

## Love beyond the mask ( Whitney ) Chapter 146-155

### Chapter 146

Keegan clasped his hands together, nodding with a sense of finality. “Glad to hear that. I invited you both out today to bury the hatchet—whether or not you argued, it’s time to make amends.”

Ludwik had indeed not seen Whitney for several days. Though his words were frosty, his heart harbored a hidden warmth, and he shot her chilly glances more than once.

Since Keegan had stepped in to smooth things, Ludwik was willing to give in.

With an awkward scratch of his head and a sheepish look, Keegan broached the subject. “Mr. L, I asked to meet with you today because, well, I have this favor to ask—and it’s not easy for me, believe me. I heard from

Whitney that you’re a big shot in the real estate game, and, as it happens, my little company’s on the brink of being swallowed whole. I don’t suppose you could extend me a lifeline, a partnership of sorts, for Whitney’s

sake?”

Whitney’s fingers tensed, concealing the shock in her eyes as she watched her uncle put on quite the performance.

His humble expression and polite tone set Whitney’s nerves on edge.

She soon turned to Ludwik, her heart secretly hoping for his rejection.

But the man paused, his deep gaze briefly touching her face before he lifted his chin decisively. “A partnership is, of course, no issue.”

Then, with a touch of arrogance, he addressed Whitney, “As the Vice President of United Realty, you can represent me. Handle the paperwork, will you?”

He was coaxing her in his own way, giving her uncle considerable respect.

Whitney got the message.

But she did not want to say, ‘Thank you.’ Her heart was just too heavy.

Keegan chuckled wryly, “Mr. L, you’re a generous businessman and clearly quite fond of our Whitney.”

Whitney

felt alienated, as if she saw a side of her uncle she did not recognize—one that was insincere.

“Well, I won’t take up more of your precious time. Here’s to a fruitful partnership,” Keegan said, emphasizing the last four words with a meaningful look as he extended his hand.

Ludwik reached out, their handshake firm, his eyes deep and honest.

Whitney watched him, her heart quivering at the intensity of his gaze.

Suddenly, he looked her way, his phone ringing, but he did not leave—almost as if waiting for her to give him an

out.

In a panic, Whitney averted her gaze from the bottomless pools of his eyes. That was when her uncle, with a chuckle, said, “My legs are *not* what they used to be. I’m afraid I’ll need Whitney to take me home, and we can discuss the partnership details on the way. I’ll make sure she gets back early.”

Ludwik’s thin lips pressed together as he looked at her.

Could she not even initiate a simple conversation with him?

After all the respect he had given her uncle, this woman still played hard to get. What would it take for her to let go of the past?

His phone rang again, signaling an important meeting—a bidding war over a prime piece of land for a five-star hotel project was imminent. With a furrow of his brow, Ludwik had no choice but to leave as Felix, his assistant, respectfully waited by the door.

Whitney slumped back into her chair, her heart pounding as Keegan whisked her away to his penthouse.

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But there, along with his assistant, was another man!

Tall, with a suit that hugged his frame, he stood casually at a table, his back to Whitney, holding a stack of

contracts.

Keegan took the contracts and turned to Whitney, his composure unchanged. "You brought your company seal, right?"

She had it **in** her bag, but as Whitney's lips tightened, she could not help but ask, "Uncle, why did you discuss a partnership with him today?"

"Because I really want to, of course" Keegan smiled warmly as he patted her cold head. "I know it's hard for you to decide, so I'm giving you a push. There's no turning back now—I've drawn the bow for you!"

Whitney shuddered, a chill spreading from within as tears threatened *to spill* from her eyes.

Her uncle was leading her towards a cliff, and ahead, there was no clear path with Ludwik anymore.

Sensing her sadness, Keegan's eyes held a hint of scornful laughter. "You need to pull yourself together and help me get my revenge!"

"But Uncle, why didn't he guard against you today? You spoke of a partnership, and he agreed without hesitation." Whitney was puzzled.

"With Ludwik's cunning and ruthlessness, what could you possibly see through him?" Keegan's voice was edged with bitterness. "He's confident I don't know the truth. A small partnership with me is nothing but a ripple to him."

"Bring out your seal. He's already agreed," Keegan insisted.

Whitney's face paled as she slowly produced the seal.

Keegan took the contract without letting her see it properly. She caught a glimpse, but it was for an overseas

company.

She frowned, sensing something amiss. “Uncle, didn’t you say your company had moved back home? But this is for an overseas company. Is this gentleman’s? Who is he?”

The young man finally turned around, his features devilishly handsome, a playful smirk on his lips as he faced Whitney.

Whitney frowned. It was the man from the airport!

His aura was mischievous, and that face... Whitney felt an odd sense of familiarity but could not place it.

“So, Ms. Valentine, you’re still leaning towards Ludwik, huh? Are you doubting your uncle?” The man’s teasing laughter filled the air. He was clearly enjoying the tension.

Keegan’s face turned cold as he snatched the seal from Whitney and pressed her hand down. “He’s here to help me. It’s *none* of your concern *who* *he* is. The overseas company is a joint venture with him. This is just a minor collaboration with Ludwik— it won’t be the end of him. But Whitney, you can’t let me down! And don’t waste my ten years of suffering!”

His voice trembled with pain, and he did not allow Whitney to refute.

The seal was pressed, and the young man immediately took the contracts away.

Whitney was unsure if there was anything wrong with the contract, but she hoped that since it was only the Vice President’s seal, Ludwik’s trust in her and his gesture to appease her were enough..

Her heart ached, torn between loyalty and betrayal. She found herself caught in the middle, playing both sides, and she knew she was bound to disappoint her uncle...

But Keegan pressed on. “Whitney, you need to get your priorities straight. You have to help me.

The biggest current project at United Realty is the five–star hotel chain, right? I heard the financing is already in

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the hundred billion, and everything's ready—just waiting for the land bidding.

I want you to be involved in this project. You'll go with Ludwik to the bidding, and when the time comes, we'll work together from the inside out..."

"Uncle! What the hell are you planning?" Whitney's forehead beaded with sweat, her fingers turning pale from the grip on her phone.

Keegan's eyes glinted with a disturbing fervor, a twisted smirk on his lips. "Don't question me. Just do as I say, sweet—talk Ludwik, and get in on that bid with him."

"Uncle, I don't..." Whitney's face was a ghostly pale, her struggle and resistance clear.

When Keegan heard her refusal, his eyes turned icy. He coldly unbuttoned his shirt collar and suddenly revealed a myriad of scars crisscrossing his body.

With a gaze filled with pain and hatred, he said, "When you can't bear to help me out, just look at what I've been through all these years. Scars upon scars, five surgeries over a decade. Whitney, this is what he's done to me, your mom, and your grandpa. Think about it!"

Whitney clasped her hands over her head, no longer wanting to listen or see, the suffocating pain making it impossible for her to speak.

In the face of such hurt, she could not say no to her uncle.

She looked into the abyss of her uncle's eyes, where hatred had spawned a demon. Whitney felt powerless to stop Keegan's descent into madness.

The next moment, he pressed a knife into her hand. She was supposed to wield it against Ludwik, but was it truly him she was striking, or was it her own heart?

“Tomorrow, you’ll head to United Realty Corporation to follow up on that hotel project. I’m tired. Go on, leave me be,” Keegan instructed her gravely, his hand massaging his right leg as his face turned ashen with pain.

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Whitney did not respond to him; instead, her heart ached with pity at the sight of her feeble uncle. She pulled out an acupuncture kit and said, “Uncle, I’ve learned some acupuncture from Mom. I can’t do much about scar tissue, but I can try to ease your phantom limb pain with some acupuncture. Shall I give it a try?”

Keegan, massaging his right leg, grimaced and nodded his consent.

To their amazement, the treatment seemed to work wonders. Keegan looked at her with a melancholy smile. “Your mom was a whiz with healing. She didn’t teach you all her secrets, but what you’ve got is pretty darn good. If only she were still here.”

Whitney’s expression froze. Every word from her uncle was a reminder of his hatred.

The next day, Whitney stepped into the towering United Realty Corporation building.

Sleep had eluded her, and it showed on her pale face.

She happened to arrive during the morning rush, and the elevator was crowded. Maybe it was the stifling space or her recent emotional turmoil, but when she exited the elevator, the little life inside her stirred more violently

than usual.

Whitney had been feeling the baby’s movements frequently lately, but it was more painful this time.

She had no choice but to stop, leaning against the wall, slightly bending over, her delicate hand caressing her belly to soothe the little one inside.

While taking deep breaths and gently patting her belly, she suddenly felt a piercing gaze sweeping over her.

She stiffened and turned her head, her eyes locking with those of a man filled with emotion.

His gaze was like a net, entangling her.

Then, as if laden with a thousand sentiments, his eyes focused on her belly.

Whitney looked up at his deep-set features, his jawline handsome even beneath the mask, and she felt his gaze searing her skin.

A deep, aching emotion welled up inside her, a maelstrom of feelings, yet she remained silent.

He was looking at her belly. As a father who was absent for a couple of weeks, he must be missing the child.

This was his child.

Yet, it was a product of hatred, a bond that should not exist.

She did not know the fate of this child yet. All she could do was try her hardest to protect it. Her heart was a mess, her anxiety and conflict bringing tears to her eyes, which she fought to hold back.

He seemed to be struggling too, his mood dark, a frown etched between his brows.

Whitney's heart ached for him, but how could she feel otherwise for the man who had once harmed the Tennyson family in the name of his business empire?

She turned her gaze away resolutely and suddenly doubled over with a sharp pain in her belly.

The sound of expensive leather shoes approached, and the man's cold aura enveloped her.

Suddenly, Whitney was lifted off her feet as Ludwik scooped her up without a second thought for the bustling corporate office around them.

Whitney tensed in his arms, the warmth of his presence searing her cold skin, leaving her momentarily stunned.

After walking down

“I’m not in pain anymore. You can put me down.”

With all eyes on them, Ludwik had no choice but to set her down gently.

His hand hesitated as it reached toward her slightly rounded belly, but Whitney dodged his touch.

His hand froze in mid-air.

His face clouded over with a frosty anger, his heart filled with irritation. He had hoped that she would come home after their encounter at the café yesterday.

But she had not returned to the villa.

Not even a phone call, not a simple thank you!

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How long was she planning to give him the cold shoulder? Just because he had embraced Elaine at the hospital, she could not let it go?

Ludwik’s chest heaved with suppressed rage. He glanced at the pale-faced young woman before striding coldly past her into his office.

Whitney knew she had angered him again, but at that moment, she could not bring herself to play a part in their ‘charade.’

Her fingers trembled. Her uncle wanted her to stay and act as an insider, but every second of deceit tormented her.

She wanted to leave him!

She could not bear it, even if it meant openly standing with her uncle against him, starting the vendetta afresh. Rather than using a sweet knife to wound him

.

So, she had come today to hand off her work, especially the hotel group project.

This way, her uncle could not use her to harm him.



With this in mind, Whitney entered the vice president's office to hand over her work and submit an extended leave request.

Suddenly, the president's office door swung open, and Felix called out publicly, "Whitney, the president wants you to attend the morning meeting."

Whitney froze. She was still on the company's payroll and had no choice but to comply, turning on her heel to enter the president's office.

Inside the spacious office, several shareholders and executives were already present. Behind the large desk sat a man whose chilling demeanor seemed to permeate the room.

No one dared to breathe too loudly, sensing the president's foul mood.

Whitney took her place at the back of the crowd, close to the visitor's sofa.

Her mind wandered, unbidden, to a memory from half a month ago when they had dined together, and she had read documents to him with a mix of shyness and irritation.

How good things had been between them then. In just a few short days, her uncle had returned, and everything had changed.

Whitney took a deep breath to stifle the pain of the sweet memories.

As if on cue, Ludwik's icy gaze swept over her. Whatever she was recalling, he must have remembered, too.

Their eyes met, hers filled with heartbreak, his with confusion.

Ludwik's lips thinned into a cold line, and he turned his attention away, his voice cutting through the room.

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"Let's assign the upcoming tasks."

He began discussing with the executives.

Whitney felt like a lost soul, her pale face unable to find warmth even under the glow of the office lights.

Then, Felix started reading from the work schedule, “Whitney doesn’t have a project at the moment; she can

take over...”

Whitney suddenly snapped back to attention. She had planned to give up her assignments quietly, but now she had to make her request in front of him, “President, I’ve been feeling unwell lately. I’d like to hand over my responsibilities at United Realty Corporation and apply for an extended leave.”

As her words hung in the air, a brief, eerie silence fell, and everyone’s surprised gazes turned to her.

“Whitney, we thought today you’d be back in the saddle?” One of the executives said with a half-smirk.

‘Yeah, Boss’s big venture is kicking off—it’s all hands on deck. You’re not thinking of jumping ship, are you?’ Another chimed in, the smiles around the room dancing with insinuation.

Whitney glanced up, catching the frosty gaze of the man behind the large oak desk. The chill from his stare was practically a physical force.

Felix, ever the peacemaker, caught Mr. Lippert’s stormy expression and hurried to smooth things over. “Whitney taking time off now is a bit tricky.”

But I...”

No buts. No more leave without my say—so. Felix, hand the five-star hotel bid over to Whitney!” Ludwik’s voice cut through the air, as cold and sharp as an icicle.

## **Chapter 148**

An extended leave? Was she really about to cut ties with him and walk away from United Realty Corporation? Ludwik could not figure out what was going on in this woman’s head. Whitney had been angry because of Elaine for a long enough time, and now she was still giving him the cold shoulder.

If she would not bend, then fine; he was tired of this, too. He would put down his pride and make the first move. “This bid is crucial. South City is a tourist hotspot; I must secure half of its land. You’ll be my secretary for this bid. In three days, you’re coming with me to South City.”

Ludwik’s decision echoed with finality, leaving no room for debate.

His piercing gaze froze Whitney in place. Her face turned pale. This was precisely what Keegan wanted.

She was ready to refuse when she caught Felix’s cautionary glance, hinting at her that the boss was fuming; publicly rejecting him would spell trouble.

Realizing the eyes on her, Whitney pressed her lips and remained silent.

“Meeting adjourned! Everyone, get back to your tasks.”

Ludwik lowered his head, his aura chilling as he started signing documents, closing off any chance for further discussion.

With a heavy heart, Whitney swallowed her words and followed the others out.

Felix caught up with her, handing over all the details of the hotel project. His voice was soft but persuasive as he said, “Madam, the boss is afraid you might not return from your leave. He’s tying you down with a major project. Please understand his intent and make this bid a success.”

What Felix left unsaid was that Ludwik had tried every trick in the book to end this standoff with Whitney, but this time, because of Elaine, she seemed determined not to turn back.

Felix thought that perhaps Mr. Lippert thought they might mend their relationship by working closely on this bid.

Without a word, Whitney looked at the hundred-billion-dollar project weighing down on her, sighing silently.

If she was set on leaving him and United Realty Corporation, this might be her last post, which he was forcing on her

Then, she would do it well. But going together for the bid?

That was out of the question. If he did not understand her reasons, so be it.

When the bidding documents were ready, she would find an excuse not to go.

Whitney buried herself in the vice president's office with Harper for the next two days, going over the bid details.

The five—

star hotel project had been a year in preparation for Ludwik, involving hundreds of billions in financing. Its success was critical to the United Realty Corporation's foundation. Failure was simply not allowed.

Ludwik's bid was for a massive piece of land in South City, having already smoothed all necessary connections.

Now, they only needed the nod from Braxton Tarrington.

She discovered that six companies were bidding.

Such a critical decision meant Braxton would meet each bidder. **If** Ludwik was last, they would have to avoid evening talks. Any health incident would cast shadows over Ludwik.

She crafted a detailed guideline, placing it on the bid document's front page. Ludwik would see it upon arrival, learning to time his approach and navigate the talks to secure the land.

On the day of the bid, Whitney left Tiana's apartment for United Realty Corporation with the confidential document, planning to bow out due to a health issue.

But then, her uncle's call came. However, the voice on the other side was not Keegan's but his assistant's, sounding anxious. "Ms. Valentine, Mr. Tennyson is in bad shape; his leg pain is severe, and he's convulsing. I want to take him to the hospital, but he's resistant and agitated. He mentioned you have a way, urging me to

get you.”

Her uncle had indeed felt relief from her acupuncture before.

She glanced at the time; it was still morning, with Ludwik set to leave at three in the afternoon.

“Calm Uncle down. I’m on my way,” she instructed her driver to detour to Northbound Residences.

Upon entering her uncle’s home, Whitney found it in disarray, clearly a result of his pain.

The assistant sighed. “He always reacts like this to phantom limb pain when he’s abroad.”

Her eyes moistened at the sight of her suffering uncle.

She quickly retrieved her acupuncture kit and reassured him, “Lie down, relax, and after I ice the area, I’ll start.”

The assistant offered to hold her bag, but she declined, knowing the bidding document was inside.

Keegan’s gaze landed on the bag and then her face, inquiring about the hotel project.

She hesitated before lying, “I’m sorry, Uncle. Ludwik didn’t involve me in the project, and I couldn’t win it over.”

Keegan’s look turned cold, disappointment heavy in his eyes.

Seeing her uncle not press the issue, Whitney heaved a sigh of relief inside. Then, she began the acupuncture treatment, inserting the needles and massaging some spots. However, her uncle’s pain was stubborn this time, and she grew tired amid the chaos.

The room quieted as Keegan fell asleep, and Whitney, exhausted, closed her eyes in the chair.

A ringing phone woke her. It was already two in the afternoon—Ludwik’s departure time!

Whitney glanced at her phone and stiffened when she saw Felix's name flash across the screen. She quickly stood up and slipped out of the apartment to answer the call.

"Madam, why haven't you come to the office? The bid proposal is still with you, and we need to get going." Felix's voice was tinged with urgency.

Whitney glanced back at the apartment, finding the perfect excuse, "My uncle is sick. I can't leave him. Tell him I'm sorry, but I won't be able to join him for the trip. Plus, Braxton is a stickler for propriety. He values the character of the younger generation. It wouldn't look right for him to have a female secretary or a vice president tagging along. He'll understand."

After settling on a meeting point, Whitney hurriedly hailed a cab and rushed to meet Felix, who had just parked. She opened her bag and handed over the white-covered bid proposal.

Felix sighed before saying, "Boss is furious that you bailed at the last minute; he didn't have time to chase you down because of the meeting. He's hell-bent on winning this property deal, and Braxton respects his capabilities. But with the proposal you put together, we're bound to succeed! Just prepare for the boss's return, maybe throw him a welcome back dinner, patch things up, Madam."

Whitney's eyes were distant, lost in thought.

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What could she possibly offer Ludwik? Reconciliation was out of the question, and not attending the bid was the best she could do for now.

She watched Felix's car drive away, feeling a wave of relief wash over her. With such a major project and her absence, her uncle could not interfere.

Whitney had not heard of her uncle having connections back home, but the man who had come for the contract that day?

She focused her thoughts, trying to piece together who he might be.

Was he really her uncle's business partner?

At this moment, her phone started ringing again.

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It was Uncle's assistant, "Ms. Valentine, I've picked up the herbs, but you'll need to mix the doses."

Whitney hurried back to her apartment.

Keegan was awake now.

She spent an hour preparing the concoction and handed it to Keegan to drink, and his complexion improved slightly. He then gestured for her to stay. "You've been running around all day for me, Whitney. Stay for dinner. I can whip up a couple of my specialties."

"But Uncle, you really shouldn't be cooking in your condition," Whitney said with a smile, seeing he seemed in better spirits.

"Don't underestimate me. Go take a nap and just wait for a good meal," Keegan said as he wheeled himself into the kitchen.

Unable to refuse such a warm offer, Whitney obliged and soon dozed off in the guest *room*, exhausted from the previous night's work on a crucial business proposal.

She overslept. When she awoke, it was past seven in the evening. Had Keegan been cooking all this time? Whitney stepped out, puzzled not to find Keegan or his assistant in the kitchen. A murmur of a phone conversation drifted from outside.

Was her uncle out for a walk?

Feeling relieved, Whitney was about to step out to look for him when something caught her eye—a familiar white binder under the bookshelf by the door.

She had no intention of snooping through Keegan's things, but that binder was unmistakably familiar. With a frown and a sense of foreboding, Whitney went over and pulled it out.

Opening it, she froze in shock.

Her face drained of color.

It was her business proposal, unmistakable because of her detailed notes on the title page and the indentations from her own touch.

But the one she took out of her bag earlier that afternoon had looked exactly the same on the outside.

Exactly the same?

Whitney's mind raced as her face turned ashen.

She had given the proposal to Felix, who had rushed to catch a flight. She had not checked it since, and the bag had been zipped up and with her the entire time.

No, she remembered being so tired at noon that she had dozed off!

A chill ran through her as she opened the door to confront Keegan.

Keegan sat in his wheelchair on the porch, ending his call as she burst out. His expression was dark and icy.

"Uncle, why is my proposal in your bookshelf?" Whitney demanded from the top of the steps, feeling the distance between them grow, although he was right there.

"You swapped the proposal in my bag, didn't you, Uncle?" Her voice was tight, her face cold.

"I asked you about the hotel project, and you lied to me, Whitney!" Keegan shot back, his tone icy. "For Ludwik? You have truly disappointed me."

"I just didn't want you to go to extremes out of madness, to seek revenge. What did you replace in the proposal?"

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Her eyes, sharp and cold, betrayed her inner turmoil.

It had to be the details she wrote. It was evening now; Ludwik had left in the afternoon. If he did not know about Braxton's history of strokes and met with him tonight, Ludwik could be in trouble.



Checking the time, it was nearly eight.

Keegan had ensured she slept until now to prevent her from contacting Ludwik or Felix.

Even if she tried to stop what was happening, it would be too late now.

“Uncle, you’ve manipulated and deceived me, using me and making me compete for the bid as a front. Your target has always been the proposal! This kind of scheming is despicable! By doing such things, how are you any different from the way he plundered and harmed you back then?”

I know you want revenge, to take back the Tennyson family’s property, but we could investigate the past and let the law punish him, not like this...”

Keegan interrupted her with a cold laugh, “Was he not despicable when he harmed my sister and father? Now, you expect me to be fair to him? Ridiculous! I will take back the Tennyson family’s estate. I was born a

billionaire’s heir, and I’m tired of living like a beggar these past ten years!”

Whitney stepped back, her scalp tingling. This Keegan felt like a stranger to her.

What did he care about more: his vengeance or reclaiming the family estate?

There was no time to ponder; Ludwik was in danger.

Whitney’s eyes were icy as she pulled out her phone to call Felix, rushing to hail a cab on the street.

“Whitney, come back! It’s too late even if you go now!” Keegan scoffed in anger.

His phone was still connected, the voice on the other end chuckling darkly, “Ludwik has been with Braxton for a while now. Mr. Tennyson, you’ve done well. With the proposal messed up, he’d never suspect that his beloved would cause his downfall.”

Keegan’s heart steadied; the night’s outcome was sealed.

“Boss, congratulations in advance.”

“Heh.” The man laughed before hanging up.

Whitney raced to the airport, incessantly calling Felix and Ludwik.

But they were not picking up.

She knew they must be with Braxton now.

Without knowledge of Braxton’s condition, if Ludwik spoke for too long, there would certainly be trouble.

The flight to South City took three hours. Every second was torture for Whitney.

When she arrived close to midnight, she switched on her phone to devastating news: Braxton had had an incident.

After a lengthy late-night discussion, Braxton suffered another stroke and was rushed to the hospital.

The Tarrington family was enraged, suspecting the CEO of United Realty Corporation had had an altercation with Braxton, and they had called the police.

The news showed a picture of Ludwik being taken away in a police car.

Braxton’s fate was uncertain, and as a witness, Ludwik was detained!

Whitney felt breathless as if crushed by the weight of her fears realized.

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The news had broken just ten minutes before.

Standing in the airport, she was at a loss, desperately redialing Felix’s number.

Finally, he answered.

Felix’s voice was a chaotic blend of sounds on the other end of the line. He was usually a gentle soul, but now his tone was heavy with a tinge of anger as he said, “Madam, Braxton has a history of strokes. Why didn’t you make a det

ailed note of it? Boss didn't know Braxton could not handle a night meeting. It would've been fine, but there was an error in the data you prepared!

It caught Boss off guard, and he had to redo everything on the spot, wasting time and leaving Braxton disappointed. The excitement triggered his condition.”

Whitney's mind went blank. An error in the data?

Her uncle had not only removed her annotations but had tampered with the numbers.

She felt a chill down her spine.

“I can't talk more now, Madam. Boss is at the police station. You'd better hurry over and be with him! If Braxton passes away, forget the hotel project. Boss might even face...” Felix's call suddenly dropped.

Whitney clutched her phone tightly, her eyes reddening as she stared at the photo in the news article, showing Ludwik's tall silhouette.

She knew the stakes; not only was the hotel project in jeopardy but Ludwik could also be implicated in a lawsuit over a man's life.

All because of her uncle.

Whitney's face turned ghostly pale.

The South City Police Department was easy to find.

But she did not head there. Right now, the most important thing was to ensure Braxton made it through the night!

In a single motion, she hopped into a taxi and rushed to the Tarrington Mansion.

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When Whitney arrived at the scene, Braxton had already been whisked away to a private hospital, and a crowd had gathered at the gates of the Tarrington Mansion. Braxton was a pillar of the community and head of the city's administration, and many from the police

force, government, and competing corporations had all come together to speculate and gossip.

The gravity of the situation was undeniable; if Braxton were to pass, the scandal surrounding Ludwik would be impossible to contain.

The pressure from these political powers was immense, and there was no doubt that competitors were stirring trouble behind the scenes.

Whitney felt her head spinning, and the cold air she breathed did nothing to calm her nerves.

Braxton had suffered another stroke.

Her mother had taught her acupuncture, a skill Whitney had a natural gift for, especially when it came to treating the brain. Some of her techniques were beyond the explanation of medicine, yet they worked wonders, targeting mysterious points on the body.

As a child, Whitney had even heard her mother speak of using acupuncture to manipulate someone's memory and temperament by controlling the nerves in the skull, a practice her mother never actually pursued.

Years ago, it was through acupuncture that she had treated a man suffering from nocturnal epilepsy, restoring him to health.

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Clutching her hands tightly, Whitney's gaze hardened, and she immediately instructed the driver to take her to Braxton's private hospital.

At the hospital, Whitney could only make it as far as the foyer. Braxton's room was at the end of a hallway teeming with well-wishers, with Tarrington relatives standing guard at the very back.

Doctors were bustling in and out as the situation grew increasingly dire.

Whitney could only catch snippets of conversation about Braxton's condition – a ruptured blood vessel in his brain was causing a hemorrhage, compressing

the nerves. They could not operate for fear of aggravating the injury, and he was in a coma, unlikely to survive the night.

The most esteemed neurosurgeons had been summoned, but even they were helpless, declaring Braxton's time

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was near.

Tears streaked the faces of Braxton's relatives, who were at a loss for what to do.

Whitney felt a surge of determination. She tried to approach but was halted by security, who mistook her for a press member and tried to usher her out.

She could not reach the room, let alone speak to anyone from the Tarrington family!

Desperate, she paced the hospital entrance, checking her watch incessantly.

Suddenly, a car pulled up, and a man with an imposing figure hurried out and dashed into the hospital.

Bang!

Whitney turned just in time to collide with the man. She nearly fell, but he quickly steadied her.

When he looked up, his worried eyes met hers, and he paused in recognition. "Whitney? What are you doing here in South City?"

"Mr. Lutz, what brings you to this hospital?" Whitney asked, looking pale and concerned.

"A dear mentor of mine is gravely ill; he may not make it through the night. I was nearby for a function and came as soon as I heard. What about you?"

moment – Braxton.

Could Bryce's mentor be....

Her eyes flickered with thought, then hope. She grabbed Bryce's sleeve, urgent. "Mr. Lutz, is your mentor Braxton?"

"How did you... Are you also..." Bryce furrowed his brow. Then his expression shifted as he pieced together why

Braxton was ill.

He looked at her with a complex intensity.

"Your man has been taken into police custody. Your being here won't change anything."

"It will. I can cure Braxton!" Whitney insisted quickly.

"You?" Bryce eyed her skeptically. "Even if you want to save him, you can't just do as you please, Whitney. Human life is precious."

"The doctors have given up on Braxton. They've written him off. For the night and refuse to operate, afraid of the liability!"

Whitney pulled Bryce toward the room, speaking with urgency. "I have a unique acupuncture technique that can stem the bleeding in Braxton's brain. If he's left to wait, he'll die. Let me try!"

"Do you even have a medical license?" Bryce asked, still shocked.

"I have an alternative medicine license back at home."

Bryce shook his head, unconvinced.

"You're desperate to save that man, utterly desperate."

"Mr. Lutz! Please..." Whitney reached for his sleeve, but Bryce walked past her, his expression grave, and entered the room.

Recognized as Braxton's close protégé and the head of the Lutz Group in Banyan

City, the Tarrington family knew him. With tears in his eyes, Braxton's son led Bryce into the room. "My father may not make it through the night. He always thinks highly of you; please, see him."

Bryce stiffened. Whitney's words about Braxton's condition were true.

After seeing Braxton, Bryce's face turned ashen. His mentor was on the brink of brain death, kept alive only by a ventilator.

Rubbing his temple, Bryce stepped out into the hallway, his handsome face drawn with concern.

By then, the Tarringtons had dismissed the gathering of relatives and friends.

Whitney, forced to wait at the hospital entrance, saw Bryce smoking in the chill of the hallway. She managed to get his number and incessantly texted him.

Half an hour later, lips pressed, Bryce stepped outside.

Whitney stood anxiously on the hospital steps.

He led her to a shadowed part of the hallway, his expression serious. "Is your acupuncture really effective? I've never heard of alternative medicine curing surgical conditions."

"Braxton's intracranial case is not surgical. Acupuncture can't treat traumatic injuries, but I've successfully treated my friend Natalie's epilepsy. Please, let me try," she pleaded.

"If my mentor dies under your care, do you understand the consequences you'll face?"

Ludwik's fate would be sealed by the next day if Braxton died.

Whitney clung to this last thread of hope. She had to try. She had to take the risk.

Nodding emphatically, she said, "I'll take full responsibility if Braxton passes under my care. I'll sign whatever

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you need."

As she stood there, her eyes gleaming with confidence and determination, Bryce felt a jolt of surprise. Squinting slightly, he wrestled with his thoughts for a moment before finally exhaling a weary sigh and cracking a wry smile. "I want my mentor to make it through this," he admitted. "So, I'll take a gamble with you. Follow me."

He led her stealthily into the doctor's office, where they swiped a nurse's uniform for her to slip into. Whitney donned a tight-fitting face mask for good measure.

Guiding her to Braxton's ward, they found the Tarringtons, a family overcome with grief, their spirits crushed. Bryce broke the silence. "We're going in for one more visit."

The Tarringtons, too distraught to pay much attention, barely registered the masked nurse beside him. "Are you here to change his dressings?" One of them asked.

Without uttering a word, Whitney simply nodded.

"Well, go on in then."

Inside the ICU, Bryce closed the door behind them, his brow furrowed in concentration as he stood guard. His gaze swept toward Whitney, his voice low and urgent, "You better hurry."

Whitney glanced back at him, her gratitude evident. "Mr. Lutz, I know you're taking a huge risk with me, and I really appreciate it."

Bryce's expression softened momentarily as he regarded her tense yet commanding presence but said nothing. Quickly sterilizing her acupuncture kit, Whitney approached Braxton's bedside. His medical records, including a brain scan and MRI images, were laid out, showing the exact location of the hemorrhage and its proximity to key pressure points.

Her hands trembled as she meticulously inserted the acupuncture needles into his skull, careful not to make a single misstep.

Nearly an hour passed in tense silence until, miraculously, the monitors by Braxton's bed began to show the faintest signs of life.

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Bryce's expression tightened, a shift flickering in his eyes.



Whitney shook her head, signaling there was more to be done. She continued to apply pressure to more points on his head while Bryce stood guard by the door.

It was not until 3 a.m. that Braxton miraculously regained consciousness!

The monitor beeped, rousing the Tarringtons, who had been dozing off in the waiting area. Braxton's son immediately called for the doctor.

Seizing the moment, Bryce stepped out with Whitney as a flurry of doctors rushed into the room, astonished. "Braxton, you're awake?"

A doctor quickly examined Braxton and found that the internal bleeding had stopped on its own, meaning Braxton could undergo surgery, offering a glimmer of hope!

In a corner of the corridor, Bryce's phone rang incessantly. He looked at Whitney in disbelief. "You really did it?"

Whitney just shook her head, her expression still tense. "Braxton's going into surgery soon. I'm worried about complications; I need to stay here."

Bryce asked, "I need to attend to something urgent. Can you handle things on your own?"

Whitney tightened her mask and nodded silently.

Leaving

Bryce behind, she stood vigil in the hallway, her focus unwavering on Braxton's condition.

Three hours later, Braxton's brain surgery concluded. The doors swung open, and a doctor emerged to congratulate the Tarrington family. "The surgery went smoothly; Braxton is out of danger!"

At

that moment, Whitney's cold sweat dripped down, and her heart, which had been in her throat, finally settled back into place.

Breathing deeply, her rapid heartbeat brought a moist glint to her eyes.

Ludwik was safe.

Clutching her phone, she looked up the distance between the private hospital and South City Police Station, ready to head to the precinct.

Suddenly, Bryce called, his tone strained, "Whitney, there's a situation here, and I need you to come over. I think I've been set up. Bring your acupuncture kit."

"Mr. Lutz, what's wrong? Where are you?" Whitney's grip tightened on her phone, alarmed by the urgency in his

voice.

Having just been helped greatly by Bryce, she could not abandon him now.

Frowning, she hailed a cab.

At the hotel.

Whitney rushed from the taxi to Bryce's room. As she entered, she saw his tall figure slumped against a desk. His usually composed face was flushed abnormally, his gaze hazy. Trying to muster his energy, he grunted, "I was at a socializing event here, and someone from a rival company spiked my drink. I'm feeling off. We can't let this get out. Help me get out of here."

Whitney realized he had been set up because of his assistant's absence. The business world was ruthless. People would use any means necessary to reach their goals.

She quickly helped him to his feet and headed for the door.

Suddenly, someone outside slammed and locked the door!

Whitney was startled and rushed to try the handle while Bryce joined in, kicking at the door. But their combined strength could not budge it.

Bryce's face darkened as he quickly assessed the situation, looking at her regretfully. "Damn, I shouldn't have involved you. I wanted your acupuncture to help me, but I didn't anticipate their next move. They're trying to catch me in a trap!"

Whitney, too, was anxious; she was in a hurry to find Ludwik at the station, and now they were trapped.

Bryce made a few more calls; his team in Banyan City was three hours away.

His temperature rose rapidly, his gaze on Whitney growing intense.

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“Mr. Lutz, stop moving. I’ll get the needles ready,” Whitney said urgently, dragging him toward the bathroom. “You look bad; I’m not sure if acupuncture can take effect quickly enough.”

Suddenly, he pulled her wrist, and Whitney realized her mistake in touching him.

Bryce’s large frame pinned her against the bathroom wall as he lunged, desperate with discomfort. “Whitney, I’m burning up, I... Get away! Stop with the needles.”

Startled, Whitney tried to escape.

But, out of control, Bryce did not let her go; instead, he knocked her into the bathtub.

The cold splash shocked Whitney into stillness as her needle kit fell into the water, scattering the silver needles. While she struggled, she tried to gather them.

Bryce pressed her against the tub’s edge, his touch feverish, his breath scorching as he whispered, “Whitney, I like you. I’m sorry, I...”

“Mr. Lutz! Snap out of it. This is not right!” Whitney cried, tears welling, prying her mouth free as his lips moved down her neck. She was pushed underwater, desperately reaching for a needle and finally jabbing it into his neck.

Bryce flinched, but his strength was overpowering, and he continued his advances.

Exhausted, Whitney slammed his head against the tub, quickly found another needle, and applied it, turning his face pale.

Finally, Bryce stilled, his hand still tearing at her collar.

Whitney, pale and trembling from the cold soak, quickly composed herself, fixing her collar and easing his heavy body into the tub.

Bryce remained unconscious until morning. Whitney dared not remove the needles, fearing he would lose control again.

It was not until after 7 a.m. that Bryce's team arrived. Whitney allowed him to regain consciousness.

As the drug's effects waned, Bryce's face regained color, and he turned apologetic. "Don't worry, I'll make sure the footage is destroyed. It won't affect you. Thank you for saving me last night, Whitney."

"It's what I had to do, Mr. Lutz. You've done so much for me."

Whitney breathed a sigh of relief when he said that, fearing that some incriminating footage might make its way to Ludwik and spell disaster.

Her brows knitted tightly. She hurried toward the exit. "Mr. Lutz, I'm in a bit of a rush, so I'll have to take off."

"Hold on a second. Your clothes are soaked through. I've sent someone out to pick up a new outfit for you."

Bryce caught up to her, noticing her pallid, anxious face, and felt a twinge of sympathy. "You're hurrying off to the police station, aren't you? Do you realize who he is? It's not so easy for him to get into trouble, you know. The Tarringtons hold their breath around him, too."

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"I'm aware he's Ludwik," Whitney admitted with a slow, bitter smile, *much to his* astonishment. "But even he can't afford to gamble like this."

Especially *since* this whole mess began with her uncle, *who was out to get Ludwik. This time, her uncle probably wanted to cause trouble for his company and put lives at risk!*

Whitney *could not* shake *the* guilt; *she* had to do *everything in her* power to *stem this tidal wave of* chaos. Right now, she did *not even know* the *status of* the hotel project. Her furrowed *brow showed no sign of* easing. *With a heart full of* bitterness, *she mustered her* weary body and *dashed toward the* police station.

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In the South City Police Station, the interrogation hall was silent except for the creak of leather shoes and the occasional shuffling of papers. As heir to the Lippert family fortune and a titan of industry in Banyan City, Ludwik sat with his entourage, his presence too formidable to be confined behind bars.

However, Braxton was also an influential figure in the government, so the police did not dare to take this matter lightly either.

The investigative proceedings had lasted only a couple of hours the previous night, and it had been a long wait

since then.

Ludwik could not leave for the hospital, and updates on the situation did not come swiftly.

As dawn's tentative light seeped through the windows, marking the end of a sleepless night, Ludwik's unreadable eyes lifted coldly, his gaze cutting across to the precinct entrance like a frost-covered blade.

Felix watched with a mixture of awe and fear. Another visitor had arrived, a shareholder from United Realty Corporation. Felix knew who Ludwik was hoping for and what disappointment he was trying to mask. He had called Whitney numerous times—why had she not picked up? Had she not promised...

Whitney, fraught with nerves, pushed through the precinct doors. The chilly coastal wind had lashed at her the whole drive, whipping through her open car windows and drying her damp clothes. She had to appear normal, for Bryce had delayed her and now feared she was too late.

Pregnant and anxious, she stumbled into the hall and immediately spotted Ludwik's imposing silhouette. He sat tall and lean, his noble features tight with tension, an aura of icy detachment surrounding him. In his arm, he cradled a delicate hand, the wrist bandaged, while Elaine, ever the attentive companion, whispered to him, her touch gentle upon his arm, her handkerchief dabbing gracefully at his brow.

Elaine stood, conferring swiftly with the shareholders as if orchestrating their next move. Ludwik, stoic as ever, was about to light a cigarette when Felix's voice sliced through the tension.

"Madam..." Felix's gaze fixed on the entrance as he called out to Whitney.

All eyes, including those of the United Realty Corporation executives, turned to see.

Ludwik's piercing gaze settled on Whitney, his expression colder than the steel of a knife. She stood disheveled, looking like she had been dredged from the depths of a stormy sea, her face worn and lost.

Felix rushed to her. "Madam, why have you only just arrived? I told you last night to come quickly. Boss needed you."

Realizing his potential blunder, Felix clamped his mouth shut.

Ludwik's stare turned glacial, his disappointment palpable. He had been informed of her whereabouts the night

before.

A whole night had passed, and she arrived only now?

He glanced at her once more, then turned away, his cold indifference like a blade to Whitney's already chilled

heart.

She felt drained, watching Elaine's tender ministrations, her heart sour with regret yet relieved for Ludwik. She hoped that her desperate actions from the night before had been worth it.

At this time, a new group entered from another door. It was Braxton's son approaching Ludwik.

Ludwik stood, his towering presence commanding the room. Braxton's son, a man of about fifty and shorter in stature, approached with a changed demeanor, caution in his eyes. "Mr. Lippert, please understand our family's distress last night. My father is our cherished patriarch, and his illness during your meeting was unforeseen. Our call to the authorities was justified."

"Of course," Ludwik replied, his voice a mixture of understanding and formality. "How is Braxton fating?"

"Last night, we nearly lost him, but by some miracle, he clung to life and has successfully undergone surgery."

With those words, the tension in Ludwik's brow eased slightly.

Elaine squeezed his hand excitedly. "Bro, you're cleared!"

Whitney watched their clasped hands, her heart bitter yet silently rejoicing for his sake.

But then, Braxton's son added, "My father has awakened, and I'm here to convey the outcome of the land bid. He's still troubled by the error in your proposal. He had high hopes for your luxury hotel project, but I'm afraid the land will go to another company."

The executives' faces turned ashen.

Unruffled, Ludwik apologized with a steely calm. "Mr. Tarrington, I accept responsibility *for* Braxton's condition and the consequences. I won't contest the land bid any further. United Realty Corporation will not profit at the expense of Braxton's health. I wish him a speedy recovery and will ensure the best medical care *for* his future treatment."

Braxton's son, taken aback by Ludwik's nobility, nodded with a newfound respect. "Mr. Lippert, you're a man of great character, both inside and out. It's no wonder you're Banyan City's leading businessman, having built your company from the ground up. This setback must be costing you hundreds of billions. I hope you'll overcome this challenge."

With a few courteous words, he had addressed a company's very survival.

Ludwik remained unshaken, his gratitude cool. "Thank you."

As Braxton's son and his party left, the United Realty Corporation executives could hardly sit still. They respected Ludwik's authority, but his youth was belied by his formidable tactics. This project was vital to the corporation's foundation.

Shareholders stood up in a huff, pointing fingers at Whitney. "Mr. President, the bid was prepared by Whitney. If she made a mistake, she should be the one held accountable. Drag her over to Braxton and clear the air. We can't afford to lose this piece of land!"

"Yeah, it's all her fault. Her irresponsibility has led to such a huge blunder on your part!"

"You trust her too much, Mr. President!"

Whitney felt as though their words were piercing her skin, the pain sharp in her heart. She never meant to harm

him.

The bid was flawless; every detail was accounted for.

But her uncle had used her, and she was left with no defense, unable to confess the truth.

Ludwik watched her with a chilling gaze, silent as frost.

Yet Elaine stepped forward, her voice laced with anger and concern, "Whitney, you're the CEO of Skye Gem; preparing a bid is a no-brainer for you, so Bro trusted you with it. I'm not questioning your integrity, but mistakes in data like this are highly suspicious. Is it possible... do you harbor some resentment towards Bro?"

Her seemingly offhand remark planted seeds of doubt, causing the shareholders' expressions to shift, dramatically.

"Mr. President, could Whitney be harboring a malicious intent by messing up the data on purpose?"



“Whitney, what’s your endgame in sabotaging the President and causing us to lose a major deal?” The shareholders demanded angrily.

Whitney’s gaze turned icy, her frown deepening as she eyed Elaine, sensing that she was deliberately stirring the pot.

Could she know something?

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The secret of her uncle’s revenge...

Ludwik’s stare became sharp and piercing as he looked at Whitney, his dominating presence making it impossible for her to meet his eyes.

The tall, imposing man walked over to her, and in the end, he asked her nothing in front of the shareholders, his silence serving as her shield.

He gave her a frosty once-over and asked only one cold question, “Where have you been all night, from last evening until this morning?”

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Whitney translated the coldness in his tone; he was questioning her tardiness; his world had been shaken, yet she seemed indifferent.

She understood his sense of loss, but she had to swallow all the bitter consequences silently.

She could not tell him that she had run off to secretly save Braxton, turning danger into safety, all because of

the sin her uncle had committed.

She felt guilt weighing heavily on her soul.

Nor could she mention being trapped in a hotel with Bryce. In such a situation, she feared it might drive him mad.

Ludwik waited, a slow count of seconds ticking by.

Whitney choked back her bitterness, only able to look at him with hollow, sorrowful eyes and feign indifference. "I was taking care of Uncle in Banyan City, and my presence here wouldn't have changed anything."

The man's grip on her collar suddenly loosened, his knuckles elegant and beautiful, yet so chillingly cold.

Staring blankly at his large hand, Whitney raised her eyes to meet his, now cold and indifferent, and felt the tears that had long been falling inside her heart.

He stood upright, his eyes red with anger, gazing into the distance.

The shareholders were discontent. "Mr. President, can you believe what she's saying? The vice president herself, with her errors, is still so brazen. She relies entirely on your favor!"

"Her incompetence could've ruined the company."

"And then there's Elaine, who dragged her sick body here last night, dealing with everything smoothly this morning."

"There's no comparison. What's so good about Whitney anyway?"

The shareholders' complaints filled the air, and Elaine's hidden smirk widened with satisfaction.

She walked tenderly to the man's side, saying, "Bro, you've been up all night. Go rest for a while before we visit

Braxton."

Ludwik's lips were tightly sealed. Without another word, he left Whitney behind, his tall, stern figure getting into

the car.

The convoy sped away, leaving behind the chill of the police station on a winter morning, along with trailing exhaust fumes.

wind

Felix closed the car window and looked back at Whitney standing forlornly at the police station entrance, his eyes welling up with pity. He refused to believe she was so indifferent, absent from South City last night to care for her uncle. Plus, her appearance at the station suggested she had run there, her clothes soaked.

What had happened?

But Ludwik was livid, clearly unwilling to inquire further.

Thus, Felix dared not provoke him and sighed silently.

Whitney slowly squatted down, staring at the sunlight streaming down. It was a beautiful day, no snow, not too cold.

Yet her heart, why did it feel so cold, as if she could never climb out of this abyss?

It hurt so much, she wanted to say, but she could not as she watched him walk away in utter disappointment. Maybe it was for the best, an end.

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His disappointment in her, perhaps even suspicion, was the perfect end to a love that should never have been.

To sever their shared future.

Because of the guilt her uncle had instilled in her and the remorse she felt towards this man, she was tormented to the brink of madness.

Her phone rang. It was her uncle. She answered numbly.”

Keegan’s voice was laced with disappointment. “Did you save Braxton last night? Whitney, you just couldn’t bear to see him in trouble. I was so close to success, and you’ve cost me to fail!”

Whitney did not know how to awaken his conscience, her voice filled with sorrow, “Uncle, revenge can’t be sought this way; this is about taking a life for money.”

“What do you know? He owes me! Just insist it was your mistake and don’t expose me, *or* else, with his means, you know what will become of me!” He was warning her to remain hidden.

With her face in her hands, Whitney’s eyes shimmered with tears. To protect her uncle, she had said nothing earlier.

But this life was driving her mad.

Perhaps it was nearing the end.

He would discard her for such a grave mistake and banish her from United Realty Corporation.

Whitney clutched her chest, crying yet laughing.

At South City Private Hospital.

Ludwik visited Braxton in the ICU, where the Braxton’s consciousness was fairly clear. He was recounting the previous night’s events, “In my delirium, I thought I saw a white figure, a young girl, performing a procedure over my head.”

The Tarringtons exchanged puzzled looks, assuming the old man was confused by his illness.

Ludwik’s brow furrowed. Braxton’s condition had been dire the previous night; when Ludwik had entered the police car, Braxton had been taken by ambulance, the doctors shaking their heads.

He knew he was in deep trouble, but everything had miraculously turned around by morning.

“Ludwik, you have integrity, but the land deal has been finalized. It’s gone to the previous bidder,” Braxton said, his eyes still showing admiration for the young man.

Ludwik nodded calmly, “It was my oversight. Please focus on your recovery.”

“You don’t seem like someone who makes errors. Who did you entrust with the bid?” Braxton inquired.

Ludwik did not reply, merely nodding before turning to leave the room.

In the corridor, Ludwik's eyes narrowed as he asked, "Which company was the previous bidder?"

Felix understood his implication. The previous day's events had been suspicious; Ludwik's competitors had been in lengthy talks with Braxton from afternoon until evening, deliberately delaying, causing Ludwik to be late.

And then there was Whitney's error in the bid, coinciding with Braxton's stroke.

It all seemed too convenient.

Now that the land had gone to that company, Felix immediately began investigating.

"Mr. Lippert, it's an overseas construction firm," Felix replied with a frown, "Their representative yesterday was the chief delegate. The owner of the company is shrouded in mystery, quite secretive."

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Ludwik's expression tightened with an edge of cold fury in his voice.

"Dig out everything you can! And have you tracked down Orion's whereabouts?"

Felix paused, then looked sharply at Ludwik's icy gaze, "You suspect that this overseas company is his doing?"

"It doesn't matter if it is. A hundred-billion project, we can still afford the loss." Ludwik's face was stoic, a cold smirk forming. "He's always liked to lurk in the shadows, competing with me since we were kids. His mother certainly did not raise Orion well."

Felix clenched his fists; Kaden's favor had always been with the second son, Orion, and Ludwik had not had an easy life.

Orion was still hell-bent on taking down Ludwik's enterprises!

The doors slid open just in time as the group approached the elevator.

Out stepped Bryce, the epitome of sophistication, and the sight that befell him caused his brows to furrow in contemplation.

What on earth did Whitney see in this man? Did his looks simply spellbind her? Rumors had it that Ludwik was as cold-hearted as they came, both in tactics and spirit.

Ludwik's eyes met Bryce's, but he did not offer the slightest acknowledgment, striding into the elevator as if the other man were *no* more than a wisp of air.

As Ludwik brushed past, Bryce's frown deepened, and he let out a pointed, chilly barb, "Mr. Lippert, you'd better treat Whitney right, she..."

The previous night's events flashed through his mind—Whitney's unauthorized medical intervention and her obvious desire to keep it a secret.

He choked *on* his words, deciding against speaking them out loud.

But Ludwik's icy glare was piercing, his aura unyielding, and the tension between the two men was palpable.

Ludwik let out a derisive chuckle, his every expression bearing the weight of dominance. "And if I do not treat her well, what could you possibly do about it? Do you really think you have what it takes to take her from me, Bryce?"

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Bryce's gaze turned frosty as he faced off with Ludwik, whose influence was as vast as the ocean. But Bryce was not one to be easily daunted. "If that day comes, may the best man win," he declared with a steely resolve. And with that, he left.

Standing in the elevator, Ludwik fixed a hawk-like stare on the back of Bryce's head. Felix could feel the chill emanating from his boss, a clear sign that his mood had soured even further.

Rivalry in love, a tangled situation with Whitney—what a mess.

As the elevator doors slid shut, Elaine emerged from the shadows. She watched Ludwik descend, then turned her thoughtful gaze toward Bryce.

Was Bryce truly this taken with Whitney?

A cold smirk played on Elaine's lips as she dialed her assistant. "The investigation I asked you to conduct on Whitney's whereabouts last night—what have you found?"

Whitney had rushed to the police station soaking wet that morning—certainly not a regular occurrence.

Ludwik, in his fury, had overlooked the details.

The assistant replied, "Elaine, I've discovered that Bryce helped Whitney sneak into the hospital to save Braxton. Later, Bryce was drugged by a rival, and Whitney rushed to his hotel. They were trapped together until the morning."

What?

Elaine's face paled. Whitney had saved Braxton?

She knew the bid fiasco had something to do with Whitney's uncle, but she had not anticipated Whitney secretly aiding Ludwik!

"Make sure to erase any trace of Whitney's visit to the hospital." Elaine could not let him discover that Whitney had helped him in secret.

Elaine's lips curled into a sly smile. "Find out if there are any photos or videos of what Bryce and Whitney got up to in the hotel."

If Ludwik found out, Whitney's fate would be sealed.

But Elaine was in no hurry. Whitney was already on a path of no return with an uncle like that. Elaine would simply bide her time by Ludwik's side, waiting for the right moment.

At nightfall, Whitney returned to Banyan City from the South City, alone and without a place to go except to Tiana's apartment.

No sooner had she stepped through the door than her body collapsed to the floor, her stomach churning with anxiety.

Fearing another fever might harm the baby, Whitney mustered the strength to take a herbal bath. However, exhaustion took over, and she fell into a deep slumber.

When Tiana returned later that night, she found Whitney unconscious in the now icy bathwater, her phone clutched in her hand, frozen on the news page of United Realty Corporation.

The loss of the tender was significant news in the business world, and Tiana, ever in the know, had heard about it.

With a sigh, Tiana helped Whitney out of the bath, whispering urgently, "Whitney? Get dressed before you catch

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a cold again."

Whitney's eyes fluttered open, her voice hoarse, "What time is it?"

"It's nearly midnight. Look, I know about the tender—it was your project. Data errors happen; don't be so hard **on** yourself."

Whitney's eyes fell, bitter and sorrowful. Tiana did not grasp the entire situation—how could Whitney not blame herself?

"L's situation was dangerous, but thank goodness Braxton is okay. He's not giving you a hard time, is he?" Tiana worried about Whitney's return to her apartment, fearing her relationship with L might have worsened.

Whitney remained silent, unsure of what to say.

Tiana helped her up, softly touching her belly, "The baby's growing. Just put up with Elaine, that little thorn in your side. You've got to think about the child who's about to be born."

Whitney stiffened. Because of her uncle, there was no turning back.

Unaware, Tiana continued, "You've been so out of sorts lately, you probably don't even know tomorrow's New Year's Eve. I have to head back to my home tonight, and you..."



Whitney, forcing a smile, interrupted, "Go be with your parents. I'll be fine here."

Tiana hesitated, then asked, "Aren't you returning to L's villa? It's your first New Year together."

Whitney felt a sharp pang in her heart, biting her lip to hold back tears. She clutched her clothes, eyes fixed on the ground, "There's no chance... Tiana."

Seeing Whitney's pale face, Tiana's heart sank, and she said no more.

Was it possible L had not called her? Tiana dared not probe further, fearing it would bring Whitney to tears.

After staying with Whitney for a little while, Tiana had to leave for the morning prayers.

Whitney remained in the bedroom, sitting in solitude until dawn.

New Year's Eve had come; with it, snow began to fall, each flake as cold as the loneliness in her heart.

Her absence from the villa was a statement he would surely understand.

The phone rang at the most inopportune moment. Whitney glanced at it, stunned to see the villa's number.

Her heart trembled, knowing it must be Natalie calling.

With a tight grip, she answered, "Mom..."

Natalie's voice, tinged with worry, said, "Whitney, it's such an important day. Why aren't you here?"

Whitney could not speak, her lips sealed.

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Natalie continued, a hint of concern in her laughter. "I remember you two were fine when that rascal I was hospitalized. I've been recuperating in my place these days. Have you two had a silly quarrel again? Come back, dear. It's our family's first New Year's together. We can't be without you and the little one."

Tears fell onto Whitney's knees, silent yet profound.

Natalie gently coaxed, "There's no misunderstanding that can't be resolved. Come home, and we'll sort it out. I'll stand by you."

"Mom..." Whitney had long since regarded the lovely Natalie as a second mother.

Her heart was a mix of warmth and agony. She could not believe that someone with such a wonderful mother could have hurt her mother all those years ago.

"He means it too, you know. He might not say it, but Whitney, we're waiting for you," Natalie soothed.

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Did he mean it? Did he want her to come home?

Whitney's heartbeats quickened, a mix of unrest and desolation.

Maybe today marked an ending.

Was he asking her to come back just to break things off?

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Whitney pondered, feeling hollow. If so, she would rather face him head-on, even as an adversary.

Regardless, Natalie's health was deteriorating, and Whitney had to play her part to soothe the old lady's

worries.

He probably had the same idea.

Taking a deep breath, Whitney composed herself, applied a light layer of makeup to mask her pallid complexion, dressed, and drove off.

Standing before the grand estate gates, a layer of soft snow blanketed the fence, her breath forming wisps of white mist in the cold air.

Whitney was momentarily lost in thought as her facial recognition triggered the gates to open automatically.

With a troubled heart, she stepped inside. The familiar living room seemed to be filled with Ludwik's masculine presence.

Natalie was sitting on the sofa, monitoring her blood pressure. Whitney's gaze flitted about, seemingly not noticing him.

"Whitney!" Natalie called out to her softly, naturally smiling as she pointed towards the kitchen. "Good to have you back, dear. We're preparing a New Year's Eve dinner. The house feels empty with only a few of us. We had a plan, you know. Everyone has to make a dish."

The atmosphere was quiet and harmonious, and Natalie seemed in good spirits.

Whitney forced a smile and rolled up her sleeves to wash her hands, moving into the kitchen in tune with Natalie's wishes. "What would you like to eat, Mom? I'll make it."

"My appetite *is* not great," Natalie said weakly but with a smile. "Just make some of the boy's favorite dishes." Whitney paused for a moment. His favorites? Celery, steamed pork ribs, cucumber and shrimp salad, and mushroom chicken soup—all without a hint of spice. He preferred them light.

She had not realized she had memorized these little details.

A heaviness seemed to settle in her chest once more. She exhaled slowly and said softly, "Taryn, let's start with the mushroom chicken soup."

"Sure, Sir loves it," Taryn replied with a smile, beginning to slice the chicken.

Whitney was cleaning the mushrooms, wondering whether to blanch them or add them directly to the pot, when she was enveloped by a familiar, frosty scent—the unmistakable aroma of the man who had long since burrowed into her senses, with his imposing presence.

Then, a warmth pressed against her as he spoke from above her head, “You’re not exactly a chef.”

## **Chapter 155**

Ludwik’s tone was cool and emotionless, and Whitney could not comprehend his emotions.

Her heart raced as she jerked back, feeling like it might leap right out of her throat.

Why was he in the kitchen?

Ludwik eyed her suddenly downcast face, saying nothing as his long fingers covered her pale ones. He expertly took the spatula to sauté the morels in the pan, skillfully bringing the water to a boil.

Whitney was a mess of nerves, unable to comprehend why he would still want to be near her.

Trapped in his scorching embrace, unable to break free, she did not know how to escape.

“The water’s boiling,” he reminded her, his voice nasal, hinting at a cold.

“Oh,” Whitney replied stiffly, reaching for the pot.

The man assisted her, pouring out the water with ease.

Natalie’s silhouette lingered at the kitchen entrance, her laughter peeking through.

Turning her head, Whitney started to grasp what he meant.

Pretending to go along with it, she did not dodge him anymore, and he instructed, “Add just a bit of oil.”

She reached for the oil bottle, her pinky finger instinctively raised in a delicate and graceful manner, pouring just a little and waiting for his cue.

Ludwik squinted, watching her dainty, onion-like fingers, his husky voice commanding, “Pour more.”

“Add the morels,” he directed.

Whitney quickly scooped up the morel slices, her cooking skills obviously lacking.

The man enveloped her tiny hand with his, taking up the spatula.

Their bodies were so close in the warm kitchen that it gave Whitney a dizzying sensation as if the warmth inside her was returning.

But was this just a fleeting dream?

Perhaps he knew it too, hence this last close moment he allowed?

Her heart felt pricked by a needle, sharp and stinging, and Whitney silently wished for time to slow down.

Just a little slower.

Yet the dishes were quickly prepared.

His long legs carried him out of the kitchen, leaving the warmth behind and returning to his frosty demeanor.

The lavish marble dining table was soon laden with a feast, cakes, pastries, and exquisite wine glasses.

Natalie was lighting romantic candles, inviting Whitney to take a seat.

At the grand table sat only three people.

Natalie seemed particularly joyful, sighing, “It used to be just the two of us for New Year’s, so dreary and quiet. Now, with Whitney and the baby on the way, we’re still few, but I think your happiness will grow.”

Her face beamed with joy.

Whitney’s expression stiffened, her inner turmoil whispering, could their happiness really grow?

No, this was their first New Year’s together, probably the last.

Ludwik remained silent across the table, his face as impassive as ever.

He poured himself a glass of wine, his long fingers swirling it before drinking it with icy detachment.

The silence spread around the table until Natalie nudged her son, "Don't you have something to **say** to Whitney?"

Ludwik set down his glass, wiping his lips with a napkin, his gaze coolly meeting Whitney's.

She froze in her seat, her heart feeling locked in a box, suffocating.

She knew what he was about to say, what she had been awaiting.

She had caused his company trouble, United Realty Corporation, to face a significant loss, and he would not forgive her.

So be it, a clean break.

Her fingertips trembled slightly, as if pricked by needles, unbearably painful.

Yet he stood, towering over her, holding a small velvet box, the royal blue case sliding under the romantic candlelight to Whitney's stunned presence.

He leaned against the table, looking down, his deep eyes fixed on her, "Open it."

Confused, Whitney did.

Inside was a stunning diamond ring that left her speechless.

In a complex, grave tone, Ludwik said, "Whitney. Did you make a mistake in the bid on purpose? I won't ask. I can forgive that error. If you thought your mistake would anger me, drive me away, and set me free with Elaine, you need not have bothered. I won't have it."

His gaze darkened. "What exactly went wrong between us? I don't understand. It seems to be over?"

A mocking, pained smile flickered in his eyes.

Her heart clenched, and she bit her lip hard, fearing she would be overwhelmed by desolation.

He looked at her intently, his voice a low whisper, "I don't want it to end! Nor do I want to lose you. Take your time to consider wearing this ring. Give us one last chance. If you're not wearing it tomorrow morning, I won't force you."

After his resolute words, he returned to his seat, the man who always seemed so untouchable.

But what had he just done?

Whitney's heart trembled.

He was proposing to her.

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Stunned, she gazed at the ring, simple yet centered with a rare pink diamond.

Was it a symbol of her uniqueness, and how much did she mean to him?

Her fingers hid under the table, shaking uncontrollably as Natalie took her hand, placed the ring in her palm, and folded her fingers over it, her voice filled with significance. "Whitney, he designed this himself. You must wear it. I swear, he's never said anything like this in his life."

A sword seemed to pierce Whitney's heart, the pain indescribable.

Her mind, tangled with shock and pain, could not stay another second without giving herself away.

She stood abruptly, pretending to feel nauseous, "Excuse me, Mom. The baby might have upset my stomach. I'll just head to the restroom."

Fleeing Ludwik's forlorn gaze, Whitney rushed to the bathroom, slammed the door behind her, and turned the water on full blast.

Beneath the sound of running water, she trembled, opening her hand to reveal the warm ring shining in her palm.

The ring's edges, like gentle blades, cut into her heart.

She should not be given this kindness.

Looking into the mirror, she wondered, “Ludwik, are you foolish? Why not cast me away? Do you know what I’ve planned? I intended to seek revenge! Why propose? After yesterday’s despair, why still tolerate me? With United Realty Corporation in such trouble, why not abandon me?”

At that moment, all the answers lay in Whitney’s heart. His feelings for her were genuine, truly real. He tolerated her endlessly, even wanting to keep her after the disaster.

He said he did not want to lose her.

His affection for her was that deep.

Whitney felt like she could see the beating heart beneath his icy exterior, presented to her on an open palm. Just moments ago, he had offered it up to her.

But in her hands was a blade of hatred. She was poised to pierce his heart, to make it bleed, to cause pain. Before she could hurt him, though, she had already wounded herself.

Her pain was so intense she could not breathe. Staring at the ring, she curled up in a corner. Tears dropped one by one, heavy and relentless. Her sobs were hoarse as she kept asking, “Mom, why did it have to be this way? Why did the *man I love* have to be the one who hurt you all those years ago? If only my enemy were not him, how perfect that would be. I want to be with him, have his children, wear this ring, and share in his

Why can’t I? Why can’t I...”

**Chapter 156**