

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 4-10

Chapter 4

On the eleventh day, after he had meticulously planned her fake 'murder,' they actually went and secretly got their marriage license.

What a twist of fate!—

Whitney froze, a suffocating agony drowning her, hate that was bone-deep, and a coldness that splashed from the depths of her eyes.

The past taunted her like a sharp sword.

“Whitney, I will definitely marry you. You’ll soon be Mrs. Perlman.”

“Whitney, you’re a genius. Help Monica with her draft one more time; she must win the jewelry competition!”

“We’ll get the license after the wedding. Don’t worry, I won’t betray you.”

After the wedding, huh? But he wanted her dead!

The tight grip on her palm was released by the man standing beside her, his tall figure casting a cool shadow. He asked her, “Need a few minutes?”

Whitney pressed her pale lips together and shook her head.

A clerk politely ushered them inside.

It only took two minutes to get the license. Whitney glanced at the man working busily in the chair, then at the marriage certificate. His name in the document had only one initial: L.

Domineering, indifferent, perfunctory.

What kind of marriage was this? It seemed the license was just a way to bind her and to appease the old lady.

She knew nothing about him, nor did she know whom she had truly married.

Suddenly, Whitney spotted Simon and Monica entering another office. Monica took her purse to the restroom.

Whitney's lips curled into a cold smirk, and she said to L, "I have something to take care of."

Felix, the man's assistant, looked at Whitney's retreating figure and asked the man quietly, "Sir?"

The man's gaze never left his work, only frowning slightly. "Keep her safe."

Whitney took out a lipstick inside the restroom, crushed it into water, and smeared it all over the paper. She stuffed it into a cubicle and left with a cold smile.

Outside the city hall, Whitney asked the driver to stop the car.

Within seconds, a delicate figure tumbled down the steps in panic, screaming unabashedly, "Simon!"

Simon ran towards her.

Monica, pale as death, shook out a blood-soaked paper and said with a trembling voice, "Look... This is the horoscope for a ghost marriage, with Whitney's name written in blood! It just appeared in my purse. Is Whitney coming back for revenge?"

Simon also recoiled at the sight of the bloody paper, helping Monica up. "Nonsense. She's dead! Calm down, don't let the paparazzi snap this."

"Simon, I'm so scared..." Monica's eyes darkened, her face drained of color.

Watching the guilty couple huddled together, Whitney coldly snapped a photo with her phone. The pain from her palm, punctured and raw, was unbearable, and her eyes began to fill with a bloody hue.

Her stepmother's words echoed in her ear. "Harsh? Whitney was born to shield Monica from misfortune, a life cheaper than dirt!"

14:54

Chapter 4

So be it, the truth cut like a knife. From now on, she would become Monica's calamity!

Whitney glanced at the afternoon's funeral news, her mouth twisting in a cold smile. The appetizer was served; the entrée would soon follow.

A sea of blood and deep vengeance, she would claim it all back, everything that belonged to her!

She pulled her hand back. "Mr. L, we can drive off now."

Suddenly, her pale hand was enveloped by a larger one. The man beside her divided a fraction of his attention from his work to ask, "Does it hurt?"

His voice, so deep, made Whitney's resolve falter, and the tears she had been holding back threatened to break through.

"Don't cry! Let me rub it for you." He frowned, rubbing her hand gently, his face emotionless, his breath calm and deep.

Whitney gazed at this noble man, who commanded, "I don't care what you're planning; just make sure you keep yourself safe, especially what's in your belly!"

"I promise you!" It was a transaction, after all. Whitney did not expect him to avenge her, especially since he doubted her intentions.

But she needed a haven, and this marriage was her temporary shelter.

"Please take the young lady to her destination," he said as he stepped out of the car, too busy to state where.

Whitney watched his retreating figure, then told the driver, "Please take me to Sun Funeral Home."

Meanwhile, in the VIP lounge of the funeral home, Yvonne tore the blood-stained paper with a scoff, "It's just lipstick and water, a childish prank. Who are they trying to scare?"

Monica shivered. "But no one else knew about us giving Whitney a ghost marriage!"

Yvonne dismissed it with contempt. "Even if all her company's people have turned to us, she might still have a friend or two. Just a minor nuisance."

"Humph, the funeral is starting soon. Your father will announce in front of the media that all of Whitney's inheritance will go to you. There will be no more Whitney in this world!"

"She's dead and gone, and she can't come back," Preston stated with certainty.

Monica regained her composure, a triumphant smile on her face.

At two in the afternoon, the funeral home was packed.

The Valentine family was a well-known dynasty in Banyan City. Everyone knew about Whitney Valentine, a business prodigy and stunning beauty who made a name for herself in Banyan City by 18.

Now, she was dead. And her death was as scandalous as her life had been, enough to shake the city to its

core.

Whitney narrowed her eyes as she made a call from a public phone. Even with nothing to her name, she remembered some media contacts.

She hid the blood packet she had bought in her clothing, donned sunglasses, removed the bandage from her palm, and walked into the funeral home's entrance.

Her lips twisted in a bitter laugh. She had come back.

Whitney's eyes landed on the empty casket in the center as the funeral music started.

"The once-glorious socialite, who would've thought this would be her end?" Someone lamented.

“Didn’t you see the news? Her lover killed her! She seemed pure, but rumors say she was promiscuous, conducting business in bed, cheated on Simon, and suppressed her half-sister!”

14:54

Chapter 4

“That’s right, I work at Skye Gem Ltd. I saw Whitney sleep with a male shareholder, and she always made life difficult for Monica.”

“Stop talking,” Monica said, tears in her eyes. “I’m grieving for my sister. I can forgive her for forcing me to create designs and claiming them as her own.”

“Such a tyrant, mistreating her sister. It’s good that she’s dead,” a passerby growled.

Whitney leaned in a corner, her fists clenched as she laughed coldly.

“Shut up, all of you!” A furious female voice exclaimed, “Monica, how dare you bite the hand that fed you. You used Whitney’s designs, and now that she’s dead, you spread lies about her; your heart is black!”

Whitney stiffened. Tiana Melford, her best friend, had come to the funeral too.

A cruel glint flashed in Monica’s eyes as she subtly signaled to one of her cronies.

Without missing a beat, the lackey grabbed Tiana. “You’re cut from the same cloth as Whitney, aren’t you? Spreading lies about Monica here? Get her out!”

Overpowered and alone, Tiana was quickly brought to her knees. Yet, her gaze remained fixed on the memorial plaque as she wept, “Whitney, I know your death was untimely...”

Whitney, her eyes brimming with unshed tears and fists clenched with determination, silently promised Tiana to turn the tables.

The memorial service commenced, and Whitney, with her hair in disarray, seized a moment of distraction to hide behind flowers swiftly.

Preston stood at the podium, tears streaking down his cheeks. “My dear daughter is no more, but life must go on for the living. In accordance with Whitney’s

last will, her business and fortune will be willingly passed on to her sister, Monica...

Suddenly, the casket jolted!

212

Chapter 5

The silence was deafening.

Preston looked up. The casket was to his left, draped with flowers.

Suddenly, from the adorned casket emerged something bloody.

“What’s that? It’s a hand!”

“But wasn’t Whitney’s body never found?”

A chilling terror swept through the room!

Just then, a person, bloodied and mangled, clambered out of the casket, wailing ghostly, “Daddy, it hurts so much! Am I dead?”

Preston, frozen, looked up in horror, his soul seemingly fleeing as he crashed to the ground!

The gruesome corpse crawled out of the casket, approaching Yvonne, “Yvonne, it hurts. My sister crushed my palm. Sis, you let the kidnapper beat me so badly!”

“Ah!” Yvonne and Monica screamed, tumbling to the floor.

Their faces were ashen.

Monica, clutching her head, wailed, “Mom, wasn’t she supposed to be trapped in hell, never to return? Why has the ghost come for us? Oh, don’t come for me, please!”

Her words revealed a crucial piece of information.

Whitney, with a cold sneer, slowly stood up.

The pale-faced crowd, some lifting their eyes, saw Whitney moving freely, asked, "Ms. Valentine, you're not dead, are you?"

"Yeah!" Whitney walked over, stepping on Monica's hand with a chilling smirk, "Strange, my family acted as if I were dead, pressing me into hell."

This revelation shocked everyone.

Whitney's eyes turned a piercing red as she sneered. "Was it that by burying me, my company would be easier to swallow whole, my will easier to forge? My fortune willingly left to Monica? Dad, have you forgotten how just ten days ago Monica and Simon paid off kidnappers to abduct me to the wilderness, to kill me off for good?"

"My God, the story's different. Wasn't she killed by a lover?"

"What, she's implying the Valentine family conspired to kill her..."

Preston stared at Whitney, convincing himself she was real, alive!

He reacted quickly, rushing to embrace Whitney. "Whitney, you're alive! Thank goodness!"

"Daddy, how could I bear to die?" Whitney, with a spectral gaze, turned to Simon. "Before the wedding, my fiancé and my stepsister had an affair; she got pregnant, and for their child, they left me for dead. Such a debt of gratitude, how could I ever forget!"

Monica and Simon turned ghostly white.

The room erupted into whispers, and journalists who had somehow infiltrated the scene raised their cameras.

Preston signaled his security to clear the room!

"What's gotten into you, child, speaking such nonsense?" Yvonne reacted quicker, rushing to cover Whitney's mouth and squeezing crocodile tears. "Are you angry with me and Daddy? Sorry! We thought you were dead."

14:54

Simon raised his palm, and Whitney glared coldly at the despicable jerk before her.

Still, his betrayal pierced her frozen heart like a dagger.

Their tender eight years together—he had claimed to be the bastard of the Perlman family, placing extra importance on family values.

He had talked about having a whole brood of kids with her.

Now, he had traded her for Monica.

“We’ll see what kind of spawn you two produce. Hell’s got a special place for you both!” Whitney wrenched her hand away and stormed off.

Simon frowned, instinctively following her retreating figure, lithe and indifferent.

Monica caught his gaze, her expression darkening suddenly.

“Damn it,” she thought, “I can’t let that wench take back the company and lure Simon in again!”

Outside the towering skyscraper of Skye Gem Ltd.

Tiana saw Whitney emerge, her demeanor icy, and quickly asked, “How did it go? Did any shareholders back you up?”

Whitney shook her head. “Business folks chase profit; no one’s dumb enough to cross the Valentines right now. But I did sabotage Simon’s deal today and goaded Monica into making a bet.”

“Nice! What’s the bet?”

“A provincial jewelry contest next month. If I win, I take over as General Manager.”

“No way! You struck a nerve. Simon and Monica, those two must be rattled!”

“I don’t know if they’re rattled, but the shareholders at Skye Gem sure don’t believe in me. They’re all backing Monica, mocking me openly.”

Tiana clenched her teeth, a cold smirk crossing her face as she booted up her computer. "They have no clue about your skills, do they? We've got to win this! Let's see, the regional contest starts in October, and it's hosted by Imperial Gem Corporation, the top judges..."

She suddenly fell silent.

Whitney's face turned rigid with anger as she spun around. "What did you just say? Which jewelry company?"

Swallowing hard, Tiana muttered, "The jewelry monarch, your arch-nemesis—Imperial Gem Corporation. They're running the show."

Silence filled the car.

Tiana turned to see Whitney's face ablaze with fury, her eyes smoldering.

"Isn't Imperial Gem Corporation's CEO the same guy who emailed you mocking your breasts?"

"And I cursed him with a hidden ailment!"

"That evens it out, right?" Tiana's lips twitched. "Imperial Gem's the industry leader, but the boss is a mystery. Rumor has it he's from the Lippert family, third son or something? And you've got him as your rival, head-to-head with his firm."

"You don't get it. Our families have a history. A Lippert stole my grandfather's deal! And every bid Skye Gem made, Imperial Gem tried to snatch it. A few years back, I lost a huge contract to them in a neighboring state because I stopped to help some guy with hysteria. I'll remember that for life."

14:56

Chapter 11

"Whatever," Tiana muttered, watching Whitney rant.

She thought that if Mr. Lippert was a young man, this could be quite the feud—a pair made in adversary heaven.

Sighing, she said, "You've never even seen Mr. Lippert's face, and you're holding a grudge. But we can't let Monica win this contest. We need to get cozy with Mr. Lippert. He's the judge!"

Tiana hacked the system. "Look, Mr. Lippert has a business appointment at the Southern Elegance Club tomorrow at 3 PM."

Whitney was taken aback. "Send me the address."

Tiana's grin was sly. "You're going to suck up to your mortal enemy?"

"Mind your own business," Whitney snapped.

In the current predicament, she had no choice but to make nice with her foe.

Her emotions were a complex web.

The following day, in the afternoon, Whitney arrived promptly at the Southern Elegance Club.

After mentally bracing herself, she approached the establishment, only to be condescendingly stopped by a security guard. "Ms. Valentine, do you have an appointment?"

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This was a playground for the rich and powerful, a place Whitney used to enter at will. But now, with her accounts frozen and penniless, she was about to be turned away when-

"What's going on here? Let her be!" A roguish male voice suddenly called out.

Whitney turned, surprised. There stood a man with phoenix eyes, young and with a rakish charm.

The man was equally startled upon seeing her. "Isn't that Whitney?" He wondered.

He approached her, eyeing her curiously yet warmly, "Ms. Valentine, I own this club. Who are you looking for?" She sized him up, a man of leisure, seemingly harmless.

"I'm here to see Mr. Lippert of Imperial Gem Corporation. I hear he's here today. Could I trouble you to introduce me?"

"Isn't the boss of Imperial Gem Corporation Ludwik?" The man thought.

The man's amusement was evident as he teased, "Oh, you want to see him? But Mr. Lippert isn't someone you can just meet."

Seeing his hesitation, Whitney asked, "What will it take?"

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He looked at her pointedly, "You'll have to cater to his tastes. Go change into something appropriate first!" Eager for a chance, Whitney did not hesitate and followed a manager into the changing room.

But once changed, she was stunned/A super short white blouse, a deep neckline, a pleated skirt—this was... a schoolgirl look. What was this man planning? She was fuming.

Yet the man tempted her, "He's in room 2022, just ahead."

Reluctantly, Whitney followed him into the room

The man glanced at the empty bed, then pushed Whitney towards the bathroom, smirking mischievously. "Wait here, and I guarantee you'll meet him!"

After he swiftly exited and locked the door, Whitney's head spun. "Hey, why are you locking the door?" Her defenses went up.

14:56

Outside.

"Nolan, what are you sneaking around for, dude? You know full well that Ludwik's been struggling with insomnia like crazy. If you mess with him now, you're asking for a world of hurt."

"Isn't Ludwik just hitched, bro? I snuck in a killer wedding gift! A freshly woken man seeing that – he's gonna lose his mind! Heh heh."

Nolan Fuller said with a cheeky grin, "Ludwik's gonna thank me big time!"

Inside the room.

Whitney surveyed the posh bedroom, feeling out of place and thinking about making an exit when the bathroom door suddenly swung open!

She stood right by the door, and with a natural reflex, her delicate frame lurched forward, crashing into a towering wall of flesh.

"Oof!"

The man instinctively wrapped his arms around her slender waist, and Whitney's head shot up, her eyes widening, completely stunned.

What a sight the Adonis fresh from the shower!

The guy in front of her was about six-foot-two, strikingly tall and proud, and she had to tilt her head back just to get a glimpse of his face.

The thought flashed through her mind: A vision of endless charm.

This man's features were exquisitely defined, with deep-set eyes, a high-bridge nose, and thin lips – he was a total knockout, surpassing any of the high-class hunks Whitney had ever encountered.

Such perfection in a face, Whitney caught her breath.

And the moment the man saw Whitney, he subconsciously touched his face, his eyes narrowing sharply.

In an instant, Whitney's gaze trailed down the chiseled collarbone of the man before her, her eyes widening with a mix of shock and a hint of desire she could not quite conceal.

He seemed to relax, noticing her stare.

Damn it.

Not only did this guy have a face to die for, but his physique was the epitome of rugged charm. Broad shoulders tapered down to

a lean waist, each muscle in his abdomen as defined as if it were etched in stone. And those legs—long, firm, and peeking out from the bottom of his towel—were downright sinful.

Wait a minute, was this guy her arch-nemesis? Looking like this?

Whitney could not believe it. A tear of appreciation escaped her lips before she could stop it.

“Got an eyeful yet?” A cool, teasing voice floated down from above her.

“Or are you so satisfied with the view that you can’t tear yourself away?” The man’s playful yet piercing gaze drifted to the towel around his waist.

Whitney’s cheeks flamed red. It was not like she meant to gawk at that particular area.

“Sorry!” She stammered, trying to turn away.

“Miss,” he drawled, amusement lacing his voice. “you’re about to pull off my towel.”

Whitney blinked in confusion, then looked down. Damn it, why was she holding onto one end of his towel?!

She tried to hand it back to him, but as she turned, her foot caught on the rug, and she stumbled, causing the towel to unravel from around the man’s waist.

“Ah! Sorry!” She exclaimed, eyes shut tight.

“Careful!” He frowned, reaching out to catch her as she fell.

“Thud.”

Whitney slowly opened her eyes to find herself sprawled on top of him.

And to her utter mortification, her hand was still clutching the towel, now draped across her back and covering them both.

Which meant he was completely...

Whitney suddenly realized just how compromising their position was.

“Don’t move!” he warned her in a husky voice.

Whitney froze, her face burning even hotter.

“I won’t look. I’ll just slowly hand you the towel!” She said, her eyes closed tight, hand shaking as she tried to grab the fabric.

But the man did not respond, his breathing growing heavier.

Peeking through her lashes, Whitney caught him looking down her neckline, his eyes smoldering.

She looked down and let out a sharp scream, immediately scolding him, “You pervert, what are you looking at?” His gaze then shifted down her legs, and Whitney followed his eyes to see her pleated skirt was way too short! She blushed furiously and warned him, “Close your eyes!”

“You dressed like this for me to look, didn’t you?” He teased, his voice rough and provocative.

That was because someone else had made her change!

Whitney tried to shift her angle slightly, but the man suddenly grunted and growled, “Be careful, or your face might touch something.”

Whitney stiffened, her cheeks blazing.

He began to pull the towel from her back, gently easing her off him.

Whitney sat to the side, covering her eyes, panting. “Okay, are you decent now?”

Looking at her flushed appearance, the man hooked the corner of his lips in a faint smile.

“Stand up slowly,” he advised, not wanting her to stumble again.

Seeing him wrapped in the towel once more, Whitney dared to open her eyes. The man seemed oddly familiar.

Looking at his perfectly sculpted features, Whitney remembered the purpose of her visit. "Hey, are you the owner of Imperial Gem Corporation, Mr. Lippert?"

"And who might you be?" He asked, towering above her with an air of indifference as if he did not know her at

all.

"I'm the owner of Skye Gem Ltd.! Your sworn enemy," Whitney declared with a mix of frustration and anger.

"Never heard of it," he replied arrogantly, his gaze deep and unreadable.

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He claimed not to know her? But he had emailed her insults about her figure! Whitney refused to believe he did not recognize her.

"Are you Mr. Lippert or not?" She pressed, seeking confirmation.

He gave her a fleeting glance, his look dark and warning, "Is it safe for you to be standing here dressed like that? Or are you interested in watching me change my pants? If something else happens, I might just have to pin you down."

Whitney was dumbstruck, and upon glancing down, she noticed her shirt was about to tear!

And the man, unhurried, began to unravel the towel.

"Ah, you creep."

With cheeks flushed and indignation bubbling within her, Whitney bolted for the door!

Watching her flee with such grace and beauty, the onlookers outside were left with agape jaws.

And then, they were all suddenly blinded by Ludwik!

Nolan quickly removed the shirt covering his eyes and turned to see the tall man

with a mask emerge, his curiosity piqued, “Ludwik! Why the sudden need for a disguise?”

“Who brought her in here?” Ludwik asked with a heavy tone.

Seeing Ludwik’s darkening expression, Nolan shivered and weakly raised his hand, “I... I brought Whitney in...”

“You let her dress like that?”

“It was for you, Ludwik, to spice up the newlywed’s life!”

Ludwik shot him a piercing look and ordered Parker Doonan, “Get the manager to wrap her up in some clothes and make it quick!”

With his gold-rimmed glasses, Parker chuckled mischievously and went off to handle the situation.

“Ludwik, you seem reluctant to let go. I’ve heard you can still do it during pregnancy. Do you need a cold shower?” Nolan teased, glancing at his waist.

Ludwik gave him a swift look and strode toward the bathroom, his tie whipping through the air and lassoing

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14:56

Nolan by the neck.

“Ow, Ludwik, my bad! But when have you worn that mask last? Used to be for warding off the ladies, and now? Who can’t you face?”

Parker returned, finding Whitney still in the doorway. Her phone call with Tian revealed her fury. “President of Imperial Gem Corporation? Just a show-off! I had to change just to see him, some lolita-obsessed freak; I’m done buttering him up; we’re enemies for good...”

Her voice drifted in, causing Ludwik’s lips to twitch, his gaze growing inscrutable.

Parker glanced at Ludwik, then told Nolan with interest, "If Ludwik's wearing a mask, there must be someone he can't face, a reason he can't share, a unique secret."

"What kind of secret?" Nolan wondered.

Whitney had changed back into her own clothes, still grumbling.

Tiana cut her off, "What does your enemy look like?"

Whitney had to admit, "Even more beautiful than me."

Tiana let out a squawk. "More beautiful than you? That man must be godly handsome!"

Whitney pouted. "It might not even be Mr. Lippert. I asked him several times, and he never answered. I hope he's hideous beyond belief..."

Suddenly, she bumped into someone from behind. Whitney turned to see the mask and nearly dropped her phone in fright.

"Mr. L, what are you doing here?" She asked, seeing his dark expression.

Whitney could not believe where she was—the dim lighting, the clinking glasses, the low hum of jazz in the background. It felt like a scene straight out of an old speakeasy. And to think, she had just been in a close encounter with a man she did not even know. She immediately hung her head, her cheeks flushed with guilt.

"Who do you wish looked hideous beyond belief?"

"Definitely not you," Whitney said, trying to smooth things with a coy smile.

The man fixed his gaze on her, his presence imposing. "Who gave you the audacity to come to a place like this?"

"Sir, we agreed not to meddle in each other's affairs. I have business here; please, go about yours."

Whitney feared his authority and sought to make a quick exit. But as she turned to leave, she spotted Monica slipping into a private room down the corridor.

And not long after, a man followed her in.

It was not Simon.

Whitney narrowed her eyes. The Valentine family had been holding her down for too long, and she was thirsty for revenge. She could not afford to miss any opportunity that might give her leverage.

“I really must be going, Sir, I have matters to attend to,” Whitney said hurriedly.

She made her way to the secluded room at the end of the hallway, but the door was locked.

Just as she wondered what to do, a tall figure approached from behind. The man casually used a card to swipe. the door open.

And to her surprise, the door unlocked.

Whitney was stunned. She looked at his chiseled features hidden behind a mask and speculated, “Mr. L, are you into some shady business at this club?”

Was he the type to pick locks, to extort and blackmail—was that how he had amassed his wealth?

He turned to her, a wordless glance that spoke volumes. This was his club.

What kind of man am I? The kind that could easily get you pregnant,” he retorted dryly.

Whitney was speechless.

Without a sound, they both slipped into the room. It was spacious, and suddenly, Monica’s voice carried over from the direction of the window.

an instant, Whitney was yanked into a wardrobe by the door by the man.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

She nudged open a sliver of space, and through it, she spied Monica storming out, her face etched with impatience. The man inside pursued her, his voice a smooth caress, "Monica, am I not your first man? Have you really forgotten me in the arms of Simon?"

"What more do you want from me?"

"You weren't so cold when my family's fortune was the talk of the town. Now that I'm bankrupt, you've climbed the corporate ladder to become the CEO of Skye Gem Ltd. Cut me some slack."

Annoyed, Monica thrust a check at him. "Don't come looking for me again!"

"Hey, don't be like that. Give me a kiss before you go. You're getting more beautiful every day." The man lunged forward, enveloping Monica in his arms.

"Get off me!" Monica struggled, dashing towards the door.

Whitney cautiously took out her phone inside the wardrobe and captured several shots of the room's setup and the entanglement unfolding before her.

Considering Monica's innocent facade before Simon, Whitney doubted he knew about her colorful private life.

A smirk grazed Whitney's lips.

Outside, the two had departed.

Whitney pocketed her phone, but something felt off. She spun around, coming face-to-face with a man's solid frame almost plastered against her back.

It dawned on Whitney how cramped the wardrobe was; the man had been holding her waist when she entered.

And as she leaned forward to take photos, her back had pressed against an area off-limits.

She suddenly felt his heat, the masculine scent and forceful breathing hot on the back of her neck.

“Sir... Sir?”

The petite woman turned to speak, her breath a fragrant whisper lingering on his Adam’s apple.

His throat bobbed, and with a hint of severity in his jaw, he instructed, “Don’t move just yet.”

“Huh?” Whitney’s face flushed with embarrassment, his voice raspy and unsettling.

Lowering her gaze, her cheeks burned with realization.