

Billionaire's Ex-wife : Craving You Chapter 81

Chapter 81

HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

Ravel appears surprisingly unperturbed by my decision to keep the baby hidden from him. In the wake of his departure from my home, he hasn't initiated contact with me. In my hopeful heart, I want to believe that he harbors no resentment. Nevertheless, if he remains silent regarding the baby and refrains from reaching out, I've resolved to take the initiative. It falls upon me to mend the rift between father and daughter.

As we eagerly anticipate an upcoming exhibition scheduled for next month, the preparations have been proceeding flawlessly thus far. I've diligently reached out to numerous esteemed and renowned artists, all of whom have graciously pledged to contribute both ancient and contemporary artworks to our showcase.

David's demeanor had taken a noticeable shift, and it was clear that he was unhappy about the news of Daisy's existence becoming public. Moreover, the prospect of me spending more time with Ravel due to the baby was evidently causing him some discomfort. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving my little girl alone with Ravel, given the circumstances.

Suddenly, the door to my office swung open, and David rushed in, with Agatha following closely behind. The urgency in his voice prompted me to rise from my seat and meet him halfway. "Hazel!" His tone was laced with panic, and it was evident that something was amiss.

His anxiety was obvious, and I couldn't help but ask, "Clearly, something is wrong. 'What's happening?'" Agatha gestured for me to sit down on the sofa, which I did. "Can someone please tell me what's going on?" I pressed, growing increasingly concerned by the minute.

David's words hit me like a hammer, and my heart sank as he revealed the shocking news. "Our biggest client pulled out," he explained, and I could feel the weight of the situation bearing down on me. "He called me this morning to inform me that he's no longer interested in the exhibition, and I've been trying to reach him ever since, but he isn't taking my calls, and neither is his secretary responding."

This was an unprecedented situation. In all the years since my art gallery gained global recognition, we had never faced an artist pulling out like this. I sought clarification, my voice trembling slightly, "Mr. Jericho pulled out?"

David confirmed with a solemn nod. "Did he provide any reasons?" I inquired further.

"He wasn't on the call long enough to explain," David replied, his frustration

evident.

Just when I thought things couldn't get worse, Agatha cleared her throat and drew our attention. Two pairs of concerned eyes turned toward her, and she hesitated before dropping another bombshell. "Mr. Jericho isn't the only one who pulled out," she muttered, causing a cold sweat to break out on my brow. "Mr. Warren dropped out too. He called me this morning and informed me that he isn't ready to exhibit his new work just yet."

The gravity of the situation was becoming increasingly dire, and I couldn't help but feel a sense of impending crisis looming over my gallery.

The news of Mr. Warren pulling out of the exhibition had ignited my anger. "Is he insane?" I exclaimed with frustration. "We've been planning this exhibition for months, and I've been in constant communication with him. He assured me he couldn't wait to exhibit his work with us. What's all this nonsense he's talking about?"

David, ever the voice of reason, tried to calm the situation. "Now isn't the best time to get upset," he advised. "We should

finding a solution. Jericho and Warren are the major artists we're showcasing, and the entire exhibition hall will be nearly empty if we don't address this."

"They're not giving us any reasonable excuses," I added, my frustration unabated. "That suggests someone might be behind this. If we want to resolve this problem, we have to find out who's responsible." It was clear that there was more to this situation than met the eye, and unraveling the mystery behind it would be crucial to salvaging our exhibition.

Agatha's raised hand caught our attention, and she tentatively spoke up. "I don't know if this counts, but someone sent me an email last week, warning me that someone was trying to sabotage the exhibition. I didn't take it seriously at the time."

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My frustration boiled over as I snapped at her, "You didn't think it was serious? How could you keep such vital information from us?"

Agatha apologized, her gaze shifting away. However, David interjected with an unexpected question, "Did you receive the picture too?" Agatha blinked, clearly taken aback, but nodded in affirmation. My curiosity piqued, I raised an eyebrow, urging David to explain further.

"I received a picture in my email two days ago," he disclosed. "It was a photo of Ravel Southwark having dinner with Mr. Warren, and the message that accompanied it was the same warning that someone is trying to sabotage the exhibition."

The picture on David's phone didn't make any sense to me. Ravel had no apparent reason to sabotage our exhibition. Nonetheless, I requested to see

the image, and David nodded, handing me his phone. As I viewed the photo of Ravel dining with Warren, doubt lingered in my mind. It seemed too inconclusive to point fingers at Ravel solely based on this picture.

Returning the phone to David, I asserted, "This doesn't necessarily mean anything. It could be just a harmless dinner." My attempt to downplay the situation didn't sit well with David, who appeared unconvinced.

"I want you to send that email to our technical team," I instructed, my tone resolute. "They should track down whoever sent that email and provide us with their home or office address before sunrise tomorrow."

David agreed, assuring me, "I'll get that done."

I turned to Agatha and issued instructions, "Go and inform my driver to get the car ready. I'll be leaving in the next thirty minutes. Mr. Warren and Jeremy will have to look me in the face and say that again."

Agatha nodded, promptly exiting my office, but David remained seated, his curiosity apparent. He couldn't help but question my faith in Ravel. "You honestly think Southwark didn't do this?" he inquired skeptically.

I sighed, feeling exasperated, and took my seat behind my desk. "Don't start with me, David. I know you don't like Ravel, but he isn't capable of such evil."

David persisted, his tone firm. "He might not be capable of it when he's sweet, but you can't be so sure when he's angry with you."

I glared at him, perplexed by his insinuations. "What are you talking about?"

David's suggestion about Ravel's possible motive made me uneasy. "He could be upset that you kept Daisy away from him, and this could be his way of punishing you," he surmised. "He knows this will only affect you, but it won't close down the gallery. In my opinion, that's the ideal punishment."

Exhaustion weighed heavily on me, and I rubbed my temples tiredly. "I just need some time alone, David."

He nodded and stood up. "I'm not saying he's the one. All I'm saying is, don't rule out the possibility." With those words, he left my office.

As I stared at the artwork on the wall, I tried not to dwell too deeply on David's theory. Eventually, I picked up my phone and dialed Ravel's number. He didn't answer at first, but I persisted with my calls until he finally picked up.

"Hey, Hazel," he greeted. "Sorry for not answering earlier. I was in a meeting."

"It's fine." I responded absently, "I have a question for Ravel, did you meet with anyone named Warren lately?" I know it is foolish to ask him head on, but Ravel isn't the type of person to hide if he decides to strike.

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"Warren?" he paused for a moment. I already know the answer to my question because I already have a picture but then I want to know why he met with him.

"I did not meet with anyone named Warren. Why?"

Ravel's response to my question about meeting someone named Warren

didn't match the information I already had from the picture. "You didn't?" I asked, suspicion creeping into my tone.

"No, I did not. Why?" he inquired again.

I hesitated for a moment before offering a vague explanation, "Oh... I was hoping you knew him because I need someone

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close to him to set up a meeting for me."

Ravel quickly volunteered to help, saying, "I can help you do that."

But I declined, "It's fine. I'll handle it myself. I'll talk to you later."

Disconnecting the call, I continued to gaze at the artwork on my wall.

Something wasn't adding up, and I couldn't ignore the nagging feeling that Ravel was hiding something. I made up my mind: I was going to New York.

He would have to look me in the face and lie to me.

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RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

Receiving that urgent call for assistance from Hazel yesterday was a profound source of joy for me, and it wasn't solely due to the fact that I found some satisfaction in witnessing her vulnerability or knowing that she had encountered a challenging situation. What truly touched my heart was the realization that, among all the people in her life, she had chosen to reach out to me.

The significance of this choice was not lost on me. It spoke volumes about the trust and connection that we shared. It was a reminder that our bond and connection, are slowly building, enough for her to turn to me in her time of need. While I deeply appreciated her reaching out and was more than willing to extend my assistance, I also held immense respect for her newfound determination to handle the situation herself.

Hazel's decision to assert her self-sufficiency was a testament to her personal growth. She had evolved from the fragile woman I once felt an overwhelming urge to protect at all costs into an independent and resilient career woman.

This transformation, this display of inner strength, filled me with immense pride. It was a testament to her ability to navigate life's storms with unwavering confidence, and it signaled her readiness to face challenges head-on.

So, as I reflected on Hazel's call for help and the subsequent development, I couldn't help but feel a surge of happiness mixed with admiration for her growth and our enduring connection. It was a beautiful reminder that our bonds could evolve while remaining steadfast, and that was something truly

special to cherish.

Sneezing for what felt like the umpteenth time throughout the day, I couldn't ignore the telltale signs any longer-I was slowly succumbing to the grips of the flu. Making the executive decision to call it a day, I moved swiftly, collecting my jacket, laptop bag, and car keys, signaling my intent to vacate my office. As I slowly made my way towards the exit, a lingering thought compelled me to pause at Rose's desk. There, amidst the organized chaos of paperwork and office supplies, I found it imperative to convey a specific message: "Rose, please make certain that any impromptu meetings that arise are handled through Zoom on my behalf."

Upon hearing my request, a flicker of genuine concern materialized in Rose's eyes as she closely scrutinized my somewhat pallid countenance. Her thoughtful inquiry came as no surprise, "Are you alright, sir? You look a bit under the weather."

The truth was that I stood at the precipice of falling ill, plagued by the early symptoms of an impending ailment. However, I was not inclined to burden my colleagues with the knowledge of my condition. Grateful for her solicitude, I acknowledged her concern, saying, "I appreciate your kindness, Rose. I'll manage. And, in the event that Elenor should inquire about my whereabouts, please do inform her that she can find me in my first penthouse."

The prospect of returning home to June, in my weakened state was an option I wished fervently to avoid, and I hope she doesn't come here looking for me. I wouldn't put it past her to do that.

Rose nodded understandingly, assuring me she would execute my instructions flawlessly. "Of course, sir. I'll make sure she's informed." With a final, appreciative nod, I left the office.

As I finally arrived home, my body was ablaze with feverish heat. Raymond, who had been intermittently casting concerned glances my way throughout the car ride, now fixed his gaze upon me and voiced his worry, "Are you okay?" I responded with a grunted acknowledgment, but the fatigue was evident in my features.

"You seem like you're teetering on the verge of collapsing any moment now," he observed, his hand extending tentatively to graze my forehead.

Irritated by both his touch and my deteriorating condition, I swatted his hand away with a sharp, muttered command,

"Leave it."

Our journey continued as we entered the elevator, my hands buried deep within the confines of my jacket, a desperate attempt to stave off the relentless chill that seemed to pierce through me. Raymond, however, remained undeterred, his discerning gaze still locked on me. With genuine concern in his voice, he inquired, "Do you think you might be running a fever?"

He pointed out the obvious, "You've been sneezing continuously in the car, and you keep clutching your jacket as if trying to ward off the cold."

Raymond's unexpected action left me momentarily stunned as his hand made contact with my forehead, and his expression revealed a combination of concern and exasperation. His incredulous words followed, "What's happening, man? How are you even managing to walk around with such a high temperature?" he hissed, clearly taken aback.

My response was limited to a grunted acknowledgment, as I lacked the energy to engage in a lengthy conversation. Raymond gently guided me to my room, ensuring that I was comfortably settled. He took the initiative to draw the curtains closed and turned off the air conditioner, creating a more soothing environment for my recovery.

With a sense of urgency, Raymond rushed to the store to acquire the necessary medications. However, upon his return to the penthouse, he discovered that I had succumbed to sleep, my weakened state finally claiming me.

Upon waking, I felt the comforting coolness of a damp cloth on my forehead. I groaned softly, gathering the strength to leave my bedroom. My weary feet carried me sluggishly towards the living room, where I detected faint sounds emanating from the kitchen. As Raymond emerged from the pantry, he froze in his tracks upon spotting me.

"Are you feeling any better?" he asked, his genuine concern etched across his face, providing a glimmer of hope amid my illness...

I nodded cautiously, my initial suspicions giving way to a modicum of relief as I motioned toward the kitchen. "Could you tell me who's currently in my kitchen?" My tone conveyed not only irritation but also a deep-seated concern. The mere thought that someone might have brought Barbara, a presence I had intentionally avoided by staying away from the manor, weighed heavily on my mind.

Raymond, ever quick to provide reassurance, stepped forward with an explanation, "It's Elenor. I thought you might benefit from a proper meal instead of relying on takeout, so I decided to call her over." As he uttered these words, Elenor materialized from the kitchen, holding a bowl of steaming soup in her hands.

Her arrival brought a faint smile to her lips as she spotted me standing in the hallway. With a tone laced with genuine concern, she inquired, "How are you feeling?" Elenor approached me, her touch gentle as she took my arm and guided me toward the dining hall. Her voice conveyed a deep sense of care as she continued, "Why didn't you reach out to me when you started feeling unwell and uneasy?" Her worry was palpable, and I couldn't help but

appreciate her sincere concern for my well-being in that moment.

My deadpan response seemed to catch Elenor off guard, and she furrowed her brows in response. "Has no one ever told you what kind of pest you are in someone's life?" I quipped, causing Raymond to chuckle.

Elenor's glare intensified, and her retort was sharp, "F uck you. You're fortunate you're sick, or else I'd have given you a good slap." She didn't spare Raymond either, continuing, "And as for you, no dinner for laughing."

Raymond, seemingly undisturbed by Elenor's threats, strolled casually into the kitchen and served himself dinner, almost as if challenging her bluff. When he returned to the dining area, Elenor practically snatched the food from his hands, her irritation evident.

While the playful banter continued between them, I absently pushed the soup around with my fork, my thoughts wandering. It was then that a realization struck me, and I asked, "Where's my phone?" I asked suddenly as I couldn't locate it. I distinctly remembered it being in the jacket I had brought back from work, but that very jacket seemed to have vanished from my bedroom.

Elenor's revelation that she had plugged in my phone drew my attention, and she fed me spoonfuls of soup as she explained, I noticed it was low on battery, so I thought I'd charge it for you." She briefly glanced at me from her own phone and asked, "Do you need it now?" I nodded, and she promptly got up to retrieve it.

As Elenor momentarily left the room, I took the opportunity to turn my attention toward Raymond, a question lingering in my mind. "Did you manage to patch things up with her?" My curiosity regarding their relationship had been piqued. To my surprise, I witnessed a rare blush spreading across Raymond's cheeks, and he chuckled nervously. "We're working on it, he confessed, his admission tinged with a hint of optimism.

I nodded, genuinely pleased to hear that progress was being made in their relationship. Elenor returned to the dining room, handing me my phone.

"Thank you," I expressed my gratitude, relieved to have it back. As I double-tapped the screen, I

couldn't help but notice a missed call from Rose, which immediately sent a pang of regret coursing through me."Shit! I told her I'd take all calls via Zoom. The realization that I had inadvertently missed an important call weighed on my conscience, and I knew I needed to address it soon.

Redialing Rose's number, I brought the phone to my ear, and she picked up immediately. "Rose, I missed your call," I apologized.

"Apologies for any inconvenience, sir, but Ms. Hazel was here, insisting on seeing you, and I was calling to confirm if I should disclose your current whereabouts," Rose explained.

Hazel was in New York? I was taken aback. "When did she arrive?" I inquired.

“Approximately forty-five minutes ago,” Rose responded. “I contacted Mr. Raymond, and he gave the green light to share your location.” At that moment, the doorbell rang, diverting everyone’s attention to the entrance.

“That must be Hazel,” Raymond deduced as he rose from his seat to answer the door. “Thank you, Rose, but I’ll have to hang up now.”

Ending the call with Rose, I turned to my sister with a question in mind. “Did you inform Hazel that I’m dealing with a fever?”

Elenor scoffed dismissively. “Are you seriously suggesting she flew all the way to New York just because you have a fever?” She shook her head. “Don’t be so conceited, Ravel.”

Just as we were discussing it, Hazel stormed into the dining room, her demeanor anything but concerned. Seeing her obvious anger, I slowly rose to my feet and asked, “Hazel, is everything alright? What happened?”

Hazel’s piercing glare bore into me as she reached into her purse, producing an envelope and slamming it onto the table. “Explain this.”

My brows furrowed with confusion as I picked up the envelope, uncertainty gnawing at me. With cautious fingers, I delved into the envelope, retrieving several photographs of myself alongside Warren. My jaw tightened in response to the incriminating evidence before me.

My patience wore thin as I confronted her, my tone edged with anger. “Are you spying on me, Hazel?” I demanded an explanation, unable to mask my irritation.

She continued to glare at me, her voice dripping with frustration. “Is that all you have to say to me?” She hissed, her eyes narrowing. “I asked you if you had met with Warren, and you blatantly denied it!” Her accusation hung heavily in the air, and I found myself at a loss for words.

I let out an exasperated sigh, weary of the mounting tension. “Yes, I met with him,” I admitted, my voice tinged with frustration. I couldn’t understand why my meeting with Warren was causing such a reaction in Hazel. “But why is this such a big deal?” I questioned, feeling unjustly accused.

As I spoke, Hazel circled the table, her footsteps measured and purposeful. My guard was momentarily down, and I wasn’t prepared for what happened next. With a swift, stinging motion, she delivered a resounding slap to my cheek. The shock of it left me momentarily speechless, my hand instinctively reaching to touch the stinging sensation on my face.

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RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

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The resounding slap reverberated through the dining room, sending shockwaves not only through me but also through every present witness. Elenor reacted swiftly, stepping forward with an unmistakable stance that declared her alignment with me, not Hazel. Her voice dripped with reproach as she confronted Hazel.

“Why on earth did you hit him?” she snapped at Hazel, her displeasure evident. “He’s clearly unwell with a fever, and for that reason alone, you shouldn’t resort to physical violence.”

Hazel’s response was far from conciliatory. She scoffed incredulously, her agitation evident as her veins seemed to pop out in anger. “Unwell with a fever?” she retorted, her voice raised in frustration. “I’ll be dealing with a lot more than just a fever because of this nonsense! Do you get that?!” Her emotions were clearly running high. “I demand to know why you lied about meeting with Mr. Warren.”

I retreated defensively, taking a step backward and placing the envelope back on the table. “I met with Warren for personal reasons,” I admitted, avoiding eye contact, even though Raymond, who was privy to the truth, looked at me with concern.

“For personal reasons?” Hazel bit out, her arms folded across her chest as she fixed an intense glare on me. “What sort of personal reasons, Ravel? I insist on knowing.”

Why was she meddling in my affairs like this? I maintained my composure.

“It’s called ‘personal’ for a reason, Hazel, I deadpanned, my tone unyielding. “I have no intention of disclosing that information to you.” I returned to my seat, spoon in hand, but made no move to touch the food. “What’s the real reason behind your obsession with my meeting with Warren?”

“Because my show is on the verge of being canceled due to whatever transpired in that meeting with Mr. Warren!” she yelled, gesturing wildly with her hands. “Is your anger stemming from my decision to keep Daisy away from you?”

Perplexed by the sudden change in the conversation’s direction, I raised a finger, silently signaling for Hazel to pause for a

harrest way moment. “Hold on a second,” I requested, tilting my head as I contemplated the best way to address this unfolding situation. “Could you please clarify what you mean by your exhibition being on the verge of cancellation due to the outcome of my meeting with Warren?” A sinking feeling gnawed at me as I considered the implications.

Hazel’s irritation remained palpable as she forced out her explanation.

“Warren abruptly and inexplicably withdrew his support for the exhibition, citing reasons that are utterly impractical,” she retorted, her glare intensifying

with each passing moment. "Those reasons reek of nothing but excuses." The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place, and my own frustration mounted. "Are you suggesting that I intentionally sabotaged your dealings with Warren out of spite for keeping Daisy away from me?" My voice carried a note of incredulity, and when she offered no immediate response, my jaw clenched in irritation. "Now you're genuinely testing my patience," I snapped. "Do you honestly believe I would resort to such underhanded tactics against you?" Hazel smacked her lips together in annoyance, her clenched fist betraying her frustration. "Heaven knows I defended you when David and Agatha insinuated that this might somehow involve you, particularly with the pictures and emails."

My frown deepened, and I demanded further information, "What emails are you on about?"

She rolled her eyes with evident irritation. "That's not the crucial issue right now! What's imperative is understanding why you lied about your meeting with Warren and why you're refusing to disclose the nature of that meeting to me." Her impatience was clear, and the tension between us continued to escalate. "I choose not to disclose it to you," I replied firmly, my gaze unwavering as I met Hazel's eyes. "I must say, it's deeply disappointing to discover that you hold such a low opinion of me."

Elenor intervened, attempting to bridge the growing chasm of misunderstanding between us. "Perhaps, if you were to apologize for the initial deception and then share the details of your meeting with Warren, we could swiftly resolve this misunderstanding," she suggested. Her diplomatic tone carried a note of hope.

Raymond and I exchanged puzzled glances, both of us equally uncertain about the best course of action. I was conflicted, torn between the urge to protect my personal affairs and the need to clear the air with Hazel. My meeting with Warren was a matter I preferred to keep under wraps until I had tangible results to present.

However, I squared my shoulders and leaned forward, determined to bring some resolution to the situation. "Hazel, to be perfectly candid, I have nothing to divulge to you at this juncture. Trust is something that needs to be worked on at this juncture."

Hazel's response was sharp and cutting. "Where did trust get me the last time?" Her words hit me like a punch to the gut, a reminder of past betrayals. I hadn't expected her to bring that up. "So you have nothing to share with me," she declared with slow, deliberate emphasis, to which I nodded in agreement. "F**k you, Ravel!" she erupted in anger, her voice echoing through my home. "Sabotaging my business and lying in the process is nothing but an act of cowardice, and you're going to pay for it." She shot me one last withering

glare before storming out of my house.

The atmosphere at the dinner table had soured considerably. Raymond remained silent, his expression mirroring my own inner turmoil, while Elenor fixed me with an expectant stare. Her question hung in the air like a heavy weight. "What exactly did you discuss with Warren that you're unwilling to repeat in Hazel's presence?"

I shook my head, trying to dispel the mounting frustration, and turned my attention back to my meal. "Please, Elenor, not now. I'm already infuriated as it is."

She scoffed, her irritation palpable. "I'm even more furious with you than you are," she retorted, grabbing her jacket as she prepared to leave. "Just as I was about to extend an olive branch, you go and do something this reprehensible."

My eyes shot up in disbelief. "You, too, believe that I'm guilty of what Hazel's accusing me of?"

Elenor merely shrugged. "The evidence seems to point in your direction, and I didn't hear you vehemently denying it either." Her logic left me flabbergasted. "I'm leaving your house, Ravel. Give me a call when you've sorted things out with Hazel." With that, she stomped out of my home, leaving me alone with Raymond.

I continued to eat in somber silence, my thoughts weighed down by the turmoil of the evening. Raymond eventually broke the silence with a suggestion. "I think it's finally time to tell Hazel the truth, so she can stop seeing you as the villain."

I shot him an incredulous glare. "Get out of my house, Raymond!" With everyone else already gone, he could as well join them in leaving.

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Chapter 84

HAZEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

Following my suggestion, we eventually found ourselves at Anne's birthday dinner. Ravel, who had initially been reluctant to attend, wore a persistent frown throughout the journey. On this particular evening, he had enlisted Raymond as his chauffeur, citing the need for alcohol to endure Anne's company at the dinner.

I held a different perspective on the situation. For some inexplicable reason, I harbored hope that tonight would be a turning point. Perhaps it was my yearning to mend the rift within our family and rekindle the love that had

faded.

As the car came to a halt outside the family's garage, Ravel's grip tightened on my forearm, preventing me from opening the door. He spoke in a hushed tone, his concern evident. "If, at any point during the dinner, Anne makes you uncomfortable, don't hesitate to inform me. We'll make our exit as soon as possible."

I acknowledged his words with a nod, and he gracefully exited the car before circling around to assist me. Together, we approached the grand manor's entrance. The moment we stepped inside, Ravel took charge, helping me slip out of my jacket and handing it over to the attentive staff. With a gentle touch, he guided me toward the dining room.

As we entered, a radiant Elenor rose from her seat to greet me. She enveloped me in a warm hug, planting kisses on both sides of my cheeks. "You look absolutely stunning in that black dress," she complimented, and I couldn't help but smile. "I might have to borrow it the next time I visit your place."

Ravel, with a playful grin, seized Elenor's hand and tugged her away. "Give my wife some room to breathe, Elenor," he teased. "Have you transitioned from stealing my hoodies to borrowing my wife's dresses now?"

Elenor playfully rolled her eyes at Ravel's remark and dismissed his interference. "Shut the hell up, Ravel. Sometimes, sisters-in-law need to share clothes, and I'm allowed to borrow," she retorted with a mischievous grin and directed a glance at me, seeking my validation. "Am I not?"

Unable to suppress my own smile, I nodded in agreement. "Absolutely, you're more than welcome to borrow anything you like."

It was a surreal moment, considering Elenor's upbringing in Southwark. I couldn't help but marvel at how far we had come. Gathering my composure, I approached Anne and greeted her politely, "Good evening, ma'am."

Her gaze first settled on Ravel, who maintained a steely glare, before she rose and enveloped me in a hug. There was an unmistakable rigidity in her posture, hinting that this display of affection was primarily for her son's sake. Nevertheless, I graciously accepted her feigned warmth. As she resumed her seat, I presented her with the small gift box I had been holding.

"Happy birthday, ma'am," I murmured with a warm smile, hopeful that she would accept the gift.

Anne's gaze dropped to the bag, and after spotting the brand name on the gift bag, she inquired, "Did you get me a fake Bulgari jewelry?"

I quickly responded, "No, they're genuine. Ravel assisted me in ordering them."

Her response was a barely audible scoff, accompanied by a muttered comment meant only for my ears. "Of course, my son bought it." In reality,

Ravel hadn't purchased the jewelry; I had simply asked for his assistance in making the order to ensure the authenticity of the purchase and avoid potential scams. Every aspect, from the selection to the payment and even the delivery, had been handled by me with my own money.

Returning to my seat, I settled down and turned my attention to the meal before us. As we indulged in the delicious dishes, Anne abruptly cleared her throat, causing all eyes to focus on her. She posed a question that carried the weight of expectation. "What have you decided to do with your life, Elenor?" she inquired, her tone laced with a touch of authority. "You can't continue spending your time on partying. Perhaps you should consider joining your brother in the company."

Elenor's expression soured with visible discontent. "I have no interest in being a part of that company," she protested, her voice carrying a hint of defiance. "It looks boring, and I don't want to be a part of it."

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Feeling a sense of empathy for Elenor and wanting to contribute to the conversation, I decided to offer a suggestion. "Maybe you should consider modeling," I suggested, my words breaking the collective silence and drawing all eyes toward me. My newfound courage wavered slightly as I realized the attention I had garnered. With a shy smile, I continued, "I mean, you have a passion for fashion and enjoy experimenting with different styles. You stand at an impressive five feet nine inches, and your beauty is undeniable. Why not give modeling a shot? I'm confident you'd excel at it."

Elenor's face lit up with a wide, hopeful grin. "That sounds like a lot of fun," she responded enthusiastically. "I'm willing to give it a try."

Ravel, ever the voice of reason, pointed his fork at Elenor, offering some sage advice. "You shouldn't venture into business solely because it seems fun," he cautioned, his tone carrying a note of concern. "Challenges and tough times are inevitable in any business, and if you're in it just for the enjoyment, you might find yourself giving up when things get rough."

His advice had a ring of truth to it, but it was met with a cheeky retort from Elenor, who defiantly flashed him her middle finger. Anne, not one to tolerate such behavior, swiftly scolded her.

As the dinner continued, I found a moment to excuse myself, mentioning my intention to use the restroom. Anne directed me upstairs, explaining that one of the bathrooms on the lower floor was currently out of commission due to a leak, and they had cut off the water supply to prevent further issues.

Ravel's brow furrowed as he sought more information. "How long has it been faulty?" he inquired.

"Since yesterday, the plumber will be here tomorrow to fix it." Anne responded tersely, putting an end to the conversation about the faulty bathroom. She

returned her focus to her meal, and the dinner continued without further discussion on the matter.

As I rose from the table, Ravel made a move to accompany me, but I gently shook my head, signaling for him to remain seated. I navigated my way upstairs with the assistance of one of the domestic staff members, eventually locating the restroom.

After attending to my needs and washing my hands, I stepped out of the restroom, heading back towards the stairs. It was then that a throat cleared behind me, causing me to pivot and discover Anne standing there. Uncertain of what to say, I blurted out the first question that came to mind. "What are you doing up here? Is the dinner over?"

Anne's reaction was a mixture of surprise and irritation as she arched a skeptical brow at me. "Are you asking me what I am doing in my own house?" she retorted, her tone carrying a touch of annoyance. "Do I require your permission to be anywhere in my own home?"

I shook my head, recognizing that my initial words had come out wrong. "I apologize for the way I phrased that," I admitted, my voice tinged with regret, and I turned to leave.

However, Anne's grip on my wrist halted my departure. With a reluctant sigh, I turned back to face her, blinking in exasperation. "Is there something you'd like to say?" I inquired, my patience wearing thin.

Anne's response was far from reassuring. She hissed her words, making her stance abundantly clear. "Don't think I will ever accept you," she declared firmly. "I'm only doing this for my son."

My exasperation finally reached a breaking point, and I couldn't contain my frustration any longer. "You made that abundantly clear when you hugged me earlier," I retorted, my tone more assertive. "And you know what, Anne? I'm exhausted from trying to prove myself to you. It's been an uphill battle that never seems to end."

Her eyes narrowed, seemingly offended by my tone. "Are you speaking to me in that manner?" she questioned, her voice cold.

With a firm resolve, I snapped back, "Yes, I am! You've made it abundantly clear that you'll never fully accept me, so why should I keep trying so hard? Anne, I'm married to your son; isn't it time you accepted that fact?" My frustration and fatigue with her ongoing hostility were evident in my words.

"Let her go!" came the furious, familiar voice of Ravel from the foot of the stairs, a stark contrast to the tension that had enveloped the moment. I shifted my gaze to him just as Anne released her grip on my wrist.

However, Anne's abrupt release was far from gentle. The sudden force

caused me to lose my footing, and before I could

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regain my balance, I found myself tumbling down the stairs. Panic and confusion engulfed me as everything happened in a blur.

The world spun as I descended, and the last thing I managed to focus on was Ravel's anguished expression as he rushed to my side, cradling my head and face. I attempted to speak, to convey the pain I felt, but my tongue felt heavy and uncooperative. Tears welled up in my eyes as the pain intensified, and then everything went dark.

Chapter 85

ELENOR

PRESENT TIME

My family dynamics have become increasingly draining. It feels as though tranquility has become a rare commodity within our household. I once admired the harmony that Ravel and Hazel shared, as it provided a glimmer of hope for familial peace. However, at this moment, their relationship seems to be embroiled in more conflict than even my own struggles with my mother. Feeling the weight of it all, I reached for my jacket and made the decision to pay a visit to Raymond. We've been earnestly working on repairing our relationship, and I'm hopeful that within his embrace, I might discover the solace and serenity I yearn for.

I slid into my car, igniting the engine, and set course for Raymond's apartment. His prolonged absence from work had been a conspicuous indicator of Ravel's tumultuous emotional state. It seemed that Hazel's silence in response to Ravel's attempts at communication had pushed him to vent his frustration on Raymond. The result? Raymond was left out in the cold, quite literally, as Ravel had locked him out of his apartment. Eventually, Raymond had grown weary of waiting for Ravel's call and ceased showing up for work. As I parked in front of his apartment building, I turned off the engine and stepped out of the car, determined to check on him. My footsteps echoed through the hallway as I made my way to Raymond's unit. Upon reaching his door, I rang the doorbell twice, but there was no response. Could he not be at home? Frowning, I retrieved my phone and dialed his number, only to be greeted by his voicemail.

Persistent attempts to reach Raymond through my phone proved futile as it stubbornly continued to divert me to his voicemail. Frustration mounting, I reluctantly abandoned my efforts with the phone and resorted to repeatedly

pressing the doorbell. Still, there was no response, and for a moment, I contemplated walking away in resignation.

However, just as I was about to retreat, the elevator doors slid open, revealing a weary and disheveled Raymond. His suit jacket hung haphazardly on his shoulder, a clear sign that something was amiss.

My heart skipped a beat as he halted upon spotting me, his tone carrying an unexpected edge as he inquired, "What are you doing here, Elenor?"

A sudden uncertainty gripped me, making me wonder if I had unknowingly provoked his anger. I replied cautiously, "I came to visit my boyfriend, of course." His scoff at my response furrowed my brows in confusion. "Is everything okay?"

Raymond's expression remained tense as he finally voiced his concern, "I called you earlier. Why didn't you answer the call?"

"I was in an important meeting, which is why I couldn't answer your call," I patiently reiterated, my voice laced with concern as I watched him keep his distance. His distant demeanor puzzled me, especially considering he hadn't answered my call just moments ago.

A telltale whiff of alcohol hung in the air as he sniffed and attempted to walk past me. My concern deepened, and I couldn't help but ask, "Have you been drinking, Raymond?" My hand extended to grasp his, but he pulled away abruptly, a visible tension in his frame.

His response was more intense than I expected, filled with frustration and a raw sense of repulsion. "Leave me the f*** alone!" he yelled, his words stinging like an unexpected slap. "All of you should leave me the f*** alone!" I couldn't simply let this go. It was evident that something was deeply amiss. "What happened, Raymond?" I pressed, my determination unwavering as I sought to uncover the root of his distress, hoping to provide the support he needed.

Raymond's glare was piercing as he spoke, his words sending a shockwave through me. "Your brother has not been answering my calls. If he eventually decides to answer yours, tell him that I quit!" I couldn't conceal my astonishment at his declaration.

Digging his hand into his pocket, he extracted a crumpled sheet and dropped it at my feet. "Give this to him; that's my resignation letter." I attempted to reach for his hand, seeking some form of connection, but he forcefully shoved me away,

nearly causing me to lose my footing. His next words pierced my heart. "Get the f*** out of my house and never return again, Elenor."

Struggling to contain my emotions, I bit my trembling lips. "What are you talking about, Raymond?" I took another cautious step forward. "I understand you're upset, but please don't say things you don't mean."

His anger flared, and he hissed back vehemently, "I mean every damn thing I say. You and your family disgust me." With that final declaration, he opened his door, walked inside, and slammed it shut, leaving me standing there, stunned and heartbroken.

Stunned into immobility, I remained rooted in place, staring at the closed door as tears streamed down my cheeks. Clutching the torn pieces of the resignation letter in my trembling hand, I could hardly comprehend the whirlwind of emotions that had just unfolded.

Exiting the building, I entered the elevator with a heavy heart, the weight of the situation pressing down on me. Once inside my car, I immediately dialed Ravel's number, desperate for any insight into what was happening with Raymond. My repeated calls, however, yielded nothing but unanswered silence.

Frustration mounting, I discarded my phone onto the passenger seat and began to ponder the potential causes of Raymond's drastic behavior. Despite my efforts to unravel the mystery, only one name echoed relentlessly in my mind: Anne. She was the one person who could wield such influence over him, causing him to act in such an extreme manner.

Determined to seek answers, I steered my car towards Anne's imposing manor. My sense of urgency was palpable, as I broke every traffic rule in my haste to reach her. The need to understand what had possibly transpired between Raymond and Anne had become an unrelenting obsession, driving me forward with relentless determination.

Arriving at Anne's house, I left my car running, my emotions a tempestuous whirlwind as I stormed into her residence. The determination to uncover the truth had taken hold of me, and I was prepared to bring the entire house down if necessary.

My steps reverberated through the spacious mansion as I pressed forward, the staff directing me to the library where Anne was supposedly located. As I approached the library door, I noticed it was slightly ajar, and curiosity overcame me. The familiar voice emanating from within, and the nature of the conversation, caused me to pause and discreetly eavesdrop.

"I am quite impressed," June's voice sounded, a hint of satisfaction in her tone. "I had no idea that sabotaging Hazel's business and pinning the blame on Ravel would have such a profound impact on their relationship."

My eyes widened further as the implications of their conversation sank in. June was the mastermind behind the sabotage of Hazel's business, and Ravel had been entirely innocent. My heart ached at the injustice of it all. "I told you all I needed was just the number of her important client," Anne declared in a smug tone. "How did you manage to get him to give you the number?"

June's laughter filled the air, and I strained to hear every word. "He's been in on this with me longer than you know," she confessed. I could sense shuffling feet, suggesting a secretive exchange. "So what's the next plan?" she asked Anne.

Anne's response was equallying. "I don't have the next plan yet; we'll have to wait for this one to play out first."

June seemed content with that response. "If that's the case, I have no reason to stay here. I should be on my way."

My heart racing with the shocking revelations I'd overheard, I quietly tiptoed back downstairs and headed toward my car. As I settled into the driver's seat, I dialed Ravel's number once more, desperately hoping he would answer, but he continued to ignore my calls.

Determined to reach him, I drove toward his house while persistently trying to get in touch. My calls went unanswered, and my anxiety grew with each passing moment. I even

attempted to contact Raymond, hoping for any response, but the silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

The audacity of Anne and June's actions weighed heavily on my mind. How could they manipulate and harm Hazel, all for the affections of a man who clearly didn't want her? The motivations behind their cruel actions were a mystery I couldn't comprehend.

In that moment, I couldn't care less about the consequences for Anne and June. Ravel discovering the truth would likely

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sever any ties he had with Anne, and I found myself indifferent to the fallout.

My focus remained on reaching Ravel when, distracted by my phone, I hit a speed bump. The device slipped from my grasp, and I instinctively reached down to retrieve it. When I raised my head, I was met with blinding headlights, a terrifying realization dawning upon me in the split second before impact.

The blinding brightness made it nearly impossible to maintain control of the car. In an instant, I transitioned from cruising down a smooth, paved road to a terrifying descent down a steep hill.

My body jolted violently as the car tumbled downhill, colliding with the unforgiving terrain. Amidst the chaos and wreckage, my thoughts raced. The last coherent idea that crossed my mind before everything faded to black was the urgent need to convey the truth I had discovered today to Ravel and Hazel.

SEND GIFT

COMMENT

Chapter 86

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

Hazel's continued avoidance of my calls was disheartening, and I eventually ceased my attempts to reach her. If she genuinely believed that I had any involvement in the complications that arose from her business dealings with Warren, it was clear that mending our relationship would be a formidable challenge. Perhaps, I pondered, it might not even be worth the effort.

To confront the underlying issues head-on, I decided to arrange a meeting with Warren. He couldn't afford to decline my request if he intended to maintain our business collaboration. As I exited the elevator and strode toward his office, his secretary immediately sprang to her feet upon catching sight of me. "Mr. Warren has been eagerly anticipating your visit," she informed me with a tone of urgency.

He'd better be ready to provide the response I'm hoping for, or else I could lose my composure.

Anticipation hung heavy in the air as I swung the door open, revealing Warren's neatly arranged office. Warren himself, dressed in a crisp suit, rose to his feet upon my entrance, his face lighting up with a brilliant smile that conveyed both warmth and surprise. "Southwark!" he exclaimed, exuding cheerfulness. "What a delightful surprise to have you grace my office with your presence." With a graceful gesture, he invited me to take a seat in one of the plush, leather chairs that adorned his office. "I trust Timothy has been successful in locating the object of your quest?"

Taking my time to settle into the inviting chair, I crossed one ankle over the other, an air of purpose about me. "That's not the purpose of my visit," I informed him, the smile on his face slowly fading as he too resumed his seat. "I've come here to seek clarity on your decision to sever business ties with Ms. Blacks.

His frown etched deeper lines on his forehead. "Mr. Southwark, I must insist that my business decisions remain my own concern," he asserted firmly. Leaning back in his chair, he tilted his head inquisitively. "I've heard whispers that you and Ms. Blacks were once married and subsequently divorced." My gaze turned steely as I locked eyes with him. "And why, in the world, would that be any of your business?" I retorted, my frustration simmering beneath the surface.

He offered a nonchalant shrug. "Well, the same way my personal dealings with Ms. Blacks aren't your concern."

I couldn't hold back my exasperation any longer. "It becomes my concern because whatever discord you have with Hazel is wreaking havoc on my relationship," I admitted, trying to temper my frustration. It wasn't his fault, and

I didn't want to lash out at the innocent bystander. "She's convinced that I'm somehow involved in your decision to terminate your business ties with her." Warren raised an eyebrow, his expression resolute. "Then, Mr. Southwark, it's simple. Just tell her the truth – that this has nothing to do with you," he deadpanned, his tone unwavering.

My patience wore thin, and I couldn't help but let my frustration seep into my words. "And do you think I haven't done that?" I snapped, my voice no longer holding back. "I need you to call her and assure her that I'm not involved in whatever transpired between you two."

His frown deepened, and he muttered stubbornly, "I won't do that. My dealings with Ms. Blacks are strictly business, and I won't entangle myself in your romantic troubles. If she can't trust you when you tell her it's not your doing, then perhaps you should reconsider that relationship."

My frustration surged, and I ground my teeth. "Warren, you're dangerously close to crossing a line here," I warned through gritted teeth. If only Hazel would answer my calls. Should I consider taking a trip to Seattle? Maybe use Daisy as an excuse to get her to see me? Anything to sort this out. "Can you at least reconsider your decision regarding doing business with her?"

Warren shook his head resolutely. "I had my reasons for pulling out, and those reasons don't simply vanish because you're asking for a favor," he replied, his lips moistening with a hint of regret. "I'm sorry, Mr. Southwark, but I can't be of assistance in this matter."

Exasperated and feeling like this meeting had been a complete waste of time, I rose from the sofa and stormed out of his office. Climbing into my car, I started the engine but didn't drive off just yet. Resting my head on the steering wheel, I took a deep breath, trying to collect my thoughts and figure out how to resolve this mess.

As I sat in my car, contemplating the frustrating conversation with Warren, my phone suddenly vibrated in my pocket. I retrieved it and glanced at the caller ID, only to let the call go to voicemail when I saw it was Raymond who was dialing.

That bastard had sent me a text just a few hours ago, announcing his resignation. I knew I hadn't been the easiest boss to work for, but he wouldn't quit just because of that, unless he had some solid business plan or other compelling reason.

My phone began to ring again, and in annoyance, I tossed it onto the passenger seat before pulling away from the curb. A few minutes into my drive, my phone came to life once more, this time with an unknown number displayed. Letting out a resigned sigh, I pulled over to the side of the road and answered the call. "Southwark. Who is this?" I demanded, my frustration

lingering from the earlier encounter.

Raymond's voice crackled with frustration from the other end of the line.

"What the hell, man?" he snapped, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes at the fact that he was using a different number to reach me. "Mrs, Anne and I have been trying to get hold of you for ages."

I responded with a flat, deadpan tone, my irritation clear. "Mrs. Anne has quite the nerve trying to reach me," I muttered under my breath. "What do you want, Raymond? I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone right now." Well, anyone who isn't Hazel, that is.

Raymond hissed in exasperation. "Get your head out of your ass, man!" he retorted, his voice rising. "Not everything revolves around you and Hazel and your relationship drama."

My patience was wearing thin, and I warned him curtly, "You're on a short leash, Raymond. I might just hang up this call soon."

"Eleanor was in an accident," he disclosed, and my breath caught in my throat, my heart racing with fear. "She's been seriously injured, Ravel, and she's been in surgery for over an hour."

My world suddenly shifted as Raymond's words hit me like a ton of bricks.

"Eleanor was in an accident?" I stammered, breath catching, heart pounding with fear. "And she's in surgery for over an hour?"

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With trembling fingers, I hastily turned on the ignition of my car. Panic was coursing through me as I gripped the steering wheel. "Which hospital?" I demanded, already pulling onto the road.

"Central Hospital," Raymond replied urgently. "You need to put aside your anger and get your ass over here. Eleanor urgently needs a blood transfusion, and you're the only one with the same blood group as her. The hospital is struggling to find AB negative blood, which is why we've been trying to reach you for the past hour."

My heart pounding, I slammed the accelerator, disregarding traffic rules as I raced down the road. "I'll be there in no time," I muttered through clenched teeth. Tears began to blur my vision, one after the other, until my eyes were brimming. With one hand, I wiped away the tears while keeping the other firmly on the wheel.

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I arrived at the hospital with lightning speed, carelessly leaving my car running as I dashed into the building. Finding them wasn't a challenge; the entire hospital seemed focused on ensuring that Eleanor Southwark would pull through.

Anne spotted me first and rushed into my arms, her tears soaking into my chest. Raymond intervened, gently pulling her away. "He needs to go donate

blood,” he insisted, his urgency mirroring my own.

Nodding, Anne let me go. I followed the doctor in and did the necessary tests before the blood was finally transfused. I was told to take

a rest in one of the wards, but I insisted on being close to Anne. She may have not have been the best mother, but Elenor was her favourite.

Walking back into the waiting area, I sat down on the seat and pulled Anne into a warm embrace. Raymond left to say a prayer for Elenor in the hospital chapel.

Whilst he prayed, I consoled Anne while we all hoped and prayed for a better and hopeful result.

Chapter 87

RAVEL

FOUR YEARS AGO

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Hazel lay unconscious, her delicate frame still, and the painkillers held her in a deep slumber. The skilled hands of the doctors meticulously stitched the crack on her skull, a dire consequence of her unfortunate fall. This intricate procedure consumed a grueling two hours of time, a relentless battle against the clock. Throughout the ordeal, Hazel remained blissfully unaware, as I couldn't bear the thought of her enduring even a moment of agony.

In the waiting area, the atmosphere hung heavy with unspoken words and tension. Raymond, Elenor, and Anne stood by my side, their silence echoing the collective anger that enveloped us all. No one dared to address Anne, their resentment palpable in the air.

Desperate pleas had fallen from Anne's lips countless times, each word an attempt to convince me of her innocence. She was adamant that the push down the stairs had been a dreadful accident, a tragic twist of fate she never intended.

My wife's fall and the subsequent serious injury she suffered cannot be excused. Had she not confronted her near the stairs or halted her progress, my wife would have descended the staircase unharmed. Therefore, ultimately, she is the one responsible for this unfortunate situation.

In response, Raymond had to take Elenor to my apartment to obtain fresh clothing for both Hazel and me. Meanwhile, Anne likely lingered in the hallway, hoping I would reconsider my decision. I had explicitly instructed my men to prevent her from entering this room, as she has no right to see Hazel. Gently holding Hazel's hand, I pressed a tender kiss to her inner wrist, my lips trembling as I whispered, “I'm so sorry, Hazel. I'm sorry for failing to protect you from my mother.” The prominent crack on her skull served as a constant, painful reminder of my shortcomings. “I'm sorry,” I repeated, my voice heavy

with guilt. Leaning in, I placed a gentle kiss on her forehead, as if seeking solace in that small gesture.

As the first tears welled in my eyes, I realized I couldn't recall the last time I had cried. I wiped them away hastily with the back of my hand, my thoughts spiraling in a tumultuous mix of sorrow and anger. Would I ever find it in my heart to forgive Anne for this? Doubt lingered in the depths of my soul like a relentless shadow. Among all her transgressions, this was the gravest, and the wounds it had inflicted ran deep.

I hadn't even noticed that I'd drifted off to sleep until I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I found Raymond watching me intently, his concern evident in his eyes. He cautioned, "You'll strain your neck if you sleep like that for too long," and handed me a cup of coffee.

Suppressing a yawn, I gratefully accepted the coffee. "Thank you," I murmured, my eyes scanning the room and landing on the empty bed. A crease of worry marred my brow. "Where's Hazel?"

Raymond settled onto the other vacant sofa, exuding an air of reassurance.

"Calm down, man. She's in the restroom with Elenor."

I couldn't help but involuntarily gaze at the closed bathroom door. "Why didn't she wake me up?" I wondered aloud, a sense of disorientation clouding my thoughts. How long had I been asleep? Glancing at my wristwatch, I winced at the realization that three hours had passed; I hadn't even been aware of my exhaustion.

"You looked peaceful in your sleep, and she didn't want to disturb you,"

Raymond explained. Almost as if in response to his words, the restroom door swung open, and Elenor emerged, Hazel in tow.

With a sense of urgency, I rose from my seat and approached them, silently signaling to Elenor to let go so I could assist Hazel on my own. Gently, I took her forearm and guided her to the bed. She settled onto it, making an attempt to reach for the pillow. I quickly aided her in adjusting it for her comfort.

Whispering softly, I asked, "Are you okay? Are you in any pain? Should I call the doctor?" Concern filled my voice as I settled down beside her.

She managed a weak smile. "I've been awake for almost two hours now," she informed me. "I'm fine."

Despite her reassurance, I still felt the need to call the doctor. Stepping away from the bed, I walked over to the button and pressed it, determined to ensure Hazel received proper care. Raymond, however, seemed skeptical. "Didn't she tell you she's fine?" he remarked with a hint of incredulity.

I walked past Raymond, slapping the back of his head in the process. "You should have called the doctor the moment she woke up," I scolded, my concern for Hazel's well-being overriding any patience I might have had. She

had endured a significant injury and needed to receive the best care possible. Returning to my spot beside Hazel, I gently cupped her face in my hands.

"You really scared me, Hazel," I admitted, my voice laden with emotion. The memory of finding her unconscious on the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood, had shaken me to my core. "Don't ever scare me like that again."

"I promise not to," she whispered, and I leaned in to plant a soft, reassuring kiss on her lips. As I pulled back, she smiled softly. "Where is Anne? I haven't seen her anywhere around since I woke up."

"That's because I don't want to see her anywhere near you," I gritted through clenched teeth, my agitation palpable. The mere mention of Anne's name had the power to unravel my composure. "Attending her birthday dinner was my attempt at extending an olive branch, but she managed to make it worse by doing something even more egregious than her previous actions."

Hazel's voice trembled as she whispered, "It was a mistake," and I shot her a piercing glare. "Honestly, Rav, it was a mistake. Yes, Anne wasn't pleased with me, but she never intended to push me down the stairs."

"Don't defend her, Hazel," I warned vehemently, my frustration with Anne's actions simmering beneath the surface. "She shouldn't have confronted you at all." Anne had certainly pushed the boundaries, and if she weren't my mother, I would have responded in a manner she'd deeply regret. The only reason she remained untouched was our family ties.

Hazel sighed, her expression weary, as if grappling with the weight of the situation. "Don't let this affect your relationship with her," she pleaded earnestly, her eyes locking onto mine with an unwavering gaze. "I'm okay with her not liking me, but please, do not hate her because of me."

I shook my head resolutely, my resolve unwavering. "I have every reason to hate her, Hazel, and you won't be able to talk me out of it," I affirmed, wanting her to understand the depth of my feelings. Her frown deepened, but I needed her to understand my perspective. "I want you to listen to me, Hazel. I want you to stay away from Anne," I asserted firmly, my tone leaving no room for compromise. "Under no circumstances should you meet with her or acknowledge her in any way." My concern for Hazel's safety and well-being drove my insistence.

"She's your mother," Hazel insisted, her voice tinged with empathy. "I can't possibly just ignore her."

"Well, I am telling you to," I responded sternly, the hardness in my tone causing her to avert her gaze momentarily. "I've never forced you to do anything before, Hazel, but I will in this case." Her gaze slowly returned to me, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. "I forbid you from meeting with Anne or being in the same space with her."

Hazel let out a sigh of frustration, her patience clearly tested. "Let's talk about

this when I'm all better," she mumbled, lying back and attempting to close her eyes.

"It isn't going to change anything. My decision still stands. Stay away from her," I asserted firmly, my concern for her well-being fueling my resolve.

"Ravel is right," chimed in Elenor, lending her support to my stance. "Anne might be my mother, but nothing good comes from meeting her, so just avoid her altogether." Hazel shifted her gaze to Elenor, who continued, "You were lucky this time,

but we can't afford to take another chance."

Hazel licked her lips, her decision made. "Fine. I will avoid meeting with her." Relief washed over me like a soothing balm. Perhaps, finally, I could start to enjoy my marriage without the constant worry that my mother might pose a threat to Hazel's safety. I leaned down and kissed her again, my love and gratitude overwhelming me. "I love you, Hazel, and I can't afford to lose you; I refuse to lose you." The thought of a life without Hazel was unbearable, and I vowed to protect her at all costs.

Chapter 88

HAZEL

PRESENT TIME

I remain perplexed by my ongoing inability to resolve the issue with the client. Despite my attempts to reach out, they steadfastly declined any participation in the upcoming exhibition and have been evasive about providing me with any substantial explanations for their decision.

Out of a mixture of both anger and frustration, I made the impulsive choice to take a brief respite from my professional responsibilities and spend some quality time with my beloved daughter, Daisy. While not necessarily in the mood for a conventional vacation, I opted to embark on a visit to David's mother, whom I had not seen since that unfortunate incident. My days have been overwhelmingly consumed by the demands of my work and time with Ravel, making it challenging to allocate time for her, and this visit was long overdue.

David had also reached the point where he felt compelled to take a break from his own professional duties, a sentiment I wholeheartedly understood. Truth be told, the atmosphere at the office had become rather lackluster, especially since the news of Warren and Jericho's withdrawals had prompted other artists to reconsider their participation as well.

As I prepared to depart, the unmistakable sound of a car horn resonated through my compound, signaling David's arrival. In a swift motion, I retrieved my suitcase from atop the bed, handing it over to Robertson, our trusted helper. With my precious daughter, Daisy, cradled in my arms, I exited the

building and found David busy loading bags into the car's trunk.

David, ever the melodramatic soul, couldn't resist planting an exaggerated, messy kiss on Daisy's cheek, all the while cooing in a comically exaggerated baby voice, "I've missed you, my little pumpkin."

Rolling my eyes at his theatrics, I settled Daisy into the back seat, ensuring she was safely strapped in, before taking my place in the passenger seat beside David.

David settled into the driver's seat, ignited the car's engine, and smoothly exited my driveway. Throughout the drive, he couldn't help but steal occasional glances in my direction, genuine concern etched across his face.

"Are you okay?" he inquired, his voice laced with worry.

I couldn't help but smile at the somewhat obvious question. "I'm fine," I reassured him, my tone resolute. I had weathered far more formidable storms in the past and emerged unscathed; this situation wouldn't be any different.

"Could you please roll down the window? I could use some fresh air."

David nodded in understanding, obliging by lowering the window and gradually increasing the car's speed, ensuring the safety of all passengers. Retrieving my phone from my purse, I powered it off, stashed it deep within, and extended my hand out through the window, savoring the caress of the cool breeze against my palm.

The soothing embrace of the cool breeze and the picturesque countryside scenery worked their magic, granting me a temporary respite from my worries. It was as if, for a while, I could set aside the weight of my concerns. The journey to Monica's place passed in serene silence, with Daisy eventually drifting into peaceful slumber. Fortunately, David respected the quiet atmosphere, allowing only the gentle strains of music and Daisy's soft snores to fill the car.

As we pulled up into Monica's driveway, her warm, welcoming smile greeted us from afar. Stepping out of the car, she enveloped me in a heartfelt hug before kindly offering to take care of Daisy's belongings. I cradled my sleeping daughter in my arms and followed Monica to the room she had prepared for us.

After a refreshing shower and a change of clothes, I emerged from the room, only to learn that David had ventured into the woods to gather firewood for the fireplace. Monica, who was busy preparing dinner, welcomed my offer to assist. I diligently washed my hands and began chopping vegetables for the meal.

"David mentioned the challenges at work," Monica remarked, her tone tinged with concern.

I paused, the knife hovering close to the vegetables, a subtle frown creasing my forehead as I contemplated the weight of my workplace woes. "I really

don't want to talk about work," I admitted with a sigh, the weariness in my voice echoing the fatigue that had led me to seek solace away from the city in the first place.

Chapter 88

Monica offered a sincere apology, her voice filled with understanding as she tried to provide a comforting perspective. "I'm sorry," she said softly, her words carrying a touch of empathy, "but I want you to know that challenges are an inevitable part of life, and they come and go."

The irony of the situation gnawed at my soul; this particular challenge was being inflicted by someone close to me, leaving me feeling as if I'd been wounded twice. Biting my lip in an attempt to quell the rising emotions, I picked up a watermelon to wash. As I turned on the tap, an unexpected surge of water cascaded out with surprising force, drenching my hair, face, and shirt. Yelping in surprise, I instinctively leaped back, my inadvertent mishap adding a touch of unintentional humor to the moment.

Monica abandoned her kitchen duties and hurried over to inspect the misbehaving tap. "David will fix it when he gets back," she reassured me.

"Why don't you go change into dry clothes while I handle things here?"

I nodded gratefully and made my way to the door. "Do you happen to have a hairdryer? I didn't bring mine," I inquired.

"Yeah, check the last cabinet in the dresser," she replied, already reaching for her phone, likely to call David to return promptly. I left the kitchen, returning to my room first to change into a dry shirt before making my way to Monica's room.

Upon entering her room, I headed straight for the closet and bent down to open the last drawer. To my frustration, it refused to budge despite my persistent tugging. As I exerted one final, forceful pull, a box resting atop the drawer tumbled to the floor. Its lid sprang open, and the contents spilled out. Setting aside the stubborn drawer, I hastily began collecting the scattered contents of the spilled box, my curiosity piqued by a particular photograph. In it, a younger Monica was cradling a little girl in her arms. This image led me to inspect the other photos within the box, revealing a series of snapshots chronicling the girl's growth, from infancy to adulthood, always alongside Monica.

A perplexed furrow creased my brow. David had explicitly stated that he was an only child, so the presence of these images raised questions. Had Monica experienced the heart-wrenching loss of a child? My mind raced with unspoken queries as I carefully returned the photograph to its place within the box.

Resolving to address my curiosity later, I pulled over a nearby vanity chair, climbed onto it, and positioned the box back on top of the dresser. Ignoring

the uncooperative drawer, I made my way back to the kitchen to inform Monica of my struggle with it. She gave it a try herself and eventually managed to open it, then handed me the hairdryer.

After swiftly drying my hair, I rejoined Monica in the kitchen. This time, she had completed dinner preparations, so I assisted by setting the table. Then, out of the blue, a question I had been pondering compelled me to ask, "Do you have any other children besides David?*

She paused, her expression shifting subtly as she arched a brow at me. "No, I don't, she replied, her response laced with a hint of caution. "Why do you ask?"

I could sense that she was withholding something from me, a secret lurking behind her gaze. Revealing that I had stumbled upon the photographs didn't seem like the best course of action. Instead, I chose to share a different piece of information. "At the hospital last time, you mentioned wanting to see your child, and you made it clear that David isn't your child."

David, who had entered the room unnoticed, interjected from the doorway, his voice casual. "Anesthesia," he explained, "when under its influence, people often say things that don't make sense. You shouldn't take them seriously. I'm quite certain that I don't have any other relatives, at least not to my knowledge. As he spoke, he casually helped himself to an apple from the fruit basket, his demeanor nonchalant.

David's phone interrupted our conversation with an unexpected call, and he retrieved it from his pocket with a puzzled frown, noticing the caller ID.

"Agatha? Is everything okay?" he inquired, briefly glancing in my direction.

"Yes, she's here with me, but I don't think she wants to talk to you."

My curiosity piqued, I extended my hand and took the phone. "What is it, Agatha?" I greeted her, but the urgency in her voice caused my eyes to widen.

"Slow down, Agatha! What happened to Elenor?"

Her words hit me like a tidal wave. "She was in an accident, and it's all over the news!" she exclaimed.

The shock and concern washed over me as I realized the gravity of the situation. "Shit," I muttered under my breath. "I need to be in New York as soon as possible."

Chapter 89

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

The passing of time has transformed these last two days into a grueling ordeal since Elenor fell into a deep coma. The persistent absence of any concrete updates on when she might regain consciousness has been profoundly frustrating, to say the least. A profound sense of helplessness consumes me

as I stand by her side, watching her lie there motionless.

My frustration is compounded by the knowledge that she had been trying to reach out to me before this happened, but I had been consciously ignoring her calls. Guilt clings to me like a heavy cloak as I reflect on this.

Anne decided to temporarily step away, returning home to fetch fresh clothes for herself and some essential items for me. It's been roughly an hour since she departed, and I'm fairly certain she's on her way back to the hospital at this very moment.

Raymond, who had been seated on the sofa, finally decided to rise from his seat. His action, marked by a subtle throat-clearing, was a silent yet assertive attempt to capture my attention. However, in keeping with my recent pattern, I continued to ignore him, just as I had been doing with everyone since Elenor was relocated to this room."

Raymond's voice, rough with emotion, finally broke through my distracted state. "I'm embarking on a journey to my hometown tomorrow," he disclosed, his words carrying a heavy weight. "This trip will keep me away for two days, and I should return by Sunday. I implore you to keep me informed if any significant changes occur."

Raising my head, I blinked at him with a mixture of curiosity and concern. Elenor held a special place in his heart, and his departure at this critical juncture puzzled me. "May I inquire about the purpose of your trip to your hometown?" I asked, my voice laced with surprise. "I didn't expect you to leave her side at a time like this."

Raymond's response only deepened my confusion. "I'm going to fulfill my father's last wish," he revealed, causing my brows to furrow even more. "I understand I previously submitted my resignation, but before I depart, is there anything specific you want me to get you?"

Standing up, I took a step closer, and continued to scrutinize him intently, a myriad of questions swirling in my mind. "Could you please explain what you mean by you're going to fulfill your father's last wish?"

"He asked me to cremate his body and send his ashes back home when he passed away, and I must honor his wish," Raymond replied, his voice tinged with a mixture of determination and sadness. "I can't keep delaying it any longer.

Understanding finally dawned upon me as his words fell into place. "Your father has passed away?" I responded with genuine sympathy. It was a terrible loss; Raymond had been incredibly close to his father until the accident that had claimed my own father's life and put him in a coma.

Raymond had adamantly kept his father on life support, despite the medical advice to let go. I had offered to cover the mounting hospital bills, but he had

declined my offer, shouldering the financial burden for the past five years. "When did he pass, and why didn't you inform me?" My voice held a mix of concern and surprise as I tried to grasp the situation fully.

A frown etched across Raymond's face as he responded, his frustration palpable. "I would have informed you if you had bothered to answer my calls," he retorted, his voice carrying a hint of irritation. He sighed deeply, his lips moistened by his tongue, and he asked once more, "Is there anything you need before I leave?"

Regret washed over me like a heavy wave. "I'm truly sorry," I apologized sincerely, the weight of my actions sinking in. Raymond had always been there for me, and at the one moment he needed my support, I had let him down. "I should have answered your call. I deeply regret not being there for you when you needed me."

Raymond clenched his fist, his gaze shifting away. "Your apology won't change the situation," he muttered bitterly. "The damage is done, and your apology won't bring my father back."

A furrow creased my brow as I contemplated Raymond's words. Why was he making it sound as though answering his call would have altered the course of events? "Would it have truly made a difference?" I questioned, meeting his gaze directly. "If

I had picked up that call, would your father still be alive?"

He held my gaze sternly and without blinking. Initially, it seemed like he might not respond, but he eventually did. "Yes," he replied firmly. "If you had cared to answer, I wouldn't be on this trip to scatter his ashes." His eyes then drifted toward Elenor's unconscious form. "Just as Elenor might still be with us if we had answered her calls."

His implication hit me like a dagger, and my jaw clenched in response. "What are you trying to insinuate?" I hissed, my frustration bubbling up. "Are you suggesting that I'm to blame for what happened to my sister?"

Raymond's sad chuckle hung heavily in the air. "I'm saying we share the blame. The accident report states it happened at 8:00 PM, and she called me at 7:52 PM," he explained, tilting his head. "I'm quite certain she tried to reach you too."

I recoiled, taking a step back as my worst fears were confirmed. "No, it can't be," I whispered, my voice trembling, tears streaming down my cheeks. "I had nothing to do with this."

Raymond's shoulders lifted in a nonchalant shrug. "Believe what you will, but it doesn't change the truth," he stated solemnly. With one last look at Elenor, he walked out of the room, leaving me in a state of disbelief and sorrow.

Stuck in place, I turned to gaze at Elenor, my tears flowing freely. I had no idea how long I stood there, motionless and lost in my thoughts. The door

opened, and Anne entered, carrying an overnight bag. She paused, her expression filled with concern, as she witnessed me crying while fixated on Elenor.

Anne's panic was palpable as she rushed to Elenor's side, checking the medical equipment to ensure Elenor's heart was still beating. With that reassurance, she turned her attention to me, her voice trembling with concern. "Ravel? What's happening? Why are you crying like this?" Tears mirrored my own began streaming down her cheeks, and her worry deepened. "Ravel, you're scaring me. Please, tell me what's going on."

I couldn't bring myself to answer her. Instead, when she reached out to cradle my cheeks, I took an involuntary step back, avoiding her touch. Bitter laughter escaped my lips as I wiped the tears staining my cheeks with the back of my hand. I had failed both Elenor and Raymond when they needed me the most. "I need some time alone," I mumbled, my voice laden with regret, before turning and walking out of the room, leaving Anne behind, bewildered and crying.

I moved like a man possessed, my hand patting my pocket until I retrieved my car keys. My security personnel followed suit, ready to accompany me, but I halted them with a firm command. "I want to be alone," I asserted, and they exchanged puzzled glances. "Consider it an order."

Sliding into my car, I drove away, needing space from the overwhelming emotions that had engulfed me. My first stop was a bar; driving aimlessly through the city seemed too dangerous in my distraught state. Normally, I would have turned to Elenor for solace, but she wasn't answering my calls, and to be honest, I wasn't in the mood to speak with her.

Taking a seat on a barstool, I signaled the bartender over. "Could I have a bottle of whiskey and a glass, please?" I requested, and he nodded before swiftly serving my drink. Without hesitation, I poured a generous amount into my glass and downed it in one go, trying to numb the pain that had gripped my heart.

I poured another generous refill of whiskey into my glass, my vision blurring as I continued to drown my sorrows. Pulling out my phone, I scrolled through my missed calls, and the painful truth stared back at me: Elenor had called me fifteen times, and I had ignored every single one.

By the time I reached my second bottle of whiskey, the alcohol had taken its toll. My surroundings became hazy, and I could barely make out the tumbler in front of me. I chuckled drunkenly and decided to rest my head on the bar counter, hoping a brief nap would offer some respite.

"I'll handle his bills," a familiar female voice declared. Ignoring the voice, I attempted to drift off into an alcohol-induced slumber. However, I suddenly felt the grip of two pairs of hands on me, lifting me from my seat, and then I was

unceremoniously dragged out of the bar and into a waiting car that sped away. My blurry consciousness struggled to comprehend what was happening.

Chapter 90

RAVEL

PRESENT TIME

The piercing, maddening sound of an unfamiliar ringtone rudely shattered the serenity of my slumber. Groggily, I reluctantly pried open one eye, only to be greeted by an unforgiving wave of throbbing pain in my skull. I couldn't help but wonder just how much alcohol had crossed my lips the night before. Yet, the persistent ringtone left me with no choice but to coax my other eye open. As I begrudgingly adjusted to the blaring noise, the first thing that registered in my bleary gaze was the comforting sight of my own bedroom ceiling. My curiosity urged me to crane my neck to the left, desperately scouring for the source of the incessant ring. But my intention to disengage from the bed was abruptly halted as my hand made unexpected contact with a warm, living presence beside me.

Confusion knitted my brows into a perplexed frown as I turned my gaze toward this unexpected bedfellow. A vehement curse involuntarily tumbled from my lips upon beholding the peacefully slumbering form of June. My thoughts raced, frantically attempting to piece together the puzzle of last night's events. What on earth had transpired during those hazy hours?

As if sensing my intense gaze, she slowly blinked her eyes open, a mischievous smile playing on her lips as our eyes locked. "What's so amusing?" I snapped, my irritation apparent. "And seriously, why are you in my room?"

Suppressing a yawn, she nonchalantly rose from the bed, letting the duvet slip down to her waist, revealing her bare chest. A wave of nausea swept over me, and I couldn't help but react sharply. "Cover yourself up!" I scolded.

She rolled her eyes, begrudgingly complying with my request by concealing her exposed chest with the duvet. "Why the sudden irritation?" she retorted. "You weren't like this last night."

A sense of dread gnawed at me as I scrambled to piece together the fragmented memories of the previous night. "Oh, da mn. it! What did I do?" I muttered under my breath, fearing I had succumbed to the very thing I'd been trying to avoid. Running my fingers through my tousled morning hair, I attempted to cling to a glimmer of hope. "Can you please enlighten me on what exactly happened last night?"

The infuriating ringtone resurfaced, compelling June to step out of bed, dragging the duvet with her and leaving me unabashedly exposed and

vulnerable. She cast a quick glance at the caller ID. "It's your mom; I need to take this," she informed me before accepting the call.

"Hello, ma'am," her voice rang out as she glanced back at me, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. "Yes, he's right here with me." She paused briefly, presumably listening to my mother on the other end of the line. "He appears to be doing fine. Okay, I'll talk to you later." With that, she ended the call and turned her attention back to me.

"Your mother needs someone at the hospital," she explained, gathering her clothes and belongings strewn across the floor.

My mind raced as I seized the opportunity to address the pressing questions from the night before. "Now, can you please tell me what happened last night?" I implored, my memory still hazy but beginning to piece together fragments of our time at the bar. A flicker of realization crossed my face.

"Wait, were you the one who paid for the drinks at the bar?"

With a smile gracing her lips, she spoke, her voice filled with hope, "Could this be the moment when I finally receive a heartfelt thank you for assisting you last night?"

I cautioned myself not to respond with anger, reminding myself that it takes two to create a situation like that. "How did you manage to find yourself in my room?" I inquired, my curiosity piqued.

Her smile widened as she reminisced about the events that had unfolded, even though they happened to be my worst nightmare. "I suppose you were overcome with desire last night, she teased, her words laced with a hint of mischief. "You went from being unconscious to lavishing me with kisses all over."

My glare intensified as frustration seeped into my voice. "Why didn't you put a stop to it?" I hissed, my words laced with exasperation. "I was clearly intoxicated and out of my senses! Why didn't you intervene?"

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She raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement dancing in her eyes. "Why would I have stopped you?" she scoffed. "You expect me to halt something that I've always yearned for?" Her tongue darted out to moisten her lips, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "This is the first time you've touched me since we entered into this relationship."

I let out a deep inhale, desperately hoping for some reassurance. "Please, for the love of all that is holy, tell me that I had the sense to use a condom." The mere thought of not using protection sent shivers down my spine. Once again, June rolled her eyes at me, as if my question was utterly absurd. "Relax, I'm clean. I got tested just last week," she replied dismissively, as if that was supposed to ease my worries. What the hell? My heart sank as panic surged through my veins. "I would rather risk contracting a disease than have you end

up pregnant, June!” I exclaimed, my voice laced with desperation. Hazel would never forgive me if I let this happen. “Tell me, did I use a condom or not?!” A small yelp escaped June’s lips, startled by the sudden sharpness in my tone. “No, you didn’t,” she admitted, her voice filled with guilt. “I couldn’t find one, and you didn’t want to wait for me to search for one in my room.” My fingers began to tremble uncontrollably as the weight of the situation crashed down on me. “So, in other words, I released inside you?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. June nodded, confirming my worst fears. The overwhelming sense of regret washed over me, making me wish I could just disappear. “Are you on any form of birth control? Pills, perhaps?” She shot me an indignant glare. “Do you seriously think I’d engage in unprotected sex with you if I weren’t on birth control?” She scoffed, her irritation evident. “Contrary to what you might believe, I have no desire to carry your baby.”

I heaved a sigh of relief. “Well, that’s a mutual agreement then,” I replied, relieved that the risk of an unplanned pregnancy was seemingly averted. “I definitely don’t want you carrying my baby either.”

Just as our conversation seemed to be settling, a knock at the door disrupted our fragile peace. June, defying my glare, moved to answer it. Annoyed, I clambered out of bed, hastily donned my clothes, and took it upon myself to respond to the interruption.

At the door, I found Garfield, the housekeeper, waiting patiently. “Ms. Hazel is in the living room,” he informed me. “She wants to see you.”

My eyes widened in shock at Garfield’s revelation. “Hazel is here?” I stammered, seeking confirmation from him. He simply nodded in response. “I’ll be with her shortly,” I muttered, closing the door behind him.

Turning back to June, my tone had an edge of irritation. “Get out of my room,” I instructed firmly. “I don’t want to see you in here when I come out of the shower.”

I hurried through the shortest shower imaginable, trying to wash away not only the physical dirt but also the overwhelming guilt from the previous night. As I brushed my teeth, a hiss escaped me when I noticed a love mark on my neck. Opting for a turtleneck sweater to conceal the evidence, I hastily grabbed a pair of loose jeans before rushing downstairs to face Hazel. However, the scene that awaited me in the living room was far from what I had anticipated. June, wearing nothing but my shirt, sat across from Hazel, sporting a sly smile that sent a shiver down my spine.

Hazel’s gaze could have burned a hole through June as she locked eyes with the shirt June was wearing. There was no doubt she recognized it; it was the very shirt I had worn when we exchanged our vows, a shirt she had personally bought for me.

I couldn't let this confrontation escalate any further. "Hazel," I whispered, my voice barely audible, but enough to draw her gaze away from June. She finally tore her eyes from June's figure and looked at me, standing up from her seat. "Excuse us," I requested, gesturing for June to leave. She stood up and sashayed out of the living room.

Once we were alone, I couldn't help but feel anxious. "What did she say to you?" I asked, worried that June might have divulged what had just happened. Hazel shrugged, a hint of annoyance in her expression. "Nothing, really," she replied nonchalantly. "I suppose she's trying to assert her dominance." Her eyes then softened as she studied me closely. "Are you okay?" she inquired with genuine concern.

I took advantage of the moment, extending my hand toward her with a hopeful expression. "I'll be even better if you give me a hug," I admitted. Hazel's grin softened her earlier annoyance. "You're such a baby," she teased softly before enveloping me in a warm hug. Her presence was reassuring, and I found solace in her embrace.

She pulled away slightly and stared at me reassuringly, "I couldn't see Eleanor at the hospital because Anne wouldn't allow it, but I can assure you she's going to be fine."

Regret gnawed at me as I realized I should have confided in Hazel yesterday instead of ending up in that situation. "Everything is going to be fine now that you're here," I murmured, genuinely grateful for her presence.