

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 111-130

Chapter 111

I swear, maybe I was not clear enough, but Whitney, why the backstabbing?" Elaine frowned innocently.

Whitney shot her a frosty look, eyeing the real backstabber. At the café earlier, she had not realized Elaine was playing the long game, so she had not recorded anything. Now, she was left empty handed.

Elaine's eyes brimmed with mist, bitterness lacing her gaze as she looked at Ludwik. "The Lotus Clubhouse, I genuinely heard it was a great place to eat. If Bro thinks I had ulterior motives, then I've got nothing more to say"

You're so innocent. Your tweets must be, too," Whitney scoffed as she opened Twitter, finding only a few sparse posts from Elaine – the incriminating one already deleted.

Whitney's lips curled into a cold smile. "Slyly provoking me and then hastily deleting the evidence. But you know, the picture you took was quite atmospheric. Surely you won't mind if I show L."

Tiana had sent the picture to her.

Whitney handed her phone to the man.

He took it and glanced at the selfie where Elaine was snuggled up close to him. It could be misinterpreted. But Nolan and Parker were also in the frame.

Ludwik gave Whitney a look that said she was overreacting.

Just then, Elaine caught Ludwik's expression and immediately covered her eyes, starting to sob pitifully. "Whitney, when you're out to get someone, any excuse will do. Don't I even have the freedom to tweet about work anymore? Yes, I deleted it. I'd had a drink that day, was not thinking straight, and then I worried you'd see Bro at the bar and get the wrong idea about him. I'm so considerate towards you, yet why do you always target

me?"

She

played the part of a saint perfectly, her tone a mixture of innocence and vulnerability, almost pitiable.

Whitney's smirk froze over.

The doctor, unaware of the full situation and seeing Elaine's 'bullied' demeanor paired with Whitney's more dominant presence, guessed what was happening and could not help but feel for the beautiful but seemingly wronged woman. "I've come to update you on Natalie's condition. Thanks to Elaine's timely acupuncture, her epilepsy has improved significantly, and she's resting in the neurology department."

Whitney's eyes flashed dangerously.

Elaine looked at her, the triumph in the depths of her eyes unmistakable.

Whitney knew that look all too well; Monica had worn it often.

It had been Whitney who had given Natalie the acupuncture treatment yesterday.

Yet today, Elaine was being lauded for it, having already informed the doctor, while Natalie's memory was too muddled to remember.

Elaine was adept at reaping where she had not sown, clearly having come prepared for this very moment.

Suddenly, Whitney's gaze shifted.

True to form, Elaine turned her doe eyes on the man, deftly avoiding the topic of Whitney's accusations. With feigned concern, she said, "Bro, I only brought your mother for a check-up to ease your mind because you were injured. I did not want her to worry, so I kept her from your room. It's just a coincidence that I walked in on Whitney's misunderstanding. I'll get out of your hair and leave..."

Her eyes shone with unshed tears as she walked away, looking forlorn.

Ludwik rubbed his temples and frowned slightly at Whitney, not uttering a word.

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While Whitney had been busy trying to expose Elaine, Elaine had been caring for his mother. In fact, the servants had reported that Elaine had rushed to the villa overnight.

She had cured his mother's epilepsy with acupuncture.

Despite

Whitney's suspicions, Ludwik had no reason to doubt Elaine, who had always shown nothing but dedication to him and his family. On the other hand, Whitney seemed to be throwing yet another tantrum.

He said softly. "You're too prejudiced against Elaine. She might be a bit scheming, but she would not dare cross you. She knows how I handle things like that. Let's not let her come between us, okay?"

Whitney looked at him, speechless. She had saved Natalie, but now, in the man's eyes, Elaine was the hero.

Clenching her fist, Whitney realized Elaine had come far too prepared.

Their silent gaze lingered until Whitney muttered, "I need some air."

Ludwik's frown deepened, and he instructed Felix, "Make sure the bodyguards follow her."

In the car outside the hospital, Elaine chuckled maliciously, almost savoring Whitney's name, wishing she could tear her apart.

She had almost predicted every word Whitney would say to Ludwik. Knowing they had reconciled and anticipating Whitney's influence, Elaine had spent the previous night scheming ways to dispel Ludwik's doubts. Using Natalie to her advantage. It had worked—any suspicions had been quashed.

But Whitney's medical skills were undeniable. Elaine wondered why Whitney had not clarified that she was the one who had saved Natalie. Did Ludwik not know Whitney was skilled in medicine?

If he did not, that was all the better. Elaine pulled a half-ring from her bag, her trump card for when the time

was right.

But that time had not come just yet.

Whitney met up with Tiana at a coffee shop near the hospital.

"I can't dig up dirt on the banquet that fast," Tiana teased as she walked in with her laptop, only to find Whitney

looking pale as a ghost. She sat down immediately. "What's wrong? Weren't you and L cozying up in the hospital?"

Whitney let out a humorless chuckle at Tiana's ribbing, her smile faint. She quickly spilled the morning's

events.

Tiana clenched her fists after hearing it all. "Damn it, I've always said these stealthy types are the worst. She's been silently competing with you, and now she's showing her claws this viciously? A wolf in sheep's clothing, and L... He's just as bad, falling for her act time and again. Can't he see she's out to get you?"

Whitney shook her head, her thoughts a whirlwind of emotions as she squinted, a cool edge to her voice. "I rushed things today. I confronted Elaine without any solid proof, just empty words relying on what I thought knew about her after all these years/Then she goes and tugs at his heartstrings by playing the devoted caretaker to Natalie. My suspicions seemed like wild guesses to L—he did not buy it. He thinks I'm just being petty and jealous."

"Yeah, well, it's a classic tale, right? Some guys just can't spot a wolf in sheep's clothing." Tiana spat disdainfully

Whitney's gaze deepened. "But it's not all a loss. Today made one thing crystal clear: that woman's tricks are anything but amateur. She's a master at this game."

Elaine was a pro at playing the good Samaritan, always retreating in such a way that allowed her to advance, solidifying deep trust with L through her silent sacrifices and tender image.

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In such a situation, Elaine's every sneaky move against Whitney could lead to Whitney being labeled as irrational and hysterical if she did not handle things carefully.

The suppliers and the time L stumbled upon her working with Bryce were all Elaine's doing, all serving to paint Whitney as the one in the wrong.

The more Whitney analyzed, the narrower her eyes became.

Elaine had come prepared while she had been caught off guard.

After a couple of such surprises, Whitney started to see the pattern. "I know her tactics now. Moreover, I suspect she's been watching me for a long time. Back when L and I had our sham marriage, Elaine appeared on my radar at Alpine Springs Resort. She crafted this image of being our matchmaker, ensuring he trusted her from the get-go. She's calculated every move, playing the innocent while sowing seeds of discord and setting traps for me."

Tiana listened, her heart pounding with fear. "This is like some kind of extreme martyr complex."

A chill flickered through Whitney's gaze. "Now that I see through her charade, I won't be defeated again because of lack of evidence. Guys like L, who are high on the ladder and value reason, only believe in hard proof. So that's what I'll give him. I'll find the evidence, and the facts will leave him speechless."

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"Yep!" Tiana watched Whitney quickly regain her composure, returning to the familiar friend she knew and loved. "You think Elaine put Hannah up to framing you at the party? Let's dig up some proof."

"There's more to it," Whitney mused, sensing that Elaine's preparedness meant her hostility ran deeper than it seemed. She was certain Elaine had designs on L, a possessive desire to steal him away.

"Oh, right, let me just butt in for a second." Tiana, beaming, booted up her laptop. "Haven't you been waiting for Valerie's investigation? About how Monica got propped up by foreign Judges, and who's the bigwig backing her? Valerie got in touch with me today. Just hang on..."

Tiana immediately connected with Valerie, who was halfway across the world.

Whitney frowned slightly, a thought from Tiana earlier that morning echoing in her head, "You've been like a trouble magnet lately!"

Monica's miraculous comeback in the competition, followed by the scheme framing her for buying fake gemstones and landing her in jail, seemed unrelated to her recent entanglements with L

But were they truly unrelated?

A bold idea sprouted in Whitney's mind—if the person behind Monica was...

At that moment, the call connected, and Valerie's voice came through. She was the epitome of sophistication, and even after a long absence, there was no excitement in her greeting, just a slight smile and pressed lips. "Whitney, long time no see."

Among the three, Tiana was bubbly, Whitney mischievous, but Valerie was always the grounded one, like a glass of clear water with a few floating leaves—understated at first glance but with a lingering, mellow taste. If Whitney's edge lay beneath the surface, Valerie's was right out in the open.

Among the three of them, Valerie contacted the least, having been abroad for studies and only briefly reuniting with them when she returned home.

But that was how their friendship was—Stella, despite being in constant touch, turned out to be nothing more than a fair-weather friend.

"How's the investigation into the judges going, Valerie?" Tiana asked eagerly.

"There was definitely someone pulling strings to get those foreign judges to boost Monica, Valerie said, taking a sip of water. A hint of amusement crossed her face.

"Can you find out who it was?" Whitney pressed, certain that this person was either Monica's backer or closely connected to them.

Doubt flickered in Valerie's eyes, and she gave a thin smile. "It's my husband, Ashton Fuller."

"What?"

“Valerie, you’re married?” Whitney and Tiana gaped in unison.

A bittersweet smile crossed Valerie’s lean face. “Sorry, it’s hardly what you’d call a marriage. I did not see the point in bringing it up.”

“Ashton, isn’t he the man you’ve always loved?” Despite Valerie’s private nature, Whitney remembered bits and pieces. “When did you marry him?”

“A year ago.”

Tiana was stunned. “Girl, how much have you kept from us while studying abroad? That’s not cool. But Ashton—he’s the Fuller family’s eldest son, right? Why would he help that bitch Monica ...”

Whitney was just as puzzled, but a very elegant male hand appeared on Valerie’s screen before they could inquire further.

The man roughly pulled Valerie up, and the laptop fell to the floor, cutting to black

“Valerie? Was that handsome hand Ashton’s, Banyan City’s second-most handsome man after Mr. Lippert?”

Whitney stared at the black screen, deep in thought.

On the other side of the ocean, in the middle of the night, Valerie was lifted effortlessly. She was slender, with a model’s physique: delicate in front, striking curves behind, and legs that were a sight to behold.

Ashton’s eyes were bloodshot with drink. He was tall and imposing, with sharp features and a cropped haircut that accented his chiseled bone structure.

He tossed Valerie onto the bed without a hint of tenderness and collapsed on top of her.

He kissed her fiercely, murmuring another woman’s name in his fervor.

Valerie’s eyes, which had been distant, suddenly froze with pain, a pain that felt like a knife twisting in her heart. This agony had never stopped torturing her.

And so, tired of the torment, she grabbed his sturdy neck, her face cold with rage. "Open your eyes, Ashton! I'm not her, not your first love. If you're drunk, go find a hooker. You've got plenty of lovers, don't you?"

Ashton sobered slightly, his gaze filled with deep loathing as he saw her cool, detached expression.

He sneered. "Valerie, you've been whispering poison in Dad's ear, saying I've neglected you since our wedding a year ago. Aren't you just lonely and desperate? Forced by him to come here for a honeymoon, I ignore you, so you start digging into that judge's affair, trying to get my attention at all costs. Now that I'm giving you what you want, you're not happy? It's been a year since you crawled into my bed—are you that thirsty?"

His insults cut through her like a cold wind.

Valerie's heart was as cold as her radiant, forced smile. She wrapped her arms around his neck. "You're overthinking. I just don't want to catch anything."

"You think you're so clean? I despise women like you. If it weren't for her needing a liver transplant urgently, do you think I would've married you under duress? You're just like your mother, all high and mighty on the outside but a whore on the inside. I hate being threatened. Just wait and see how miserable I'll make this marriage for you!"

Indeed, it had been a mere year, but she had gone from a foolish hope that he might fall in love with her to experiencing a living hell.

Initially, she had manipulated the situation, forcing him away from his first love. No, that was not true. Valerie scoffed bitterly, enduring the pain as she glared at him,

"Ashton, don't act like I stole your love. Her heart was never with you; she was sweet on another man, and oh, that man happens to be your best friend. In the end, you're just a pitiable man."

A sharp slap across her face silenced her for good.

Ashton's eyes reddened, the emotion lingering until the very end.

He roughly pulled out a cigarette, lighting it up as he coldly pinched her pale chin, examining her face with a mocking sneer. "You're nothing like her."

Valerie shut her eyes, her lashes quivering. He always knew how to wound her with his icy words.

"Don't you dare go running to Dad, he warned, his voice dripping with disgust as he started to dress. "The very thought of touching you makes my skin crawl!"

Wrapped in a blanket that only highlighted the patches of red on her skin, Valerie was an irritating sight to him, yet she defiantly lifted her chin, biting back, "Make your skin crawl? Yet you can't seem to stay away, can you? Hypocrite and shameless—that's what you are, Ashton Fuller!"

Ashton glared at her coldly, his departure punctuated by the slamming door and a phone call. "Get the private jet ready. I can't stand another second around this woman,"

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19:03

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Well, if he was disgusted, she would make sure to repulse him further.

Valerie booked her own flight home immediately. She was curious how Ashton would orchestrate the overseas judges to boost Monica.

Whose side was he really on?

Only one person could manipulate Ashton into unconditional aid – the woman he loved.

Besides, Tiana had contacted her not long ago, and Valerie learned about the major crisis Whitney had been through in the past months. She had to return and check on her friend.

Whitney and Tiana had been waiting at the café for an hour when Valerie finally came back online.

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But this time, she did not show her face.

She simply shared some exciting news: she was about to return from abroad and wanted them to prepare for her arrival.

For Whitney and Tiana, this was undoubtedly great news! They would definitely grill Valerie about her love life once she was back.

Moreover, Whitney had a hunch that the mysterious benefactor backing Monica would be revealed with Valerie's return.

Whitney stood up to settle the bill, but Tiana stopped her with a frown, reminding her, "Do you realize Monica is staying at this hospital? Didn't she suffer a broken rib recently? It hasn't quite healed yet. Elaine and Monica are out to get you, and you need to be careful not to let Monica cause you trouble."

Tiana had a feeling that many bad things were happening to Whitney lately, so she reminded her.

Yet a thought flashed across Whitney's mind, connecting her earlier suspicion s..

Monica, Elaine...

Her eyes darkened. What if Monica's benefactor was Elaine?

The thought sent shivers down her spine.

"I got it." Whitney said, calming her thoughts and waving her hand dismissively.

But no sooner had she stepped out of the café than a few police officers blocked her way.

They spoke to her in a negotiating tone, "Ms. Valentine, your husband disagrees with using you as bait to lure the criminal, but we still need your assistance ...

He is hospitalized, and the criminal is lurking nearby. He's skilled in martial arts, so he's quite dangerous. I suggest we take the offensive instead of you being on constant guard. Don't worry. We'll ensure your safety and that of your un

born child. You just need to make an appearance, and we'll have officers everywhere..."

"No, Ms. Valentine!" The bodyguard who accompanied Whitney immediately rushed over to stop them.

Whitney looked at the police, then at her bodyguard, her eyes reflecting deep thought.

She was pregnant, and under normal circumstances, she certainly would not take risks.

But the fact that the criminal had suddenly targeted her the day before was peculiar. Felix and L thought the criminal had followed L and thus discovered she was his wife.

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Harming her and her child was to take revenge on her husband, the CEO of United Realty Corporation.

But Whitney's intuition told her otherwise.

She really wanted to ask the criminal a few questions face-to-face.

Clutching her slender fist tight, she said, "If the police can guarantee my safety 100%, I'm willing to cooperate." *L would never allow you to be in any danger!" The bodyguard reached for his phone to contact Felix. Whitney stopped him, persuading, "Do you want your boss to always be at risk? He was nearly killed by falling glass last night."

While the bodyguard hesitated, Whitney quickly followed the police to their car.

They had a witness who had seen the criminal in an alley next to the hospital, possibly hiding in a motel.

What Whitney needed to do was walk down the alley, of course, with officers stationed in every building on both sides.

Whitney had two bodyguards follow her in plain clothes so she would be completely safe if the criminal appeared

She was afraid, but the officers' assuring glances made her willing to risk a confrontation.

As she walked into the dimly lit alley, in less than two minutes, a shadow emerged from beneath the building.

next to her

"The criminal!" Whitney shouted

Her bodyguards charged forward in the nick of time, but someone was even faster. Before the criminal could bring the knife to her throat, an arm swiftly intervened.

The bodyguards arrived quickly, and Bryce shielded Whitney to the side. His shirt was torn, and blood was

visible!

"Mr. Lutz? You again?"

"What a coincidence, right?" Bryce said with a pained grin.

Whitney turned and saw the criminal pinned down by the bodyguard. Remembering her purpose, she rushed over, crouched down, and demanded, "How did you know I'm the wife of United Realty Corporation's CEO?" "I'm going to kill you. Without you and the child in your womb, he'd taste the pain of losing a father! Damn capitalist, poor safety measures at the construction site cost my father his life, and to suppress the news, they gave us a pittance. I kept petitioning, and your husband pretended to be oblivious. I don't believe he was unaware of my father's case climbing up the ranks in his company!"

Whitney frowned, shocked and puzzled.

She was shocked that the criminal even knew she was pregnant.

She was puzzled because, from L's conversation this morning, he genuinely seemed unaware of the construction site incident. Why had his subordinates not informed him?

"How did you get such detailed information about me?" Whitney asked again.

you?

The criminal violently pulled a photo from his pocket, sneering as he compared it to her, "Isn't this yo Someone gave me this picture. You are his wife!"

Before the police could seize the photo as evidence, Whitney quickly pocketed it.

She needed that photo!

Someone had deliberately given the criminal her picture, clearly using him to harm her.

But who?

Connecting recent events and her suspicions about Monica's benefactor, Whitney could only think of one

person.

Tiana said she had been plagued with misfortune. Indeed, Whitney was starting to piece everything together. The recent series of incidents seemed accidental but targeted her and her child's lives.

She was carrying L's child. Who viewed that as a thorn in their side?

It had to be Elaine...

A chill ran through Whitney's body.

Bryce saw her staring blankly, her face pale and cold. He moved towards her but winced in pain.

Whitney immediately turned, having forgotten he was injured while saving her.

Just now, he had been quicker to save her than the bodyguards.

"Mr. Lutz, I'm sorry! Come on, I'll take you to the hospital; it's very close."

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"I know" Bryce pressed his bleeding arm with a smile. "I heard you were injured and came to visit you at the hospital I parked my car in this alley and just happened to see you when you were being held at knifepoint. gave me quite the scare."

Whitney realized why he had appeared so coincidentally.

She smiled weakly, her face pale. "Scared you, yet you still risked yourself to save me?"

Bryce looked at her intensely, took a breath, and said softly, "Saving a woman I fancy is a man's instinctive act." Whitney's fingers, supporting him, stiffened suddenly,

He saw her turn pale, and an embarrassed smile crossed his refined face as he grunted in pain.

Whitney hurriedly helped him towards the hospital.

He had sliced a tendon and needed minor surgery. Whitney felt too guilty to ask him to call his assistant; it was her fault he got hurt, after all. She felt obligated to stay by his side in both conscience and reason, so she reluctantly asked Tiana, who had not left yet, to help with the paperwork and run errands.

The medical team quickly whisked him away to the operating room.

Tiana pulled Whitney aside, her eyes wide with curiosity as they fixed on Whitney's striking face, her gossip-hungry soul on full display. "Bryce is Gunner's uncle! He is known in Banyan City as the quintessential gentleman.

He spends most of his time abroad, but his Lutz Group is a big deal, too, only second to giants like Imperial Gem Corporation and United Realty Corporation

You're

on fire, girl! In just two days, two guys have risked their necks for you. It makes the whole rescue by L seem less like a miracle now, doesn't it? I mean, you do have this way with men. Could it be that Bryce is into you?"

Whitney stiffened, her thoughts racing back to Bryce's ambiguous comments.

A wave of distress washed over her, and she shook her head. "It's not the same. Last night, L nearly died for me. You did not see how he shielded me and the kid, how he did not budge and took the knife."

"I get it, I get it," Tiana clicked her tongue sympathetically "Poor Bryce took this hit for nothing, huh?"

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"No way, I appreciate him too,"

Bryce had no idea she was undercover when he saved her, and his chivalrous spirit was truly genuine.

Right then, Tiana snagged a call, "Got a gig, gotta jet. Oh my, Whitney dear, you do have a knack for romance- husband and lover in the same hospital ward. I'd love to dip my toes in your dramatic love life with two hunky dudes!"

Whitney smacked her playfully. "Shut it. Have you ever heard of loose lips sink ships?"

Tiana covered her mouth, "True, Lis just too possessive." She waved goodbye, reluctance in her eyes.

Whitney rolled her eyes, and soon Bryce emerged, his shirt sporting a fresh slash sewn up with several stitches. She felt sincerely sorry.

Bryce looked at her tenderly. "I chose to save you. You owe me nothing, and I don't expect a reward."

Whitney could not help but chuckle at his tone.

Compared to Bryce's genteel generosity, that other guy was all about the life debt, narrow-minded, petty, cold, and domineering.

Whitney internally ranted, oblivious to her daydreaming.

Bryce gazed at her as she was lost in thought, gentle and delicate. She was not hurt; she cared for another man—which he had investigated.

A flicker of hesitation crossed his mind, but his eyes grew more intense as he solemnly called out, "Whitney

Valentine."

Startled by her full name, Whitney looked at him curiously. Their relationship had not reached such familiar grounds.

He spoke in a low, frowning voice, "I knew about you long ago, probably when you were twenty. You were pitching for investments at a cocktail party for Skye Gem Ltd. I saw you from upstairs—you seemed so young yet bold. I wanted to ask for your business card but did not dare, fearful of being the old guy hitting on the young girl."

Whitney was taken aback; at twenty, she was a corporation and attending many functions.

just starting Skye Gem Ltd, helping Preston with the family

"Three years fly by, and I return home only to cross paths because you've offended my mother. I'm wondering. is this some kind of fate?"

I've also looked into what you've been through these past six months, and frankly, I don't buy the gossip. I think you're a good girl... But at that dinner, I saw you leave with a masked man. I don't know your relationship with him, but I worry. If he's forcing you to stay with him, I can help "

Whitney froze, realizing he misunderstood, thinking she was kept by a wealthy man like L

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"Ms. Valentine, I must say I quite fancy you." His towering figure radiated warmth, standing not far from her, his eyes soft.

Whitney blushed, then quickly pulled away, stepping back and cutting him off, "Mr. Lutz, I think you're mistaken. The man with the mask, Mr. L, I'm dating him!"

Not knowing how to explain her fake marriage, Whitney was blunt, "I'm carrying his child, it's not what you think, I like him."

“What?” Bryce was shocked, looking at her flat stomach.

Knowing he would not believe her, she smiled. “I have no reason to lie to you. If I’ve disappointed you, I’m sorry. But I don’t want to cause any misunderstandings. Our relationship is purely professional. I’m grateful for your

belt and will make sure to give my best to your mother’s jewelry designs as a token of gratitude”

Bryce’s eyes dimmed slight his gaze cooling as he was still in shock

A faint bitter smile crossed his lips, he had not expected that he would be so late after three years.

And sheather being caught up in the Valentine family’s turmoil, had her life change so suddenly

Pregnant with that man’s child, could she really have feelings for him?

Bryce sat silently, and Whitney did not leave until his assistant Cooper arrived

Whitney left money for the medical expenses, politely saying goodbye. “Mr. Lutz, I’m sorry, but I’m a bit busy I might not be able to visit while you’re recovering. Any expenses, please have your assistant contact me.”

Her refusal was crisp, her tone gentle

Reading between the lines, it seemed like fear of that man.

Bryce watched her leave, wordless.

She was out feeling guilty, berating herself for not being entirely honest, but she feared Lutz was upstairs, ready to misunderstand again. Taking a deep breath, she switched off her phone recorder.

With a helpless smirk, she glanced at the time and gasped—it was already six in the evening.

The sky had darkened

Six hours

had passed, and he had not called once. Was he holding back? Did he not know how to sweet-talk her?

Or was it because she 'slandered Elaine, and he was concerned?

Lost in thought, Whitney passed the reception and caught a familiar gaze.

It was Baines assistant, but he disappeared quickly.

Whitney paused her eyes flickering. She had rushed into the hospital with Bryce without disguise.

A cold smirk crossed her lips; she was prepared for such situations.

Walking out of the hospital she shopped at the nearby farmers' market, picking up fresh veggies and lean cuts

of meat

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

It was L's number

She stared

what?"

ed at it, her lips curving slightly, her heart racing before she finally answered, her voice casual, "Hello,

"What?" His voice was cold haughty arrogance bleeding through, "What's with that tone? Do you see the time? You could not even make one call. If I had not reached out, were you planning not to come back at all?"

Oh, so he was waiting for her call, too

Whitney sensed the faint worry in his voice and teased, "Were you worried I would not come back?"

"Should I be worried?" Ludwik chuckled darkly, drumming his fingers harshly on the quilt. "I saved your life, after

Just look at him, thinking he could even hold a candle to someone like Bryce

Whitney rolled her eyes, unseen by him.

“What have you been up to, gallivanting outside? Did you run into a Lutz and Perlman, perhaps?” He asked with

a sarcastic tone.

Silence again.

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Whitney jumped, startled. Did he have X-ray vision or something?

“I’m in a foul mood, and there’s no one here to cheer me up. Can’t I chat with Tiana for a bit? I was just picking up some food for you at the farmers’ market.”

Ludwik’s thick brows knotted. Something about that did not sound quite right.

He commanded with an air of possessiveness, “Get back here. Now.”

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After hanging up the call, Ludwik’s fingers released the grasp on the blanket, and his taut muscles seemed to relax instantly

Felix watched him silently, noticing that the man seemed to let out a sigh of relief.

His lips twitched in amusement. Mr. Lippert’s face might as well have had it written all over it: “Thank goodness my wife still wants to talk to me.”

He had been enduring all day, yet he still played the cool card and ordered Whitney around. It was pretty amusing.

Whitney hurried back to the hospital room, grocery bags in hand

As her hand pushed the door open, the man’s gaze instantly shifted away, his face turning cold.

“Hmph,” he snorted with a low, chilly hum.

Whitney’s heart fluttered with insecurity, uncertain if the bodyguard had spilled the beans about her going undercover. She held up the groceries as a peace

offering. "You hate hospital food, right? I went to the market and got these to cook for you. That's why I was late"

Ludwik narrowed his eyes suspiciously. She was visibly upset with him this morning for not trusting her, and now she was being so nice?

"Stand still. What have you been up to behind my back?" His gaze was sharp as a scalpel.

Whitney's shoulders slumped. Rather than wait for the bodyguard's report, she rushed to confess in a low voice, "The police contacted me to go undercover for a bit. I figured you and I are in danger as long as the criminals are out there. I thought it's better to..."

"Whitney!" Ludwik's chest heaved with concern, immediately checking her over, "Damn it, are you hurt?"

His urgency and worry made Whitney feel a sweet warmth in her heart. She shook her head honestly and even twirled to show she was unharmed. "I'm perfectly fine."

She paused, then said, "But..."

"But?" Ludwik's voice was icy, demanding that she finish her sentence.

That was when Whitney put down the groceries and stepped closer to him. She stood up straight, facing the man whose chilly gaze was scrutinizing her, and admitted with a hint of fear, "But, I happened to run into Mr. Lutz. He thought I was really in danger and came to my rescue. He got hurt, so Tiana and I took him to surgery. It was just a minor injury."

Since she had already seen Elaine's assistant, she figured it was better to come clean herself.

Now, she was changing her tactics completely.

The previous misunderstanding was because she had clumsily tried to smooth things over, which only played into Elaine's hands, leading to an even bigger misunderstanding.

If Elaine was going to play dirty, Whitney would leave no room for her to maneuver. She and L needed to build trust; the more she shared, the better—he was not one to be handled with force.

But as her words dropped, silence fell, and the man's face grew stormier by the second.

“Ha, he saved you, so you spent the afternoon offering yourself to him? Playing the damsel in distress, right?” Ludwik mocked her bitterly, anger brewing.

“Ugh.” Whitney was not hurt by his words; instead, she retorted with unusual calmness, teasing him, “Look at you, getting jealous over nothing... Don't misunderstand. I recorded my conversation with him to prove my

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Innocence. Listen for yourself.”

She reluctantly took out her phone and played the recording for him.

Of course, the part where Bryce confessed his feelings was strictly off-limits for this jealous lion.

After listening, Ludwik's expression softened, though still frosty. The little fool had cleared things up well enough.

She had even told Bryce that she was pregnant, which Ludwik could tolerate.

Which high-profile man would covet a pregnant woman?

Whitney watched as he pursed his lips and put away his phone, then she prodded his solid arm, “Are we good now, Mr. Jealous? I just did what any decent person would do and got him medical help. Please put yourself in my shoes.”

Ha

you still have a lot of business to discuss with him, flirting over dinner tables”

Whitney sighed in resignation. If only to appease him for now, she silently rolled her eyes in her mind, then spoke with a touch of sadness, “Fine, I'll compromise. If you can't accept me working with

him, I'm willing to give up Skye Gem's gemstone deal for you, even though it means paying a hefty breach of contract fee

Ludwik's gaze faltered slightly, considering her small, dejected face. He had not expected her to go this far to alleviate his doubts.

It made him seem rather petty.

Even Felix, standing nearby, felt Whitney had been accommodating enough to Mr. Lippert, who was indeed too petty.

Ludwik's lips became stiff, and seeing her look so downcast, he huffed, "You're sensible enough. I handle your gemstone issue. Whatever breach fee he wants, I'll pay double! And as for Claire's design,"

"That's non-negotiable," Whitney interjected, her brows furrowed in businesslike determination "I personally promised that, and it concerns my reputation as a designer."

Ludwik's gaze deepened but did not press her too much, "Just make sure you keep your distance from..."

"Got it, a Lutz and Perlman." Whitney pouted as if she could recite it by heart.

Ludwik watched her, his demeanor threatening, but she quickly turned to retrieve the groceries. "Are you going to eat or not?"

"Do you only know how to cook spaghetti?" He teased with a raised eyebrow, "Can you even cook without poisoning me?"

Felix's lips twitched.

Whitney was even more annoyed, glaring at him. "Don't worry, I'll add extra vinegar. It'll suit your sour jealousy Just fine!"

Watching the little lady move skillfully into the tiny kitchen, Ludwik turned to Felix and commanded, "Help her out. Wash, chop, and stir-fry the vegetables."

And what, then, was Whitney supposed to do?

Felix sighed internally. Despite being an assistant, he was a man of pride. "Sir, a gentleman stays clear of the kitchen. I don't know how to chop vegetables,"

"I do know how to chop you, though."

Without another word, Felix promptly entered the kitchen.

Ludwik glanced toward the kitchen, partially obscured by the suite's partition but still within a direct line of sight to catch glimpses of the young woman's flitting shadow.

The man closed his eyes, his posture relaxed, his aura of intimidating nobility undiminished even in sickness

It was not about what he wore, even in a hospital gown, with a few strands of hair fathoming carelessly across his forehead, he looked devastatingly handsome and aloof.

Elaine watched from the doorway, captivated by the man's beauty

Ludwik had enchanted countless young women's dreams, and in her eyes, not even Ashton compared nor

of the city's elite. Following her mother's arrangement, she had waited for him all these years if not for Whitney, she would have been Mrs. Lippert by now.

Clasping her hands together, Elaine donned a mask of subservience and knocked gently on the door "Bro Castor and I have some urgent documents that require your signature.

Ludwik opened his eyes at the mention of work and gestured for them to enter

Elaine stepped inside, glancing around and noticing Whitney's absence.

She walked rigidly to the side of Ludwik's bed and handed over the documents.

Castor began to explain the contents: a proposal for a nationwide five-star hotel chain project by United Realty Corporation.

Ludwik picked up a pen and signed.

Elaine received the documents back but lingered, her concern slipping out unintentionally, Bro, I've heard that Whitney went undercover for the police today to catch some criminals. It was so dangerous. Although she doesn't like me much, I still worry about her. Especially since she's carrying your child"

Ludwik's brow furrowed at the news.

Elaine glanced at Castor for support.

Castor chuckled reassuringly. "No need to fret, Elaine. Madam was rescued in the nick of time by Bryce from the Lutz Group, right? As long as she's safe, that's what matters"

"Castor, if you did not see it, don't spread rumors!" Elaine interjected quickly, "Bryce did not rescue Whitney Bro, don't jump to conclusions"

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Castor looked like someone had just accused him of a crime he did not commit. He pulled out his phone with a scowl and said, "The afternoon's sting operation is all over the news, man. It was Bryce who saved Madam. She was leaning on him as they walked into the hospital. They looked like the perfect couple—so many bystanders took pictures thinking they were hitched. Look, Elaine, I've got the snapshots right here, why won't you let me talk about it."

"What snapshots?" As Elaine had expected, Ludwik questioned coldly.

Asly smile curled at the corners of her mouth.

Castor glanced at Elaine and immediately handed over the phone, "Boss, some coworkers stumbled upon the scene and sent them to me, asking if she was Madam..."

Ludwik stared at the photos. Anxious and caring, Whitney was helping Bryce with the hospital admission and fees, her attentiveness evident in every gesture.

A sneer curled his lips, and a chill emanated from his very being.

Elaine looked down, narrowing her eyes, waiting for Ludwik to explode upon seeing the photos.

She pretended to glance at the photograph and advised, "Bro, please, don't get mad. At least hear Whitney out... And these photos can't hit the news. Your father can't know about this. He already dislikes Whitney, so if he gets the wrong idea, it could mean trouble for you..."

She seemed thoughtful and considerate, yet her mention of Ludwik's father, Kaden Lippert, was sure to fuel Ludwik's fire.

Whitney had really done it this time, getting tangled up with Bryce and falling into her trap. She would 'make good use' of this situation.

Whitney listened to every word in the kitchen. Her lips curled into a frosty smile.

So, this was Elaine's usual trick—sweet talk with a poison pill, making others do the dirty work while keeping her hands clean. No wonder there was never any dirt on her.

One played the good cop, the other the bad.

Elaine could feel the cold rage spreading from Ludwik already

Suddenly, Ludwik tossed aside the phone. His handsome face showed no sign of surprise or fury, just a cold voice stating. "I already know about it."

Elaine was utterly stunned.

Ludwik's lips twisted into a cold smirk. "Whitney came clean herself. To cheer me up, she even canceled the Skye Gem and the Lutz Group's partnership"

Satisfaction flickered in his eyes.

Elaine's pupils shrank. How could this be?

Just then, a delicate cry came from the kitchen.

Felix jumped. "Madam, did the oil splash you?"

"What? Whitney, come out here," Ludwik's heart was already in the kitchen, his brows furrowed in concern. Whitney had staged the little accident with the oil

. It was her cue to enter the scene. She emerged from the kitchen, her gaze s weeping over Elaine, who looked like she had been turned to stone.

Elaine had not expected Whitney to be hiding in the kitchen, overhearing her s owing discord. Not that it mattered; Whitney had nearly seen through her act a nyway.

Looking at Elaine, Whitney remembered the thugs and Monica's backer. A chil l ran down her spine. Elaine's

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scheme against her was so grand. Such a horrifying woman, Whitney thought.

But it was her turn to fight back.

With a pained hiss, Whitney approached the man, cooing. "Some water got int o the oil."

"Clumsy." Ludwik frowned. "Let me see."

Whitney held out her finger, expecting him to just look at it.

To her surprise, he took her finger into his mouth, unabashed by the onlooker s, and chided her in a deep voice, "You're such a klutz. I wonder how our kids would turn out."

Whitney blushed. Then, as if she had only just noticed Elaine's presence, she quickly withdrew her finger. "There are people here! Elaine, good evening."

Even Elaine, master of her emotions, could not hide the stiffness on her face.

Castor glanced between the doting Ludwik and the stiff Elaine, uncertain how their performance would

continue.

Whitney let out an inward chuckle.

Elaine's eyes fixed on Whitney. This woman had grown clever!

*Playing the coquette, confessing proactively—
Whitney seemed to have changed her tactics.*

*Today, Elaine realized she had been outplayed; the pit she had dug was filled
in before she could push Whitney
into it.*

*Quickly masking her frustration, Elaine managed a smile while Ludwik was still
oblivious. “I always knew there was nothing between Whitney and Bryce. You
can rest easy, Bro. And
Castor, tell your people to stop spreading rumors. We must preserve Whitney’s
reputation.”*

She spoke sweetly, trying to win Ludwik’s favor.

*Whitney smiled subtly. Thanks for believing in me, Elaine. Maybe you should
delete those photos, too. Mr. L, I think Elaine has a point. If they end up in the
news and your family gets the wrong idea about me, I’d be unfairly accused and
cause you trouble, right?”*

Elaine was silent.

*Ludwik frowned and gave Castor a cold look. “Delete them! Keep an eye out,
both of you. We don’t want this nonsense in the news.”*

y delete th

*Elaine gritted her teeth secretly, watching Castor photos. She and Castor had
no choice but to ensure Whitney’s incident was kept under wraps.*

Elaine shot Whitney a chilling glance before she and Castor quickly left.

*Outside the hospital room, Castor vented, “Ms. Elaine, you were about to leak
those pictures to Kaden. The Lippert family has never been fond of Whitney, and
Kaden would’ve dealt with her himself, but Whitney’s got some serious moves.”*

*Elaine’s face darkened, and she let out a cold laugh. “She’s
gotten smart, outmaneuvering me.”*

Just moments before, she had played the good guy in front of Ludwik by mentioning Kaden, adding pressure, hoping to fuel Ludwik's anger towards Whitney

And now, Whitney had started to fight back!

A fire burned in Elaine's heart./

Did Whitney think she would back down because of this? Not a chance!

Back in the hospital room, Ludwik seemed oblivious to the silent battle between the two women.

Seeing Elaine leave in defeat, Whitney breathed a sigh of relief.

Scheming while acting innocent? She could play that part, too—Monica had been an exemplary mentor.

Whitney smirked coldly, ready to gather evidence of Elaine's treachery from the last few days, lay out the facts to the man, and expose her for good.

She turned her head, and there it was, the man's eyes, cold and sharp as a knife, cutting through the air as they fixed on her.

"What's wrong?" Whitney licked her lips, a touch uneasy.

A shadow of a frown flickered across Ludwik's gaze before he scrutinized her. "You're acting a bit off today" Whitney's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean?"

That thing this morning, I thought you'd be mad at Elaine again. But you were not. You even openly admitted that Bryce saved you. Plus, you were quite polite to Elaine just now. Aren't you angry with me?"

Whitney rolled her eyes inwardly. How could she not be mad? She was merely giving Elaine a taste of her own medicine.

Yet, her lips curved into a knowing smile. "It's nothing. I figured I should be more generous. It's pointless for you to be caught between two women. She's an outsider, I'm your lover."

Her sudden change took the man aback. Elaine's thoughtfulness had always been charming, but Whitney's naive airs were som

ething else they made his heart flutter. However, too much of it could also be at headache

—

Without realizing it, he grabbed Whitney's wrist, gazing at her pouting face. After a moment of silence, he said with a calm resolve, "If you really can't stand her, I'll find a way to make her leave, but it's going to take some time."

Whitney's head shot up, her eyes wide with surprise. Was he really making such a concession, such an indulgent promise?

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But the complexity in the man's eyes, the storms they concealed, were beyond Whitney's comprehension. Ludwik mused in silence. Elaine was the bridge between him and the Bartels family; their interests intertwined. There was a time he had wanted her gone, his dislike manifesting as a reluctance to keep her close. But the Lippert family was eyeing him with predatory intent; Kaden was eager to make him hand over the reins of Imperial Gem Corporation to Orion.

Just waiting for him to slip up.

In such times, he needed the Bartels family.

How could this silly girl understand the depths of it all? Ludwik shot her a sidelong glance. "Enough talk. I'm starving. If the food isn't ready soon, I might just eat you!"

"What an abrupt turn," Whitney thought, returning to the kitchen.

Yet, even if they were just to soothe her, his words filled her with a sweet sense of being valued and finally feeling the weight of her importance to him.

ly prepared.

Eventually, two maids joined to assist, and dinner was finally

Whitney stood by the bed, feeding him like a dutiful wife, unable to resist glancing at his hands that moved with ease.

“What are you looking at? Injured shoulders don’t mean I can’t move my hands,” he declared righteously, even as his fingers deftly navigated the screen of his smartphone.

Whitney was too shocked for words, thinking that saving her seemed to justify all manner of twisted logic. Felix, too, was silently twitching at the corner of his mouth, thinking. “Mr. Lippert, just admit you enjoy being pampered by your little wife. Would it kill you?”

Clearly reveling in the attention, the man frowned. “I haven’t bathed all day. I will wipe me down later.”

The bowl in Whitney’s hands nearly tipped over. She stole a glance at his mature, muscular frame, her heart skipping a beat as she blushed. “Maybe... Felix should do it?”

“Did I risk my life to save Felix?”

Whitney fell silent.

And Felix, all too aware, had already left the room.

Whitney clenched her fists, trying to reason with him. “But I’d be embarrassed. We’re not that close yet,” she protested.

“Don’t be embarrassed. I allow you to admire my perfect form. Just don’t get overwhelmed,” he said, his noble arrogance on full display.

Whitney was at a loss for words against his impregnable facade.

After being saved by him, she owed him a debt of service, one way or another.

She made sure the door was closed tightly before fetching a basin of warm water. Taking up the washcloth with trembling hands, she undressed him, muttering to herself not to overthink it she was just cleaning a sculpture.

But... this particular sculpture was too captivating, his form long and graceful, his muscles well-defined, his skin smooth and pale—a stark contrast to the fashionable bronze tans of the day, exuding an air of nobility.

She tried to control her gaze, but it kept wandering.

Ludwik watched her with a mischievous glint, her eyes darting over his body, her cheeks flushed like tempting apples. Her lips bitten

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His Adam's apple bobbed as he acknowledged her struggle against his damned charisma.

"Heh, she's not pouncing on me yet, huh?" He thought.

But soon, it was revealed that the man faltered first.

Ludwik's jaw tensed. "Are you done yet? Hurry up!"

Whitney's face was aflame as she coughed lightly, "Done."

She finished quickly, rushing to the washroom with the hot water, leaning against the door, panting, her face in her hands.

Frustrated thoughts ran through her mind as she returned, ready to negotiate again. "Can't you just hire a male nurse? Just now, your..."

"Still on about just now? Got some idea on your mind?" He leaned against the headboard, taking deep breaths, his gaze dark and intense.

Whitney's face flushed. "Stop bullying me, L. I had maids helping me with dinner earlier. You could've easily called someone."

That was only because he realized she could not handle the dinner alone, so he could not bear to see her stand and bend for too long since she was pregnant

Ludwik gave her an indifferent look. "Falling out of love with me already? Yesterday in the hallway, you were pleading for me to wake up, willing to do anything."

Whitney skipped the retort. She had never said such things.

"Can he stop twisting my confession into something it's not?" Whitney thought.

Then, she heard a sudden wince from him. "What's wrong?" She asked, concerned.

The man pressed his lips together, feigning vulnerability. "It hurts all because of you."

Whitney was skeptical but feared he might truly be in pain, her face showing a hint of regret. "Then stop moving. I love you, alright? I'll do anything for you, okay?"

She was at her wit's end.

He smirked, a devious curve playing on his lips. "Alright, sleep with me then," his voice weak.

A handsome man with an incredible physique could be devastatingly charming when he whined without clashing with his maturity.

Whitney looked at his 'sickly handsome' face, the mask adding an enigmatic allure. She had just settled into her small bed when he complained, "You're so far away, it hurts more."

What did distance have to do with it? Guided by his commanding gaze, Whitney eventually lay in his embrace. The hospital bed was not wide, and she was cautious not to touch his injured shoulder or head. She felt tired, her eyes heavy with sleep.

Seeing this, he frowned and snorted in complaint, and Whitney instantly snapped awake. "Are you in pain again?"

He nodded sorrowfully, his face a mask of stoicism. "Never mind, you sleep."

But how could she sleep knowing it was because of her? If it were not for him, she would be the one with a cracked skull.

Whitney sat up, her brows furrowed with concern. "No, I'll find a doctor."

"What use is that? Can he stop the pain?"

"Then what?"

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His eyes drifted to her lips, the warm light of the infirmary casting a soft glow on her beautiful face, her eyes clear and warm, nearly igniting him, as they did just now.

His gaze shifted to her tiny hands, and he murmured, "Just lightly massage me.

Massage? That she could do.

Whitney leaned in, her hands reaching for his head, his sharp hair pricking her palm. She massaged gently, occasionally blowing on the wound.

It was instinctive, her maternal softness spilling out before him.

Her hair fell around him like feathers, tickling his face and making the itch worse.

Ludwik moved her hand gently, his voice low and husky. "It seems a bit better. Keep going, all over."

Did it really help? Whitney set to work, massaging his solid shoulders... then suddenly, her hand was caught and guided towards his waist..

Whitney was utterly flabbergasted when, with a deep breath and his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, Ludwik bowed his head and started kissing her gently on the cheeks.

She was taken aback; her eyes widened in surprise, unable to speak. The kisses left her breathless and her mind blank. As she began to realize and try to resist, Ludwik whispered soothingly, like comforting a little girl, "You said you'd do anything for me. I'm in so much pain right now, Madam..."

Like a delicate marshmallow, Whitney was overwhelmed by him, her eyes wide with indignation yet not daring to resist for fear of hurting his wound.

She felt utterly defenseless, convinced she must have been dazed by his kisses, unaware of what she was even doing.

Long after, still in a daze and with reddened eyes, she fled to the bathroom, where she lingered for what seemed an eternity.

When she emerged, he was still looking at her with deep, burning eyes, full of apology as he asked, "Are you alright?"

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Whitney had half a mind to hurt a pillow at him with all her might, the scoundrel. Climbing onto her tiny bed, she resolved to give him the silent treatment.

Ludwik licked his lips and teased her with a devilish charm, "See? It doesn't hurt anymore. I told you, my technique works wonders."

"Drop dead."

Whitney buried her flushed face into the pillow, extending a foot, attempting to push his hospital bed away

The man watched her quietly, his gaze lingering on her delicate, pale foot. He mused that perhaps he had not had his fill

But

when he awoke the next morning, his wife was nowhere to be seen, and Ludwik's expression darkened.

Felix entered, saying.

"Madam went back to the villa early this morning. She wanted to check on Natalie and said she'd bring over some of your clothes."

Ah, she was probably too shy after last night's intimacy to face him in the morning.

Ludwik's lips curled into a smirk once more.

Witnessing Mr. Lippert's mood swung that could rival the weather, Felix grimaced inwardly. Love was a no-go for him if it meant becoming lovesick like Mr. Lippert,

Back at the villa, Whitney made sure to visit Natalie in the guesthouse.

Natalie was nearly back to her old self, her consciousness clear. Holding Whitney's hand, she expressed her joy. "My dear Whitney, it's been too long. Is yo

ur little bump showing yet? That rascal told me over the phone you're about fo ur months along. Once we get the ultrasound, I'll have a good look."

Natalie's condition was undoubtedly deteriorating, as she was even unclear a bout the duration of the pregnancy.

Whitney sighed inwardly.

However, Natalie looked at her intently and added, "I seem to recall, on the da y of my episode, were you there? I remember you saying something by my bedside, encouraging me. Whitney, you're truly kind-hearted."

Whitney was elated, amid Natalie's confused memories, she remembered her presence.

But there was no need to explain anything to L; she had intended to save Nat alie sincerely, though Elaine had reaped the benefits. She initially hid her medical skills, so revealing it now might lead L. to overthink.

Considering her words carefully, Whitney also reminded Natalie, "Mom, if Elai ne visits you, make sure you have more servants around or notify me immedia tely."

Natalie's eyes darkened as she gripped Whitney's hand tighter, saying, "I don' t know why, but I feel the need to warn you too, stay away from that girl."

Natalie could not articulate her reasoning; she only had a gut feeling to keep E laine at bay.

Whitney, who had already seen Elaine's true colors, suspected that Elaine might have previously done something to Natalie.

She needed to expose Elaine to L as soon as possible, leaving him no room f or doubt.

On her way back to the hospital, Whitney received a call from Valerie. She ha d just landed at Banyan City International Airport and requested a pickup.

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Whitney had not expected her friend's return to be so immediatel

Excited, she hurriedly got back to the hospital room, dropped off the fresh laundry, and stole a glance at the man engrossed in paperwork. "A friend of mine has returned. I'm going to a gathering, so I might be back late," she said quickly.

Ludwik looked up, about to respond, when his eyes caught her tight sweater dress.

Frowning, his gaze deep and authoritative, he said, "You're going to a gathering dressed like that? Change it."

"What's wrong with it?" Whitney did not get it; she thought her outfit was quite casual.

**Pregnant women should dress like pregnant women," Ludwik insisted, eager for her to start showing so that other men would know she was taken and expecting.*

Otherwise, her slender, graceful figure...

Speechless, Whitney retorted, "I'm not even showing yet. I don't want to wear something so frumpy."

Ludwik ignored her protests and turned to Felix, "Isn't what she's wearing now frumpy?"

With a headache brewing, Felix felt like he was being forced into the crossfire of a lovers' spat.

Under the weight of authority, Felix bowed his head, "Madam's outfit is indeed unflattering."

"Then find her something nice to wear," Ludwik instructed before returning to his paperwork.

Ten minutes later, Whitney left the hospital in a straight-cut pinafore dress, her expression sour.

Banyan City International Airport.

Valerie stepped off the plane, her long legs striding towards the shuttle.

Nearby, a man in a black coat with a military haircut stepped out of a private jet, his profile sharp and chiseled. He briskly walked by, deeply engrossed in a phone call.

As he passed Valerie, his voice, unlike its usual coldness, softened, “Elaine, I’m back in the country. No need to thank me. It was just a casual mention to the overseas judges. But if you really want to show gratitude, how about we meet tonight?”

Valerie felt like a gulp of icy air was lodged in her throat, unable to swallow or exhale.

Her heart ached as she focused intently on the dusk ahead, knowing she was about to meet a good friend and could not afford to have red, tearful eyes.

A cold laugh escaped her.

At the domestic arrivals gate, Whitney immediately spotted Valerie’s figure.

Tall and striking, her face was a picture of high-class, aloof beauty. She wore a pale gray trench coat over skinny jeans and boots.

“Valeriel” Whitney called out with a smile.

Just then, Tiana parked the car and ran over. She did a double-take at Whitney’s outfit and burst into laughter. “Whitney, what on earth are you wearing? A bucket?”

Speechless, Whitney grumbled, “L, that damn man, forced me into it. The outfit rendered her waistline nonexistent and her legs invisible.

Tiana gave her a once-over, her cheeks rosy with joy, and nudged her. “Spending two days cozying up with Lin the hospital has really warmed things up between you two. Looks like he’s keeping you on a tight leash. But honestly, you seem to be enjoying it.”

Pfft, as if.

Yet, thinking about last night....

Whitney recalled their intimacy; it was her first time doing something like that, and she was utterly lost in the haze.

The memory still made her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Considering the night of the banquet when he had kept her confined and kissed her for so long, plus their recent boundary-breaking moment...

Her relationship with L had indeed ascended to a new level.

Approaching Whitney, Valerie noticed the sweet radiance on her friend's face. She knew about the pregnancy and the man in Whitney's life and smiled, "Whitney, have you finally met the right guy? It's precious, cherish this love."

Her voice carried a hint of weary sophistication, causing Tiana and Whitney's embrace to pause as they looked up at her.

Valerie's youthful face was serene, betraying only a shadow of darkness.

She mustered a faint smile. "Let's go. It's been a while. We should catch up."

Whitney signaled Tiana not to pry just yet. Tiana nodded subtly and drove Valerie to her apartment to drop off her luggage.

Then they decided to hit a local pub to relax.

But just as they arrived, they bumped into Nolan. He seemed to have come on purpose, waiting outside for quite some time, with Parker standing behind him, nursing a drink.

The moment Nolan saw Valerie, Whitney could tell something was off in his gaze.

There was a flash of suppressed brightness in his eyes. The usually suave playboy seemed a tad nervous. He blocked Valerie's path, the tall man towering over her, his voice taut, "Valerie, why did not you tell me you were back from abroad? If I had not overheard my father mention it... Where's Ashton? Isn't he with you? Where is he?"

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Valene's lips twisted into a wry smile, her gaze icy, "Nolan, who do you think Ashton is with right now? Isn't it obvious?"

Nolan and Parker's expressions darkened.

Whitney, ever perceptive, caught on that Ashton, Valerie's husband, might be keeping company with another woman at this very moment..

And this woman might be someone Nolan and Parker both knew.

Was Valerie's marriage unhappy?

Whitney pressed her lips slightly.

Furious, Nolan blurted out, "That bastard Ashton, I'll take you to him."

Valerie shook her head with a dark chuckle. "Forget it. I'm not in the mood to walk in on a steamy scene. That woman can turn it around on me even if I'm not involved. After all these years, if I can't confront her, I can at least avoid her

Whitney's head snapped towards Valerie.

Parker stood up, forcefully pulling Nolan with him. "Stop meddling in women's affairs. It's about time we brothers caught up."

As Nolan left, his piercing gaze lingered on Valerie's delicate face.

The three women sat down, and Tiana's gossip-loving soul took over, staring at Valerie, "Valerie, I've noticed Nolan seems pretty concerned about you. Nolan and Ashton are brothers, right... Oh my God, I just remembered When I first met you, you said you had just moved out of the Fuller Mansion. You lived there for a decade, right? Jesus, the day you told me your husband was Ashton, it did not click in my dumb head. I was so surprised, but thinking about it now, you and Ashton, it was meant to be."

Tiana's eyes widened in shock, and so did Whitney's. Valerie had such a connection with one of the top families, the Fullers?

Whitney knew Valerie even later than Tiana and was unfamiliar with her family background.

Suddenly, Whitney remembered something. Did Valerie just mention 'Elaine?

A revelation hit her like a lightning bolt. The surname "Bartels" was not uncommon, but it had never occurred to her that Valerie and Elaine could share it.

Whitney could not help frowning. "Valerie, you and Elaine, could you possibly be...

Valerie turned her head, nodding with a distant look, "The Bartels of Emperor City are my kin, but Elaine is the legitimate heiress. I'm just from a side branch, not closely related. I was fostered with the Fullers in Banyan City as a child..."

So, Valerie's entanglement with Ashton was far more complicated than just an Elaine issue.

Ashton and Nolan were half-brothers. When Valerie was a child, her parents did business in Banyan City and were close with the Fullers.

Valerie remembered her mother as kind and gentle, but one day, they claimed her mother and Ashton's father had an affair, which Ashton's mother, Matilda, discovered. Convinced of their guilt, Matilda dragged Valerie's parents to a confrontation...

That fateful car ride also carried Valerie's younger brother, and it ended in a devastating crash. Valerie's parents died, and her brother went missing.

Matilda was left crippled.

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Ashton's father, feeling guilty, took Valerie from Emperor City to the Fullers to raise her.

Young Valerie understood nothing, and Ashton back then was not the cold-hearted man he was now. He knew Valerie was innocent, so he pampered her as a sister, In contrast, Nolan was hostile towards her.

Rumors spread that Ashton had a sister who was always with him, like a little shadow.

Valerie thought that although she had lost her parents, at least she still had Ashton's warmth.

That all changed when Elaine from Emperor City entered the picture.

On that icy day by the lake, young Valerie nearly lost her life saving a teenage Ashton, asking her distant sister, Blaine, to look after him while she changed clothes.

But when she returned, she found a young Ashton blushing with gratitude towards Elaine.

The hero who saved Ashton had become Elaine.

As Elaine visited Banyan City yearly, Ashton's warmth towards Valerie turned to disdain and misunderstanding. He fell into love, blind to the malice and hypocrisy of a true manipulator.

Meanwhile, Nolan, who had always disliked her, became unexpectedly kinder.

As these memories surged, Valerie's face twisted with pain and bitterness, her slender fingers clenching the glass, a wry laugh escaping her lips.

Whitney, piecing things together, quickly pulled up a photo on her phone. "Valerie, the Bartels heiress in Emperor City, Elaine, is this her?"

Valerie glanced at the photo, recognizing the saintly facade of Elaine. "I'd know her even if she turned to ashes. Do you know her too?"

Tiana and Whitney exchanged a look.

Almost blurting out, Whitney questioned, "Is she also the person Ashton invited international judges to help?" "Exactly," Valerie confirmed without a doubt. "He called Elaine after landing, mentioning that favor. There's no one else he'd go out of his way for like that."

A realization struck Whitney's heart, an answer falling into place.

It was Elaine who revived Monica in the competition, Elaine who was the powerful force behind Yvonne! Although Whitney had suspicions, Valerie's confirmation solidified the truth, a sharp chill sweeping through her.

Supporting Monica was undoubtedly a move against her, and Elaine had laid her plans far too early, long before Whitney had any clue.

Whitney had suspected something was off when Monica framed her, leading to her wrongful imprisonment over counterfeit gems. The scale of the deceit suggested to Whitney that someone with clout bore a grudge against her, but she could not pinpoint who it might be. Now, as recent events came together in her mind, a chill ran down her spine. Perhaps the inmates who had attacked her in jail were not acting on Monica's orders after all.

From the moment Elaine showed up, she seemed hell-bent on causing Whitney to miscarry. Clenching her fists tightly, Whitney braced herself for the storm ahead.

Tiana was seething with rage. "I can't believe this bitch! Not only did she try to steal Whitney's husband, but is she also after Ashton, Valerie?"

Valerie let out a lazy, scornful laugh. "No, I'm the one who snatched Ashton away from her, and now I'm reaping what I've sown.

My sister has always been an expert at playing the innocent while plotting behind the scenes. She loves to

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take what's not hers, and her malice is beyond your wildest imagination and tough to tackle. Isn't my decade-long misunderstanding with Ashton proof enough? She doesn't even love him but relishes having a string of admirers. The only man in her heart is someone else, but karma's a bitch- he doesn't give a damn about her!"

Valerie's words were tinged with relish, and Whitney suddenly understood—Elaine's true affection was reserved for L.

As anger and thoughts of revenge surged in her heart, Whitney's face remained calm, but her eyes glinted with icy resolve.

Leaving such a woman near L was like waiting for a disaster. If Elaine was willing to go to such lengths to harm her and her unborn child, Whitney was more than ready to return the favor.

It was time to strike back.

After parting ways with Valerie, Whitney set out to gather evidence. Monica was the obvious starting point, especially since she was staying at the same hospital as L. How convenient.

A smirk played on Whitney's lips as she checked the date—the submission deadline for the jewelry competition semifinals was just around the corner.

The timing was perfect.

She instructed Tiana, "Spread some rumors about the competition online, push it to trending topics. Say there's insider news that the Imperial Gem Corporation still intends to disqualify Monica from the semifinals." Tiana hesitated for a moment but quickly caught on. "You have effectively neutralized Monica's shares in Skye Gem. Elaine claims she's supporting Monica and Yvonne, but it's more like she's using her influence to suppress them. I bet those two are having a rough time and are desperate, hoping Monica will win the semifinals with the piece Elaine provided. Announcing her disqualification now will make Monica lose her cool."

And that was precisely Whitney's intent.

If Monica panicked, she would slip up.

Since L was staying at this hospital and Elaine could not seem to stay away in her attempts to get close to him, Whitney's plan solidified. She had Tiana plant extra cameras at strategic points throughout the hospital.

Once the rumors hit the trending charts, Monica indeed became frantic.

Whitney timed her move perfectly, heading to Monica's hospital room just as Elaine was due to arrive with some documents.

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“What are you doing here?” Monica’s voice was a mix of hatred and fear as she saw Whitney standing at the door. The once robust figure had withered away after a long recovery from a broken rib and leg.

Ever since that scuffle with her husband, she had grown wary of Whitney.

Whitney lifted her eyebrows and smirked, “Step outside for a second. We need to talk.”

“You’re not cooking up some scheme, are you?” Monica could not help but feel suspicious.

Whitney dangled the bait. “It’s about your shares in Skye Gem. Don’t you care about that anymore?”

That got Monica’s attention. Clenching her jaw with resentment, she followed Whitney out of the room.

Whitney glanced upwards, plotting her next move. Monica’s room was on the fourth floor, orthopedics, while L’s private suite was on the eighth. It was about time Elaine would be making an appearance.

She led

Monica upstairs, making her way to the sixth floor. At the elevator, Whitney excused herself to take a call, leaving Monica to wait.

As the elevator door opened, Monica caught a glimpse of Elaine inside.

The news had just broken that Monica’s spot in the jewelry competition semifinals was in jeopardy.

Desperation had set in, and although her mother had tried to reach out to Elaine, she would not give them the time of day.

Now, unexpectedly facing Elaine, Monica mustered her courage and stepped into the elevator.

Elaine’s eyes held a warning.

When the elevator reached the ground floor, Elaine strode out quickly, with Monica hot on her heels.

At a corner, Elaine paused, her cold gaze meeting Monica's

"Elaine..." Monica began tentatively. "The competition is going to disqualify me! You promised you'd help me win..."

Without a word, Elaine looked around cautiously and just nodded impatiently.

Monica's spirits lifted. Elaine had power, and that was all she needed to know.

Elaine left quickly

As Monica returned to the sixth floor, she realized Whitney was nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, Whitney was already retrieving the security footage with Tiana. The camera had captured everything, including Elaine's face and Monica's pleading.

"Elaine's cunning, all right," Tiana remarked. "Without her saying a word, we can't prove she's behind any of this to Mr. L, and Monica's words alone aren't enough to show Elaine was the one who instructed Monica to plot against you and send you to jail!"

Whitney nodded. This charade was just to show the connection between Elaine and Monica. She had ways to make Monica confess everything Elaine had her do.

"Tiana, round up some muscle for me. I have a plan for tomorrow night."

The following evening. Tiana brought the hired muscle as requested. Whitney instructed them to split into two groups: one to abduct Monica from the hospital and the other to snatch Yvonne from the Valentine Mansion. The mother and daughter were taken aback by their sudden kidnapping, ending up in a desolate warehouse where they faced a brutal interrogation. Whitney had her thugs pretend to be Elaine's men.

Yvonne, sharp as ever, deduced that this must be retribution from Elaine for Monica's brash demands at the hospital, which had offended Elaine. Thus, Elaine no longer wanted to help them and even considered them obstacles.

They were just pawns from the Valentine family of Banyan City, and Elaine could easily discard them.

Whitney then had her men leave a phone with the captive pair. Overwhelmed by their predicament, Yvonne snatched the phone and dialed a number, which Tiana intercepted, allowing the call to go through.

Monica screamed into the phone, “Elaine, why are you doing this to us?”

“You’ve gone too far, Elaine, Yvonne’s voice crackled through the line. “Just because you’re the heiress from Emperor City doesn’t mean we’re at your mercy. You came to us with Kyler, promising to help Monica in the competition, to take down Whitney. You used the Lutz family, instructed Monica to get Whitney jailed, and arranged for her beating in custody... We’ve been your weapon, but now you want us dead. It won’t be that easy!”

With the confession recorded, Whitney had what she needed.

“What do we do with them now?” Tiana asked.

“Let the muscle reveal the truth—it was not Elaine who kidnapped them,” Whitney replied coolly

“But won’t they realize they’ve been deceived and possibly snitch to Elaine?” Tiana was puzzled. Whitney merely smiled. “If they snitch, even better.”

Tiana

could not grasp Whitney’s strategy, but she followed along as Whitney called Valerie, inquiring about Elaine’s expertise in jewelry design.

Valerie confirmed that Elaine had a background in jewelry design and traditional medicine. After moving to Banyan City, Elaine helped her beloved manage his business, quickly rising to a position of power and influence.

Indeed, Elaine was quite similar to Whitney.

Whitney then handed Monica’s ‘design draft’ to Tiana, “Check this out. Elaine would not use her work. She must have bought these designs; there will be a trail.”

The next day, Whitney arrived at Felix’s room to discuss recent developments in United Realty Corporation, especially the worker’s death at the Elate City Sea Bay project. As they chatted outside, Ludwik watched from the window with displeasure.

Elaine, signing papers for Ludwik, noticed Whitney and Felix talking. "What could Whitney and Felix be discussing so intently?" She mused.

Whitney and Felix eventually returned to the room, their conversation hidden, their plans unknown.

Ludwik's features were clouded with gloom as he confronted Whitney. "Really? Chatting up some other guy right in front of me?"

Whitney was momentarily speechless.

He could be so petty.

Felix shuddered, about to reveal the topic of their conversation, but Whitney interrupted him in a timely manner, stepping forward to massage the man's shoulders. "Felix and I were talking about you, silly, What else?"

Ludwik's icy gaze was filled with disbelief. He snorted, "Do you think I'm that easy to fool? You've been all secretive these past days, always disappearing. You and your bestie, sneaking around, up to who knows what."

It was merely a complaint.

Elaine's eyes shifted to Whitney, and she paused, slightly startled.

Whitney had intended to let something slip inadvertently, but L had unwittingly touched upon the truth. She looked up at Elaine, offering a calm smile.

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That smile sent a chill through Elaine, a foreboding sense of dread creeping upon her.

Ludwik glanced at Whitney, reminding her, "I'm getting discharged this afternoon. Don't you run off on me. Before that, we have our four-month prenatal appointment."

"Okay. I'm nearly done with what I needed to do anyway." Whitney puckered her lips obediently, then cast another glance at Elaine.

Elaine's brows furrowed at that look.

Stepping out of the hospital room, Elaine could not shake the feeling that Whitney's gaze had been off. Mulling it over, she was about to reach out to her assistant, Jaxon.

Suddenly, her phone rang. It was Jaxon. "Elaine, there's trouble with Monica and her mother. They're looking for you. Should I take the call or not?"

Elaine had always kept her distance, directing all communications with Yvonne through her assistant, Jaxon.

Elaine's expression shifted, her face paling slightly. "Isn't Monica supposed to be in the hospital? What trouble could she possibly be in?"

She claims she was kidnapped last night.

Elaine's eyes narrowed as she felt the situation growing more ominous. "Patch her through!"

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On the other end of the phone, Yvonne and her daughter were a bundle of nerves. They had been shackled in a desolate storage facility, and after the goons had left, it took all their wits to make their way back to the Valentine Mansion. Now Yvonne's mind was racing—the con was clear as day!

Stammering, Yvonne said, "Madam, we were kidnapped last night. They claimed you sent them. In a moment of spite, I let it slip about how you got Whitney locked up. But then they said it was not you who sent them. Could it have been Whitney? Was she fishing for information? We've been careless, Madam. Please, could you spare us from punishment over Monica's competition."

Elaine could not be bothered to listen to them anymore. Her face turned icy in a flash—it had to be Whitney. She was not just fishing for information; she probably recorded everything.

These two dimwits!

Elaine squinted her eyes furiously, caught off guard by Whitney's sleuthing—she had discovered she was Yvonne's secret backer.

And now she had Yvonne's 'confession.

If Ludwik heard those words....

Elaine clenched her fist tightly. If Whitney had dug this deep, what other evidence might she

hold?

Meanwhile, Ludwik was accompanying Whitney to her four-month prenatal check-up.

Masked and exuding a majestic aura, he undoubtedly drew the gazes of countless expectant mothers, outshining every other husband present.

Whitney lay on the examination bed, her cheeks flushed as the doctor lifted her shirt. Ludwik's eyes lingered on her slender waist, as smooth as a baby's skin, befitting her high-society upbringing.

Such a delicate waist, thankfully complemented by a pleasing behind, otherwise, he would seriously worry about how the baby would make its grand entrance in five months.

Catching Whitney's warning glare, Ludwik sobered his gaze, turning to look at the computer screen opposite

her

In a deep, mellow voice, he asked, "Doctor, when can she start showing?"

The female doctor chuckled at the first-time father's curiosity. "That's something to ask your wife. She's quite slim, and every woman's body is different. She could benefit from some hearty meals."

"Did you hear that? Don't you dare keep your figure on purpose, refusing to eat more," Ludwik chastised, dissatisfied

Whitney was at a loss for words—she was not skimping on food; she just could not gain weight.

Whatever, it was not worth explaining to him.

“Madam, you should be able to feel the baby’s movements now, the doctor said, pressing on Whitney’s belly. “The baby is right here, swimming like a little fish. If you feel a bubbling sensation, that’s the baby moving.”

Whitney touched her stomach, a bit slow on the uptake. She did not feel anything.

She shook her head, puzzled, and Ludwik impatiently moved his hand over. “Silly, let me try!”

His fingers, strong and elegant, rested just below her soft waist. Whitney’s skin blazed for a moment.

The doctor blushed and withdrew her hand.

Of course, Ludwik could not feel the baby move, but he did not remove his hand, keeping it on Whitney’s stomach, his touch igniting a warmth in her. Pregnant women can be sensitive, and when Whitney saw him

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wing to it with his wat she mediatly glared and bit her lip. “What are you doing? L, the baby’s gotten

bisten bia away Let the doctor is waiting”

Coly then did Ludwik turn sharply catching the doctors embarrassed flush. He snorted.

He got up gumpy.

After the ultrasound, Whitney was helped up and told to wait outside for the pictures.

She dutifully left noticing the examination room door closing behind her.

inside the room, Ludwik’s demeanor shifted from playful to serious. His eyes, dark and probing, were fixed on the ultrasound image on the computer—it showed two tiny beings.

The doctor's expression grew solemn "Mr. Lippert, do we continue to show the single pregnancy ultrasound to your wife, or do we reveal the twins?"

Ludwik's brow furrowed.

Whitney was carrying twins, a fact discovered during a two-month check-up.

Initially, their marriage was just a contract, and Ludwik was guarded, worried that if they had twins, she might want to take one away. Besides, he had his family to consider.

So, he had been lying to her letting her believe it was a single baby.

Now, with genuine feelings involved, revealing the truth seemed less straightforward.

"Forget it. When they're born, it'll be a surprise for her, Ludwik said, a low chuckle in his voice as the doctor understood his wishes

Whitney received the single pregnancy ultrasound picture and scrutinized it—so tiny. It was hard to tell if the baby resembled her or its father.

She tucked the image away, and just then, a message from Tiana popped up: [Yvonne and Monica called Elaine's assistant]

Tiana had been keeping tabs on the mother-daughter duo.

Whitney pressed her lips. This meant Elaine was now aware of Monica's late-night ordeal.

She texted Tiana back: [Come to the hospital. It's showtime.]

In the private ward, Felix was finalizing Mr. Lippert's discharge papers.

The man had been hospitalized for a week and was eager to return to the office. He frowned at Whitney and said. "Go home after your check-up."

I have a few things to take care of, then I'll head back. Be home early tonight, I need to talk to you, L."

Ludwik left without a second thought, with an important meeting on his afternoon agenda.

Once he was gone, Whitney calmly packed his things, and Tiana walked in, handing her a laptop case and several documents.

Together, they left the ward, and Tiana glanced around before speaking in a clear, moderate tone, "Banyan City Prison is a long drive. Do you want me to come with you?"

"Aren't you busy with work? Forget it."

They conversed while stepping into the elevator and descending. Whitney then drove off to Banyan City Prison. A shadowy figure emerged from the shadows and swiftly made a call, "Ms. Elaine, Tiana handed Whitney a laptop case and some documents. It's probably the evidence they have. Whitney is on her way to the prison, possibly to meet with the construction worker's family..."

Clearly, Whitney also suspected their involvement in her misfortune!

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In the hospital room, Whitney urged Ludwik to head home early, hinting she had something important to discuss. Elaine's composure was shattered. She could not let Whitney present any incriminating evidence to Ludwik. There was still time, Whitney had not spoken yet!

"Jaxon," Elaine commanded icily, "I need two guys to intercept Whitney on her way there. And those documents she has they need to be destroyed."

As Whitney approached the crossroads, her phone buzzed with a text from Tiana. [Did you set up the GPS tracker and the

bug? Whitney, I'm worried. This is too risky.]

[We don't have enough to pin it on Elaine directly; we need to force her hand.] Whitney replied, her gaze sharp as she noted the car trailing her.

At 4:30 PM, Ludwik was in a meeting at United Realty Corporation when his phone rang. Tiana's voice was fraught with urgency.

"Mr. L, Whitney's been kidnapped!"

"What?" The tall man stood abruptly, his face draining of color, bewildered by the news.

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“Who the hell kidnapped her from the hospital

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uspect it is Elaine Tiana said with a certainty that could not be shaken

paused, clearly skeptical. “What are you on about? Did Whitney put you up to this?”

It’s true. Whitney was abducted on her way to Banyan City Prison. Mr. L, if you don’t believe me, check if Elaine’s even at the office”

Doubt gnawing at him. Ludwik sent Felix to look for Elaine.

Felix returned with news. “Elaine left the office about 20 minutes ago and said she was grabbing some coffee”

Ludwik’s brooding brow furrowed even deeper, a chill settling in his gaze.

“Mr. L we need to hurry and save Whitney! I’m right downstairs from your office.”

The towering man stepped out of the corporate building. “Felix, gather a team.”

Whitney’s safety was paramount.

Ludwik climbed into Tiana’s car, and with the tracker leading the way, she followed it.

Meanwhile, in a farmhouse on the outskirts, Whitney was tossed into a corner by two men.

They hastily rummaged through her laptop and some documents before making their exit.

Elaine appeared behind the house, her eyes cold as ice. She powered up the laptop, and there it was – recordings of Monica, Yvonne, and Valerie, as well as surveillance footage of Monica conversing with her at the hospital!

The documents were evidences of the shady dealings over Monica's preliminary contest submissions.

Another item caught her eye- a photo she had given to the laborer's family of Whitney. And now it had fallen into Whitney's hands.

She had to destroy the evidence herself to be at ease.

After setting everything ablaze, Elaine prepared to make a swift exit.

But as she stepped out, a car screeched to a stop by the roadside. Ludwik and Tiana emerged and marched toward her.

Cornered by them, Elaine knew she had no time to hide.

Ludwik fixed Elaine with an icy stare, disbelief flashing in his eyes. "Did you kidnap Whitney?"

Tiana had already sent someone to retrieve Whitney from the farmhouse.

Freeing herself from her binds, Whitney stepped out, composed and cool.

In a matter of seconds, Elaine's expression shifted dramatically. She was smart, and piecing it together, she realized something this had been a trap within a trap, Whitney was not after the evidence, she was after her!

In her desperation, Elaine had played right into their hands.

"Why did you kidnap Whitney, Elaine?" Ludwik's fury was palpable as the truth lay bare before him.

Elaine, however composed, struggled to defend herself, "I did not, Bro, I was just trying to get something from Whitney..."

"What could you possibly want? Is it this?" Whitney returned with a laptop from Tiana's car, a cold smirk on her lips. "I have the evidence of your schemes against me, Elaine. So you panicked, fearing I'd show it to L, and you

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rushed to kidnap me and destroy the evidence?"

She flipped open the laptop and laid bare the truth before L, Elaine's facade crumbling.

Whitney had made backups. It was a trap all along

After reviewing the damning evidence and witnessing Elaine's attempt to abduct Whitney, Ludwik's expression turned frosty

Whitney looked up and said, "I just wanted to prove that Elaine has been plotting against me and our child from the start. She orchestrated the attack in jail, not Monica. L, so many incidents lately have been her attempt to harm me, including the laborer seeking revenge – she distributed my photo to his family. If you need proof, just check her or her assistant's computer for downloads of my picture."

"No need

Ludwik had seen enough. His trust in Elaine had turned to utter disappointment.

He had always believed Elaine would not dare cross him. Despite his repeated rejections, he thought she had given up and was not so thick-skinned or cunning. She had helped his company several times, and he had conflated professional trust with personal.

Moreover, Elaine had admitted to seeing him as nothing more than a brother, even agreeing to let him find her a suitable husband

Thus, he never thought much about it.

Plus, Elaine had been helping to smooth things between him and Whitney, even caring for the child in Whitney's belly.

Witnessing all that, he started to trust Elaine even more.

His eyes flashed with a glacial light as he faced Elaine. "You've truly disappointed me."

"Bro, I'm wronged— all this evidence is fabricated!" Elaine pleaded with pitiful eyes.

"Is your abduction of Whitney and attempt to destroy evidence also fabricated?" Ludwik's voice was a chilling calm as he turned to Felix, "Spread the word:

Elaine is suspended from her vice-presidential duties pending investigation, Elaine, think hard about how you'll explain your actions to the Bartels family when you return to Emperor City."

"Bro! This whole setup is Whitney's doing, can't you see? You know my character. How could I want to harm your child? Are you really going to believe her slander over me? Don't suspend me, Bro. I've done so much for you..." Elaine's desperation was palpable as she reached out to him.

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Ludwik's response was unyielding, "Felix, have the bodyguards escort her home and keep watch."

Whitney clenched her fists tight.

As Elaine was ushered into the car, her gaze pierced Whitney as if to say she was not defeated yet.

Whitney met that icy stare with calm resolve. She knew giving this cunning woman another chance could cost her and her child their lives. This counter strike had to be merciless—and it was.

She took a deep breath.

Once Elaine was in the car, her phone lit up with an alert from the Imperial Gem Corporation system: [Elaine is suspended from her position, pending investigation.]

The news spread like wildfire, igniting a storm of whispers among employees.

One moment, she was Ludwik's trusted vice president; the next, his cold indifference had shattered her world.

Damned Whitney, that wretch. She had struck Elaine when she least expected it, threatening even her standing in the company.

Whitney tore away her facade, causing her sudden betrayal to shatter Ludwik's trust.

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Elaine clenched her fists, vowing that Whitney would not get off easy!

Since she was being pushed into a corner, Elaine did not mind dropping a bombshell on Whitney. She steadied her breathing, a cold smile creeping across her face as she scrolled through the contacts on her phone, her gaze landing on Ashton's name. Her eyes narrowed, and a sly grin played on her lips.

In the car, Ludwik was silent, the tension palpable.

Whitney remained quiet as well.

It was not until they pulled into the mansion's driveway that Ludwik lifted his heavy gaze and fixed it on her for what seemed an eternity.

Finally, he wrapped his arms around Whitney's delicate form. The flickering light and shadow in the car made his gaze seem even more mysterious. He held her hand tightly twice before speaking in a low, cold voice, "I'm sorry for my misjudgment. But I can't condone you putting yourself in danger!"

"If I had not, you would never have seen Elaine's hostility toward me," Whitney said helplessly.

She knew how to play the game – getting angry with him now would be foolish. She was aiming for reconciliation and to fend off Elaine's advances.

In a soft, aggrieved tone, she said, "You've known her for many years, and you think you know her completely. Always treating her like a sister. She plays the part well, has strong work skills, and sabotages me behind your back – it's normal that you did not see it. You said you'd find a way to make her leave, which touched me. But I can't tolerate her threatening my safety."

Ludwik rubbed his temples, his expression stern. His relationship with Elaine was not as simple as Whitney thought.

His voice was cold as ice. "Anyone who harbors ill will against our baby cannot be forgiven."

Whitney looked up, her eyes bright and questioning. She could not help but ask, "Why is she so fixated on you, to the point of not even tolerating your child? You said she was like a sister to you. Is that really true?"

Ludwik stiffened, then turned his head to gaze deeply into her piercing eyes.

This was the third time she had asked him, but once a lie starts, it takes countless more to sustain it.

He frowned, "What exactly do you suspect? No matter what she feels for me, I have no feelings for her, and that's all you need to know"

Whitney pushed down the flicker of doubt in her heart, her feelings for him growing deeper. That very morning, they had witnessed their child's first ultrasound together.

She chose to trust this man.

But she did not know that her blind trust would soon be shattered.

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Whitney headed over to the cottage to join Natalie for dinner. Natalie seemed to be over the moon all day. probably after catching a glimpse of the ultrasound picture, her grin so wide it barely fit her face. She looked at Whitney, almost bursting with excitement, as if she had the most wonderful news but could not share it. Whitney was puzzled. It was just a baby, was it not? Natalie was acting like she was expecting twins or something, she was so ecstatic.

Elaine was in her apartment, waiting silently for dusk to fall.

Then she called Ashton.

No matter when she reached out, this man would appear at a moment's notice

She had basked in his affection and love for years, feeling utterly entitled. So what if Valerie had schemed and married him? She was nothing but a pitiful worm.

As expected, hearing Elaine's voice laced with sobs, Ashton immediately said he would come over.

Elaine hung up with a smirk, calculating the time. She sipped a few glasses of red wine, and then the doorbell

rang.

It was Ashton, having a run-in with the security guard outside.

Ludwik's security guard could not stop Ashton, which was precisely why she had concocted this plan.

Elaine quickly tugged at her neckline, creating a picture of disarray, and with a loud crash, she smashed a wine glass.

At the sound, Ashton kicked the door open with his long legs.

The man in a light gray coat entered with an air of cold authority. "Elaine!"

He brusquely lifted the staggering woman. Elaine looked up at him with a half-smile and teary eyes. "Ashton, you came."

"How could you drink so much? Don't you know your stomach is delicate?" Ashton's brows furrowed in concern. Her eyes, mysterious and filled with hurt, looked at him as tears quickly followed. "You always remember about my stomach, Ashton. Ludwik, he knows nothing. After all these years, I've been nothing but open-hearted to him, yet he chose to believe Whitney's few words instead. He fired me today, and I'm just... really upset."

She wept pitifully, and Ashton's handsome face turned frosty. "You've been hurt by him again. What has Ludwik done this time? That Whitney, I've told you not to be too kind-hearted. Not everyone appreciates it. You're just too good-hearted."

Elaine's eyes narrowed slightly, knowing exactly how to project an image of innocence and kindness before a

man.

She had been planting seeds about her helping Whitney in Ashton's mind.

To Ashton, she was nothing short of a goddess.

Elaine shook her head in a fragile manner. "Maybe because I had no ill intentions, I assumed everyone else was the same. I felt that way about Valerie, too. Even though she schemed to take you from me, I had no designs on you, and I never wanted to get in your way. I always wished you and her the best."

“Enough of that. That woman is full of schemes. Haven’t her plots against you been numerous since you were kids?” Ashton’s voice was cold when he mentioned Valerie.

Elaine smiled inwardly, never missing a chance to trouble Valerie.

She mentioned offhandedly. “Today, Whitney presented evidence, claiming it was Valerie who told her that you helped me bribe international judges. Because of that, Whitney misunderstood that I was using Monica against her.

How could I? I loved Ludwik so much, but still, I almost gave up when Whitney and he had their fake marriage. Yet she keeps pressing me.

Ashton, why do they have to bully me? I feel so indignant. I was Ludwik’s fiancée by right! Whitney stole my love. I’ve already retreated, yet she still corners me...”

Her voice trailed off in a sob.

Ashton frowned deeply, a chill setting in his heart. “Whitney is so vicious—no wonder she and Valerie are cut from the same cloth. I heard they are best friends, birds of a feather.

You were too naive. You should’ve stood your ground. After a year, Ludwik was supposed to marry you.”

“Shh, we can’t speak of that,” Elaine replied, her face a mask of woeful sorrow, “Ludwik is keeping it a secret from Whitney. He told us not to say a word.”

“What? That bastard, he’s even hiding your status? What kind of man does that? Is he completely biased towards Whitney?”

Ashton’s expression darkened, feeling the injustice on Elaine’s behalf.

Elaine wanted precisely this reaction, which was why she had called him. Ludwik had once hidden from Whitney that Elaine was his fiancée, and Elaine did not dare defy Ludwik. Parker and Nolan would not dare play the informant, either.

Thus, Whitney remained unaware of Elaine’s true identity.

That night at Alpine Springs Resort, when he coldly called her his sister, Elaine’s heart ached.

But she bore it to gain his trust, pretending to be the sister, waiting to take Whitney down once and for all. But now, Whitney had foiled her plans, leaving her defeated.

This secret of her being the fiancée had to be revealed to Whitney!

No one dared to do that except Ashton, who always had a bone to pick with Ludwik

Thus, Elaine had set her sights on Ashton that afternoon.

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After all, he listened to her, adored her, and was always ready to fight her battles.

Elaine's heart laughed coldly as she quietly observed Ashton's rising anger, delicately imploring, "Let it be. I can bear this grievance. Just don't say anything to Whitney or Ludwik. Perhaps I'm not meant to marry Ludwik after all. It just hurts to think of all the years I've invested."

"You shouldn't suffer like this!" Ashton asserted, his face chilling, "Don't worry, I'll see justice done for you."

Elaine's tearful eyes turned to him, filled with gratitude. "Having you say that means everything to me, Ashton. Maybe I should have liked you... If only I had not fallen for Ludwik a month too early. But you know, you're really special, right?"

Ashton felt a stir in his heart; he remembered how she had saved him from the icy depths of a glacier, risking

her life when she was so frail.

He kept that gratitude close to his heart.

"Elaine, you're special too."

Elaine, pretending to be heavily intoxicated, leaned in closer to him, and in a missed beat, her soft lips nearly brushed against his.

In that moment, a flash of defiance sparked in Ashton's eyes. Then, the memory of Valerie's icy lips, their sweet

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taste invading his thoughts, surged forth.

Instinctively, he pushed Elaine away, murmuring, "Elaine, you're drunk, and I'm not Ludwik."

Elaine stiffened; she had merely wanted to play a game of flirtation with this man, pretending to be inebriated.

Relieved to see her asleep. Ashton sighed in frustration, lifting her gently onto the bed.

After adjusting his collar with a quick, practiced motion, he strode out of the room, pulled out a cigarette, and left the apartment behind.

On the bed inside the room, Elaine's eyes fluttered open. She traced the direction of his departing car with her gaze, slowly outlining her lips into a smirk.

In the manor's villa, Whitney sat on the cashmere carpet of her bedroom floor.

Tiana's voice buzzed through the phone. "Whitney, your move today was brilliant! Now, L will finally see how two-faced Elaine is. It's time to kick her to the curb!"

That was precisely Whitney's goal—to peel Elaine away from L's side.

But how deeply were their work lives intertwined?

Lost in thought, Whitney's phone buzzed with an unfamiliar number.

Puzzled, she answered the call, and a distinctively deep male voice resonated, "Ms. Valentine? This is Ash

Chapter 124

Whitney's brow twitched as she answered the phone with a hint of unfamiliarity, "Ashton?"

His tone was icy. "Are you free? Come down for a chat!"

Whitney paused, then suddenly stood up and went to the window. Sure enough, outside the villa was a luxury car with its headlights flashing.

This Ashton seemed to be related to L, but she did not know him. What was there to talk about?

The man's approach was aggressive, and Whitney was on guard. She thought about calling L but decided she did not want to seem overly dependent.

Instead, she confided in her friend Tiana before changing her clothes and going

Ashton took her away without a word, just one contemptuous glance.

going downstairs.

That one glance was enough for Whitney to sense trouble. Coupled with what Valerie had told her about Ashton's fondness for Elaine, Whitney's impression of the man soured.

Ashton led her to a coffee shop, and once they were seated under the bright lights, Whitney sized up the handsome man before her.

He was almost as tall as L, but where L was composed and refined, Ashton had a roguish air about him. His demeanor was entirely different from his brother Nolan's flirtatious charm. It was clear he was dangerous.

With his hands in his pockets, he started on an unfriendly note. "Ms. Valentine, a woman should have some conscience. Why are you bullying Elaine?"

Whitney was taken aback, but then she chuckled, guessing what he was about to say next.

"Did Elaine run to you with her woes?" Whitney clasped her hands together. "You seem quite protective of her."

"That's none of your business," Ashton replied, his impression of Whitney far from good.

"You've already snatched L, even if it's just for a year. For someone from your modest background, that should be enough. Keep your claws retracted. Do you even know, what Elaine means to him? What right do you have to frame her?"

"I framed her? Ashton, perhaps you should ask L about today's events first. She tried to harm my child; shouldn't I fight back?"

"L is bewitched by you. Of course, he'll believe you! You and Valerie are besties, right? Ganging up on Elaine, bullying her, do you find that amusing?"

Ashton's eyes were cold.

Whitney's eyes danced with laughter, but then she understood why Valerie had been so unhappy since returning from abroad.

Her eyes, once full of life, now held a cold pallor.

Ashton was so protective of Elaine; He did not love Valerie and might even despise her.

Whitney also had to admire Elaine. Even with her heart elsewhere, she had Ashton wrapped around her finger.

Whitney tried to explain, "Elaine did many things to try and make me miscarry ..."

Ashton cut her off. "That's what you deserve. Everyone knows you climbed into L's car with ulterior motives. Ms. Valentine, do you know you've usurped Elaine's love? She was the legitimate fiancée, betrothed to him years ago by their families. She doesn't want your child; what's wrong with that?"

Whitney's mind went blank as if struck by lightning..

What did he just say? Fiancée?

1/3

14.07

Seeing Whitney's change in expression, Ashton remained furious. "You think ignorance is an excuse? Elaine has been in love with L since her teens, silently by his side. If it were not for you, they would eventually marry. You know she learned jewelry design and complex business operations for him, right? Her youth revolves around him. And you interfere, and you still think you're justified?"

They say you want to cling to him, not let go? Ha, in a year, he'll have to marry Elaine. You, a child-bearing woman, had better not delude yourself. They are the real couple!"

After his tirade. Whitney fell silent, her heart sinking.

Elaine was L's fiancée, with a formal engagement. Why did he lie to her?

She felt like an idiot.

Ashton continued to berate her, calling her the mistress. Was she really?

Whitney did not remember how she left the coffee shop.

She did not return to the villa; she went straight to Tiana's house. The blow was too much; she could not digest it and did not want to face L

Ashton watched her leave in a daze, his expression cold. He stood up and made a call, his tone suddenly softer. "Elaine, don't be upset. I've made things clear to Whitney. She seems genuinely unaware of your status, but now she knows and will surely be ashamed!"

Elaine's reply was uneasy, "Ashton, why are you so impulsive? By confronting Ludwik, I'm afraid..."

"What's a few more fights between us?" Ashton was unconcerned. "Get some rest."

Hanging up, Elaine's feigned weakness vanished, replaced by a cold smirk.

Now that Whitney knew her status, Elaine was sure that with Whitney's pride and image as Banyan City's top socialite, she would not cling to Ludwik anymore. With Ludwik's resolute nature, trouble would arise, and Elaine could turn her defeat into victory.

Ashton had indeed done her a huge favor.

At midnight, Ludwik finished his work and returned to the manor to find it eerily quiet.

Whitney was not in his bedroom.

Halfway through removing his tie, he called her number with a grim face, but she did not answer.

She had been so obedient earlier.

A bad premonition settled in Ludwik's heart. He strode downstairs and commanded Felix, "Drive."

He knew exactly where to find her.

Twenty minutes later, the Bentley pulled up to Tiana's apartment.

In the deep winter, a man in a black coat, imposing and stern, knocked on Tiana's door.

Tiana opened the door, her face clouding at the sight of him. "Mr. L, what brings you here at this time?"

"Is Whitney here? What's the upset about now?" Ludwik was not in the mood for pleasantries.

Tiana rolled her eyes dramatically. Clearly, this guy had no clue about the storm that was brewing.

Bowing to the pressure, Tiana reluctantly called out to the person inside, "Whitney... he's here. No use hiding anymore. Just lay it all out for him!"

Whitney emerged from the shadows.

Ludwik's handsome features were stern as he fixed his gaze on the petite woman before him.

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He reached out to wrap his arm around her waist, intending to whisk her away, but Whitney dodged his touch.

As he looked down, he noticed the redness around her eyes for the first time.

“What’s wrong?” Ludwik’s thick brows furrowed with concern.

At his question, Whitney could not help but lift her gaze to meet his. Under the porch light, his eyes were deep and mysterious, hidden behind a metaphorical mask that made him unreadable.

Indeed, how could she see through a man whose very identity was a mystery to her?

So, armed with her naive trust, did he think he could deceive her time and time again?

Whitney confronted him with a frank stare, “Elaine is your fiancée. When I asked you this afternoon, you kept it from me!”

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She was floored she had speculated that Land Elaine were probably chums, given their deep professional ties and then families being old money allies

But engaged? That was beyond her wildest guess.

So where did that leave her?

Lipon hearing her words, Ludwik’s handsome face froze, his features turning rigid.

grip tightened around her delicate hand, his gaze fierce. “Who told you that?”

“Ashton) So, it’s true? Whitney’s laugh was hollow, tinged with sorrow, “You and her, childhood sweethearts with a wedding on the horizon Once our child is born, you’re set to marry her. Then why be serious with me? Now get it. I’m just a fling, but now I’ve been cast as the mistress. L, are you amused by playing me?”

Her soft eyes drilled into him.

Ludwik’s face went cold, “He’s talking nonsense. It’s not like that at all!”

“Did you lie to me?”

“wouldn’t call it lying” His frown deepened, and an oppressive aura surrounded him.

Releasing Whitney’s hand, Ludwik shoved his hands in his pockets, blocking her path, his tone detached as he explained, “Elaine was my fiancée, but only for three months. The family dumped a failing business on me, with everyone waiting to see me fall. I was a self-made man, and the Bartels family put her by my side. I needed her status and used her to ward off some women later. I made it clear to the Bartels that she was like a sister to me. The marriage was their one-sided attempt to promote her. If I liked her that much, you would not have stood a chance!”

His mockery was evident, pride etched in his features.

“So, he truly believes he did not deceive me?” Whitney thought.

As long as he did not admit to having a fiancée, there was not one, right? Elaine adored him, and Ashton’s certainty indicated she had been by his side for years as his fiancée.

Whitney wondered if he ever realized that Elaine’s harassment these past days might all stem from his secrecy. The hurt inside her had no outlet, and she offered a self-deprecating smile, “I never wanted to be a mistress, and I doubt any woman does. If you’re serious about someone, you should clear up your relationships first. L. if you’d told me at Alpine Springs Resort that you had a fiancée, especially her, I would’ve never agreed to date. you...”

“So, you’re having second thoughts again, huh?” His face darkened abruptly, cutting her off.

This woman was always so uncertain about their relationship.

Anger surged through him as he spoke coldly, I’ve explained myself. She’s not my fiancée now, was only in name for three months. Why can’t you let it go? Do I strike you as the type to lie? You believe the gossip but not me?”

The truth was, he had lied to her, whether out of a desire to avoid trouble or a subconscious reluctance to share his personal life.

Whitney shook her head, her eyes dimming. "You haven't grasped my point. I may have fallen on hard times, but I still have my pride. A transaction forcing me to bear your child is one thing. But to do so with feelings for a man engaged to another, I can't."

"What are you saying?"

"We need to cool off." Whitney turned away, shutting the door behind her.

Thus Tom, the detimeeting man did not stop her

But the moment the door closed, a loud thump erupted from the adjacent wall.

Tiana, trembling steamed herself against the wall "Why on earth is this guy a CEO? He should be hauling bricks on a construction site with that strength"

Whitney could not focus on her friend's attempt at humor, sinking into the couch, her eyes weary.

She realized I never saw her as an equal, adept at controlling her, demanding her compliance, yet stingy with explanations.

This relationship was exhausting

Tiana asked. "When you say cool off, do you mean to break up, Whitney?"

Whitney paused, then said. can't stand the scom of being the mistress. He doesn't understand. I'm angry because he lied and did not respect me."

Tiana knew her dilemma, sighed deeply, and reached for her phone. "You're so upset. Should I call Valerie to keep you company?"

But when she dialed, Valerie did not pick up.

At the Fuller Mansion, dinner had just ended when Valerie grabbed her phone, ready to leave.

Ashton's mother, Matilda, sat in her wheelchair, eyeing her like she was some kind of streetwalker.

Ever since the car accident left her legs disabled, Matilda harbored a deep-seated resentment towards Valerie.

Today, with Beckford Fuller, Ashton's father, present, she restrained herself.

Beckford looked at Valerie with kindness. "Don't go just yet. I've called thatascal Ashton home."

Sure enough, headlights appeared outside the villa—a Range Rover, befitting the ruggedly handsome man with an air of danger about him.

Had Ashton really come back?

A flicker of joy crossed Valerie's somber, elongated eyes.

Ever since their yearlong marriage, he had avoided the Fuller Mansion, all because she had schemed her way into his bed here, with Beckford forcing him into marriage.

He loathed her.

But today, he had returned. Could it be....

"Young Master likes sweet pudding. Come with me, ma'am, and serve him a bowl," a servant suggested cheerfully.

Somehow, Valerie found herself rising to fetch the pudding from the kitchen for him.

As she returned, she collided with the dashing man entering the house.

Ashton greeted softly. "Mom."

Matilda finally smiled.

Then, Ashton faced his father with a cold, stern expression. "Why did you call me back?"

"We have family dinners every week. Valerie has finally come back to the country. Why aren't you here?" Beckford said, displeased. "Sit down and eat."

As Ashton's gaze shifted, he saw Valerie approaching with the bowl, heading towards his seat.

The kitchen's soft lighting caressed her slender, unique face, her cool silhouette seeming more alluring.

For a moment, Ashton was caught off guard, the memory of her unclothed body abroad flashing in his mind.

A strange dryness caught in his throat, followed quickly by the memory of Elaine's aggrieved face.

Excellent!

He had yet to confront this woman for her trouble, and now she was throwing herself in his path.

Valerie looked to assert her presence before him again, and Ashton's eyes grew icy.

Just as Valerie set the bowl down for him, her gentle expression was met with his abrupt action, flipping the bowl and utensils, and her face set into a hard mask.

Ashton rose to his feet and yanked her up, his voice a whisper only they could hear, "I should've known that with your vicious streak, you'd be in cahoots with Whitney, picking on Elaine. Get upstairs now."

The flicker of warmth in Valerie's heart plummeted into an abyss.

What was she thinking? That he would bury the hatchet and come home for a cozy family dinner? Oh, no, he was here to champion Elaine.

Because Whitney had asked her a few questions, he was holding her accountable.

"Since I'm so vile, just put me out of my misery, or else your precious Elaine better watch out." Valerie sneered.

As she mocked him, her delicate features shone with a captivating luster.

Her slender, cold eyes were striking.

Something tightened in Ashton's throat, his voice icy. "You think I wouldn't dare?"

He hauled her up the stairs by her waist.

"What are you doing, Ashton?" At that moment, Nolan burst in from outside, ready to rush to Valerie's rescue.

Ashton caught his brother's protective gaze on Valerie, growing even more icy and resolute, and suddenly bent down to kiss her cheek, "What's wrong? Can't I show a little affection to my wife without you playing the hero?" Beckford was about to flare up but instead managed a subtle cough.

Nolan's handsome face flushed with concern, his eyes darting to Valerie.

She gave him a bitter 'mind your own business' look.

Seeing this exchange from the corner of his eye, Ashton felt a surge of irritation pulsing through him. With a defiant heave, he shouldered Valerie and tossed her onto the bed in their bedroom.

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The door was shut tight, and his towering frame pressed down upon the bed, engulfing Valerie's petite face in his grasp. A mix of disgust and an uncontrollable desire to touch her surged through him as he began to peel away her clothing.

As her fair skin was exposed, the fire within him raged out of control—a fire certainly kindled earlier at Elaine's apartment.

But he could not touch Elaine, so his hunger was redirected towards this woman.

He leaned in, ready to bite.

Valerie pushed him away coldly, her voice laced with biting sarcasm as she said, "You're here to hassle me over Elaine, right? Hypocrite, you loathe me, so when did you start craving my body? Enjoyed it last time, didn't you?"

Ashton's face twisted as if she had stripped away his mask, a flash of embarrassment in his eyes. He grabbed her fiercely, his voice icy with mockery. "Don't you get it? You're just a stand-in. Even now, it's her I'm thinking about."

"Get off me!" Valerie could not stand it anymore.

Her heart felt like it was being pierced with a sharp spike.

"She's so wonderful, why don't you go to her? Didn't Ludwik cast her aside?"

"If she had not been in love with Ludwik, do you think I would have married you?"

So, this marriage was just charity from Elaine?

A bitter smile crossed Valerie's heart, her face growing colder. Suddenly, she laughed. "Good thing Ludwik isn't as blind as you. You're the only one who treasures that woman. You have no idea how evil she is!"

Ashton gripped her chin tightly, "And you think you have the right to talk about her? She risked her life to save me once, and when I asked you to get help, you did not."

Looking into his cold eyes, Valerie suddenly lost the will to argue.

This was why Ashton hated her.

Back then, she had saved him, nearly freezing to death while getting him clothes.

But returning, she saw Elaine administering CPR to Ashton, and Elaine even slandered her, claiming she had delayed getting help.

That was when Ashton's heart turned cold.

Valerie did not know just how malicious Elaine was in her targeting.

Valerie had tried to explain, time and again, that she was the one who saved him.

But there was something about explanations, the more you give, the more misunderstandings grow.

Ashton saw her as a selfish woman who left him for dead.

Now, she had given up on explaining.

She could not care less about the man's misunderstandings and indifference.

Valerie pushed him away forcefully, refusing to be tormented any longer. Then, suddenly, a chilling voice, echoed from downstairs, "Ashton, get out here!"

Ashton tensed; even he feared that voice.

Outside. Nolan rushed down. "Holy smokes, why are you here. Ludwik?"

Ashton, pressing a hand to his forehead, had no choice but to get up and straighten his shirt.

Valerie seized the chance to kick him away and distanced herself.

Downstairs, Ashton emerged to face the imposing Ludwik, a formidable presence that made one's blood run

cold

Ashton carried an air of rebellion, but even he fell short in presence.

Ludwik strode over with icy determination and kicked at Ashton, his voice a cold interrogation, "Who gave you the right to wag your tongue about Whitney?"

Ashton staggered, quickly regaining his footing, and returned a punch in rage, "You dare hit your friend over some woman?"

"Anyone who meddles in my business is looking for trouble."

Ludwik was ruthless.

Nolan and Parker stood by, uneasy in the presence of Ludwik's wrath.

Ashton often targeted Ludwik over Elaine in the past.

Ludwik, indifferent to Elaine, had looked the other way.

But this time, touching on Whitney had provoked Ludwik to violence.

Ashton's surprise turned to anger. "Elaine was your fiancée. You've fallen for that scheming Whitney?"

"Centuries ago, Elaine and I were done," Ludwik said, his voice dropping into a cold rage as he was reminded of how Whitney did not trust him.

He landed

another punch on Ashton and walked away to smoke in the night, warning, "Ashton, say another word to Whitney, and don't blame me for ending our friendship for good."

From the upstairs balcony, Valerie watched, shock flickering through her as she saw Ludwik's gorgeous face.

Tiana had told her that Whitney married a mysterious man of unknown status, likely a significant figure.

Valerie had assumed he was one of Elaine's many suitors.

Little did she know, Whitney had not only married the renowned Ludwik Lippert but had also captured his heart. Thinking of Elaine, Valerie felt a surge of satisfaction.

Whatever unfolded downstairs, Ashton left in a cold fury.

Nolan and Parker, always on Ludwik's side, stood smoking in the night. Nolan looked at Ludwik's dark

expression and ventured, "Whitney asked me about it at the gala. I was shocked, Ludwik, Why lie and make me cover for you? I knew Whitney would be upset."

"She asked you, too?" Ludwik's eyes turned frosty.

Nolan reasoned, "She must have suspected something, I mean, with such an excellent sister by your side, which woman would not?"

"And you didn't think to warn me?" Ludwik's voice was icy.

Nolan rolled his eyes, complaining inwardly. "Who dares to confront you about lying to your wife, Ludwik Lippert?"

Nolan wondered, "Why didn't you tell Whitney the truth from the start?"

“The ties between Elaine and me are complex. Whitney doesn’t even know who I am. How could I explain? Besides, I didn’t want trouble,” Ludwik said in frustration.

Typical male pride, now complicating matters.

Hon shook his head. “Then did you properly explain things to Whitney?”

Cubenk’s page turmedics. She refused to listen to my explanation, insisting she’s become the mistress.”

vadjamad

wer adjusted his glasses, chucking Do you think Ludwik is the type to coax a woman? Please.”

masikan nodded knowing as Ludwa shot a chilling glare, the night deepening around them.

Notar looked at Luck with a mix of sympathy and exasperation. “You know, Whitney isn’t entirely wrong to

De does. You broke off your engagement with Elaine in private without making it public. And as Elaine stays in the company, maintaining the balance of power for the Lippert family, the Lipperts and the Banels wit assume she’s still in line for the top spot. In everyone else’s eyes, isn’t Whitney the mistress?

must’ve been strong—arming her without a proper explanation.”

_lower tell silve

Parker rubbed his temples. “Ah, the trials and tribulations of dating an alpha male.”

Ludwik shot them a frosty glance. “So, what am I supposed to do?”

Parker squatted down on the spot and pulled out his smartphone.

Ludwik glanced over and saw him typing into the search engine: [I did something really moronic, how do I make it up to my girlfriend?]

Ludwik’s handsome face darkened

Nolan could not help but add. "You messed up. You deceived your wife. Even a dignified man like you can make mistakes. No worries, we'll think of something."

Parker read out some advice from the internet, "Buy a durian, give the flesh to your wife, and you kneel on the

husks

Nolan shuddered, not daring to look at Ludwik.

Parker continued, "Go shirtless, strap on some thorns, and kneel at the front door. Or just go for chemical

castration."

Nolan could not listen anymore. Those have to be female netizens! Look up some advice from the guys."

Parker searched again. "Just keep buying her gifts."

Take her straight to a fancy hotel."

*Get her 9,999 roses."

Ludwik's proud face remained impassive. The second option is not bad. The first and third are too cliché."

Nolan and Parker had nothing to add.

Parker stood up, patting Ludwik on the shoulder with grave sincerity, "I'll spend all night looking up relationship manuals and get back to you tomorrow"

"She might want to break up with me by tomorrow. I need something tonight!" Ludwik declared decisively.

Parker thought, "Jesus Christ, Ludwik..."

After a sleepless night, Whitney prepared to leave Tiana's apartment for the office the next morning.

As soon as she opened the door, she was greeted by an overwhelming sea of flowers that nearly knocked her off her feet!

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Tiana heard Whitney's loud inhale and hurried out of her apartment, only to be greeted by a heart-shaped arrangement of 999 roses lying on her doorstep, with a limited edition designer purse in the center.

900

There was no card, but so clearly the giver was quite aloof

Tiana exchanged a knowing look with Whitney. They both had the same suspicion.

with a twitch of her lips, Tiana said. "It's not from L, is it? He was so harsh on you last night, but now he's realized his mistake? The big boss is actually making an effort."

"Wow is that an alligator skin purse? She exclaimed, picking it up with admiration,

Whitney's small face twitched, and she gave her a look that silently forced her to put it down. Sighing, Whitney

1. d. How boning, just ignore it."

She thought he would have reflected overnight and at least understood where he went wrong.

But apparently, he had not. What was the meaning behind this extravagant display?

"Aren't you pleased?" Tiana asked cautiously, "I thought L would just give you the cold shoulder again, but it seems he's made some progress."

Whitney pressed her lips, feeling tom, and grabbed her briefcase to head to work.

At Skye Gem, the morning passed without incident.

But at lunchtime, a chef from a five-star hotel made a special delivery, bringing a gourmet meal prepared especially for expectant mothers, addressed to the general manager, Whitney.

The secretarial pool was abuzz.

Was the general manager being courted by someone?

Whitney, with a cold expression, had security escort the chef away.

At three in the afternoon, two couriers arrived with armfuls of tulips air-flown from the Netherlands, destined for Whitney's office.

Now, the whole company was abuzz. Someone was indeed wooing the general manager – how romantic.

Returning from a meeting, Whitney was surprised to find a boutique manager from H waiting in the lobby, politely offering her several limited edition bags.

The receptionists and passing employees were all looking on enviously.

A familiar female supervisor joked with Whitney. "Whitney, did your boyfriend upset you? This seems SO familiar. My guy tries to do the same, just on a much smaller scale. Your boyfriend has deep pockets and seems very attentive!"

Whitney, facing everyone's sparkling eyes, felt her composure slipping away.

What the hell was L doing? His antics were disrupting her work. Was it on purpose?

Afraid he would send more distractions and disrupt the office further, Whitney decided to leave work early.

Tiana picked her up, and they waited together at a downtown café, expecting Valerie to join them.

Seeing Whitney's exasperated face, Tiana chuckled. "L must have gotten some bad advice. Buying his way out of trouble, but don't you feel his efforts to apologize are sincere?"

Whitney paused, a flicker of emotion crossing her face.

Tiana sighed. "Even with my limited interaction with L, I can tell he's not one to wear his heart on his sleeve."

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This might be the first time he's gone to such lengths for a woman."

"Are you defending him?" Whitney pouted.

Tiana waved her off. 'As if I would! But seriously, without a personal appearance, it lacks sincerity."

Whitney's thoughts were a whirlwind as she looked outside.

Valerie arrived, calling them out.

The winter darkness settled early, but the city center remained vibrant. Queen's Square was ablaze with lights, the towering skyscrapers standing sentinel. The tallest among them was the Imperial Gem Corporation Building

Outside the Imperial Gem Corporation, a man of cool elegance emerged, his deep gaze fixed on Queen's Square. "Is she there?"

Parker nodded, guiding him. "Everything is set. Just go over there and turn Queen's Square into a proposal scene. Got your sweet talk ready?"

Ludwik gave Parker a cold look.

sweet talks.

Nolan sympathized with Ludwik's difficulty, it was hard to imagine Ludwik uttering

Ludwik eyed Parker suspiciously. "All these stunts you've had me pull today, and she leaves work early. Are you sure you're not just making it worse?"

Parker coughed. "What are you implying? If you were man enough to apologize directly, I would not have had to spend all night shopping for a love guide. You think this is easy for me?"

The arrogance drained from Ludwik's stance.

Parker glanced at him. "Whitney feels you don't value her enough, that you've relegated her to some secondary position, even behind other women. Your lie is the crux of the issue this time. You need to show her that she matters to you."

"That's what she thinks?"

"That's what all women think, even if they don't say it. You've never really pursued her since you've been together. Use this opportunity to show her you're sincere."

"What do you mean by being sincere?"

"I've set everything up." Parker turned into a director, pointing towards the Imperial Gem Corporation building. "Look."

Ludwik turned to see the building's facade light up with LED letters: [Whitney, I'm Sorry!]

The message scrolled across the screen.

Ludwik's face darkened, and he lifted his foot to kick Parker.

"Hurry up and go over. I've got more planned. Parker threatened.

Grinding his teeth, Ludwik rubbed his brow. "My dignity, make sure you don't throw it all away!"

Nolan tried not to laugh, feeling Parker's schemes ground Ludwik's pride into the dust.

Ludwik walked toward the silhouette in the square.

Meanwhile, the square fell into a hushed silence.

Moments ago, the tallest building went dark, then lit up with the message 'Whitney, I'm Sorry!'

Tiana and Valerie were shocked, turning to look at Whitney.

Whitney was just as confused, her face a mask of bewilderment.

Tiana gasped, "Could this be L's doing?"

And then, amid the paused gaze of onlookers, a tall, dashing man in a black suit strode toward Whitney. He wore a silver mask, but his piercing gaze was unmistakable to her.

As he approached her, a net of dazzling light, woven from countless tiny diamonds, fell from the sky, enveloping Whitney in its glittering embrace.

Tiana and Valerie were speechless.

It might have been a bit over the top – indeed, extremely so – but the sight of hundreds of natural diamonds was undeniably breathtaking.

Around them, women gasped in awe, and the man's imposing figure only added to the envy.

"My god, is that woman being proposed to?"

A diamond-studded net to capture the heart of the woman you adore – oh, it's sickeningly sweet!"

Whitney was at a loss for words.

Her eyes widened as she looked at the man, her cheeks turning a rosy shade of embarrassment. But inside, her heart was a chaotic drumbeat of nervous excitement.

A frown creased Ludwik's brow. He glanced at the diamond net and cursed Parker silently for the hundredth time for his astonishingly gaudy taste.

Yet, in this moment, he had to own up to it. He strode stiffly towards the petite woman, observing her rosy lips and white teeth contrasting with the faint shadows in the winter light under her eyes.

A storm of emotions surged within him. Frowning, he took her small hand in his. Uncomfortable yet with a deep, resonant voice, he said, "Stop being mad, alright? I admit I was wrong to deceive you, but my desire for you is no mistake."

Under the crowd's scrutiny, Whitney's heart pounded wildly, feeling utterly defenseless against his onslaught.

Did he want her? His usual cold and ruthless demeanor made it seem like there could be no sweeter or more eloquent confession.

But the meaning was implicitly clear.

"How many times do I have to tell you I don't care for Elaine? She's no longer my fiancée. How many times must I repeat that? I care about you; if you haven't felt it, I'll try harder. I'll learn how to make you see it," he said with a stern and commanding tone.

"Okay, Whitney?" His chilly exterior briefly softened, revealing a trace of tenderness in his low, magnetic v

oice.

Whitney's cheeks burned hotter, her heartbeat threatening to burst forth. She quickly withdrew her hand and took several steps back, putting distance between them.

"Whitney!" Ludwik called after her with a furrowed, icy brow as he set off in pursuit.

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"What's there to think about? You were never the other woman," he asserted with a dominant, almost dictatorial

air

"That's not your call to make," Whitney muttered under her breath, turning to pull Tiana and Valerie away with her quickly.

The onlookers continued to buzz with excitement. "Looks like the boyfriend screwed up and is making it up to his girl with a grand gesture. A sky full of diamonds—so over the top, I would have forgiven him on the spot."

"He must really care about her, putting up her name in big LED letters on the building. Talk about romantic!"

"I think it's super romantic, too. Oh, Whitney, I'm sorry, I'm totally swooning here," Tiana confessed with a dreamy expression. "We're all a bit cliché, aren't we, Whitney? Don't you feel slightly swayed by such a public display of affection?"

Whitney had to agree with Tiana; clichés had their charm.

Who does not love flowers, diamonds, or the thrill of a public declaration?

She had designed so many jewelry pieces in her life, yet no man had ever gifted her one.

Even if the grand gesture was L's friend's idea, she still felt valued.

Yes, what she wanted was an equal, valued relationship. Not to be stashed a way at his convenience, under his controlling thumb.

"They're following us," Valerie remarked with a sly smile, glancing at Whitney.

Whitney turned to see L, Nolan, and Parker, the three dashing men, trailing them through the mall.

Bystanders turned their heads in curiosity.

After walking in a circle, Whitney's cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she left the mall with Valerie and

Tiana.

Once in the car, they headed back to Tiana's apartment.

Valerie looked at Whitney with a serene gaze. "You're not seriously considering breaking up, are you?"

Whitney gave a wry smile, glancing down at her belly. "How can I? I'm four months along."

"That thorn in your side was Elaine being his publicly acknowledged fiancée. Does him declaring your name in the city center change anything for you?"

Whitney felt Valerie's piercing accuracy.

Her heart was indeed in turmoil.

She looked down again, and Valerie continued, "Will you swallow that thorn or let go?"

"I believe there's nothing substantial between him and Elaine, but he hasn't publicly ended the engagement. That leaves Elaine with illusions, especially since he lied to me, which further suggests to her that he doesn't value me. In the eyes of his family and the public, I'm the mistress," Whitney admitted, biting her lip.

Valerie smiled faintly. "I advise you to endure being seen as the mistress and secure your place. If you step back, Elaine will not let you be, even after she's engaged to him. You're smart, Whitney. You've understood this all along."

Whitney froze, realizing the truth. She could not back down from this relationship now that she was pregnant. If she let go of L, Elaine's schemes would not allow her to live in peace.

It seemed her only option was to hold on to L and push Elaine out—for the safety of her unborn child and to

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prevent Elaine from becoming a wicked stepmother.

"You've already made up your mind," Valerie said with a knowing smile.

Whitney looked up and noticed bruises peeking from Valerie's collar. She frowned and inquired, "What happened, Valerie? Who did this to you?"

Valerie paled a bit, then forced a bitter smile. "Who else but Ashton, taking out Elaine's frustrations on me?"

"Oh my God, Ashton's that kind of jerk?" Tiana joined in, seeing the bruises on Valerie's neck that hinted at something more intimate. Tiana paused, then frowned. "Elaine's really making trouble for both of you. What a vile woman."

Whitney's eyes hardened as she looked at Valerie, realizing her friend's life with Ashton was even worse,

L did not love Elaine, but Ashton did.

Whitney knew she had to get rid of Elaine for Valerie's sake.

Suddenly, Whitney's resolve solidified.

The next morning, Whitney unexpectedly headed to the hospital to register for a gynecological check-up.

Tiana looked puzzled. "You should be seeing an obstetrician. Gynecology is for... terminations."

Whitney's lashes lifted slightly. "Exactly. I'm forcing a confrontation. Spread the word to L. Tell him to come."

"What?" Tiana's panic turned to understanding mid-sentence. She patted her chest, relieved. "You scared me. If you dare harm my godson..."

Whitney placed a hand gently on her stomach, smiling. "Sorry, baby. I won't hurt you. I just need to push your father a little."

Tiana hurried off to deliver the message.

At the top floor of the imperial Gem Corporation building, Felix, the executive assistant, turned ashen when he learned of Whitney's whereabouts. He rushed to report, "Mr. Lippert, Madam is at the..."

Ludwik had been sure his little lady would have forgiven him by now, ready to fetch her. "Where?"

"In the hospital, and it looks like she's going to abort the child."

Ludwik's pen froze mid-signature, and Felix trembled.

His pen clattered onto the desk as he stood up, his handsome face turning icy. "That damn woman, has she lost her mind?"

His heart sank, and he stormed out.

At the door, Parker strolled in leisurely. "So, did Whitney forgive you or not?"

Ludwik kicked him in the leg. "Your lousy idea? Forgive me? She doesn't even want the child anymore!"

Parker's face went slack with shock,/Impossible!

He raced after Ludwik.

In the hospital's gynecology department, Whitney waited for her turn, received an anesthesia prescription, and followed the doctor into the operating room. As she lay on the table, a silence fell outside.

Then L's cold, bone-chilling voice came, "Whitney, you're courting death!"

A man with a masked fury barged into the operating room, his eyes ablaze with danger as if he could devour Whitney whole.

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Chapter 128

Tiana, terrified, had never seen L. 60 menacing. She prayed Whitney had not miscalculated

Whitney pressed her lips, looking up at him with a defiant, sorrowful gaze.

"Get up, now!" Ludwik yanked her up, dragging her off the bed. His grip was so tight it could shatter her wrist. He spat out, "What the hell are you doing? You dare to harm my child? I'll kill you, Whitney. Is this how much you love me? Great, just great!"

He seemed ready to devour her alive.

Whitney looked up, her expression stubborn yet wistful, and offered a bitter smile. "I don't have a choice."

"Are you deaf or something? Elaine is not the issue; never was!" He gripped her hand tightly, his fingertips icy.

Whitney felt intimidated by his intensity, her heartbeat racing.

A twinge of regret flashed through her mind, and she bit her lip, saying, "Look, L, just because you don't see her as a problem doesn't mean she isn't one. You say she's not your fiancée, but why does she look so heartbroken. over yo

u? It's because you've unintentionally given her hope. I get why you need to keep her on at the firm, and that's precisely why your family has taken to her.

But me? I can't stand being the talk of the town, the subject of gossip. I have to step out of this triangle. Whether I keep this baby or not, Elaine will never accept it. Instead of being tormented by others, I might as well be the one to make the hard choice. After all, I've left you, and it all should end right there."

"Who said you could leave me?!" Ludwik's chest heaved as he pulled her into his embrace.

His arms felt so cold and unyielding, and in that moment, Whitney's heartbreak was not an act. Her eyes slowly filled with tears as she clung to his waist and looked up at him, saying with a weak voice, "I don't want to leave you, either. I choose you, which means you must give me some security and respect. Honestly, I can't stand having Elaine around you. Call me petty if you want."

Ludwik looked down, his gaze softening as he took in her porcelain face, his breathing easing ever so slightly.

His brows furrowed with a dark intensity, "What do you want me to do?"

Chapter 129

"Fire Elaine, send her back to her hometown of Emerald City. I can't rest easy with her around, she's too big of a threat to me."

Plus, Elaine would cause a lot of trouble to Valerie, too.

Whitney was determined to get rid of her. She was unsure what L's original plans for Elaine were, but untangling Elaine from the company and the family would be no small feat.

Thus, she pushed L to cut the Gordian knot.

Ludwik's brow was furrowed as he looked at her with piercing intensity, his hand gently touching her forehead.

His voice was deep and resonant, "So, she leaves, and you stay. I can only choose one, not even work-related contact, is that it?"

Whitney pressed her lips and silently nodded.

With a sharp glance, Ludwik pulled her away, his voice icy, "If I haven't given you peace of mind, that's my oversight. We'll do it your way."

His decisiveness took aback Whitney. This man was responsible, and while he might face pressure, she still wanted to play the 'villain' this time.

Ludwik, with no further ado, called Elaine out.

Elaine had been cooped up in her apartment, watched over by bodyguards for two days, unaware of the outside world. Now, she was being escorted to the lobby of United Realty Corporation.

Ludwik wanted to see her! A flicker of joy danced in her heart.

Last night, Ashton fought with Ludwik and came to tell her that Ludwik and Whitney had a falling out.

Good, Whitney could not handle being the other woman. Now that Ludwik had summoned her, perhaps there would be a temporary penalty, but as long as Whitney backed off, she would quickly reclaim Ludwik's heart.

She had burned her bridges, and it was the right move.

"Bro," Elaine masked her elation and entered the conference room with a pitiable air.

Ludwik was sitting behind a stack of documents, his voice cold, "Elaine, it's time we settled things once and for all."

His words were not reassuring, and Elaine felt a surge of panic as she saw Whitney walking into the room.

This sent a chill down Elaine's spine.

Why was Whitney here? Had she not left Ludwik?

"Surprised to see me?" Whitney's gaze was icy as she sat beside the man and naturally took his arm. This possessive gesture made Elaine's heart sink further.

As expected, Ludwik slid the documents toward her, "Elaine, you're relieved from your position as vice president of the main company. Here's your financial settlement. Take it and go home. I'll announce that our

engagement has been called off long ago, and you'll have no ties with me anymore."

Elaine, in disbelief, looked up sharply, "Bro, why? I only love you. Is that also a mistake? This isn't your idea, is it? Whitney made you do this, right?"

"It was my decision. You made mistakes!" Ludwik's voice was frosty.

Tears quickly fell as she shook her head.

Elaine felt a numbness in her scalp, unable to face his icy "Have you considered how you'll explain this to your family? Do you realize the risks you're taking? You need my status! What can Whitney give you?"

Chapter 129

She stared at the distinguished man, speaking veiled truths only they understood.

His eyes turned colder. "That's not for you to worry about. Go home."

"I won't!" Elaine's desperation surged. She could not return; Ludwik was the man the Bartels family was desperate to cling to. If she went back, another Bartels girl would come for him. Why should she surrender

him?

With this thought, Elaine quickly considered her options and grasped Ludwik's hand, pleading pitifully, "Bro, I built the branch office from the ground up. You can't be so heartless. I don't want any more money; I've helped you so much in the past. For old times' sake, let me stay at the branch office, please?"

Ludwik frowned; the branch office was indeed Elaine's making, and her wretched crying made him uneasy.

Indeed, Elaine had helped him during his difficulties.

Whitney watched as L hesitated.

Elaine, dropping all pretense, turned her pleading gaze to Whitney, "Whitney, I promise to let go of Bro. Can't you show me some mercy?"

Her words put Whitney on the spot.

Ludwik looked to Whitney as if awaiting her decision.

Whitney was no fool. If she insisted on sending Elaine away today, she might be

He seemed inclined to be lenient with Elaine.

seen as heartless in L's eyes.

With a forced smile, she said, "Elaine, if you're willing to be L's sister and stay at the branch office, that's fine. You said you'd let go of L, and I sincerely hope you move on, maybe find a boyfriend. L, as Elaine's brother, why don't you introduce her to some eligible bachelors?"

Ludwik fixed his gaze on Elaine, saying, "Go to the branch office and start a new life. I promised to find you a suitor, and I'll keep an eye out."

A sharp pain crossed Elaine's heart, and her eyes bore into Whitney with cold fury.

This wretch, playing the victim, was forcing Ludwik's hand to find her a boyfriend.

With an engagement looming, it would be improper for her to approach Ludwik openly.

Elaine bitterly agreed. "I accept Bro's decision. I'll go to the branch office."

Without another word, Ludwik instructed, "Go to your office and pack your things. Leave the vice president's nameplate. The financial settlement is still yours."

He would not shortchange her, at least not in terms of money.

Elaine clenched her teeth and left in resentment, heading to the vice president's office where Felix had already boxed her belongings.

She clutched the cardboard box, having no choice but to set down the tightly gripped nameplate. Under the murmurs of the entire office staff, she made an awkward exit from the company.

Years at Ludwik's company had earned her a prestigious position, second only to one. Her close professional relationship with Ludwik had always been her pride and joy.

But now, Whitney had ruined it all.

She had thought she could embarrass Whitney into resigning, but that wench, despite the scarlet letter of being the 'other woman, had used Ludwik's guilt to oust her completely!

Pure, unadulterated rage seethed within Elaine's eyes.

This was not over. She quickly got into her car and instructed Jaxon to book a flight. "Back to Emperor City."

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Barely minutes after Elaine departed from the office, Ludwik's phone began to ring incessantly.

Elaine's dismissal was big news; the Lipperts were all watching closely.

Whitney looked on worriedly as he took the calls.

Shortly after, with a stern face, he instructed Felix to take her home and admonished her. "Don't leave the house for the next few days!"

"L is something going to happen to you?" Whitney's brow furrowed with concern and guilt, suspecting it was a call from his family. With him ousting Elaine and publicly calling off their engagement, he was likely facing

turmoil.

Ludwik helped her into the car without a word, then drove off in another vehicle.

At Emperor City.

A torrential downpour enveloped the night as Elaine arrived at the grand Bartels Mansion and stormed into her mother's room.

Delphine rose from her luxurious chaise, casting a glance at her daughter. "The news from the Banyan City company has reached your father's ears, and he's already gone to confront the Lipperts about Ludwik's mess

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Chapter 130

"Mom, he dumped me right out in the open. He sent me packing back home. He used to put up with me for the sake of the business, but now, because of that tramp Whitney... I was thinking of showing him the half of the ring that proves I'm the one who saved his life all those years ago. He won't be able to leave me then!"

Delphine looked at the half-ring in her daughter's hand and shook her head. "Good thing you had the sense to come home and ask me. It's not the right time now."

"But Whitney has stolen him from me! Give it a few more days, and he might fall all for that bitch. I can't stand it!"

"If you show him that half-ring now, pretending to be his savior while he's disappointed in you, at best, he'll feel financially indebted. You still won't win him back. Just wait. Ludwik is meant to be yours. You don't know, Whitney has an uncle."

At that, Delphine smiled, her eyes sharp with calculation, "You think it's a coincidence that Skye Gem and Imperial Gem are at odds? Her uncle will show up sooner or later. When they fight, the prize will be yours for the taking. Whitney and him won't last long.

All you need to do is wait for the perfect moment to reveal the half-ring, and he'll be entirely yours."

Elaine kind of understood; the moment would be when Whitney and Ludwik fell out.

Did that mean her mother was sure that Whitney and Ludwik would split?

Elaine walked over and hugged Delphine, voicing her doubts. "Mom, how do you know about Whitney's uncle? Are you really that familiar with her family drama?"

Delphine hesitated, then playfully tapped her daughter's nose. "You're smart. Strive for a position at the branch office; it'll keep you connected to him. You have your inside man at the headquarters, and returning to Banyan City is only a matter of time. Ludwik is a catch you must secure."

Elaine nodded. Her mother had said when sending her to Ludwik's side that his true identity was more than just being the third son of the Lippert family, though even he was unaware of it, and that she must hold on tight to Ludwik.

In the Banyan City, the Lippert family study.

Kaden was in a rage. "You publicly ditched Elaine for that Whitney? The ties between the Lippert family and the Bartels are intricate. You explain it to Zane Bartels!"

"Ludwik, this is indecent of you. Where do you leave Elaine's dignity? She's been loyal to you for years!" Zane challenged.

Ludwik, poised and detached, remained unfazed.

The vortex in his eyes was enough to slightly intimidate the two elder gentlemen,

He said coldly, "Elaine and I privately called off our engagement years ago. I've made it clear to Delphine. You're the ones using your family's power to deny it. Any compensation I owe, I'll pay in full."

"Ludwik, without the Bartels' support, you'd better watch your back," Zane said with a meaningful sneer before leaving.

Kaden sat brooding in silence for a while before finally lifting his gaze, a calculating pressure in

his eyes. *“Either get rid of Whitney and bring back Elaine so we maintain ties with the Bartels, and I’ll ensure your place at Imperial Gem Corporation, or...*

Without the Bartels, I won’t consider you for the heir. Your brother will take over the company.”

That last remark was most likely what he truly wanted to say today.

Ludwik had no expectations of his father.

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With eyes cold as ice, he smiled. “When Imperial Gern Corporation was handed to me, it was bankrupt. If Orion thinks he can take over a top global company now, let him try. Both the company and the woman, I’ll have!”

“You’re declaring war against the Lippert family over a woman?” Kaden slammed his hand on the table, standing up

“Yes,” Ludwik replied slowly, his voice as if emerging from the depths of hell.

Kaden’s eyes darkened.

Outside the study, Rylie, having eavesdropped, quickly retreated to her room and dialed a number.

After a moment, a young, handsome voice laced with mischief answered, “Mom, what’s up?”

“Orion, there’s a storm brewing in the Lippert family. Your brother is willing to forsake the Bartels for a woman. It’s time to end your studies abroad and come home, son,”

Rylie clenched her fist, her eyes alight with anticipation.

After years of lying low, her opportunity was finally nearing.

“Sure,” the voice on the other end chuckled lightly, casual and carefree, “Bro’s got a girl named Whitney? I’ve recently met someone interesting too, not a Valentine, but a Tennyson.”

Rylie did not grasp the connection in her son's words.

But with her son returning, she felt secure. Under Ludwik's leadership, Imperia I Gem Corporation had grown stronger, solidifying the Lippert family's position as the foremost family in Banyan City.

But he was just Natalie's son, the frail one, not the favored child of Kaden!

Her son, Orion, was the true heir, and Imperial Gem Corporation must belong to him.

Whitney waited at the villa until the man returned the next night.

The winter chill permeated the air as he walked in, weary: He removed his handcrafted leather shoes and tie, revealing the redness in his eyes from exhaustion.

Whitney stood up, her small frame watching his towering figure in silence.

Suddenly, she dashed toward him, wrapping her tiny arms around his lean, chiseled waist.

Whitney looked up at him with concern in her eyes. "What's going on? Is your family putting a lot of pressure on you?"

The man was silent, his fingers gently lifting her chin.

Their eyes locked, his gaze narrow, fierce, and profound.

Without warning, he captured her lips in a passionate kiss.

Whitney was forced to tilt her head back as he kissed her fervently, his masculine vigor mingled with an alluring scent of tobacco. The next moment, she found herself pinned against the wall.

The coat rack tumbled to the ground, along with various other items, creating a clatter.

After a long moment, their breaths uneven, he released her slightly, his gaze intense and his hold on her hand

still firm.

He kept her petite frame pressed against the cabinet, her body soft and intoxicating to him.

Ludwik held her gaze, his fingers tracing her cheeks as if trying to peer into her soul. He arched a brow and said, "I hope you're worth it."

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A thud resonated in Whitney's chest at his words, her heart pounding fiercely.

Her blood seemed to warm and stir.

"I like you, L" she confessed, boldly yet shyly stepping into his embrace.

"Because I let Elaine go?" He asked, his brow arching coolly.

"No, but it moved me even more. You finally gave me a place of importance in your heart." That had always been Whitney's concern.

In a swift motion, he scooped her up, his eyes deep and determined, and headed for the bathroom.

Whitney nestled her head against his broad shoulder, murmuring, "You were gone all day, and I know it was not simple. I understand Elaine's significance in your family; I can't match her background. From what your brother said, I know my status burdens you. But I want to be the woman who can support you."

His handsome jaw set firmly. "Are you mocking me, suggesting my success depends on a woman?"

"No!" Whitney trembled before quickly explaining, "Being part of the Valentine family, I'm all too aware of the family struggles, how unavoidable they are."

She felt for him.

He understood then. "You want to contribute, to help me?"