

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 61-75

Chapter 61

The man's gaze was piercing, almost as if it could cut through the air.

Elaine's heart skipped a beat, her intention to feign recognition faltering under the intensity of his stare.

He only had half a ring, a clear indication that he'd given the other half as a token of commitment to the other girl—a piece of evidence Elaine sorely lacked.

She hesitated, leaving Ludwik to his own wandering thoughts, before finally handed back the ring with a resigned smile. "Never mind, Ludwik," she sighed.

Ludwik pocketed the half-ring and glanced in the rear-view mirror on the sedan, which had resumed its journey. Was she on the phone with her bestie?

With a slight curve of his lips, Ludwik's large hand spun the steering wheel.

Upon witnessing the car ahead make a sudden turn, Whitney promptly ended her call with Tiana.

Tiana had infiltrated Imperial Gem Corporation and had just reported spotting someone in the executive elevator—possibly 'Ludwik' himself. She needed to confirm it immediately.

There was a ten-minute drive left to Alpine Springs Resort.

Out of the blue, Elaine spoke in a melancholy tone. "Ludwik, I must admit I'm a bit envious of Whitney, seeing how you've been making her laugh."

Ludwik's expression stiffened.

Before he could respond, Elaine quickly backtracked with an apologetic plea, "I'm sorry, Ludwik. I didn't mean that. I've been speaking out of turn today and just couldn't help feeling a bit envious..."

Ludwik frowned and remained silent. Despite her pitiable demeanor, he didn't spare her a glance.

He looked at her coolly, his words heavy with intent, "Elaine, I believe I made it clear a long time ago—I only see you as a sister."

"I know, I know, you were just dealing with the elders..." Elaine tried to conceal the pain in her eyes, offering a carefree laugh. "Ever since you and Whitney made it official, I've given up on those girlish dreams. Now, I see you as a brother, Ludwik, I work hard, I don't trouble you, but please don't send me away, okay? I swear, I'm looking for a boyfriend. It just hasn't happened yet. You can't expect me to rush into marriage, right?"

Her words left him with no recourse to continue the conversation.

Ludwik could ignore her compliance and lowered stance, but he knew that for family interests, he couldn't dismiss her just yet.

After parking the car, he spoke with a chilling seriousness, "You did speak out of turn today! I don't want to hear any more potentially misleading statements. Please, show some professionalism."

"Yes, Ludwik," Elaine responded, her posture straightening. "Actually, I've started to worry about you and Whitney's relationship, just like Nolan. Are you doing this because you had a conflict with Whitney?"

Ludwik regarded her coldly. "That's none of your business."

He stepped out of the car.

A red sedan parked in the distance.

Elaine followed, trailing behind him,

As she spotted Whitney searching for him, Elaine suddenly hooked her arm through Ludwik's.

Ludwik's mood plummeted, "Elaine, what are you doing?"

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But Elaine leaned closer, quickly gesturing behind them with a sly whisper, 'Look, Whitney's watching you. You know, there's a simple way to find out if a woman is really into you. It's foolproof, and I can help you put on a little act. I'm just being helpful' her smile was empathetic.

Ludwik's face was set to refuse, but upon seeing Whitney's shocked reaction seeing another woman on his arm his lips twisted into a smirk. She had been pushing him away, even locking him out of the bedroom. He was curious to see if she could remain indifferent.

He glanced at Elaine and thought, perhaps this wasn't such a bad idea after all.

He didn't push Elaine away.

Whitney's eyes widened in shock as she saw L step out of the car, arm-in-arm with another woman. She felt a sting of betrayal.

Had he not noticed her following him? Was this jerk bringing a female subordinate to Alpine Springs Resort for a fling? The secretary he fired last time must have been just for show. He always had a bevy of women around

him!

Feeling a mix of anger and disappointment, as if a fish bone was stuck in her throat, Whitney didn't think twice before confronting them.

She stormed up to them, raising an eyebrow in a wry smile. "What a coincidence, L. Who's the lady? To an outsider, it might look like you're still on the market."

"Whitney, what brings you here?" Ludwik asked, as if he'd just noticed her, a crease forming on his brow.

Felt annoyed, was he? Seems like she had disrupted his plan, huh?

Whitney scoffed, "I'm here for the hot springs. Who knew I'd bump into you playing the happy couple!"

Looking up at the woman, Whitney stiffened slightly.

The woman was undeniably beautiful, with a gentle demeanor and delicate features. She certainly wasn't any less attractive than Whitney herself, and the subtle air of sophistication hinted that she might be more than just a subordinate. A professional and beautiful woman was always alluring.

Whitney felt a sudden threat.

At that moment, Elaine playfully tugged at Ludwik's arm. "Bro, do you know this lady? Who is she?"

Whitney clenched her dress tightly, her eyes sparkling with emotion.

Ludwik responded, "A house worker from my residence, currently on an annual contract. Elaine, go ahead and purchase the ticket."

"Oh, a house worker." Elaine chuckled.

Whitney's lips twitched, pulling a faint curve.

As Elaine went to purchase tickets, Ludwik stood there with his hands in his pockets. Immaculately dressed in a white shirt, black trousers, and an unusual addition of a waistcoat, he exuded a striking presence. His commanding aura drew the attention of many female tourists, making the surroundings seem even more radiant.

However, Whitney was too agitated to appreciate it; her mind was in turmoil.

"What, a house worker?" she managed to say with a tight smile, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Mr. L sure knows how to play around, calling his wife a hired hand. You're quite something!"

His mask was impassive. "Considering your desire to clarify that we're only here for a year and then it's over, my analogy seems fitting. Besides, do you even care? weren't you the one who wanted to maintain a distance and lead our separate lives?"

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Whitney felt as if the air was being squeezed out of her. She hadn't expected him to be so callous

So why tease her? Why keep taking liberties with her?

His cold indifference was a stark contrast to the warmth she'd once felt, leaving her in a swirl of confusion and

anger,

Her small hand clenched, a bitter sentiment slowly fermenting in her heart.

Ludwik observed her bowed head, the soft tendrils of her hair spilling over her delicate shoulders, revealing a pair of tiny ears flushed with vexation.

His thin lips curved involuntarily.

He raised an eyebrow and introduced with a hint of mischief, "The woman you saw earlier is one of my employees, a branch CEO, quite the achiever!"

"Is that so?" Whitney's lips curled into a subdued smile. She, too, had been a manager once. His praise of another in her presence felt pointedly intentional.

"What do you think of her?"

"What about her?" Whitney asked with a stiffness.

His deep eyes gleamed as he boasted, "She's very capable, and quite attractive, don't you think?"

A slight sting pricked at Whitney's temples as she chuckled lightly, "Indeed! Very pretty, though I'm curious about the strengths that have Mr. L so impressed."

That insufferable rogue, she thought, his smugness crawling under her skin.

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The man's eyebrows arched with a hint of mischief, his lips curling into a sly grin. "Are you getting all snarky because you're jealous? Weren't you the one planning to hit the road after a year?"

He rubbed his chin, wearing a faux expression of concern. "I've got to think for the kid and myself. The baby gonna need a mom, and I can't be without a woman by my side forever. I think Elaine's pretty decent

Whitney barely had time to curse him out. Since when does a man die without a woman?

Pes words snagged her attention, drawing her gaze to her still-flat belly

The seed was sprouting, silently and unseen. It was the first time she considered the stepmother issue after the baby would be born.

A pang of discomfort suddenly prickled her heart.

Was this man already planning to find the kid a stepmother, just waiting for her to pack up and leave?

Whitney clenched her fists. She always talked about keeping her distance, not wanting to fall too deep, yet she hadn't anticipated his pragmatism!

A stepmother for her child? Over her dead body.

Fear and loss flickered across her face, her eyes glistening with tears.

Ludwik paused, wondering if he'd gone too far with his harsh medicine.

She was young, still not fully grasping the gravity of the situation with the child.

His hand reached out, gently squeezing her ear as he asked indifferently, "What's wrong?"

Whitney, sullen and annoyed, pushed him away. "I'm just a house worker, right? Don't touch me."*

His gaze darkened with amusement.

Elaine swayed over, having caught the tail end of his flirty touch on Whitney's hair.

Ludwik was usually frosty to the core. Elaine had only seen him ruthless in business, a cold-hearted king with no regard for kin, even toward her and his close friends.

Rare was the moment he'd dote on a woman like that.

Elaine's fingers tightened, her smile masking the storm within. "I've got the tickets! Oh, I forgot the worker's. Should I go back and get another?"

“No need to bother, thanks!” Whitney had no intention of soaking in a three’s-a-crowd hot tub.

The sight of them together was more than she could bear. She shrugged off his hand and bolted for the open-air camp nearby.

“Bro, shall we...” Elaine’s eyes brimmed with hope.

The soft look Ludwik had given Whitney was long gone, leaving Elaine to doubt her senses. He glanced at her indifferently, “Elaine, go ahead without me.”

And with that, he sauntered toward the camp.

Elaine stood rooted; her jaw clenched.

Today’s probing had revealed Ludwik’s interest in Whitney was deeper than she thought. But why should this interloper matter? It was all a sham marriage, a contract. Did Whitney even understand her place with Ludwik? Elaine’s lips curved into a devious smile, her eyes narrowing with a chilly glint, still graced with a smile.

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Chapter 2

The camp was alive with a barbecue party, European style tables, and grills laden with an assortment of sweet

Treats

The chill of the evening set in, and Whitney wrapped herself in a cozy apricot sweater dress, soft but hardly warm enough.

“Bro, it’s so cold out here!”

A delicate voice drew Whitney’s attention. Beneath an umbrella, Ludwik lounged with his legs crossed. Elaine was peeling a lychee, delicately offering it to his lips.

Ludwik frowned at Elaine’s gesture.

Elaine hinted with a smile, “Act your part, she’s watching.”

Ludwik turned to look.

Caught in his gaze, Whitney's eyes momentarily froze. Rather than avoiding it, she coldly observed the two. Despite attempting to feign indifference, her cherry lips were subtly tightened, and anger flashed in her eyes.

Catching Whitney's stare, Ludwik's eyebrows raised. He casually accepted the lychee from Elaine.

Elaine feigned bashfulness, "Oh, you bit my finger!"

"Did I?"

The pleasure in his voice echoed in Whitney's ears, creating a lump in her throat.

Ludwik glanced at Whitney's ashen face, deliberately draping his coat over Elaine's shoulders with tender care, "You said you were cold; don't freeze."

"Bro!" Elaine's voice quivered with feigned surprise. When his coat enveloped her, she blushed theatrically, her eyes sparkling with feigned affection, "I'll always remember this moment."

He played along with a detached affection, "Silly girl."

A short distance away, Whitney's face paled as she realized she had nothing to shield her from the cold.

A surge of bitterness swept through her like a gust of icy wind. He knew about her pregnancy and still gave his coat to another woman!

What a philandering jerk.

Just a business arrangement, a fake marriage, and yet, why did it hurt so much?

With her head bowed, she suddenly stood and walked away, finding herself a grill loaded with spicy skewers.

Struggling to breathe, she grabbed a handful and sat down on the grass to eat.

Her mouth burned, and she gulped down water.

Then something rolled against her foot and nudged her behind.

She turned to find Ludwik towering over her, his brows knitted in concern.

“What are you eating?”

“Are you blind?” Whitney retorted, tossing the corn cob he’d kicked over right back at his shins.

Grimacing with pain, he approached and crouched before her. Seeing her mouth full of chili, his face darkened, “You’re feeding my child spicy food?”

Whitney’s retort was laced with sarcasm, “Oh, so you do remember you have a child. I thought you couldn’t wait to start a family with Elaine. Perfect, the child can be all mine.”

His lips curled with suppressed anger, “What’s gotten into you? So fiery all of a sudden?”

He snatched the skewer from her hand, “You can’t eat this. Give it to me.”

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Whitney refused, angry. She knew better, moderate spice wouldn’t harm the baby. It was all a myth.

Her defiance flared, “I want to eat. I grilled these myself, and I’d rather feed them to a dog than to a philanderer’s mistress.”

Taking a bite of the grilled bread, she fumed silently.

A mocking chuckle escaped him, “So now we have a little pup gnawing on bread?”

Whitney froze, her wide eyes reflecting her awkwardness. Her cheeks flushed with anger, yet oddly alluring against her stunning features. Puffed with indignation, she snapped, "Stop laughing at me!"

The man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in silence as he watched her, like a feisty little kitten about to explode with fury. She was curled up on the grass, her soft sweater dress revealing a stretch of ivory legs which she hurriedly tucked back under the hem of her dress at his gaze, leaving only a glimpse of her alabaster feet.

His eyes lingered on the hem of her dress, and he felt an inexplicable thirst, his throat moving restlessly.

With a sly smile, he said, "Alright, I won't share the food with my mistress. Nanny, grill me some corn on the cob!"

He reached for the corn.

Whitney's small hand swatted it away, her voice dripping with venom, "Didn't you almost choke on the lychee earlier?"

His eyes deepened, and he clicked his tongue, "Look at you, all sharp-tongued and sour. Where's the grace and poise of a young lady of your stature? What's got you so upset, angry, and jealous?"

Whitney was left speechless.

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That smirk plastered on his smug inask face nearly left her breathless with anger.

Suddenly, it hit her she was behaving like a drama queen, lashing out without any filter, throwing shade at every turn. Wasn't she just proving how much she cared, how jealous she was?

No, she needed to remain cool and detached. After all, she had insisted on them keeping their distance. Why on earth was she so riled up?

She fought to contain the fury bubbling inside her, her face set in a mock display of serenity

as she laughed it off, "Why would I be angry? It's just a sham marriage, right? Mr. L, you could even take your lover to a motel right now, and I'd be the first to applaud your departure!"

His warmth froze in an instant, his gaze piercing as he studied her defiant expression. "You mean that?"

"Absolutely," Whitney replied with a light chuckle.

"Then no regrets!"

At that moment, Elaine gracefully approached, "Bro?"

"Elaine, join me for a soak in the hot springs!" he said coldly, taking Elaine's hand and leading her away.

Elaine responded with a bashful and soft-spoken, "Alright, I will go with you. No rush."

As Whitney looked down, feeling suffocated, she stuffed her mouth with food, trying to drown out their flirtatious banter.

Abruptly, a waiter cleared away the grill and skewers from her table.

Her face turned pale with frustration as she watched the two share a coy smile before disappearing.

She cursed silently, wishing them a watery grave!

Elaine glanced back at Whitney, feigning concern, "Is Whitney alright?"

Ludwik cast a brief, icy look at Whitney, his lips curling into a cold smirk, "She's just playing hard to get. Needs more stirring up."

Elaine teased, "Then we better keep at it."

Tiana's call came through, and Whitney picked up absentmindedly, "Hello?"

"Whitney, Ludwik just showed up in his signature CEO suit and walked into the office, but I haven't seen his face yet," Tiana excitedly whispered, disguised as a janitor.

“Okay,” Whitney responded, devoid of spirit.

“He’s coming out! Great, he’s heading to the washroom. I’ll get a look at his face.”

“Okay,” Whitney muttered, her legs leading her unbidden into the lobby, her eyes fixed on the ‘Coed Soaking Pool’ sign.

Tiana ended the call, clutched onto her broom, and stealthily entered the men’s room.

The men’s room was empty, and Tiana’s pretty eyes scanned the area. Suddenly, a tall figure caught her eye.

The man’s side profile was sharp and lean, dressed in Ludwik’s typical suit, tailored to perfection. His long legs were the epitome of elegance. As Tiana’s gaze traveled upward, a blinding shock made her scream, and she quickly covered her eyes!

“You... you...”

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The man turned, seeming surprised.

“Turn around, Mr. Lippert!” Tiana stammered, feeling like she was seeing stars. In that moment, she questioned herself repeatedly was this her first taste of meat in 22 years? Why couldn’t it have been Gunner!

“Who are you?” the commanding CEO demanded, “What are you doing in the men’s room?”

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“What did you see?” he pressed, stepping closer.

Blushing furiously, the panic in Tiana’s wide eyes grew as she stumbled backward, “Stay back, Mr. Lippert! Mr. Lippert!”

She bolted like the wind, leaving behind a chill in the restroom.

Parker raised an eyebrow, watching the fleeing figure, then zipped up his pants. A sly smirk slowly emerged, concealed behind his glasses. Swiftly, he returned to his businesslike demeanor, switching off the voice recorder in his pocket.

His suit clung to his frame, and standing at 6'2", he could easily be mistaken for Ludwik, who was just an inch taller.

Tiana needed three bottles of ice water to cool her flushed face.

Chewing on her fingernail, she called Whitney back.

"Hey Whitney, that was definitely Ludwik himself."

Whitney's senses began to return, "You saw his face?"

Tiana's cheeks flushed once more as she recalled, cursing inwardly – she remembered only what she shouldn't have seen!

After a heavy cough, she said, "I didn't see his whole face, but it was him. The voice was unmistakably Mr. Lippert's rich Italian baritone."

Whitney frowned, "Can you be absolutely sure?"

"Of course!" Tiana thought angrily, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. How could she tell Whitney she'd seen the man fully exposed?

Determined to keep this to herself, Tiana assured her friend, "Nothing, just, uh...I've verified it; Ludwik and Mr. L are two different people."

Really? Had she been wrong all along?

Whitney's brows knitted together.

Tiana could be unreliable

Just thinking about that

spa with that woman,

It was nearly dark.

and Whitney knew she had to find out for herself who was behind Mr. L's mask.

Scoundrel made Whitney check the time. It had been three hours since he entered the

Whitney sat in the lobby, mindlessly tearing petals from a rose.

"Drowned? Not drowned..." she mused, nearly tearing them apart.

Tourists began to leave here and head into the restaurant.

Suddenly, from the swimwear shop to her left, a familiar laughter rang out, "Hi!"

Whitney turned to find Elaine calling her.

Elaine, draped with a towel, epitomized grace and awe. Her outfit revealed just enough, showcasing her

long, pale legs and slender waist. Wet hair, shining like silk, framed her beautiful, aristocratic face – sweet yet

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mischievous

Men couldn't help but steal glances

With a smile, Elaine said. "Would you book two rooms? One for yourself and a suite with a king-size bed for him

and me."

The last three words hit Whitney hard.

What did that mean? Were they planning to spend the night?

The spa was outdoors, Whitney hoped that meant nothing untoward could happen.

She hadn't expected Mr. L to actually invite this woman to stay the night.

A sharp pain pierced her heart, turning her face pale.

Still, she booked the rooms mechanically.

Handing the key card to Elaine, who was perusing the sultry, sheer lingerie on display, Whitney's mind raced. The garments were provocative enough to make anyone blush.

Elaine fidgeted with a set of crimson lingerie; her cheeks tinged with a bashful pink as she turned to Whitney "Which set do you reckon he would like? Tonight's a big deal for me."

Whitney's expression turned icy; her hands clenched into fists, "Well, he'd probably like it best if you wore nothing at all," she said with a frosty edge.

Elaine seemed oblivious to the sarcasm dripping from Whitney's words, her smile unwavering. "You're absolutely right."

She then picked up a pair of men's trousers that lay nearby and asked in a loud, showy tone, "You've been working at his place, ever washed his pants? Do you know his size? Could you pop to the shop and grab me a box to deliver to our suite later?"

Whitney could barely stand to listen. The purchase she was referring to was beyond doubt.

The seductive look on the woman's face could melt stone.

Whitney detected the challenge in her voice and replied with a faint smile, "It appears you're not on such personal terms with him if you're consulting me about such matters."

Elaine's imperious gaze faltered for a moment.

Always with a smile playing on her lips, she quickly retorted, "After tonight, I'll know all there is to know. Why don't you just do what house workers are supposed to do?"

Like a zombie, Whitney went out and bought several boxes of the cheapest stuff she could find.

Ludwik was seated in the dining room, having dinner with another boss and two assistants.

Whitney entered in a fit of rage, tossing the boxes onto the man's table. Meeting his lifted gaze, she offered a sarcastic smirk, saying, "Your sweetheart instructed me to make these purchases. Not sure what to buy, I opted for the lowest quality. It should be just right for you, don't you think?"

Her sneer was loud enough to turn heads, including the astonished boss and the stunned assistants.

Ludwik's eyes narrowed dangerously as he met her challenge.

Whitney bolted out of the room, rushed up the stairs, and locked herself in her room, tears stinging her eyes.

She must have been driven mad by his infuriating behavior.

Whitney buried her head in her knees, crouching down on the floor in a bout of self-pity.

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Just the thought of him with that woman later made Whitney's chest feel tight with discomfort. She cared so much about the issue and also felt so down.

Why did I have to endure such torture? She thought.

had been avoiding it all; her life was finally on track and she was able to revenge, leading to the downfall

powerful

Monica and her mother. She would make a clean sweep and start a new life when the

Valentine family's internal strife kicked off and Yvonne's true colors were revealed.

But there was one miscalculation: L. the jerk. He had toyed with her feelings, and now he was off to another woman. Didn't he feel any guilt in her case?

Her sorrow turned to anger. She wouldn't avoid it anymore! She wasn't going to be some weeping willow while the scoundrel had his fun.

Blaine entered the suite, her eyes lingering fondly on the king-sized bed.

She unfolded the sexy lingerie she had bought, holding it against her body with a sly smile, "Better keep this safe."*

Her assistant looked on in surprise, "But Elaine, didn't you say this was just for a show?"

"For a show?" She couldn't help but laugh, dismissing the idea. She was serious about everything today.

If she couldn't seize this chance, she wouldn't get the chance to touch Ludwik's hair. So what if it was all an act? She was a player in this drama.

Her eyes twinkled with mirth, "Someday, I'll wear this for him. What's the rush?"

She wasn't in a hurry. After all these years, she knew this little setback would pass.

"Call Ludwik in, the show's not over yet," she gave a light smile. She was still going to enjoy the last bit of intimate moment" between them.

At nine o'clock, Whitney burst out of her room. She had arranged their key cards, so she knew exactly which room was his. Fueled by a towering rage, she stormed up to the suite's door and knocked fiercely.

Elaine answered. She was wrapped in a bath towel, her alluring figure half-concealed, her cheeks flushed with allure.

Whitney felt a sting in her heart.

In a cold voice, she asked, "Elaine, where's L? Is he in the room?"

Elaine blocked the door and said in an annoyed tone, "What are you doing here so late? L and I were just about to rest. Don't waste everyone's time." Her eyebrows arched suggestively.

Whitney, choked with anger, demanded, "I need to speak to him! Move, Elaine."

"And if I don't? Know your place, you're just the nanny!" Elaine's whisper was laced with provocation.

Whitney pushed her aside, "Then I'll give you a problem."

"What are you doing? Are you getting physical as a nanny? L's not decent so I can't let you in..."

The more Whitney heard, the more furious she became. She charged in like bantam hen, "L, get out here!"

The two women quickly tangled into a scuffle.

The man in the study finally frowned and reluctantly stepped out.

Elaine, hearing his voice, changed her expression instantly and retreated with feigned concern, "Whitney, please, watch out for your belly..."

Whitney was lost in anger so she couldn't react that fast. She inadvertently knocked Elaine to the floor.

Elaine let out a pained cry as her hair was caught in Whitney's grasp, "Whitney, my hair, my hair!"

Ludwik was standing at the door and watching the scene unfold, "Whitney, what are you doing?"

Whitney's head buzzed with fury, "I'm here to catch a cheater! What's it to you?"

"What did you catch? Ludwik approached and freed her hand.

Elaine's hair was tousled as she got up, looking all pitifully aggrieved.

Whitney saw that the man didn't wear a towel. Instead, he was dressed neatly. She was taken aback on seeing the scene.

Ludwik scanned her with a suggestive gaze and then pulled her into the study in an indifferent manner, "You're fighting now? Come with me."

The door to the study didn't close, and the man studied her dazed face for a long time.

His lips curled almost imperceptibly; his face was grim as he tossed a few packs of condoms on the table. He moved closer to chastise her, "Look at what you've done. What did you buy for me? The smallest size? Don't you know my situation?"

Whitney glanced at the packs, her face flushed with embarrassment, "Who told you to cheat inside your marriage?"

He was silent for a second, then chuckled with a touch of severity, "Did I cheat? You're assaulting my professional assistant in front of our business partners, humiliating your husband, and disrupting my business trip. Do you have any idea what kind of punishment you deserve?"

Whitney was incensed, "She's professional? And how professional have you been? Just a man and woman seeking a fling at the spa resort."

"Watch your mouth," he stepped forward, lifting her effortlessly onto the desk, his arms encircling her with

irritation.

Whitney's face was all flushed as she was jabbed by one of the small packs.

He removed it from under her with heated eyes, staring at her twisted expression for a moment before grinning, "What if I told you there was no

affair, no misconduct, and everything today was just a performance for you? What would you say?"

Whitney was stunned. Her mind was a confused mess as she was looking at him.

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He whispered close to her, "Don't you get it, idiot? I was deliberately provoking you, making you jealous and driving you crazy."

"Why? Are you sick, L?" Whitney was incensed. Was he just playing with her emotions?

Her eyes, which were burning with fury, reflected his chiseled image.

Her confused look was a bit adorable.

His throat felt dry as he loosened his tie and moved his hand to her waist, pulling her in and asking in a low, magnetic voice, "So why did you get so twisted up when you thought I had a lover? Couldn't stand the thought of me sharing the spa and bed with her?"

His breath warmed her ear. The heat seared into her soul and blood.

Whitney shivered, her mind and heart jolted awake.

Under his questioning, she was forced to confront the changes in her heart that had quietly taken hold.

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The had felt jealous today, so jealous that she was on the brink of crying and heartbroken. All her negative emotions were erupting at the sight of him being intimate with another woman.

Why was that?

Can't figure out your feelings for me? You little fool," L teased, lifting her chin with his deep, compelling gaze, You are jealous just because you care about me. No more hiding, little hedgehog. If I hadn't pushed you, you'd never admit it. You've got a little crush on me and you want to keep me all to yourself!"

"L" Whitney tried to deny it, but her cheeks were burning and getting hotter by the second.

Her eyelashes fluttered nervously like the butterflies. Her heart was all disturbed.

The answer, it seemed, was shrouded in a mysterious fog, only to reveal itself in moments of clarity.

Damn it, she cared far more than she wanted to admit. She had lost her usual composure today and gritted her teeth so hard. The last thing she wanted was to let him stray.

He suddenly leaned in and kissed her deeply; his touch on her lips set her heart ablaze,.

Whitney felt utterly spellbound by this man. Her eyes shimmered with tears as he gazed at her with a playful smile on his face, "How about I give you a chance," he murmured, "Shall we... take a real shot at this?"

Take a shot at what? Whitney's heart fluttered, uncertain what his 'shot' could mean.

But then, a knock at the door and Elaine's cheerful voice cut through the tension, "Hey, you guys have left me hanging out here for ages!"

Jolted back to reality, Whitney pushed the man away and scrambled off the table.

The study door had been left ajar, and Elaine had heard everything.

As the moment intensified, her jaw clenched, and she chose this precise moment to interrupt them.

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Ludwik frowned and turned to look over.

Whitney stared into Elaine's eyes, and now, Elaine gazed back with nothing but friendly warmth in her smile. The provocative coquettishness of the afternoon was nowhere to be seen.

Whitney looked at the man with suspicion, "L, what exactly is your relationship with Elaine? Why is she calling me Whitney?"

Elaine glanced at the man with a blink and a teasing smile.

Ludwik glanced at Elaine, and after a barely noticeable pause, he introduced her to Whitney, "She's like a sister to me!"

"Like a sister?" Whitney raised an eyebrow, her expression inquisitive.

"Yeah," the man said indifferently, "what did you think?"

Hearing his dispassionate introduction, a tightness formed in the back of Elaine's eyes. Her fingers curled slightly, yet she flashed a bright, broad smile, "Whitney, I'm sorry about this afternoon. I was just playing along with Bro in a little act. It was all to help him out. I hope there are no hard feelings. Can you forgive and forget?"

Elaine's demeanor was playful and seemingly harmless.

Whitney's eyes shifted, and she laughed off the awkwardness, "So, you're like a sister, huh? Well, Elaine, it's nice to meet you! L has never mentioned you so I didn't recognize."

A sly glint crossed Elaine's eyes, but she kept her tone light and smiling, "I guess I'm not worth mentioning. His heart is all for you, a true example of placing love before friendship."

"Nonsense," Ludwik scolded with a frown, but his eyes smiled at Elaine as he said softly, "Elaine, thank you for today."

"It's nothing, glad I could help you both," Elaine said sweetly, then added, "Whitney, I was really worried about your belly when you pushed me. Everything's okay, right?"

Whitney, feeling a bit embarrassed by the concern, replied, "I'm really sorry about earlier."

The man

wrapped an arm around her waist and looked her over closely, "Elaine was only trying to protect you. She was even falling to the ground, and there you were, pulling her hair out. Why you had such fierce combat skills?"

Whitney's face flushed with embarrassment.

Elaine smiled generously. The man knew that she was helping him out, that she was careful with Whitney and his unborn child, seeing her as an understanding and harmless woman.

All of this was so good.

Elaine's almond eyes curved playfully, "Alright, I'll make my exit now. You two enjoy your time together!"

Just then, an assistant knocked on the door urgently, "Sir, the matriarch is back from the spa and is having some difficulty breathing. You should come quickly!"

What?

Natalie was here too?

Ludwik quickly took Whitney's hand. Noticing her concerned look, he reassured her with a smile, "I was with my mother at the spa this afternoon, Elaine didn't even go in. Are you relieved now?"

Whitney's expression softened. She was feeling a bit more at ease indeed.

Following

Ludwik out, they found that Natalie's room was just next door. The room was so close that nothing untoward could have happened between L and Elaine.

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As Whitney entered the room, she saw the old lady leaning on a couch, clutching her chest and gasping for breath. Her face was pale, her forehead was beaded with sweat, and her lips were tinged with purple.

Whitney immediately went to her, checking Natalie's wrist and recognizing the signs of oxygen deprivation and cardiac distress in the old lady.

She turned to retrieve her medical bag from her room when she caught Ludwik's eye and remembered she had kept her knowledge of medication a secret from him.

After hesitating for just a moment, Elaine walked in briskly with a first-aid kit, "Step aside, everyone,"

Ludwik's furrowed brow relaxed as he pulled Whitney away, "Elaine, check my mom carefully."

"I'm more anxious than you are," Elaine said with a smile, quickly kneeling down to check the old lady's eyes and lips. She then took out some medication and, with efficient grace, began administering treatment.

Whitney watched Elaine work and was surprised that Elaine was also skilled in curing diseases.

The old lady's breathing started to ease, and slowly her eyes fluttered open.

"Are you awake now?" Elaine asked, holding her hand with tender care, "I haven't visited you in so long. Although you are still looking young and beautiful, I should really start calling you 'Auntie' now with all the years we've shared!"

Natalie watched Elaine for a long moment before smiling, "Elaine, what brings you here?"

"I accompanied Bro on a business trip today. I am usually busy fulfilling my duties at the company," Elaine explained.

"Don't ask so many questions. Elaine is saving your life," Ludwik interjected gently; his brows were knitted together as he reminded his mother.

Natalie pouted at her son but her demeanor towards Elaine was cool and polite, "Thank you, Elaine."

"It's the least I can do!" Elaine replied cheerfully while soothing the old lady's hand.

Whitney noticed that Natalie withdrew her hand imperceptibly.

Natalie looked up. When she finally noticed Whitney, her face lit up with a smile, "Whitney! Are you here at the spa resort too?"

"Yes, Mom, didn't he tell you?" Whitney glanced at the man.

The old lady also shot her son a look before beckoning, "Whitney, come here. Has this rascal taken you out for dinner yet?"

"Mom..." Whitney walked over with a laugh.

Natalie pulled her down onto the couch, chattering away.

And Elaine, who had been kneeling in front of the couch, began to pack up her kit with a smile after a while.

She stayed, listening and occasionally chiming in, and though the old lady responded to her, she would quickly turn back to engage Whitney with a beaming smile.

Whitney sensed something subtle in the air.

Elaine was like L's little sister and also calling Natalie 'Auntie, suggesting they should be close. Yet, it seemed Natalie preferred talking to her. There was a hint of estrangement mixed in her gentleness when she faced Elaine.

Whitney's peripheral vision

took in Elaine. She was stunning, aristocratic, skilled in medicine, and also a corporate manager. She was not a simple character. Whitney thought back and recalled her identity as a fake lover this afternoon and L's affectionate and kindhearted sister this evening. Whitney also recalled Elaine's earlier antagonism and her orders to fetch a lingerie; her blushing look seemed a bit too real as a fake lover. "Auntie, you gotta take it easy tonight and don't talk too much," Elaine said softly, concern lacing her voice.

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"Alright, Elaine, Natalie replied with a nod.

"Bro, I'm gonna call it a night and head to the dinner party. I still have some things to hash out with Mr. Lutz,

Elaine mentioned.

Ludwik felt a twinge of guilt mixed with gratitude, "You've been a real trooper today, Elaine. Thank god for you when Mom had that sudden turn."

Elaine patted her medical bag and smiled, "What can I say? I've got the healing touch. Just give me a shout if there's any change with Auntie, and I'll be here in a jiffy!"

Ludwik asked his assistant to walk Elaine out.

Elaine could still hear the laughter of the old lady with Whitney while she was standing outside and clutching the first aid kit. The old lady didn't like her. She never had.

If it weren't for that old bat, maybe Ludwik would've married her by now instead of having Whitney in the picture.

But she'd never let him see that his mother didn't like her, or the reasons why!

Soon enough, Ludwik had professional caregivers in. Natalie's condition was stable after that.

Whitney's stomach let out an ill-timed growl. She didn't want Natalie to hear it so she quickly hid away and pressed her hands against her belly.

Catching her expression, Ludwik chuckled, "Mom, mind if I take her out for a bite?"

"Oh, get out of here! The last thing I need is you two making googly eyes at each other in my room, Natalie teased, though she secretly yearned for the young couple to grow closer.

Instead of heading out to dinner, Ludwik led Whitney downstairs but took a detour, guiding her into a secluded hot springs garden.

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Whitney peeked through the parted curtains, her eyes taking in the opulence of the private courtyard complete with its own shimmering pond. He had booked the entire venue—this guy was loaded.

The man watched her intently, attempting several times to take her hand, but she resisted, tucking her hands away and awkwardly leading the way.

Ludwik gave a low chuckle. His towering figure was emanating a grace charm as he closed in on her and whispered, "What about what I said back in the room? Have you thought it over?"

Whitney bit her lip, "I don't quite follow what you mean by 'a real shot'."

He turned back, grasping her slender shoulder with a firm, serious grip, "I meant, let's give a real relationship a shot. What do you say we see if this one-year trial marriage can transition into a lasting union?"

Whitney's heart skipped a beat as if something inside her had exploded.

She stood there, dazed, her silly expression oddly endearing.

Ludwik knew about her past relationship, but when it came to matters of the heart, she seemed utterly clueless. She was pure as untouched canvas and couldn't stand a man's flirtatious movement at all. Her constant blush and watery eyes were too tempting to resist.

He tickled her neck again as his voice became hoarse with urgency, "Well? What's your answer?"

In a panic, she pushed his hand away; her mind was already a whirlwind from the intimate moment they'd shared in the suite.

And now he was talking about dating? Oh God, that was a total mess.

Whitney hurried towards the hot spring pool, her heartbeat erratic. There, on a stone bench, she saw a table set for dinner, adorned with a sumptuous spread of fine cuisine and pastries—had he arranged a romantic hot spring dinner too? Was this his idea of a date?

She shook her head in annoyance. What was she even thinking?

Noticing her gaze fixed on the cake, he assumed she was just hungry. With a helpless chuckle, he pushed a slice into her mouth, “Eat! And then give me your answer.”

Whitney glared at him silently. Did she look like a hungry kitten to him?

Her cheeks flushed with irritation as he pressed her for the answer, “Nobody forces one to date like you do.”

Considering he was the one who’d suggested a ‘trial marriage’, Ludwik held back his frustration, “How about we s oak in the spa first?”

He pointed out, “There’s your swimsuit.”

Whitney looked down to see matching men’s and women’s robes laid out on t he floor.

She turned to look for a changing room.

But before she could, Ludwik was peeling off his shirt and revealing his well-defined and enticing chest.

“Ah! What are you doing, L?”

“Getting changed for a bath. What, should I go in naked?”

“I meant, where’s your pool? Get to your own pool.”

“My dear lady, must you be so proper with me? I am your husband, after all.”

“A fake one!”

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His brow arched, and he approached her with long strides, “I just talked about getting serious, and you’re back

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to 'fake' again?"

Whitney pouted, "I didn't agree to anything."

He halted, and his expression was unreadable, "Then I'll wait for your agreement for just one sec. Make it quick, or else I'll-"

With a fluid motion, he unbuckled his belt, and his trousers fell to the floor in a swoosh.

"Ah-

"Whitney's shriek echoed again, "Just put on your swim trunks! Why are you being such a rogue?"

He let out a low chuckle.

Her face turned a deeper shade of red, her hands covering her eyes. Even in that brief glimpse, she'd seen the sculpted legs, as well as the narrow but powerful waist. The man's waist was deadly-too sexy for words.

"Are you done yet?" she asked, exasperated.

"Open your eyes!" Ludwik commanded. He pried her hands away and stepped into the pool, his tall frame imposing.

Whitney sat down, trembling. As long as he was there, she wouldn't dare change.

He returned to the edge and tugged an unlit cigarette in his mouth, exuding a rakish charm as he reached for her delicate ankle.

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Peeling off her thin socks, her cute pink toes emerged. His gaze deepened and his breath hitched.

Yet he gently eased her feet into the warm water and said in a low voice, "This is good for a pregnant one."

Whitney looked at her ankle in his grasp. His hand was so large, and the palm burned against her skin. His calm and collected demeanor was so manly, but she felt like she w

as burning up with embarrassment. They had never been this close before, “Let... let go...” she said.

“Doesn’t it feel good?”

The innuendo in his words was unmistakable.

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Whitney shot him a furtive glance. Her mind was too overheated to think straight, and she couldn’t bring herself to look up at his handsome face, “I’ll answer your question. Just stop torturing me like this.”

He smirked, the cigarette adding to his roguish look, “You could have just given in earlier.”

Letting her go reluctantly, he pinched her little toe. His Adam’s apple was rolling with suppressed desire.

Whitney retracted her foot, biting her lip, “So, are you serious about giving this a try with me?”

Leaning in close, he breathed onto her face when he spoke up, “Sweetheart, do you have any idea how precious even a second is to me?”

“I used to earn tens of thousands in a second too,” Whitney retorted with a touch of high-society pride.

He scoffed, tilting her chin up and looking at her with oceanic eyes. He said in a low

baritone, "I don't have time to play games with little girls. I need a real wife, not a roommate who won't even let me in the door. You're the mother of my child, and there's no one better suited to be the mom. I don't want to find my child a stepmother. We can get a long, nurture some affection, and build a complete family if we want. I have no desire to waste energy on a second romantic relationship."

Whitney burst into laughter at his serious yet languid expression.

A second romantic relationship?

Was she his first one?

As if reading her mind, he leaned toward her earlobes and let out a husky chuckle there, "Indeed, you are. Remember what I said that night at the hotel? You were my first, and so far, the only one I'm interested in. Remember my words and don't doubt me so easily, little kitten."

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Chekkenoveret to her his large hand had found its way to her belly

Through the weater Whitmes et an bende heat. The atmosphere was extremely simmering

Me locked down and narrowed his eyes with desire, he was leaning in for a kiss but Whitney backed away

Seeing the white sum of her neck, his breathing intensified The warmth of the pool made his heart race.

Whitney raised her evebrows, What te kitten? You have no respect for me. If I agree to date you, you can't just touch and kiss me whenever you want. You need to respect me. Marriage is about equality, you know"

DC he conceded with a frown of discomfort and his gaze was grim

Whitney nearly melted under his intense stare, her cheeks blushing with indignation, "You ate Elaine's lychee

andley You're tarbed

A laugh rumbled in his chest as he eyed her "Still jealous? I told you about Elaine's role. Besides, I didn't even touch that hichee Sansted now?"

Whitney pouted, "What about her saying you bit her finger?"

Ludwik messaged his brows. You actually believe that? Do you have any idea how many women try to feed me their homemade treats? If indulged every single one. I'd have keeled over by now."

Whitney stifled a laugh, her voice playful yet pointed. "Smooth talker."

The man's hand captured her delicate chin, his voice deep and laced with a raw desire. "I don't like other

women getting close to me. You're the exception, though I can't quite put my finger on why."

Whitney remained silent. Her cheeks turned a shade of crimson under the moonlight.

Could it be that he was speaking the truth?

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She pushed him away in a fluster, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment, "Okay, enough already. I've been sitting here so long I'm practically boiling"

*Seems like our little Miss Denial has finally come around, huh?" The man's thin smile was like a spider's web, and his gaze seemed to ensnare her like a little bee unable to resist his charm.

Whitney was beside herself, her face aflame as she looked up at the towering man; her heartbeat skipped wildly out of rhythm.

There was no denying it—she was a little smitten.

A man like him—handsome, aloof, wrapped in an air of mystery and prestige, with a control that was measured and a wisdom that was cunning—what kind of woman wouldn't be?

The man, who had a lethal magnetism, had come to her aid in her moments of need. His identity was a riddle yet his background was undeniably powerful.

The inner barrier Whitney had built was starting to crumble...

She turned to leave as her lips unwittingly curved into a smile, "All good now? So, I can go, right?"

But Ludwik swooped her up in his arms, "Consider this our first date. And maybe a little massage after this?"

Whitney gasped.

Why did a simple massage sound so salacious when he said it?

Whitney, facing a portrait of mature mischief, found herself carried into a stylish suite.

Two therapists were already there waiting.

Ludwik set Whitney down gently—being pregnant, she could only get a foot rub.

He, on the other hand, stretched out on the bed with a male therapist attending to him.

He must be tired because he said no more. It seemed that he was always falling asleep quickly whenever she was around.

Whitney quietly dismissed her masseuse and moved next to him, attempting to adjust his position. Even in sleep, his brows were knitted in tension. She instinctively wanted to smooth them out but then her fingers brushed against his silver mask. Her heart skipped a beat.

Now, getting this close was her best chance to unveil the mystery.

Just one look beneath the mask, and she would see his true face, discovering who he really was.

Her nerves were taut, but she hesitated not. She'd soon know if he was the real Ludwik, wouldn't she?

She held her breath and lifted the mask, revealing a chiseled face with rising brows. But it was a face completely different from Ludwik's! A scar marred his eye socket, and Whitney froze in shock. He was indeed not the man she thought.

"What are you doing?" The cold tone was followed by a grip on her wrist, and he pinned her down.

His eyes flashed with a dangerous red hue, only softening when he recognized her. Whitney's hand throbbed with pain, "L..."

"Getting this close while I'm asleep is dangerous. And did you ask for my permission?" His eyes were icy, his anger palpable.

Whitney paled, her fear prompting a stammered explanation, "I just wanted to see you..."

"See what? I don't like being looked at. Don't ever be this rude again, got it?"

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The stern warning that he gave intentionally surrounded her like frost.

"Okay..." Whitney's voice was small with a tinge of hurt.

He let her go and lay back down, his gaze cold and oceanic. He knew the girl would try something like this. He touched the mask on his face, hoping he'd managed the deception well. Noticing the silence beside him, he wondered if he frightened her with his anger.

Ludwik turned to see the complex look on her face.

Nearly chuckling, he pulled her close and softened his voice. "What's the matter? You don't like the scar?" he asked the question on purpose.

Whitney shook her head. It wasn't that; she just hadn't expected that he really wasn't Ludwik.

She couldn't tell if she was relieved or somehow disappointed.

"So you think I'm ugly?" he teased further.

Whitney was speechless, "I haven't even seen all of you, but you're not as handsome as I imagined."

He shrugged, the rogue in him prominent, "Too bad, you've already agreed to give us a try. No returns now."

Whitney mused for a moment. Then she crossed her arms, ready to negotiate, "L, if we're going to date and try this marriage thing, aren't you going to show me the real you? I don't even know your full name, your identity, or what you do... It all makes me feel so insecure..."

Clever words from a clever tongue.

His lips curved in a smirk as he pulled her onto his lap, his voice a deep caress, "All that's superficial. Wouldn't you rather feel the man right in front of you now, hmm?"

Whitney felt his wicked energy, not sure what 'feelings' he referred to, her face turning a deeper shade of red, "Put me down!"

He held her close, admiring her delicate beauty and whispering deeply, "Security, my dear, is something I can provide. I'll let you get to know me, and as for my identity, you'll find out the day you fall in love with me."

Maybe she would no longer want to duel him to death and abandon his kid the day she fell in love with him.

Ludwik smiled helplessly at the thought.

Whitney blinked, taken aback. Fell in love with him? She scoffed inwardly—was this man too full of himself? Right now, she was merely attracted to him; love was still uncertain.

She pouted playfully, "Then you might pray for God's help to let you have an immortal life."

Ludwik gritted his teeth, "Looks like you need to be taught a lesson!"

Whitney tried to squirm away when suddenly his phone on the bedside table rang. The caller ID read 'Elaine'.

The phone rang persistently until Ludwik answered with a frown, "Elaine?"

Whitney wasn't eavesdropping, but she couldn't help overhearing Elaine's panicked plea on the other end, "Bro, could you come over? Mr. Lutz is being terribly inappropriate at the dinner..."

She didn't spell it out, but Ludwik, a veteran in the business world, had seen it all before.

"Is it serious? Do you have someone with you?" he asked in a cold voice.

"My assistant's passed out drunk. Bro, I didn't want to trouble you and Whitney, but... Ah!"

The call abruptly ended.

Ludwik jumped to his feet, assuring Whitney before making a series of calls to his secretary and bodyguard.

Finally, he escorted Whitney back to her room, saying, "I'll go check on the situation. She did call me, after all."

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Whitney nodded. It was right to check on things, but then she added, "I'll wait for you to come back."

His eyes warmed at that.

Whitney quickly clarified, "I just mean I'll be here waiting. We'll sleep in separate beds!"

He nodded and strode out swiftly.

But that swift exit turned into three hours, and Whitney couldn't help but wonder what was taking so long—the dinner was at the resort, wasn't it?

Three and a half hours later, Ludwik returned.

Whitney was curled up in bed. She was lost in thought rather than sleep.

"Why aren't you tucking yourself in?" he asked, standing by the bed. His shirt was tidy but slightly wrinkled. Noticing her gaze, he explained, "Elaine got hurt. I drove her to get checked out and waited for her IV until her assistant arrived. She even rushed me back, worried you would be mad. Said you girls like this drink."

Ludwik handed her a cup of drink, on which the label cheerfully proclaimed "Pregnancy Safe."

But Whitney just glanced at his beaming face and didn't take it.

The guy in front of her was probably clueless about women. Whitney didn't see it as a big deal as well.

Still, she curled her lip playfully and tugged at his tie, "Mr. L, you should keep your social distance from your sister. After all, I'm going to be your favorite soon, right?"

He was taken aback, a deep rumble in his throat as he moved closer to the edge of the bed,

"We're just trying out this courtship and now you are claiming to be my favorite already, huh? How about a kiss first?"

Whitney's foot, through the sheets, pushed him away. And she rolled over, burrowing deeper into the bed.

Seeing her refuse the drink, Ludwik tossed it in the trash.

It was a typically clueless guy move, but Whitney found it oddly satisfying.

Narrowing her eyes, she didn't judge him harshly. She was just getting to know Elaine, and her feelings were unclear.

How could a powerful woman be bullied to the point of injury at a party? Calling her boss for help in the middle of the night seemed a bit like a cry for attention./

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Whitney returned to Banyan City the following day

The Valentine Corporation was in turmoil. Banks were clamoring for their loans, the stock price had hit rock-bottom, and partners were causing chaos. The corporation was reeling from a massive blow.

Preston had yet to return home. His whereabouts were unknown, probably galivanting around who-knows-where.

Yvonne was fuming. Her complexion was pale and haggard with frustration.

Meanwhile, the upheaval at Skye Gem Ltd. was even more severe.

Since Monica had taken the reins, her impatience for success had led to a flurry of jewelry orders in just two months, which resulted in inconsistent quality. Her poor decision-making was bad enough, but now, as the chief designer, she was caught red-handed for plagiarism and bribery. Numerous partners were pulling out of contracts, leaving Skye Gem Ltd. facing a gaping hole of penalty fees.

Shareholders were furious at their losses and regretted siding with Monica over Whitney, not believing in Whitney's ability to win the competition.

Now they had no choice but to strip Monica of her position and kick her out of the company to distance themselves from the plagiarism scandal!

This was previously unthinkable, as Monica was the second-largest shareholder. But during this critical meeting, Simon did something unexpected: he allowed the shareholders to have their way.

Monica was in disbelief. She couldn't stand being dismissed. If she lost her grip on Skye Gem Ltd., that meant her position as the second largest shareholder would be nothing but an empty title.

She was enraged but unable to locate Simon.

He was dodging her by staying absent from the company.

After days of stalking, Monica finally caught sight of Simon.

He was on a date in an extremely posh French restaurant, being introduced to a debutante from a renowned Banyan City family!

Monica's chest was ready to burst with anger. She stormed in and screamed, "Simon, you lowlife! What are you up to behind my back? Flirting with other women and ready to discard me so soon? I, Monica, am not yet defeated, you..."

Her fury wasn't containable so she grabbed a bottle of wine, ready to douse the contemptible woman before her.

Simon's eyes turned icy as he signaled his bodyguard.

Before Monica could make her move, she was floored by the guard.

Simon wouldn't even dignify her with a response. He had the bodyguard carry her out of the upscale restaurant. Dumped at the entrance, Monica was utterly humiliated. The restaurant's patrons snickered at her.

The debutante looked at her with smug disdain.

Having endured days of cold treatment, she had forgotten about her image and looked haggard. A lot of passersby quickly recognized her. They snapped unflattering photos and uploaded them online.

Some enraged ones even tried to strike her.

Monica, in a pitiable state, ducked and covered her head. Her heart was bleeding with fury, but she could only scurry away like a rat.

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Back at the Valentine Mansion, the atmosphere was grim. Monica, distraught, threw herself into Yvonne's arms and seethed with resentment, "Mom, Simon is courting a debutante behind my back. He doe

sn't want me anymore! And the old fossils at Skye Gem are dismissing me and siding with Whitney! I won't allow it. The company is mine, help me, please. We can't let Whitney take it back. I can't lose!

With the Valentine Corporation in such disarray, why hasn't Dad come back?"

This was a mystery to Yvonne as well. In times like these, Preston would have sought her out for resources. long ago.

Yvonne's heart was ached with rage as she watched her daughter cry. Her greatest wish was for Monica to marry into one of the top families and trample Whitney from head to toe.

Now, all her dreams were shattered by Whitney.

Whitney received a formal letter from the shareholders of Skye Gem, which was sheepishly inviting her back to take a position at the company. They had witnessed her ability to manage the company and were eager for her to help navigate Skye Gem Ltd. through this crisis.

Curiously, Simon had signed the letter himself.

Simon had called Whitney numerous times, which she, of course, ignored.

He then sent a message, his tone enthusiastic: [Whitney, they sincerely ask you to return back to the position. Honestly, I'm pleased and looking forward to your return too. If you're willing to accept me and don't want to give up on your grandfather's legacy, I'll keep the general manager's position open for you.]

Had he ousted Monica?

Whitney sneered internally. What a heartless man.

She was determined to reclaim Skye Gem and her grandfather's shares, so she coldly typed a reply to Simon: [Of course I'll return. Consider when you'll relinquish your shares!]

Simon paused and frowned, but felt an inexplicable joy within. He realized he still loved Whitney.

Meanwhile, Tiana congratulated her, “Whitney, congrats on getting what you wished for. No wonder you let me trash Skye Gem Ltd. on Twitter. You were pressuring the shareholders into a corner, weren’t you? Clever fox. But the Valentine family’s house is on fire. Why hasn’t Yvonne made a move?”

“She’s at odds with Preston. Over the years, she’s secured a lot of deals for him, which is why she’s stabilized her position as Yvonne. She has some ‘special’ methods to maintain her support.”

Whitney’s eyes narrowed with an amused smile, “We have to weed out. Let’s turn up the heat and force her to show her hand. Once we know her depth, we can uproot her power completely.”

Whitney sent videos of Preston’s illegitimate child and Roselyn’s secret affair with Preston to the Valentine Mansion.

And she didn’t do that anonymously,

When Yvonne saw the videos, she was thunderstruck and almost passing out on the spot.

Monica was shattered, “Mom, Dad has been with Roselyn! He even has a love child on the outside! Whitney, that wretch, she knew all this and she’s doing this to provoke you!”

Yvonne’s face contorted grotesquely.

Preston, the beast, had bedded that lowlife Roselyn. The betrayal made her blood boil.

The revelation of an illegitimate child was the final blow that shattered Yvonne’s world.

But she quickly regained her composure amid her rage. She sent her henchmen to drag Roselyn out from

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wherever she was hiding, beat her senseless, and then forced her to star in a lewd video that she promptly uploaded to the internet for all to see.

She didn't stop there, though.

Just as Preston was about to exploit the chaos at the Valentine Corporation to force Yvonne out and even contemplated banishing the mother-daughter duo to obscurity to make way for his mistress and their love child, he received a call that turned his blood to ice.

His precious son had been kidnapped!

By Yvonne, no less!

And in a twisted act of cruelty, she had chopped off one of the little boy's pinky fingers!

His son was only six, and Preston's face turned ashen with horror. Overcome with fury, he stormed back to the Valentine Mansion and found Yvonne in the living room. He grabbed her throat with a shaking hand and slapped her hard across the face, yelling, "You she-devil, release my boy at once!"

"If you don't let go, I'll cut off his second finger," Yvonne spat back, her eyes boring holes into him with pure hatred.

She was unable to bear a son, and that's what she hated most.

Yvonne was violently thrown to the floor, looking utterly defeated yet laughing maniacally, "Preston, don't think that I can't see right through you. You want to use the turmoil at Valentine Corporation to kick me to the curb and bring back your mistress and your love child? In your dreams!"

All these years, I've been the one pulling in the deals for the Valentine Corporation! Do you have any idea what I've sacrificed for you? And now you think you can just dispose of us when I'm no longer of use to you?"

Her laughter was laced with bitterness, "Did you forget I have an Auntie? My Uncle is on his way. Monica and I won't fall so easily. Better watch yourself and keep your

bastard son out of my sight. And remember, I know the secrets that Whitney's grandfather left behind. Don't forget Whitney has an uncle. You think you can get rid of me?!"

Preston's anger was momentarily replaced by a wave of fear. As he carefully processed his thoughts, his disdain for her momentarily faded.

This woman knew far too much.

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She knew too much, so he couldn't shake her off just yet!

With the Valentine Corporation in peril and Yvonne's uncle, who had invested in the corporation multiple times, he suddenly remembered Yvonne's worth. Preston's face turned thunderous as he tried to help her up.

But Yvonne, filled with resentment, shrugged him off and straightened up, heading upstairs with dignity, "You better remember who can save the Valentine Corporation in its hour of need and be grateful to me!"

Her flawless makeup took years off her face. That night, Yvonne arrived at a five-star hotel and knocked on a door.

The man who opened the door was fat and lavish, in his fifties or sixties. His eyes lit up at the sight of Yvonne, "You've come, my dear niece."

Yvonne pushed away his wandering hands with a playful scold, "Just let me in first, Uncle Kyler. then we can talk."

And "talk" unfolded in its most intimate ways.

This man, Kyler, was an "uncle" Yvonne called in her younger days when she was involved in the entertainment industry. He ran a large company in Emperor City..

But Yvonne's sights were set not on him, but on his wife's illustrious family, the Bartels of Emperor City.

Emperor City was a rich and powerful place that everyone envied. It made her hometown of Banyan City insignificant.

The Bartels were a force to be reckoned with, a true dynasty, and Kyler's wife, whom Yvonne called her Auntie, was just a distant relation of that family.

Over the years, Yvonne had been currying favor and aiming to weasel her way into the Bartels' main family. She proudly claimed to be their niece, and it gave her an edge in society.

"Uncle Kyler, you must help me," Yvonne implored tearfully. "Could you plead with the Bartels on behalf of your poor niece and her daughter?"

After her 'ministrations,' she secured a 500 million dollar investment for the Valentine Corporation.

The next day, Kyler brought astonishing news – he had the Bartels' heiress coming to meet them, who was moved by their plight.

For Yvonne, this was an unprecedented honor.

She had never been able to break into the Bartels' inner circle, let alone meet the renowned Elaine Bartels.

Monica was dumbstruck, "Mom, is that the cousin you've always told me about? The most powerful and noble one?"

Yes, Yvonne had instilled in Monica the drive to cling to power and status. She regarded Elaine Bartels as a high-born cousin, and she was brimming with pride.

Standing at the pristine entrance of the Valentine Mansion, they nervously awaited Elaine.

A Maserati pulled up. Monica thought her cousin had a taste for understatement.

But when the woman stepped out, her presence was anything but understated. Surveying the Valentine Mansion with a glance, she entered with an air of ownership.

Monica was struck by her cousin's beauty, which rivaled that of Whitney, the woman she loathed.

Elaine was so young; her eyes were twinkling with an effortless aristocracy and depth.

Monica's attention, however, was captured by the low-key but exceedingly valuable watch on her cousin's wrist.

1/3

Chapter 69

In the face of such grandeur, the mother and daughter felt utterly inadequate.

The woman sipped her coffee with a discerning eye, seemingly unimpressed.

Kyler, out of nervousness, managed to stutter out, "Elaine Bartels."

"Leave us alone." Elaine commanded.

Kyler hastily complied.

Elaine regarded the mother and daughter with a soft voice, "Uncle Kyler told me that you are some kind of relatives of his. Hearing your predicaments, I'm a bit touched and willing to help. Who are you up against?"

"Whitney," Monica spat with venom.

Elaine's smile held a hint of mischief.

Raising an eyebrow, she blew on her coffee, "Monica, I hear you've been embroiled in a plagiarism scandal. But don't worry, I have the power to bring you back from the brink and ensure you stay in the competition. And this is the condition: follow my instructions to the letter, keep my identity secret, and remember your place. Understood?"

Yvonne and Monica were dumbstruck by the sheer luck. They could hardly contain their excitement.

Monica trembled with the prospect of staying in the competition and of crushing Whitney. That was so great.

Elaine glanced at her, then produced a design draft from her bag, placing it on the table with a chill in her tone, "This is your

comeback design. Learn it well. In two days, you'll draw it live. You're not so foolish as to fail at that, are you?"

"I can," Monica assured her, astonished by the design.
"Cousin Elaine, are you a jewelry designer too? This is even better than Whitney's work."

Elaine smiled with a hint of disdain in her voice, "What is she, after all? With my support, you two just need to be obedient, and Whitney will be vanquished overnight."

Monica felt a chill down her spine as she observed Elaine's beautiful yet intimidating face. This woman's machinations were beyond their wildest imaginations.

Monica shivered as Yvonne enthusiastically invited Elaine to dine, and Monica cordially offered her a tour of the Valentine family's home.

Elaine's interest piqued, "Where is Whitney's bedroom?"

Monica frowned, sensing a cold interest from Elaine. Did she know Whitney too? Did she also have a grudge?

That would be perfect! Monica thought with hatred.

Suddenly, as Elaine passed Monica's bedroom, she caught sight of a striking jade half ring on the wall.

"What's that?" Elaine's expression shifted as she stepped inside.

Monica followed and saw it was a half-ring made of crystal-clear, high-quality jade – an item from the past she had almost forgotten.

"Why on earth is this in your possession?" Her icy eyes were fixed intently on Monica.

Monica shivered under the penetrating gaze of her older cousin. Steadfast in her honesty, she confessed, "This... this belonged to Whitney! I saw her bring it home years ago, and she put it on her desk. I thought it looked really valuable, so I... I took it. Too bad it's only half a ring, otherwise it would've fetched a fortune at the

arity auction!"

The woman's gaze dilated with surprise as she examined the fragmented ring.

Monica, puzzled, stared as her

cousin handled the half-ring with delicate reverence; then with a gentle smile, she said, "I like it, Monica. Would you give it to me?"

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Chapter 60

She was akin to a goddess to Monica and her mother, so her wishes were commands.

Eager to please her, Monica chirped, "Of course! I would give you anything. Mom and I are ever loyal to you."

"Good," Elaine smiled, clutching the half-ring tightly in her palm as if she had just secured the winning hand in a game.

That was perfect.

Beneath the warmth of her smile, a chilling intent surged forth like a wave of ice. She probed, "Whitney knows about medication?"

Monica frowned, her voice turning cold, "Who knows? Her mother always had her shrouded in mystery. But one thing's for sure—she hardly ever got sick!"

Elaine's eyes narrowed as she drew in a breath and descended the staircase.

All the vexations were swept away, except for the enviable shock that the half-ring, the object of her dreams, literally belonged to Whitney.

Ludwik had given it to Whitney. So she was the girl who had occupied the deepest recesses of his heart all these years.

Elaine had never anticipated this. And so, it was clearer that Whitney had to go!

She had been looking for that girl all this long and never knew that the girl was right in front of her eyes.

But now she became the savior. Again, her features relaxed into a radiant smile.

Chapter 70

Whitney never imagined that Yvonne could be cruel enough to sever the finger of a six-year-old child.

Chaos erupted in the Valentine family. Yvonne and Preston had a complete falling out, which was what Whitney desired. However, it was her who leaked video of the love child.

After the child was kidnapped by Yvonne, Whitney had someone notify Violet. Thankfully, the rescue was swift, and the child's finger could still be reattached.

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"Your dad would love to see you six feet under, and here you are, worrying about his love child." Tiana quipped.

"The kid has nothing to do with it; he is only six years old." Whitney replied, her gaze inadvertently dropping to her own belly.

"When are you gonna start showing, Whitney? You're skinny as a rail, still rocking those killer curves. Lucky L's got it good. Hey, did you ever ask him if he's hoping for a boy or a girl?"

Whitney blinked her eyes. They hadn't talked about kids before. Well, they weren't exactly close back then, and now?

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her lip and ready to retort, Whitney was interrupted by Tiana's scrutinizing stare. "Aww, getting all doe-eyed chatting with L? Whitney, ever since you guys came back from that hot spring trip, your relationship's been on the fast track. Did you ever flirt on Facebook like this before? Spill it, did something happen that night...hmm?"

"What are you on about!" Whitney protested at Tiana's insinuating tone.

Come on, it was just a couple of messages.

"You texted him on Facebook, and he replies in a heartbeat. L's a busy man, yet he makes time for you. Sounds like love is in the air," Tiana teased, playing detective.

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Tiana clicked her tongue in disbelief. "Wow, so you turned the fake into real? Who was it that was so adamant about a marriage of convenience? And now, you're getting all lovey-dovey with L."

"It's a trial marriage," Whitney mumbled, her eyes shimmering with a mix of emotions. "It means we're giving it a shot. He wants something stable, and I get that. Business-minded men rarely equate marriage with love. As for my feelings, they're far from love or even like. I need to see if he's really into me, right?"

“L’s the proud type. If he’s flirting with you, it means he’s totally into you. And you? Ha, I can tell you’re halfway into the ‘like’ camp already. Love after marriage, sparks flying—you won’t be able to resist a man like him.”

“What’s there to resist? Sure, he’s got a hot bod, but he’s got scars, too.”

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“No, I only caught a glimpse before he stopped me.”

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Though Whitney knew Tiana was trying to cheer her up, it felt like her friend flipped sides too quickly.

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On the other end was Elaine. Whitney’s surprise was evident in her narrowed eyes and faint smile. “Elaine? To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Well, when Bro saved me that day, I felt the need to express my gratitude. After considering it, I thought it would be best to thank you directly, so I want to gift some baby clothes to you.”

Elaine’s tone was sweet and friendly, pulling their relationship closer while also signaling she wanted to keep her distance from L.

Whitney understood perfectly.

With a slight nod, she agreed to meet. “Sure, where should we meet up?”

“Queen’s Square sound good?” Elaine chirped happily.

After hanging up and sharing the location, Tiana drove them there. Whitney pulled her along, “You’re free anyway, come meet her with me.”

“Who is she?”

Tiana was about to ask again when Elaine walked in. The woman was dressed in a tailored suit that hugged her waist, her long curls cascading down her back. Her face was strikingly beautiful, and she moved with an effortless grace that hinted at her refined upbringing.

Whitney observed quietly as Tiana gawked. This woman was a match for Whitney in terms of beauty.

As Elaine approached with a playful twinkle in her eyes, Whitney introduced her friend. "Elaine, this is Tiana." "Hi, Tiana!"

Tiana waved back with a grin. "Hey there."

"Whitney, I hope you don't mind the intrusion. Thanks for making time today. Let's take a seat and chat," Elaine suggested, her hands holding a tastefully understated custom-made bag.

Whitney noted her watch without a reaction, guessing its price to be in the millions.

As they ordered coffee, Tiana, ever the gossip, asked, "So, Elaine, where are you from? I know Banyan City like the back of my hand, and I've never seen a beauty like you around."

Elaine chuckled. "You flatter me, Tiana. I'm from Emperor City, working at my bro's company, just a hardworking employee."

Whitney's mind raced. Emperor City? Could it be the famous century-old medical dynasty, the Bartels family? Emperor City was a metropolis, and Whitney wasn't familiar with the extravagant families over there. If there was any connection, it would be when she was a child, she heard from the servants that her mother and grandfather also came from Emperor City. Their arrival in Banyan City was quite sudden.

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“These little outfits are all made from the finest natural materials. Your baby can wear them as soon as they arrive, though it’s a bit early. You just focus on a healthy pregnancy, Whitney. Let my bro pamper you until you’re nice and plump for the delivery,” Elaine said with a wink,

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Elaine stood up to fetch the treats, playfully serving them to Whitney and Tiana.

Not an ounce of high-society airs about her.

Tiana blushed, feeling a tad shy from the gesture.

After a bit more chit-chat, Elaine’s phone buzzed with the urgency of business. She stood, flashing an apologetic smile, and warmly shook Whitney’s hand. “Whitney, I’d love for us to be good friends. What do you think? Let’s hang out more, yeah?”

“Absolutely,” Whitney replied, her eyes crinkling in a warm smile.

With a spring in her step, Elaine left, cheerfully disappearing into the elevator.

Whitney watched her go, a thoughtful smile playing on her lips.

Tiana, nibbling on her slice of cheesecake, asked, “Is she a new friend you’ve made? L’s sister, right?”

“What do you make of her?” Whitney inquired.

“She’s bubbly and sweet, downright kind too – didn’t hesitate to help us with the dessert. Not the diva type at all. It’s rare to find someone so down-to-earth,” Tiana chuckled.

Elaine certainly left a good impression on Tiana.

Whitney’s eyes twinkled with mirth. “What if I told you that her watch alone is worth a fortune, and that she’s anything but ordinary? She’s the Vice President of L’s company, a high-flying executive. What would you say to that?”

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Whitney shrugged noncommittally, her eyes narrowing slightly. "I don't start off seeing adversaries in everyone I meet, but I can sense if someone intends to harm."

Time would tell.

What intrigued her now was why Elaine, a wealthy heiress, was working at L's company. How deep did her devotion to her brother run or was L's company that impressive?

Carrying the baby outfits, Whitney headed back to the villa.

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Chapter 71

When Natalie saw that Whitney had returned with a bag of baby outfits, a smile

spread across her face. "Whitney, are you seriously buying clothes for our little peanut already? Look at you, playing mom."

"It's not like that, Mom. This is a gift from Elaine."

Natalie's smile faded a bit as she paused, examining the tiny garment. "Why would she give you baby clothes?" "Out of courtesy, I guess." Whitney, feeling a bit sleepy, wandered into the kitchen for a glass of warm milk. Emerging from the kitchen, Whitney couldn't find Natalie, Taryn or Xandra. While searching for them, she discovered Natalie by the backyard trash can, tossing away the clothes from Elaine.

Shocked, Whitney approached. "Mom, why are you throwing away brand-new clothes?"

Natalie whirled around, startled by the unexpected sound. Recognizing Whitney, she relaxed slightly but remained visibly tense.

Quickly, she offered an explanation with a forced smile. "The fabric... it's not suitable for a newborn. Elaine probably didn't know any better. Don't worry, honey, I've bought plenty of clothes for the baby. Come upstairs and see."

Whitney, sensing Natalie's words were jumbled and her gaze troubled, followed her upstairs but couldn't shake the feeling that something was off.

Why would Natalie discard the gifts upon hearing they were from Elaine? There seemed to be no apparent animosity between them.

Before long, Natalie had to leave for an injection.

Whitney walked back to the trash can, yet Taryn halted her. "Natalie insisted that you shouldn't pick them up." "I wasn't going to. It's just that Mom's been a bit off today."

Taryn

sighed. "The lady once suffered from memory loss. Sometimes, old forgotten matters stir her emotions, leading to unusual behavior. Haven't you noticed how carefree she's been lately? It's because of her forgetfulness."

Taryn

dared not discuss Natalie's condition further. However, Whitney had also observed Natalie's childlike joy, free from the burdens of the past.

Could Natalie's previous aversion to Elaine, now forgotten, be the reason for discarding the clothes? Was there something harmful about them?

Whitney's curiosity about Elaine increased, sensing a subtle complexity.

Later, Taryn brought some baby clothes to Whitney's bedroom, per Natalie's request.

While Whitney sorted through the clothes, Ludwik entered the room, loosening his tie. Witnessing his radiant

wife selecting tiny clothes struck him with unusual warmth, as if they were a real couple.

His usually guarded heart softened, and he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Whitney turned, flustered, tossing aside the clothes.

"Embarrassed to be a mom? You'll have to pick clothes for them eventually."

Ludwik strode over, long-legged, and casually examined a onesie. It looked comically small in his large hand. Imagining their child nestled in his palm, Whitney was struck by how paternal he seemed.

"They're kinda cute," he remarked, "Will the baby be as small as a bean?"

"Of course not! Were you born the size of a bean?" Whitney retorted, having done her reading.

"It depends on you. Eat more," he frowned, assessing her figure critically.

"I'm in great shape, thank you very much."

His eyes swept over her. "For the moment, I'm not worried about the baby's nourishment."

Whitney blushed at his implication, hastily adjusting her cardigan.

Ludwik, unfazed, added, "You can look forward to our child's looks."

Proudly, she hummed, "Of course. The baby's good looks are all thanks to me. Have you seen yourself?"

"How so?" he challenged, stepping closer, his silver mask emphasizing his stunning features.

Whitney pouted. "You're hardly handsome by any standard. The scar won't be hereditary, right?"

Ludwik was at a loss for words.

Was she trying to infuriate him?

His amusement turned into a mock threat as he caressed her chin. "Just wait until the baby is born. If they inherit my looks, they'll be too much for this world."

Whitney rolled her eyes at his vanity. "Right, Mr. L, you're certainly a match for me."

Ludwik couldn't help but laugh, though he feigned annoyance and pinched her cheek, whispering, "Do you even realize who you've married? One day, you wouldn't dare speak so boldly."

Whitney had never met a man so full of himself.

Analyzing him, she ventured, "You're wealthy, but you couldn't possibly be richer than my past self, right?"

Ludwik's chest heaved with laughter.

"I've seen half your face. There's no scarred tycoon like you in Banyan City, so you must be an outsider."

An out...out what?

He kissed her, quipping, "You dare to guess, my lady. Such a sharp tongue needs taming before you start rattling the rooftops."

She protested softly, "You promised to respect me."

He released her, frustrated. "We've started dating, and now you won't even let me kiss you. We're going backwards."

Resting his forehead against hers, he looked undeniably handsome.

What she had said was a lie, even with the scar, he was incredibly attractive.

Her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink, her fingers nervously fumbling with his shirt as she tried to find her footing. She spoke with a mix of determination and reason, "It's precisely because we're dating that we should be guided by our feelings and proper boundaries. If you wish to steal a kiss in the future, then it must be with my wholehearted consent."

"And how do I earn your consent? Strip down?"

Whitney punched him playfully, her small fist as harmless and tickling as a kitten's paw.

Ludwik's eyes narrowed with a mischievous glint as he took her tiny hand and placed it against his chest. "Unbutton my shirt, take a good look at these muscles, and then you might just find yourself wanting that kiss," he teased with a roguish smirk.

"Stop it, will you!" Whitney protested, her cheeks burning even redder as she pushed him away, creating some space between them.

The commotion had left the baby clothes in a disheveled pile on the bed.

Chapter/I

She reached out with embarrassed determination to tidy up, her mind slowly cooling down from the flirtatious heat, remembering there was something she needed to tell him.

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Whitney walked back to the trash can, yet Taryn halted her. "Natalie insisted that you shouldn't pick them up." "I wasn't going to. It's just that Mom's been a bit off today."

Taryn

sighed. "The lady once suffered from memory loss. Sometimes, old forgotten matters stir her emotions, leading to unusual behavior. Haven't you noticed how carefree she's been lately? It's because of her forgetfulness."

Taryn

dared not discuss Natalie's condition further. However, Whitney had also observed Natalie's childlike joy, free from the burdens of the past.

Could Natalie's previous aversion to Elaine, now forgotten, be the reason for discarding the clothes? Was there something harmful about them?

Whitney's curiosity about Elaine increased, sensing a subtle complexity.

Later, Taryn brought some baby clothes to Whitney's bedroom, per Natalie's request.

While Whitney sorted through the clothes, Ludwik entered the room, loosening his tie. Witnessing his radiant

wife selecting tiny clothes struck him with unusual warmth, as if they were a real couple.

His usually guarded heart softened, and he cleared his throat to announce his presence.

Whitney turned, flustered, tossing aside the clothes.

“Embarrassed to be a mom? You’ll have to pick clothes for them eventually.”

Ludwik strode over, long-legged, and casually examined a onesie. It looked comically small in his large hand. Imagining their child nestled in his palm, Whitney was struck by how paternal he seemed.

“They’re kinda cute,” he remarked, “Will the baby be as small as a bean?”

“Of course not! Were you born the size of a bean?” Whitney retorted, having done her reading.

“It depends on you. Eat more,” he frowned, assessing her figure critically.

“I’m in great shape, thank you very much.”

His eyes swept over her. “For the moment, I’m not worried about the baby’s nourishment.”

Whitney blushed at his implication, hastily adjusting her cardigan.

Ludwik, unfazed, added, “You can look forward to our child’s looks.”

Proudly, she hummed, “Of course. The baby’s good looks are all thanks to me. Have you seen yourself?”

“How so?” he challenged, stepping closer, his silver mask emphasizing his stunning features.

Whitney pouted. “You’re hardly handsome by any standard. The scar won’t be hereditary, right?”

Ludwik was at a loss for words.

Was she trying to infuriate him?

His amusement turned into a mock threat as he caressed her chin. "Just wait until the baby is born. If they inherit my looks, they'll be too much for this world."

Whitney rolled her eyes at his vanity. "Right, Mr. L, you're certainly a match for me."

Ludwik couldn't help but laugh, though he feigned annoyance and pinched her cheek, whispering, "Do you even realize who you've married? One day, you wouldn't dare speak so boldly."

Whitney had never met a man so full of himself.

Analyzing him, she ventured, "You're wealthy, but you couldn't possibly be richer than my past self, right?"

Ludwik's chest heaved with laughter.

"I've seen half your face. There's no scarred tycoon like you in Banyan City, so you must be an outsider."

An out...out what?

He kissed her, quipping, "You dare to guess, my lady. Such a sharp tongue needs taming before you start rattling the rooftops."

She protested softly, "You promised to respect me."

He released her, frustrated. "We've started dating, and now you won't even let me kiss you. We're going backwards."

Resting his forehead against hers, he looked undeniably handsome.

What she had said was a lie, even with the scar, he was incredibly attractive.

Her cheeks were flushed a rosy pink, her fingers nervously fumbling with his shirt as she tried to find her footing. She spoke with a mix of determination and reason, "It's precisely because we're dating that we should be guided by our feelings and proper boundaries. If you wish to steal a kiss in the future, then it must be with my wholehearted consent."

“And how do I earn your consent? Strip down?”

Whitney punched him playfully, her small fist as harmless and tickling as a kitten’s paw.

Ludwik’s eyes narrowed with a mischievous glint as he took her tiny hand and placed it against his chest. “Unbutton my shirt, take a good look at these muscles, and then you might just find yourself wanting that kiss,” he teased with a roguish smirk.

“Stop it, will you!” Whitney protested, her cheeks burning even redder as she pushed him away, creating some space between them.

The commotion had left the baby clothes in a disheveled pile on the bed.

Chapter/1

She reached out with embarrassed determination to tidy up, her mind slowly cooling down from the flirtatious heat, remembering there was something she needed to tell him.

The next day, the man told her he had to go on a business trip and warned her to behave herself before he left.

Whitney was speechless.

Today was the day the jewelry competition announced the shortlist for the next round and the day Monica would be officially fired for plagiarism.

The meeting was live-streamed, so the preliminary winners didn’t need to attend.

With a stack of documents in hand, Whitney entered Sky Gem Ltd...

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Returning to this place, she felt a wave of nostalgia as she looked around at the familiar surroundings.

The shareholders who supported her were waiting in the lobby with their top executives, shamefaced yet spontaneously welcoming her back.

Whitney made her way to the 16th floor, stopping before the door to the CEO's office.

Simon emerged from the executive elevator, dressed impeccably with sharp and distinguished features. Catching sight of Whitney, her stunning face calm as still water, dressed in a simple business dress that

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couldn't hide her elegant vitality, he felt a deep pull of attraction.

His voice roughened as he approached her, "Whitney, welcome back!"

Whitney gave him a cool glance and brushed past him.

Simon's mood seemed buoyant, and he didn't mind her coldness. He opened the door to the office for her, inviting her in.

Monica's personal items were still there, untouched.

Whitney surveyed the office with detached interest before settling on the sofa. She briskly opened a meeting with the shareholders, getting a grip on the current state of Sky Gem Ltd.. Narrowing her eyes, she decided her first order of business was to review the company's finances.

The finance director was summoned, sweating at the sight of Whitney's commanding presence.

After a quick review of the financial reports, Whitney's expression turned icy. "Such glaring discrepancies in just two months, sales plummeting. Simon, have you been neglecting your duties, letting Monica run amok?"

The reports were a mess. If Monica's mismanagement continued for another year, Sky Gem Ltd. would be no more.

Whitney's sarcasm made Simon stiffen. He had indeed lost focus on managing the company in the last

quarter.

“What measures did Monica take to address these financial gaps?” Whitney inquired, her brow furrowed as she scanned the other documents. She noticed a sharp decline in sales at retail counters over the past two weeks. The plagiarism scandal only broke the week before. What had happened the week before that?

After some digging, Whitney discovered issues with the jewelry materials in the store! A customer had made a scene over a purchased diamond.

However, Monica had quickly suppressed the news.

Whitney realized what Monica had done to cover the financial shortfall.

She called in the manager responsible for diamond sourcing. The manager was evasive, but Whitney soon learned that Monica had been cutting costs by secretly purchasing substandard stones and mixing them with quality merchandise.

This was tarnishing Sky Gem Ltd.!

“Which jewelry lines were made with these inferior stones?” Whitney demanded.

The manager promptly handed over details of the ‘True Love Collection,’ which had been launched two months before Whitney left the company.

The collection had been the best-selling line at Sky Gem Ltd., making it a prime target for Monica.

Whitney frowned, realizing the extent of the damage might not yet be known. She began to gather and organize information, sensing the need to keep evidence at hand.

Simon returned from HR with Whitney’s new nameplate, eager to please. Handing it to her, he seemed earnest.

Looking at the ‘General Manager’ title on the nameplate, Whitney pondered, her gaze on Simon, who was as fickle as the weather. With a hint of mockery, she said, “You’re sure about handing this back so soon? Monica

hasn't been dethroned yet, and the competition hasn't announced her dismissal. If she makes a comeback, you'll have to make a new nameplate."

Simon's handsome face showed a flicker of embarrassment. A wave of tenderness filled his eyes as he looked at her. "Whitney, whether you believe me or not, I am genuinely happy you're back. I've finally realized that it's you I want to see every day at the company, not Monica. It's a shame I realized it after making so many mistakes. I'll do whatever it takes to win you back."

"Stop right there. My return has nothing to do with you. Well, it actually does, because I'm going to take back

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your shares. You better be prepared."

Whitney's heart was cold as a mountain stream. She looked down at her phone, preparing to join the jewelry competition's live-streamed meeting.

Tiana suddenly sent a trending message to her, her tone laden with urgency: [Whitney, trouble's brewing, you've got to see this video! There's been a twist at the jewelry competition!]

What sort of twist?

Whitney immediately clicked on the video, only to see Monica at the jewelry competition jury panel, sketching a design that was nothing short of breathtaking.

Before Monica stood a bearded foreigner, closely examining her work, his eyes lit with evident admiration.

Monica had been sketching for two hours. Whitney had seen that design before—it was even a notch above her own skill set, clearly not something Monica could have conjured up on her own.

It was the caliber of a top-notch jewelry designer.

Whitney's grip tightened, and she quickly tuned into the live stream of the jewelry competition meeting.

All the judges were in place, except for Ludwik from the Imperial Gem Corporation. Now, occupying the honorary seat beside the chairman, was the bearded foreigner.— Presenting Monica's on-the-spot design, he expressed clear satisfaction and declared, "As a member of the international jury, I just happened to be in the country. To encounter such a talented young designer is a stroke of luck. Regardless of her past plagiarism allegations, her ability to draft a design on the spot has won my approval. Disqualifying a contestant requires a unanimous vote, but I cast a dissenting vote. Talent should not be wasted. I believe Monica deserves another chance!"

Whitney's eyes widened, her almond-shaped pupils turning to ice.

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The judges from Banyan City were a mixed bag, their expressions varying as the drama unfolded on stage.

Everyone knew that, aside from the hosting committee from the Imperial Gem Corporation, there were always important judges from international jewelry associations involved in this sort of provincial jewelry competition.

How on earth did Monica manage to rope in an endorsement from this prestigious international committee?

Some of the local judges, known for their ability to read the room, shifted allegiances, raising their objection alongside the foreign judge.

The rules were clear: expelling Monica required a unanimous vote. Any dissent meant she would remain in the running and advance to the next round,

Simon, too, witnessed the live broadcast, his handsome face stiffening with shock. Monica's miraculous turnaround was the last thing he expected.

Her plagiarism seemed a foregone conclusion, her dismissal a certainty. Suddenly, an unexpected appearance from the normally absent international association threw their support behind Monica.

Even Whitney was blindsided. While she had anticipated some trickery from Yvonne, orchestrating influences with an international judge and presenting such an exquisite design surpassed Yvonne's usual tactics.

What had happened behind the scenes?

Whitney's gaze narrowed, her aura chilling.

Just then, the office door flew open, and in strutted Monica, triumph written all over her face. Catching sight of Whitney and Simon together, a sneer flickered across her features. "Bet you didn't see that coming, Whitney," she taunted. "I've turned the tables just like that!"

"Simon, I bet you're even more surprised," she continued, stepping up to Simon with a mocking smile, her voice dripping with smugness. "You wanted to kick me out, bring Whitney back with all this fanfare? Dream on. The Valentine family hasn't crumbled; neither my mother nor I have. Instead, we've turned misfortune into a blessing. Do you have any idea..."

"Monica," Yvonne interjected, briskly entering the room and cutting off her daughter's careless rant.

She glanced at Whitney, a smirk barely concealed, then turned to Simon with a direct proposition. "Simon, Monica has effortlessly made a comeback. A wise man knows when to make the right decision. Return the General Manager position to Monica, send Whitney packing, and I'll overlook your past indiscretions. Otherwise, Monica will always be out of your league."

Whitney listened intently; her eyes narrowed.

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Simon's face turned ashen. Even if Monica had somehow turned the situation around, her reputation was tarnished, and it would not be easy to clear her name.

He dismissed her coldly, "Monica, why don't you head home and rest? You've turned Skye Gem Ltd. into a disaster. Whitney is here to help the company,"

"Help? You just want to fool around with her. You'll regret this!" Monica hadn't expected Simon to resist her and stormed out angrily.

Simon called for security to escort the duo out.

When he returned, Whitney was already gone.

Whitney entered Tiana's car downstairs, where Tiana, appearing concerned, was scrolling through the trending topics on social media.

"Despite the netizens slamming Monica for possibly memorizing her sketch and buying a master's piece, that

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design, Whitney, it's beyond her means! How did she get her hands on such a high-end work? Not only has that little cheat risen from the ashes, but there's some thing very odd about the whole thing. They acted so quickly—who's got that much clout?"

You've hit the nail on the head that piece of artwork matches the caliber of a top-tier jewelry designer. As far as I know, Yvonne used to sleep with a few wealthy businessmen to get some investment funds. We need to dig into who's backing her." Whitney said, her memory drifting to Yvonne's arrogant tone upstairs. "Check who Yvonne's been cozying up to these last few days."

Tiana nodded vigorously, "And that international judge—who just happened to be in the country in time to witness Monica's sketching prowess?"

Whoever it was, with the ability to influence an international judge, was not to be underestimated.

Whitney frowned, quickly checking the international jewelry association's records. A thought struck her. "Wasn't Valerie studying abroad in Maelstrom Country?"

Tiana's eyes lit up. "Right! Let's get her to look into that judge."

"Whitney, Mr. Lippert didn't attend today's meeting; he's probably unaware of the competition scandal. If you were to appeal to him, could he be persuaded to kick Monica out for good?"

Whitney contemplated, "I'm not well-acquainted with him, and the international committee has significant influence in the competition, on par with Imperial Gem. It wouldn't be easy to ask him to overstep the rules, especially since it's just one event. A global company like his wouldn't necessarily be concerned with such details."

"But Monica's like a thorn in our side, resurrecting just when we thought she was done for. Her work today had some serious backing."

"That's why we need to expose who's behind her," Whitney said, her eyes hardening.

Concerned for Whitney's well-being, particularly given the downfall of the Valentine family – a moment Whitney had long anticipated – Tiana offered a heartfelt apology. "I'm sorry, love, but I won't be able to join you tonight. Gunner's grandmother, Claire, is celebrating her eightieth birthday tomorrow, and I need to go help out."

The Lutz family, one of the four magnates, would undoubtedly host a grand celebration for Claire's milestone birthday.

Whitney patted Tiana's head with a smile, "I'm fine, I won't be easily taken down. By the way, I've got some data to leave on your computer."

Tiana, unsure of what it was, took the flash drive and departed.

Alone with her thoughts, Whitney pondered who Yvonne had turned to for help.

Arriving home to an empty house, with L away on business, she found herself unexpectedly longing for his presence, despite the chill he brought to the house.

Gathering courage, she decided to initiate a video call with him.

He picked up the call, and Whitney came into view. She looked freshly bathed and radiant, with a natural glow on her cheeks. She was modestly dressed in a cotton nightgown that hinted at the delicate beauty of her collarbone.

The man's eyes froze, his expression suddenly rigid. He was in the middle of a meeting, for crying out loud. What was she playing at? Did she have no self-control, to be flirting with him right now?

Taking a deep breath, he snapped his phone shut with a loud click.

Whitney was puzzled.

L sent Whitney a message: [I'm in a meeting, with a bunch of execs. Who are you trying to impress with that disheveled look?]

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Whitney replied: [...]

How was she to know he'd be so swamped? The man was a workaholic.

L sent another message: [Send me a picture.]

Whitney: [Why?]

L: [I didn't get a good look before.]

"Creep," Whitney murmured to herself, her cheeks flushed a rosy crimson as she glanced down at herself. She was dressed quite appropriately.

Not sure what he wanted to see, Whitney decided to ignore his request: [Where are you on business?]

L: [Elate City.]

[When are you coming back?]

L: [In a couple of days. Miss me already, my dear?]

Whitney

curled her lip, the urge to confide in him about the things weighing on her heart growing stronger. She was really falling for him, wasn't she?

With a smirk, she replied: [Not at all, Mr. L. You focus on your meeting. And remember to eat, okay?]

L: [Make sure our kid is tucked in early. And don't you dare get cozy with your ex while I'm gone. If I catch you, you're dead.]

Whitney was at a loss for words.

However, with his little distraction, Whitney found her mood lightening, and she eventually drifted off to sleep

in a daze.

Ludwik did not receive another message from his lady. Glancing repeatedly at his phone was an unusual behavior during his typically stern meetings. The other executives were nearly slack-jawed with surprise.

Ludwik's deep and serious gaze lifted, "Hmm?"

The manager who had been speaking immediately continued his presentation with renewed vigor!

Ludwik reined in his wandering thoughts. The kitten must be asleep by now.

The man, expressionless, lit a cigarette, casting an imperious look over those gathered. He furrowed his brow and inquired, "Where's Elaine?"

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The Elate City project was of utmost importance, involving the participation of all senior executives. Ludwik had a reputation as a relentless taskmaster.

Without delay, the executives responded, "Mr. Lippert, Elaine has messaged about a flight delay and sends her deepest apologies."

The man's face was a mask of icy disapproval. "Tell her to get here as fast as she can!"

At that moment, in Banyan City at the Valentine Mansion.

Yvonne and Monica stood awkwardly before the couch, where Elaine unveiled a 28-carat diamond as large as a pigeon's egg and glanced at it with a sly smile before handing it to Monica.

"What's this about?"

Elaine stood up, her eyes harboring a chill in the night. Smirking, she remarked, "Claire from the Lutz family is celebrating her 80th birthday tomorrow. I've heard that her husband, Hunter Lutz, has gone out of his way to buy a huge diamond from the Skye Gem Ltd. boutique to please her. You're going to replace it with this one. Aren't you furious about Whitney snatching back the General Manager position from you?"

Monica pondered for a moment, then her eyes lit up with understanding. She knew exactly what the diamond Elaine handed her was.

She looked at Elaine in shock.

She hadn't expected Elaine to have such a clear grasp of Skye Gem Ltd.'s internal affairs, even the fact that Monica had been secretly buying subpar gems to pass off as quality merchandise.

Elaine had only shown up a couple of days ago, but Monica felt as though she had been preparing for a long time. Elaine appeared well-acquainted with all matters related to Whitney, possessing an intimate knowledge of every detail.

This terrifying capacity for strategy sent shivers down Monica's spine.

She was now almost certain—Elaine seemed to hold a personal grudge against Whitney?

Trembling with excitement, Monica hurried off to set her plan in motion.

Tomorrow promised to be quite the spectacle!

The following afternoon, Whitney headed to Skye Gem Ltd. to start an investigation into the diamond supplies.

She sent for Monica, the instigator, to come to her.

Yet Monica was nowhere to be found.

Whitney instructed the materials manager to take her to the company's storeroom to personally inspect a batch of diamonds for authenticity.

As she stepped into the storeroom/before she could even flick on the light, the door suddenly slammed shut behind her.

Whitney's brow furrowed, her bright eyes flashed with alarm, and she immediately sensed something was amiss. Despite her efforts, she couldn't open the door.

After a tense half hour, the door suddenly burst open from the outside.

As Whitney looked up, a squad of police officers rushed in. They glanced at her, then at the cabinet of diamond materials she was standing in front of, and immediately cuffed her wrists. "Are you Whitney? Take her away!"

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"What's going on? Whitney asked, confused and apprehensive.

The officer looked at her coldly. "During Claire Lutz's grand 80th birthday celebration, the globally limited 'True Love Collection' 28-carat diamond purchased from your company's boutique was found to be a counterfeit! Now, an inspection by the trade department found over half of the jewelry from the Skye Gem Ltd. boutique to be fake. As the General Manager and designer at Skye Gem Ltd, you've been implicated in dealing with counterfeit materials—a serious criminal offense under commercial law. You're coming with us to the station "What?" Whitney was incredulous.

Simon, who had rushed over after hearing the news, went pale and said, "Claire's diamond was bought from our company, and it was revealed to be a fake at the luncheon. The scandal has rocked Banyan City. Claire was so upset she had a heart attack on the spot, and the Lutz family is furious. Two hours ago, the trade department's inspectors found a mass of fakes in our boutique, and it's already hit the news. Whitney..."

“That was Monica who bought the subpar materials,” Whitney’s eyes narrowed, guessing this was a setup by Monica. “Officer, I left Skye Gem Ltd. two months ago. I designed ‘True Love Collection’ but had no hand in production—that was Monica’s responsibility. Please investigate thoroughly!”

The officer seemed to have anticipated her defense. “Whitney, there’s no need for excuses. Monica has already provided evidence of your collusion with a subpar gem supplier, involving kickbacks amounting to millions. And this manager from your company also claimed you entered the storeroom to destroy evidence. Come with us, now!”

Whitney turned to look at the materials manager, who was visibly evasive.

Her face turned ashen. This matter involved the Lutz family—one of the city’s magnates—and was no small affair.

Panicking, she immediately reached for her phone to call L. He had told her to contact him if anything happened, and though unsure if he could help, he was the first person she thought of.

Back in Elate City.

Elaine strode into the office in a professional dress. “Where’s Mr. Lippert?”

The office was deserted.

The assistant spoke gravely, “The Sea Bay project has run into trouble due to a typhoon. Mr. Lippert left to deal with it just a moment ago.”

At that instant, Ludwik’s personal phone rang on the desk. Elaine narrowed her eyes at the caller ID—Whitney.

The assistant reached for the phone, intending to deliver it to Ludwik.

But Elaine interjected, “Give it to me; I’ll take it to Mr. Lippert.”

“But it’s Mr. Lippert’s personal phone.”

“You know who I am? I’m heading to the project site now. What’s there to worry about?” Elaine said with a gentle, reassuring smile.

The assistant's face flushed with embarrassment. Elaine was the vice president of Imperial Gem Corporation, a company that not only sold jewelry but also owned countless subsidiaries. Her status was unparalleled; she was a socialite and even addressed Mr. Lippert by his first name, Ludwik.

Reluctantly, the assistant handed her the phone.

Elaine took it and left the office, deliberately slowing her pace on the ten-minute walk to the project site.

Whitney's frantic calls came through twice, and Elaine watched the phone ring without answering, letting it go to voicemail.

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The corners of Elaine's mouth curved in a deep, knowing smirk.

Back at the storeroom, Whitney frowned, baffled as to why L wouldn't answer the phone. Desperate, she could only assume he was busy with something critical.

Immediately, she rang Tiana, but before she could utter a word, a cop snatched the phone right out of her hand.

She was herded into the squad car, and Simon hurried over.

Squinting against the sun, Whitney whispered urgently to him, "The Lutzes are livid. Can you get Tiana to vouch for me, see if it'll make any difference? And find her, quick. I've got something at her place that could clear my name. Tell her to bring it to the station."

Simon frowned, nodding with grave determination.

He was clueless about Monica's shoddy gemstone dealings, totally in the dark about the fake diamonds hitting the market—diamonds that Hunter had unluckily snagged a whopper of a dud!

Damn it all!

Simon realized belatedly that Monica had been framing Whitney with evidence from the beginning. He dialed Monica right away.

But Monica was playing Houdini, dodging his calls.

At the station.

Whitney was marched into an interrogation room. The harsh white light overhead blanched her face, draining it

of color.

Her mind was buzzing, trying to connect the dots at lightning speed. It was crystal clear—Monica was pinning her as the fall guy.

With a resounding thud, an interrogator slammed a pile of documents onto the table in front of her.

In a stern and solemn tone, he spoke, “So, Carter, the supplier of those knock-off diamonds you’ve been taking kickbacks from, has confessed. According to him, you not only provided subpar raw materials to Skye Gem Ltd., embezzling over twenty million, but you also peddled his shoddy diamonds to other jewelers, sparking a nasty turf war in the biz. Your profit from this collaboration exceeded sixty million, with a seventy-thirty split between you two. Is this true?”

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“No way,” Whitney vehemently denied with a furrowed brow, her voice laced with agitation, “I haven’t done anything illegal. It was Monica who brought in counterfeit gems, and I’m in the middle of investigating it. I have proof that Monica purchased fake materials. I’m requesting a lawyer to defend me, and my people will bring the evidence to the station any minute now”

That day, she had wisely secured an ace up her sleeve.

Despite her lips turning ashen, Whitney maintained an eerie calm,

The interrogator's brow furrowed deeply. "You can't request a lawyer. Given the severity of the case, Hunter's already filed an appeal against you in a fit of rage."

Her eyebrows knotted even tighter. "Then please, just wait. The evidence will be here shortly!"

The detective's voice was icy, "We can only delay the interrogation for four hours. After that, we have no choice but to process you into the detention center."

Tiana would surely rush to her rescue.

And what about L?

He must have heard by now. He would come for her, wouldn't he?

Whitney wrung her hands, feeling a sense of helplessness. It was her first time in a police station, and despite her composure, the magnitude of the case was beginning to unsettle her.

Monica relished her hiding, smug in the chaos.

When Elaine called, her voice carried a chill despite her soft laughter. "Feeling comfortable now? You fool. Whitney is waiting for Tiana to save her. Did you not know that the evidence against you is in Tiana's hands? Remember your dear friend Stella? It's high time her affair with Gunner made some waves. Tiana is Whitney's close confidante, a glaring annoyance, isn't she? Use this opportunity to cripple her and sour her bond with Whitney. Got it?"

Monica's brain struggled to keep up.

How did Elaine know everything? It was unnerving.

A shiver ran down Monica's spine as Elaine's reminder sank in. Had Whitney cunningly left evidence behind?

Monica had long resented Tiana's assistance to Whitney.

"Of course, I'll take care of it."

“And,” Elaine added, her tone still light but with an edge, “imagine Whitney’s desperation, locked up for the night. Wouldn’t you relish her suffering? A little scuffle in the detention center is par for the course. You could even arrange for someone to keep her company. A miscarriage, a severe injury—it would all be an unfortunate accident, understand?”

Monica felt a shiver down her spine at Elaine’s veiled threat.

She nodded briskly, “I understand.”

Elaine ended the call with a swift click.

Monica hastily dialed Stella, then turned to Yvonne with a sigh of awe. “Mom, Elaine’s moves are brutal, way out of our league. In the past, when we tried to mess with Whitney, we couldn’t even breach the gates of the Lutz family. However, Elaine enters the scene at Claire’s level, and it’s like she’s playing chess with the elites. She’s got the whole game in her hands, and she’ll crush Whitney sooner or later, ha—ha. But why does she hate Whitney so much? She wants her to miscarry in jail! Did you hear that? She’s more vicious than us.”

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Yvonne simply smiled. “Didn’t I tell you that Elaine has always been close to Mr. Lippert in the Lippert family? Last time, it was Mr. Lippert who saved Whitney.”

“Right,” Monica exclaimed in realization. “Mom, you knew all along. We’re simply riding on the coattails of the powerful, reaping the benefits.”

“Whitney has met her match this time,” Yvonne remarked with a cold laugh.

Simon couldn’t find Monica.

His only option was to rush to the Lutz family estate to seek out Tiana.

Though his family was one of the four magnates, Simon, as an illegitimate son, held a lower status within the tight—

knit circle of the elite. At the Lutz estate, his word carried little weight; he even had to wait half an hour before being admitted.

With a thunderous expression, Simon entered the grand Lutz Mansion, a sprawling edifice of wealth. He finally made contact with Tiana.

Tiana, caught up in the grand celebration of Claire's milestone birthday, was unaware of the midday fiasco that had unfolded.

Claire had been rushed to the hospital, and Tiana had been by her side the entire time, oblivious to the news that the cursed diamond had originated from Whitney's company. It wasn't until Simon's call that her mind went blank with shock.

She responded with urgency, "Whitney had given me a USB drive out of the blue that day. Is that where Monica's evidence is? I encrypted it. I'll go home and get it."

As she returned to the Lutz Mansion, the aristocratic relatives were still reveling in a ball. She couldn't find Gunner; that scoundrel had shown up at noon only to rush off hurriedly after a phone call. His recent behavior was increasingly off, his attention waning, and even the engagement party following his proposal was indefinitely postponed.

Tiana grabbed her purse to leave the ball when a maid approached. "Miss Tiana, the young master Gunner has returned. He's asking for you."

Gunner had come back?

Worried about Whitney in the police station but also concerned about her elusive fiancé, Tiana thought a brief detour wouldn't hurt. She followed the maid.

However, the maid led her into a secluded courtyard of the mansion, pointing to a door. "The young master Gunner is in there."

The Lutz estate was grand and lavishly decorated, but this courtyard was not Gunner's usual abode. With a sense of foreboding, Tiana approached the door. Just as she reached to open it, the unmistakable sound of an intimate encounter spilled through the cracks. As the door swung open, a trail of trousers and undergarments littered the floor, and Tiana's eyes met the grappling figures on the bed.

Her heart felt as if it had been pierced by a slow-moving sword, and a wave of ice-cold realization washed over her.

Retreating two steps in shock, Tiana clenched her teeth and charged forward, her cry slicing through the air, "Gunner? Stella? You filthy traitors..."

Gunner's panic was palpable, and as he saw Tiana's eyes brimming with red, a twinge of pain flashed through his heart.

Tiana, let me explain..."

"Get away from me! Stella, how low can you stoop? Sabotaging Whitney wasn't enough, so you are sleeping

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with my fiancé now? I'll slap some sense into you!" Tiana's fury knew no bounds as she lunged at Stella on the bed, the betrayal igniting a wildfire within her.

Stella was the picture of serenity, even managing to curve her lips into a sly, seductive smirk. "For the past two months, I've been sleeping with your fiancé, darling. How does that make you feel? Oh, and let me spill the beans—Whitney stumbled upon your fiancé and me getting cozy a month ago. Did she keep it a secret from you? Oh, sweet Tiana, you're so pitiable. The whole world knows about my affair with your man, and you're the last to find out, left in the dark. You treat Whitney like your BFF, always being there for her, but her? She didn't want to complicate things, leaving you in the dark and looking foolish."

Tiana's complexion turned ashen; her body felt ice-cold. "Whitney knows? No, she wouldn't deceive me."

"It's gullible souls like you that get played," Stella chuckled, slipping into her clothes with a deliberate slowness. She glanced at the silent Gunner, batting her eyelashes coyly. "Mr. Lutz, remember our little agreement?"

Gunner's expression tensed as he gave Tiana a weighty look.

Overwhelmed and heartbroken, Tiana's youthful face was a canvas of raw emotion.

With a fierce glint in her eyes and a tilt of her chin, Stella snapped her fingers, and three men barged through

the door.

"You..." Tiana's head whipped around as she sensed something amiss. She stood up abruptly, but the three men were quick to restrain her, tying her up as she struggled furiously. Her eyes sought out Gunner, who seemed to be looking for an escape. "Gunner, are you even human? You cheat on me, and now you've set these goons on me? What are you trying to do?"