to beg him to send you the wedding invitation Anne.

Her frown deepened.

"I literally begged your son to send a wedding invitation to his mother. Do you still think you're not losing him?" Short of response, she just blinked at me.

"Make haste while the sun shines Anne."

Offering her one last smile, I got into my car and drove away.

Chapter 74

HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

A mere week had passed since my birthday, and Elenor and I remained in an unsettling silence after our intense altercation on the penthouse doorstep. The heat of our argument still lingered in the air as we exchanged words that carried more weight than either of us intended. Elenor, unyielding in her

stance, fervently pressed me to disclose Daisy's secret to Ravel. Her reason? The current exciting and happy atmosphere supposedly lent itself as a perfect time to make the revelation. Yet, I found myself resisting, a feeling deep within me insisting that the timing wasn't opportune.

With each attempt, Elenor, driven by her unwavering belief, asserted that there would never be an ideal moment. Frustration boiled over, and my patience waned, leading me to unleash words that I now regret. The tension escalated to the point where I, overwhelmed, angrily got into her waiting car. Astonishingly, she declined to accompany me, instead instructing her chauffeur to transport me to the airport.

My birthday had nearly been marred by the tension with Elenor, but my excitement for Ravel's surprise buoyed my spirits, preventing our quarrel from casting too long a shadow. Determined to channel my emotions elsewhere, I engulfed myself in the rhythm of the treadmill, drowning out the world with music coursing through my headphones. Each footfall matched the machine's pace as I poured my energy into the exercise. Unbeknownst to me, I shared the gym with an unexpected companion.

The thumping of my own feet pounding the treadmill drowned out the environment so effectively that I failed to notice David's presence until he appeared beside me, standing in close proximity. The sudden sight nearly caused me to lose my equilibrium, a near mishap on the treadmill reminding me of my surroundings. Swiftly disengaging the treadmill and stepping onto solid ground, I grabbed my towel to wipe away the sweat that had accumulated during my focused exertion.

Breaking the silence, I finally addressed David, curiosity lacing my words. "How long have you been standing there?" I inquired, my hand reaching for a refreshing bottle of water resting on the bench.

"Not long enough to figure out how to show you this," David's response carried an air of intrigue, leaving me to cast a sidelong glance his way. Taking a seat on the bench, I settled down, ready to hear whatever he had to share.

"What's going on? Did something happen at the office?" My inquisitive words hung in the air, awaiting an explanation.

In response, David extended his phone toward me, a gesture accompanied by a somewhat strained expression. His words held a hint of urgency. "I think you should go online and check the trending news." His tone was almost laced with a wince, sparking my concern even further.

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A frown creased my forehead as I swiftly grabbed my own phone from the bench. A flood of notifications caught my attention, missed calls from Ravel, Elenor, and Agatha. The realization dawned upon me my absorption in the workout had inadvertently blocked out the world beyond my headphones.

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Attempting to connect online, my focus was interrupted as the gym's door burst open, and Agatha barged in, clearly winded. My eyes blinked in rapid succession as I shifted my attention between her and my phone. Finally managing to access the internet, my breath hitched at the sight of the news that awaited me, an unforeseen turn of events sending shockwaves through my being.

RAVEL SOUTHWARK'S EX-WIFE ALLEGEDLY HAD A CHILD FOR HIM, A BEAUTIFUL BABY GIRL CALLED DAISY WHO IS ALMOST THREE. THE PUBLIC ARE BAFFLED ON HOW THE EX-COUPLE MANAGED TO KEEP IT HIDDEN

ALMOST FROM EVERYONE.

The internet was ablaze with pictures of Daisy and me, the last one unmistakably taken yesterday at school. A surge of anger coursed through me as I realized that one of her teachers must have captured that moment. My hands balled into fists, my frustration palpable. "When was this released?" My voice carried a mix of urgency and disbelief.

"An hour ago," Agatha's response came swiftly, her tone mirroring the bewilderment of the situation. Her fingers raked through her hair as she continued, her words tinged with concern. "Who could have released this? Who leaked the news?" A hint of exasperation colored her voice as she pondered the possibilities. "You think it's the nanny?"

My thoughts raced back to the heated argument with Elenor, and a gnawing suspicion surfaced in my mind. Suppressing panic, I rose from the bench, David and Agatha following suit. Stepping out of the gym, I immediately took charge. "Give Robertson a call and have him bring Daisy home. He should use the emergency parking lot," I directed, a sense of urgency underscoring my words. The possibility of papara zzi swarming outside the school gates to capture images of Daisy was very real. How had things spiraled to this point?

Agatha swiftly moved away to place the call, and I moved with determination, heading toward the bar area. My query cut straight to the chase, a blend of frustration and concern lacing my voice. "How many of them are outside my gate?"

Taking a seat beside me, David's response revealed the extent of the situation. "The papara zzi? I don't know. I took the emergency parking lot," he admitted, his tone somber. "But with the picture online, there are quite a lot of them outside."

I reached for a bottle of scotch and took a long swig, the warmth of the liquid momentarily numbing the chaotic thoughts racing through my mind. "Nobody is to use the emergency parking lot aside from my daughter," I declared firmly,

my frustration evident. The paparazzi would certainly take notice if we were seen entering or leaving the house through any route other than the main entrance, potentially sparking further invasive inquiries.

David acknowledged my concerns, his hand finding its place atop mine, a gesture meant to reassure. "Everything is going to be fine," he uttered, though his words carried a tinge of uncertainty. His attempt at reassurance was appreciated, but the storm brewing within me was not so easily quelled. "Who do you think could have leaked that?" he inquired, his gaze seeking understanding.

My mind circled back to Elenor, the most probable source of the leak given her knowledge of the secret. She held the knowledge, yes, but broadcasting it publicly rather than simply confiding in Ravel raised doubts about her being the sole culprit. "Honestly, I do not know who to point fingers at," I admitted with exasperation.

My phone vibrated on my hand and I glanced at it, scoffing at the unfamiliar number. I ignored the call but it kept coming until I angrily answered. "Who the fuck are you and what do you want?!" None of my business associates have my personal line, so I know for a fact that this isn't business.

"You will speak to me with respect you sneaky low life!" The familiar voice snarled. I don't need any confirmation to know who is talking. "How dare you ask who is calling? Did you lose my number?"

"I didn't lose your number, I deleted it." I corrected, setting the record straight. "If you were attentive, you would have noticed that I blocked you on WhatsApp too."

"I don't care whether you blocked me or not!" She snapped, "I want to know why you hid the existence of that child away from my family?!"

"Fuck off Anne!" I hissed, "I have no business explaining myself to you, and the next time you want to reach me, contact my fucking secretary!" I disconnected the call, slamming my phone on the counter and cursing loudly. "You need to take it easy Hazel," David advised.

My phone vibrated again before I could even respond. Picking it up, I glared at Elenor's name for a moment before answering the call. "Elenor?"

"This has nothing to do with me." She blurted out, "I have absolutely nothing to do with this news at all. I know what you're thinking and I know how connected the situation is but this isn't me. I didn't betray you at all, you have to believe me."

"The fact that I don't even know who did this is driving me crazy Elenor." Someone is after me and I don't even know who.

It can't be David because no matter how angry he was with me, he never wanted Ravel to know about the baby.

"I'm going to help you figure this out, I promise." She sighed when I didn't

respond. "Did Anne call you?"

"Yeah, I just received her call before you called."

She cursed under her breath. "And what did she say?"

"She was being her usual self and I ended the call on her." Despite the tense situation, I found myself chuckling when Elenor complimented me for ending the call on Anne. "I have to go Elen, I'll talk to you later."

"P.S., I think you should know that Ravel is on his way to Seattle. He left an hour ago."

Chapter 75

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

The moment the jet touched down in Seattle, I dialed Hazel's number, planning on giving her the liberty of knowing that I was headed to her house. Finding her place isn't going to be difficult, especially since it is all over the internet.

Getting into the rented car, I gave out her home address to the driver, knowing that there was no way she'd show up at the office with the news flying around. Relaxing back, I dialed her number again, hoping that for her sake, she would pick up.

I have a daughter. An almost three years old daughter and Hazel told me nothing about it. She intentionally kept me away from my daughter; why? Because I hurt her? Hiding my daughter from me was just so cruel.

She finally picked. "I'm heading to your house Hazel, Tell your security to open the gate for me." I'll have to climb through it if I have to.

"My entrance gate isn't accessible Ravel," she informed me with a tired tone. "Head to your hotel, I'll meet you there."

Does she think I abandoned an ongoing meeting to f uck around with her? "I know Daisy is in that house with you and I'm going to meet her after I have a conversation with you." I drawled out, punctuating each word, "Tell your security to open the gate when I get there. I'd hate to create a scene Hazel, but that doesn't mean I won't if I have to."

She sighed. "Stop by the bridge."

I scoffed. "I said I'm coming to your da mn house and you tell me to stop by the bridge?!" I snapped angrily. "What?! Do you want to keep hiding her from me? Isn't three years long enough?"

"Stop snapping at me, Ravel!" She yelled, "I'm stressed by the situation Ravel! I can't even leave my house! I had to pull my daughter out of school early! Please do not add to it!"

I took a deep breath. Shouting and scolding each other isn't going to help the situation at all. "I want to see my daughter, Hazel, even if it's her pictures, her

baby pictures.”

“Stop by the bridge, I’ll come pick you up myself.” She rasped. “There is a secret tunnel that leads to my parking lot. If you take the main entrance, the papara zzi won’t let you through.”

Does she have a secret passageway? She sure made enough effort to keep her hidden. “Fine, I’ll stop by the bridge.” She disconnected the call before I could say any other thing. “Stop at the last bridge,” I informed the driver. Leaning back, I closed my eyes and exhaled. By the time we got to the bridge, there was a red Ferrari parked there. I got down, walked to it, and knocked on the window; it rolled down and revealed Hazel dressed in a black dress and sunglasses.

“He’s not coming with us.” She mused, jerking her chin towards my parked car. “Only those very close to me are aware of that passageway, and I want to keep it that way.”

That’s not a problem. Nodding, I walked back to my car and instructed the driver to leave. I watched him drive away before getting into Hazel’s Ferrari.

“Nice car.” I complimented, fastening my seatbelt.

She glanced at me, no doubt surprised at how calm I looked and sounded now, a complete contrast to how I sounded on the phone earlier. “Thanks.” She grunted, the car purring as she turned it on. She took a left turn, driving down a rural path before disappearing down a tunnel covered with grasses. We rode in silence until she pulled over at her parking lot, parking next to one of her numerous sleek cars. I got down and admired her cars. “What a collection you have here,”

Rounding the car, she joined me and stared at the car too. “Thank you.” She gestured towards the elevator. “Let’s go to my office and have that conversation, and if things should end well, you’ll meet Daisy.”

“If things should end well?” Why is she trying to piss me off? Licking my lips roughly, I followed her gesture and headed for the elevator quietly. If I should say something, I might end up saying something that we both might regret.

The moment we stepped into the house, I finally understood why she never wanted me in her house. Artworks of her while she was pregnant and that of Daisy were scattered all over her hallway. I stopped right in front of the artwork that is now my favorite.

An artwork of her and Daisy on a bed. She looks so small. “How old is she here?”

“Two days old,” Hazel responded. “I wasn’t able to get a picture of her when she was born because I faced some complications and wasn’t conscious to take the picture.”

"Complication?" I whispered, averting my gaze to her. "You faced complications after childbirth?" I stared at her, unable to move my gaze from her face. I could have lost her... I could have lost her forever.

She waved me off. "It's fine. The most important thing is that I'm fine now and so is the baby." Grabbing my hand, She led me away from the hallway into her office. "Do you want a drink or something?"

The more I am in her personal space, the more I'm proud of the woman she became; I am proud of the growth in her life; she has come a long way from the Hazel I met in my office hallway. "Whiskey please."

She walked over to the mini bar and grabbed a whiskey and two glasses. She filled both glasses before settling down. "I know you have a lot of questions Ravel."

Yeah, I do. "When did you find out you were pregnant." It would be quite understandable if she found out about the baby after our divorce but didn't know how to come tell me.

"I found out the day I caught you in bed with Jane." She revealed and I winced, the feeling of shame consuming me. "I went to your office that day to tell you about it but I was told you never showed up, I went to your mum's and Elenor told me you went home, that was when I came home to that unexpected sight."

Unable to hold her gaze out of guilt, I stared at my feet. "I'm sorry Hazel, I'm really sorry about some decisions I made in life, and hurting you was one of them."

"Why?" She whispered, the pain in her voice demanding my attention. "I'd been asking myself what really went wrong. One night we were happy, and the other You were giving me divorce papers."

I really want to tell her the truth, to tell her what happened but I can't, not when I don't have a solution yet. "I'm sorry."

Her jaw clenched. "Stop apologizing, you've already done that more than a million times. I want to know what happened!" She demanded, "How did you end up falling out of love with me?!"

Blinking rapidly, I licked my lips. "This isn't about us Hazel, this is about our daughter Daisy and the fact that you hid her from me."

"You deserved it." She spat, "all of you did."

"What?" I scoffed out, bewildered. "Here I was, trying everything humanly possible to fix our broken relationship and you behaved like you wanted the same too, but little did I know that you lied to me in the face and f ucking lied to me all this time!"

"I didn't lie to you!" She quickly asserted, "I just didn't mention it!"

All the emotions came crashing down and even to my surprise, I found myself crying. "Don't you get it Hazel? I missed everything in my daughter's life. I

missed her birth, her first words, her first step, her first everything and it's all my f ucking fault!"

My shoulders shook as uncontrollable tears kept rolling. "My daughter doesn't even know who I am Hazel."

Her eyes turned glassy as she watched me cry. Getting off her seat, she joined me on my sofa and pulled me down to her chest. "I should have told you Ravel... I should have and I apologize for not telling you."

My shaking body froze when a soft voice filled the room. "Mamaa..."

Hazel looked up at her desk. She sniffed, wiping away her tears. "That's Daisy, she's awake." She smiled weakly, "Do to meet her?"

you want

No. I'm not worthy to meet her now. I'm emotionally unstable and I came empty-handed. Standing to my feet, I grabbed my jacket. "Maybe some other time. I just can't meet her now." Exhaling, I walked over and pulled her into a hug. "Don't worry about the press, I'm going to control them."

She nodded. "Are you sure you don't want to meet Daisy?"

"Yeah," I affirmed, giving her a peck, "some other time." I need to clear my head a little bit and get rid of this hurt before it consumes me. "I'll see you later Hazel."

"I'll see you too Ravel."

I held her gaze, pinning her with it. "I love you, Hazel."

Chapter 76

HAZEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

Elenor is as excited as I am for the bridal shower. I don't have any friends aside from Elenor, so we'll be using her friends instead. I don't mind though, as long as I'll be having fun; and trust me, we will be having fun because Elenor's friends are just as crazy as she is.

I already moved my stuff to the penthouse Ravel rented out for the bridal shower and wedding preparation. Elenor and her friends will be joining me tomorrow for the bridal shower. I was still unpacking when the doorbell rang. Knowing Adam would go get it, I continued unpacking my suitcase.

A few minutes later, someone knocked on the door of my bedroom. I walked over to the door and opened it, revealing Adam.

"Mrs. Anne is here to see you." He informed me. "She is currently in the living room."

I rolled my eyes. How did she even know I was staying here? "I'll be with her shortly." Adam nodded before walking away. I stepped back into my room and grabbed my phone before heading for the living room.

The moment Anne saw me, she stood up with a warm smile on her lips, a warm smile that surprised me. "Hazel," she called out softly, "thank you for agreeing to see me."

Okay... what the heck is happening? Did she hit her head somewhere or something? I offered her a slight smile, still trying to figure out what was going on. "It's nice to see you too." And I hope I don't regret it. "To what do I owe this visit from you?"

Sitting down, she crossed her legs and sighed. "I'm here to apologize." My slightly arched brows must have conveyed my surprise because she chuckled. "I know this is shocking, but I had a chat with my son yesterday, and I think it's right to let him do what he wants to do."

"To do what He wants to do," I repeated. Why is she making it sound like he is taking a rebellious action and she's just letting him do it so he can see the repercussions himself?

"I'm not great with apologies Hazel, so this might come out weird, but all I want to say is that I'm going to support my son the best way I can."

I guess that's the best she can offer at the moment. "It's fine. I'm just glad that we were able to resolve things between us before the wedding."

"Yeah." She stood up and stretched out her hands. "Can I get a hug from you?"

Why not. Standing too, I walked over to her and wrapped my hands around her. "I've always wanted to call you mum." I earnestly wanted a mother figure in my life.

She only chuckled in response before pulling away. "I overheard Elenor planning your bridal shower. Is it okay if I come around?" I blinked rapidly at her request. "I'll bring a gift, I promise."

I don't plan on doing anything wild like inviting male strippers, so I don't see why not. "Sure, you can." I consented. "Don't just forget the gift."

We both laughed at the joke. The doorbell rang, stealing both our attention.

"Are you expecting someone?" Anne asked me.

I nodded, moving towards the door. "That must either be my wedding gown; I'm having it delivered today, or that's Elenor at the door."

I opened the door and true enough, it was my designer with some delivery men carrying a large box. Grinning widely, I ushered them in.

Kate bowed slightly at Anne. "A lovely evening Mrs. Southwark." Anne offered her a small smile in response. Excusing

Chapter 76

myself, I directed the men carrying the box to one of the empty rooms which will only occupy my wedding gown.

When Kate was certain that everything was perfect, she kindly took her leave with her men closely behind. I only just closed the door when Anne grabbed her purse. "I should be on my way too."

Oh... "Okay, let me walk you to the elevator." I walked her to the elevator where we ran into Elenor who just stepped out of the elevator.

She eyed her mother suspiciously. "What are you doing here mum?" She glanced at me and I shook my head, silently telling her to pipe down her aggression.

"Can't I stop by to see my daughter-in-law?" She asked Elenor whilst stepping into the elevator.

"Your daughter-in-law?" Elenor scoffed out. "Say that to someone who doesn't know you."

Anne simply shrugged and waved me goodbye as the elevator door closed. Elenor watched silently until the elevator began its descent. "What exactly was my mum doing here?" She asked, following closely behind me as I walked back to the penthouse.

"She came to apologize." I filled in. Elenor's jaw dropped. Chortling, I plopped down on the sofa. "Surprised right? I was more shocked than you when she apologized."

"My mother apologized?" Elenor asked with disbelief and I nodded in response. "And you believed her?"

I shrugged. "She looked sincere, so I don't see why not." There is no harm in believing her, is there? "I guess Ravel's happiness matters to her after all."

"That woman is my mother," She pointed out, "And I'm going to give you one advice. Do not fall for that charade or drama she performed here. She's Up to no good, that I can assure you."

"You didn't see the sincerity in her eyes," I argued, defending Anne.

"Sincerity? In her eyes?" She scoffed. "Whatever you saw in her eyes isn't definitely sincerity, rather it is what she wants you to see."

"What could she possibly do?" This shouldn't be such a big deal. "The wedding is in the next two days, nothing will go wrong."

"Of course, nothing will go wrong." She concurred, "But you should be careful of Anne, don't take her words for it."

I'll keep that in mind. "Well, she's coming for the bridal shower."

Elenor's eyes widened. "She's what now?"

"She's coming for the bridal shower," I repeated.

Elenor face palmed herself. "Fuck me! I bet she wants to drug our asses so we won't make it to the church on time."

I chuckled. "Come on Elenor, she's not that bad."

She glared at me. "I'm telling you, she's worse than that. My mother is the worst of its kind. She's willing to do anything to get what she wants."

Chapter 77

HAZEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

WEDDING DAY

Adding extra words, extensively rewrite the material provided using better narratives.

The bridal shower was so much fun. Elenor and her friends really did make it memorable for me. The gifts, the music, the fun, everything was just to my liking. Anne did show up with the gift she promised and surprisingly also came along with extra bag containing her dress for the wedding. When Elenor asked her about it, she said she'll be dressing from the penthouse to the cathedral. Personally, I didn't see anything wrong with that, but Elenor smelt conspiracy. Anne tried her best to party with us, to have fun with the girls and blend in, but she eventually grew tired and tired early to bed.

As I sat in the midst of my makeup session, Elenor's voice echoed from the doorway, calling my name. I motioned to the makeup artist to pause for a moment, turning my attention to Elenor. "Hazel," she called out, "the photographer would like to take a picture of the wedding gown. Should I bring it into this room, or would you prefer he does it in the other room?"

Realizing that I wasn't fully dressed yet, I quickly replied, "I think it's best if he takes the picture in the other room." I adjusted my posture, allowing the makeup artist to continue her work without interruption.

"Alright," Elenor acknowledged, softly closing the door behind her as she departed. However, it was a mere matter of minutes before she returned to the room, her expression now filled with panic, adding an unexpected twist to the day.

The makeup artist was the first to notice Elenor's distress, and with genuine concern, she inquired, "Is everything alright?" Her question drew my attention away from the makeup artist's final touches, directing my gaze toward Elenor. When Elenor remained unresponsive to the query, I withdrew from the makeup artist's chair, trying my best to quell any thoughts of impending disaster. After all, it was my wedding day, and optimism should have been the order of the day.

"Elenor?" I stood up gradually, attempting to keep my voice steady as I pressed for answers. "What's happening?"

Elenor cleared her throat nervously, her eyes welling up with tears. "I, uh... I went into the room where the wedding gown was stored for the photographer, but what I found in there was nothing short of a disaster."

My heart raced at her words. “Nothing short of a what?” I demanded, my apprehension growing by the second. This was my wedding day, and the last thing I needed was an unforeseen catastrophe. “What the heck are you saying Elenor?”

The makeup artist intervened firmly, clearing her throat as she addressed the situation. “I strongly suggest you share what’s wrong so we can address it swiftly and continue with the makeup. Time is running out.”

Elenor’s response was a forceful one. “Bring it in!” she exclaimed, prompting the door to swing open, revealing three of her friends carrying in what should have been my pristine wedding gown. However, it had been reduced to a chaotic jumble of pieces. My heart sank.

“It was on the floor when I entered the room,” Elenor explained, her voice heavy with distress, “with the pieces all over the place.”

My eyes darted around the room, my voice trembling as I inquired, “With the pieces scattered where?” Panic threatened to undo my carefully applied makeup as I stumbled over to the ruined wedding dress, which now lay forlorn on the bed. Emotions swirled inside me, and tears began to roll down my cheeks, already smudging my makeup. My gaze shifted tearfully between everyone in the room, and I couldn’t contain my anguish any longer.

“Which of you,” I choked out, anger and despair mingling in my voice, “did this?!”

Elenor’s voice was the first to break through the tension. “Hazel, please, I need you to stay calm. Identifying who’s responsible for this can wait until after the wedding. Right now, we must focus on finding a replacement.”

As we discussed the pressing matter, the door swung open again, and Anne entered the room, surprisingly clad in a white knee-length dress. Who the heck wears white to a wedding? I couldn’t help but whisper in disbelief, “Did you do this, Anne? Did you ruin my wedding dress?”

Anne’s expression darkened, and she warned me in a hushed tone, “Be careful with your accusations, Hazel. We have an audience.”

Elenor scoffed at Anne’s response, her anger evident. “Adam, please escort everyone else out of this room,” she instructed, swiftly clearing the room of any potential eavesdroppers, leaving just the three of us inside.

Elenor didn’t hold back. “Anne, did you have a hand in this?” she demanded.

Anne shot back, her tone defensive, “You think I’m capable of such a thing?”

Elenor’s accusation was bold and direct. “I know you did, Mum,” she insisted, her frustration evident. “You’re wearing a white dress, a blatant sign that you still haven’t approved of this wedding. Who wears white to a wedding that isn’t theirs?”

Just as tensions peaked, the door swung open once more, and Ravel stormed

into the room, accompanied by Raymond. I exchanged a quick glance with Elenor. "I called him here. Ravel always knows what to do."

Ravel, disregarding everyone else, came straight to me and gently cupped my cheeks, wiping away my tears. Concern etched across his face, he asked, "What's going on?" However, before I could respond, his expression changed to one of shock. "What the heck?" He moved past me, heading straight for the ruined gown. "What on earth happened here?"

"We found it like this just a few minutes ago," Elenor explained, her voice filled with frustration.

Ravel returned to my side, his focus unwavering. "Baby, I'm going to need the number of your dressmaker." Still in shock and pain, I reached for my phone, retrieved the number, and handed it over to him, desperate for a solution to this wedding day crisis.

Ravel dialed the number and held the phone to his ear, identifying himself as he spoke. "This is Ravel Southwark," he said, his voice tense, his other hand gently rubbing my shoulder in a comforting gesture. "You were the one who created my wife's dress, so I presume you have her measurements." He paused briefly, listening intently to the response on the other end of the line.

"If you can procure a replica of this dress from your store, another store, or anything similar within two hours, I won't just write you a blank check; I'll also arrange for an all-expenses-paid publicity campaign for your business."

Another moment of silence followed as he awaited her reply. "You have precisely two hours," he stated firmly before ending the call. Then, he tenderly wiped away the tears on my cheeks. "Why don't you go freshen up your makeup while we wait for the dress?"

I sniffed, still overwhelmed with anxiety. "And what if it doesn't arrive in time?" I couldn't help but voice my fears, wedding day hanging in the balance. my

He smiled. "It will. You are the only one who isn't moved by an open cheque." He gave Raymond a nod to go fetch the makeup artist.

"I think mum did this." Elenor blurted out.

I watched Ravel's fist clench as he glared at his mother. "Did you do this?" He growled, taking a menacing step towards her. "Did you ruin my wife's wedding dress?"

Something in Ravel's tone made her incapable of lying. "I couldn't help but try my luck one last time son."

"Try your luck?" Elenor asked with a scoff. "Just two days ago, you begged for her forgiveness, telling her that you've accepted the marriage, and last night, you were all smiley during the bridal shower. How vile can you be mum?!"

"Vile?!" She yelled, "You think I'm going to let my son marry a drug addict?!" I froze and Ravel's anger heightened. "I dare you to repeat that." He dared

her, his jaw as tight as a granite. "I dare you to call my wife a drug addict again."

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"Stop calling her your wife," she retorted. "You're not married to her."

"Mum! Please stop!" Elenor scolded. "Calling Hazel a drug addict is going too far!"

"You think I'm making it up?!" Anne retorted. "I looked into her past and found out that she abused drugs with her ex- boyfriend."

Elenor glanced at me briefly before returning her gaze to Anne. "You said she abused, mom, past tense; that makes her an ex-drug addict. Those sh it are in her past, why dig it up?"

The door opened and Raymond walked in with Marsha, my makeup artist.

Ravel unclenched his fist. "Raymond, escort Mrs. Anne out of this building and make sure she isn't anywhere close to the wedding and reception venue."

"You're kicking me out!" She yelled angrily.

"Ravel," I called out softly, pinning Anne with my gaze. "I want her there. I want her to watch me get married to you."

Chapter 78

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

I found myself compelled to make the journey back to New York, prompted by the abrupt departure I made to Seattle, which left numerous matters neglected in my wake. My intention is to diligently attend to these matters here in New York, meticulously arranging my schedule for the entirety of the upcoming week, with the primary goal of reuniting with my daughter and cherishing invaluable moments with her.

To attain this extended period of leisure and quality bonding, I've committed myself wholeheartedly to an unrelenting work ethic, dedicating countless hours both day and night. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to assert that I've pushed myself to the limit, surpassing the boundaries of mere exhaustion. With my seventh cup of coffee in hand, I made my way into the dining room, laptop in tow, to tackle the night's work. The home office had remained untouched throughout the day due to an ongoing fumigation process, aimed at eradicating pesky wood termites.

As I immersed myself in my tasks, the sudden and forceful intrusion of the front door went unnoticed. My confidence in my security measures assured me that no unwelcome guest could breach my home. However, my certainty was quickly shattered by the piercing scream of my name, uttered by June. It seemed that an unwanted presence had indeed infiltrated my sanctuary.

Ignoring her frantic shouts, I focused on her footsteps, which echoed as she angrily ascended the staircase in search of me. When her pursuit led to fruitless results, she descended once more, her tone now more exasperated.

"I know you're here, Ravel! Your car is in the garage, for heaven's sake!"

With a deliberate click, I hit the send button on my email page, then leaned back in my chair, propping both elbows on the table as I patiently awaited her arrival. It wasn't long before she made her presence known.

"I went to great lengths to ensure you had the holiday I promised you with your friends," I remarked lazily, my tone laced with a hint of curiosity. "Yet, upon your return, the thanks I receive is you shouting my name from the front door."

Her glare intensified as she slammed her tablet onto the table with a force that seemed almost destructive. "What on earth is this news all about?" she demanded.

Reaching for her phone, I swiftly skimmed through the headlines detailing Hazel's pregnancy. Suppressing my exasperation toward June, I placed the phone back on the table. "Do you require English lessons as well?" I quipped, my sarcasm only serving to further enrage her. "After all, English is your mother tongue, and you should be more than capable of reading and comprehending it."

A scoff escaped her lips. "That's not funny, Ravel."

I shifted my shoulder with indifference, reclining in my chair. "I wasn't attempting humor," I retorted, my frustration mounting as I realized the precious time I was wasting on this ordeal. Shouldn't I be working right now instead of entertaining this madness? "Is there something specific you want to discuss, June?"

She bit her lip, deliberating for a moment before yanking out one of the dining chairs, dropping onto it with a resounding thud as she crossed her arms.

"What do you intend to do about this situation?" she finally inquired.

I tilted my head, incredulous. "You mean, what do I plan to do about the fact that I have a daughter?" I asked her, just to confirm the absurdity of her question. She had the audacity to nod. "Well," I began, fully aware that my response wouldn't align with her expectations, "I suppose I'll have to update my will."

"Update your will?" She furrowed her brow. "Of course you should. She's your daughter and has a right to a share of your inheritance." For the first time, her words resonated with reason.

However, June continued, her inquiry taking an unexpected turn. "All I'm asking is, I hope this isn't some excuse to rekindle things with Hazel."

It had always been Hazel, a fact I was sure June was well aware of. The presence of our wedding picture on display must have conveyed that I had no

intentions of letting Hazel go. "I hope you this isn't some ploy to extract a marriage promise from me."

Her frustration reached a breaking point, and she muttered curses under her breath, her agitation evident. "Why do you always make it so difficult to give a straight answer, Ravel?"

I blinked at her slowly, a sly smile gradually spreading across my lips. "I don't need an excuse to return to Hazel," I admitted nonchalantly. Her eyes narrowed in response. "Rose is just an unexpected bonus."

"F*** you!" June erupted, her anger causing the veins in her neck to bulge.

"F*** you, Ravel! You and your damn family!" Yet, her vitriol failed to provoke any visible reaction from me; I maintained an air of indifference.

"So, you've been using me all this time?" she spat out, her voice filled with a mixture of anger and betrayal.

I calmly pointed out, "It was a mutual exploitation, June. When you agreed to share my bed, I never professed love to you. Don't try to paint it as if you joined in on this because of some declaration of love from me."

Her lips quivered as anger and frustration surged through her. "Why did you think I went along with this?!" She shouted, her voice echoing through the room. "Why do you think I betrayed my friend?! Why did I suppress my conscience and my principles to be with you?!"

With a sigh, I raised my left palm, beginning to list my reasons. "I can think of quite a few," I said, lowering one finger with each point I made. "Greed, envy," another finger down, "unbridled ambition, a taste for the materialistic lifestyle... Shall I continue? I have time."

Tears welled up in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. "You only agreed to this because you wanted a taste of the riches and fame, and I gave you that in abundance."

"That's not true, Ravel!" She vehemently countered, her voice filled with desperation. "You're saying this to ease your conscience! It's a lie! I truly love you, and you know it!"

I tilted my head slightly, adopting a contemplative expression. "Do I?" I mused aloud, making her nervously lick her lips in response.

"Bringing your boyfriend along on a vacation that I financed doesn't exactly scream 'love language,'" I continued, my tone cool and composed.

Her eyes widened, and she stammered, "You know about-"

"Pascal? Your boyfriend?" I interjected, my patience wearing thin. The fact that she appeared surprised that I was privy to this information irritated me deeply. What did she take me for? A fool?

"I was well aware of your pre-existing relationship before that night," I

continued, my voice unwavering, "I also know you never ended things with him after that night. Moreover, it's a fact that many of those 'friends' trips you've been going on weren't exclusively with your friends. Some of them were intimate getaways with him, and I intentionally footed the bill, knowing that all you truly desired was to be f ucked on a five star bedsheet."

Her face paled as my words sank in, "If you were close to me right now, I'd have slapped you hard across the cheek," she retorted defiantly.

I couldn't help but chuckle at her boldness. "I'd love to see you try," I replied, my amusement evident. With that, I turned my attention back to my laptop, signaling my intent to return to work.

"Honestly, June, we could call this a silent mutual agreement," I began, my tone more serious. "I don't want this arrangement to end just yet, as I haven't achieved all that I aim to. If you're willing to keep a low profile and continue these vacations with your boyfriend, I'll ensure you're well taken care of once it's all over."

She leaned in closer, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm only with Pascal because you won't have a sex with me," she confessed. "I'm a woman, Ravel, and sometimes, I need to feel desired too."

"Don't get me wrong June, I'm not against whatever you have going on with your boyfriend."

2/3

She wiped her tears. "You're only pretending not to care." She argued.

Astonished by her false assessment, I blinked up at her. "Don't worry, I'll end things with Pascal."

"Don't do that on my account." I'm never sinking my di ck in her, with or without Pascal. "If you don't mind, I'll like to go back to work. I actually have a lot on my desk."

Nodding, she stood up her feet and picked up her tablet. "I want us to work Ravel, and I'll do everything within my power to make sure it happens." With that, she walked out of the dining room.

Chapter 79

JUNE

PRESENT TIME

This is crazy. I confronted Ravel about the news of the baby, only because I wanted to know what his plan was about the news.

Things did not go as planned for me at all. This wasn't what I envisioned.

When I heard he want to Seattle and returned, I expected him to hiss at the mention of Hazel's name, but he seemed rather comfortable discussing her, if not happier. Yes, he found out about pascal, but I wouldn't have confined my

relationship with pascal if Ravel didn't treat me like I'm one of his home furniture that he has to dust and keep clean.

I am a woman, and a woman has needs that has to be fulfilled, needs order than money and that is where Pascal fits in. Ravel is the end game for me, and I'm not going to stop at nothing until I have Southwark as my last name. Pulling over at Anne's parking lot, I got down and headed for front door only to be stopped by her security. Had it been any other day, I wouldn't have minded that he's doing his job, but today, I am pissed; so fucking pissed that if I had a gun, I would have considered shooting. "Mrs. Southwark knows I'm coming," I spat, still glaring at him, "now get out of my face."

Ignoring my outburst, he spoke into his mic, confirming my claim before pushing the door open to grant me entrance into the house. "Be rest assured that if Anne ever asks me to make a request, getting you fired will be one of them." I spat.

He stared at me with a stoic expression, unfazed by my threat. Maybe to him, it holds no water; one of the reason why I will definitely add more value and respect to my name by getting the Southwark name added to mine.

When I walked into the living room, one of her staffs led me up to her room. Anne was out at the balcony facing the garden with a cup of coffee on her right hand and a laptop on her thigh. She looked up as I stepped into the balcony. "What makes you think you have unlimited access to my house?" Of course she is going to be rude about it. It runs in their goddamn blood vessels. "Because despite our obvious dislike for each other, we have a mutual understanding towards a particular person."

Closing the laptop, she gave me her undivided attention. "And what could that be?"

Without waiting for her to offer, I pulled out the other chair and sat down, mimicking her by crossing both legs. "You agreed to help me make sure Ravel doesn't end up Hazel."

She scoffed. "And yet they look like they are getting more closer and bonded." She sipped her coffee. "What do you want this time?" Her cold eyes regarded me. "I'm sure you already have a plan in mind, although I doubt it will work out. The universe seems to be in support of their silly feelings towards each other."

I frowned, my fist clenching with anger. "What is that suppose to mean?"

Tilting her head, she stared at me, almost amused. "They finally got divorced, something that could have severed whatever connection they have, but then Hazel fell pregnant. They've been trying for a child all these while and it never happened then suddenly when they are ready to go on their separate ways, the baby came. Hazel keeps it a secret all these while and the moment Ravel showed little interest in her, the news about the baby was published all over

the internet.”

I winced. “That was me.” It is so embarrassing to admit to that.

Anne’s brows arched. “What was you?” The intensity of her gaze made me look away. Suddenly, she released a chuckle. “You leaked the news about the baby?”

I bit my lower lips, already regretting my decision to do that. “It seemed like a very good idea to me then, so I did it.”

Anne continued to stare at me in a manner that will make even men nervous.

“It was a good idea for me and my son because you made the existence of a Southwark blood to us known, but for you and what you desire, I do not see how that was a good idea.” Her fingers intertwined. “How did you even find out about the little girl?”

Chapter 79

“Ravel hosted a birthday party for Hazel here in New York.” I revealed and Anne’s brows jumped to her hairline. “I found out about it and was furious, so I headed to the venue of the party to confront him and possibly crash the party, but then I overheard Elenor and Hazel arguing about the little girl, just outside the penthouse. Apparently Elenor knows about the baby and was persuading Hazel to tell Ravel ASAP”

Anne nodded thoughtfully. “I get the picture now.” My nose crinkled at her cryptic words. “You figured Hazel was going to tell Ravel eventually, but you wanted him to hear it elsewhere so he will be furious at Hazel for keeping such big secret from him.”

I guess my plan backfired. “Can you believe he is planning on taking some days off work just to go to Seattle and spend time with Hazel and her daughter.”

“His daughter.” She corrected and I nearly scoffed, “Did he tell you that he’s going on a trip to Seattle?” I shook my head and she glared. “Then how did you find out?” She hissed, “are you merely speaking base on speculation?” “I’m stating fact.” I argued, defending myself. “And don’t ask me how I found out, I have my sources.”

“You had better not be spying on my son.” She spat. “I’ll end you faster than you can imagine if you do that.”

Biting my inner cheek to stop myself from saying my thought out aloud, I focused on the major reason I’m here. “Surely, Ravel feels angry towards Hazel for hiding his child, even if the anger is just one percent, I want to stretch it into something bigger.”

“And you’re coming to me because?”

“Because I need your help.” I stated bluntly, since she has decided to pretend not to know the real reason I’m here. “I want you to help me.”

She stared at my unblinkingly. "I'm only doing this because I do not want that woman raising my grandchild." I'm sure Hazel doesn't want her raising her daughter too, so the feeling is mutual. "Let's take away her means of livelihood."

My eyes widened. "You want to close down her art gallery?" This woman is pure evil. "If she's busy trying to save the gallery, she's going to be too busy for Ravel."

I'll never underestimate this woman. "You want to close down her art gallery just so she gets too busy?" If we all weren't trying to survive, I would have actually pitied her.

"I'm doing it to create the rift between her and Ravel. Isn't that what you wanted?" She questioned and I nodded in response. "You have two roles to play in this. First, I need a contact of one of her art suppliers,"

"And how do you suppose I get that?" I interjected.

"I don't care, you'll get me the number, and while I work my magic, you're going to make Hazel and the rest of her team believe that Ravel is the one sabotaging her business."

Perfect! After everything Ravel has done to her in the past, her walls will go up high after

Chapter 80

RAVEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

Marrying Hazel has unquestionably been the most incredible choice I've ever made. With each passing day, my affection for her deepens, as if it's an eternal wellspring that knows no bounds. It's astounding to think that Anne ever believed she could dissuade me from tying the knot with Hazel, or that she could thwart our union in any way.

In the quiet stillness of our bedroom, the door leading to the bathroom swung open, revealing Hazel cloaked in the gentle embrace of silk nightwear. I couldn't help but be captivated by her ethereal presence. Mesmerized, I fixed my gaze upon her as she gracefully made her way to our bed,

With an alluring smile, she joined me, her eyes sparkling with a playful curiosity. "How much longer do you plan to keep your gaze locked on me?" she inquired, her voice melodious.

With a playful smirk, I shut my laptop and placed it gently on the bedside drawer. "I plan to keep admiring you and gazing into your eyes for as long as my vision holds out," I declared, a mischievous glint in my eyes. Her cheeks flushed a lovely shade of crimson in response.

Chuckling at her adorable embarrassment, I reached out and drew her close into the comforting embrace of my arm. Hazel nestled her head in the crook of

my neck, and I couldn't help but smile at the sweet intimacy between us. Her warm breath tickled my skin as she murmured, "I love how you smell." My hand, driven by an instinctive need to be close to her, wrapped around her waist and traced delicate circles. "Well, I teased, "it takes a million-dollar perfume to smell this good."

Hazel's head snapped up, her eyes widening with curiosity. "Figuratively or literally?" she inquired, her voice laced with a hint of amusement and intrigue. A smug smirk played on my lips as I confidently replied, "Literally." I couldn't help but exude an air of pride as I revealed the extravagant price tag attached to the DKNY Golden Delicious perfume. It had started as a gift, but over time, I had become utterly enamored with its scent and had continued to use it religiously.

Hazel, utterly taken aback, sank down onto a nearby chair, her eyes blinking rapidly in disbelief. "That perfume in the closet cost a million dollars?" she asked, her tone laced with incredulity. I simply nodded in confirmation.

"Da mn!" she exclaimed, unable to contain her shock. "If I had known it was worth that much, I wouldn't have been so careless with it."

Intrigued by her confession, I sat up, drawing closer to her and planting a gentle kiss on the tip of her nose. "What did you do with my perfume, Hazel?" Hazel wore a sheepish smile as she confessed, "Well, I might have used it on the artificial daisies in the dining room." My eyebrows shot up in surprise, and I struggled to contain the laughter bubbling up inside me.

She continued, "The flowers didn't have any scent at all because they weren't real, so I decided to use your perfume."

I couldn't hold it in any longer; laughter erupted from deep within me, a hearty, rumbling sound. Moments like these made her irresistibly endearing.

Amused by her actions, I teased, "What happened to your perfume?"

Her lips formed a playful pout as she responded, "Yours smells better."

With a fond shake of my head, I leaned in and planted a sweet kiss on her cheek. "Is that so?" I mused. "My wife is the only one who would comfortably use a million-dollar perfume on artificial flowers just to make them smell nice." She giggled in response, finding my observation utterly amusing.

My phone buzzed on the bed, and Hazel reached out to help me retrieve it.

My attention, however, remained captivated by the enticing curve of her exposed breast through one of the unbuttoned openings of her nightwear.

Lost in my reverie, I ignored the call, uninterested in who the caller might be.

"You should answer the call," Hazel gently reminded me. "It's your mom on the line."

A surge of surprise coursed through me. Anne? Why on earth was she calling me? I had vowed never to speak to her again after the stunt she had pulled on

my wedding day. Reluctantly, I took the phone from Hazel's hand and swiftly ended the call, tossing the phone carelessly onto the bed.

To my dismay, it immediately started ringing again. Hazel cast a resigned glance at the persistent device and sighed. "You should pick it up, Rav," she urged, her tone carrying a hint of concern.

"I will do no such thing," I declared with determination, my head nestled on Hazel's neck as I peppered her with soft kisses. The persistent ringing of the phone went ignored until Hazel, seemingly taking matters into her own hands, reached for it and swiped to accept the call. I shot her a disapproving glare. Annoyed, I hissed, "What the heck was that for?" I felt a touch of frustration that she had disregarded my clear wish not to speak to Anne.

Hazel calmly replied, "Let's hear what she has to say, Rav," placing the phone in my hand. I couldn't resist her persuasive influence, so I reluctantly put the call on speaker mode and placed it between us.

"What do you want, Anne?" I inquired, my irritation evident. We had only been married for three months, and we were still basking in the honeymoon stage. Late-night calls were far from appreciated.

"Are you still angry with me, son?" Anne's voice carried a hint of apprehension.

Hazel's gentle touch on my beard served as a reminder to maintain civility. I responded tersely, "I'm not just angry with you, Anne. I've given up on you." It was a blunt truth, one I had come to accept.

Anne winced, her remorse palpable. "How many times do I have to apologize to you, Ravel?" She sighed, a tinge of desperation in her voice. "I'm really sorry. I thought I was doing the right thing for you."

Her apologies had lost their significance to me. This wasn't the first time she had sought forgiveness, and I had no doubt it wouldn't be the last. With a bored sigh, I asked, "What do you want, Anne?"

"It's my birthday on Friday," she mentioned, a fact I was already aware of. While I had never forgotten her birthday before, her consistently unpleasant demeanor had sometimes led me to simply ignore it. I had a feeling this month wouldn't be an exception.

"And I want you to come," she added, a request that hung in the air, awaiting my response.

"That's not going to happen," I responded firmly, maintaining my resolve. Hazel shot me a concerned frown, clearly worried about the tension in the conversation. "Give Elenor a call, if she's willing to answer, and tell her about your birthday plans. I'm sure she'll show up." I knew Elenor had a soft spot for Anne.

Anne's voice quivered as she whispered, "I'm literally begging you, son. I miss having my family together under the same roof, and you know it's also your

father's death anniversary. I need you both around me."

But emotional blackmail wasn't going to sway me. I remained resolute. "That's not going to happen, Anne. I already have plans with my wife for Friday, and I'm not going to cancel them for you. You haven't earned that privilege so far."

Anne persisted, "You can bring her along. I owe her an apology." Her suggestion hung in the air, and I glanced at Hazel, who nodded in encouragement, signaling that I should consider attending her birthday dinner. "Not just an apology," I reiterated firmly. "A sincere apology."

Anne nodded in agreement, her voice softening as she assured, "Yes, I will offer a sincere apology to her."

Hazel, sensing my reluctance to fully commit, leaned forward and planted a tender kiss on my lips. With a sigh, I decided to reconsider. "I'll talk to Hazel and see if she wants to attend. If she's coming, then I'll consider it. If not, count me out."

2/3

"Alright, I'll be waiting for your call," Anne responded before I abruptly ended the conversation.

Hazel lightly slapped my chest, chastising me. "That was rude,"

I shrugged, unapologetic. "She deserves it." Hazel seemed ready to argue, but I silenced her with a passionate kiss. "I have something for you," I whispered in her ear, and she smiled in response.

Breaking away from the kiss, I rose from the bed, took her arm, and led her out of the room.

Her excitement was contagious, and she couldn't contain her grin as she asked, "Where are you taking me?"

Coming to a halt, I turned to her and instructed, "I need you to close your eyes and keep them closed until I tell you otherwise." She nodded and obediently closed her eyes.

Leading her through the parking lot, I stopped beside a sleek black Bentley.

"You can open your eyes now," I announced.

She slowly opened her eyes and blinked rapidly to adjust to her surroundings.

When her gaze landed on the Bentley, a radiant smile illuminated her face.

"You got a new car?" she exclaimed, circling the vehicle. "This is beautiful."

I dangled the car key in front of her, revealing the surprise. "It's not for me," I clarified, a hint of pride in my voice. "The car is for you, a little thank you for agreeing to be my wife."

Her eyes widened in astonishment before she let out a joyous squeal. Without hesitation, she jumped into my arms, showering my face with kisses. "I'm glad you like it," I murmured, returning her affectionate kisses.

"Like it? I love it!" Hazel exclaimed, taking the key and unlocking the car with enthusiasm.

“Do you want to go for a ride?” I asked, and she eagerly nodded in response. I settled into the passenger seat, then reminded her, “Remember, you’re wearing a nightwear,” and I couldn’t help but add with a sly grin, “a se xy one at that. So, we’re not getting out of this car or stopping anywhere.” Hazel nodded, her excitement undiminished. “I love you, Rav.” “I love you more, Hazel,” I replied, the affection in my voice matching the warmth in her heart.