

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 21-35

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The man's gaze shifted toward her, and he smirked ever so slightly.

"No way your fake husband is more handsome than Mr. Lippert!"

Whitney sized up the rival's tall frame. She had not seen L in the flesh but mused, "They seem to be about the same height."

"Same height and you dare to say equally handsome?" Tiana rolled her eyes.

"Not just height. Now that I look at them, even their build and presence seem similar..."

Whitney's eyes narrowed on the man, a sense of dissonance settling in.

Why did L and this rival seem alike?

The man had already entered the company with security, but Whitney could not resist following, determined to

1/3

14:59

Chapter 21

uncover the truth.

She slipped behind a guard amid the chaos, sneaking into the company lobby.

Suddenly, the man stepped into the CEO's private elevator!

Whitney was swiftly blocked by security, 'Miss, you're trespassing. What are you trying to do?'

“...” As the elevator doors closed, Whitney blurted out in a moment of quick thinking. “L! What are you doing here?”

The rival, back turned to her in the elevator, did not respond.

“L!” She called again, testing.

Still, the man gave no indication of hearing her.

Watching the elevator ascend, Whitney sighed and slapped her forehead. The rival had no reaction to ‘L’ so they could not be the same person, could they?

What was she thinking?

“Whitney! How did you get in here?” Tiana teased after finally catching up. “You’re such a hypocrite, dissing our enemy and then sneaking into his company!”

Whitney did not want to admit she had, for a moment, suspected her rival was her ‘fake husband.

She pushed Tiana to leave. “I came to see the jewelry, but it’s nothing special. Let’s go shopping!”

“Mr. Lippert’s collection is nothing less than extraordinary!” Tiana pointed out, revealing the truth. “He’s a jewelry tycoon, and you’re just bitter!”

With a clenched jaw, Whitney retorted, “I may not be at his level now, but once I rise again, I’ll definitely take

him down!”

The man who had left the elevator observed the fiery little woman from a second-floor window, smirking at her

bold claim.

Take him down? His lips curled with a wicked edge. How did she plan to do that?

His assistant could not help but chuckle. Ms. Valentine saying she would take down the CEO—he was sure his boss would be delighted.

Downstairs.

“Alright, let’s hit the shops. Do you need to check in?” Tiana reminded.

Whitney promptly called Natalie.

As they ordered milkshakes, Whitney’s phone rang. She answered, “Madam, this is your husband’s assistant. Please add him on Facebook; he has instructions for you.”

Wondering why L’s assistant suddenly called, Whitney hurriedly added L’s contact—a black profile picture that matched his cool demeanor. A message popped up on Facebook.

L: [Have you been sneaking around looking at other men?]

Whitney’s eyes darted around guiltily. How did he know?

From the second-floor window, the man’s lips quirked as he watched her fidget.

L: [Are you going shopping?]

Just as Whitney was about to reply ‘yes,’ he sent a document.

Whitney’s face turned green as she read it.

2/3

Suddenly, Whitney’s hand was slapped, and Roselyn snatched the shirt away.

Her arm was still smarting from the last time Whitney and her thug buddy roughed her up at the club. Today, she was hell-bent on humiliating Whitney.

With a sneer, Roselyn said, “Whitney, this is a Hermès counter. Can you read it? Do you think you’re still that jet-setting socialite who used to be front row at fashion shows?”

And you, sales clerks, times have changed. Why are you letting every Tom, Dick, and Harry in here to pollute the view of us esteemed VIPs?"

The clerk, eager to appease Roselyn, immediately looked at Whitney with disdain.

Tiana was about to rush forward in Whitney's defense, but Whitney stopped her with a hand.

Roselyn picked up a dress with an air of superiority, "This is Monica's custom gown worth 880 grand. You're with some nobody who can't even afford my medical bills. Do you think you can afford a scrap of this dress? And what are you wearing?"

She viciously pulled at Whitney's collar to inspect her clothes, "Monet? Ha, must be a knockoff!"

Everyone, take a look! The once untouchable Ms. Valentine is wearing fakes now. Oh, how the mighty have fallen! Sales clerks, be careful, don't let the poor steal anything!"

Whitney wanted to laugh, curious about what L would say if he heard someone questioning the authenticity of his clothes.

"Shouldn't you be throwing out this down-and-out who can't afford to buy anything with a black card?" Roselyn thought smugly, sure that publicly stepping on Whitney would earn her points with Monica.

The clerk hesitated, moving to usher Whitney out.

With a slow, deliberate movement, Whitney produced her smartphone, with a gold-embossed black card resting on top. She approached the counter and calmly said, "I'll take the entire collection in this store, including the dress she's holding – the precious gown Monica wants." She glanced back at Roselyn with a mocking smile.

The store fell into an eerie silence, punctuated only by gasps.

The clerks' faces transformed, and Roselyn's turned ashen.

Disbelieving, Roselyn charged at her. "Impossible, how could you have a black card? Clerk, check her card. It must be a fake!"

Whitney completed the transaction without batting an eyelid, and millions were paid successfully!

Roselyn's face turned livid, and the onlookers began to mock her.

Tiana snatched the gown from Roselyn and tore it, sneering, "See now? We don't even bother tearing into people like you. Oops, my bad, I tore it a bit. But ragged clothes suit a vile person like Monica anyway. Here, take it back to her with my compliments!"

"Tiana, you bitch, you..."

"What's the matter, can't afford a black card and still not scurrying away, waiting for me to kick your ass?" Tiana's voice was fierce, and she looked ready to throw a punch.

Roselyn left the store, clutching the torn gown, her face devoid of all dignity.

She immediately called, whining, "Monica, Whitney tore your dress!"

"What? You can't handle this one thing. You're useless!" Monica's voice was icy.

Roselyn's face darkened with malice. She and Monica were just fair-weather friends. If it were not for Monica's current power, she would not bother sucking up. Holding back her rage, she informed Monica, "Whitney has a

1/3

14:59

Chapter 22

gold embossed black card. She just bought the whole store's collection and humiliated me thoroughly."

Monica, full of envy, scoffed. "Impossible, are you blind? Whitney's barely making ends meet. Didn't you say that her nobody boyfriend couldn't even pay your medical bills, and now she has a black card? They're probably putting on airs with borrowed money!"

She did not care about what Roselyn said, her voice filled with venom as she said, "That bitch, she's caused scandals for my mother, Ha, my dad has already forgiven my mom, and she's working on something. Wait and see how long Whitney can strut around. She'll be done for soon."

Roselyn immediately flattered, "Yvonne sure is skilled."

Meanwhile, in the Valentine Mansion's bedroom.

In the afternoon, Yvonne used all her tricks to please Preston, and after his mood visibly improved, she finally lay down, panting.

Though aging. Yvonne's figure was still youthful, but the effort left her breathless. She clenched her fists when thinking about how Whitney had exposed her past. Fortunately, Preston had quashed the trending searches, and the taunts from the other high society ladies had subsided. Yvonne had managed to preserve her reputation and status.

Cuddling Preston, she cooed, "Darling, I've dealt with Phebe. She finally agreed to Simon and Monica's engagement. But Monica still needs a dowry. If we gave the East Side resort as a generous gift, our daughter would shine."

"Then it's hers," he said simply.

Yvonne's eyes gleamed, "But Whitney's grandfather left that resort. Even though we've taken all her assets, the resort needs her signature."

Preston looked at her, and Yvonne's eyes reflected a ruthless smile. "That girl has crossed us all, hurt Monica, and had you attacked... This time, when she comes back, not only will I make her sign, but I'll also ensure she never causes trouble again. Then no one will compete with Monica for the jewelry contest."

Understanding her meaning, Preston's expression darkened, and he nodded. "You've done well with Monica's engagement."

Yvonne felt a shiver of triumph. She would kill two birds with one stone, ensuring the downfall of that bitch.

Back at the boutique, Tiana teased Whitney about her black card, “And here I was, wanting to buy you a dress to cheer you up, but you had a trump card up your sleeve.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’ve been fighting with your Lutz family fiancé, haven’t you? And your old man’s cut you off?” Whitney hit the

nail on the head.

Tiana’s expression took a slight dip before breaking into a teasing grin. “Your mysterious hubby must be loaded! You swipe that card for a few million, and he doesn’t even call to chew you out. Whitney, seriously, no matter who he is or how he looks, you should totally snag him!”

Whitney just sighed. The credit card was a parting gift from L before she left, and she had not intended to use it at all. “I was just showing off for a second. I’m planning to return all the clothes later,”

“Return them? No way, you should try this one on, and this one!” Tiana thrust a couple of outfits at Whitney and pushed her towards the fitting rooms.

As Whitney opened Facebook to explain the spending spree to a certain someone, Tiana was already pestering her from the outside. “Hurry up! I want to check out the handbags next. Come out and show me how it looks!”

213

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1/3

14:59

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213

Chapter 24

Whitney remained the very picture of composure amid the whispers and stares.

She waited for the murmurs to die down and then spoke with a cool detachment, “A bit carried away? If I remember correctly, wasn’t it you who was caught in the scandal of the decade just a few days ago, Yvonne?”

Yvonne’s face turned as stiff as a board.

The socialites and ladies gathered around suddenly fell silent, recalling the recent gossip.

Yvonne, struggling to contain her fury, tried to explain in a gentle voice, “Whitney, those rumors were false, and they’ve been debunked...”

“Oh, have they? Last I heard, my father doesn’t even want to speak to you. What’s the real story?”

Whitney’s smile was cool and detached. Without waiting for a reply, she turned and walked away.

The crowd dispersed awkwardly, with Monica stamping her foot in frustration. “Mom! She humiliated you like that, and you’re just going to let it go? Look at her, so smug and self-satisfied!”

A deep loathing simmered in Yvonne’s eyes. “Patience, darling. After tonight, she won’t have the gall to be so arrogant anymore.”

The charity auction was set to begin at nine, yet it was only seven. Whitney moved through the venue while Yvonne and her daughter had yet to reappear.

Whitney had a hunch that something was amiss; they would not simply let her off the hook.

Passing by the kitchen, Whitney caught the scent of something medicinal. She frowned, seeing the steaming pot on the stove, and recognized the ingredients for a traditional tonic, which sparked a cold sneer at the corner of her lips as she remembered Monica’s feigned miscarriage.

“Who is making this remedy? Is someone in the household unwell?” She asked a servant, feigning ignorance.

The servant hardly paid her any regard and laughed without responding.

Whitney left the kitchen, suspicions confirmed about Monica’s condition. It was clear that Monica barely had the capability to bear a child anymore, and the situation had gotten so severe that she even had to take medicine.

Suddenly, the sound of barking dogs and crying interrupted the quiet. Yvonne’s shrill voice reached her. “Whitney! Look at what your dogs have done—it’s bitten someone!”

Whitney’s brows knitted together, and she hurried outside.

Yvonne had her servants subdue Whitney’s two dogs and approached her with a veneer of civility. “These dogs have been quite unruly lately. Just now, the

y nearly
bit a little guest. Whitney, you are their owner; you would be responsible if they actually hurt someone. I'm going to have them taken away. Is that alright?"

Whitney scrutinized the whimpering little girl and then her agitated dogs, who communicated through their eyes that they had not bitten anyone.

She knew her dogs were intelligent creatures. Reluctantly, given the circumstances, Whitney agreed. "Where will you take them?"

"To the old lodge by the back hill," Yvonne said, watching her intently.

Fearing they might harm her dogs, Whitney insisted, "I want to go with them."

Yvonne nodded, and once Whitney was out of sight, a sinister smile played at the corners of her lips. The little wretch had taken the bait.

At the old lodge, Whitney crouched down to her dogs. "I'll get you out of here tonight," she promised.

Just as she was about to stand up, the servants suddenly hoisted her up and, along with the dogs, locked

1/3

14:59

them all in the basement!

What is the meaning of this?" Whitney demanded, her eyes flashing with icy fury.

One of the burly servants threw a contract in front of her. "Sorry, Whitney, but the madam wants you to sign this deed of transfer as a wedding gift to Monica."

It was a contract for a vacation resort!

Whitney's expression turned icy. This property belonged to her grandfather, and she knew that even if the Valentine family had seized control, a transfer still required her signature.

With force, the servant pressed her hand to sign. Then they left, locking the door behind them.

Whitney and her dogs remained trapped.

Looking through the narrow window at the cold moon casting its silvery light, Whitney felt a growing sense of wrongness.

If Yvonne only wanted a contract, why lock her up? And why with her dogs? The night's odd events were piecing together, and Whitney did not understand why Yvonne had brought out her dogs.

Her heartbeat quickened, and she sensed that Yvonne's intentions were not solely about the contract.

What else could she be planning?

Whitney turned to her innocent dogs, deep in thought.

It was nearing eight. The auction would start at nine.

Her hands clenched, and her unease grew.

Suddenly, the door crashed open!

Two male servants rushed in, dragging her dogs away.

"What are you doing? What will you do to them?" Whitney stood up, trying to intervene.

"You're quite a beauty, Whitney," one servant said with lewd intent, caressing her face. "After tonight, I might just have my way with you."

The other snapped, "Shut it. Have you forgotten she might be insane? Watch out, she might bite."

They left quickly with the dogs.

What were they planning? To kill her dogs? What was Yvonne up to?

As Whitney paced the room, a thought struck her—the servant's mention of "she might be insane" connected the dots.

A chill went through her as she realized Yvonne's vicious plan. Whitney's lips curled into a cold smile—she had uncovered it just in time.

She immediately called her ally, Tiana.

Tiana had struggled to sneak into the estate and had just arrived at the banquet hall when she received Whitney's call.

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Tiana rushed to the back hall and fumed, "They dared to lock you up..."

"Shh, Tiana," Whitney's face was taut with urgency, "Listen, I need you to do something for me."

Tiana noticed the unusual coldness in her eyes and leaned in as Whitney instructed, "There's a medicine pot in the kitchen. Here, take this syringe.."

Tiana's expression darkened with the revelation. After rescuing Whitney from the basement, she ground her teeth in anger. "Those evil women, to think of such a vile scheme. Whitney, you must find a way to turn the tables."

213

14.59

Chapter 24

"Of course." Whitney gazed into the night, her eyes ablaze with intensity. Yvonne was after her dogs, and she had to save them, but she did not know where they were.

Just then, a figure approached from behind, addressing her respectfully, "Madam, is there anything you need help with?"

Whitney whirled around to see the driver who had been assigned to her these past days. She guessed eagerly, "Did L send you?"

"Yes. He instructed me to be at your service," the driver replied. "He said you're usually quite self-sufficient but to use my judgment when necessary."

Whitney inwardly snorted at the man's lack of sentiment yet meticulous nature. A fleeting mix of emotions crossed her face, but having a chauffeur around was indeed a stroke of luck. She softly instructed him with a hushed tone, and they both set off to look for the dogs.

The chauffeur managed to rescue the dogs, and Whitney felt a wave of relief wash over her. She took a deep breath to compose herself.

Then, her eyes glinted with a hint of frostiness. She squinted towards the bustling ballroom. Tiana must have already taken care of everything. Whitney gave a subtle cue, and the chauffeur went off to handle the last piece of the plan.

Whitney clasped her hands together, rubbing them slightly to bring back some warmth. She squinted and smiled; Yvonne must be itching to reap the consequences of the intricate trap she had laid out.

A perfect scheme returned to them in spades!

In the ballroom, Yvonne was the epitome of grace. Suddenly, she turned to the ladies and asked, "Did any of you hear a dog barking?"

The wealthy matrons fell silent.

Indeed, there was the sound of a dog yelping, and it sounded agonizing!

"What's going on?"

Yvonne's gaze swept over the butler who rushed in, his face contorted in sheer panic as he exclaimed, "Sir, madam, something terrible has happened! Whitney, she... she..."

"What happened to Whitney?" Yvonne rose with feigned concern.

"Whitney, she... she did something to her dogs... Please, you must come see!"

The butler's hesitant words and his terrified expression piqued the curiosity of the elite women to the extreme.

Yvonne and Preston exchanged a knowing look and dashed to the backyard, with the entire gathering trailing behind.

As they moved, Yvonne glanced subtly at Roselyn in the crowd.

Catching the hint, Roselyn raised her voice and said, "Could Whitney have lost her mind?"

"She's actually insane?" another socialite chimed in.

"Kidnapping and indecency, if she doesn't have a screw loose, I'd be surprised..."

The murmurs grew louder, and whenever the name Whitney was mentioned, faces twisted with an involuntary look of disdain.

Yvonne lowered her head, a smirk of triumph curling her lips.

"Whitney, your good days are over as of today!"

Chapter 25

At this moment, Yvonne was practically quivering with anticipation, eager to witness Whitney's public downfall as the scene of her brutalizing her own dogs unfolded before the eyes of all.

She had Preston summon a doctor to declare Whitney mentally unstable right then and there, ensuring she would be hauled off to the asylum and locked away for good.

She would never see the light of day again, never be able to turn the tables. That irksome little wench would be out of her hair for good!

In her mind's eye, Yvonne smirked with vicious satisfaction. As the servant shattered the lock and pushed open the door, she stepped into the dimly lit basement.

The stench of blood hit them like a wall, causing everyone to cover their noses. As the lights flicked on, the assembled ladies gasped at the sight of a girl sitting amid a bloody mess, her hands and face smeared with blood, even flecks on her teeth, like she'd gone mad ripping into raw flesh.

"Agh!"

"What in the world? Who killed the dogs? Was it Whitney?"

"Whitney, darling!" Yvonne rushed to the girl's side, her face etched with feigned concern as she reached for the girl. "Sweetheart, even if you're unwell and

faced some ridicule at the party, they were your own dogs. How could you be so cruel to your own pets, you...

Yvonne was laying out Whitney's supposed sickness and its triggers, ready to signal Preston to call for the doctor, when she took a proper look at the girl's face and let out a shrill scream, collapsing backward, her face ashen.

"What's wrong, Yvonne?"

"Yvonne, why did you call me?" Whitney sauntered in from the side, feigning surprise. "Oh no, it's my sister!"

Every gaze in the room turned to the girl in the pool of blood.

It was Monica! It was actually Monica!

Yvonne was stunned. She lifted her shocked gaze to Whitney, who was cool as a cucumber, then back down, refusing to believe her daughter had 'attacked the dogs.'

How could it be Monica? Her plan had been flawless. Where had she gone wrong?

Snapping back to reality, Yvonne glared at Whitney with pure loathing.

Meanwhile, Preston, his face a picture of disgust, quickly moved to disperse the onlookers.

But the crowd was too intrigued and refused to disperse.

In desperation, Yvonne covered Monica and covertly tried to wake her daughter.

Monica came to with a start, "Mom, why am I here? Ah!"

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As she took in the sight of blood and the mutilated remains of what seemed to be a dog, Monica screamed.

Whitney watched the dramatic scene unfold before squatting down innocently, "Sis, what in the world happened to you? How could you kill my dogs?"

"I didn't, I didn't kill any dog," Monica stammered, her face pale and confused, turning to her mother for

answers.

"Enough! Stop this nonsense. Everyone, there's nothing to see here. This is just some frozen meat from the storage, and Monica just fainted because of her fragile body, that's all. A simple misunderstanding!" Yvonne hastily explained with a forced smile, urging everyone to leave.

"Yvonne, is my sister sick? I saw the kitchen was brewing some tonic soup for her. Is it because she lost

1/3

15:00

another baby recently, and that's why she's emotionally unstable and could do something so extreme as to harm dogs? Whitney speculated calmly, her voice laced with concern.

The audience caught on to the underlying implication.

Yvonne wished she could rip Whitney's mouth right off her face.

But she was powerless to do so.

Just then, Phebe stepped forward with a face like thunder. "What's this all about? Monica, did you have a miscarriage with my boy Simon?"

Everyone knew Phebe had high standards for purity and took a dim view of Simon's relationship with Monica. After all, Monica was the mistress, and Phebe despised her. However, Simon was too much in love with Monica, and Phebe had no choice but to compromise.

Her question made Monica and Yvonne stiffen.

Whitney kept up her act of concerned sister. "Phebe, didn't you know? Monica's miscarriage even made the rounds in a video. Yvonne, Monica's lifestyle is taking a toll on her health. Despite her youth, such recklessness will only lead to ruin."

The murmurs grew louder, with whispers of disdain. "What's going on with Monica? Has she lost several babies?"

"Just now, Yvonne was boasting about her daughter's purity, and now this slap in the face."

Phebe, now indignant, glared at Monica before storming out.

Whitney watched with a smile and then gracefully exited the scene.

Yvonne sat on the floor, defeated, as the whispers around her grew.

Monica quickly got up and chased after Phebe, sobbing. Meanwhile, Preston panted heavily as he stared at Yvonne with wide eyes.

Yvonne's face was pale as a sheet, and this humiliation had gotten her so filled with rage she almost bit her tongue off. She had planned to humiliate Whitney and send her to the asylum, but shockingly, Monica ended up being the one humiliated.

With an ashen expression, Preston cleaned up the mess. Fortunately, not many esteemed ladies had followed them here and witnessed this nonsense, and he could pay them to keep their mouths shut. However, this expenditure made his heart ache.

No matter how hard Monica tried to explain to Phebe that this was a misunderstanding and that Whitney twisted the truth because there was something wrong with her brain, Phebe was not convinced at all and left the Valentine Mansion in a rage.

Having cleaned up and changed into her evening gown, Monica looked somewhat revived, but the situation with Phebe had left her visibly shaken.

She blamed her mother.

"Mom, Whitney saw right through your plan, and now I'm the one covered in filth! I hate her! Stop interfering. She thinks she's won, right? Just wait until the auction starts. I'll see how much she can spend. I'm going to make her the laughingstock of the evening!"

And so, the auction began, drawing the attention of the wealthy attendees, temporarily setting aside the scandal involving Monica for the excitement of the bidding

war while Yvonne and Preston scrambled to salvage their tarnished reputations.

“Monica!” Yvonne was visibly worried. If she had faltered, what hope did her daughter have?

Monica dashed into the auction house with an air of grace just as Simon returned with a stormy expression.

Her eyes quickly caught sight of Whitney making an entrance. In a heartbeat, Monica threw herself into the man’s arms, tears streaming down her face like a spring shower. “Simon, is Mom still mad? She’d rather

213

15:00

Chapter 25

believe those nasty lies from my sister than in her own son?

You know me. You know you’re the only one for me. My sister is just jealous of our love; she wants to ruin me!”

Simon, who had been slightly swayed, felt his resolve soften once more at the sight of her tears.

Following Monica’s gaze, he, too, noticed Whitney just entering. His brows knitted together, then he strode over and grabbed Whitney by the arm. “This is too much! Whitney, why would you frame Monica? Don’t I know her well enough to see through these lies? Even if Aunt Yvonne has it out for you, you’ve got no right to drag Monica’s good name through the mud!”

Chapter 26

Standing there, Whitney translated the confrontation in her mind, “Even if she and her daughter want to wipe you off the face of the earth, you can’t hurt Monica even the slightest!”

She looked up at the man whose handsome features had been transformed, her heart cold as an iceberg silently drifted within her.

With a sneer, she said, "Simon, I guess the hospital really did wonders on that face of yours"

"What do you mean?"

Monica glared at Whitney and quickly changed the subject, "Sis, you came to bid on landscapes today? But I heard your finances are tight, and you've got some street thug for a boyfriend now. Do you need my help?"

Simon's gaze on Whitney darkened.

A murmur rippled through the crowd. "What, Whitney's taken up with a street thug?"

Monica feigned innocence. "Don't talk like that, everyone. Maybe my sister just made a mistake."

"Oh my God, to consort with riff-raff is to fall from grace. The Valentine family's name must be totally tarnished by Whitney."

"Let's not be too harsh. Didn't Roselyn say she saw Whitney splurging at the boutique the other day? Maybe her new beau is loaded! Sis, since you have a new man, why not introduce him to us?" Monica's challenge was thinly veiled.

"A thug worth meeting? With her looking penniless and bidding on million-dollar paintings, I doubt she even has the money to start the bid. Isn't that right, Whitney?" Roselyn mocked openly, the two of them taking turns. The socialites looked at Whitney with ridicule.

Then, the lights dimmed, and the luxurious auction began.

The first item up was a landscape painting from the late Renaissance era.

The starting bid was a million dollars.

Simon raised his paddle. "Two million!"

The socialites cooed with envy, "Simon's so lavish, doubling the bid just to win Monica's favor!"

Monica smirked smugly, satisfied with her prediction, as Whitney did not raise her paddle. Monica stood up and said to the auctioneer in a helpful tone, "Wait, my sister wants to bid too. Come on, Sis, place your bid."

Her voice carried over the microphone, audible to everyone.

All eyes turned to Whitney, waiting for her to bid.

Whitney sat still, her expression unchanged. She knew she had only \$800,000 in cash from Tiana- not enough to meet the starting bid.

F2 @12305PEFFFXZ

Simon had called out two million, showcasing a blatant attempt to humiliate her.

"Whitney, isn't your thug boyfriend showing up, or do you not even have a million dollars to your name?" Roselyn taunted sharply.

The socialites laughed mockingly.

"If you can't afford it, don't embarrass yourself by taking up space."

The

auctioneer frowned at Whitney. "Whitney, are you bidding or not? If you can't afford it, have security escort you out so you don't disrupt the proceedings!"

Monica chuckled under her breath.

1/3

15.00

Just

then, a chillingly magnetic voice cut through the darkness, "She bids five million!"

Everyone was stunned, including Whitney, who recognized that captivating voice and turned to look back.

A towering figure strolled toward her, his lazy gait and broad shoulders exuding the composure and dangerous allure of a mature man. His presence commanded silence, and his mysterious mask elicited gasps from the socialites.

The room held its breath,

Whitney's almond eyes widened in shock.

The man approached her calmly, bending elegantly in the shadows and drawing near. His large hand gently grasped her wrist.

His cool breath enveloped Whitney.

His eyebrows were dark and intense. He looked at her, scrutinizing her delicate face, petite forehead- all so fragile. Yet her eyes sparkled with intelligence and defiance. He was sure she was unharmed.

He then sat down, inscrutable, and asked softly, "Am I late?"

Whitney's heart skipped a beat.

For some reason, his arrival always brought a surge of emotion.

That deep voice, she guessed he wanted to ask, 'Are you okay?' His concern was hidden while she felt vulnerable.

Whitney blinked, her lips parting slightly, "No, you're not late, Sir."

The man settled next to her, elegantly crossing his legs. Whitney stole a glance at him. Was he not supposed to be on a business trip? How did he come down like a deity to save her?

She suspected he had heard about tonight's ordeal from his driver.

With a raised eyebrow, he elegantly raised his paddle. "No one else is bidding? Six million!"

The room erupted, and the socialites were in shock, "Is that the thug Whitney's with? He's so tall and handsome!"

Roselyn, shaken by the thug's dapper appearance, remembered her grudge and sneered. "Didn't you see the mask? He must be hideously scarred, a gangster! Simon, outbid him!"

Simon felt a pang of jealousy as the rumors of Whitney's thug boyfriend materialized. He had never believed Whitney could land a man.

But this thug bid six million.

This provoked Simon's competitive spirit; Whitney could not possibly find someone wealthier than him! This thug must be bluffing.

He shouted, "Eight million!"

"Ten million," the man's voice was as smooth as fine wine, nonchalantly cold.

Simon's eyes hardened, "Twelve million!"

"Fourteen million."

Whitney watched as the man did not even glance up.

The painting was worth five million at most; he was bidding twice its value. Whitney could not help but feel uneasy, "Mr. L, there's no need to outbid him. It's not worth it."

"I don't intend to buy it."

Whitney was confused.

2/3

15:00

Chapter 26

The man glanced at the petite woman beside him, his indifference evident as he said, "Just driving up the price

for him."

Speechless, Whitney admired his ability to command the situation so gracefully yet ruthlessly and mentally gave him a thumbs up.

“Twenty million,” he continued his bold bidding.

Simon’s eyes reddened with fury. He kept glancing at the tall masked man beside Whitney. He must be hideous!

He could not let a thug overshadow him and shouted, “Twenty–six million!”

The man did not raise his paddle again. Whitney watched as he propped his chin up, his narrow eyes slightly

lifted.

The auctioneer, eager not to lose a big spender, quickly banged the gavel three times, “Congratulations to Mr. Perlman! The landscape painting is sold for twenty–six million!”

Simon slouched into the chair, his face tensed as if on the brink of a fury, while Monica silently watched, too terrified to make even a peep.

They both realized they had been played for fools by that damn thug!

Sure, Skye Gem had a high market value, but money doesn’t grow on trees. Spending twenty–six million dollars on a landscape painting really stung.

Yet, Monica felt a sense of triumph as she strutted up to Whitney. She glanced at the man in the mask, wondering why he, clearly a street thug, exuded such an untouchable aura. His mere presence seemed to cast a dazzling spell around Whitney, suddenly making her unapproachable as if wrapped in an air of icy nobility.

Monica convinced herself it must be an illusion. Nothing more than a pretty boy!

Leaning in, she sneered at Whitney. “A thug is a thug, good at nothing but driving up the dirt. Not to mention twenty–six million. I bet your boyfriend couldn’t earn a million his whole life, Sis!”

3/3

Whitney raised an eyebrow and looked at Monica with amusement as if she were watching a court jester perform.

Standing

beside her, L. towered with an impeccable posture, blatantly ignoring Monica as if she were beneath

his notice.

“Let’s get going,” he said, turning with an air of distinction.

Whitney followed

him, delicate and soft, which only made him seem more imposing.

Simon watched from behind, his eyes simmering with an intense, fiery anger,

“Whitney!” He barked, halting her in her tracks.

Monica’s face soured instantly.

Whitney paused, and L. glanced at her. “I need to take a call. The driver will pick you up. Can you handle that?”

She nodded with a faint smile.

With a cool glance back, Whitney watched Simon approach, eyeing L as he walked away to take his call. “Who the hell is that guy?” Simon demanded.

“None of your damn business.”

“How can you associate with riffraff? Whitney, have you sunk so low?”

“At least I’m not scavenging for coins in the gutter.”

Her words stung Monica and Simon, and onlookers struggled to suppress their laughter.

Monica’s face turned icy while Simon’s expression grew colder. He grabbed Whitney’s hand and sneered, “Riffraff without a car, right? He’s probably riding a motorcycle. I’ll take you home!”

The sound of his car keys jingled, and the headlights of a Lamborghini flashed

.

Monica feigned concern as she approached. “Oh dear sister, you must have walked here, right? You

should be careful, especially being pregnant, even if the father's identity is a mystery. Let Simon and me take you home. What if something happens to you on that motorcycle?"

The elite ladies nearby cast disdainful glances at Whitney. As beautiful as she was, it baffled them why she would be with a thug.

Whitney remained silent.

Then, the unmistakable roar of an ultra-luxury car approached, and when the onlookers recognized it, they collectively gasped.

A one-of-a-kind, limited edition Bugatti Veyron—not just the car, but the consecutive numbers on the license plate left Simon and Monica dumbfounded.

Such a license plate number symbolized power, something even the elite of Banyan City could not procure.

Whose car was this?

The driver stepped out, respectfully calling, "Ms. Valentine, your car is ready."

He addressed her as Ms. Valentine, not as the lady of the house, which suggested L's directive. With a knowing smile, Whitney swept past the stunned Monica, Yvonne, and Preston, and gracefully got into the car.

The Bugatti Veyron sped off, leaving a cloud of exhaust for the Valentine family to choke on.

The surrounding socialites were abuzz. "Who has Whitney gotten involved with? That license plate—only the Lippert family in Banyan City could..."

1/3

15:00

Chapter 27

“No way Whitney’s involved with the Lippert family!” Yvonne interjected with a corn. “She’s ruined. She’s just latched onto some guy with a fake plate!”

Monica, jealous to the core but feigning sorrow, added, “She’s disgraced our father.”

Simon’s complexion turned sour. How could Whitney know a man with such a car?

A deep resentment bubbled within him. Whitney was supposed to be his—all of her beauty, excellence, and capabilities should have been his!

And Whitney traveled in separate cars, he ahead and she following behind.

Tiana urgently contacted her, “Did I do well, Whitney?”

“Perfectly.” Whitney had instructed Tiana to drug Monica and take her to the basement.

The driver had bought some dog meat to stage the scene.

Yvonne’s plans were derailed, and everyone witnessed her supposed madness, making her institutionalization a foregone conclusion.

“These two are always jumping around, but too bad for Monica—just as she stepped into high society, you kicked her out again. And that resort contract won’t do her any good now, haha,” Tiana said cheerfully. “By the way, did Mr. Lippert show up?”

“No,” Whitney replied, distracted by her fake husband and missing her nemesis’s handsome face.

Once at the villa, Whitney alighted from the car. L, already there, stood elegantly, smoking a cigarette—a mature man with a dangerously attractive demeanor.

He nodded for her to wait as he finished his smoke.

After the smoke cleared, he approached her with the grace of a gentleman.

Whitney’s dogs bounded from the car. She knelt to greet them, her face softening. “They’re getting old,” she said. “My mother gave them to me. They’ve been with me

through everything. I should've picked them up days ago. Thank you for your driver, Sir."

"Try again?" L raised an eyebrow.

Whitney laughed, standing up in the evening breeze like an ethereal flower.

He glanced at her lips, and his fingers loosened his Windsor-knotted tie.

"Thank you, L. Without you, I wouldn't have my dogs!" She said, stepping closer to him playfully.

"Hmph."

Whitney pointed to the imposing Bugatti behind her. "But you really shouldn't use that license plate. The cops might not like it, Sir."

L's mouth twitched in response.

His assistant grimaced, feeling sorry for the plate for being mistaken as a fake.

Then, they headed towards the villa.

Whitney noticed the man's formal attire, suggesting he had been at an important event. "Did you come back from a trip, or did you return just for this?" She asked quietly.

His pause and deep gaze were answer enough.

Whitney blushed, her thoughts turning to his concern for her pregnancy.

As they neared the door, L frowned. "They can't come in!" He said, referring to the dogs.

Whitney glanced back at the stray dogs with a pang of sympathy, "They're just like me, without a home. Can't you take them in, Sir?"

213

15:00

Chapter 27

“Nope.” His response was heartlessly brief.

“Madam, Sir is allergic to dogs! Taryn chimed in with a smile as she approached

Oh? Whitney blinked in surprise, suddenly understanding his aversion to letting the dogs side. She had touched the dogs earlier, and his eyes had indeed flared with rejection.

She pouted, “Oh, I’m sorry then”

“But Sir has a little kitty living in a separate house in the backyard. Your dogs could stay there: Taryn respectfully asked the man, “Sir, would that be alright?”

He had just slipped off his suit jacket, revealing a well-built figure under his crisply pressed shirt, the very picture of elegance.

He glanced at Whitney and, without a word, tacitly consented.

Taryn immediately led Whitney to the backyard.

In front of a pink miniature villa, Whitney was almost blinded by the brightness, “Is this his cat’s house?”

Talk about living large!

They entered the spacious villa, and a pure white, aristocratic kitten lay atop a luxurious cat condo, barely acknowledging their presence with a haughty glance.

Just like its owner!

Whitney turned around to see the man standing aloof outside the pink abode.

“Aren’t you coming in?”

Taryn giggled softly, “Sir loves his cat, but he’s allergic to cat dander too, so he keeps his distance.”

Whitney was at a loss for words.

Chapter 28

Allergies and still keeping a cat? Quite the peculiar masochist and a loner, this guy.

Whitney's gaze was too transparent, and the man's icy glance swept over her. "Are you insulting me?"

"No way. It was a compliment."

"Complimenting my looks?"

Speechless, Whitney glanced at his smugly curved, thin lips.

Thick-skinned much!

"This whole pink-themed decor, it wouldn't also be..."

Taryn teased quietly, "It was Sir Ouldn't also be..."

request."

Whitney suddenly envied the little cat princess. He spoiled her way too much!

Seeing his indifferent face, Whitney figured if he ever had a daughter, she could not even imagine what twisted thoughts a grown man like him would harbor.

She subconsciously touched her tight belly.

"What unseemly thoughts are you harboring?" Leaned against the door frame, L's gaze teasingly fixed on her. Whitney's face flushed, and she quickly walked in with the dogs, "Hey, kitty, this is Spark and Blaze. They'll be staying here temporarily, so you all need to get along, okay?"

She even went through the motions of making the cat and dogs shake hands.

"L, what's your cat's name?" Whitney asked, tilting her egg-shaped face up.

The man's jaw tensed.

Taryn laughed, "Sir hasn't named the kitty yet."

Whitney cheekily said, "Your Daddy is so lazy, not even giving you a name. I'll name you."

Her voice was soft and sweet; she was just a little girl at that moment. Clearly, she had many sides.

"Let's call her Olive. It's noble."

"I think Whitney is nice too. She's quiet, not like some girls, all talk no substance." The man casually observed her.

Whitney pondered, then turned to ask, "What's your name then? Let's see if you live up to it."

The man's eyes twinkled with amusement, quick-witted.

Taryn brought over a cat teaser, "Sir, why don't you try playing with the kitty? It's okay from a distance!"

Unaccustomed to such activities, the man took the teaser, standing far off, stiff and detached.

Whitney teased him as he frowned. "If you're allergic like that, why keep a cat?"

The small cat teaser in his large hands suddenly shifted direction, the fluffy end lifting Whitney's chin as he swiftly leaned in close, his lips brushing her ear, his voice dangerously charming. "I'm not allergic to you, little kitty!"

Whitney was stunned, her face flushing at his suggestive words. How dared he compare her to a kitten?

Then his strong arm encircled her, teasing her several more times with the wand. He whistled lowly, a serious look on his face, "Can you meow for me?"

He was the epitome of rakish charm, suggesting her to do something so explicit without saying it directly.

Before Whitney could get angry, he gracefully withdrew.

His playful demeanor was evident as he walked away, clearly in good spirits.

Leaving Whitney wrapped in a haze of flirtation, unable to look directly at the cat teaser anymore! She thought this man was dashing to the bone. His teasing was irresistible, leaving any naive girl blushing for a long time

Quite the charmer!

Back at the villa, Xandra suggested Whitney take a bath. She mentioned that Sir was hungry and asked if she had any simple cooking skills.

Was Natalie retiring to the back house today? Whitney emerged clean from her bath, pondering that she indeed needed to express her gratitude tonight.

She could cook. A woman of her standing had to know how.

Whitney entered the kitchen and quickly whipped up a plate of spaghetti for him.

“Mr. L, dinner is served.” She presented it promptly.

Her delicate hand, pale and dainty, offered him the fork.

He glanced at it and took it.

Whitney sat opposite him, hands cradling her face, looking a bit despondent.

He poured a glass of red wine, glancing over at her.

Whitney voiced her worries, “Mr. L, did you know? The landscape painting was bought by Simon, so I can’t cozy up to my nemesis, and the jewelry competition in October is under his thumb. I’m really in trouble.”

“Who’s this nemesis of yours?” He took a sip.

“Imperial Gem Corporation’s obnoxious boss!”

His eyes darkened, “What beef does he have with you?”

“It’s an old family feud, a cutthroat business rivalry! You into business? If not, you wouldn’t understand,”

The assistant behind the boss stifled a laugh. The lady sure spoke her mind.

His eyes playful, L asked coldly, “Does your nemesis even take you seriously?”

“He said I have a small chest. That’s a grudge I won’t even let go!”

His gaze trailed down to the base of her neck. He frowned, failing to remember, and slowly said, “So he did, but haven’t you grown bigger?”

Whitney suddenly crossed her arms, her face turning red, “L, Whose side are you on?”

The assistant thought, “What an extremely interesting question.”

Elegantly taking a bite of spaghetti, he crossed his legs. “Don’t worry about the painting.”

“Why not?”

“Imperial Gem’s Mr. Lippert isn’t fond of landscape paintings.”

Whitney’s eyes sparkled. “You’re guessing? That’s what I thought, too! A man that handsome couldn’t possibly have such an old soul as to like landscape paintings, right? I’ll let you in on a secret. That creep likes young girls!”

The assistant twitched, glancing at the boss.

Noticing the man’s suddenly grim expression, Whitney was puzzled, “What’s the matter, Mr. L?”

He narrowed his cool eyes, “You could try a different approach to win him over.”

ㄹ

Chapter 28

“How so?”

Your sign-in reward. Come to claim your free coins.

“Come here.” He beckoned with a finger.

Suspicious, Whitney approached, her clean, soft nightgown revealing a slender waist as he pulled her into his embrace.

She gasped, landing on his lap, his muscular physique solid and powerful.

Suddenly close in his arms, Whitney squirmed uncomfortably. He held down her struggling hands, his voice sinfully low, “There are a few ways a woman can please a man. Which do you think?”

Whitney caught on, her brows furrowed, “You mean I should seduce my nemesis? He can get lost; besides, I wouldn’t betray you.”

He raised an eyebrow. Whether he was pleased or cold was unknown. “You are quite loyal to me.”

“We have an agreement.”

“Shall we practice?” He suggested, seducing the young woman with his mature charm.

“Practice what?”

“Charm a man,” he murmured, his breath warming the delicate skin below her earlobe.

Whitney’s cheeks flushed a deep pink as his gaze darkened like ink, his large hand settling firmly on the small of her waist. He coached in a low voice, “To charm a man, you need to be soft—soft in your demeanor, tone, and movements.”

“How do I... be soft?” Whitney felt as if she were intoxicated, not by wine but by his intoxicating presence. How else could she explain following his lead so willingly?

The next moment, she felt weightless, gently lifted and placed on the tabletop.

Chapter 29

The plates were just beside her, and towering above was a man of statuesque stature.

His body exuded a warmth that seemed to scorch her smooth skin.

Especially when he leaned down, bringing his handsome lips close to her ear. His cheek brushed against her hair, hovering just an inch from her lips, neither advancing nor retreating. He simply hooked his lips and breathed

Was this man flirting with her? Whitney felt like she was running out of breath, her face blushing furiously as she clutched his chiseled arm, her heartbeat erratic.

“What’s the matter?” He noticed her rising temperature and arched an eyebrow playfully, “Soft?”

Whitney felt like a little cotton ball.

He looked triumphant, his eyes revealing his pride.

Biting her lip, embarrassed by his teasing, Whitney refused to be outdone. She straightened her back, deliberately draping her hands around his neck.

Mimicking his movements, she leaned toward the man’s chiseled jaw, her lips brushing past his Adam’s apple.

But as she drew near, she did not kiss him, maintaining a tantalizing distance.

Their breathing grew heavier, and she heard his breathing deepen into a husky timbre.

Whitney curved her red lips, her eyes provocatively challenging him, “So, Sir, are you feeling a bit breathless?”

Suddenly, he seized her chin with his large hand, his gaze burning, breath heavy. His chest heaved with a dangerous edge. “Quite the quick learner! Well, I won’t hold back then.”

The next moment, he took control of her chin and brought his lips down to hers.

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Whitney's mind went blank, struggling frantically.

He smirked, rolling his lips over hers, not letting her escape.

It seemed like an eternity before he finally released her. Now, his eyes were tinged with red, staring at her flushed face for a moment before he turned irritably and dashed upstairs.

Soon after, Whitney heard the sound of running water in the bedroom.

Stunned, she realized that he had taken the time to set her down before he went upstairs.

Whitney covered her crimson face, her head spinning...

Were they not just practicing? How had it turned into a kiss? She hurriedly began to clear the tableware, trying to calm herself, but her heartbeat was still skipping beats, the air thick with innuendo. And then she wondered, why had he taken a shower?

Could it be...

Her face flushed even redder.

Whitney did not sleep well that night, her mind replaying that kiss. The man had kissed her twice before, and both times, she had been too busy resisting. But tonight, in addition to resistance, there seemed to be a bit of confusion.

Was this man's flirting game a bit too strong?

Whitney burrowed under her covers, thanking her lucky stars he had not entered her bedroom that night.

The next day, Whitney woke up with heavy eye bags.

1/2

15:01

tie, Madein?"

Speechless, Whitney wondered, "Has he gone blind at such a young age?"

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Her eyes widened as she walked over to him. His towering height required her to stand on tiptoes, and she looped the tie around his neck, knotting it tightly, her voice soft. "Like this, Sir. Is this to your satisfaction?"

He glanced down at the knot, effortlessly untied it, and headed downstairs, muttering, "I have to travel for work. I'll deal with you when I get back."

Taryn, who was nearby, blushed at the sight, and Whitney's face turned even redder as she ducked back into her bedroom.

Taryn called out to her, inviting her down for breakfast, but she refused to come.

Her stomach growled, hunger striking quickly now that she was pregnant. Whitney opened the curtains to see if the man had left; she would head down to eat at once he was gone.

But a figure caught Whitney's eye in the car, waiting for him downstairs.

A woman sat in the passenger seat, a mass of curly hair obscuring her face, but her silhouette was unmistakably voluptuous. She wore a tight red dress that was both understated and sultry.

Crucially, as the man approached, holding the tie Whitney had playfully knotted, the woman easily took it from him.

He did not refuse.

Then they drove off together.

Whitney's fingers tightened on the drapes, the previous tenderness on her face cooling into a straight, calm line.

Was she his secretary? Unlikely, a secretary would not act so familiar.

Who was she?

Whitney pondered, yet also felt ridiculous for doing so.

Maybe she was his girlfriend. After all, she and this man were married only by agreement because of the sudden arrival of the child, and he still suspected her of having ulterior motives.

So, was it not normal for him to have had a girlfriend before?

After all, the deal was just for a year. Maybe when it ended, he would marry his girlfriend!

That was what Whitney thought, but her heart still felt tight.

Why did he flirt with her last night if that was the case?

Or was he just an expert in the game, with many women at his side?

Whitney felt like she had been doused with cold water and jolted awake.

What was she confused about last night? Or did she think he was a good person just because he had saved her twice?

Hadn't the despair men had given her been enough? After experiencing all that despair, she would not give

20/3

15:01

She ran into the man, who was already dressed in a shirt, reaching for his tie. He glanced at her with an air of noble indifference. He seemed to have slept just fine.

Whitney glared at him but was caught in the act. He curved his lips and said, "What do we have here? A little panda? Didn't sleep well?"

"Mind your own business, Whitney snapped back.

He did not seem to care, tossing his tie into her hands and standing tall before her, "Hanging around to tie my tie, Madam?"

Speechless, Whitney wondered, "Has he gone blind at such a young age?"

Her eyes widened as she walked over to him. His towering height required her to stand on tiptoes, and she looped the tie around his neck, knotting it tightly, her voice soft. "Like this, Sir. Is this to your satisfaction?"

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213

15:01

Chapter 29

anyone the chance to make her feel that way again.

Her heart needed to be locked away tightly. Whitney lowered her gaze and calmed down Right, this was just a transaction, after all.

Then her phone chimed

It was L. I do not wish to see what happened at the Valentine Mansion ever again! From now on, avoid going out alone and call me for anything, pregnant kitty, hmm?]

His tone was domineering and teasing. But Whitney was already alert, what she truly cared about was indeed the child in her belly.

She did not reply.

Whitney searched for materials at home, preparing for the upcoming state-level design competition,

She was fond of Natalie, who tried her best to nourish her. Whitney had lost her beloved family too early and had not felt such pure warmth in a long time.

“Whitney, why do you look a little pale?” Natalie inquired.

Whitney paused, then shook her head with a smile. “You must be mistaken.”

Just then, her phone rang. Seeing the caller, Whitney’s eyes turned cold, and she quietly stood and walked

away.

She did not answer.

But Simon was persistent.

Finally, Whitney answered with a cold expression, and Simon’s voice, tinged with a strange gentleness, reached her.

“Whitney, I’ve been thinking a lot these past few days. I can’t let go of you. Let’s meet, shall we?”

Whitney could only scoff.

“Simon, whatever you’re spouting now, I’ll forward straight to Monica. As for meeting up, the only places you’ll see me in this lifetime are at a jailhouse or a graveyard. Whenever you find yourself in either, expect me.”

“Whitney!”

With an icy click, Whitney ended the call.

But Simon seemed to anticipate her move; he immediately responded to a text message.

Whitney’s thumb hovered over the delete button, yet as her eyes flicked across the screen, her motion froze.

Chapter 30

The message from Simon read, [I know you wouldn’t come out willingly, so I’ve got leverage. Whitney, I have your grandfather’s old phone book, the one he had before he passed away. Haven’t you been trying to dig into that accident for years now? Are you sure you don’t want it?]

Simon knew her too well, and he had found her Achilles' heel.

Her mom and grandfather had perished in a horrific accident, or so the story went, according to Preston.

She was too young at the time, and she was studying abroad. Upon her return, she was bluntly informed of their sudden deaths. After they were gone, it was as if a giant hand had wiped away all traces of their existence.

Whitney had never questioned it before. She just wanted to know what really caused the accident. Back when she and Simon were an item, she had asked him to track down her grandfather's assistant and any leads. The phone book was probably what he had found.

But after being double-crossed by the Valentine family, she started suspecting their involvement in her mother's and grandfather's deaths.

On the day of the funeral, she had searched the Valentine Mansion to no avail; Preston had cleared out all of her mother's and grandfather's belongings.

The phone book could reveal who her grandfather had been in contact with. If she could get her hands on it, it would be her only lead.

Whitney decided to call him back.

Simon's voice was smug with triumph. "So, Whitney, what have you decided?"

"Where's the phone book?"

"Come meet me. Agree to my terms, and I'll hand it over."

Whitney's eyes narrowed. With a sly edge to her voice, she spoke, "How do I know the phone book is real? Show me a video of it now, and then we'll talk."

Simon agreed, and about two minutes later, he sent her a video.

Whitney squinted at the footage. Aside from the yellowed pages of the phone book, she recognized the background—the furniture, the layout—it was his bachelor apartment.

En så « no s

Armed with the information she needed, Whitney did not hang up in a hurry.

Simon's voice had a hint of pleasure as he said, "Meet me tomorrow night at Crystalline Bar's private booth. You come, and I deliver."

Whitney agreed. "Fine."

"Don't stand me up!" Simon sounded genuinely pleased.

After hanging up, Whitney immediately contacted Tiana. "Tiana, do we have enough time? Did you get his location?"

Indeed, she had coordinated with Tiana before the call, asking her to trace Simon's location.

"He made the call from his bachelor apartment!"

Whitney nodded, confirming the video was shot in real-time and the phone book was there.

Tiana smirked. "So, what's your plan?"

The following evening.

1/3

15.01

Whitney lied to Natalie, saying she would be back before eight.

Her phone buzzed with a Facebook message from L, [What are you up to? Dare ignore my messages?]

Whitney pondered for a moment. He had told her to call him if anything came up. She furrowed her brows, her fingertips hesitating over the screen before ultimately closing Facebook.

With an indifferent expression, Whitney left for her appointment.

She needed to draw Simon out to make her move easier.

Inside Crystaline Bar's private booth, Simon stood tall before Whitney, gazing at her with a mysterious intensity.

"Come in and sit down, Whitney."

Whitney stood her ground near the door, catching a whiff of alcohol on his breath. "What do you want to talk about? Make it quick."

Simon's eyes roamed over her figure, hidden beneath plain clothes. She was breathtakingly beautiful, with a striking face and delicate features. She had once been the object of many a young man's affections in Banyan City, exuding a noble elegance without a hint of vulgarity. At times, her demeanor was as playful and vibrant as a young girl's.

She was such a beauty; no man would want to let her go.

"Is the baby really that thug's?" Maybe it was the dim light, but Simon's gaze was deep and fervent. Whitney pressed closer to the door. "That's not something you should care about, Simon."

"Why can't I care? You, your body... It was all supposed to be mine!" He stepped closer.

Whitney clenched her fists, a chill settling in her heart. Her lips curled into a sneer. "In your heart, I can die, but I can't carry another man's child? Is your pride hurt? Are you here because you can't stand it? How did you weigh your options back then?"

You realized I would become a pawn for the Valentine family. You used me to start your business, and after Monica wrapped you around her finger with her seductions, you dropped me without a second thought. The Valentine family could secure you the Perlman inheritance, and I was out numbered, right?"

Her piercing words left Simon's facade in shambles, his pretenses ripped away. He seized her shoulders. "It wasn't like that. I still have you in my heart!"

"Can you ever escape Monica's seductions?" Whitney taunted him bitterly.

"What right do you have to judge me? You're nothing but a fallen woman. If so many men can have you, why can't I?"

His rage shocked Whitney to the core. It took her a moment to regain her composure, staring at him like he had become a stranger.

Whitney's heart trembled with a cold fear. "What do you want, Simon?"

"Forget that lowlife. Come to me. I hate seeing you trade your body for leverage. You were always mine." His drunken gaze locked onto her.

Whitney's laugh was cold. "So you can't stand to see me with someone else, and now you want me as your secret lover? You're despicable, Simon, and drunk to boot!"

Her phone vibrated again, and she glanced at it discreetly. Her expression eased, "Forget it. I don't want the phone book anymore. I'm not going to keep you company."

She made a show of naturally reaching for the door.

Suddenly, with a loud bang, Simon rushed over and slammed the door shut!

Whitney was taken aback, her face cool with alarm. "I've already refused you, Simon."

213

15:01

Chapter 30

"Ha, Simon caressed her shoulder, leaning down to smell her hair. "You think I don't know how clever you are. You might fool Monica with these games, but I know you too well

Whitney, I know you're stalling for time. The thief you sent to my place is already being held at the curb having tea with my guys!

Whitney halted abruptly, turning around.

She had enlisted Tiana to hire a local cat burglar, planning to have him sneak into the apartment and steal the phone book while Simon was out meeting with her.

But she had not counted on Simon being so acutely aware of her tactics. His people had caught the thief red-handed!

“The phone book is back in my possession, and now, I’m not considering any deal with you. You’re not going anywhere tonight anyway.”

With swift motion, he scooped her up and strode over to the couch inside, proceeding to tie her up.

“What are you doing?” Whitney’s face immediately paled, but she dared not struggle too much for fear of hurting herself. She was helplessly shoved down.

Simon’s eyes, heavy with intoxication, burned with enthusiasm as he leaned in to tear at her clothes. You forced my hand. I’m going to have you tonight.”

“You’re insane,” Whitney subtly reached for the sewing kit, but her hand was abruptly caught by his.

*Simon sneered,
“I know you’re crafty. Don’t even think about pulling any tricks.”*

“Let me go, Simon!”

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips onto hers forcefully.

“Stop!” Whitney clutched desperately at her clothing, fear taking over...

With a loud bang! At that moment, the door suddenly burst open.

A sudden chill swept through the private room, sending a shiver down Whitney’s spine.

Simon shot up from his seat just as Whitney turned her head to see a tall figure clad in a perfectly tailored black suit, his mask hiding a stern jawline beneath. Those deep, piercing eyes aimed a chilling gaze straight at

her.

Why was L here?

Whitney tried to compose herself in disarray as her cheeks flushed a bashful pink.

Without a hint of tenderness, his icy grip hoisted her up. He had appeared next to the couch without notice, his frosty stare alone enough to send Whitney's heart racing with fear.

Biting her lip, she immediately positioned herself behind him.

He turned, his gaze sweeping over Simon, who had his arms wrapped around Whitney's waist.

Simon faltered, taken aback. This man was supposed to be a thug, but the aura around him was so intimidating that Simon's arms fell away without conscious thought.

Coming back to his senses, Simon's anger flared. "You again, you thug!"

But before he could throw a punch, he was met with a fierce blow that sent him sprawling to the ground.

"Hiss." Eyes blazing, Simon scrambled back to his feet. Just then, two other young men entered from outside. Simon's demeanor shifted on spotting Nolan Fuller and Parker Doonan. Nolan was from one of the four families, while Parker, not quite from that elite circle, was even more notorious. His family, the Doonan family, was one of the rulers of the underground world.

Parker was the youngest head of the Doonan family.

Now, the Fuller family's young lord and the Doonan family's head were flanking the masked man, like his right and left arms.

Simon's expression soured. Maybe this guy was not just some thug after all. But who was he?

Whitney was abruptly swept up in the man's arms as he strode out of the room.

"Stop!" Simon bellowed, his pride wounded. "What right do you have to take her? You're nobody to her!"

The man's eyes narrowed, a sneer spreading as he glanced down at the woman in his arms. "Didn't you tell her who you belong to?"

Whitney hung her head as if she had done something wrong.

"Who the hell are you?" Simon roared, still not ready to back down.

Nolan glanced at L before kicking the door shut with a sneer. "Just a man who doesn't give a damn about you. Simon, you touch her again, and your whole Perlman family will have to watch out."

Simon stiffened, overwhelmed by the audacious tone. Just who was this man?

The night air was crisp with a hint of cold.

Whitney found herself carried to the car, sitting on his lap, the temperature inside as chilling as the embrace of the man she leaned against.

He did not say a word, and the oppressive silence was heavy between them.

Feeling awkward in her disheveled clothes, Whitney wanted to move away.

Before she could, his hand came down sharply and slapped her butt. "Eager to get off my lap? Were your ex-fiancé's legs more comfortable? I thought your hatred ran deep, but it seems old flames can be rekindled."

1/3

17:47

Chapter 21

His cruelty was biting when angered.

With her hand covering the spot he had hit, Whitney muttered in embarrassment, "Mr. L, there's no need for sarcasm... Thank you for earlier."

His mood was clearly foul as he eyed her pale face with mockery. "You think I want your thanks?"

He kicked the seat in front, signaling the driver to turn on the air conditioning.

The woman in his arms trembled lightly.

He pulled her closer, his gaze falling to the torn fabric of her blouse. As he reached out, she recoiled instinctively.

“What are you doing?” His rough fingers touched her delicate skin, and Whitney, already rattled by the night’s near-disaster, pushed his hand away.

A low, mocking chuckle came from above. “What do you think I’m doing? Should I finish here what you started with that ex of yours?”

Whitney’s cheeks burned with humiliation. “Please don’t speak so crudely.”

“Who’s acting crudely? You lied to my mother, telling her you were going out with your BFF, right?” He shot back coldly.

Whitney’s face paled further. “I didn’t want to worry anyone with this. I can explain. I needed a phone book, and indeed, if you hadn’t arrived in time, I couldn’t have borne the consequences. But I never imagined Simon would stoop so low...”

Never would she have expected Simon to do something so sick to a pregnant woman.

His tone grew colder. “Didn’t I make myself clear? Have you forgotten, Madam?”

Whitney lowered her gaze, her lashes quivering. She thought of his private life and, after a moment’s calm reflection, stated, “Thank you for your kindness, Mr. L, but let’s be clear. Ours is a contract marriage. We should maintain our distance. I don’t want to bother you with my issues, and I’ll stay out of yours.”

Silence fell for a few seconds.

Whitney could feel the temperature drop.

The assistant, Felix, in the front seat shivered and could not help but look back, whispering, "Madam, Mr. L was working late... He rushed back to pick you up from the airport, but you didn't reply to messages or answer your phone."

Whitney blinked in surprise.

"Felix!" Ludwik's voice was ice-cold.

The assistant fell silent.

Whitney lifted her head to the sound of Mr. L's chilling voice.

"You want distance? Then keep your distance."

Whitney stiffened and quickly crawled off his lap, squeezing herself as far into the corner as she could.

Observing the woman trying to distance herself, the man's chest grew stiffer. After a second, he barked at the driver, "Close the window on her side!"

The chill against Whitney's face vanished, and she stopped shivering as he turned on the heat. She kept her eyes low.

His anger was palpable, yet his observation was meticulous. He a man was hard for any woman to resist.

Was domineering, cold, yet considerate. Such

Whitney could only assume that he did not want her stomach to suffer from the coldness, nothing more.

35

17:47

Chapte 3

The car stopped at the hospital, where doctors quickly attended to Whitney to ensure the baby was fine.

Notan breathed a sigh of relief, grumbling. "Ludwik married her just for the kid. If anything happened to the baby, he'd probably take it out on Whitney.."

Parker, however, looked toward the slender figure and mused. Is it just the child Ludwik wants? I sense something more”

“What are you sensing?”

“A whiff of scandal,” Parker said with intrigue.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Ludwik’s a cold fish! His heart’s like a monk’s—untouched. Have you seen how he’s never so much as glanced at the woman who’s been by his side for years?”

“That’s different. After all, Whitney is his first... taste,” Parker said with a wicked grin.

“You’re utterly sick!”

Nolan was convinced that Whitney was a mystery, and Ludwik was only interested in having a child, not in the child’s mother!

“Excuse me, where can I find Mr. L?” Whitney approached and asked.

Seeing that she was unaware of the incident at the club, Nolan decided to play a trick on her. “His mother got sick because of you. Where do you think he is?”

With that, he pointed in a direction.

Whitney’s complexion changed slightly, and she quickly made her way to Room 02, “Mom?”

A tall man stood in front of the hospital room, his suit jacket removed, leaving him in a crisp white shirt accentuating his noble and aloof demeanor.

He glanced at Whitney briefly before looking back at the bed. “You didn’t come back by eight, and the maid let something slip, then Mom fainted out of worry for the baby,” he said coolly.

How could this have happened? Whitney was filled with guilt!

3/3

Chapter 32

The man's brows were a cold shade of ash as he scanned her. "You know how much she's been longing for a grandchild, yet do you even care about this baby? Whitney!"

Whitney froze, at a loss for words.

The baby had come so unexpectedly, and she was forced into this situation. Thus, she truly did not feel very strongly about it.

"What are you getting all riled up for, kiddo? Look at Whitney. Her eyes are all red from you yelling at her," Natalie's voice came from the bed as she opened her eyes.

Whitney rushed over, holding Natalie's hand, her nose tingling with guilt. "Mom, I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking it through. I've worried you."

"Ah, my blood pressure spikes, and I tend to faint, but it's not as serious as that brat made it sound. Don't listen

to him!" Natalie caressed her face.

She had always cherished Whitney, holding her close, and Whitney felt incredibly guilty. Since her mother's death, she had not felt such warmth from anyone. She had not realized her lie would send Natalie rushing to the hospital. She did not know how frail Natalie really was until now, and she seemed more fragile than she had thought.

The man watched her anxious little face, his eyes cold.

"Son, come here, help me up."

After the old lady got up, she pushed Whitney's hand into the man's arm. She seemed fine. Apart from high blood pressure, her spirit was still strong. She shuffled out with Taryn, "I'm heading to the restroom. You go charm your wife. She's carrying my golden grandchild, so no fighting!"

With that final roar, Natalie even had Xandra shut the door behind her.

The hospital room's light was a soft white, and silence fell.

The man let go of Whitney's hand and walked to the window, his tall figure standing coldly.

The chill lingered.

Whitney understood why he was so angry now; she had indeed caused his mother great distress.

Him comforting her? That was impossible.

"L, I'm really sorry..." she said, biting her lip.

Her presence diminished instantly.

It took a moment for him to look back at her, his gaze hard as he stared at her pitiful expression.

"What exactly are you sorry for?"

Whitney sincerely said, "I was so caught up in my vendetta that I neglected how Mom would feel."

"What else?" He eyed her coldly.

Whitney's eyes welled up, but she shook her head after a moment of thought,

When you're wrong, admit it; when you're not, there's nothing to say.

Her righteous indignation made the man laugh in spite.

L's tall frame closed in on her, cornering her against the wall, his voice dark with accusation. "Why didn't you answer my calls or reply to my messages?"

Whitney's face stiffened, her gaze turning away. "My phone was broken."

17:47

Chapter 32

He scoffed.

Suddenly, he wrapped his hand around her waist and, before she could react, snatched the phone from her pocket.

“L! Give that back!”

He immediately turned on the screen; the phone was intact, and Tiana’s Facebook page was still open, his eyes clouding over. “So you deliberately ignored my calls and messages? What’s that about?”

Whitney stood on her toes to reach, but he was too tall and strong. Amid her struggle, his chest began to heave, and he steadied her restless little body, his eyes narrowed and voice husky. “Are you craving some kind of attention, perhaps a special punishment, hmm?”

His eyes narrowed dangerously.

Whitney suddenly realized what was happening. His body was burning up. She quickly backed away, flushing, and said coolly, “I haven’t done anything wrong, so why should I be punished? Please don’t joke with me like that; we have a business relationship, and overstepping boundaries would only complicate things. I don’t care which women have been sitting on your lap, and I certainly won’t be one of them!”

He watched her, then leaned in with a half-smirk. “Why do I detect a whiff of jealousy? Are you feeling envious for no apparent reason?”

Jealous? She was nothing of the sort. Whitney denied it immediately. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” “How many women have sat on my lap? Wouldn’t you know if you tried?” He raised an eyebrow, grasping her wrists, his anger seeming to fade slightly.

Whitney felt her cheeks burn at his suggestive words. “I’m not sitting on your lap! I told you we need to keep things professional.”

“Alright, you’re quite the accountant. So, should I assume that since I rescued you today, you owe me something in return, Madam?”

His words were always so bold. She realized she was no match for him!

Annoyed, Whitney pushed against his chest, but he pulled her into his arms, inhaling her soft scent. His Adam’s apple bobbed slightly as he said, “You’ve done

something wrong, yet you dare to talk back to me. It seems you're asking for it .

He pinned her hands behind her back, Whitney forced to arch her back, and his lips descended.

"Don't!" She had said they needed clear boundaries.

But he did not give her a chance to struggle, kissing her while watching her eyes flicker with fear and resistance, her cheeks flushing further, tempting him to taste more.

Whitney's eyes widened, trapped against his broad chest, her legs growing weaker, her hands instinctively clutching at his expensive shirt, his belt.

He held onto her 'little cat paws, pressing them to the end of his belt, his voice sultry. "You like this? Then hold on tight!"

His voice made Whitney blush furiously; she did not like it! She did not know how things had gotten to this point again.

Frustrated, she bit him,

He slowly released her, touching his lips with a frown. "Is that all you've got? Turning into a wildcat?"

"Who told you to bully me!"

"Do you even know what bullying is?" He asked, looking down, his eyes growing darker.

212

17.47

Chapter 32

"I know! I know. Whitney feared being burned by his gaze, and her fists pressed against his solid chest.

He took a deep breath, his arms still around her, but his eyes turned sharp as he warned, "Remember, even if our agreement is only for a y

ear, you are now the lady of the house. I won't let you off easily if today's incident happens again"

Whitney nodded. 'Til fulfill my role for this year'

"Can you let go of me now?" Whitney said, irritated, "You're acting like a thug, pressuring an innocent girl."

"Innocent?" He scoffed, hand in pocket, about to let her go when the door swung open, and someone walked in, "Bro, what the hell are you dilly-dallying for?"

Bang!

Nolan froze, immediately covering his eyes with his hands, peeking through a crack, and yelled, "Yo... you getting ready for a wall slam? Ms. Natalie, your son's got game. I didn't see a thing!"

"Let me have a look," Natalie said, shuffling over with a chuckle.

"Out," L said, swiftly shielding Whitney with his body, throwing a cold glance at Nolan.

"Alright, alright, I'm out."

The door slammed shut, and Whitney's cheeks flushed a deep crimson while the man remained as cool as a cucumber. After releasing her, he glanced mischievously at the bathroom, "Shall you take the first shower, or shall I?"

Whitney eyed him warily, her large eyes narrowed.

He raised an eyebrow, a hint of mockery in his voice. "Don't you need to freshen up after coming back from another hotel?"

Oh.

"And what, pray tell, has our little lady's ears turned such a lovely pink shade?" He teased, pinching her earlobe gently as he passed by her.

With long strides, he entered the bathroom.

Whitney bit her lip, deciding it was best not to engage in a war of words with him.

3/3

Chapter 33

“Sotankadent The door knocked, and Xandra came in with a tray of warm comfort food, saying. Ser asked me to prepare something light for you. The old lady has already eaten. No need to wait up for her?”

When did he instruct Xandra? They had been arguing all the way here

Whitney took the tray sullenly

The rise had spent quite a while in the bathroom, doing who knows what. After he came out, Whitney finally went in wash her hands.

That was when she spotted a jade ring on the vanity, but it was only half of one as if it had been snapped in

two

Because of her background in jewelry design, Whitney instinctively picked it up. A memory surfaced unbidden—the man she saved that year gave her a half-ring as a token of gratitude. At the time, Whitney had not paid much attention. After her business bid failed, she had returned to the Valentine family, and within a few days, the ring was lost.

Their meeting was a fleeting connection, and Whitney had long stopped dwelling on his promise of repayment. But whose half-ring was this? Whitney lifted her head and walked out, bumping straight into L, who was returning to the room.

The man saw the object in her hand and immediately took it, saying. “Thank you.”

Whitney watched him carefully pocket it, treating it with such importance. “Is it something very important?”

“Yeah

So important, who gave it to him?”

Whitney's eyes deepened. She could not help but ask, "Mr. L, is this from a girlfriend?"

The man glanced over, his tone teasing, "What are you trying to find out?"

Whitney immediately pursed her lips, pretending to be indifferent, "Before you and I entered our marriage agreement, did you perhaps have a girlfriend?"

He propped his hand against his chiseled jaw, chuckling, "Who was it just now who wanted to set clear boundaries, and now you're prying into my private affairs? Isn't that a bit of a contradiction?"

Whitney turned red-faced, caught off guard. "No one wants to know. If you won't tell, then don't."

The man walked back to the door, his lips curling slightly, "I have a wife, but she's not very obedient."

He stepped out, and his assistant asked him in a low voice, "Sir, are you still giving the departure gift to Madam?"

The man spoke indifferently, "A little ingrate, what's the point? Toss it in the trash."

The assistant was speechless.

Very astutely, he walked in and threw something into the trash can next to Whitney's feet.

Sipping her soup, Whitney looked down and saw "Gemstone Gazette"! She was surprised and quickly picked it up. This was an original, hard to come by. It contained jewelry knowledge compiled by the world-renowned master L.C., a mysterious prodigy who gained fame at a young age and was Whitney's idol. Unfortunately, he was so low-profile and rarely released his work!

Whitney clutched the book to her chest in adoration. Then her face went blank.

Was this the gift L brought her from his trip? How did he know she was preparing for a design competition? Oh, she had let it slip while having spaghetti that day.

1/3

17:47

Chapter

Her heart fluttered like ripples on the water.

Whitney looked at the table full of appetizers, biting her lip.

This man, was he good or bad? Or was he just too sophisticated, his aloofness hiding the kind of attention to detail and allure that women found irresistible, and he had perfected the art? And that teasing answer just now, was he denying he had a girlfriend?

Whitney could not read him, mysterious men were too dangerous, drawing one deeper and deeper into their

orbit

She needed to build walls.

Outside the hospital room in the corridor, Nolan saw Ludwik approaching, smoking a cigarette, his stern features as expressionless as ever.

Nolan asked, perplexed, "Ludwik, what's your deal with this Whitney? Were you planning on continuing your advances in her room just now?"

The man barely glanced at him, uninterested in responding.

An assistant approached, handing over a file, "Sir, there's been—no progress on the night you were set up, and whether Ms. Valentine is a suspect is still..."

"Keep investigating."

With a playful glint behind his glasses, Parker said, "Nolan, Ludwik is still observing the lady. In his high position, he's naturally suspicious. Plus, Natalie's safety is paramount. But while he doesn't trust easily, he can't resist teasing the girl in his loneliness. He's not far from letting passion cloud his judgment."

Ludwik flicked away the cigarette butt and fixed Parker with a cold, inscrutable look, then strode away with a swift kick.

Parker chuckled softly.

The next day, while Natalie stayed in the hospital for recovery, Whitney was taken for her first official prenatal checkup.

The baby was five weeks along, just over a month old.

Although she frequently monitored her blood pressure at the villa, seeing the tiny seahorse—like blob on the ultrasound made Whitney's emotions a mix of strange and complex.

She had to start coming to terms with this child.

L's child—did she really plan to keep it? After a year, to give the child to L and cut all ties, returning to a state of strangers—could she bear parting with her baby?

These complicated questions fogged Whitney's mind as she looked at the path ahead, knowing she could only take one step at a time.

Without a doubt, the child was vital to pacifying Natalie's health for the time being.

Natalie looked at the tiny seahorse and smiled all day long.

Whitney diligently stayed by her bedside, opening her laptop to start on her designs.

Before she knew it, the evening had fallen, and the tall figure of the man entered, his suit jacket elegantly slung over his arm.

He switched on a lamp, but the woman did not budge.

Not until a commanding warmth enveloped her from behind did she realize he was there. Looking at her laptop,

17.17

Chapter 33

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17:47

Chapter 33

he raised an eyebrow and asked, “Stuck for inspiration?*

Whitney turned her head, her forehead brushing against his attractive lips, her skin burning hot. She cleared her throat. “The most important judge of the jewelry competition is the Imperial Gem Corporation. I can’t get a read on my arch enemy’s preferences, and this submission is crucial for me.”

She had to defeat Monica at every turn. This competition was vital to overcoming the Valentine family and reclaiming Skye Gem.

The man’s eyes twinkled mischievously, “So you need to cozy up to Mr. Lipper, inside and out?”

Such a pointed way to put it, inside and out’.

“There’s no theme for the preliminary round, right? What elements are you considering?” He asked. Whitney was surprised by his tone—it seemed like he knew a thing or two about the jewelry industry? She lifted her fluttering eyelashes, skeptical, “Mr. L, are you offering to guide me now? Do you know jewelry design?”

The man let out a cool chuckle, glancing over the laptop screen. “These themes are too basic. The judges at the jewelry competition are esteemed and respected. Many are antique connoisseurs. Why not consider blending vintage flair with contemporary jewelry design?”

Whitney’s gaze trailed over his casually sprawled legs against the desk, and suddenly, her mind clicked as if struck by lightning.

“Of course, vintage is all the rage now. This could be a groundbreaking idea...” Her eyes sparked with excitement.

The man’s lips curled into a slight smirk.

As Whitney rapidly sketched out her thoughts, she suddenly looked up, forced to reassess this enigmatic man. “L, you seem pretty savvy! How come you know so much about the niche field of jewelry design, and your insights are so unique?”

Leaning close, his eyes twinkling with amusement, he said, "I know a little about everything, enough to always stay on top of you."

He emphasized the words 'on top, causing a blush to dance in the depths of Whitney's eyes.

"You get one compliment, and you're off in the clouds!" She pouted.

"Don't believe me?"

Test me on something else," he teased with a mischievous glance.

She believed him; the aura of distinction that enveloped him, filled with the depth and complexity of a leader, layered with a sense of danger, was not something an ordinary man could possess.

Staring at his mask, Whitney felt an overwhelming curiosity. She yearned to peel it back and see the face beneath.

Who was he, really?

3/3

Chapter 34

Her gaze was pointed with an unmistakable intention. The man's eyes narrowed, and he quickly stood up, tossing her copy of "Gemstone Gazette" to the side.

"Hey, why'd you chuck my heartthrob, huh?" Whitney immediately cradled the book to her chest like a prized possession. "Once you gave it to me, it's mine. It's got works by the world's jewelry maestro, L.C., in it. I plan to cuddle up with this book in bed!"

The man paused for a moment, then let out a meaningful chuckle. "L.C. is your heartthrob?"

"Yep, he's the man I admire most."

"Oh." Whitney could not fathom the deepening amusement in the crook of his smile.

She muttered, "L.C.'s insights on jewels are the sharpest and most profound! Sadly, nowadays, many jewelry firms have strayed from their true calling. Take Imperial Gem Corporation, for instance. That Mr. Lippert is all businessman, full of sneaky tricks. I just hope he doesn't accept any kickbacks for Monica's painting. If he does, may his ego shrink by 4 inches!"

A sudden chill replaced the lazy amusement beside her.

Whitney did not notice. "Hmph, serves him right if he ends up lonely and childless."

A piece of candy was abruptly shoved into the young woman's mouth, effectively silencing her.

October 1st arrived swiftly, marking the opening of the grand jewelry competition.

Designers from all levels of jewelry companies were to enroll at the Imperial Gem Corporation tower. Tiana accompanied Whitney early to the event. As they spotted Monica's car outside, Tiana snorted coldly, "Monica sure got here early! After her reputation took a hit at the charity gala, the Valentines must have been busy throwing money at PR. Preston must be on the verge of a heart attack because of that mother-daughter duo."

Whitney's lips curled slightly. "Their reputations have been tarnished, and the high society is whispering about them. Preston, of all people, cares about reputation the most. Plus, with Phebe opposing the engagement, Monica is desperate to dazzle at this competition to win over Preston and secure a lavish wedding. Besides, this competition is a bet between her and me; she's bound to take it seriously."

Tiana smirked, "With Monica's reputation in shambles, if you take a swipe at her career and ensure her defeat, I bet the Valentines will be even more annoyed with her. When the family crumbles, you can reclaim your company and exact revenge."

Whitney's eyes narrowed, contemplating exactly that.

As they entered the grand lobby of Imperial Gem Corporation, Monica descended from the executive elevator with Simon in tow, both sporting smiles.

Upon spotting Whitney, Monica's pride soared. She pulled Whitney aside, her voice dripping with malice, "Sis, you're here, too? I'm afraid an unknown designer like you won't catch Mr. Lippert's attention. Just so you know, Mr. Lippert accepted and adored my landscape painting. You don't stand a chance, bitch."

Whitney blinked in surprise, and Tiana's face stiffened.

"Simon, thanks for spending 26 million dollars on the painting for me!" Monica sweetly returned to Simon's side, flaunting their affection.

Simon's eyes, however, flickered towards Whitney.

Whitney clenched her fists. That insufferable Mr. Lippert.

On the surface, she remained calm, her voice icy. "A man who spends 26 million on you but eyes a mistress

1/3

17:48

Chapter

behind your back? Better watch your back, Sis.

Monica stiffened.

Simon's face darkened, "What nonsense are you spouting, Whitney?"

Whitney did not spare him a glance and walked away, loathing in her heart.

The registration event was held in the third-floor conference room. When the handsome figure of the Imperial Gem Corporation's boss appeared, every designer, male and female, gawked.

This man bore an extraordinary countenance, a testament to God's favor, with a tall and

imposing physique. Wherever he went, hearts fluttered, yet his enigmatic aura and intimidating presence kept people at bay.

“OMG, Mr. Lippert himself is here!” A female designer squealed under her breath.

Tiana frantically tugged at Whitney’s sleeve, “Despite everything, this infuriating man is just too much. So his name is Ludwik Lippert, such a charming name!”

Monica, too, felt weak at the sight of the man. A titan of the jewelry industry, he held sway over business life and death. He was more dashing and capable than Simon; marrying him would be a true coup.

Only Whitney’s eyes blazed with hatred as she caught sight of the name Ludwik, mouthing silently, “Lousy name.”*

At the chairman’s seat, the man of high stature frowned suddenly.

The registration was a mere formality—designers introducing themselves and presenting their credentials. Unlike Whitney’s prior battles with him, the elusive Mr. Lippert was shockingly overseeing even a minor registration event.

As Whitney grumbled internally, the man in charge asked in a deep, severe tone, “Who is Whitney?”

Whitney stiffened, biting her lip as she slowly rose, “That would be me.”

His eyebrow arched inquisitively, glancing at her dismissively. “You lack manners.”

Whitney cursed him inwardly.

“Mr. Lippert, it is a pleasure to meet you. I’m Whitney.”

“Your tone is rather brusque. Do you have a problem with me?”

His dashing appearance and profound demeanor were making the ladies flush with excitement.

Whispers spread quickly. Mr. Lippert seemed to have a bone to pick with this Whitney?

Whitney clenched her fists tighter.

The man flipped through her resume, frowning critically, "You look decent enough, but I haven't heard of you. Are your designs any good?"

He was questioning her qualifications to compete.

Whitney forced a toothy smile. "Good enough. Maybe even better than yours."

"Such arrogance, challenging Mr. Lippert! Does she even want to compete?" Someone snickered from below.

Monica's smirk widened.

The man stood, eyeing the fuming young woman, his voice low, "Meeting adjourned! Whitney, stay behind. We need to have a word."

Standing behind her, the assistant watched as the big boss turned on his heel, his thin lips curling into an almost invisible smirk.

Man, he had a knack for teasing his little wife.

2/3

17:48

Whitney had not expected to be singled out by her nemesis, feeling like she ne

office after class. A mix of anger and apprehension surged through her as Tiana squeezed her hand. "He's not about to disqualify you on the spot, right?"

"He is your dreamboat, huh?"

Tiana just sighed.

Simon waited in his Lamborghini outside the company skyscraper, eyeing Monica as she approached. "Where's Whitney?" He asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Simon, since when do you care about my sister?” Monica’s face twisted into a pout, but her eyes darkened with malice. Ever since the charity gala, she sensed Simon’s thoughts toward that bitch had grown disturbingly tender.

Simon’s expression stiffened as he wrapped an arm around her. “Just asking,” he said casually.

Monica feigned concern. “Whitney just got chewed out by Mr. Lippert in front of everyone, and she had the nerve to cop an attitude. I’m afraid she’s been held back for questioning... She might not even make it through the preliminaries.”

Usually, such remarks would prompt Simon to berate Whitney, but not this time.

A shadow crossed Monica’s face. She felt a shift in Simon’s demeanor. She was determined to win the competition and keep Simon’s affections from drifting away.

Tiana and Whitney were ushered into the CEO’s office, where they stood in awe of the grandeur presented by the 270-degree window walls.

“I have to admit, Mr. Lippert’s office makes your Skye Gem Ltd. look like a broom closet,” Tiana whispered, impressed.

Whitney responded by kicking over a trash can with a loud thud.

“Whitney!” Tiana was petrified, quickly grabbing her friend’s wrist as she moved to vandalize the desk. “Do you want Mr. Lippert to throw you in jail for life?”

Whitney regained her composure and stiffly sat in the big boss’s chair, her eyes filled with resentment. “What’s so luxurious about this chair? It’s as hard as rock. All for show,” she muttered. “This chair can’t be worth more than a grand. It’s killing my backside.”

“Is your butt made of gold? Sometimes, acknowledging someone’s success is a step forward, Whitney.”

“Did you marry Ludwik already? Mrs. Ludwik, are we not BFFs anymore?” Whitney retorted.

Tiana fell silent and sat down, booting up the computer. "There's no mention of a 'Ludwik' in the Lippert family records. Mr. Lippert, the kingpin of the jewelry world – is he really a Lippert or not?"

3/3

Chapter 35

"Who cares? He's my archenemy for life. Especially after he dared to accept Monica's painting. That man is nothing but a devious snake, a greedy wolf in sheep's clothing, pretending to be a gentleman but with the

heart of a jackal

Whitney approached the bookshelf with a scowl, slapping the picture of the man back and forth with disdain.

Tiana, quivering nervously, whispered, "Isn't it a bit much to be trash-talking and hitting his picture in his own

office

"Do you really think he'd have surveillance in his office?" Whitney snorted, scanning the room suspiciously.

She noticed a one-way mirror on the wall; the other side was probably another office.

At that moment, just a mirror away, the tall man stood with his arms crossed, an assistant beside him sweating bullets as he listened to the young madam's tirade.

But the boss had a deep, amused smile on his lips like a man watching his kitten put up a playful fight utterly adorable

"No use. Tiana! With the way Monica cozied up to him, he took the bait. What's the point of me even trying?"

Whitney slumped into a chair, her defeat weighing heavily on her.

“If only I could’ve taken him down before all this,” she gestured around the imposing office. “The desk, the chair... It would all be mine.”

“Am I also yours, Ms. Valentine?” A deep, lazy voice suddenly came from the doorway, laced with a teasing lilt.

Whitney, who had been facing away, stiffened and spun around in her chair.

Tiana had vanished, and there stood a strikingly handsome man at the door, hands in pockets, his dark eyes fixed on her.

A heavy silence fell.

Whitney was a leading socialite, known for her grace and poise. Yet there she was, her legs disrespectfully thrown over the boss’s desk.

Whitney stiffened, then stood abruptly.

“Stay put.” The man raised an intrigued eyebrow, strode over, and grasped her delicate foot in his warm palm with one swift move. “This desk is worth three million, a fitting throne for your dainty feet.”

Before Whitney could react, he playfully tickled the sole of her foot, sending her face into a blaze.

She tried to pull away, but his firm grip held her in place, immobilizing her with just three fingers.

His gaze slid over her curves, his lips curving into a devilish smirk, “And the chair, six million, imported fine wood, a worthy perch for your ... butt.”

Whitney’s cheeks flamed as she realized the implication, “You... Mr. Lippert, you were eavesdropping! Let go of

me!

She struggled, but he held her ankle, his muscular arm bracing against the chair. With only three fingers, he had pinned her to the chair, unable to move.

“No.” He lowered his head, a glimmer of a smile hiding in his eyes. “As you know, a greedy and lustful man like me tends to give some contestants an unfair advantage. Some are willing to showcase their cleavage, among other things, are you?”

His demeanor was composed, but his eyes were wickedly playful as he leaned in and whispered suggestively, “Wanting the top prize is easy, Ms. Valentine.”

You, the great Mr. Lippert, are proposing indecent favors in exchange for winning the competition?” Whitney

17:48

wrenched her foot free, her skin trembling. She scrambled away from his imposing figure like a startled kitten.

He remained seated, looking after her with an amused gaze.

Whitney retreated, seething, “Shameless! Despicable! You hold a grudge, but I’ll tell you this – I’ll rise again and take you down.”

“Though I could win lying down and not doing a thing, I’d rather welcome the challenge in bed.” His eyes narrowed, the corners of his mouth lifting.

He was a scoundrel!

Whitney’s cheeks reddened even more as she grabbed her flats and bolted. “Don’t you dare think about me! I have a husband, and I love him. I will never stoop to your level. You’re not even half as handsome as he is!”

The man’s lips curled further. “How would you know without trying?”

Whitney fled without a word, her suspicions about the man’s rakishness confirmed.

As she stormed out, the assistant walked in with two lunches. “Sir, why did the madam leave?”

“She left in a huff. Arrange for a car to take her home.” The man settled back in his chair, his eyes falling on a scrap of paper littered with doodled turtles.

The chair still held the sweet scent of her perfume.

Was she calling him a turtle?

His brows rose with pleasure. She dared to curse him?

The assistant thought, “Boss has stayed back on purpose just to tease his wife. Tsk tsk, the rich and their games of cat and mouse.”

Fuming, Whitney climbed into Tiana’s car.

Tiana had good news. “Stella wants to meet up, a little gathering this afternoon!”

“Great,” Whitney replied while putting her laptop back in her bag, smiling despite the earlier debacle.

They arrived at the Aquatic Harmony Club, where Stella had just appeared, her disguise on point.

“Stella, how did you manage to escape the set?” Tiana hugged her.

“The new film wrapped up, Whitney.” Stella gave her a once-over, eyes brimming, “I just heard about your trouble. Are you okay?”

“All good now.” Whitney blinked back.

They hugged and headed to their private room.

Stella removed her hat, revealing a cascade of rose-colored curls, the embodiment of a screen siren.

“Stella, you’re getting more and more enchanting. Tell us, any love interests?” Tiana was ever the gossip.

Stella frowned, “When would I have the time? And Tiana, how are things with the Lutz heir?”

“An arranged match. He’s a philanderer.” Tiana rolled her eyes.

Whitney watched her friend's dramatics. "And yet you're totally smitten with him."

Stella's smile hitched slightly as she glanced toward Whitney, "I heard from Tiana that you're expecting... Is it true the guy's a thug?"

Tiana furrowed her brows. "Who told you he's a thug? I never said that."

Stella's grin froze for a second before she quickly recovered, laughing off her faux pas, "Oh, maybe I got it mixed up with something I saw on TV. My bad. Anyway, let's drop that. I've heard you guys are really diving into that jewelry design competition, huh?"

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