

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 46-60

Chapter 46

Stella felt Whitney's reaction was incredibly swift. She chuckled and said, "Well, Monica's been quite the matchmaker for me, unlike you. She's much more generous!"

Whitney paused, her mind quickly piecing things together. A month ago, Monica had already begun courting Stella's favor, helping her hook up with Gunner. Tiana's future heartbreak would just be icing on the cake of

Whitney's misfortunes.

"Did Monica invite you and Gunner here tonight?" Whitney suddenly asked.

"Yep, but don't you go thinking you can take me down, Whitney. I'm Monica's new BFF. Gunner values my connection with her, so he wants to marry me. Tiana? She's just dull and childish. Gunner doesn't care for her one bit. Oh, but it seems like you'll have to keep this secret until you watch your dear friend get dumped!" Stella strutted off, smug with triumph.

Whitney stood there, feeling like she was suffocating at the thought of Tiana.

"Sis, why the long face? Who did you see?" Monica approached with a teasing smile.

Whitney looked up, realizing Monica had watched the drama unfold for a while.

By setting up Gunner and Stella here, Monica intended Whitney to catch them in the act, pouring salt on her wounds.

Whitney had only wanted to confront Stella, but Monica's scheming against her friend was intolerable.

Clutching her hands, Whitney scoffed and suddenly asked, "Didn't you invite me to your victory bash?"

"Of course, Sis! Let me show you the lavish feast Simon has thrown in my honor!" Monica boasted, pulling Whitney into the dance floor.

Stopping in front of a luxurious private suite, Monica pointed inside. "Sis, take a seat. I'll go get Simon and the others."

Whitney eyed her, her lips curling into a knowing smile, and obediently entered the room.

Roselyn approached as soon as Monica left, her ill-fitting gown begging for mercy. "Monica, can I borrow one of your latest Chanel-inspired dresses? This one just isn't working, and with all the hotshots here to night, I want to dazzle."

Monica gave her a cold glance. "Dazzle more than me?"

Roselyn's face froze in embarrassment, quickly appeasing, "I didn't mean it like that, Monica. I could never outshine you."

"Good, you know your place. Now, keep your gold-digging antics under wraps. If you really want to snag someone, you'd do better not wearing anything at all," Monica sneered.

Roselyn's face flushed with shame, but she dared not retort.

Then she spotted Whitney inside the private suite, her embarrassment intensifying under Whitney's indifferent

gaze.

Monica, before leaving, had a mischievous smile that Whitney did not miss.

Sitting quietly, Whitney anticipated Monica's next move.

Monica pulled Roselyn aside with a devilish grin, instructing, "Get Troy to Whitney's room. Now."

"Why, Monica?"

*"Just **do it**, Roselyn. Stop asking questions."*

Roselyn nodded begrudgingly and fetched Troy.

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Seeing Roselyn had left, Monica immediately turned around and went to look for Faith.

Although she and Faith had a mutual hatred for each other, she needed Faith today.

She planned to pull Faith into the room Whitney was in. The thought of seeing how Faith would make things difficult for Whitney once she saw what was happening in the room, Monica could not hold back her laughter.

She knew very well that Whitney's doom was only a week away, yet she could not hold back from wanting to humiliate her as much as she could tonight.

After all, she still resented Whitney for embarrassing her at the Royal One Club last night. What infuriated her even more was that when she went home and cried about it to Simon, he not only did not immediately intend to settle scores with Whitney like he used to, but he even seemed concerned about Whitney.

It was at that moment that Monica realized things had not gone astray.

After the charity dinner, Simon seemed to have become interested in Whitney again!

Monica would never allow that!

Thus, she planned to skin Whitney alive tonight using the Perlman family.

About ten minutes later, Roselyn helped Troy into the private room, who lit up at the sight of Whitney's stunning face.

Jealousy flared in Roselyn as she remembered supporting a disinterested Troy all the way here.

Recalling Monica's instructions, she pushed Whitney towards him and swiftly locked the door behind her.

"What's the rush?" Whitney caught the door, flashing a grin at Roselyn. "You're not too bright, are you?"

“What did you say?” Roselyn glared.

Whitney’s smile pierced through her. “Did Monica want us locked in here? If I were you, I’d take advantage of Troy’s drunken state. Monica’s using you like a pawn, but becoming Troy’s lady? That would put Monica in her place.”

She glanced at Troy. He was just as handsome as Simon, a playboy, and a sure thing.

Troy was the legitimate son of the Perlman family, and his wealth was immeasurable.

Whitney was right. This was her moment to rise above Monica and escape her life of poverty. From today onwards, those socialites would never dare to bully her again, let alone laugh at her borrowed dress!

Roselyn’s eyes flickered with greed.

Reading her thoughts, Whitney subtly snatched the key and suggested, “This opportunity won’t come again. Make it quick. I’ll keep watch.”

She locked the door behind her, leaving Roselyn with her prize.

***Whitney** surveyed the bar and dance floor outside, eerily quiet like the calm before a storm.*

She knew the kind of storm Monica could unleash.

Monica really did not hold back in trying to set her up.

***So**, why **not** add fuel to the fire?*

***With** a sly smile, Whitney ordered a drink from the bartender under Gunner’s name to be delivered to Stella.*

*Minutes later, Stella sauntered to the private suite, cooing, “Oh, Gunner darling, you really have endless **energy**...”*

She slipped inside, with Whitney quietly locking the door behind her.

She sat **at** the booth leading **to** the **private** suites, her delicate face composed and cool as she sipped on ice water leisurely.

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A raucous noise erupted from nearby, with Monica attempting to soothe and Faith, her face twisted in anger, looking imperious under the flickering lights.

Faith was notorious for her fiery temper, and her overprotective nature towards her little brother was legendary. Any woman who dared flirt with him had learned the hard way about Faith's vengeful wrath.

Troy, the unreliable charmer he was, only made her more vigilant!

Monica tried to calm her down with a timid voice, "Faith, just chill for a moment. Maybe my sister just needed to discuss something with Troy. You know she plagiarized my work and is about to be disqualified from the contest. She's desperate, and since Simon won't give her the time of day, she's turned her sights on Troy..."

Bang!

Faith's fuse was lit even brighter. "The Valentine family only produces such lo wifes! Wait till I flay her right here!"

Monica's lips curled into a sly smile as they briskly passed the booth area.

But that smile had not fully formed when, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Whitney seated nonchalantly at the booth, sipping her water. Monica's face stiffened comically, her eyes bulging like something from a fantasy novel.

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She was utterly flabbergasted.

Whitney?

Was she not supposed to be in the **room**?

*Why was she just **sitting** here, cool **as** a cucumber?*

And, more importantly, whose heated moans were echoing from the lounge?

Monica's lips twitched. She watched Whitney glance up at her with an icy smirk, but she could not stop in her tracks, not when Faith was already storming a head to kick open the lounge door!

Inside, the dim lights barely illuminated the scene – Troy was drunkenly pinning two women on the couch, his shirt flung open, his lips hungrily moving over them.

One of the women seemed reluctant, playfully struggling in a mock protest.

*The other, however, was **all** in, eagerly wrapping her arms around Troy's neck and pressing her lips to his.*

"You two sluts! How dare you seduce my brother! Whitney, get out here... Wait, where's Whitney?" Faith's fury exploded as she flipped the women's faces, only to freeze in shock, "Roselyn? Monica, isn't this your bestie, Roselyn? And Stella? Isn't she that hotshot celebrity everyone's talking about? This..."

Faith's face flickered through a myriad of expressions before turning to Monica with a dark, vengeful glare, "Aren't these your cheap friends? Oh, I get it. You were trying to frame Whitney, claiming she was coming onto my brother, but it turns out your two shameless besties are the ones in his bed!"

Faith lashed out, striking fiercely. Stella was quickest to flee, her face the picture of misfortune. She had been called over by Gunner, expecting some sort of affair, only to find herself locked in the moment she entered.

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She did not even understand how things had escalated whether it was a natural disaster or man-made

chaos.

"It's not me. I have no interest in Troy. I just happened to be here; I have a boyfriend! Monica, explain for me, pl

ease.” Stella’s complexion was ashen as she looked desperately at Monica, silently pleading.

Meanwhile, Monica was still rooted to the spot near the door, blindsided by the discovery of Roselyn and Stella inside.

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It felt like doom was bearing down on her she planned to get Faith to catch Whitney and Troy in a scandal, to give Whitney a thorough thrashing.

But how had it turned into her best friends being caught?

Now, she seemed at a loss for words.

Whitney...

Yes, that wretch, she must have sabotaged everything with that mocking smile.

Just then, Simon approached, his voice grave, “What’s going on here?”

“Simon, you have the nerve to ask!” Faith spun around, pointing an accusing finger at Monica, “Your precious girlfriend was trying to set up Whitney. And somehow, it ended up being these two women. Stella might be innocent, but what about your best friend Roselyn? She’s utterly shameless, throwing herself at men and just like Monica!”

Simon’s gaze darkened as he turned to Monica, “Is this true? Have you been scheming against Whitney?”

“No, Simon, I would never hurt her,” Monica pleaded, her eyes brimming with feigned innocence.

But this time, Simon was not buying her act. Recalling past disputes between Whitney and Monica, he had always sided with Monica, seeing her as fragile and gentle.

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However, Faith was the one revealing the truth now, and Simon could not deny what he saw with his own eyes.

Perhaps Monica was not as innocent and weak as he had thought.

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He left Monica to **deal** with the aftermath.

But Faith would not have it. She dragged Roselyn **out**, stripping her clothes and tossing her into the hallway, shouting. "Let everyone see what a shameless little **tramp** she is! Did Monica send you here? Simon, what's your game? Thinking you could send your minion to charm my brother and win over the Perlman family inheritance? I'll be telling Grandpa about this! And your mother, Phebe, won't get off scot-free either!"

Monica's **face** turned ghostly pale as she stumbled **back**. No, she had only intended to disgrace Whitney, but now she was caught in her own trap.

As Simon turned away with a cold expression, she felt the chill of isolation. She had just managed to turn things around with Phebe, and now, had she caused more trouble?

Roselyn was **left** to bear Faith's wrath, humiliated in front of everyone. Though vain and materialistic, she still had her pride. The men around her leered, a mix of lust and mockery in their eyes.

Clutching her face in horror, Roselyn clung to Monica's legs, begging, "Monica, I was wrong. I got confused for a moment. Please, explain to Faith, keep me safe!"

Monica had already seen through Roselyn's true colors, and now that she was in danger herself, she had no intention of saving her.

Without hesitation, she shook off Roselyn, adding insult to injury. "How could I save you when you're so despicable? I never taught you to be this low. Don't smear my name in front of Faith. Just get lost! Faith, I had no idea about her actions. Please don't misunderstand me."

Roselyn was crushed under Faith's foot, her humiliation recorded by the mocking crowd, her fists clenched in rage.

Monica would pay for this night's betrayal – Roselyn swore her vengeance would be as ruthless as possible.

Having quietly observed the entire farce from her booth, Whitney clapped her hands lightly and stood up.

Monica could not even wait for the competition results before trying to sabotage her.

Well, she did not mind turning the tables and using this incident as payback. It was uncertain whether Phebe would find out, but one thing was for sure the friendship between Roselyn and Monica was ruined. The

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seeds of hatred planted in Roselyn's heart would, with a little nurturing, provide Whitney with a weapon in the future.

Stella, too, would feel the repercussions, and Whitney watched with a detached chill.

Monica wanted to disturb the peace between her friends, right?

She would return the favor.

The next day, the landline rang after lunch with Natalie in the villa.

It was L.

Taryn answered and then turned to Whitney, "Madam, Sir has sent a driver to pick you up. He'd like you to visit

his office."

"Hmm? What for?" Whitney wondered.

With a knowing twinkle in her eye, Natalie ascended the stairs and selected an outfit that could have come straight out of a chic Parisian boutique—a sophisticated Chanel-inspired suit dress. “No matter what he’s up to, doll yourself up, Whitney,” she advised. “Outshine those other gals at his office. Our girl’s a natural beauty, with skin as smooth as a baby’s cheeks. This pink will suit you to a T.”

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The old lady was sharp as a tack, she had already grilled her son and understood the conflict in detail when he returned that evening.

Meanwhile, Whitney was pondering a different matter altogether: was she really about to visit his company? Could this mean she would finally uncover L’s identity?

A frisson of excitement washed over her. The moment the chauffeur pulled up in the car, she hopped in without hesitation.

The unassuming Bentley entered the city center and approached a nondescript office building.

*The assistant escorted her **to** the 28th floor. **As** they exited the elevator, Whitney observed various other companies; the building was clearly a leasehold for office spaces.*

Then, she entered a rather ordinary-looking office.

*Behind the glass **door**, a man sat at **a** desk, his suit crisp, his posture emanating an air of solemnity from beneath his mask.*

On the desk lay a solitary document, seemingly placed there to give the impression of a makeshift attempt at officialdom. .

*Whitney’s **gaze** landed on his crossed legs, her voice tinged with disbelief, “L, is this really your office?”*

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The man looked **at** her with a mysterious smile. “Surprised to find me so unremarkable?”

It was not that.

The monthly rent for this office space could not even match the cost of a single button on his suit. It was a glaring mismatch.

The petite woman eyed him with suspicion.

His smile was deep-seated as he offered a gentlemanly gesture, “Please, take a seat.”

Whitney turned to see the only chair in the office, its foam innards spilling out through a tear.

Frankly, she had never sat **on** such a shabby piece of furniture. What on earth did he do for a living?

Clutching **the** hem of her skirt, she perched on the edge of the chair, revealing a pair of milky-white, slender legs that dazzled the eye. She sat with a demure grace that barely touched the seat.

He appraised her attire from head to toe; her pink blouse enhanced her porcelain complexion, and her hair cascaded over her shoulders, a few wisps playfully framing her forehead. Today, she looked particularly youthful, her figure outlined by a subtle curve.

Who had dressed her like this? The directness of his gaze unexpectedly brought a blush to Whitney’s face.

“What did you want to see me about?” She asked.

Only then did his gaze drift from her figure, and he pressed the intercom button.

Soon after, a male assistant arrived with a woman who looked like a seasoned executive assistant – attractive face, curvy figure, obviously high-class. She glanced at Whitney, then turned pale as she faced the man behind the desk, “Boss.”

His voice was icy as he began, "Iris, where was I on the afternoon of October 1st? Did you take any calls for me without permission?"

The executive assistant faltered, "You were at the Coastline City branch. After the emergency meeting concluded at five, you rested in the lounge and left your phone outside."

Whitney blinked, realizing he had summoned her to clarify.

The assistant's voice trembled, "I saw the call was from Madam, and I've admired you for so long that I foolishly answered the phone. Please forgive me, boss!"

He continued attending to his paperwork, simply gesturing towards Whitney.

Whitney suddenly felt her dignity had been acknowledged.

Iris bit her lip and approached Whitney to apologize, "Madam, I'm so sorry, I was out of line!"

"Why did you say you were in the same room as him?" Whitney remembered the voice on the phone; it was indeed Iris. She narrowed her eyes and asked.

The woman's jealousy flared, "Because I wanted you to think we were close!"

That made sense.

Whitney looked at Iris, recalling the woman she had seen in L's car that morning. Was it the same person?

*She was not **sure**.*

At that moment, the man's gaze settled on Whitney, his voice lazily deep, "Are you satisfied now?"

Whitney snapped back to reality, her gaze clashing with his detached one; he looked so aboveboard yet aloof."

*Whitney silently pursed her **lips**.*

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His voice was cold and ruthless as he said, "Felix, fire her."

"Please, boss!" The executive assistant begged, "Give me another chance..."

The assistant escorted her out.

The office fell silent.

Whitney quietly raised her head, her eyes meeting his.

He was watching her!

Clearing her throat to hide the sudden brightening of her spirits, she pouted, "Well, things are somewhat clearer

now..."

Somewhat? That's quite an attitude to have in my presence, Madam. Do you still think I'm a womanizer?" He asked with a mocking lift of his eyebrow.

Whitney's face flushed, her hands tightening. She appreciated his efficiency but was not ready to concede, "I don't know... It would be better if you and I maintained a respectful distance. That way, there would be no overstepping, no arguments."

He stared at her intently, seemingly displeased.

A phone call interrupted them, and he furrowed his brow to deal with business matters. Running out of time, he had his assistant take Whitney home.

Confused, Whitney exited the building, which did not seem to fit his corporate image.

Meanwhile, on the 28th floor, Ludwik stood by the window on a call.

A graceful figure entered, her poise impeccable.

When Ludwik finished his call and turned, his brow creased at the sight of her, "What brings you from the branch office?"

“Ludwik.” The woman was dressed in a sharp business suit, lacking any of the ostentatious flair of the secretary. She carried a professional aura and exquisite features that spoke of a high-society upbringing. She said with a slightly apologetic smile, “Iris was one of my subordinates I left behind. I didn’t expect her to disrupt your new relationship with Whitney. I’ve come to offer my apologies.”

Ludwik watched her, his gaze no different than it would be for any other subordinate, yet there was an

undercurrent of warmth.

She was a loyal partner and held an important position, now serving as the CEO of the branch office.

He said flatly, “You have no reason for self-reproach. Return to your duties.”

“Yes, Ludwik.” She nodded obediently and left, but not without looking back with a teasing smile. “Nolan mentioned there’s something special about Whitney. It seems he was right. You’ve even ‘moved’ your office to this rundown place. What are you hiding from Whitney?”

“Get back to work,” he replied, his tone chilling.

With a respectful nod, she departed/

On the 24th-floor balcony, Iris accepted a card from the woman and said, “Thank you, Elaine.”

She was Elaine’s confidante, not enamored with Ludwik but following Elaine’s orders to answer the phone and rile Whitney by pretending they were in the same room.

“I’ll leave Imperial Gem Corporation immediately,” she stated respectfully.

Elaine’s lips curled into a cold smirk, “A small joke, but well played.”

Iris knew she was referring to provoking Whitney.

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Llame had yet to reveal herself to Whitney, Iris was merely a scapegoat

But as long as Ludwik remained unsuspecting, all was well.

tris Tell a mix of resentment and relief, "All these years, every female secretary has been arranged by you. M Lippert's side has been clean except for Whitney. She's the only obstacle to the path you could easily have walked down. Sooner or later... your patience will pay off."

The woman's smile faltered momentarily. She had harbored feelings for Ludwik. For years, she had been the loyal, demure lady by his side, professional and silent.

She glanced down from the balcony, her smile mixing with a frosty edge, "You're wrong. She's not an obstacle, she's a usurper!"

Her fingers clenched tightly.

Down below, Whitney was about to get into the car.

Yet, she could not shake the feeling of a gaze boring into her from above.

She paused, flustered.

*Was it just her imagination? A chill ran down her spine **as** if someone **was** watching her with malevolent intent. Whitney frowned and got into the car.*

Back at the townhouse, Whitney recounted her afternoon's adventure to Tiana

"You wouldn't believe how shabby his company looked. No sign, no nothing. I rummaged around for ages and couldn't dig up a single piece of useful info. And get this, he still goes by 'Mr. L'"

Tiana let out a low chuckle, "Mysterious Mr. L, huh? You're too naive, girl. He probably intentionally picked out that dump to keep you in the dark!"

Whitney had been harboring doubts herself. "Tiana, do you think he might know me?"

“Wrong question, honey. It’s more like you might know him!” Tiana’s tone was more pointed.

“That makes sense. He’s afraid I’ll recognize him, so he wears a mask? But I don’t know many men well, and he doesn’t match any of them. I just don’t get it—why would he hide his identity from me?”

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*“There’s gotta be a reason for it!” Tiana rubbed her hands vigorously, her eyes alight with excitement. “Whitney, this sham marriage of yours is just too wild. I can’t even begin to guess who he’ll turn out to be when the mask comes off, or if you’ll do a double—take in shock. But I’ve gotta say, L’s move today was bold—I dig it. He fired his secretary without a second thought **just** to clear the air with you! I bet he’d spoil you rotten if there’s real affection between you two.”*

Whitney felt her cheeks burn, and her heartbeat quickened at the thought of real affection with him.

*“What are you on about, Tiana? That’s just crazy talk. Him and me? We’re worlds apart,” Plus, she was not about to open her heart again **just** to get hurt.*

Tiana knew Whitney’s sore spots and changed the subject. “Let’s talk about that jewelry competition. Have you asked L for help?”

“I haven’t, and he hasn’t offered.”

Tiana’s voice took on a sharp edge. “He knows you’ve been wronged, and yet he doesn’t offer to grease some palms for you? What a jerk!”

Whitney defended him, albeit weakly, “I told him I wanted to keep things professional. Do you really think a guy like him would be so shameless as to offer help after I said something like that? I’m better off relying on myself.”

Despite saying this to Tiana, Whitney’s heart held different thoughts.

In the following days, L was rarely home and never brought up the sabotage during the preliminary round, nor did he offer any assistance.

Whitney could not help feeling a twinge of disappointment.

As the day of the preliminary awards ceremony drew near, the online vitriol against Whitney grew more frenzied, with many digging up her supposed sordid past—fabrications spun by Monica.

The internet trolls launched a vicious campaign against her, making her infamous throughout Banyan City as a plagiarist.

On the Monday of the awards ceremony, Whitney arrived at the Imperial Gem Corporation exhibition hall to a crowd of angry netizens who had camped out waiting for her. The moment she stepped out of the car, she was met with jeers and nearly pelted with eggs.

Thankfully, her driver and Tiana shielded her, sneaking Whitney safely into the awards hall.

“The die is cast, and that witch Monica has won. What are you even doing here?” Tiana’s face was a picture of misery.

Whitney pulled out a voice recorder from her bag and played it.

Tiana listened, astonished. “You’re a genius, Whitney! Exposing Stella at the Royal One Club wasn’t enough; you even thought of recording it?”

Whitney frowned. “I just wish I’d thought of it sooner to start recording right after the competition when Monica first spoke to me.”

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*“This is Monica’s indirect confession! **If** we could just **get** it to the judges...”*

Whitney was not optimistic. “Aaron’s definitely in their pocket. I doubt we can get it to them. And this evidence will only cause a small ripple.”

She had Stella’s testimony but could not risk Tiana getting hurt over Stella’s leverage with Gunner.

Tiana understood. “A small ripple is enough to nauseate Monica, and that’s why we’re here! Even if we can’t

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turn the tide, we've got to shake them up!"

Whitney nodded bleakly. "I plan to approach Aaron as soon as he arrives and beg for a chance to prove myself by sketching on the spot."

Tiana's eyes lit up. "That's the perfect way to showcase your talent!"

*"What perfect way? Sis, you're here for the awards ceremony, **too?**" A familiar, mocking voice intruded.*

Whitney turned to see Monica striding down the red carpet, flanked by a posse. To Whitney's dismay, Phebe was in attendance.

Phebe was schmoozing with Aaron, who lavished Monica with compliments. To Phebe, the more praise Monica received from the press as a "genius designer," the more she shone in her eyes.

Monica's face showed none of the defeat from that night at the Golden Hue Bar—she was the picture of triumph.

The accolades of winning first prize seemed to buoy her spirits.

As Monica passed by Whitney, she loudly lamented, "Sis, reflect on your actions! Are you still plotting 'perfect way' with your BFF? Are you waiting to be kicked out of the competition to admit your plagiarism? To snatch Skye Gem away, you're stooping so low. Please, just stop!"

Her insinuations stirred the crowd into a fresh uproar. "What? Whitney's trying to take over Monica's company? Is she here to harm Monica? That's outraged us!"

"Whitney, get lost if you have any sense left. Don't disgrace yourself here. You're definitely getting booted from the competition!"

"Check out the trending hashtags—netizens are crowdfunding a prison suit for Whitney, the plagiarizing dog. She belongs behind bars, and it's so clever."

“Ah, breaking news! Is Simon going to propose to Monica after she wins?”

“Don’t you see Phebe’s here to support Monica? Trending number one: ‘The Perlman family is preparing for the golden couple’s engagement.’ Monica, congratulations! You’re really hitting it big today!” The socialites fawned over Monica, green with envy.

Monica feigned modesty, but inside, she was gloating. She had bought those trending topics the night before.

The scandal at the Golden Hue Bar had been contained; Phebe was none the wiser.

Monica had spun new stories to win over Simon, rapidly pushing forward with their engagement.

Today, she would claim her prize and immediately hold the engagement party afterward. Only when the dust settled would she feel secure.

Her parents were busy prepping the engagement venue; with the Perlman family alliance, many influential figures were seeking to collaborate with her father. She was about to make waves in Banyan City. She had bought media coverage for both the awards ceremony and the engagement party—it was her big day!

With Whitney, the fallen rival, as a backdrop, Monica could not have been more pleased.

Undeterred by the spectacle, Whitney squeezed through the crowd to reach Aaron, pleading earnestly, “Aaron, I know I lack the evidence to prove Monica stole my work, but please give me a chance to sketch right here and now. I just need one chance to show my ability.”

Aaron did not even flinch before having the security escort Whitney away, promptly resuming his conversation with Phebe.

Whitney’s face paled, her fists clenched tight.

*Monica’s smirk was **barely** concealed.*

Amid the cacophony of a bustling crowd, Whitney refused to give up. She and Tiana made their way backstage,

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hoping to find another judge to hand over their voice recorder.

But just as they reached the shadowed folds of the curtain, two burly security guards approached them, snatched the recorder from their grasp, and snapped it in half!

The guards' firm grip immobilized them, and then Monica appeared, a sinister smirk playing on her lips. "So, you had a recorder up your sleeve. That must be your last desperate move, huh? Luckily, I had a contingency plan! Now you've got nothing. Enjoy watching me take first place while you get ready to be expelled!"

Monica strutted off, smugly satisfied with her handiwork.

Tiana pounded the wall in frustration. "Damn it, I couldn't even take down a couple of guards!"

The spark in Whitney's eyes slowly faded, and she mocked herself, "We were so desperate for help, it was easy for her to spot the flaw in our plan. I've really hit rock bottom this time, haven't I?"

Tears welled up in Tiana's eyes. "She has her minions and her cliques while we stand alone, powerless. The judges won't give us the time of day. It's not your fault, Whitney. It's Stella's! Look, there will be other jewelry competitions. Don't let this get to you."

But Whitney knew how hard it would be to enter any other contest after today. She closed her eyes, weighed down by the agony of defeat.

The award ceremony began with the sound of roaring applause, but suddenly, there was an eerie silence.

This was followed by a collective gasp from the audience of thousands and then high-pitched screams of excitement.

“Look! The CEO of Imperial Gem Corporation has just arrived!”

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Took! The CEO of Imperial Gem Corporation has just arrived!

“Why is Mr. Lippert here? That man is so stunning. He’s giving me a heart attack!”

“Imperial Gem Corporation is the jury for the jewelry competition. Does Mr. Lippert need a reason to attend his own award ceremony?”

Royalty has graced us with his presence, and everything shines brighter!”

Amid the cacophony of screams, Whitney snapped back to reality as Tiana pulled her briskly into the center of the hall, exclaiming, “OMG, my idol! Whitney, could it be your nemesis might actually show up to back you?”

Whitney blinked away the dazzle from the man’s aura and gave Tiana a wry look. “How could that be?”

Tiana grimaced. “Yeah, right. He didn’t even show up for the prelims. Why the sudden appearance at the awards?”

Whitney was just as puzzled, her gaze fixed on the man on the stage in a sharp black suit, standing tall and striking.

He adjusted his tie with an air of elegance, taking his seat under the spotlight. His angular face, straight nose, and thin lips gave him a deeply chiseled look that was breathtaking no matter how many times one looked.

Suddenly, his gaze cut through the crowd and landed a piercing intensity on Whitney.

Whitney paused. Had she seen it wrong?

He looked away, picking up his phone and furrowing his brow as he typed something out.

Whitney's thoughts were hazy when a staff member suddenly brought over two chairs and placed them in the middle of the audience, gesturing for them to sit.

Tiana was speechless.

"Whitney, who's showing you such kindness? Giving a seat front and center to someone on the verge of being fired?"

Whitney was just as confused. "Must be a mistake."

Again, she felt that commanding gaze upon her. Looking up, it was gone.

Basking in the limelight and oblivious to the small commotion, Monica was busy accepting congratulations. from all around.

Then the host announced, "And now Mr. Lippert will announce the competition winners."

The room fell silent. Monica's heart raced as the handsome and prestigious man on the stage made her forget the good looks of Simon beside her. Her girlish heart fluttered uncontrollably.

"Monica, to have the grand Mr. Lippert present you with the first prize, I'm so envious, and to have the perfect fiancé!"

"Phebe, you're so lucky to be marrying off to a genius designer daughter-in-law."

Phebe, always one for good appearances, beamed with pride.

Monica, smug as ever, cooed, "Phebe, when I go up to receive my award, I'd like to invite you to join me!"

What an honor it was, and Phebe readily agreed.

Monica could not wait to stand up and walk towards the stage. She shot an evil smile at Whitney on her way.

However, Mr. Lippert did not start the award presentation.

Monica was almost at the stage when she began to feel awkward.

That was when the deep, powerful voice of the man echoed, "Where's Whitney? Raise your hand"

Monica was stunned!

Her nemesis's magnetic voice calling her name made Whitney freeze, too.

She slowly raised her hand in a daze.

Hmm," the man uttered curtly, expressionless.

What did that mean?

Monica was now awkwardly standing there, guessing that Mr. Lippert was about to strip Whitney of her competition credentials.

The audience speculated as well.

"Mr. Lippert's probably going to kick Whitney out first! After all, one bad apple spoils the bunch at an award ceremony!"

Seeing everyone guessing the same, Monica steadied her expression, sneering as she looked at Whitney and lifted the mic with feigned concern. "Mr. Lippert, are you about to fire the plagiarizer? Could I possibly ask you to cut my sister some slack?"

"Yes, we're firing the plagiarizer." The man did not even glance at her, his face cold as he gestured to his assistant.

The assistant immediately cast the footage on the big screen.

Everyone's attention turned to the screen.

The assistant spoke, "Mr. Lippert is announcing a list of individuals who attempted to bribe the judges. Here is surveillance from October 1st at Imperial Gem Corporation's office. Skye Gem Ltd's President Simon and contestant Monica attempted to bribe Mr. Lippert with a landscape painting worth 26 million dollars in exchange for first place. Imperial Gem Corporation accepted it, but only to keep it as evidence."

Monica's face drained of color. She stepped back, unable to comprehend what was happening.

The audience was in an uproar when the next piece of evidence hit the screen

“The first prize piece, The Vintage Diamond,‘ shows Monica’s design dated October 2nd. However, Mr. Lippert received Whitney’s original concept on September 28th, preserved in email records!”

Now, it was Whitney’s turn to be shocked. She gaped at the screen. How did her nemesis have her draft from the day she consulted L?

The assistant continued the live announcement, “The head judge Aaron has accepted bribes to aid Monica in cheating and is now under criminal investigation, to be taken into custody immediately!”

Two officers appeared on stage and handcuffed a dumbfounded Aaron, escorting him away right there and then!

Aaron, a man of high esteem, was taken away just like that!

The audience, slowly grasping the gravity of the situation, looked in awe at the man in the chairman’s seat.

The room fell silent, everyone stunned by the dramatic twist.

Monica stood there, pale as a ghost, her mind a muddled mess as she stared at the formidable man. She could not understand how, with just a few sentences, he had hurled her from heaven straight into hell.

She was supposed to shine, to be the first–place winner.

But a cold sweat broke out as she stared at the incontrovertible evidence on the screen. Her feet tangled in her gown, and she fell to the floor as if dropped into a pit of ice.

The journalists finally snapped out of their shock.

2/3

17.50

The room exploded

“Mr. Lippert, is this all true? Monica bribed you, stole Whitney’s work, and then rigged the competition with Aaron’s help, only to frame Whitney as the plagiarizer?!”

The reporters’ translation made even the slowest audience members catch on

They gasped, exclaimed, and looked at Monica with a mix of shock and disbelief.

Monica’s fall to the ground was a pitiful reflection of her guilty conscience!

*“No, I didn’t— I didn’t plagiarize Whitney.” Monica scrambled to her **feet**, desperately trying to salvage her*

composure.

The reporters swarmed around her, “But Mr. Lippert himself presented the evidence! Monica, how do you explain this?”

Monica looked over at Ludwik, not daring to utter a single word of denial.

If she crossed him again, Skye Gem would be doomed!

Seeing her silence, the reporters pressed on, “So Monica, you plagiarized with intent. Why would you steal from Whitney? Aren’t you a genius designer?”

“Why even ask? Good heavens, we’ve all been fooled by her innocent facade! Maybe she’s been riding Whitney’s coattails all along?” Speculated a member of the audience.

The reporters dashed towards Whitney, “Miss Whitney, have you been wronged?”

Tiana squeezed Whitney’s hand tightly, her eyes brimming with tears. This was their moment! Whitney composed herself, casting a cool glance at Monica, “The vintage piece is original, and I have the honor of having their authenticity confirmed by the CEO of

Imperial Gem Corporation. I have been wronged and I have never plagiarized.

On the contrary, the person who accused me of plagiarism has been plagiarizing me!”

Chapter 51

While other Monica has been Daddy's little princess since we were **kids**. At home, she got everything her way and was hat to step aside for her, including handing over my good grades and even my artistic

he even took my franchise

But that wasn't enough for her. She wanted more and more until she took my company and tried to destroy me. O TUOSSE MIRNDLE, Keal talents will eventually get exposed, and playing the game too big will only play you in the

SS. I hope you'll honor our bet. Now that the truth about the competition has come to light, you'll have to give baby Skye Gem to me"

She spoke without a hint of anger, her calm demeanor evoking even more sympathy.

The crowd's gaze shifted towards Whitney, her words heavy with unspoken implication, leaving much to the imaginations of the onlookers

So Whitney is saying that Monica has been plagiarizing her work all along and posing as the lead designer?"

Someone murmured

Did we mistake Whitney for a nobody? Could it be... Whitney is the true genius designer?"

From when Whitney says, Monica took everything from her, her man, her company, using favoritism to her advantage

Reporters swarmed Whitney and Monica, the scene descending into chaos. Whitney's expression remained serene playing the role of the wronged innocent to perfection and successfully stirring the reporters' indignation

Suddenly, they were met with the wait of an immense stare

She looked towards the WP section and looked eyes with the deep, handsome gaze of her archenemy

He wanted her with a hint of amusement, the corners of his eyes crinkling slightly.

Suddenly, he arched an eyebrow at her, and in the midst of the crowd, she knew that secret, mischievous gesture was just for her

Whitney's chest heaved with an inexplicable rush. Without time to ponder why her nemesis would side with her one simple thought at this moment, he looked incredibly dashing!

Meanwhile, Monica's situation was spiraling out of control

The reporters crowded Phebe, pressing her with questions. "Mrs. Perlman, were you aware of the alleged bribery involving your future daughter-in-law and the Imperial Gem Corporation?"

"With Monica suspected of plagiarism, she surely can't be awarded first prize. Will you and Simon forgive her actions and proceed with the engagement party this afternoon?"

Phebe was livid, the Perlman family's reputation tarnished, and she dreaded explaining this to the patriarch.

Just thinking about Phebe capitalizing on this scandal sent Phebe into a fury. She answered the reporters with a cold facade, "Monica is **not** my daughter-in-law, not even my future daughter-in-law!"

"Are you canceling their engagement party right here and now?"

"There has never been an engagement party planned between Simon and her. Please, no more wild

How can you say that! Monica, desperate upon hearing the public denial, ran over, "You promised me there would be an engagement party this afternoon if I won first prize. You promised I could join the Perlman family this year

Did you win first prize? You're accused of plagiarism and bribery, yet you have the audacity to cling to the

11:59

Perlman name. You have no shame. After the charity banquet where Whitney revealed your repeated

miscarriages, I should've known you were no good girl. You're not worthy of my son! Simon, get her away from me, don't embarrass me further

The socialites watched the scene unfold, some mocking Monica, "Have you all forgotten that Simon was originally Whitney's fiance?"

"She's taken everything from Whitney, her man, her work. She's nothing but an illegitimate child"

Ashen-faced with panic, Monica wished for her mother, Yvonne's presence.

She pinned all her hopes on Simon, running to him and clinging desperately. "Simon, you can't listen to her. We have to go through with our engagement this afternoon, right? You're going to marry me, aren't you?"

"Monica, calm down."

"What do you mean? The press is attacking me, and you won't help? You must get engaged to me to save my reputation and status."

Running out of patience, Simon pushed her away as the reporters and Phebe's watchful eyes waited for his response. He knew the Valentine Corporation was in trouble, and he needed to distance himself immediately. His face set in a cold expression, and he dropped the bombshell. "You've brought me nothing but disgrace, and now this scandal. The engagement party is off!"

"Simon!" Monica's face turned deathly pale as she watched Simon and Phebe dodge the reporters and walk away.

The reporters then swarmed Monica, who had ironically arranged for the award ceremony to be broadcast live, exposing her downfall to the world. Online spectators, shocked by the turn of events, flooded in to attack Monica.

"So, it turns out the plagiarist is you."

"A perfect plot to bite back, you plagiarize Whitney's work and even framed her flawlessly."

"Has everyone put the pieces together? Since Whitney's kidnapping, Simon and Monica took over Skye Gem Ltd., planning their engagement, while Whitney is left with nothing. Out with the old, in with the new, doesn't that make you wonder?"

Standing at a distance, Whitney almost teared up upon hearing that last comment. At last, someone guessed the truth behind it all.

She was innocent, a victim, homeless while Monica basked in the limelight, her laughter echoing where once Whitney had been cherished.

“Monica, you’re truly heartless.”

“Her mother, Yvonne, was a porn star; it’s no surprise what kind of person she is.”

“Maybe Whitney’s tarnished reputation was all a scheme by this mother–daughter duo.”

“Don’t you dare leave, Monica, you plagiarizing scoundrel.”

Monica saw her chance to escape amid the chaos, but the crowd was too frantic, and she was quickly trampled to the ground.

“Don’t push me,” Monica cried out in fear, trembling.

“Mommy...” she called out desperately.

Yvonne appeared in a fluster, her face a mask of panic, flanked by her bodyguards. As soon as the reporters spotted her, they swarmed, trapping her amid a sea of questions and cameras.

Whitney watched with detached amusement as the mother and daughter duo stumbled into a mess. From today onwards, Monica’s once-pristine reputation, her crowning glory, seemed doomed to be tarnished.

2/3

11:59

Chapter 51

*Tiana stood beside her, reveling in the drama. “The crowd’s on their game today; squashing those two feels so satisfying! Karma doesn’t miss a beat, does **it**? And Whitney, did you ever **imagine** your arch–enemy would save you? My heartthrob was on fire **just now**, slapping you with a reality check!”*

Whitney blinked, feeling an unexpected warmth in her chest. She had not predicted that today's **victory** would come with **an** assist from Ludwik.

But a giant question mark loomed **in** her mind: Why would her sworn enemy lend her a hand? **It** was illogical, downright bizarre.

"Whitney! Mr. Lippert is leaving! Hurry up, after such a massive favor, aren't you going to thank him?"

At Tiana's shout, Whitney turned to see the chairman's dais, where a striking figure was rising to his feet.

With his files in hand and his long, elegant fingers, Ludwik cast a leisurely glance in Whitney's direction as he prepared to leave.

Whitney's cheeks inexplicably warmed as she quickly took Tiana's hand and darted backstage, hoping to catch up with Ludwik.

Chapter 52

Down the backstage corridor, the man seemed to be enjoying a cigarette.

Was he a smoker too, like 17

Tiana nudged Whitney, Go on, give him a hearty thanks. Fil keep watch for you"

Whitney shot her an annoyed look and hurried over

"Mr. Lippert," she called out in the empty hallway, trying out flattery for the first time, "Mr. Lippert

The tall man turned around. His handsome face was unmatched in the world, a hint of mischief playing in his deep eyes.

"Not calling me a jerk or a nemesis anymore?"

A wave of embarrassment washed over Whitney.

He had done her a huge favor, yet he was still so snarky.

She looked up earnestly to express her gratitude, "Mr. Lippert, I honestly didn't expect your help today, especially given my strong prejudices against you. I never thought you were the type to step in and help others. Maybe I had you a little wrong..."

"Just a little wrong?"

"A lot wrong." Whitney conceded, looking down.

He chuckled and stepped closer to her.

The petite woman continued her apology, "I was angry with you for being seduced by Monica's bribes, but it turns out you kept the painting as evidence. You're clever and wise. I'm sorry for my misunderstanding towards you, Mr. Lippert. Words can hardly express my gratitude to you."

She meant to say thank you, truly.

But he blew a breath towards her and said in a teasing voice, "Then how do you plan to show your gratitude? Actions speak louder than words, right?"

His suggestive gaze made her heart race.

He strode towards her the next second, and Whitney found herself cornered against the wall by his imposing figure.

The shadow cast by his tall frame enveloped her face, an air of intimacy filled between them.

Whitney's cheeks flared red and she protested, "Mr. Lippert, I'm having a serious conversation with you."

"Am I not being serious?" he tilted his head, feigning solemnity, "Shouldn't you be a bit softer, a little more grateful to your benefactor?"

"You should keep a respectful distance, though. I'm a married woman. And I still don't understand why you suddenly helped me rather than adopting a hostile attitude. Can you tell me the reason, Mr. Lippert?" She tried to maintain some distance between them, placing her fists defensively in front of her.

Ludwik glanced at her small fists and raised his eyebrows, "Me, hostile towards you? Seems to me it was you who k

ept trying to pick fights with Imperial Gem Corporation, biting off more than you could chew.”

“You!” Whitney’s face scrunched up in anger, but then she had a revelation, “Oh, so Mr. Lippert does know who I am! The CEO of Skye Gem Ltd, your competitor, remember?”

There was a brief flicker of annoyance in his eyes, but he chose not to respond.

Whitney grew more certain that this arrogant man indeed knew her identity.

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Her lips curled into a slight smirk. So why did you decide to help me?

Assistant Felix, squeezed into a corner nearby, struggled to contain his amusement.

After all who else but the boss would stand up for his own fiery wife when she’s wronged, even if he had to keep his identity a secret.

Frustrated by his silence, Whitney pressed, “Mr. Lippert, we are competitors, and yet you used that \$26 million painting to help me. You don’t have some ulterior motive, do you?”

He played along, trapping her against the wall with his strong arm with a teasing smile, “Yeah, I have no interest in those drab landscape paintings!”

What?

Leaning closer, he whispered provocatively, “But what if I had a little interest in you? Would you be willing to... indulge me?”

His voice was seductive, his charm irresistible!

Whitney pushed him away. When her hands brushed against his chest, the feeling of familiarity unsettled her.

“Mr. Lippert, you can’t use a favor to coerce me! I’m married. Even though you saved me today, I won’t give myself to you. I am loyal to my husband!”

For some reason, he burst into laughter.

Seeing his gorgeous face light up with amusement, Whitney was left dumbfounded.

Why was he laughing?

Then, he pinched her cheek unexpectedly, his eyes playful, "Are you really that devoted to your husband?"

"Yes!" Whitney replied with growing irritation.

He leaned in, his hands gripping her delicate shoulders. His eyebrows lifted in a teasing gesture, "What if I insisted on a kiss?"

"No way!" She immediately covered her mouth.

He didn't move, amusement written all over his face as he teased her reaction. Mockingly, he said, "I'd really like to tempt you. Are you sure you wouldn't have an affair with me?"

Whitney's cheeks flushed with anger, then she blurted out, "Not a chance. Unless I'm divorced."

Assistant Felix was taken aback,

Ludwik's expression darkened instantly, his grip on her face firm, "Thinking of divorce, are you? Is your husband not treating you well?"

Why was he so upset? Wasn't he supposed to be happy?

Confused, Whitney pushed him away and stepped out, "It's none of your business, Mr. Lippert."

The assistant knew the boss was swallowing his frustration.

Ludwik's gaze was troubled.

Whitney waved her hand dismissively, "I was thinking of inviting you to dinner, Mr. Lippert. But it's late, and I need to share the good news with my husband. As for my gratitude, I'll find another day to thank you."

Suddenly, his mood brightened. He seemed oddly pleased, “You’re really going home to take care of your husband?”

“Of course!” Whitney nodded, feigning seriousness, eager to escape immediately.

She quickly turned and ran, grabbing Tiana and rushing off.

11.50

Chapter 52

“You guys were so cozy! Mr. Lippert seems to have fallen for you. If you’d stayed another ten minutes, I’d have your ship name ready, and poor L’s grave would be covered in green grass...”

Whitney, fearing Ludwik might hear, clamped her hand over Tiana’s mouth.

In the corridor, Ludwik had indeed heard. Certain words heated him up as he loosened his tie.

Yet deep in his thoughts, he lingered on Whitney’s question; did he remember her?

For Ludwik, his **status** was far from ordinary. In the eyes of the elite, he never really took the female CEO of Skye **Gem Ltd. seriously**. He had heard of Whitney, the woman who was quite adept at business. But who was Ludwik? A titan of industry, he had **seen** the young lady at a gala once—beautiful as a spring night, clever and composed, yet with an arrogance in her eyes. She was a young upstart, too full of herself for his liking, and he had a distaste for such brazen young women.

Between Imperial Gem Corporation and Skye Gem Ltd., there were old scores to settle from the previous generation.

This brazen lass had **the** audacity to compete with him for contracts, to snatch away business. Despite never winning, she kept provoking him. He never showed his face and remained calm, simply watching the spectacle unfold.

Who would have thought that in the end, he would end up in a scandal, having gotten her pregnant.

Nolan asked him why he wore a mask?

At

first, he just wanted to appease his mother with Whitney not knowing his identity, to get through the year without unnecessary trouble.

Now, well...

His fingers idly traced the memory of her scent left on his skin. That light, tantalizing itch crept into his heart, gnawing at him. Teasing her seemed to be quite interesting.

3/3

Chapter 53

In the lavish estate of Valentine Manor, nestled atop the rolling hills of a prestigious neighborhood.

engagement party

preparations were a testament to opulence, with friends and family filling every seat."

Yvonne and Monica had scrambled out of the award ceremony, bruised and battered, fleeing back to the sanctuary of the Valentine family. The sight of the romantic engagement feast ignited Monica's fury, and she nearly crushed the invitation in her clenched fist.

The reporters

she had invited had already watched the live broadcast of the ceremony, and they were now converging on Monica with pressing questions.

Preston descended the stairs from the second-

floor conference room. Seeing his wife and daughter return, he asked excitedly. "Did you bring home the grand prize? Then let's get the engagement party started! Where's Simon? And Phebe, and the elders of the Perlman clan-"

Monica trembled violently, hiding behind Yvonne.

Yvonne saw the unusual excitement on Preston's face. She knew how much he valued his reputation. With today's engagement ruined, she dared not tell th

e truth. Glancing nervously at the gathered relatives and friends, she said hesi-
tantly, "Honey, come here first. There's something I need to discuss with you."

"It's **not** the time for discussions!" Preston's face was flushed with anticipation,
though a frown
soon creased his brow. "I've waited all morning. Where are those investors
who said they'd support Valentine Corp days ago? My daughter is about
to marry into the Perlman family. They wouldn't dare snub us!
I'll give them a push."

"Darling!" Yvonne couldn't let him make that call!

But Preston had already
picked up the phone, his voice commanding as he dialed, "Mr. Wendt, Monica's
back with the grand prize. Why haven't you come for the engagement ceremony?"

Silence met him from the other end of the line.

After a long pause, a mocking voice came through, "Preston, have you been off-
line?"

Your daughter had made such a fool of herself at the awards. You still expect
us to invest? Haven't you heard? Phebe had called off the engagement!"

"What?" Preston froze. He turned with a fierce glare at Yvonne.

"Darling, listen to me, it was all Whitney's wrong."

Preston shoved her aside, reaching for his smartphone to check the news.

Every headline screamed Monica's plagiarism, her attempt to bribe Imperial Gem
Corporation exposed by Mr. Lippert, her broken engagement
with the Perlman family, and Preston's failure to raise his daughter—
scandal upon scandal for Valentine Corp.

Preston's veins throbbed with anger, humiliation engulfing him.

"Darling!" Yvonne shrieked as Preston dragged her down the stairs.

Monica watched from the doorway, shivering. She knew her father's temper and
his obsession with fame. Her mother had just kept the truth from

him, and now Preston was furious. Before Monica could escape, Preston grabbed her.

Blinded by rage and thinking of Valentine Corp's tarnished reputation, the humiliation from the investors, and feeling played for a fool by his wife and daughter, he lashed out.

He threw them to the ground **and** slapped Yvonne, ignoring the relatives and reporters, "You brought such disgrace upon us and you thought you could conceal it from me? I was waiting for those investors, fool!

Do you know how much I've borrowed from the banks these days? Now look, Monica's engagement is off. You can't even raise a daughter right. If I had known how useless you both were, I should have locked you up after the last charity ball!"

1/3

11.59

Preston's dissatisfaction with Yvonne had been brewing. She had repeatedly failed against Whitney, not to mention her scandalous past

Today's humiliation was the last straw, and he vented all his anger on her.

Yvonne's face swelled from the slap. With so many eyes upon them, Monica had never felt such humiliation. Furious, she yelled, "Dad, how can you talk to mom like this? She's given everything for the Valentine family. Why didn't you find us useless when we made you proud? How can you be so heartless, caring only for your precious Valentine Corp?"

"You dare talk back after what you've done?" Preston swung again. "You're just a worthless daughter?"

"You just resent me for not giving you a son, Preston. You're feudalistic and hypocritical!" Yvonne had wanted to, but her wild youth had taken its toll. She couldn't conceive again.

"Shut up!" Preston roared in fury.

Only then did he realize his family scandal was on full display to friends and reporters.

It's too late to realize it.

He dismissed everyone and collapsed into the sofa. His phone rang, "Sir, Valentine Corp's stocks are dropping. Monica's scandal can't be contained, the media is all over it..."

Preston's face turned to stone, he stormed out, "Look at the mess you two made. If Valentine Corp is broken, you'll have hell to pay!"

On the carpet, Yvonne and Monica clung to each other and sobbed, each with a red handprint on their cheeks.

This failure left them stripped and broken by Whitney, with little hope of rising again.

"Mom, why would Mr. Lippert help that wretch Whitney?" Monica couldn't fathom, "He's rumored to be the influential third son of the Lippert family! How could Whitney possibly reach someone of his stature?"

Yvonne was just as baffled.

Monica's face was pale. She opened her phone only to find her social media accounts besieged, her inbox filled with insults.

One trending tweet caught her eye: a crowdfunding campaign to buy Monica a prison jumpsuit, sending the plagiarist behind bars for just a penny!

Below, 80,000 people had joined the cause.

Monica nearly fainted with rage.

"Ha! This generation of netizens is on fire!" Tiana exclaimed as she scrolled through the flood of comments on her Twitter feed.

Whitney glanced at the screen and chuckled. "You sure know how to bite back fast."

"Well, I'm an expert on this," Tiana replied, her fingers dancing across the keyboard as she deftly inserted Monica's scandal into the trending searches with a few swift clicks.

A smirk played on her lips. "Whitney, thanks to Mr. Lippert, we've got to take advantage of the momentum. Now it's my turn to shine. Simon, Monica, the Valentines—none of them would be spared."

Business stocks were directly affected by the news.

Whitney squinted her eyes, letting Tiana do her thing.

Only with relentless news coverage would the shareholders who had mocked her start panicking. With Monica's plagiarism tarnishing Skye Gem's reputation and the stocks plummeting, the shareholders would bail on Monica, and Whitney could snatch her company back.

2/3

12:00

Her eyes swept over the latest news about the Valentine Mansion Yvonne and her daughter sprawled on the ground after being slapped, as Preston stormed off.

Whitney's hips curled into a tight smirk. She had anticipated as much. Once something lost its value, Preston would discard it without a second thought.

She spun the steering wheel. Tiana peered out at the road, asking, "Where are you heading?"

"Back home, of course. I might be back by now."

Home? Forget it, let's go party! On a day like this, doesn't it warrant cracking open a bottle worth a cool three hundred? Tiana rolled her eyes. "And about L, he didn't even help you. If anyone deserves your company, it's Mr. Lippert Why not invite him out?"

The memory of the earlier flirtation made Whitney shake her head instantly. "Although Mr. Lippert isn't utterly

redeemable, that kind of man is too dangerous to get close to!"

"Oh, one good deed and he's not irredeemable now? Between him and L, who do you fancy more? Lucky girl, having such top-notch men at your fingertips," Tiana teased, nudging her playfully.

Chapter 54

Whitney's face flushed as she pushed her away, but Tiana was already on to the next topic. Tve set everything up at the Imperial Garden Bar. Loads of our old classmates and friends have been ringing up asking about you Sure, there are some fair-weather friends in the mix, but there are a few genuine ones too. Whitney, you've got to start building your network."

Whitney knew what she meant. If she was going to make a comeback in Banyan City, she needed a circle that would welcome her back in.

Before Whitney could hesitate, Tiana grabbed the steering wheel and they were on their way to the pub.

*Back at the villa, it wasn't even **seven** o'clock.*

Taryn watched in surprise as the man came home, suited and booted with his assistant in tow.

*"My boy?" Natalie rushed over, her lips pursed in astonishment. "You've been too **busy** to come home these past few days, and now you're back so early?"*

Ludwik's gaze swept the living room, searching.

Felix asked with a smile, "Madam, where's Whitney? She said she'd be back early today to-"

The man shot him a look.

He sank arrogantly into the sofa and waited. He saw neither the woman who had promised to serve him nor any sign of good news.

"Where is she?"

"Whitney? She hasn't come back yet," the old lady said, puzzled.

Taryn chimed in, "She had sent a text. She said she's out having fun."

Felix's smile twitched awkwardly on his face.

Ludwik's icy glare swept over him.

Felix swiftly made his exit.

Ludwik picked up his coat, his face emanating a chill. "Damn."

"Where are you off to in such a fury?" Natalie called after him as he stormed out.

At the Imperial Garden Bar, Tiana had gone to the restroom and was not yet back. Whitney was about to go check on her when Tiana raced back with an odd look on her face. "Whitney! Guess what I just caught on camera?" She waved her phone excitedly.

Whitney stepped outside and cast a look on the phone's screen. Outside an exclusive Presidential Suite, the figure of Roselyn was pacing anxiously.

Her face turned red, her expression/a mix of cold fury and determination.

The suite number was 088.

Tiana raised an eyebrow. "Preston had come here to drown his sorrows, staggering drunk right into the suite but forgetting to close the door!"

Whitney's expression froze.

*Suite 088 was Preston's regular business room at the Imperial Garden **Bar**, something Whitney had known from before.*

1/3

10.00

As uelyn renched her fats and began to undress, she stepped inside and slammed the door shut

Fian clicked her tongue, her expression complex. "You didn't see that coming, did you?"

Whitney narrowed her eyes. For her to know about this room, it's no small feat. With the Valentine family news out today it must have been a spur of the moment decision."

Roseton really went all out. I mean, if it was me, I couldn't, not with someone older than my dad, even if he kept m shape."

Whitney let out a soft scoff. “Monica made a fool out of her at the Golden Hue Bar just the other day Roselyn’s path to wealth crumbled, and she’s got it out for Monica now. But I didn’t expect her to be so bold.”

Tiana watched Whitney’s reaction closely. “Preston’s your dad. With Roselyn doing this, you’re not going to...”

Whitney let out a bitter laugh. “What kind of father he is to see his own daughter suffer? Tiana, I’m starting to doubt that whether he’s really my father.”

Tiana was thinking along the same lines. “Even if there’s something off, they’re never going to tell you the truth”

Whitney’s voice turned cold. “That’s why I have to get my revenge first. Once I’ve taken down the Valentines one by one, the truth I’m after will surface.”

She smiled calmly. “I don’t have to worry about undermining Roselyn now. She’s sharpened her own knife, and the Valentine family is going to spiral into chaos.”

It’s better this way. Let them handle their own mess!” Tiana laughed, imagining the priceless look on Yvonne’s face when she’d find out.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Whitney, Simon was also in one of the private lounges at the Imperial Garden Bar.

Monica was trying to sneak in. With her name still trending online, and more scandals about her leaking out, she was recognized instantly on the streets. She had barely managed to get inside with her face covered.

She had struggled to find Simon but there he was, drunk and alone, looking like a fallen angel sprawled across the table.

Relieved to see no women beside him, Monica hurried over. Her voice was sweetened with intent to mend fences and plead her case.

But before she could speak, she saw a photo of Whitney on the screen of his phone—taken before her abduction, Whitney was smiling and gazing at Simon with girlish adoration.

Monica's heart clouded over instantly. She pinched Simon's arm hard. "Simon! You still have her picture? Wake up and look at me!"

Simon opened his eyes but ignored Monica, his gaze still fixed on Whitney's image. He remembered her dazzling at the awards ceremony, completely outshining Monica. He was well aware of her innate talents.

Had Ludwik really taken a liking to her, backing her up and clearing her name? Could it be that the masked man who rescued her that day was Ludwik?

Simon couldn't believe it, regret gnawing at him. Why had he ever given up on Whitney for a worthless Monica?

Disgusted by Monica's hold over him, he violently pushed her away and grabbed the bottle, drinking deeply. "Whitney..."

"Simon, look at me. I'm

Monica. You can't back out of our engagement!" Monica's jealousy turned to fury as she tried to pull him away but only to be shrugged off again.

Their commotion drew the attention of the crowd outside the lounge.

Now treated like a pariah, Monica feared the backlash from the public. Uneasy to stay any longer, she stomped off in a rage.

Back at the Valentine estate, she threw herself into Yvonne's arms, weeping with hatred and frustration "He's still hung up on Whitney Will he marry me, Mom? That wretch, why won't she just die? She's made life miserable for us, and now Daddy won't even look at us. Hasn't he come home yet?"

It was already 2 a.m. Yvonne had no clue where Preston had vanished to

Over the years, she had kept a tight leash on him, cutting off all his little flings on the side

But tonight. Yvonne felt a throbbing unease. Where on earth could Preston be, not even taking her calls?

Deep down in her heart, Yvonne loathed Whitney furiously. She had waltzed into the Valentines' lives, demanding everything her heart desired for years, even leaving Whitney's own mother and grandfather with grim fates. Yvonne had never been in such a distressed position.

This wasn't over. She wouldn't concede defeat so easily. She still had an ace up her sleeve.

At ten past midnight, a luxury car pulled up with a chilling aura outside the Imperial Garden Bar.

Felix swiftly opened the door. A man's long legs stretched out from the vehicle. His gaze hardened at the sight of the bar's neon sign.

So, the young madam's idea of 'playing outside' was hitting up a bar.

Felix silently crossed his fingers for the young madam's rebellious spirit.

He hadn't taken many steps when Ludwik's gaze inadvertently caught a scene through the bar's window. The crowd inside was wildly inebriated. There, a young woman's radiant face stood out, her porcelain skin glowing. She was dressed in a tight-fitting dress that showcased her sculpted legs, holding a drunken friend and chatting with another man. Her eyes sparkled with laughter, her red lips a delicate provocation.

The man's lips tightened into icy daggers.

Felix quietly lowered his gaze.

3/3

Chapter 55

*Inside the dimly lit bar, Tiana had drowned herself in alcohol to the point of staggering inebriation. Her mood hadn't been sour **at** first.*

*But after two phone calls both ended in arguments, **it** was clear that Gunner was on the other line.*

*Clinging to her friend, Tiana vented, "That jerk! He's asked for my hand in marriage, and yet he says he's in Grace City closing deals when **I** ask him to pick me up. He's paying less and less attention to me. Is he really that **busy?**"*

Whitney flicked through her phone to catch up on Stella's latest news.

Turns out, Stella was filming in Grace City. What kind of 'deals' would he be closing at this hour? Whitney's face hardened as she looked at Tiana's dejected expression. Her heart was aching with a mix of pity for Tiana and loathing for that unfaithful pair.

But how to bring it up? How could she minimize the damage for Tiana?

"Whitney, let's go get a room and have some fun!" Tiana hollered, clearly gone off the deep end. Whitney steadied herself.

The bar was a scene of drunken collapses, but there was one sober college guy called Cooper that Whitney barely knew. He mentioned he had returned from studying abroad and ran a diamond import business. Whitney's eyes gleamed – they were in the same line of work. Skye Gem Ltd. covered everything from jewelry design to production.

"Whitney, perhaps we'll cooperate in business someday," Cooper said, handing her his business card with an impressed look.

Whitney took the card with a smile, struggling to support Tiana. Cooper offered a hand to help.

Suddenly, an icy pressure descended upon them.

"Oh, getting a room? Planning a threesome?" came a familiar, mocking voice tinged with chill.

Whitney's head snapped up to see her husband, shock written across her face.

Then it hit her – what did he just imply with that comment? Feeling awkward when she glanced at Cooper, she asked with a semblance of calm, "What are you doing here?"

—

Oh, the tone of her voice as if he didn't have the right to show up?

Ludwik's aura turned even colder.

Cooper was clearly outclassed by the newcomer's presence. He offered a nervous smile and asked Whitney, "Who's this?"

Annoyed, Whitney said in a low voice, too quick to let the man decipher their relationship, "He's my roommate."

Ludwik's face became icy, "Whitney, do you need to be set straight? Repeat what you just said."

Whitney immediately clammed up, though she felt her analogy wasn't wrong.

To avoid further trouble, she quickly suggested to the college guy, "It's getting late, maybe you should head home, Cooper?"

Sensing the tension, Cooper excused himself with embarrassment.

The room fell into an eerie silence.

In her drunken stupor, Tiana giggled at the sight of 'L', "Why not a threesome? I'm totally down for the kind of man like Mr. L, and so should you, Whitney!"

Whitney sighed internally, wishing her friend would just keep quiet.

12:00

Tapa stumbled toward Turk, who coldly sidestepped her and let her fall flat.

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Caught in his intense gaze. Whitney felt uncomfortable, "How would I know what kind you are? She's just

Oh, I thought you'd know very well he murmured, his eyes hinting at something more sinister

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Tiana had passed out on the floor, snoring softly.

Unable to lift her friend and at a loss, Whitney looked to Ludwik and muttered reluctantly, "Since you're here, give me a hand, will you?"

Do I look like a laborer to you?" he sneered.

I'm asking for your help Whitney batted her eyes, tugging at his shirt in gentle touch, her gaze pleading.

Damn it, she knew how to charm.

With a subtle roll of his eyes, Ludwik loosened his tie.

Grudgingly picking up the drunken Tiana, Ludwik held her at arm's length, asking coldly, "Where to?"

T book a suite upstairs. Tiana kept saying she wanted to sleep," Whitney said, leading the way.

But the way he carried Tiana, was like carrying a bag of trash. It irritated Whitney, who complained to the assistant, "is your boss always this fastidious? Would holding her kill him?"

Felix replied honestly, "Sir generally doesn't like women getting too close."

But he quickly added with a smile, "Except for you, young mistress. I believe sir quite enjoys holding you."

Whitney pretended not to hear. Her cheeks warmed at the thought, but dismissed it at once. Her husband's interest was surely driven by certain needs.

Once in the room, Ludwik tossed Tiana onto the bed. Whitney covered her with a blanket and fetched a damp cloth to wash her face, only to have Ludwik take it away. His shirt still crisp and clean, he intended to clean his hands.

Whitney stared, That's for cleaning her face."

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Tiana beneath him? Whitney thought indignantly. Her gaze lingered on his lon

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Caught off guard, Whitney blushed, "Not at all..."

She internally scolded herself. What had she been thinking? Frustrated with her wandering thoughts, she nearly wished to bury her flushed face.

Noticing her pink ears, Ludwik's smile deepened but soon faded as his mood soured.

"Are you done yet?" he asked.

After Whitney finished tending to Tiana, she turned only to **be** pulled into Ludwik's grasp, his other hand still casually in his pocket.

2/13

12.00

She thought about the muscles hidden beneath his shirt and blushed even more. Raising her eyes to meet his sy stare, she asked, "What's wrong with you?"

Her face darkened further. "It seems you don't realize what you've done wrong. A pregnant woman daring to hit the bars? Weren't you supposed to go home and tend to your man?"

Whitney furrowed her brow in frustration, "Look, I came to the bar but I didn't have a drink, she protested, tilting her chin up defiantly. "What's this about 'tending to you' all the time? When did I ever say anything like that? Why **on** earth should I wait on you?"

There was an awkward silence.

Felix was at **a** loss for words. Quite **the lady of** contradictions she was, seemingly oblivious to who she was dealing with.

Whitney was puzzled. She had only made **up** an excuse to get away from Ludwik, but how could her husband, have known it? Was he clairvoyant or what?

She stood her ground, "We only agreed to a marriage of convenience, and we're free to live our lives. I haven't harmed the baby by going **to** the bar, so what right do you have to drag me out? Besides, you don't come home every night either, do I meddle in your business?"

There was a hint of acidity in Whitney's voice as she mentioned his nocturnal absences.

"Is it the same, though? I'm working. What are you doing? Gallivanting in the bar, all smiles with every Tom, Dick, and Harry," he thought, irked by the memory of her laughter with another man. The jealousy was undeniable, leaving a sour taste in his mouth.

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Chapter 57

Grumpy and without much of a choice, she turned with a resigned sigh, reaching for the fridge to grab some spaghetti, tomatoes and meat.

Ludwik furrowed, gesturing to the other plentiful ingredients, “With all these, you’re just going to make spaghetti for me?”

“Is there a problem with spaghetti?” she retorted. “Be grateful I’m cooking for you!”

Moments later, she served the spaghetti **and** quickly retreated **upstairs**.

After devouring the spaghetti, Ludwik’s mood improved marginally. When he headed **up** for a shower, he found the master bedroom door firmly shut and locked. He **couldn’t get in**.

From behind the door, Whitney emboldened herself, “Mom’s gone to sleep **in the** main house. From now on, please don’t come to **my** room Mr. L. I don’t agree **to** your **sleeping on the** couch either.”

“Why not?” His expression turned **icy**.

It was silence from inside. She was probably scrambling for an excuse. Then Whitney blurted out, “**My** baby needs to sleep **well**.”

Ludwik’s face darkened further as he headed to the guest bathroom.

Whitney was worried he’d be furious. From the get-go, she knew this man had a temper.

Peeking out, she saw the guest bathroom door coldly shut.

With no Taryn **to** attend to him, his privileged self had tossed his shirt carelessly around. Whitney picked up his shirt and was intended to put it back, when she saw a slim cigarette fall out of the pocket.

It was luxurious to the touch, clearly a bespoke brand.

*That wasn't the point, though. Whitney's eyes widened as she stared at the cigarette, turning **it** over and over in her hands.*

She was certain she had seen her nemesis, Ludwik, smoking the same brand in the hallway that afternoon!

The scent and the look were identical.

Why? Suddenly, Whitney turned to stare at the bathroom door dazedly.

She hurried back to her bedroom and closed the door, sinking into peculiar contemplation.

*At four **in** the morning, Tiana was jolted awake by her phone.*

Whitney's voice was odd, "Tiana?"

"Ugh, where am I?" Tiana groaned, rubbing her eyes. "Damn it, Whitney, did you ditch me at the hotel and go home?"

*Tiana got up and saw the mess on the dresser, bits of last night's memories flooding back. She chuckled groggily, "I dreamed I saw a couple making **out** in front of me, Whitney. But then they left..."*

*Whitney's face turned pale in an instant. She tried hard to steady her expression and said, "Tiana, I've got urgent news. **I** think I've stumbled upon a huge conspiracy."*

*"What kind of conspiracy?" Tiana was **all** ears now.*

*With a heavy sigh, Whitney said, "About **L and Ludwik!**"*

*"What **is it**? You're not calling me in **the** middle of the **night** to tell me **the** two **heartthrobs** around you are actually gay, **are** you?"*

1/2

"What nonsense are you talking about?"

Just spit it out."

*"Have you ever considered that **L and Ludwik** might be the same person?"*

“What?”

Tigna’s face filled with confusion and a touch of horror, “Have I been thinking too conservatively? Whitney, you’re seriously bold with this theory!”

Whitney’s eyes narrowed, her mind whirling like a storm, “Tonight, I noticed that L and Ludwik smoke the same brand of cigarettes! Those aren’t sold on the market. Don’t you think that’s too much of a coincidence?”

“Not just that. Today, Ludwik defended me, using a draft I’d only discussed with L earlier. I never gave it anyone else before. I asked if L knew Ludwik but he dodged the question! Ludwik did the same this afternoon! And most importantly, I recalled a detail,”

“Ludwik mentioned he didn’t like tacky landscape paintings, which is exactly how I described L before. If Lis really Ludwik, I’m done—I’ve cursed Ludwik to his face about his shortcomings!”

*“Why be so harsh? According to this **theory**, isn’t he your husband?”*

“I lied to Ludwik about going home to take care of my husband, L. And when L came to the bar, he asked me directly why I hadn’t gone home to take care of him. What do you think?” Whitney grew more agitated as she spoke, “Think about it, L and Ludwik are both six-foot-two, and they even smell similar.”

“Did you sniff them?” Tiana teased with a mischievous smile.

Whitney paused for a second, “Besides, as my nemesis, Ludwik wouldn’t help me without any reasons. Unless... he is L. A man like him wouldn’t just stand by if his wife was bullied.”

Tiana watched Whitney turn detective, interrupting, “So it’s all because of a cigarette that sparked this revelation?”

*“What do you think? **If** they’re the same person, then L has a good reason for wearing the mask all the time!” Whitney paced anxiously.*

Tiana stroked her chin thoughtfully, "It's not impossible. Girl, what are you waiting for? If you're suspicious, let's go look for evidence!"

Of course they needed to seek for evidence.

But it had to be done quietly, before the man caught wind of their suspicions.

If L really was Ludwik, Whitney couldn't imagine how shattered she'd feel.

He'd been playing her all along!

In the morning, Whitney intentionally got up late, after L had left the villa.

After Natalie coaxed her into eating several cans of bird's nest soup for breakfast, Whitney rushed out the door. She and Tiana had already planned to visit the tobacco bureau to consult with an expert. Whitney presented the stolen gentleman's luxurious cigarette.

The expert examined it and said it wasn't sold commercially. This imported slim cigarette was exorbitantly priced and globally limited. Only fewer than ten men in the world could boast ownership.

Fewer than ten? And two just happened to be in Banyan City?

Tiana frowned, "I can believe some big-shot from the jewelry world puffing on fancy cigars, but L? At best, he looks like he's got some cash to throw around."

Whitney glanced **at** her, "**Isn't** everything worth a second guess?"

Chapter 57

The pair made their way back to the building Whitney had visited before, **the** one L claimed to be his company office.

When they reached the 28th floor, **it** was as **Whitney** suspected; L's **office** had vanished into thin air.

"I told you, he probably **rented** some makeshift **space** to play a little game with his darling **wife**." Tiana said with a twinkle in her **eye**, **playfully** teasing Whitney.

Whitney pursed **her** lips, “This means **his** real company must **be** something serious. **It** points even more to the possibility of **it** being something like Imperial Gem Corporation, a global giant.”

At lunchtime, Whitney stayed out, avoiding a trip home because she had overheard Natalie mention that L would be stopping by the **house** around **noon**.

She had **a** plan brewing!

Chapter 58

Tiana flipped through the menu, her eyes darting up at the sound of Whitney’s phone buzzing.

It was a call from a director at Skye Gem Ltd.

Whitney squinted, excusing herself from the table to take the **call**.

When she returned, Tiana gestured to a headline flashing on her tablet. “Monica’s plagiarism scandal is blowing up, dragging down Skye Gem **Ltd’s** **stocks**. The Valentine family’s shares took a nosedive today. Are the shareholders getting restless?”

Whitney nodded with a wry smile. “**Monica’s** got the **Valentines** backing her, **but with a scandal** this big, the shareholders I know aren’t fools. With the Valentine family’s fall, Skye Gem Ltd. **is in** turmoil, and they’re worried about their stakes.”

“So, they’re reaching **out to** you, the former CEO of Skye Gem Ltd.? Typical.”

“Many shareholders are clueless. For years, Monica’s been riding on my coat tails, and now they’re finally realizing who the real expert is.”

As if on cue, another Skye Gem Ltd. shareholder called.

It was a good sign, Whitney thought as she patiently answered, her eyes narrowing. This could be her chance to reclaim Skye Gem Ltd.

After hanging up, Tiana suddenly waved her laptop, calling out, “Holy smokes, Whitney! You had me tail Roselyn last night, and you won’t believe what she led us to!”

Whitney watched intently as Tiana excitedly booted up a surveillance feed, showing Roselyn's movements exactly as Whitney had instructed to be monitored.

Roselyn, having successfully wormed her way into Preston's favor, was bound to make a move. Whitney wanted to have leverage over Roselyn, turning her into the blade to slice into the Valentine family's core.

However, **the** footage was also showing that Roselyn was tailing Preston?

She trailed Preston to the front of a villa, and Preston remained oblivious. Soon, a captivating scene played **out**.

An elderly lady, with a young boy in tow, stepped out of the villa. The boy was carefully shielded by a hat, his identity evidently meant to be kept secret.

Preston, after ensuring the coast was clear, emerged from his luxury car and scooped the boy **up** in a fatherly embrace.

Soon after, a beautiful young woman appeared at the gate. Preston greeted her with a hug and a cheeky pat on the rear, undoubtedly the boy's mother.

"Is that a secret love child of your dad!" Tiana gasped, shocked.

Whitney checked the scene and nodded, "It seems likely."

Preston was renowned for his traditional values, consistently favoring sons over daughters. Whitney vividly **remembered the** strictly management imposed by Yvonne when she lived with the Valentines.

It came as **a** surprise to her that, under such watchful eyes, her father had managed to father a secret child, now around five **or six** years old.

The elderly lady was none other than Violet, Preston's mother and Whitney's grandmother, who had supposedly retreated to the countryside to recover her health. In reality, she'd been hiding **away**, raising her grandson- a woman known for her sharp tongue and manipulative ways.

Back in the day, **she** had never approved of Whitney or Monica, and even less so **of Yvonne**, her daughter-in-law.

Regrettably, the old lady couldn't contend with Yerine, and when Preston was utterly captivated by her he could silence his mother even if she couldn't give birth to a son.

But times had changed, and it seemed the old lady had finally one upped Yvonne by secretly introducing a new woman to her son's life, bearing him the male she'd always wanted

Whitney observed the drama with detached amusement.

actually feel sorry for Roselyn," Tiana chuckled. "She wanted to climb the ladder, but turns out the man's already got a son. What can she possibly achieve now?"

Whitney's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "We should thank her for this discovery. Tiana, can you find out where Violet's staying with the child?"

Tiana nodded, understanding the assignment, and gave a thumbs-up.

Meanwhile, Roselyn hid behind a bush in the villa compound, trembling with rage,

Her detour had led to an unexpected discovery; however, this love child could be the downfall of Yvonne and Monica.

"I feel like we're being watched. Let's head back," Preston said cautiously, urging the woman to take the child inside.

Violet hesitated before speaking, "Preston, I don't know much about stocks, but I heard the neighbors talking about the Valentine Corporation's shares plummeting. Monica's made a mess with her scandal. What's going on? I always said that vixen Yvonne was a bad omen, bound to bleed the Valentine family dry."

"Enough, Mom," Preston snapped, annoyed by his mother's superstitious and cunning nature,

"I only said a few words about her, so what?" she retorted defensively. "You've been bewitched by that woman since you were young! You're my son, and I know you. We owe our fortune to your father's beginnings and everything else is..." She trailed off, intimidated by Preston's glare.

After a moment, she added worriedly, "You even let her persuade you to harm Whitney. Don't mistreat Whitney like that, Son. What happened to her granddad and mom was an unexpected 'bonus' to us, and even though she is not really connected to you, you still shouldn't take it out on her. I know you despise Whitney, but if you harm her, her mother's spirit will come looking for..."

"Enough!" Preston shouted; his face contorted with fury.

With a clenched fist, he stormed off to his car and drove away.

Hidden, Roselyn didn't catch the whole conversation, but through the car window, she saw Preston pull out a pocket watch. Inside was a photo of a woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Whitney.

It was Whitney's mother, a woman he could never have, who met her end through foul play.

At the diner, Whitney glanced at the clock and realized it was already two in the afternoon.

She hurriedly called the villa where Taryn was, to find out when L had left.

Tiana smirked and asked, "So what's next on the agenda?"

"We tail L. If he shows up at Imperial Gem Corporation's tower claiming to 'work', he'll be in hot water!"

The two transformed into detectives, fully armed, and swiftly switched their ride, trailing the Bentley that had rolled out of the mansion's gates.

In the Bentley, Felix noticed the CEO looking quite worn and gloomy.

Did Ms. Valentine **not** let him in last night? The CEO hadn't slept properly in days.

Suddenly, the man in the back seat spoke, "Who's in that car behind us?"

Only then did Felix notice a BYD stealthily tailing them.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I didn't notice them. I'll have it surrounded immediately," Felix apologized.

"Wait a second."

Ludwik lifted his eyelids, curiously eyeing the BYD before making a call to the mansion.

*Taryn picked up. "Ms. Valentine **did call** to ask **about** the car you drove today and what time you left for work?"*

The man's eyes narrowed slightly, his lips curling into a tantalizing smile.

He looked up. "Let them follow."

"In the BYD... is that Ms. Valentine? She swapped her car to tail you?" Felix asked, surprised.

The man looked down, his gaze obscured by his lashes as he propped his chin on one hand, a mysterious chuckle escaping his throat. "We won't be going to the Imperial Gem Corporation, Take us around the overpass."

Felix's hand twitched as he sneaked a glance at the suddenly mischievous man.

Was he planning to lead Ms. Valentine on a merry chase?

Naughty.

But why skip the trip to Imperial Gem Corporation? Felix thought he had an inkling.

Was the cat about to be let out of the bag?

Chapter 59

wing around the overpass twice. Tiens was struggling to keep up, penting and puzzled. "Are they lost or are

watory, her eyes glued to the bendey that had almost lost them several times before slowing down just

nough for
them to catch up, clenched her fists. "Your choice of a BYD was a mistake"

Sorry sky just wanted to throw & off by not expecting someone like you, a former socialite, to be driving a

Whitney didn't know what to say

"They're leaving the overpass Tiana sped up.

But at the merging junction, the Bentley fishtailed, leaving them in the dust.

Damn, which way did they go? Tiana pounded the steering wheel, glancing at the street signs. "But he's definitely not heading to Imperial Gem Corporation, this is the opposite direction."

Whitney, frustrated, glanced at her, "it's your fault—bad choice of car, worse driving skills."

A string of expletives rolled through Tiana's mind, unsure whether they were appropriate to voice.

Their mission that day ended in failure.

Whitney hurried back to the villa before nightfall, only to be infuriated that the man had arrived earlier, lounging on the sofa and leisurely reading the newspaper

Seeing his lazy demeanor beneath the silver mask made her blood boil.

Had he done it on purpose this afternoon? Could he have noticed her following him?

Whitney pouted, sitting at the dining table, waiting for dinner

Ludwik glanced at her, "Where were you today?"

Whitney looked up at him, suddenly smiling, Mr. L, it seems that President Ludwik can't get enough of me. What should I do?"

"What do you mean can't get enough?" he asked, enigmatic, folding the newspaper away.

Whitney feigned distress, “And you said he wasn’t interested in me. I think he’s quite smitten! The other day, he even said he wanted to seduce me, insisted on an affair **within** marriage, the lecher...”

“Pfft” He spat out his drink, his jaw tensing.

Whitney proudly straightened up, teasing, “I still have what it takes to captivate a man. Once our one-year marriage is up, should I consider Ludwik? Mr. L, what do you think?”

She observed his expression closely.

If his expression had turned displeased and jealous, then it wasn’t him. If his expression had relaxed with a playful demeanor, then there was a problem!

But unexpectedly, he asked with disdain, “What assets do you think you have?”

Damn, was he rubbing her face in **it**?

Whitney looked herself up and down, annoyed. “I’m an asset, top to bottom!*

He approached, his warm fingers lifting her skirt, a naughty smile on his lips, “**Really?** Let’s appraise.*

“What... what are you doing?” Whitney, distracted, quickly covered herself, her **face** flushed with embarrassment.

He withdrew his hand and walked past her to the dining **table**, starting his **meal** without **another** word **to her**.

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Realizing she’d been played again, Whitney also ignored him and angrily bit into her meal.

Ludwik finished and headed upstairs, Whitney followed.

At the door to his study, the man looked at Whitney and asked, “What are you doing?”

‘I need to borrow something from your study.’”

The study was always locked during the day. She'd brought him coffee once but hadn't really looked around. Today, if she found a book about jewels or documents related to Imperial Gem Corporation, it would be solid proof!

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, which he noted without reaction.

He entered the study and closed the door firmly behind him, "I'm not lending you anything."

"You!" Whitney banged on the door, seething with anger.

*She stormed off to her room and immediately called Tiana. "I need to get into his study; he won't let me. He's obviously guilty, afraid I'll find something linking him to Imperial Gem Corporation, **right?**"*

Tiana hesitated. "Maybe. But, Whitney, you've been suspicious all day without any proof. Could it be your wild imagination? After all, a tycoon like Ludwik ending up as your faux husband?"

*"The most unlikely scenarios often turn out to be **true.**"*

"But I wonder, with Ludwik's clout and temper, why would he bother hiding behind a mask from you, a minor fallen socialite?"

"He's afraid I'd kill him!" Whitney fumed.

Meanwhile, in the study, the man watching the bedroom surveillance and listening to the phone call was left speechless.

Whitney clenched her fists, her cheeks cold with anger. "It's a joke. If L turns out to be Ludwik, not only has he played me for a fool, but I'm carrying the child of my family's archenemy. You think I'd want this kid? No way, I'd absolutely flip."

Ludwik's expression turned cold.

His eyes grew deeper, a shadow of complexity passing through them.

What a headache. The girl was quick to jump to conclusions, guessing the very last step.

It seems like her afternoon pursuit was to see with her own eyes whether he would enter Imperial Gem Corporation.

His mouth curved with a trace of dark amusement, obscured by the smoke, lending him an air of depth and charm.

Back in the bedroom, Tiana sympathized, "True, no one could tolerate their business enemy having their way with them, leaving behind a seed,"

"If Ludwik knowingly slept with you and married you under a mask, that man's scheming is terrifying! But I love these kinds of high-drama, emotional roller-coaster stories," Tiana exclaimed with excitement over the phone. Whitney held back, asking, "Is everything you've said so far complete nonsense?"

"Yes."

*"What should we do next?" Tiana had another wild idea. "Hey, hasn't L kissed you? Why don't you dash over to Imperial Gem Corporation tomorrow and get Ludwik to give you a deep kiss? Then you can compare if L is **really** Ludwik, right?"*

*"**You must've** been a professional bad-idea factory in your **last** life, Tiana." Whitney rolled her eyes, "**And if he's***

2/3

not? What would I be then, a home wreck

ferfany

Right, that too. So, what's the plan

Whitney thought carefully, narrowing her eyes. "To find out if they're the same person isn't hard. If, at the same time, in different places, you and I see L and Ludwik, then they're not the same. Otherwise, he's toast."

Tiana nodded. "Let's split up tomorrow. I'll stake out Ludwik at Imperial Gem Corporation, and you stick to L from the crack of dawn. We'll call to confirm!"

With the plan set, Whitney locked her door and went to bed.

The following morning, L's sleek ride made its way to the Royal One Club.

Whitney followed closely behind, her car's engine purring in the quiet of the upscale neighborhood.

In the Bentley, the man cast a glance at the rear-view mirror and asked his assistant, "Where is her sidekick?"

*Felix responded, "Tiana slipped into Imperial Gem Corp early **this** morning."*

So, they were weaving a net around him? The man's thick brows quirked with amusement.

At the Royal One Club, Ludwik strode into the office on his long legs. Spotting Nolan and Parker, he waved them off, "Let's hold off on the meeting for a bit."

He then walked to the window, looking down with a lively interest.

"Ludwik, what's got you looking like the cat that caught the canary?" Nolan asked, curiosity piqued.

"Ms. Valentine is down there, tailing the boss," Felix chuckled. "Today, she's determined to unmask him. Gentlemen, care to place a wager on who'll come out on top?"

Nolan was puzzled. "I've been wondering, Ludwik, why do you always wear a mask with Whitney? Why not just tell her who you really are?"

Parker simply laughed.

Approaching the window, they caught sight of a svelte figure skulking below.

Whitney looked around, her face etched with tension.

"She's all alone, trying to strip you of your disguise. Poor thing. And her inseparable confidante?"

Ludwik's lips curled into a smirk. "She's lying in wait at Imperial Gem Corporation."

Parker let out a chuckle tinged with a wicked air. "The machinations of girls are just adorable. You see right through her, yet she struggles on. Ludwik, you're a bit twisted, enjoying this cat-and-mouse game, aren't you?"

Chapter 60

The man stood with statuesque grace, taking a drag from his cigarette, a wisp of smoke lazily curling into the air, partially obscuring his mature and refined features.

Before the panoramic window, he stood tall, akin to a king surveying his realm, his gaze fixed on the petite woman below.

Felix, ever the observant assistant, offered a pair of binoculars with a knowing grin. "Mr. Lippert, the view's much better from up here. You'll see Ms. Valenti ne clearly with these!"

Parker quirked a smile, "Felix, you've just earned yourself a raise."

Nolan chimed in, "Definitely a raise for Felix."

Felix blushed at the praise, but the man glanced at the binoculars and scowled, "What do you take me for? A peeping Tom?"

Felix froze, his body going rigid.

However, in the next second, Ludwik snatched the binoculars and peered through them with keen interest.

Silence fell.

Nolan whispered, "I think we just witnessed the fastest self-contradiction in history."

Ludwik watched as Whitney struggled to sneak into the hedge, her cheeks glistening with perspiration as she searched for a perfect vantage point.

With casual authority, he commanded, "It's blazing out there. Take an umbrella to her, but make sure she doesn't spot you."

Nolan couldn't help but snicker, "Ludwik, you're hopeless."

The man turned, his expression icy, "I don't want my child getting sunburned, alright?"

Nolan muttered under his breath, "Sure, flaunt your delicate wife while you can."

"But you've got to admit, Whitney's got brains, figuring out something's up with her husband so fast. Still, I'd bet a dime she can't outsmart the big bad wolf."

Nolan agreed,

"Stack another dime **on** that. She's got no chance against Ludwik!"

Just then, a soft female voice laced with laughter, broke the tension as she entered from the doorway, "What's going on with Whitney? How did she manage to bring such cheer to you two young masters along with Ludwik?"

Ludwik turned to see a woman dressed in a chic business suit nodding at him, "Elaine, you're here for the meeting?"

The Imperial Gem Corporation had an important decision to make, and Ludwik had moved the meeting from the corporation's headquarters to the Royal On e Club.

Talking in with a graceful smile. "Hello

"The board notified me. I drove over from the branch office," she said, Nolan, Parker,"

Parker greeted her with composure, "Miss Elaine."

Nolan, however, paused at the mention of 'Whitney', accompanied by her coy laughter. Quickly, he greeted her with a polite smile, "Elaine, always a pleasure!"

"You just love to tease me," Elaine responded, slightly annoyed yet composed

Her figure was elegant in her business attire, exuding a noble charm that certainly didn't stem from her job

alone. With her striking beauty, she drew attention as she casually approached the window, smiling, "I saw Whitney sneaking around downstairs, hiding **from** Ludwik. Quite amusing."

12:03

The atmosphere turned awkward as neither Nolan nor Parker responded.

Ludwik opened a file, his expression serious, Let's start the meeting

The meeting

ended swiftly, and Nolan caught Parker's eye, signaling for a private chat.

Nolan licked his lips nervously, "Elaine's 'Whitney had me breaking out in a cold sweat. Her expression was so natural. If we didn't know her history with Ludwik, I'd let it slide. But that soft laugh of hers, is she over him, or just playing nice in front of Ludwik?"

Parker couldn't tell, "With her position at the Imperial Gem Corporation and her distinguished background from Emperor City, not to mention being strategically placed in Ludwik's company by both families, she could hide any displeasure with ease."

"That's what worries me. The true belle of Emperor City, Elaine from the Bartels family, has more means, stature, and cunning than Whitney. If she's truly moved on, fine. But if she hasn't, then..."

*Parker squinted slightly, "**Elaine** is undoubtedly talented. As the chief jewelry designer **at the** Imperial Gem Corporation, and given her family connections, her role holds significant importance within the Lippert family. Ludwik, with his mother **in** tow, is actually walking on thin ice. Do you think he wouldn't **let her** go **if he** could? But based on this situation, if Elaine doesn't express her intention to leave, Ludwik will remain silent."*

Nolan scratched his head, "It's a tough spot, indeed. Whitney's the unexpected twist, and the Lippert family probably doesn't take her seriously, just waiting for the year to pass. But what's Ludwik's real play here? He seems quite taken with Whitney. Either way, Ludwik definitely doesn't have any feelings toward Elaine; otherwise, he would have acted long ago. So, it's not really Whitney's fault. And look at Elaine, her patience is something else. You know the story of the Ninja Queen, right?"

Parker shot him a glance, "Ludwik knows his own heart. Let's not gossip."

Elaine eavesdropped from around the corner, concealed in the shadows. Despite maintaining a composed facade, her clenched teeth and strained elegance betrayed the tension within.

Her fingers momentarily curled into a fist, then relaxed.

She departed discreetly, without causing a scene.

At quarter past ten, Ludwik was preparing to leave the Royal One Club.

Nolan glanced at the figure hiding among the flowers and smirked, "She's set on tailing you today, Ludwik. What's the plan for playing with your darling wife?"

Felix perused the schedule, "Mr. Lippert has a meeting at Alpine Springs Resort today, discussing a partnership. It's chilly; his mother needs the springs for her health."

November had come, and Whitney was over two months along.

Ludwik licked his lips, warming them with his breath, and glanced at Parker, "You go to Imperial Gem Corporation and pretend you're me."

"What? Me, the decoy?" Parker said with irritation.

Nolan volunteered with a mischievous grin, "You know Whitney's friend, the one with the cute, doe-eyed look? Maybe I should try my charm on her!"

"You're not her type," Ludwik replied, his words sharp and without mercy.

Nolan was left speechless.

Elaine approached, clutching a folder, her demeanor both efficient and gentle. "Ludwik, Mr. Lutz happens to be at the Alpine Springs Resort. Shall we ride together? I can drive."

Nolan cast a meaningful glance in their direction.

Ludwik remained silent.

*

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Just before departure, Elaine came running over, a hint of apology in her warm and soothing eyes. When she towered her gaze, it could make a man feel she was particularly innocent. “I’m sorry, Ludwik; my car broke down.”

*In his usual businesslike manner, Ludwik offered a gentlemanly solution, “I **can give you a ride.**”*

*Elaine slid into the passenger seat **of** his car.*

Ludwik frowned slightly, but his attention was drawn to the red sedan behind them.

*Inside, Whitney was cautiously **reversing**. The corner of his eye caught the action with a hint of amusement.*

*Elaine glanced back, her expression easy as she teased, “Is Whitney following **you?**”*

*“Hmm,” he replied, **not** inclined to elaborate.*

Elaine returned to her documents in silence.

Deliberately driving slowly, Ludwik ensured not to lose the small car behind them.

*As he reached for a cigarette, a half-ring on a red string **fell** out.*

“Let me get that for you, Ludwik,” Elaine said, leaning over to pick it up. She had seen him carry that half-ring for years and had inquired about its significance.

Seeing Ludwik look at the ring with a deep gaze, Elaine smiled slightly and asked, “Haven’t found the person who saved your life yet?”

“I only know it was a girl. Afraid I might never find her,” Ludwik admitted, his heart forever softened by the memory of the girl who had saved him that night.

Elaine eyed the half-ring, reading his expression and realizing he truly hadn't found her. A thought flickered in the shadows of her eyes, and biting her lip, she ventured, "Ludwik, you know my family has a long lineage in medicine, and I have some skill myself. Actually, I am..."

Suddenly, Ludwik braked the car, his attention divided as he noticed the red sedan coming to a halt behind them. Despite the distraction, he caught Elaine's hesitant confession and he turned to look at her, his eyes intense, "You are what?"