

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 16-20

Ludwik's Adam's apple bobbed as Whitney leaned in closer, her soft body seeking his warmth. His breath grew heavier in response, and his cool gaze narrowed.

Whitney's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. He remained silent, multiplying her discomfort.

Seeing this, Nolan could not help but feel a bit frustrated with Ludwik's leniency. He decided to tease Whitney "Anything goes, huh? Ms. Valentine, you frequent the clubs a lot, right? You must be good at dancing. How about giving him a little show to lighten the mood?"

Whitney's face paled as she shot Nolan a cold glare, refusing to dignify his comment with a response.

Her fingers delicately traced Ludwik's tie, pulling him closer with a humiliated downward glance. "I'll dance for you at home, Mr. L. Is that satisfactory?"

Her scent wafted to him, stirring a mix of pity and desire.

Her voice was weak, and as Ludwik scrutinized her, he remembered the near brawl she had been caught in earlier that evening. Perhaps she had been hurt?

Considering the child, he thought it might be time to ease up on his lesson.

His hand gripped her chin firmly, his deep eyes lifting. "Are you going to let me get up now?"

Whitney, realizing her imposition, moved back.

He stood, casting a cold glance her way, and as he walked out, he took her small hand in his, leaving the people in the private room in stunned silence.

After Ludwik left, Nolan remarked, "Just like that, you're letting her off the hook? She almost cheated on you,"

"What, you want her to dance for you?" Ludwik's features turned icy with annoyance, "Get out, all of you!"

Nolan and Parker exchanged a look, speechless.

They watched as Whitney managed to charm Ludwik and whisk him away.

Nolan clicked his tongue, "That Whitney is no simple trouble, I tell you. She's seduced the usually abstinent Ludwik in a matter of days. If his other lady finds out, there will be hell to pay..."

Parker's expression darkened, "Watch your mouth, don't let Whitney hear you."

Realizing his blunder, Nolan shut up but could not resist adding, "Whitney is just a contract wife, isn't she? A year and the deal's done—she gives him a child, and then it's back to the other one."

Parker, however, squinted thoughtfully. After tonight's events, Ludwik's heart was an enigma to all.

Back at the mansion, Whitney got out of the car first, hiding her back pain while covertly asking the housekeeper, Taryn, for some pain relief cream.

Ludwik watched her ascend the stairs, his handsome face clouding over. She had brought him home, and now she was turning cold again?

His brows furrowed as he questioned Taryn, "What did she tell you?"

"Madam is hurt. She asked for some ointment. Sir, you should take it to her. She's so pale with pain!"

Taryn sensed a rift between the couple.

Ludwik paused, his thick eyebrows knitting together.

Whitney lay on the bed upstairs in the bedroom, in too much pain to move. Hearing footsteps, she mistook them for Taryn and, trembling slightly, she lifted her shirt. "Taryn, I can't do this on my own. I need your help..."

As she lifted her clothing, the smooth expanse of her lower back was exposed to Ludwik's view,

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His gaze darkened at the sight of a large, purplish bruise marring her skin.

“You said they didn’t kick you, didn’t you?” His voice was stern and cold.

Startled, Whitney turned to see him, her face flushing as she quickly pulled her shirt down.

But Ludwik was already by her side, forcefully preventing her from moving, his annoyance apparent, “Why didn’t you say you were hurt?”

Whitney bit her lip, her eyes reddening with unshed tears, “Did you give me a chance to speak? The moment you ensured the baby was fine, you walked away. I tried to explain, but you wouldn’t listen.”

He was momentarily lost for words.

His lips pressed into a thin line. He was still displeased. “I told you to stay home. You ignored that, sneaking off to the club. Did you think of the consequences?”

He was angry about that but did not know the whole story.

“I didn’t disobey you, Mr. L. I wasn’t at the club to misbehave. I was... tricked by Preston. The bartender said he’d had a fall, and no one could pick him up. I couldn’t be heartless, so I foolishly went, only to be ambushed by him and my stepmother. Those men were hired to hurt me, to take their anger out on this child,

to scare me. Yes, I deeply regret it, and I’m suffering the consequences. But it wasn’t as your friend saw.”

Whitney finished, her voice breaking, tears spilling over as she stubbornly turned her head to wipe them away.

She did not want him to see her weakness, her vulnerability.

But her fragile, tender state unwittingly tugged at Ludwik’s heartstrings.

His eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed as he licked his lips and spoke in a husky voice, "Why didn't you tell me sooner that you were bullied? I thought you..."

"You never gave me a chance," she shot back, her voice filled with accusation, "Preston wasn't the only one who bullied me tonight. Without understanding the situation, you embarrassed me."

Facing her accusation, Ludwik's face tightened, "Does it hurt much?"

"What do you think?"

"Lie down. I'll apply the ointment."

"Don't..."

"Don't argue!"

He was imperious and authoritative, not to be denied, lifting her shirt and steadying her slender waist to apply the ointment.

Whitney instinctively shivered under his touch, the moment's intimacy overwhelming despite its medical nature. Her face flushed as she whispered, "Mr. L, please be gentle..."

His fingers were strong and precise.

The comment caused Ludwik to pause, his gaze growing heated as he saw her skin redden at his touch.

He swallowed hard, schooling her in a rough whisper, "Whitney, there are things you shouldn't say carelessly."

"Like what?" Whitney was confused.

"Things that are inappropriate and can be misconstrued," his voice was seductively deep.

Whitney's ears reddened, understanding dawning on her, "I meant it literally. Be gentle. It hurts."

"You're getting cheeky, aren't you?" His voice was now hoarse with irritation.

Whitney realized her words were even more inappropriate and buried her embarrassment beneath the covers.

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As she moved, Ludwik's hand, applying the ointment, shifted direction, accidentally gripping her side.

He leaned over her, and from his angle, her waist seemed as soft as a ribbon, as if easily foldable.

His pupils darkened, and he abruptly stood up, quelling the rising fire within him. "There, it's done."

"Thank you..."

Whitney curled up. The spot where his fingers had touched felt like it was on fire.

The air between them was steamy, and his breathing was heavier.

She rose, her heartbeat quickening as she pulled her shirt down, "You should get some rest now."

"Come on, I patch you up, and that's how you repay me?" Ludwik's voice held a note of irritation.

"Come on, I'm just trying to avoid an awkward situation!" Whitney thought.

Not knowing how to respond, she asked, "What would you like me to do, Mr. L?"

Truth be told, he had not expected much from her—just the lack of a simple 'thank you' had ruffled his feathers. He caught sight of her innocent eyes and decided to tease, "Didn't you say you'd dance for me when we got back? Breaking your promise?"

Whitney's cheeks flushed a furious shade of red.

She had said that in a moment of compromise, and he took it seriously?

Imagining herself dancing solo for him, Whitney glanced into his deep, captivating eyes and felt a shiver run through her.

She shook her head stubbornly. "How can I dance with an injury?"

"If you can't dance, then sing." He had heard her soft voice before; singing must be a treat.

Ludwik sauntered over to the couch, making himself comfortable as if settling in for a show.

It looked like he would not leave until she indulged him.

Biting her lip, Whitney suggested a compromise, "Fine, but you have to close your eyes while I sing..."

He agreed with a slight curve of his lips and obediently closed his eyes.

Caught in an awkward moment, Whitney parted her lips to sing. Her voice was ethereal, almost otherworldly, silencing the room with its purity.

But after a few lines, Ludwik's body tensed.

He suddenly gripped her shoulders, a hint of red in his eyes, "Why do you know this song?"

Whitney stood rooted to the spot, confused by his odd reaction.

It was a song she had composed a long time ago.

The man squinted his deep-set eyes, remembering the girl who had saved him. To calm his hysterical fits, she had hummed a soothing lullaby while performing acupuncture, which closely resembled this tune.

Suddenly, he asked again, "Are you trained in medicine?"

Whitney frowned. She had promised her mother to keep her knowledge of medicine a secret for self-preservation, so she had not revealed it to anyone except Tiana.

But why would he ask that?

“No,” she denied instinctively.

The profound ripples in the man’s eyes faded away.

He ended the conversation. “You should get some sleep. Leave everything else to me.”

Whitney was left with several questions in her mind but did not dwell on them, simply nodding her head.

In the study.

The man removed his mask to reveal a face of stunning beauty, his expression laced with deadly intent. He called Nolan, his voice icy, “Here’s your chance to make amends. Take Whitney’s father and stepmother and beat them senseless. They dare to harm my child without realizing who I am.”

“Huh? Ludwik, what did I do wrong?” Nolan was utterly perplexed.

“She was meeting Preston tonight. You misled me, made me misunderstand her... Just get it done!”

The man hung up the phone, still fuming.

At the same time, in the bedroom.

Lying on her side, Whitney could not sleep due to the bruises on her back. Then, Tiana called her via video.

In a panic, Tiana asked, “Whitney, I heard you were beaten up by some guys at the Imperial Garden Bar. What happened? Are you hurt?”

Remembering the night’s harrowing events, Whitney instinctively touched her stomach and recounted the

ordeal.

Tiana was livid. “Is Preston even human? He doesn’t deserve to be a father! Monica framed you with a false pregnancy scare, and you were only defending yourself. Yet, he wanted to beat you to cause a miscarriage, all to vent Monica’s anger!”

Whitney shivered, her eyes narrowing. "Yvonne put him up to it. Monica wanted revenge. She released the video to cover up her own embarrassment with the scandal of my miscarriage and to stop me from entering the competition."

"That's outrageous, just watch me!" Tiana roared.

Late at night.

Preston and Yvonne were returning home from a social gathering when several motorcycles suddenly blocked their car.

A group of young men jumped off, yanked open the car doors, pulled Preston and Yvonne out, bagged them,

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and dragged them into an alley for a vicious beating.

Preston was in shock. They were no match for the younger assailants and were beaten black and blue, shouting, "Who the hell are you, punks? Daring to hit me, Preston Valentine, you're looking for a death wish!"

"Spit on them, boys! Break this old fool!" They shouted.

After having their fun, the assailants left, cursing as they went.

Yvonne, her beauty marred, spoke with venom yet dared not curse, "Sir, who were they? They seem to be ordinary thugs, but we haven't crossed anyone like them recently!"

A realization struck Preston. "It's Whitney... Didn't she get mixed up with some riffraff? Tonight, I tricked her into a miscarriage, and she got them to retaliate! The ungrateful wench. And it's your fault for that rotten idea, making me please Monica by getting rid of her child!"

Yvonne replied with cold resentment, "I was just trying to keep Monica happy for Simon, okay? If we get rid of Whitney, we keep control of the company."

She kept babbling as Preston was busy calling an ambulance.

Then, looking at the news on his phone, Preston's face turned pale as a sheet.

[Breaking News: The Valentine Corporation's CEO's wife, a former adult film star!]

[High society lady, Yvonne Valentine, involved in explicit videos, supported by wealthy businessmen.]

[Preston Valentine, the fall guy.]

In the darkness, the phone screen shone brightly; Yvonne saw it too and her face went pale.

Preston, his face turning purple with anger, received a mocking text from a business tycoon, [Preston, your wife's trending! Was she really an adult film star? No wonder you can't get enough of her, haha.]

The irony in those words infuriated Preston, who was extremely conscious of his reputation.

Seeing his ragged breathing, Yvonne said guiltily, "That's not true..."

"You whore!" Preston shouted, losing all reason, and turned to slap her hard, "You had so many sordid affairs in the past? Now they're out in the open, and you dragged my reputation down with you!"

"No! I was clean before I married you; it must be Whitney... It's too coincidental tonight. We tried to take her child, and she retaliates against us!"

"If you have no dark past, how could they call me a fall guy? Get out!" Preston, spitting blood in anger, immediately called The Valentine Corporation's PR to scrub the trending topic.

But Yvonne's trending topic remained high the next day as if hackers were working against them.

The next day.

When Whitney awoke and saw the news, her first thought was of Tiana.

She called her, and the girl, still groggy from sleep, confessed without denial, “Yeah, it was me. I dug up all of Yvonne’s dirty laundry overnight and gave her a five–day trending package!

But

did you see the gossip? Yvonne and Preston got beaten up by some gang and ended up in the hospital.

Wonder who the good Samaritan was who avenged you? So satisfying!”

Whitney froze. Beaten up by a gang?

Somehow, she found her thoughts drifting to last night when L said before leaving, “Leave everything else to

me.”

She felt like she knew the answer. A slight smile curved her lips. Despite his misunderstanding of her last

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night, he took her grievances to heart once the truth came out. With his means, taking down the Valentine family would probably be easy.

Whitney admired his approach, avenging her while not interfering in her personal matters.

For the next few days, she stayed home, nursing her wounds and trying her best to show good behavior.

With Yvonne trending and her reputation in tatters, she and Preston had a tough road ahead.

Whitney felt a cold sting in her heart; the scales had fallen from her eyes regarding Preston, and she would no longer show any mercy to the Valentine family.

She must win next month’s big competition to reclaim Skye Gem.

On a Saturday afternoon, Tiana called Whitney to meet up.

She came bearing important news. “Whitney, I found out that Mr. Lippert from Imperial Gem Corporation has a soft spot for landscape paintings. October is coming, and the registrations for the state jewelry contest are about to start. I’ve heard that Simon and Monica have been hovering over charity auctions lately. They’re trying to butter up Mr. Lippert, the judge for the event!”

Charity auctions were often ripe with landscape paintings, and they were aiming to curry favor with Imperial Gem Corporation through the back door, Whitney mused.

Tiana expressed her concern. “We need to cozy up to Mr. Lippert as well! Remember that spat you had with your nemesis at the Southern Elegance Club? The registrations are coming up, and I wonder if you’ll still be as defiant.”

Whitney wrinkled her nose in irritation. “Can we not talk about that nauseating man right now?”

“Fine, let’s talk about Monica. She’s got all your best drafts in her grip. Those are enough for Monica to enter numerous competitions and scoop up awards. Can you produce something better in such a short time?”

Whitney took a deep breath.

In the past, she had been naive. A sweet word from Simon, and she would comfort herself with the thought that she was still young, handing over her work to Monica, foolishly helping Simon elevate Monica to the status of a genius designer!

Whitney spoke with an icy detachment, “She may have the drafts, but I have the brains!”

The glory Monica had stolen, Whitney vowed to reclaim it, piece by piece.

“Whitney, you’re a design genius. It’s about time you make your comeback in the competition,” Tiana said, her eyes brimming with warmth.

Whitney squeezed her hand in response.

“So you’ll be busy sketching designs soon. How about we hit the mall today?” Tiana suggested, seizing the opportunity for a day out.

Shaking her head, Whitney said, "I want to check out the jewelry exhibition."

"Ambitious women are truly terrifying," Tiana thought, but her eyes gleamed with mischief as she grinned and said, "Alright, let's do it!"

She drove them through the bustling city center toward the imposing Imperial Gem Corporation building, where Whitney was caught off guard. "Why are you taking me to our arch-rival's company?"

Tiana, starry-eyed, bubbled with excitement. "We need to butter up Mr. Lippert, right? I've been dying to see him since you mentioned his striking good looks. There's a jewelry exhibition at Imperial Gem today, and rumor has it Mr. Lippert will make an appearance around lunch. You can admire the gems, and I'll get a look at this dreamboat!"

"Have you been raised on romance novels or what?" Whitney fumed. "How can you drool over my nemesis?"

"Don't jump to conclusions; you might be drooling too before long."

As they spoke, a line of luxury cars pulled up in front of the building, a Rolls-Royce at its center. The car door swung open, and a pair of long legs stepped out.

The man adjusted his suit button with an austere elegance; his profile alone was a sight to behold.

Whitney's gaze involuntarily fixed on his face, just as striking as when she first saw him at the club, peerlessly handsome.

Screams erupted from the crowd of onlooking women as security managed the throng. The man's brows furrowed slightly.

Tiana, completely smitten, shouted the loudest, "Oh my God, I'm pregnant just looking at him! He's too gorgeous! Whitney, hold me steady."

The sound of Whitney's name made the man pause and glance over with inscrutable eyes.

Whitney scoffed while looking at her formidable foe a few feet away. “Handsome? He’s not even as good-looking as my fake husband!”