

Elise's perfect world was about to fall apart but she didn't know it yet. She smiled at her audience as she concluded her lecture on finding the right one.

“It has been a wonderful weekend...I'm so glad you had me over. Until next time, stay happy and in love.” Elise Whitehall said as she waved at the roaring crowd that had come to hear her speak on all things relationship. Having built a successful career as a love and relationship coach, she often had to travel around the world to give lectures.

The crowd continued to cheer as Elise walked off the stage to thank her hosts before sneaking away through the back door.

Once outside, she heaved a sigh of relief. Although she had been giving talks for years, she still felt frazzled and worn out at the end of every lecture. She closed her eyes and began to count to 20.

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Her attempt at meditation was interrupted by her cellphone. She dug around her white bucket satchel Michael Kors bag for the ringing phone.

She sighed when she saw who was calling. It was Nancy Clark. Nancy had been one of her closest friends in college. Her only friend now.

“Hey, Nancy *Drew*.” Elise teased her friend. Elise had started to call her Nancy *Drew* since Nancy's investigative journalism helped uncover a human trafficking ring in Washington.

“Hey, Love doctor. So are we having that lunch or what?”

“Nancy...” Elise started to make an excuse. She loved Nancy but the woman knew how to ask questions. The last thing she needed at the moment was Nancy's curious nose all up in her business.

“Nope...Nope...” Nancy interrupted before she could come up with an excuse, “You're not leaving Washington without having one dinner with Mike and I. Without you I wouldn't have met him. Elie, you're magic when it comes to this love business. Mike and I are perfect for each other. God, I wasted so much time with suckers when I should have allowed you set me up. Truth be told, I thought you were a phony...” Nancy bursted into laughter for a few minutes and then she said, “I'm waiting for you. You have my address.”

The line went dead.

Elise frowned at the phone as she flirted momentarily with the idea of heading straight to the airport. She pushed the idea out of her mind and lowered herself into her rental.

Nancy's house was an attractive one storey building nestled in a colorful garden. Unlike her garden which was boisterous, the interior decoration was minimal.

“Elie!” Nancy cried as she pulled Elise into a big hug. “You know, I thought you wouldn't come.”

Elise smiled allowing herself to revel in Nancy's warm hug.

“Mike,” Nancy's beckoned to her fiancé, “Elise has arrived.”

“I told you she would come,” Mike walked into the living room grinning from ear to ear. He encapsulated the two ladies in a tight hug. “I'm so happy you could make it, Elise. I've prepared your favorite.”

Few minutes later, they were having a meal of Salmon fillet, broccoli and noodles with a sprinkle of carrots and avocados.

Nancy swirled her cup of wine thoughtfully, “I watched your interview the other day...You have really come a long way, Elise.”

Elise shrugged, spearing a forkful of pasta and lifting it to her lips.

Mike dropped his cutlery, “You don't seem so excited about your accomplishments. You were on Forbes...Are things fine with Nathaniel?”

“Yes...very fine. We're fine,” she searched their faces before staring at her plate. “I'm just...I'm excited about my accomplishments. I really am.” She offered them a smile.

Nancy opened her mouth to speak but closed it again. She studied Elise briefly and then said, “Are you sure? I hope you know you can talk to us about anything?”

She nodded and then let out a little giggle, “Everything is fine. I'm grateful I have Nathaniel and I'm grateful for the both of you,” she reached over and held Nancy's hand, “I'm grateful for your friendship.”

Nancy laughed, “Good. Because you're about the only childhood friend I have left...and making friends at this age is not as easy as it was when we were in kindergarten and all I had to do was offer you candy,” Her smile diminished a little, “Sandra hates me for choosing your side.”

Elise looked away, “She doesn't.” Her voice was a barely above a whisper.

“She does. I ran into her about a year ago. She was still upset.”

Mike picked his glass of wine and finished the content before leaning back in his seat. “She is still angry that you took her college boyfriend and married him.”

Elise’s eyes narrowed to slits, “I didn't take him. He fell in love...we both fell in love and got married. You can't always choose whom you fall in love with.”

Mike raised his hand in surrender, slightly taken aback by the coldness in her voice. “Woah, I'm sorry...I didn't mean to imply that you stole or took him. I was merely trying to add to the conversation.”

Elise stared at her lap and smoothed the creases on her pant suit. She exhaled slowly, “I'm sorry...I didn't mean to...It has been a long day. I need to...my flight is in an hour,” She lifted herself from the chair.

“Can’t you leave tomorrow?” Nancy’s brows furrowed, “We haven’t seen each other in years.”

Elise shuffled and wiped at the beads of sweat beginning to gather on her forehead. “You visited us last Christmas.”

“Christmas was months ago. The visit was brief. We should plan a vacation together. Mike and I have a lot to learn from Nathaniel and you. You two

are perfection.”

“Yeah, thanks. I really have to get going. Nate and I have um...something planned.”

Nancy’s eyes twinkled with mischief, “Something like?”

Elise flushed, “Just a couple of...we have date night. I don’t want to miss it.”

“Oh, in that case hurry home. We can’t have the Love doctor slacking in her own love life. It was so nice to see you again. Really.”

“Yeah, I’m glad I came.” Elise walked towards Nancy and planted a kiss on her cheeks. She turned to Mike and he got up and enveloped her in a firm hug.

“Call us when you land ok?”

“I will.” She mouthed before breaking away from the hug and making her way to the door. Mike and Nancy followed, waving as she drove her rental away.

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The sun had begun to set by the time the taxi pulled up in front of her house. She climbed out of the taxi and set her luggage on the warm pavement. Staring at the setting sun with wistful adoration; she replayed the conversation that had occurred a few hours ago at Nancy and Mike's. They had called to check up on her a few minutes after her plane landed at the Los Angeles International Airport. She didn't deserve them or their kindness. She knew that they meant well and were beginning to sense that something was wrong, but she couldn't let them know what it was. How was she supposed to tell her friends that looked up to her marriage as an epitome of what love should be that she suspected her husband was cheating on her, that they hadn't been intimate in years and were nothing but roommates or that with each passing day he treated her with disrespect and disregard. She sighed in exasperation. She couldn't bear to think of what would happen if her clients found out that she had marital problems because that was what would happen if she told one person. Gradually, one person would tell another until it got to the tabloids. The tabloids would have a field day, her face would be on them with words like Loveless love doctor in bold letters. It would be like the time when she recently got featured on Forbes or when Sandra wrote a piece on her gossip blog about women who broke "the code" and all but named her; paparazzi would follow her about for a while and she didn't want that.

She sighed and tugged at her luggage as she started towards her home. Once inside, she poured herself a glass of wine. After a few sips, she sauntered towards the bedroom. Her husband was most likely asleep or on his computer.

So much for date night.

“Nate, I’m home.” She whispered. She didn’t want to wake him up if he was sleeping.

“Nate?” she called as she sauntered towards their bedroom. She pushed open the door and a small smile tugged at her lips when she saw her husband sprawled out on the bed. She still had feelings for him, albeit microscopic.

She was about to walk towards him when the bathroom door flew open to reveal her personal assistant, Jenny with her towel wrapped around her body.

Jenny and Elise gasped; both obviously taken aback by the presence of the other. Their gasps stirred Nate from his post extramarital affair slumber.

“Elise, darling...” Nate pleaded jumping out of bed and reaching for her. She slapped his hand away. “Keep your wretched hands to yourself.”

“This is not... Honey, let me explain...”

She shook her head in disbelief, trying to make sense of what she was looking at. Jenny fumbling into her rumpled dress, her husband trying to

apologise. Her heart throbbed wildly in her chest as she struggled to keep tears at bay. It was one thing to suspect that your husband was cheating and another thing to find him in bed with your assistant. A plethora of emotions bubbled through her each fighting for preeminence.

She wanted to cry and scream, she wanted to throw, break or kick something- and if she was lucky, a flying object would land on their faces and dislodge their teeth from their lying, evil mouths.

She wanted to be violent but she had long buried that part of her. She wasn't the woman who fought anymore. She wouldn't embarrass herself because of a man. She wouldn't turn into her mother.

“Get out of my house...I want to speak to Nathaniel alone.” She balled her fingers into fists.

“I need to find my shoes.” Jenny replied a bit too nonchalantly for a person who had been caught cheating. Elise could swear that the petite blond was smirking at her.

The nerve.

She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly, “I can promise you that if you don't leave this instant, you'll be looking for more than your shoes. You'll be looking into getting dental implants.” Her voice was calm. Like the calm

before the storm, even Jenny knew not to tempt her luck anymore. She shot Elise a dirty look before running towards the door barefoot.

“How could you?” Elise fired the minute she heard the front door slam shut.

“Elise, I’m sorry...but...”

She squeezed her eyes shut, “But what? I don’t even know where to begin...or what to feel,” She suddenly felt weak and collapsed into a heap on the floor. “I’m leaving.”

“I think you’re overreacting.” Nate pulled himself up and walked towards her. He squatted in front of her and made to reach for her hair.

“Please don’t touch me,” She croaked, she was fighting a losing battle against the flood threatening to fall from her eyes. “What do you mean by that...how am I overreacting?”

“C’mon darling, stop pretending like you’re that surprised. I used to date your bestfriend...former bestfriend.” He sneered, plucking the wine glass from her tight clutch and downing the contents.

“So your apology meant nothing?”

“If I’m being honest, it was reflex guilt,” He handed her the glass and

proceeded back to the bed. “We both know that this whole thing is a sham.”

A soft gasp escaped her lips, “I can’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth. You were too busy playing Cupid to realize it. You used to pine for me but after your fame you began to feel you could do better than me,” he made air quotes when he said fame, “We didn’t talk for weeks after you were featured as one of the most influential women under thirty.”

She stared at him disbelievingly, her voice trembled with emotion when she replied, “I had just lost a child.”

“The foetus was what...two months old? We could have had another!”

“I can’t explain it. I felt sad about it-”

“Stop making excuses, Elise. You and I were no longer in love. You couldn’t leave because you had built an entire career on our perfect relationship and dishing out advice on relationships. You fantasized about leaving for a while until you got pregnant. You thought marrying me would make you happy, it didn’t.”

“What? That’s not true.”

He cocked an eyebrow, fished underneath her pillow and raised a brown

spiral-bound book, “Your journal would disagree.”

“You read my journal?” she lifted herself from the ground and marched towards him with an outstretched palm.

He carelessly dropped the book into her palm, “I found it in your underwear drawer. If you didn’t want it to be found maybe you should have kept it somewhere more discreet.”

“I need to clear my head,” she said stomping out of the bedroom and slamming the door behind her. As she drove about the city aimlessly, she came to a billboard calling for auditions, she briefly perused it. Thinking about how her life could make a really interesting movie before driving away.

