THE BILLIONAIRE'S MISTAKE

EXCLUSIVE BONUS EPILOGUE

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The Billionaire's Mistake

by Alison Reid

Twenty Years Later…

The late afternoon sun cast long golden shadows across the private golf course just outside Manhattan, the distant New York skyline rising against the horizon in glittering steel and glass.

Sebastian Hayes stood beside the ninth tee, one hand resting on his driver as he watched his son prepare his shot.

"Your stance is off," Sebastian said calmly.

William glanced at him with immediate suspicion. "You only say that when I'm about to beat you."

"You've never beaten me."

Daniel laughed from beside the golf cart. "Careful, Will. Your father's becoming unbearable in his old age."

Sebastian shot him a dry look. "I'm fifty, not eighty."

"At this rate, you'll still be insufferable at eighty."

William smirked before taking the shot. The ball launched cleanly down the fairway.

Daniel let out a low whistle. "Okay, that was annoyingly good."

Sebastian narrowed his eyes slightly as William grinned.

"Told you."

At twenty, William had inherited Sebastian's height, dark hair, and intimidating presence, but thankfully far more of Matilda's warmth. He carried confidence naturally, without arrogance, and smiled easily in a way Sebastian never had at his age.

Sebastian would never admit how proud that made him. His phone vibrated in his pocket. Distracted, he pulled it out, expecting work.

The moment he saw Emily's name, he answered casually. "Emily."

But the second he heard her voice, every muscle in his body tightened.

"Dad—"

She was crying. Not hysterically. Worse. Trying not to.

Sebastian straightened immediately. "Emily? What happened?"

Daniel's expression changed instantly.

"It's Mum," Emily said shakily. "She collapsed at home. I called an ambulance—they took her to New York-Presbyterian."

The blood drained from Sebastian's face.

"What?"

"They think it's her appendix," Emily rushed out. "But the doctors said it may have ruptured and they took her into surgery."

For one terrible second, Sebastian heard nothing after surgery. The noise of the golf course vanished completely.

"When did this happen?" he demanded sharply.

"About half an hour ago."

"Why didn't you call me immediately?"

"I did!" Emily's voice cracked. "You didn't answer the first time."

Sebastian looked down automatically. Two missed calls. A sick feeling twisted violently in his chest.

"Dad?" Emily whispered.

"I'm coming."

He ended the call and immediately started walking toward the cart.

William stared at him. "What happened?"

"Your mother's in hospital."

The words sounded controlled. Too controlled. Daniel saw through it instantly.

"What hospital?"

"New York-Presbyterian."

Sebastian shoved the phone back into his pocket with uneven movements that didn't resemble him at all. His breathing had changed. Faster now.

"She collapsed," he muttered. "They're operating."

William's face paled immediately. "Jesus. Is she okay?"

"I don't know."

The admission came out rough enough to make both men stare at him. Sebastian Hayes never said *I don't know*. Not about anything important.

Daniel stepped closer carefully. "Sebastian—"

"I should've been there."

The words were quiet. Devastating. William blinked in shock. His father was one of the calmest men he had ever known. Controlled under pressure. Ruthless in a crisis. The kind of man who intimidated boardrooms without raising his voice. But now he looked terrified.

Not anxious.

Terrified.

Sebastian dragged a hand through his hair, already moving again. "Get the car."

William grabbed the keys instantly. Daniel caught Sebastian's arm before he could walk away completely.

"She's going to be okay."

Sebastian looked at him then, and Daniel felt his chest tighten at the raw fear in his eyes.

"I can't lose her."

The confession landed heavily between them. Twenty years ago Sebastian Hayes had believed love made men weak. Now the mere thought of losing Matilda was enough to bring him to his knees.

Daniel squeezed his shoulder once. "You're not going to."

But Sebastian barely seemed to hear him. His gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the trees, beyond the skyline, beyond the city itself. All he could see was Matilda alone in a hospital operating room. And for the first time in years, Sebastian Hayes felt completely powerless.

Traffic crawled the moment they hit Manhattan. The city Sebastian normally ruled with cold efficiency suddenly felt like an enemy determined to keep him away from his wife.

The black SUV surged down the avenue before brake lights flared ahead again, cars packed bumper-to-bumper beneath the glow of late-afternoon traffic. Horns blared somewhere nearby. A siren wailed in the distance.

"Jesus Christ," Sebastian snapped.

In the front seat, Daniel kept both hands steady on the wheel, jaw tight as he maneuvered carefully between lanes.

"We're moving."

"Not fast enough."

William sat in the back beside Sebastian, unusually silent. His knee bounced restlessly as he stared out the window toward the blur of buildings rushing past.

Sebastian dragged a hand through his hair again, his breathing uneven. Every second felt unbearable. His mind kept supplying images he didn't want—Matilda unconscious, frightened, in pain, alone. He should have been there. Another line of traffic slowed them near an intersection.

"Daniel."

"I see it."

"Then go around it."

"There's nowhere to go."

Sebastian swore under his breath, his voice rough with frustration. "This is ridiculous."

Daniel finally glanced at him briefly before returning his eyes to the road.

"I'm worried too," he said evenly. "But we have to get there in one piece."

Sebastian looked away sharply, jaw clenched so tightly it hurt. Rationally, he knew Daniel was right. Emotionally, rationality no longer existed. The city lights streaked across the windows as they pushed deeper into Manhattan. Sebastian's phone remained clenched in his hand, his thumb hovering over Emily's contact again even though she'd already told him there was no update.

He couldn't stop replaying her voice.

They took her into surgery.

A cold sickness settled deeper in his chest.

William leaned forward slightly from the back seat. "Dad… Mum's strong."

Sebastian shut his eyes briefly. Too many memories hit him at once.

Matilda laughing in their kitchen.

Matilda asleep beside him.

Matilda at twenty-four walking into his office carrying coffee.

Matilda holding Emily after she was born.

Matilda dancing barefoot in their penthouse one Christmas while snow fell beyond the windows.

Twenty years.

Twenty years of her woven into every part of his life so completely he no longer knew where she ended and he began. And suddenly all he could think was:

What if I lose her?

The thought hit so violently he leaned forward, bracing his forearms against his knees. William noticed immediately.

"She's going to be okay," he said firmly.

Sebastian gave a short, humourless laugh.

"You don't know that."

"No," William admitted quietly. "But neither do you."

Silence filled the car again. Outside, Manhattan blurred past in streaks of gold, steel, and red brake lights. Then finally Daniel pointed ahead.

"There."

The illuminated sign for New York-Presbyterian came into view. Sebastian was out of the SUV before it fully stopped. The sliding hospital doors barely finished opening before Sebastian was striding through them.

Daniel and William followed close behind as the bright lights and sterile smell of New York-Presbyterian hit them all at once. Nurses moved quickly through the corridors, voices low and urgent around them, monitors beeping somewhere deeper inside the emergency wing. Sebastian walked straight to the reception desk.

"My wife," he said sharply. "Matilda Hayes. She was brought in an hour ago."

The receptionist looked up immediately, startled by the intensity rolling off him.

"She's currently in surgery, sir. Her daughter is waiting just down the hall—"

Sebastian was already moving before she finished speaking. At the far end of the waiting area, Emily stood abruptly the moment she saw them. Relief flooded her face so quickly it was almost painful to witness.

"Dad."

Her voice broke completely. Sebastian reached her in seconds. Emily practically collided into him, and for a moment the composed, elegant young woman disappeared entirely. At seventeen she usually carried herself with the same quiet confidence as Matilda, but now she looked frightened and exhausted, tears streaking her cheeks. Sebastian wrapped his arms around her instantly.

"What happened?" he asked roughly.

Emily shook against him, trying to steady herself. "She was fine this morning. She said her stomach hurt, but Mum kept insisting it was nothing." Her voice trembled. "Then I heard something crash in the kitchen and she was on the floor."

Sebastian closed his eyes briefly.

God.

"She fainted?" Daniel asked gently.

Emily nodded quickly. "She could barely stand up. She was in so much pain." Tears filled her eyes again. "I didn't know what to do."

"You did exactly the right thing," Daniel said firmly.

William stepped closer then, pulling his sister into a tight hug once Sebastian loosened his hold slightly.

"Hey," he murmured softly. "She's okay. They've got her."

Emily buried her face briefly against William's shoulder before looking back at Sebastian.

"They said her appendix ruptured before they operated," she whispered. "The doctor said there was infection already starting but they caught it in time."

Sebastian's jaw tightened hard enough to ache.

In time.

The phrase should have reassured him.

It didn't.

"How long has she been in surgery?" he asked.

"Almost an hour."

Sebastian turned away suddenly, pacing several steps before dragging both hands through his hair. Daniel exchanged a quick glance with William. Neither of them had ever seen him like this. Sebastian Hayes was the man who handled billion-dollar negotiations without blinking. The man who remained calm during crises that made other executives panic.

But this?

This was stripping him apart piece by piece.

"She asked for you," Emily said quietly.

Sebastian stopped moving instantly.

Emily swallowed hard. "Before they took her in. She kept asking if someone had reached you."

Something inside his chest cracked painfully. He stared down at the polished hospital floor for a long moment, his breathing visibly uneven now.

"I should've answered the phone."

"Dad," William said carefully, "you didn't know—"

"I should've answered."

The guilt in his voice silenced everyone.

Emily's eyes filled again. "Mum wasn't angry," she whispered shakily. "She told me to tell you she loves you."

That nearly made it worse.

Sebastian sat down heavily, elbows braced against his knees as he pressed his clasped hands against his mouth. His eyes shut briefly, like the words had physically hit him.

I love you.

Even frightened. Even in pain. Even being wheeled into surgery. Matilda had been thinking about him. Across from him, Emily watched her father carefully. And for the first time in her life, she realised something that unsettled her deeply. Her father had never stopped being in love with her mother. Not ever. Not even after twenty years.

If anything, it looked worse now. Deeper. More terrifying. Like losing Matilda Hayes would destroy him completely.

* * * * * * * *

The waiting room fell into strained silence after that.

Daniel sat beside Emily, one arm around her shoulders while William paced near the windows overlooking the glowing Manhattan streets below. Time seemed to drag unnaturally, every minute stretching tight with anxiety.

Sebastian barely moved. His gaze remained fixed on the floor, jaw clenched, hands locked together so tightly his knuckles had turned white. Then finally—

A door opened down the corridor. Everyone stood immediately. A surgeon stepped into the waiting area, pulling off his surgical cap as he approached.

“Family of Matilda Hayes?”

Sebastian was already moving toward him.

“How is she?”

The question came out rough enough to scrape.

The doctor’s expression softened slightly. “Mrs Hayes is going to be okay.”

The entire room exhaled at once. Emily covered her mouth as tears spilled down her cheeks again. William shut his eyes briefly in visible relief, while Daniel sagged back against the wall. But Sebastian didn’t relax.

Not fully.

“She had a ruptured appendix,” the surgeon continued. “There was significant infection beginning in the abdominal cavity, but we operated in time. The surgery went well, and we expect a full recovery.”

Sebastian swallowed hard. “Is she awake?”

“Not yet. She’s being moved to recovery now.”

“Can I see her?”

The doctor nodded. “In a little while. One person at first.”

Sebastian looked like he might physically collapse from relief and exhaustion at the same time. For several seconds he simply stood there, one hand braced against the back of a chair as he lowered his head.

Daniel stepped closer quietly. “She’s okay.”

This time, Sebastian actually heard him. His eyes shut briefly again, emotion flickering across his face too fast and too raw for him to fully hide. Then he gave a single nod. Small. Unsteady. But real. And everyone in the room understood the same thing in that moment:

Sebastian Hayes had built an empire. But Matilda Hayes was the only thing in his life that truly mattered.

* * * * * * * *

The corridor outside recovery was quiet except for the distant beeping of monitors and the soft murmur of nurses moving between rooms. A doctor finally approached Sebastian and gave a small nod.

"You can see her now, Mr. Hayes. She's still waking up, but she's stable."

Stable.

The word echoed through his chest as he followed the nurse down the hallway. Behind him, Emily squeezed William's hand while Daniel watched silently. Sebastian barely noticed any of it. All he could think about was seeing her. The nurse stopped outside a private recovery room and pushed the door open gently. Sebastian stepped inside. And stopped.

Matilda lay against stark white hospital sheets, pale beneath the soft lighting, dark hair spread across the pillow. An IV line disappeared into her arm, monitors quietly tracking every heartbeat beside her bed. For one horrifying second, all Sebastian saw was how fragile she looked.

Too still.

Too vulnerable.

The breath left his lungs.

Twenty years vanished instantly.

Suddenly he was thirty again, watching her walk into his office carrying coffee with steady hands and calm eyes, completely unaware she was about to ruin every defence he'd ever built. Only now the thought of losing her felt unbearable. His throat tightened painfully.

The nurse quietly stepped back out of the room, leaving them alone. Sebastian moved toward the bed slowly, like he was afraid she might disappear if he moved too fast. Then finally he reached for her hand.

Warm.

Thank God.

His eyes shut briefly as relief hit him hard enough to make his knees feel weak.

"Matilda," he whispered.

Her fingers shifted faintly beneath his. Sebastian lowered himself into the chair beside her bed, still holding her hand carefully between both of his as though it was the only thing keeping him grounded.

"You scared me," he said quietly.

The words sounded wrecked. Nothing like Sebastian Hayes. Matilda's eyelids fluttered slightly before opening just enough for her gaze to find him. Even exhausted and drugged from anaesthesia, she looked immediately calmer the second she saw him.

"There you are," she murmured weakly.

The simple words nearly destroyed him. A broken laugh escaped his chest before he bowed his head briefly against her hand.

"I'm here."

Her thumb brushed faintly against his skin.

"I told Emily," she whispered slowly, "to call you."

"I know."

"You were supposed to be relaxing."

Sebastian stared at her in disbelief for a second before letting out another rough laugh. She had just come out of emergency surgery, and she was worrying about him. God, he loved this woman.

"I nearly lost my mind," he admitted quietly.

That finally made her look at him properly. Really look at him. And something in her expression softened immediately. Because after twenty years

together, Matilda Hayes knew exactly what Sebastian looked like when he was afraid.

"You poor thing," she whispered gently.

Sebastian actually choked out a disbelieving laugh at that. Then carefully—so carefully—he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against hers. For a long moment neither of them spoke. The monitors continued their steady rhythm beside the bed while Manhattan glittered beyond the hospital windows.

And Sebastian realised with painful clarity that nothing in his life had ever mattered more than this woman. Not his company. Not his wealth. Not the empire he had spent decades building.

Just her.

Only her.

Sebastian kept hold of her hand, his thumb moving slowly across her skin as though reassuring himself she was truly here.

Alive.

Safe.

Matilda watched him quietly through heavy eyes, still pale from surgery but unmistakably herself.

"You look exhausted," she murmured softly.

Sebastian let out a quiet breath of disbelief. "You just had emergency surgery, and somehow you're still worried about me."

"You look terrible," she informed him weakly.

That actually made him laugh. A real laugh this time. Low and rough and full of relief.

"There she is," he murmured.

Her lips curved faintly. For a moment, neither of them spoke. The room settled into quiet around them, the steady beep of the monitors blending with

the distant sounds of the hospital beyond the door. Sebastian looked at her for a long moment before speaking again.

"I love you."

The words came easily now.

Not like twenty years ago, when they'd felt dangerous lodged inside his chest. Now they were instinct. Truth. Breathing. Matilda's expression softened instantly, just like it always did.

"I love you more," she whispered.

Sebastian shook his head immediately. "Impossible."

A sleepy smile touched her lips.

"You've been saying that for twenty years."

"Because it's true."

"Mmm." Her eyes drifted half closed again. "I doubt that."

Sebastian stared at her in mock offense. "Matilda Hayes, I tell you I love you every single day."

One eye opened slightly.

"Not every day."

He looked genuinely scandalised. "Excuse me?"

A faint smile appeared again. "Sometimes you get distracted intimidating other billionaires."

Sebastian huffed out another laugh under his breath and leaned closer, brushing his fingers carefully through her hair.

"I was terrified," he admitted quietly.

That finally wiped the teasing from her face. Her gaze searched his for a long moment before her fingers tightened weakly around his hand.

"I know."

Sebastian swallowed hard.

"You scared the hell out of me."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologise." His voice roughened immediately. "Just… don't ever do that to me again."

That earned the faintest hint of amusement in her tired eyes.

"I'll try not to schedule emergency surgery again."

He laughed softly despite himself, then lowered his forehead gently against hers once more. Outside the hospital windows, Manhattan glittered against the night sky. But inside that quiet room, Sebastian Hayes held his wife's hand and realised something he should have understood years ago.

Love had never been the weakness.

The real weakness had been believing he could ever survive without it.

— The End —

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