

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 36-45

Whitney looked at her for a moment and then nodded with a smile.

“Whitney, you’re incredibly talented! Did you finish your preliminary sketches? Can I take a peek?” Stella said, her interest piqued as she moved closer to sit with Whitney.

Tiana chuckled, “Come on, Stella, who are you kidding? I know you’re the one who least liked hitting the books. What’s got you suddenly so interested in jewelry design?”

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Whitney turned her head to see Stella’s expression hidden by a curtain of blonde hair. Then Stella lifted her gaze chuckling. “I’ve been dying to land that Imperial Gem Corporation campaign, and you, my dear Whitney, could give me a crash course in all things sparkly.”

Whitney curled a lip, powering up her laptop to show her. “I’ve only got halfway through the design.”

“Wow, this is gorgeous,” Stella admired intently, her voice filled with genuine appreciation.

After a while longer in conversation, Stella stood up, “I’m going to freshen up in the ladies’ room. Anyone care to join?”

Tiana tossed her a mask, “Go ahead, you knockout.”

With a playful laugh, Stella swept through the curtain and left.

Whitney’s gaze casually followed, and for a short moment, she thought she saw Monica.

She stood up quickly and peeked outside, but the hallway was empty.

“What’s up?”

“Must’ve been seeing things,” Whitney shrugged it off. Aquatic Harmony Club was their secret little hideout; how could Monica possibly know about it?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a slight frown furrowing her **delicate** brows.

“What’s on your mind?” Tiana nudged her.

Whitney pondered momentarily, “Tiana, don’t you feel like Stella seems a bit different since she got back?”

“Different, how?”

Whitney could not quite put her finger on it; there were no apparent changes. Maybe it was just her imagination, “After all that’s happened to me, she only asked once. And she seemed a bit edgy, steering the conversation toward the jewelry competition out of the blue.”

“You overthink things because you’re too smart for your own good. It’s normal for her to be eager for success in showbiz. She’s also chasing that ad campaign, which explains her sudden interest in jewelry. Chill out. We’ve been besties for years. Don’t let the Valentine family drama make you distrust everyone. At least you can trust me and Stella.”

Tiana gripped her hand with a reassuring laugh, and Whitney’s gloom lifted. Right, why was she doubting her best friends?

Stella returned from the restroom and touched up her makeup, and about two minutes later, another charming figure exited and went in a different direction.

The trio headed to Tiana’s place, where Whitney had left some reference books.

Stella’s agent soon picked her up while Whitney stayed behind, browsing through books as she continued her designs.

As evening approached, Whitney thought about L, who should be finishing work soon. The thought of her rival Ludwik Lippert getting fresh with her made her feel guilty about L back home. Should she call him?

As if reading her thoughts, Tiana teased, “Missing your pretend hubby? Call him. You should have him come to **pick you up**; you’re pregnant, after all.”

Before Whitney could respond, Tiana snatched her phone, found L’s number, and dialed.

As soon as the call connected, she returned the phone to Whitney. With a heated cheek, Whitney answered, "Hello, L?"

"May I help you with something?" A woman's soft and pleasant voice answered from the other end.

Whitney stiffened and Tiana's expression darkened. "Whose is this? Where's the owner of this preu

He is resting. Did you need him for something? The woman's tone was nonchalant but Whitney sensed **aft** antony in **her** claim.

Whitney recalled **the** female silhouette in the car that picked up L one morning

Her smile faded, and her lashes fluttered down as she quickly said. "It's nothing"

She hung up, the phone feeling awkward in her hands. With a cold, dim gaze, she wondered why he would be resting in the afternoon. The woman's voice sounded too intimate. What was he resting from?

The more she thought, the worse she felt. She reminded herself that she had built walls; his life was none of her concern!

Something was lodged in her heart, causing discomfort. If he truly had a lover, why deny having a girlfriend that day? Why give her favorite books, help with her sketches, and flirt...

Whitney... Maybe it's just a female colleague, Tiana tried to lighten the mood.

"Do you believe that? Besides, in a transactional marriage, his affairs are none of my business," Whitney feigned nonchalance.

"I'm crashing at your place tonight, I've got to finish my drafts."—

"Sure, you can even sleep over, no problem!" Tiana offered.

Whitney did not go home that night, staying over at Tiana's. L did not call, and she scoffed at the thought that he probably felt no need to explain himself.

The next day, Whitney was still at Tiana's when Natalie called. Fearing worry, Whitney hurriedly grabbed her laptop and returned to the villa.

Natalie touched her shoulder, asking carefully, “Whitney dear, are you and the boy having a tiff?”

“Not **at** all,” Whitney shook her head, feigning calm.

That’s good. I wondered why you hadn’t come home. He’s been busy, he might not have been able to look after you these past few days. Don’t be upset, okay?”

He had probably been very attentive to someone else.

Whitney thought bitterly. Then Natalie suddenly chuckled, “Actually, I didn’t ask you to come back. Your husband wanted you to deliver something to him. He should be free tonight to spend some time with you.”

Whitney was puzzled, “Mom, what am I delivering, and where to?”

To this hotel. Here’s the package. The driver will take you,” Natalie said as she handed Whitney a bag and hurried her into the car.

Throughout the drive to the hotel, Whitney was in a daze. A servant led her into an aromatic suite that seemed too **intimate** for comfort.

Just as she **turned** her head, the servant shut the door from the outside, advising, “Sir asked you to take a bath **and** rest first. The bag contains your **nightgown**.”

So, **he had** her come to deliver... her own nightgown?

Whitney **was** utterly baffled. The clock had struck seven in the evening, and after two grueling days on a **deadline with** little sleep, she felt exhaustion creeping in. Deciding to take a quick shower, she emerged to find **she had** no pajamas **to wear**. Thus, **she had no** choice but to put on something thin with ears and a tail in her bag. Too tired to care, she slipped **into the odd garment and** collapsed onto her bed, succumbing to sleep almost instantly.

At **eight** o’clock, the corridor echoed **with the sound of steady** footsteps. **Clad in a** sharp, tailored suit that

struggled to contain his towering frame, exuding an air of refined austerity, a man approached. His expression was stern, his presence commanding.

Upon seeing Taryn, the man's brow furrowed in confusion. "What's the madam doing at a hotel at this hour?"

"She finds the silence here conducive to her **art**. She's probably working **on** her illustrations, sir. Please, go on an." Taryn said with a smile. "By the way, you've been so busy. I bet you haven't eaten yet. Ms. Natalie made you some soup to chase away the chill."

The man's eyebrow quirked as he **fixed** his gaze **on** the door, his mind on the petite woman inside. Without another glance, he took the steaming soup and drank it down.

Then he turned the doorknob and **strode** into **the** room.

The space was dimly lit, the air perfumed with a delicate **scent** that seemed to emanate from the woman herself.

A sudden ripple passed through his Adam's apple.

Taryn quickly hurried back to the corner, where Natalie was smiling slyly. "Just one bowl of that nourishing soup, and I bet they'll patch things up! I've sensed something off between them since the hospital visit."

"But ma'am, are you sure about this 'matchmaking'? What if the young master finds out..."

Natalie brimmed with confidence. "Don't worry, I'm a die-hard fan of romance novels. The push and pull *of* love, the fiery passion, the golden rule, they may spar in the living room, but they reconcile in the bedroom. I know how to set up a whirlwind romance better than anyone."

Taryn could not help but think that the super fan, Natalie's confidence might be a bit misplaced.

in the room, a tall man stood by the bed, where a soft bundle lay, breathing out a sweet warmth.

She preferred to sleep on her stomach, he had noticed. Her curves arched invitingly, delicate hands softly curled in her inky hair, her fair face tinged with a rosy flush.

She was undeniably beautiful, pure, and delicate, yet utterly captivating.

His breathing grew heavy, and he could not help but loosen his tie. Beneath his fine shirt, his muscles tensed ever so slightly.

There was no computer in the room. Was she not supposed to be here to work on her designs? The man lay beside her, pulling her into his arms. This was the first time for them to share a bed. Before, there had only been a distance between them, a formality as they sat on the sofa in the bedroom. To his surprise, his hand brushed something **soft** – the tail attached to her pajamas. Her hat even had little

ears.

Lifting the blanket, his gaze darkened as he saw what she was wearing. What was she implying with this? A fire ignited **in** his chest, spreading through his limbs.

Something was not right.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he suddenly remembered the soup Taryn had given him. How sharp he was, instantly suspecting who might be behind this trickery.

His head throbbed, desire heating his eyes as he leaned down to capture her lips in a kiss, gentle at first, then deepening...

Whitney woke up to the kiss, her breath stifling as she pushed against a solid 'wall.'

Gaining clarity, she opened her wide eyes to see a shadowy figure above her. "Who are you?"

"It's me," the man murmured with a low, husky laugh.

“L.. What are you doing?” Whitney realized the nature of his kiss and suddenly remembered the woman on the phone and the woman in his car. Her face cooled as she pushed him away.

Thinking she was startled, the man gripped her delicate wrist, his voice low and teasing, “You invite me to this kind of hotel, dressed like that. What do you think I’m going to do, Madam?”

“**What** are **you** talking about? It was you who asked me to bring you something. Never mind that now, get up!”

“**What** if I **say** no?” He pressed down on her.

Whitney felt stifled, noting his body’s unusual heat and strength in his muscles.

“**What’s the** matter with you?”

“Touch **my** forehead,” he asked, lifting her soft hand.

She did, and it was alarmingly hot.

He **propped** himself on his elbow, his eyes smoldering, “The old lady tricked me into drinking that soup.

I had drinks before, which only made things worse. What should we do now, Madam?”

140 * Phones 10 Hink of amething” she said seriously

West jesen something

asked encircling her waist with his arm, his head nuzeling her shoulder

are ne a math he murmured referring to their child

14: dewe ames Whitney realized what he was implying and rebuked him sharply

I’ll

Na custed naughts, thaven rights as your husband I’ll carry you to the bathroom, okay?”

Heat a sack Why's angered hand landed on his jaw

edut. Nis face turning stern. Do you even know what you're doing, Madam?"

ses voce was cold haughty and low

ney stared at his perfect profile, her anger like a tiny universe exploding. "And do you know what you're A Coveting drunk and dragging me here, blaming some soup your mother gave you. I must say, we quite an engetic man. Hevent you just resting in another woman's room yesterday afternoon?"

What are you talking about? His anger made him look terrifying.

No face shappened his presence overwhelming.

mney caped curling her hands into tiny fists, afraid to move.

ex eyes were cold, his handsome face tired from working straight from the previous morning to now. Seeing her dressed like this, he naturally assumed...

was

This ungrateful little thing, what was she playing at?

Without allowing for argument, he scooped her up and sat her on the couch.

tes large hand lifted her chin, kissing her again, his voice rough with seduction, "The marriage contract is clear. You need to fulfill your duties. Consider it doing me a favor, okay?"

Whitney dodged his advances, her mind spinning with questions about the woman on the phone.

He could do as he pleased outside, without explaining to her, and then come back and flirt, using the contract to pressure her

He was truly despicable.

Her breath cooled, she pushed his solid body away and snapped, "If you need help, go find another woman! I'm not here for your amusement, Mr. L!"

"What did you say?" He suddenly released her, gripping her hands.

Whitney looked up, her voice laced with sarcasm, “Girlfriends, lovers, you’ve got plenty, right? With your money, do you think you can trample over someone’s life? I only sold you a year of my womb, not myself. After a year, we go our separate ways. I have the right to refuse you, Mr. L. If it’s just that one thing on your mind, don’t bother me, plenty of women will satisfy you.”

The room fell into an eerie silence.

His anger was palpable, chilling. He stared at her defiant face and lifted her chin forcefully, “You think any woman is worthy of my bed? What do you take me for?”

He stood, his fury palpable, and scoffed. “So high and mighty. How did you end up in my **car**? You were willing **to go to** great lengths for your goals, and now you lecture me on shame? Whitney, **if** anyone is unworthy, it’s

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kicked the table mere he left, simtling Whitney into the safety of the couch His pants were torn at the kapex au 11mer outed has hande inte hats.

testomed at slamming the door behind him.

miner’s lips tightened her head buzzing. It took her a moment to notice the blond on the glass talde

Had he cut his knee? She pressed her brow, her heartbeat racing, her emotions a jumbled mess

The driver picked Whitney up and brought her back to the villa, but she did not see the man again

Natalse knew she had blundered, her gaze flitting nervously as she approached Whitney to explain the

situation begging her not to hold a grudge it was all her doing.

裁 as then that Whitney pieced it together. Natalie had deceived both her and her son. Whitney managed a wry smile. The root of the issue was not Natalie, after all.

For several days. Whitney saw no sign of the man returning home.

This time, he was truly furious. The house was eerily quiet, with him giving her the cold shoulder.

Yet. Whitney did not feel she was in the wrong. Clearing the air sooner was better for both of them.

Nevertheless, her mood grew more somber. She forced herself to ignore the pang of emptiness in her heart and dove into her work, sketching designs to avoid worrying Natalie. She even moved in with her friend Tiana for a while to keep up appearances.

Tiana would occasionally bring over Stella, and the two of them would try to cheer her up. Thanks to their efforts, Whitney's design drafts were completed on schedule.

On the 10th of October, the day finally arrived for the preliminary round of the jewelry design competition, held at the illustrious exhibition hall of Imperial Gem Corporation.

Chapter 38

In the morning light, Whitney, Tiana, and their assistant, each toting a laptop, strode **into** the competition hall—a hive of creativity and cutthroat ambition.

As they entered, the sleek company vehicle of Skye Gem Ltd. slid to a halt at the entrance. Monica stepped out, her stilettos clicking a rhythmic challenge **to** the pavement, followed by the formidable procession of her design entourage. The contrast was stark; Whitney's party **felt** distinctly out of place, almost shabby.

Their gazes met across the charged space, a silent battle in their standoff.

Monica sauntered past Whitney, her **eyebrow arching in** a slow, condescending smile. "**Look** who showed up. Best of luck, Sis. I'm sure you'll need it to **snag** first **place**," she teased with a voice dripping in lazy sarcasm.

Tiana bristled. “What’s with her snide remarks? And that smug smile—**she** knows full well your talent. She should be the one shaking in her boots, the fake.”

Whitney’s frown deepened. Tiana’s words echoed her thoughts. Monica’s confidence was unsettling. Even though Monica might have pilfered Whitney’s earlier designs, Whitney had brought her A—game with her latest collection, far surpassing her previous work. Yet Monica appeared utterly unfazed.

Something was amiss.

Tiana’s phone rang abruptly, and she exchanged a few terse words with the person on the other end.

Whitney recognized the voice of Tiana’s fiancé.

“Go,” she urged, “I’ll manage.”

“Of all times for a lunch date. At least Stella is nearby for an ad meeting. Don’t worry about me,” Tiana reassured Whitney before heading out.

Whitney nodded and, with her assistant in tow, proceeded inside.

Her eyes swept the judges’ panel, a hint of surprise crossing her face—Ludwik, her notorious rival, was conspicuously absent. Was he not the head judge?

A flicker of annoyance brushed her thoughts. Why was he not here? He had insinuated a compromising offer just days before, and now he showed no interest? She had wanted to prove her mettle to him, but perhaps it was for the best. It was better not to deal with him at all.

The announcement for all contestants to submit their work snapped Whitney back to the present. She handed in her designs and returned to her seat, only to catch Monica flashing her a cryptic smile.

Whitney’s breath hitched.

What **did that** smile mean?

She suppressed a rising unease and settled down with her assistant.

When the designs were displayed on the large screen, the room fell into a stunned silence. The crowd was **visibly** confused.

Whitney's eyes shot up to the screen, where her work was displayed next to Monica's—identical in every way. Her assistant's grip tightened on her hand in disbelief.

“Whitney, what's happening? How can your work be...”

Monica stood abruptly, her gaze piercing Whitney with incredulity. “Sis, how come your design is the same as mine?”

Her accusation sent a ripple through the audience, sparking a flurry of speculation about plagiarism. **Whitney's eyes** turned **to** ice. **So that** was why Monica **had** been so calm—she had laid a trap.

Standing up with a thunderous rage, Whitney declared, “That design is my original **creation**. Monica has stolen my concept.”

Monica's face twisted into a mask of martyrdom. Sis, what are you talking about? That's clearly my design.” The audience and media watched, rapt with confusion.

The head judge, Aaron, intervened. “We have identical submissions, and one must be a copy. You both claim originality, so present your digital file metadata as proof.”

Whitney turned to her assistant, who pulled up the file history on her laptop. The assistant's face went ashen. “Whitney...” she stammered, pointing to a blank screen.

All their work had vanished.

Whitney clenched her fists, a cold dread sinking in. As she glanced up, she caught Monica smirking triumphantly, her laptop in hand as she approached the judges.

Understanding dawned on Whitney; she had walked right into Monica's snare.

Monica presented her 'evidence' to Aaron, who projected the file dates on the screen—October 2nd.

"Now, Whitney." Aaron turned to her. "Your evidence?"

"I've had a technical issue," Whitney said, her voice like steel. "But Aaron, the concept of that traditional style jewelry is mine. I can detail the entire creative process to prove it's my work."

Skeptical, the judges conferred and agreed to hear her out.

Whitney began **to** explain down to every detail.

The judges listened carefully while nodding, their faces filled with astonishment.

However, suddenly, Monica cut Whitney off, saying, "Sis, that is my creative process!"

Then, **she** continued on Whitney's words, claiming Whitney's ideas as her own, describing the most intricate details of the design.

The judges were shocked to their core. Clearly, Monica could also describe the creative process perfectly.

At this moment, Whitney's eyes turned cold. She finally realized that Monica had not just stolen her design; she had infiltrated her creative process.

This **was** more than theft; it was a betrayal,

As Monica played the victim, claiming that Whitney had sought advice and then stolen her concept, Whitney's **heart** sank. She clearly saw the vicious smile in Monica's eyes.

At this time, Monica smiled bitterly and said, "Sis, please stop finding excuses. You called me last time to ask me for ideas, and I told you about my design. Never would I have thought you would steal my idea."

"Enough, Monica. I started brainstorming my design on the 28th of last month, before you!" Whitney's voice was icy with contempt. She knew she had to fight tooth and nail to reclaim her work and honor.

Monica took two shaky steps back, her face awash with hurt. “Sis, I let it slide when you took credit for my **work** in **the** past. I know you’re eager to make a quick comeback at the company, but you can’t keep ripping me **off** like this. After your scandal, you vanished, ignoring the countless calls Dad and I made. And now, here you **are**, making a **scene in** public, plagiarizing and framing me—this is a new low for the Valentine family. You’ve **gone too far!**”

Tears streamed down Monica’s cheeks as she laid out Whitney’s transgressions for all to see.

The judges’ panel was in shock. It was **no** secret that the Valentine family had recently weathered a scandal involving the eldest daughter.

The Valentines **had** not disowned **her**, but here was Whitney stirring **up** trouble, using **the** competition to **plagiarize and set up her sister!**

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The media and audience below erupted in chaos. Whitney had already been exposed for stealing her sister’s work to secure her position as the CEO of Sky e Gem before today.

This was a repeat offense!

“Despicable, this woman is vile and manipulative!”

Chapter 39

Monica stood on the stage, tears glistening in her eyes, looking every part of the role of a pitiful beauty.

Below, the crowd was pointing fingers at Whitney, their voices raised in anger, “If you can’t produce evidence from your computer, get off the stage! Monica is the true design prodigy!”

“Whitney, you don’t deserve to compete. Plagiarism could get you expelled.”

Just at the charity ball the other week, this woman was spreading rumors about Monica's miscarriage. Now it seems she was framing her all along!" Someone sneered sarcastically from the audience.

The murmurs grew louder.

Whitney stood amid the accusations, her expression icy. Monica had come prepared this time.

"No, it's not true!" Her assistant burst **out** angrily, rushing forward. "I watched Whitney work tirelessly through the night on this piece. Monica, you manipulative witch, twisting the truth..."

"Enough," Aaron interjected, raising his hand. "Whitney, what's left to argue if you can't show proof? Plagiarists have no place here, and you're disturbing the peace! Security, escort these two out."

Without further ado, Whitney and her assistant were ushered unceremoniously out of the exhibit hall.

The sky was a heavy gray, mirroring the storm brewing in Whitney's heart. Seated on the steps outside, she reopened her laptop and searched thoroughly once more.

The file folder was gone, her history erased without a trace.

Whitney's eyes narrowed in cold fury.

Suddenly, her laptop was smashed under a high-heeled shoe!

Monica strutted over, her secretary holding an umbrella to block the pressing reporters. She taunted Whitney with a smirk, "Sis, thanks for creating such a marvelous piece. It won unanimous praise from the judges, no doubt snagging the preliminary round's crown.

Sure, Simon had already sweet-talked Aaron for me, guaranteeing my victory, but winning with your draft? That's an indescribable thrill!"

Monica's whisper was venomous. She pinched Whitney's cheek maliciously. "You bet everything on this competition, hoping to ruin me and make a comeba

ck. But look at you now. After today, your name will be mud, infamous across the internet. What jewelry company would employ a notorious plagiarist? Whitney, you're finished! Skye Gem Ltd. is out of your reach!"

Monica left with a triumphant laugh, her recent humiliations avenged.

Whitney remained silent, her gaze icy as she shook off Monica's hand and stood.

Behind her, Monica's laughter continued. "You still don't get why you've been played, do you? Thought you were so smart, Whitney. Did you really think you could outsmart me?"

Monica swaggered away as Tiana approached, her face as pale as a ghost.

The reporters were snapping photos of Whitney's downfall, and the onlookers whispered among themselves, especially the shareholders from Skye Gem, who scorned Whitney for her audacity and plagiarism.

Tiana shouted them away, pulling Whitney to her feet.

Her assistant picked up **the** crushed **laptop**. Tiana whirled around, her eyes blazing as she sta

"Who else could have gotten to the lapto

lared at Whitney's assistant. "It was you, wasn't **it**?" Did Monica's lackey buy you **off**?"

"It **wasn't me**, I swear, Whitney, please believe me..." Her assistant was bewildered, **crying** in distress.

1/3

They watched her assistant quietly and then stopped Trane's hand. Don't be rash, Tiana. It wasn't her?

But no one else had access to your laptop/ Trana trembled with anger.

Wasn't that Whitney said her gaze thoughtful "Remember October 2nd, Tiana? What day was it?"

Tiana paused then replied. “We had a gathering with Stella on October 1st, and you stayed at my place on the

Whitney turned to the assistant. Has anyone else touched this laptop since we arrived?”

Absolutely not? The assistant declared earnestly.

Whitney frowned, but her eyes held a sharp determination.

Think back I mean every single person, every single touch.”

Stella isn’t just anyone, though. When I went to the bathroom, she came out of the ad room and held it for me for a moment”

Tiana froze, her pretty face going cold.

Whitney’s expression had already settled into icy resolve.

Tiana struggled to believe it. “You’re joking, right? How could it be Stella? We’ve known her for years.”

I never wanted to believe it either.” That was why she had never suspected and why Monica’s trap was so perfectly laid out.

Whitney’s voice was a whisper crushed by weight.

“Where’s Stella now?”

“She mentioned a celebration party at the Royal One Club.”

Whitney got into the car, her face weary. “Then let’s go to the Royal One Club.”

“You really suspect her?” Tiana’s heart was heavy. “But what if it’s not her? We could ruin our friendship over nothing.”

“If it is her and we don’t root out this cancer, Monica will indeed have the last laugh.” Whitney’s gaze was piercing.

Tiana bit her lip and fell silent.

After a moment, Tiana asked, “But how will you make her confess? If she denies everything and we have no proof she tampered with the computer...”

Whitney closed her eyes with a cold laugh. “That’s the easy part.”

Betrayed by trust, Tiana drove Whitney to the Royal One Club with a heavy heart.

The Royal One Club was Banyan City’s most exclusive venue, its owner a mystery to all.

Entry was a closely guarded privilege, comprising the city’s elite clientele.

Tiana had to pull strings just to get Whitney inside.

They arrived at the Maple Pavilion Room No. 1.

Inside, the party was in full swing, with Stella weaving seductively among directors and actors.

‘Stella? Tiana called out from the doorway, her brow furrowed.

Holding a glass of wine, Stella turned and managed her expression instantly, smiling as she approached. “Tiana, Whitney, what brings you to the Royal One Club?”

“Is it inappropriate for me to show up now?” Whitney chuckled. The corners of her **fine** lips

smile.

Chapter 90

“What are you talking about!” Stella chided, crossing the room in a few quick strides to warmly hug Whitney, kissing her cheek. “So, how did it go? Did you totally crush it in the prelims? Let’s celebrate tonight!”

Tiana glanced at Whitney, then quickly turned her eyes to Stella. “Stella, Whitney’s design got swiped by Monica. She might get kicked out of the competition.”

Stella’s face went pale as a ghost. “What happened?”

Whitney just watched her with a thin, **wry** smile, arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “It’s alright. Who knows? I might just make a comeback.”

“Stella!” Someone called **from** inside.

Stella looked torn. “The **victory party isn’t** over yet.”

“It’s fine, you go back to your guests,” Tiana said quickly.

As the door **to** the private room closed, Whitney fixed her gaze on it while Tiana tried to console herself. “Whitney, did you see Stella’s face? She seemed genuine. Maybe she didn’t betray us after all.”

Whitney shot her **a** glance, **a** sarcastic laugh escaping her lips. “Have you forgotten what her day job entails?”

“We’ll find out soon enough,” Whitney said with a tone of resolve.

“What’s your plan?” She asked, tension lacing her voice.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40

Whitney scrolled through the latest entertainment news about Stella on her phone, glancing over at her friend. “Tiana, let’s head upstairs. Can you get us a private suite?”

Tiana was off like a shot, making a beeline for the club’s manager. Securing a private suite was next to impossible without a reservation, but with a bit of cash persuasion, she managed to wrangle a room for an hour.

But why did Whitney want a private suite?

Whitney’s eyes were calm and unreadable as she said, “An hour will be enough.”

She took a seat, logged into a burner account, and sent a message into the digital ether,

In less than six minutes, the click-clack of high heels approached. Stella, who had claimed

to be too busy, hurried in with a smile plastered on her face. “Monica, has Kyle arrived yet?”

The moment she entered, her expression turned to stone.

Even Whitney felt a twinge of stiffness for her.

Tiana, out of breath and pale, was the first to confront her. “Stella, whose name did you just call? Since when are you friends with Monica? Do you have any idea what she did to Whitney?”

Stella snapped back to reality, quickly putting two and two together after seeing the message.

Her demeanor chilled as she turned to Whitney. “You always were the sharpest one among us.”

“Why betray me?” Whitney’s question was straightforward.

Leaning against the wall, Stella no longer bothered to fake a smile. Annoyance flickered in her eyes. “Why do you think, Whitney? Standing beside you now, I feel embarrassed. You’re not worthy anymore.”

“Stella, why have you become like this?” Tiana asked, visibly upset.

“People change. I’m on the rise, and Whitney is spiraling down. There’s no such thing as forever friends. Among the Valentine sisters, the rising star is Monica, and I’m only weighing the pros and cons. Aligning with you would tarnish my image. Don’t blame me for making the smart choice.”

Weighing the pros and cons, huh?

Whitney’s eyes turned icy, her heart shedding the last threads of warmth. “Did you delete my files from my computer? Did you leak my designs to Monica step by step?”

Stella stiffened, then scoffed. “Did I? You have no proof.”

“You’ve been using Whitney’s trust to sabotage her career! Now, the news is painting her as a plagiarist. Do you want to ruin her life?” Tiana seethed, her eyes reddening with anger.

“If it wasn’t for Whitney’s trust, how could I have achieved my goals?” As they spoke, Monica entered with a smirk.

Stella quickly sided with Monica, and their group looked down on Whitney and Tiana arrogantly.

Monica laughed. “Stella, Director Kyler will give you the lead role. You’re on your way to becoming the next big thing in Hollywood.”

“Thank you, Monica,” Stella said with a nod.

Disgusted by Stella’s obsequious behavior, Tiana stepped forward.

“But there’s **a catch**,” Monica continued. “You need to prove your loyalty. Slap Whitney right here and drive her out. The Royal One Club is **no** place for a washed-up has-been like her, and I believe you’ve wanted to do that for a long **time**.”

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Stella’s face tensed. She glanced at Whitney and reluctantly approached.

Tiana stepped in front of Whitney, and before Stella could act, she slapped her across the face.

“Stella, I can’t believe you were about to hit her. I’m so disappointed in you. From now on, our sisterhood is

over

“You naive fool, how dare you slap me?” Stella tried to retaliate.

Whitney’s gaze was sharp as she **stood** up and grabbed Stella’s hair. “Touch Tiana, and I won’t hold back.

“T’d like to see you try,” Stella spat venomously. “Is **it** not your fault I’ve become like this? When you were the darling of high society, knowing my family was struggling, with a little help from you, I could have been a star by now! But you had to talk about hard work, as if that meant anything in Hollywood. You can’t stand to see me climb over you, so fine, I’ll step over you without a second thought.”

Tiana was furious. "You blame us for not helping enough when it was Whitney who got you into the industry! You repay kindness with betrayal, and now you're following Monica, thinking you'll rise with her?"

The situation was about to explode into a brawl when Monica, thoroughly entertained, signaled for one of the socialites to fetch the club manager.

Monica thought spitefully. If Whitney got humiliated enough, maybe even a scandalous news story of her causing a scene in the club, coupled with plagiarism accusations, would ruin her completely.

"Ms. Valentine, what seems to be the problem here?" The manager arrived swiftly.

Monica pointed arrogantly, "Those two rabid dogs over there, do they have a reservation? Why are they hogging the room? I have my eye on this room for dinner."

The manager hurriedly sent security to remove Whitney and Tiana. "They have no money, no status. How did they even get in?"

Tiana shouted back, "I made the reservation and paid you. Are you pretending not to recognize me now?"

In front of Monica, the manager would not dare acknowledge them. "Tiana, this is the Royal One Club. Your family doesn't have VIP status here. Please take your disgraced friend and leave immediately!"

Monica giggled. "Sis, even the club manager saw the news about your plagiarism scandal today."

Whitney and Tiana were being dragged to the door. Tiana shielded Whitney's face, fearing more bad press. Their expressions were full of pain and humiliation.

"What's all this commotion about?" A cold, masculine voice suddenly cut through the noise.

Whitney stiffened at the sound and then saw the imposing figure approaching. Her lips pressed tightly together.

“Damn it,” She thought. Of all the moments for him to witness this spectacle.

The man, wearing a silver mask, exuded a cool and intimidating presence. His tailored black suit accentuated his lean physique, and his aura was one of undeniable authority.

The manager spotted the big boss entering the room and immediately began to tremble ever so slightly. “M—Mr. Li...

The man glanced his way.

The manager clamped his mouth shut, his fear palpable enough that the security guard holding Whitney instinctively loosened his grip.

Monica and Stella, socialites of the highest order, were momentarily struck dumb.

The whole scene went quiet in an instant.

Parker craned his neck, peering over his glasses with **a narrow ved**
then turned to look at

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Whitney bit her lip, anxiety etching her features.

“Ha!” Monica scoffed as if she had just heard the world’s funniest joke, expressing her disdain. “Turns out he’s not here to rescue you. Whitney. Look at you, disgraced and abandoned. Not even the street thugs want you now Pathetic. Hey, manager! Get them out of here!”

Parker caught up in a few strides, saying, “Bro, she’s pregnant! You’re so worked up you’re ready to abandon your kid?”

L swept him with an icy glance.

Parker got the message, his laugh trailing off as he spun on his heel.

Security hoisted up Whitney and Tiana while Monica, with a sly nod, urged the socialites to shove Whitney down the stairs.

With a gust of cold air, Parker was there, shoving the women aside. "Let those ladies go!" he bellowed.

Caught off guard and not recognizing Parker, Monica assumed he was just another nobody from the streets. She yelled, "Who the heck are you to push me around? Manager, don't you dare let them go. Throw them out, along with this guy!"

Parker's smile was thin, his patience wearing thin. "Manager, what are you waiting for?"

The manager, now pale as a ghost, knew better than to cross Parker, a friend of the big boss. His previous flattering of Monica now turned to disgust as he directed the security to encircle Monica **and** her posse.

"What are you waiting for? Get them out of here!"

"What?" Monica's voice was incredulous, her eyes wide in disbelief. "Are you out of your **mind**? I'm a VIP member of this club, the darling of **the** Valentine Corporation. You wouldn't dare..."

When the women resisted, the security grabbed Monica and Stella, dragging them to the carpeted stairs and throwing them down without ceremony.

Monica stumbled and landed with a thud, her hair and clothes in disarray.

Stella, in her high heels, fell gracelessly to the ground floor.

The entire floor of wealthy businessmen and socialites watched the scene unfold, some even pulling out their phones to capture the moment.

Monica's face turned an angry shade of blue.

Stella, a celebrity, **covered** her face and screamed, "Stop filming!"

Tiana stood at the top of the stairs, looking down at Stella with a cool, mocking laugh, "Stella, this is the rising star you've been clinging to."

Stella **spun** around, her face dropping several degrees at the sight of Whitney's indifferent expression.

Parker smiled at Whitney.

"Thanks," Whitney replied, having seen this bespectacled man at the hospital before. His eyes, behind his glasses, hinted at a deceptively cunning persona.

"Your man's dining at the other private suite. Want to join?" Parker offered.

Recalling the man who showed no interest in coming to her aid, Whitney shook her head. "No, thanks."

But Tiana was already piecing things together. The man behind the mask? Of course, he was Whitney's enigmatic husband!

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She immediately clung to Whitney, her eyes twinkling. "Why not go? It would be lovely for you two to dine

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together. I'm starving!"

And with that, Tiana dragged Whitney into the private suite, but as soon as they entered, the chill from the man silenced Tiana, and it took her a moment to muster a compliment. "You must be the renowned Mr. L7 Whitney always speaks of you. Truly, meeting you exceeds all the rumors. You're the epitome of elegance and maturity—a natural-born leader!"

The room fell into a silence as cold as the snow.

Tiana, feeling out of place, nudged Whitney. "Go on, call him honey".

Rigid and uncomfortable, Whitney pressed her lips together, feeling entirely out of place.

Parker cleared his throat and pulled out a chair for her. "Whitney, **please**, take a seat. Manager, the menu, please."

Respectfully, the manager presented two copies, landing in the hands of Whitney and Mr. L.

Just a few light dishes,” the man spoke up, his voice deep and resonant.

He sat back his posture impeccable, his legs crossed, his face as cold as ice.

Parker, with a mischievous grin, glanced at Whitney. “Why don’t you order some of your favorites?”

Whitney passed the menu to Tiana, who glared at her as if to say, “No way!”

Whitney forced herself to look composed, her appetite returning as she scanned the menu. “Let’s have some caramelized bananas, spicy braised lamb chops...”

Before she could finish, Tiana snatched the menu back, her voice honeyed but her intention clear. “Whitney, I thought you preferred lighter fare, just like Mr. L? Besides, you’ve been so down lately you’ve barely eaten a thing. Why pretend now?”

Inside, Whitney bristled

Tiana shot her a lethal warning look, then glanced at the man.

Whitney caught a glimpse of the stoic man and thought, why should she cater to his tastes?

Under the table, Tiana pinched her.

Hating the pain, Whitney glared at Tiana before reluctantly ordering some lighter dishes.

Parker watched the exchange with amusement. Young girls were just too cute

He looked up to see L, who remained expressionless, his aura growing colder by the second.

Clearly, Whitney’s choices had not pleased him.

In this oppressive atmosphere, the four of them ate a meal that did little for their digestion.

The tall man stood up, the epitome of cool sophistication, as he adjusted his suit. Parker asked, "Which room are we going to?"

"Doesn't matter," L replied indifferently, not even glancing at Whitney's way.

Fed up with his cold shoulder, Whitney wanted to leave, but Tiana was already probing. "Parker, what's next on the agenda?"

"Poker," Parker said quickly, adding after a pause, "My bro's in a foul mood, just like Whitney. Maybe a game will cheer him up."

L shot Parker a frosty glare before departing.

Whitney watched his retreating figure, **tall** and distant.

"Poker sound great. Whitney, you're an ace at cards, aren't you, Whitney?" Tiana stirred the pot.

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Whitney remained silent, her frustration mounting.

Parker's lips curved in a smirk. "Oh? I'd love to see that. Join us in the 2033 suite."

Once they left, Whitney turned to Tiana, her anger barely contained. "What are you trying to do, forcing things like this? Can't you see he clearly despises us?"

"You have no idea how a man's mind works, do you? Especially one who's always playing his cards so close to his chest? L is as mysterious as they come, the ultimate brooding gentleman. No wonder he's got you all twisted up

"Who says I'm twisted up?" Whitney retorted with a chill in her voice that could freeze the Pacific.

"Oh, come on. Aren't you the one who got all jealous over a simple phone call?" Tiana teased with a sly grin.

Whitney shot her a look that could kill, and Tiana quickly raised her hands in surrender. "I just mean, the **guy** did save our skins, after all."

“It was Parker who saved us, not him.”

“And you think Parker would have turned up without L giving him the nod? Plus, he did give us a **good** laugh putting that jerk in his place, Tiana nudged her, pushing her towards the action. “Look at you, all wound up. This sham marriage is getting under your skin, and with today’s fiasco at the competition, you’ve got enough on your plate. I say, make up with him. It’ll clear your head so you can take down Monica. Besides, a guy with his bank account might just come in handy.”

Before Whitney could protest, Tiana had already dragged her into the VIP lounge, Suite 2033.

They entered a poker room that screamed luxury, its floors covered in the finest cashmere carpeting. Whitney could not help but wonder who owned the Royal One Club to afford such extravagance.

As she was reluctantly ushered in, the room was bustling with well-dressed men and scantily clad women. Her eyes immediately found L, nestled on a plush sofa with ladies on either side.

The sight was like a punch to the gut, and she suddenly found it hard to breathe.

She had not been wrong about him. He was a player, and these past few days, he had likely left a **trail** of conquests.

Just moments ago, Whitney had thought Tiana might have a point. But now, with the sting of betrayal in her eyes, she spun on her heel, determined to leave, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

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Tiana chuckled lightly it’s all just a show, you know? He’s probably deliberately trying to rile you up. Didn’t you notice how, with just a lift of his brow, Parker had everyone in the suite snuff out their cigarettes? He’s clearly looking out for you because of your pregnancy”

Really?

Whitney had to admire Tiana’s ability to turn a dire situation into something light-hearted with her silver tongue.

Whitney, care to join me for a game?" Parker called out.

Meanwhile, the aloof man sat on the sofa, sipping the cocktail a lovely lady had handed him, his gaze unreadable

Feeling an irrational surge of defiance, Whitney sat and began playing cards with Parker.

By the second hand, Parker excused himself, "Bro, I've gotta hit the restroom. Mind stepping in for me?" Whitney would have to be oblivious not to see through this thinly veiled excuse.

Her fingers tensed.

However, she saw the man rise gracefully and approach.

As he took his place across the table, his commanding presence made Whitney's breath catch, as if his very aura enveloped her.

Tiana then sneakily positioned herself behind Whitney.

As the third game started and the man laid down his cards, it was Whitney's turn. Just as she was about to make her move, Tiana swiftly played another card instead.

That's a good one! Tiana said.

Whitney glanced at her hand – it was a complete setup for defeat. She glared at Tiana as if saying with her eyes, "Are you blind?"

From then on, Tiana wreaked havoc, and Whitney could not tell if the man's card skills were just superior or if her luck had plummeted, but she kept losing miserably.

Tiana teased, "Mr. L, are you doing this on purpose? You really seem to be hard on Whitney tonight!" "Have I been 'hard' on her?" He finally looked up, directing his first glance of the evening at Whitney His tone was cool, yet the deep timbre of his voice was unintentionally suggestive.

"Hard on me..." Whitney felt her cheeks flame at the thought.

Then, she saw Parker return and immediately declared, "I'm out."

Tiana mocked, "You're quitting after all those losses? Since when **have** I had such a loser of a friend?"

"How much did Ms. Valentine **lose**?" Parker picked up the ledger, an eyebrow raised, "Ms. Valentine, you owe him a cool five million."

What?

Whitney had not realized the stakes were so high; a million a game, and she did not have that kind of money!

Feeling the eyes in the room on her, she turned to Tiana in panic, "This is all our fault. Do you have a credit card on you?"

Tiana turned ruthless. "I ain't got no money! You lost to him, so just beg your dear Mr. L for mercy. Maybe he'll let you off the hook."

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Whitney's eyes, wide and watery, turned to the man.

He looked back, cold and unyielding, with no room for negotiation.

She did not want to beg, it was she who insisted on setting boundaries, and he was right to enforce them. It stung, but she did not want to lose her dignity

"Come on, just say something nice to him," Tiana nudged the girl forward.

Pushed in front of the man, Whitney was **about** to speak when another shove sent her tumbling into his arms.

"What the hell?" She glared at her friend.

"Oops, my bad!" Tiana feigned an apology.

The man remained still, his long legs catching her in their embrace.

His presence quickly engulfed Whitney, strong and undeniable. She was transfixed by the warmth of his chest, visible under the crisp, inviting shirt.

Stunned, their eyes met, and she seemed a little dull, with her cheeks burning **red**.

The dullness, distinct from her earlier defiance, was almost endearing.

He noticed her fingers clutching at his shirt, his eyes darkened slightly, and with a mocking tone, he taunted, “Can’t seem to let go, huh? Fallen for these legs that many women have sat on?”

Snapping back to reality. Whitney’s embarrassment turned to anger as she tried to stand.

His expression darkened, but his arm subtly wrapped around her, his hand reaching forward to play a card. What did this mean? Whitney froze in his embrace, her skin flushing with an unspoken intimacy.

Tiana’s laughter filled the room.

—

The teasing continued from the men nearby. “He sure knows how to play with a beauty in his arms, no less. Talk about living the life!”

“Yeah, look at that confidence, unbeatable.”

“Just don’t let things get too heated, hal”

Whitney curled up in **his** arms, her face aflame, knowing they had the wrong **idea**.

Needing to use the restroom, she squirmed a little.

He looked down at her.

Too embarrassed to speak out loud in front of everyone, Whitney leaned in and whispered awkwardly, “I need to pee.

Direct and to the point because of her urgency, her words, especially “pee, hanging in the air, resonating in **the** man’s ears as he stared at her soft, flushed face.

A mischievous impulse struck him

“What was that?” He asked, pretending not to hear.

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Her embarrassment intensifying, Whitney leaned even closer and hissed, “I really need to pee.”

His lips curved in amusement, and he let her go.

Whitney dashed away.

Returning from the restroom, she was

Tiana and Parker had vanished.

stunned to find the suite empty; the game was abandoned, and even

The imposing man stood by the window, a cigarette between his fingers.

He extinguished it as she approached.

“Where did everyone go?”

He approached her, his aristocratic features cool and mocking, “Isn’t this your little scheme? Conspiring with your best friend, playing the victim, the seductress... Or are you...”

He cornered her against the wall, his **tone icy**, “Enjoying this little cat-and-mouse game, Madam?”

His sudden chill caught Whitney off guard, “Mr. L, what are you talking about?”

“Playing coy after denying me the other night, now here you are, trying to seduce me again?” his words were laced with scorn.

Whitney realized he had misunderstood the whole evening’s events.

Her discomfort grew, matched by a cold resolve. She sidestepped his arm and explained without warmth, “I have no plans to seduce you, Sir. I lost a compet

ition today and was upset enough, I don't need to add fighting with you to my night."

Her heart sank further.

But he heard her all wrong, thinking she was now picking a fight with him.

This clueless little thing had been irritating him for days, and now, instead of softening and coaxing, she wanted to argue?

Suppressing his irritation, he mocked her, "Upset over a competition and taking it out on me? Isn't losing normal for you, especially when I coached the team? Your youthful arrogance blinds you to the fact that there are always better people out there. What makes you think you're something special, Whitney?"

Whitney stood silently momentarily, contemplating whether her confidence **was** mistaken for arrogance. Did he truly understand her past?

She replied with a **cool**, dismissive smile, "I'm not claiming to be special, and I never said I couldn't lose. But, Mr. L, you're making assumptions without seeing the whole picture. My **loss** wasn't fair and square. Of course, I didn't expect any consolation from you."

Feeling a sting of disappointment, Whitney decided not to dwell on the conversation. She briskly **opened** the **door** of the suite and dashed into the elevator.

Tiana had overheard their entire exchange from where she stood.

The man inside the suite stepped out with a chilly demeanor, paused, and then, with furrowed brows, turned to Parker. "What's the deal with today's jewelry competition?"

Ludwik, too upset to even attend the judges' panel, was naturally not in the mood for anyone to bother him with the details.

As Parker began to speak, Tiana cut him off with a fiery urgency, "Mr. L. do you not know what happened

your wife?"

The accusation hung heavy in the air as she continued, "Today, that Monica stole *her* artwork, exploited her connections to present first, leaving Whitney blindsided. The judges lashed out, accusing her of plagiarism. Now, the whole to

wn's abuzz with the scandal. She's barely holding it together, and you're here, giving her a hard time? Tell me, Mr. L, is that fair?"

She whispered the last word so softly it was nearly inaudible.

L's face registered shock upon hearing the news.

Parker gestured towards the elevator, saying, "Whitney's gone that way."

He added, "And it's raining outside."

In a swift motion, L snatched Parker's car keys and chased after Whitney into the elevator.

"is it really raining outside?" Tiana asked Parker, concern lacing her voice.

"I made it up."

Tiana stared at the sophisticated, bespectacled man before her, "How can you be more conniving than me?"

"It's a guy thing," he quipped with a devilish smirk.

Shocked, Tiana stepped back.

Whitney left the Royal One Club, aimless and alone as the night deepened and rain began to fall.

Passersby hurried along, couples shared umbrellas, and parents shielded their children from the downpour. She, on the other hand, was alone, lacking a mother, and with a father who wished her harm. As for a partner. She scoffed at the thought.

Squatting by a flower bed, she refreshed the news on her phone, and her screen flooded with insults. Today marked her first major setback since her vow of vengeance. She had never shed a tear over the Valentine family's cruelty, but now she was on the verge of crying, partly because of L's disregard. His unexpected kindness had given her a sliver of warmth on her otherwise grim path.

Blaming

herself for the weakness born from the desire to rely on someone, Whitney shook her head rapidly, trying to sober up.

Just as she was about to break down, the roar of an engine and the screech of a car stopping abruptly interrupted her wallowing.

The onlookers turned to see a handsome man emerge from the sports car. Dressed in a black shirt and trousers, his rolled-up sleeves revealed muscular arms, and a discreetly luxurious watch hinted at a mysterious and affluent identity.

He approached Whitney at the flower bed. His voice softened as he recalled her friend's words about her being sabotaged. Yet, instead of sympathy, he had mocked her confidence and lack of skill.

"Didn't you realize it was raining?" He asked gently.

Whitney looked up, surprised. "Why are you here?"

She wanted to leave as soon as she saw him, but he quickly stepped forward and lifted her into his arms, much to her annoyance.

"What are you doing, L?" She snapped, pushing him away.

The onlooking girls cheered enviously

L playfully smacked her bottom, causing her to blush and protest, "What right do you have to carry me? I'm not going with you,"

He replied coolly, "Can't I take care of my child? It's in your belly, not someone else's."

Stunned by his audacity, Whitney found herself being carried back into the Royal One Club.

In the presidential suite, the butler had prepared a warm bath. L carried her to the bathroom, set her down, and with a look of mock disgust, said, "You're light as a cotton candy.

Warm yourself up. If you catch a cold, beware, I'll have to discipline you!"

Shivering from the cold and slightly indignant, she disappeared into the bathroom.

His assistant knocked, delivering the lady's outfit he had ordered.

After her bath, Whitney realized she had nothing to wear. She called out, “Hey ... Where are my clothes?”

I was waiting just outside and cracked the door open slightly, “They’re with me .”

Irritated like 4 cornered rabbit, she retorted, “Why are you standing so close? Were you peeping?”

He opened the door further with a cold smile, “Guess how **much** I saw?”

Embarrassed and clutching her towel, Whitney exclaimed, “L, you’re **such a s** coundrel!”

With a chuckle, he steadied her. “Be careful!”

His tone turned sharp, “Who would want to peep you? The bathroom doesn’t have a non–slip mat. If you fall, what about my child?”

Realizing her oversight, Whitney felt the familiar allure of his charm. Once **aga in**, she **was** caught up in the care he seemed to provide

The sensation of being taken care of filled her mind. Whitney pouted and said, “Give me my clothes.”

L passed the clothes to her through the door gap, and she caught it. However, he hung on to it, refusing to let

go

Whitney tried to pull it away but to no **avail**. Seeing her charming figure, L’s A dam’s apple throbbed elegantly as he said, “Need help?”

Whitney responded by cncatching the clothes away and closing the bathroom d oor with a loud **bang**.

With a flushed face, she was once again stunned by how skilled he was at charming women.

Dressed and stepping out to the scent of ginger coffee, she found L in the kitch en, sleeves rolled up, preparing the drink. His actions were a stark contrast t o his usually arrogant demeanor, which surprised her.

Trying to ignore the flutter in her chest, she turned her attention to the **room**.

By the time L came out of the kitchen with the ginger coffee, he immediately caught her scanning the room like a detective.

Placing the ginger coffee on the bedside table, he was instantly by her side with a mocking grin. "Looking for traces of other women?"

Whitney spun around, and her retort tinged with sarcasm. "**Even** if there were traces, wouldn't a man like you **know** how to cover them up?"

He lifted her effortlessly onto the bed. "It seems you need to be put in your place!"

She reached for the comforter, feigning criticism, "Is this bed even clean?"

Annoyed, he tossed back. "It's not. Sniff the middle of the bed, and you'll find another scent."

Curious, Whitney did as he said but only found his masculine, musky scent. Flustered, she quickly sat up, only

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to have him lean over and suggest. "There are more direct ways to check, **you** know

"How?" She asked innocently.

He took her hand, guiding it towards the buckle of his belt, his eyes brimming with seduction, "How do you

think?"

Whitney pushed him away, her face burning with embarrassment. "L"

He smirked, "Aren't you the one who's suspicious?"

Suddenly, his expression turned cold. "I've been alone here for days, not even a female fly in sight. Why haven't you gone home? Because someone's made me angry!"

Whitney looked around, his suite was indeed spotless and meticulously tidy, devoid of any feminine touch.

“What’s been eating at you these days, throwing hints and suspicions? Are you really convinced I’ve been chasing other women?” His grip on her chin was firm, a clear sign he was still **riled** up about the other day’s spat

Whitney pressed her lips together, fighting the urge to nod in both defiance and fear.

But did she truly believe that?

Confusion clouded her thoughts as she bit her lip.

“Speak up!” He snapped, growing impatient.

His closeness was overwhelming, his scent and warmth enveloping her—it was all too much, especially on the bed, that conjured uncontrollable thoughts, making him uncomfortable.

Hearing his voice grow husky, Whitney immediately scooted away.

But he was domineering, scooping her up effortlessly into his embrace and reaching for the ginger coffee. “Drink this before it gets cold.”

Whitney scrunched her nose. “It’s too

spicy, I don’t want it.”

Her complaint carried a coquettish undertone.

His gaze deepened, a tickle in his throat; he threatened, “If you won’t drink, I’ll have to feed you.”

“And you can imagine just how,” he added with a provocative edge.

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Whitney’s cheeks were flushed with anger as she took several gulps of the drink.

L quirked a grin, asking. “Tastes bad, huh?”

“Yes,” Whitney lied defiantly, although, in truth, it was not bad at all—he was quite the chef.

His brows **arched** quizzically, and he leaned closer, “Let me be the judge of that.

Instead of tasting from the glass, his lips found hers in a sudden kiss.

“Hey!” She protested, words muffled. How could he do this again? Whitney struggled, but his absence **had** clearly affected him, his kisses growing more fervent, Gradually, her resistance faded, her grip crumpling the

fabric of his shirt.

His back was a landscape of strength, which Whitney dared not touch as her cheeks blushed even deeper. Finally, he pulled away to catch his breath, looking at her intently. “Now, you can explain properly.”

How could he? After teasing her, he had the nerve to ask for an explanation?

Pushing him away, Whitney stood up, her voice tinged with annoyance. “There’s nothing to clarify. Mr. L, your personal phone line was answered by some other woman. That alone tells me all I need to know about you. We may be in a contract marriage, but while I won’t meddle in your colorful private life, don’t you dare flirt with me. Got it?”

The atmosphere in the room turned icy.

He stepped forward, his presence chilling. “Me? Colorful private life?”

“Isn’t that so?” Whitney went on, feeling a need for clarity. “Eight days ago, I called you in the afternoon, and a woman answered.”

Frowning, he pulled out his phone and shoved it into her hands. “Check for yourself,”

Whitney took the phone, surprised by his boldness. Guilty men would never hand over their phones so easily. yet he was utterly indifferent.

Feeling a bit awkward but determined not to lose face, Whitney scrolled through the call log.

Eight days back, she checked once, and the record was gone.

Whitney smirked, “You deleted it, Mr. L. Or maybe that woman did.”

“No matter who did.” He pushed her against the wall, his voice laced with mockery. “If I really had someone else, why would I hide it from you? Who do you think you are? Besides, I don’t have any secret chambers for lovers.”

A sting of pain shot through Whitney’s heart.

How dare **he**?

Who did she think she **was**?

The hurt in her voice was palpable as she pushed him away. “You’re right. I’m nobody. I’m just a tool to you.”

“Cut the drama,” he retorted, his tone hard yet softening as he looked into her eyes. “If you want to be someone to me, then try harder. He leaned in, whispering with a mix of arrogance and tenderness, “And just so you know, I’m not interested in women... but if I had to choose, it would be you. You slept with me, and you have to be responsible for this, understand?”

Whitney blinked, slowly comprehending his meaning.

Her cheeks burned with a sudden realization—was she the only one for him?

Her ears reddened as she stammered, “**Don’t** talk nonsense to me. I don’t understand it anyone’s benefiting, it’s you...”

“If you want to benefit, I’m at your service,” he said, his lips curving into a wicked smile.

What a waste of breath, Whitney huffed, still upset about the mysterious phone call. No sincerity, no explanation.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist, his eyes gleaming with pleasure. “All this fuss over a phone call. You’re just jealous, aren’t you? I have to admit it’s quite fun to see you jealous. What would you do if I really had other women in this house?”

Whitney’s face tightened. I’m not jealous. You can have whoever you want.”

“Really?” He breathed out, tickling her skin.

Whitney shoved him away, losing patience. “Can’t you ever stop, Mr. L?”

“Never” L declared, leading her by the hand to the bedside cabinet, which he opened to reveal some medical supplies. He rolled up his trouser leg to show a significant wound on his knee.

Surprised, Whitney asked, “Got this the other night?”

He replied coldly, “Would I be injured if not for you? Ungrateful thing, tend to it.”

Whitney **rolled** her eyes at his self–inflicted tantrum but obediently applied the antiseptic and wrapped the wound with fresh bandages, her fingers gentle and careful.

As she worked, he asked out of the blue, “Did your stepsister steal your artwork?”

She looked up, surprised he knew. “Are you offering to help?”

“Do I look like I’m over it? Do I look like I want to **help?**” His voice was icy

Whitney pouted, her own grievances still not addressed. He still had yet to explain the phone call or the woman involved.

In frustration, she blurted out, “Then I’ll just have to go see that Ludwik, my dear rival. He’s got the power, he seems interested in me. Maybe I’ll just sacrifice myself.”

His demeanor turned frosty. “Ludwik interested in you? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, he’s quite the catch! Though he’s a scoundrel at heart, a one–time investment wouldn’t be a **loss,**” Whitney taunted.

His lips thinned in displeasure. “And how would you make this one–time investment?”

and

“That’s something a ladies’ man like you would know best. We’re just in a business arrangement, you have no say over me.”

“Don’t you dare!” He pulled her closer, his voice a mix of threat and amusement. “Ludwik wouldn’t give you a second glance, especially not a pregnant woman like you.”

“How do you know? Are you friends with Ludwik? L. could you possibly introduce us?” She asked eagerly. He stood up abruptly, grabbing his coat. “Enough. You’ve caused enough trouble tonight. Just sleep here.” Whitney blurted, “And where will you go? Not coming home?”

“I’ve got plenty of secret chambers for lovers to choose from, don’t I? I’ll just pick on,” he snapped back.

She had wanted to invite him home to appease Natalie, but now, seeing his continued indifference, Whitney lost her temper. Then go find someone else; it’s none of my business!”

Watching her feign indifference while clearly upset, he smiled crookedly, not bothering to soothe her, and closed the door behind him.

Chapter 44

Outside, Nolan, who had just finished his tasks, felt like he had missed out on a fortune.

“Ludwik, you’ve been holed up here for days, giving us hell. Parker said Whitney was here! Wow, she calmed you down already? That Whitney is something else. What did you two get up to in there?”

Looking mischievously, Nolan waited for an answer.

And the man glanced at him, his voice icy, “Check my phone for a deleted call on October 1st.”

Confused. Nolan was left with more questions than answers.

“Parker” The man announced as he strolled up to the elevator.

Parker was slouched against the wall, looking up with an air of impatience, “What now? Another headache?”

Inside the suite, Whitney was fuming, having just hurled a pillow at the front door.

The doorbell chimed

She stood up, her face a mask of embarrassment. Was it him returning?

Peeking her head out the door, Parker, with a playful glint in his eyes, said, “Whitney, it’s me. There’s no need for more pillow–throwing.”

Whitney was mortified.

Parker held out an upscale paper bag, the aroma wafting around, “You didn’t have a decent dinner, did you? Have a little more to eat.”

Whitney was pleasantly surprised, “Parker, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Don’t mention it. Mr. L picked it out, said you might be stewing and that staying up would only make you hungrier,” Parker said with a look of cultured grace.

Whitney’s face flushed with a mix of anger and embarrassment.

Chapter 45

What was with that jerk? Just leaving like that was bad enough, but to send food? And then to insult her with

She was fuming

With a forced smile, she said through gritted teeth, “Thanks for making the trip, Parker. But... has my friend Tiana left already?”

“No idea,” he replied nonchalantly.

A bit embarrassed, Whitney asked, “She’s a girl on her own. Would you mind giving her a lift, Parker, if it’s not too much trouble?”

“No trouble,” Parker said almost too easily.

Before leaving, he paused at the door, his eyes behind the gold–rimmed glasses betraying a lazy indifference. He dropped a bombshell. Is Tiana’s fiancé Gunner Lutz, the one from the Lutz family?”

Whitney was taken aback, but Parker added with a hint of mischief before she could respond, “Ran into Gunner at the hotel last week playing with some celebrity.”

Being a man, the implications of ‘playing’ were clear.

Whitney was shocked. Was Tiana’s fiancé cheating on her?

Parker had mentioned it casually, not really concerned with the lesser-known Tiana’s family, but the Lutz clan was among the top four wealthiest families. He had seen Gunner before—a notorious playboy.

The next day, Whitney received a Facebook message from Tiana telling her to ignore the news.

Whitney guessed that her reputation must be boiling over by now. No doubt Monica had bought a legion of trolls to drag her name through the mud.

This debacle was Monica’s golden ticket to fame and fortune.

To distract Whitney, Tiana sent over several pictures of engagement rings.

Bashfully, she said, “That bastard Gunner proposed to me. I didn’t want to say yes, but our parents are pushing it. Whitney, can you help me choose? Or better yet, design a rock so big it makes him really pay!”

Whitney suddenly remembered Parker’s reminder.

Tiana might badmouth Gunner, but she was still hopeful about their relationship.

Whitney hoped Parker was mistaken, or maybe Gunner was just playing the field.

She seriously considered several options before making her choice for Tiana.

Then, she called home to check on Natalie. Natalie was in high spirits, laughing. “Dear Whitney, your husband came home to sleep last night. When will you be back?”

Whitney was surprised. Had L come home last night? She thought he was off chasing some lover.

A smile tugged at her lips, one she did not even notice, **as** she softly said, “I’ll come home after I finish up today, Mom.”

But there were still things to do. The breakthrough in her plagiarism case hinged on Stella confessing she had given Whitney's manuscript to Monica,

That's why Whitney had not rushed to confront Monica but had instead focused on dragging Stella into the light.

TIP

Without any other evidence, the outcome was in the hands of fate.

Whitney had found out Stella would be at the Golden Hue Bar tonight before leaving town for a film shoot.

Just then, Monica's taunting call came through.

"Whitney, the preliminary results are out in a week, and I'll be the top prize. The media are all over me. Phebe praised my talents today. She's over your little games, you wretch. Once the prize is mine, it'll be time for my engagement to the Perlman family. Oh, and Simon's throwing a celebration for me tonight at the Golden Hue Bar. You must come."

"Not interested," Whitney replied, dismissing the provocation.

But if she wanted to find Stella, tonight was her only chance.

Under the cloak of night, Whitney arrived at the Golden Hue Bar.

Simon had booked out the entire **bar** for Monica's celebration, and the Perlman family was well represented.

Whitney spotted the legitimate heir, Troy Perlman, and the daughter of the family, Faith Perlman. They were clearly there to pave the way for Monica's integration into the Perlman's main branch.

Troy was a known playboy, otherwise, the illegitimate son Simon would not have **caught** Wyatt's eye, bolstered by Phebe's favor.

And Faith, born of the same mother as Troy, was determined to support her brother.

Whitney steered clear of these people, going straight for Stella.

She passed a private suite where young men were carousing. There was Troy, and Faith, stern-faced, keeping a close eye on him.

Suddenly, Whitney noticed a curtain in the corridor, behind which muffled voices could be heard, "Gunner, please don't..."

"Do you like it, you little temptress?"

Gunner?

Tiana's fiancé!

Parker had not lied; this scumbag was cheating on Tiana.

Fury rising, Whitney marched over and yanked the curtain aside!

The disheveled couple inside, caught off guard, paused their heated encounter and looked up in annoyance.

Whitney's shock was palpable when she saw the woman's face.

Stella's panic flashed but turned into a cold smirk upon recognizing Whitney.

"Whitney?" Knowing her as Tiana's best friend, Gunner tried to push Stella away quickly.

Stella, however, pressed closer to him, smirking provocatively at Whitney, "Fancy seeing you here. Who are you looking for? Tiana's fiancé, dear Gunner, or me?"

Whitney clenched her fist, thinking of Tiana's happiness earlier that day, sharing pictures of rings for her to choose from.

She was itching to slap Stella hard!

How could it be Stella? She had never imagined.

Seeing Stella's shameless grin, Whitney knew she had been the one to seduce Gunner.

The illustrious Lutz family was a prize among socialites, and Gunner was as corrupt as they come.

He was the kind of guy who loved to fan the flames, threatening Whitney with a sneer, “You know how innocent

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and fragile Tiana is You better think twice before spilling the beans to her.”

With that, he sauntered off, his laughter trailing behind him.

Whitney’s gaze bore into Stella in the corner, sending an inexplicable chill down her spine.

But the pain and conflict etched on Whitney’s face filled Stella with a wicked sense of triumph.

Just yesterday at the Royal One Club, she was humiliated and shoved off the **stage** for the whole **crowd** to see— what blow for a star like her! Whitney and Tiana, perched upstairs, had watched with smug

amusement. How satisfying it must have been for them.

Stella seethed with resentment.

Whitney’s voice was icy as she demanded, “When did you start fooling around with Gunner? How long has this sordid affair been going on?”

“Don’t be so crude,” Stella retorted with a casual flippancy, “It’s only been a month. But Tiana’s so clueless, and she has no idea that Gunner often rolls right out of my bed to take her out to brunch.”

Whitney’s palm cracked against Stella’s cheek with a sharp slap.

Stella’s face twisted to one side as Whitney hissed. “You’ve become sick. Tiana may be the most loyal among us, but she’s also not one to be crossed. Do you really think she’d let you off the hook if she found out?”

“Why don’t you go ahead and tell her? Her dearest friend and her beloved fiancé tangled up together— let’s see if she can handle that blow,” Stella taunted with a confident sneer.

Whitney frowned, troubled by the very thought. The image of Tiana blissfully choosing engagement rings in ignorance tugged at her heart.

She was grateful, at least, that Tiana had not come tonight, spared from witnessing this despicable duo's betrayal.

Whitney glared at Stella coldly. "How did you even get your hooks into Gunner? Tiana barely introduced you. What tricks did you play?"