

Love beyond the mask (Whitney) Chapter 86-95

"You're off the hook now, Carter might not want to cross you," he snorted with feigned indifference.

"I won't admit to something I didn't do. I know you're a business tycoon who looks down on female entrepreneurs, but I do have my principles. Believe it or not, that's up to you, Whitney said with a light smile, her lips brightened by the warmth of the heater, looking quite fetching. Ludwik's gaze darkened with longing for that pretty mouth.

His Adam's apple bobbed as he spoke with a chilling tone, laced with biting sarcasm, "Congratulations, getting nabbed was supposed to land you life behind bars. Who was blind enough to bail you out? Your husband?"

Whitney flinched, life imprisonment? She muttered, "My friend said it would be just over a decade, tops."

"Ignorant," he scoffed arrogantly, "Billions in counterfeit diamonds, and the Lutz family pressing charges— did you really think they'd settle for anything less than life? They wouldn't bother otherwise."

Whitney felt her blood run cold.

With a thin smile, he taunted, "Scared now? Do you actually think that ex of yours could save you? Hunters temper is explosive, and Wyatt is slick as they come. Would he really attract hatred for someone like you? If you're blind, perhaps it's time to wash your eyes out."

She sat there stunned, shocked by his furious words.

But his reminder made her think. Wyatt was indeed cunning and would not curry favor with the Lutz family over a few words from Simon, a love child.

That day, Tiana also mentioned Simon being inconsequential, but she had not seen anyone else but Simon.

"Mr. Lippert, perhaps you're privy to what happened that night? Then tell me, who saved me?"

Ludwik felt his blood boil with irritation, his handsome face framed with a frosty sneer, "Apart from a husband saving his wife, who else saves someone else's wife? Because you're pretty?"

Whitney's face stiffened slightly, she had considered it, but L never mentioned saving her, bursting in only to fight and berate her.

Her face showed hurt, eyes brimming with unshed tears.

Ludwik knew he had been somewhat...harsh that night.

He just would not admit it. And this stubborn little mule would not back down either.

So, the cold war lasted until today.

Now, assuming the role of 'Ludwik', he explained awkwardly, "If your husband is mad at you, did you ever stop to think why? Maybe he dropped everything to save you, went through all that trouble, and what does he see? An ungrateful woman not only failing to recognize her savior but also tangled up with her ex. How do you think he feels? Isn't it natural for him to lash out at you?"

His blunt guidance made Whitney stiffen again.

Thinking back to the heated argument that night, she was so furious she was not thinking straight. When L charged in, she was thanking Simon.

And when her anger peaked, she sarcastically accused L of being too busy to answer his phone.

If it was L who saved her, would that not mean he completely misunderstood her? No wonder he was so angry

with her.

Her delicate fingers twisted in self-reproach, her face paling.

He watched with a touch of satisfaction. Had she finally realized her mistake?

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Ludwik's eyes softened a bit.

But the next moment, she bit her lip defiantly, looking up to challenge him, “Even if he misunderstood, he had no right to berate me without knowing the facts. Does he have any idea how much I’ve suffered?”

Ludwik frowned, “Suffered, how?”

It was just a scare, was it not?

Tears glittered in Whitney’s eyes, and even though he was a stranger to her, she felt an overwhelming sense of injustice. She rolled up her sleeve, revealing the bruising, “I was beaten in the holding cell, and even my child was in danger. But you men are all the same, only caring about your pride and jealousy. He didn’t even see my injuries, just mocked me for being just fine.”

What?

His pupils dilated, and he saw the deep bruises on her delicate wrists. She had been beaten in jail?

Why had no one told him?

He had not noticed that night and he had been so cruel to her.

And the caregivers these past days, were they blind or mute?

His gaze hardened as he realized how fragile she was and how she should not have been hurt.

Damn, he had been blind with rage, oblivious to everything.

“Does it... hurt?”

“What hurts more is my heart,” Whitney clenched her teeth, pulling her sleeve back down, her eyes stubbornly holding back tears, “Thinking about how I was throwing up for his child in that bathroom, all Simon did was hand me a tissue, and L blindly accused me of kissing my ex. I’m about to die from his jerk’s rage.”

Ludwik’s handsome eyes froze, wondering how many more bruises like that she had, her face barely a hand-span wide, now even thinner, her eyes shimmering as if in pain. His heart softened, mixed with regret.

She was angry because he had been negligent and kept taunting her.

He reached out with his long fingers, wanting to comfort her, but Whitney sensed it and withdrew like a startled crab, guarding herself. "Mr. Lippert, what are you doing?"

His eyes narrowed. Clearly, she still remembered she was a married woman, that day with Simon in the bathroom, maybe it really was...

"Thank you, Mr. Lippert, for listening to my explanation today, and for letting me vent so much. Skye Gem will slowly return to my hands. Watch out for me as a fair competitor," she said, picking up her bag and walking away with a smile.

He leaned back in his chair, his long legs stretched out awkwardly, dress pants revealing a hint of a sensually bare ankle above his sharp leather shoes, as stern as his expression.

"Damn," he muttered, clenching his fist.

Felix followed Ludwik back to his office as the temperature seemed to drop.

Ludwik said, "Find out what exactly happened to her in the holding cell that night. And why was there no mention of bruising on her medical records these past days?"

Ludwik had been monitoring the baby's condition every day, he had seen her records, too, although he never mentioned it.

Elaine received a call from the hospital and stepped into her private office, the caller said, "Elaine, Mr. Lippert is suddenly questioning why Whitney's medical records failed to mention her injuries. I've responded that it wasn't reflected because pregnant women don't take medication."

Elaine paused, then said, "You did well, your director's position is secure."

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After hanging up, Elaine's eyes narrowed. She had instructed the doctor to hide Whitney's injuries, hoping to fuel a misunderstanding between Whitney and Ludwik, causing a rift between them.

Wasn't Ludwik still angry? Why did he suddenly care about Whitney?

An ominous premonition hit her as she picked up a stack of documents and headed to the CEO's top-floor office.

Felix was giving his report, "I checked with the attending physician and the nurses, the patient wasn't on any medicine because she's pregnant and it did not show up on her chart. But the nurse mentioned that Madam had been sneaking off to the restroom for a while every day. She's probably self-medicating in secret."

What? His woman was reduced to taking medicine on the sly?

Ludwik felt a lump in his throat.

What on earth had he overlooked?

She had mentioned her pregnancy nausea earlier, and as a soon-to-be father, he was desperate to see his little lady, to see his unborn child, to soothe her with a gentle touch.

Ludwik's emotions were in turmoil, but his voice was ice-cold. "Fire that doctor!"

Elaine walked in just in time to hear him demanding accountability.

Was it for Whitney? Her slender fingers curled into a fist.

Behind his desk, the man stood tall by the window, his mind clearly not on work. A restlessness marked his brow, yet he suppressed it with an air of nobility, "Felix, call Nolan, tell him to set up a gathering night. It's been too long since we got together."

"What? Mr. Lippert, aren't you the workaholic type? Usually, when Nolan invites you out, you tell him to take a hike," Felix thought.

Despite his confusion, he carried out the order, only to hear Ludwik add casually, but with a pronounced depth to his words, "Tell him to bring that woman along."

"Which woman?" Felix asked, puzzled.

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Elaine murmured under her breath, Hannah, how can you be so rude to Whitney? Whitney, get up. You'll catch a cold

She sauntered over, her steps unhurried as she helped Whitney to her feet.

Hannah's temper

flared, "Elaine, why do you even bother with her? She's beneath us.

You think you're something special, Whitney? Everyone knows you only got with Big Bro because you had a scheme up your sleeve. In a year, you'll be out on your ear. For someone as manipulative as you, I'm just giving you what you deserve on behalf of him."

As she spoke, Hannah lifted her glass again, ready to unleash another wave of her fury.

"Hannah! Your brother asked me to look after Whitney. What on earth are you doing?" Elaine's voice was tinged with exasperation.

Mentioning Nolan only stoked Hannah's jealousy as she eyed Whitney's stunning features.

Whitney merely glanced at Elaine, her eyes conveying a story of their own.

But as Hannah's drink came flying, Whitney was done playing nice. In a flash, she twisted Hannah's wrist, redirecting the assault, and doused her with the contents of the glass.

"Aah!" Hannah was caught off guard, her head soaked and chilled, the glass rattling against her scalp.

Screams echoed in the private room, but they were soon interrupted by footsteps and a commotion at the door. "What's going on?" Nolan burst in first, taking a back by the scene before him.

Whitney turned at the sound and saw L, a towering figure in a crisp black shirt and slacks, his presence dominating the room.

He wore a silver mask, its intricate design throwing shadows across his face in the dim light, only his piercing gaze visible, ensnaring Whitney instantly. She felt her heart flutter, her face paling at the sight of him after

days apart.

Ludwik's gaze lingered on her, locking onto hers with a palpable intensity.

Elaine noticed the exchange, the longing and heat in the man's eyes, and pressed her lips.

Hannah, spotting Ludwik, lit up and ran to the imposing figure, pointing an accusing finger at Whitney, "Big Bro! This woman dared to throw her drink at me! She actually thinks she's your wife, treating me like dirt. You have to stand up for me!"

Her sobbing was an act of pure melodrama.

Ludwik's eyes moved to Whitney, his expression unreadable.

Whitney faced him squarely, her demeanor cold. If he dared to defend Elaine like he did that night, she would not hesitate to file for divorce.

"Why is there alcohol in this room?" Ludwik's voice was icy as he addressed the manager.

The manager shivered. "Hannah insisted on drinking."

Ludwik's gaze turned icy, making Hannah tremble with fear.

"I don't care if she threw her drink at you, but if you had thrown that drink on her, my child might have been exposed to alcohol, Hannah."

His final words left Hannah shaking, disbelief etched on her face.

Whitney was equally surprised by his defense. Was this jerk actually taking her side without question?

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Ludwik paid her no mind and strode into the room, sitting on the central sofa with an air of authority.

Nolan glanced at Hannah with distaste, "Who even invited you here? I'm warning you, don't mess with Bro's affairs."

His patience with his brash cousin had worn thin.

“You! I’m your sister! Hannah retorted, her eyes narrowing further at Whitney, whom she saw as nothing more than a seductress.

Elaine broke the tense silence, guiding Whitney to sit beside Ludwik, her voice gentle. “The little spat with Hannah was just a misunderstanding. Let’s not get worked up, everyone. Whitney, come sit by Bro and patch things up!”

Her mediator’s tone seemed genuine, and Ludwik looked her way, pleased.

His eyes settled on Whitney.

Whitney glanced at Elaine, shrugged off her hand, and coldly declined the seat next to the man, “Why so eager, Elaine?”

Ludwik’s expression darkened at her rebuff.

Even Nolan felt the awkward tension.

Elaine was at a loss, “I’m sorry, Whitney. I thought after all this time, you might have forgiven him.”

Her words, meant to smooth things over, only served to make Ludwik look worse. His eyes turned frosty.

Hannah could not hold back her contempt, “Elaine, why bother being nice to her? She’s full of herself, totally clueless about her place!”

Ludwik did not counter Hannah’s remark. His expression remained inscrutable, his presence chilling the room.

Whitney remained calm, casting a side glance at Elaine, who appeared downtrodden with eyes that hid her true feelings. Whitney understood—her earlier rejection of Elaine’s gesture was a test. The reaction had provoked L, riled up Hannah, and played right into Elaine’s hands.

Whitney’s lips curled into a faint smirk as she heard L’s low command, “Elaine, sit down!”

Elaine obediently nodded, "Bro, it's natural for Whitney to be upset."

"Does she really think she's all that?" Hannah pushed past Whitney with disdain.

Ludwik's frown deepened as he caught Whitney's eye. His inscrutable gaze was as hard to read, and he said

nothing more.

Pushed aside, Whitney watched as Hannah positioned herself before L, her gaze filled with admiration and scorn, "Big Bro, I can't understand how you ever fell for such a woman. No family background, a tarnished reputation... Her child isn't worthy of being yours. Thankfully, the agreement is almost up, and soon you'll be single again..."

As Hannah's humiliation of Whitney continued, Ludwik remained indifferent and cold.

Taking a bold step, Hannah sat down beside Ludwik.

Ludwik frowned, ready to dismiss the irritating woman, but his eyes caught Whitney watching them.

He held back, his expression stoic.

Seeing him not push her away, Hannah's heart fluttered with triumph, her proud glance at Whitney rippling with satisfaction

"Big Bro..." Hannah purred with a seductive whine. "After your divorce, could you give the Fullers a thought? My cousin, Nolan, is like a brother to you. We're practically family. I know marrying you would be reaching for the stars, but I'm younger and fresher than Whitney, not some second-hand rose!"

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She took a dig at Whitney, her daring little hand creeping towards the man's shirt, inching ever so close to his chiseled chest. The warmth of his muscles radiated through the fabric, turning Hannah's cheeks a rosy shade of embarrassment.

Nolan nearly choked on his drink, itching to kick this foolish girl out!

Ludwik's thick brows furrowed, his eyes squinting slightly.

But Hannah mistook his reaction for contemplation and snuggled even closer.

Elaine watched her brazen display with patience, waiting for this very moment. She shot a quick glance at Whitney.

"Go on, storm off, let tonight be the end of it all!" She thought.

Ludwik's gaze also settled on Whitney.

The petite woman's face was a mask of frosty composure until, with a sudden burst of energy, she strode over, grabbed a glass of water from the table, and splashed it onto Hannah's coquettish face.

The ice cubes from the glass hit Hannah with a tremble, "Ah, Whitney, you so aked me again! Are you out of your mind?"

"I think Hannah's had one too many," Whitney said icily, eyes narrowed. "Just helping you sober up so you don't go naked in public and end up in the station."

Whitney whipped out her phone and dialed 911, reporting for real, "Officer, there's a slut here trying to seduce my husband, and I'm pregnant, please."

In a flash, Hannah snatched the phone, pointing at Whitney, "You're out of your mind, a total lunatic!"

"That's still better than being a slut, trying to snag someone else's husband."

"What do you mean, your husband? You just got knocked up by Big Bro, and that's it. With your looks, he would never want you," Hannah sneered, looping her arm through the man's.

Whitney yanked her off, plopped down beside Ludwik, and pinched his jaw fiercely, not caring for his expression. She raised an eyebrow in mockery, "My looks? My looks made your dear Big Bro insatiable that night. And you? You don't even stand a chance at carrying his child. How pitiful, Hannah."

"You!" Hannah's face turned beet red with rage.

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Nolan's jaw practically hit the floor, and his cheeks flushed with a rare shade of red from the audacity of Whitney's comment.

"Bold words, Whitney," he stammered, trying to mask his surprise with a chuckle.

Ludwik's

gaze darkened, taking in the sight of the petite woman before him, her cheeks aflame with

indignation. Her delicate hand, soft as a feather, pinched his jawline, a gesture so light it only tickled him. But the itch spread to his throat, a subtle Adam's apple bobbing with a sensual threat.

Just like the smoldering look in his eyes.

Whitney turned to him, only to catch him watching her. Repulsed, she released his chin and shot him a fierce glare.

Ludwik's lips curved into a sly grin.

His feisty little kitten was back.

"Big Bro! Look at her, shameless and insulting me. Make her leave," Hannah complained, leaning closer to Ludwik for support.

His cold gaze swept over her. "Get out," he commanded with an icy sharpness.

Whitney froze, her heart sinking.

"Did you hear that? He said get out, Whitney!" Hannah sneered with malicious satisfaction.

"I'm talking to you." Ludwik's handsome face was stone-cold, his patience wearing thin. He pushed Hannah away with disdain.

"Nolan!" He growled, his brows knitting in disapproval. "How did this woman get in?"

Nolan glanced at Hannah, clearly exasperated. "How was I supposed to know? I heard Whitney was here and immediately came to fetch you."

Whitney looked up at Elaine, who seemed to have excluded herself from all this mess. "Seems like Hannah arrived with Elaine," Whitney mentioned offhandedly.

Ludwik's eyes snapped to Elaine.

Caught off guard by Whitney's sudden accusation, Elaine smiled innocently. "Oh, Whitney, that's not fair. I just bumped into Hannah at the door, right, Hannah?"

Hannah, who had promised not to involve Elaine, nodded in agreement. "This vindictive woman is slandering others. I've been at the club for a while now."

Whitney's smile held a tinge of innocence.

"Look at you guys getting all worked up. I just mentioned it. I didn't say I was certain Hannah came with Elaine. Besides, it wouldn't be a big deal if she did, right?"

Ludwik's gaze lingered on Elaine, his brows furrowing slightly.

Elaine's heart sank as Whitney expertly turned the tables on her. She had worked hard to maintain an image of

kindness and harmlessness in front of Ludwik.

"Enough, Hannah, stop causing a scene. Let's focus on mending things between Bro and Whitney," Elaine urged, helping Hannah up and portraying herself as the voice of reason and gentleness.

Whitney's lips curled slightly. Suddenly, she felt a warmth behind her. Through the corner of her eye, she saw L's strong arm assertively reaching over, resting on her seat as if embracing her.

Whitney stiffened, immediately scooting away, but the man quickly caught her wrist.

In the dim

light, his eyes gleamed with a warm intensity, his voice a low, intoxicating rumble, "Do you remember that I'm your husband?"

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A shiver ran through Whitney. With his mask of shadows in the dim light, he resembled a handsome demon dangerously appealing.

She was holding back so much anger. "Not for long!"

Yet he seemed unaffected, his heart feeling as if a kitten's paw had brushed it, ticklish and stirring. He clasped her small hand firmly, sighing softly, "Will you come home with me?"

Home...

Whitney's heart felt like a warm blade had pierced it – comforting and bitter. He still knew they had a home. He even talked about creating a real home together.

After days of neglect....

A tear threatened to escape as she abruptly stood up and darted out of the club.

Ludwik's brows knitted together, but his lips curved into a sly smile. With his long strides, he caught up to her

in no time, scooping her up effortlessly and heading to the Bentley parked out front.

Felix, ever the eager assistant, swiftly opened the car door.

Under the brooding night sky, Elaine watched the scene unfold from the club window.

Whitney was tenderly helped into the car by Ludwik. Elaine's heart twisted in pain, her eyes narrowing. It seemed this woman now saw her as an enemy.

Good. It would make executing her next plan all the easier.

"I can't stand it, Elaine," Hannah seethed with jealousy.

Elaine glanced at her dismissively. This fool stood no chance against Whitney, but she was still useful. Elaine forced a smile. "Don't give up, Hannah. I'll help you create more opportunities."

“Thank you, Elaine. I’ll make sure that wench Whitney pays!” Hannah vowed through gritted teeth.

Elaine’s lips curled. Yes, once Whitney was out of the picture, Hannah would be no trouble at all.

Silence enveloped the car as Whitney sat as far away from Ludwik as possible, his brow furrowing deeper with each passing moment.

Felix, driving cautiously, suddenly received a message from Mr. Lippert: [Turn off the heat.]

Felix stealthily glanced at the ‘oceanic gulf’ between Mr. Lippert and his lady, admiring the ruthless yet cunning

move.

The heat was off.

As the November chill set in, the car’s temperature dropped rapidly.

Whitney, wrapped in her light sweater, shivered visibly.

Felix checked the rear-view mirror, noting the boss’ brooding eyes. Another message popped up: [Talk!]

Speechless, Felix’s jaw twitched.

Could the man not coax his wife himself?

Clearing his throat awkwardly, Felix announced, “Ma’am, it seems the car’s heater is broken! You look quite cold. Perhaps you could sit closer to your husband, or he could wrap his coat around you...”

Whitney was not blind. The heater in a Bentley broken? She glanced sideways at the composed man beside her, this mature rascal full of tricks.

She huffed in annoyance.

Ludwik arched an eyebrow and slipped off his jacket, extending the warm garment to her. "Since Felix mentioned it, why don't you sit on my lap."

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"No thanks!" She rejected him coldly, tossing the jacket back at him.

The rebuffed man merely smirked.

Felix's grip on the steering wheel tightened.

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Ludwik turned to watch her, her profile radiating stubborn coldness. She was still angry, even though she had agreed to come home with him.

It felt like a kitten's paw was scratching his heart. His lips curved into a mature smile, and with a narrowed gaze, he reached out to hook her delicate hand.

Whitney dodged quickly, sending him a glare of irritation.

The man's fingers, burning hot, reached out again.

She tried to evade but was trapped against the side of the car.

With a swift pull, he caught her tender, defenseless hand.

Annoyed, Whitney turned and slapped his hand away!

"Are you always this annoying?" She pouted, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, looking both petulant and utterly wronged.

Ludwik just blinked in surprise.

The phone rang with a jingle, and Whitney's heart skipped a beat as she quickly turned to answer it. It was Tiana on the other end.

"I was worried about you. I went to the Royal One Club to find you. Where are you?"

Whitney pursed her lips, "I'm already home."

"Home... with L?" Tiana's voice was laden with implication as she gasped dramatically.

Whitney remained silent.

In the ensuing silence, Tiana blinked and hung up.

Handsome men were so alluring was it not just the other day they talked about breaking up, even divorce?

Tiana smirked and spun around in the club, only to collide with a veritable wall of muscle.

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She looked up to see Parker, behind his glasses, a face as chiseled as if it were carved with an ink brush, a visage that could rival any Hollywood heartthrob behind spectacles.

A blush crept over Tiana's cheeks. Her memory of that night was a jumbled mess, but she seemed to recall this very man coming to her rescue, even teasing her about being a 'plain view?'

Yet when she woke up, she found herself abandoned in a hospital corridor, discarded like trash.

Facing this somewhat graceless man, Tiana mustered her politeness, "Parker, ahem, you saved me that night, didn't you?"

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Parker glanced down at the woman, the chill of his glasses betraying his impatience as he moved to walk past her.

'Parker?' Tiana piped up, a hint of confusion in her voice. "Did I do something to you? Why are you ignoring me?"

Great, the little ditz had completely forgotten.

His henchmen dared not laugh. This woman had no shame—she had nearly forced herself on Parker that night, leaving his shirt and belt all askew.

As the man strode away coldly, Tiana was left baffled. He gave off a dangerous vibe, ruthless and intimidating; she shivered at the thought. Better to keep her distance, she decided.

Leaning against the wall, Nolan eyed the sweetly clueless woman making her departure and flashed a wicked grin at Parker's men. "Does Parker have a thing with Whitney's little friend?"

The henchman chuckled. "A bit, yes. Parker had to take a cold shower afterward."

Nolan clicked his tongue, gossiping, "Parker, your fiancée never got you all worked up, huh? What's little Tiana's secret?"

Parker glanced at Nolan's charming, playboy face and could not help but sneer. "Laughing at me? Look at yourself. Your beloved gal got scooped up by your big brother, Ashton Fuller, and you're just gonna keep moping around? Ashton doesn't even love Valerie; his heart belongs to..."

He trailed off with a mischievous smile. Ashton was their friend, too, but his relationship with Ludwik was fraught with tension, mainly because of a one-sided infatuation with a woman—Elaine. The four brothers were as close as can be, and although Nolan appeared to be a ladies' man, he was actually the first to really fall for a girl—Valerie.

Unfortunately, Valerie...

"When are Ashton and Valerie due back from their honeymoon in Maelstrom Country?" Parker inquired.

Nolan's face darkened. "How the hell should I know?"

Felix drove the car back to the villa.

Whitney stepped out and headed inside, swapping shoes.

The man's tall shadow loomed over her as he casually blocked her path to the stairs, one hand in his pocket.

Whitney tried to push past, but he effortlessly swept her up in his arms.

Ludwik's brows furrowed as he ordered Taryn, "Get the first aid kit!"

Whitney was taken aback. "You..."

He looked down at her and said with a deep voice, "I know everything."

Whitney ended up on the couch, sitting on his lap.

Ludwik gently rolled up her sleeve, and as she flinched under his touch, she could no longer hold back her tears.

Tears spilled from her eyes like broken pearls.

Ludwik's steady gaze flickered with panic as he looked at her pitiful expression.

He gripped her soft shoulders, his heart melting.

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Whitney's emotions were out of control, oh, so he finally knew.

Her grievances.

"There, there" His voice was deep and alluring as he wrapped his arms around her, feeling her tears against his shirt like burning embers on his heart. "I know you were roughed up in jail; that night must've been terrifying, and you were all alone. I'm sorry, okay?"

Whitney buried her head in his shoulder, biting him hard in her sobs.

Taryn quickly came with the first aid kit as Ludwik soothed her trembling back, applying ointment to her bruises with a firm yet gentle touch.

Whitney, her skin pale as snow, winced in pain.

“Does it still hurt?”

“Of course...” She muttered irritably, “There are more bruises all over.”

“I’ll check them later.”

“I don’t want you to.” A fire burned inside her, now smothered by his tender masculine presence, turning into warmth she could not release.

Her small hands pushed at his, a mix of pain and tears, feigning annoyance, “You weren’t there when I needed you most. You’re just a jerk.”

“Alright, I’m the jerk, and you’re the angel.” Ludwik’s lips curved slightly; his restraint slipped as he kissed her temple, her soft forehead, and the wet trails on her cheeks. The room’s atmosphere shifted, and Taryn discreetly slipped away.

Ludwik sought those lips he had missed for days but held back from being too forward while holding her hand. Her little hands beat against his chest, a playful punishment. It was like a kitten’s scratch.

Ludwik’s breath hitched in a moment of tension, his muscular chest tightening. Catching her hands, he said, “I get it. I was wrong. Stop hitting me, or you’ll stir up a different kind of desire!”

Whitney cried out, her eyes wide in realization.

Her cheeks flushed crimson. “You...”

Even now, his thoughts were not pure?

She abruptly tried to kick him away.

Ludwik looked distinguished even with his shirt open at the collar, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he seriously caught her small ankle. “You better not kick. Your little punches and kicks might just fan the flames in my heart.”

Whitney was both annoyed and embarrassed, unsure how to punish him properly.

“Hmph.” She pouted, her head drooping.

Her arms, both covered in bruises, were gently held by him. “Did you get a good look at who hit you?”

“Yeah, Monica orchestrated it.” Whitney was certain of this.

His aura turned frosty, his gaze terrifying. “You don’t want me meddling in your affairs, but after what she did—getting you locked up, putting our child at risk—I won’t let her off.”

Whitney could sense the danger in his tone. However, he was unaware of the full extent of her feud with Monica.

Behind this case lay Yvonne’s powerful backing. Whitney had thought it through; such fierce tactics from the start meant her adversary held significant animosity, rivaling even Monica’s. She wanted to uncover who was

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behind it all.

Whitney frowned. “L, just give her a lesson. I still have use for Monica.”

“Have you calmed down?” He asked, his voice suddenly low.

Whitney looked at him as he gently blew on her bruises, his features hard yet tender in his coaxing.

Her heart fluttered, and she snorted awkwardly, “This little act of kindness won’t make me forgive you.”

“As if I’ve forgiven you either,” he replied, his face hardening once more.

Whitney met his deep gaze, feeling like he was waiting for something...

Whitney knew she had to swallow her pride. Her eyelashes fluttered as she softened, her fingers nervously twisting a piece of his shirt. “I... I’m sorry, too,” she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper. “I thought you weren’t coming to save me.”

He gazed at her intently, his intense stare making Whitney’s heart race with unease.

It was a moment before his long, slender hand reached out to pinch her nose gently. His eyes, brooding with a hint of annoyance, bore into hers.

“Silly,” he chided softly, “you should trust me more. I care about you—how could I not come to your rescue? Use that little head of yours and think. Who else but me has the power to set you free on a whim?”

“He cares about me?” The thought sent Whitney’s heart into a flurry of beats.

His gaze was like a calm abyss, powerful and reassuring, and it unexpectedly filled her with a sweet sense of security.

Maybe she did not trust him enough, and the realization made Whitney feel small.

“I thought... I thought once you had me, you’d get bored,” she confessed, her voice laced with vulnerability.

Ludwik’s expression darkened, but a chuckle escaped him, one that was both exasperated and amused. “Bored? We’ve barely started dating, and I haven’t even had the pleasure of a proper night together. How could I be bored? Have you been donating your EQ to boost your IQ?”

Whitney looked up at him, seeing the roguish charm that was so distinctly masculine.

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Whitney huffed with irritation. “So you don’t trust me either? What kind of woman do you take me for?”

Ludwik stiffened. Their relationship, a trial marriage of sorts, was built on unfamiliarity. Trust was scarce, and both had sharp edges no one had yet to smooth out.

“It’ll get better in the future,” he said, frowning slightly as he took her small hand in his.

So they were making up? And there was a future? Whitney wondered.

Her cheeks flushed with the thought. She wanted to ask about that night. "I called you twice when everything went down. Why didn't you pick up?"

Ludwik

pinched the bridge of his nose. "There was a crisis with the Elate City project. I had to rush over and left my phone behind. Elaine brought it to me later at Sea Bay. As soon as I got it, I headed straight back to Banyan City. By then, you'd been detained for four hours."

Elaine had L's phone? Whitney's eyes darkened with suspicion.

To the conspiracy theorist, Elaine had deliberately delayed, causing a four-hour wait.

But Ludwik, oblivious to her expression, continued matter-of-factly, "Elaine was running around with me that night. She's the one who hired the lawyer for you. I waited outside your hospital room, unable to leave. You were angry with me, so I took advantage of her presence. You shouldn't hold a grudge against her."

Whitney bristled inside. He made it sound like Elaine had been a saint to her.

But she pushed her emotions down, looking at him with a forced smile. "What makes you think I hold a grudge against her?"

"Don't you?" Ludwik teased, playfully flicking her nose, his eyes sharp. "You were a bit harsh on her tonight at the club. Jealous of the attention she's getting?"

Whitney had been probing on purpose, suspecting Hannah was someone Elaine brought in to stir trouble.

Whitney smirked at him, deliberately provoking, "Why shouldn't I be jealous? Is she really your sister? Related by blood?"

Ludwik paused, his gaze deep and mysterious as he looked away, his brows furrowing, "She's just a sister; don't overthink it. She poses no threat to you because my heart is all..."

He stopped on purpose, looking at her with a proud arch of his brow.

Whitney's face heated up, his non-confession sending her heart racing.

Ludwik pulled her close, his brow furrowed in mock seriousness, "I've known her a long time. She's been a great help to me. No need to be jealous."

She might be helping you with ulterior motives, thought Whitney. Men never see through such things. She

could tell he trusted Elaine.

Whitney clenched her fist slightly, realizing that speaking ill of Elaine now would only cause trouble without evidence. It seemed a silent battle was looming.

Her stomach growled audibly.

This time, however, he did not scold her but asked with indulgence, "Have you been feeling too sick to eat these past few days?"

"You have the nerve to mention it. Your child, you should deal with the morning sickness," Whitney retorted with feigned petulance.

Ludwik, charmed by her playful pout, licked his lips and scooped her up towards the kitchen, "It's all my fault. Letting you get pregnant was a mistake."

Whitney stared at his Adam's apple, her cheeks burning, "You're shameless."

The man raised an eyebrow and handed her a stack of cupcakes from the cabinet, noting the bright sparkle in her eyes.

He tossed them to her arrogantly. "I'll indulge you this once."

He was letting her have them, but only if she ate them in his arms.

Whitney compromised for the sake of the treat.

As he bent over to grab a napkin, ready to catch any crumbs from her delicate bites, the door swung open, and an elderly lady walked in. From her angle, it looked like her son was nestled close to his wife's heart.

“Oh Xandra, look at those two, what a picture they make, hehe... Carry on, just don't hurt my little grandson! I'm just grabbing something, and then I'll be out of your hair.”

Natalie scurried upstairs like a gust of wind.

Whitney was at a loss for words.

Her face flushed with embarrassment as she glared at L.

He glanced down at her belly, his Adam's apple bobbing, “She saw it wrong. I wasn't really diving in.”

“Stop talking about it. Is Mom feeling any better?”

“Same as always,” Ludwik replied, his brow furrowed with concern.

Whitney watched Natalie's cheerful departure. After what Taryn said last time, she was tempted to ask. “L, is Mom's memory loss severe?”

“Yeah, she had a serious head injury and lost her memory. She's better off this way, carefree. I'm here with her.”

Ludwik's voice was icy, unwilling to elaborate.

Whitney felt a pang of sympathy and curiosity, “How did Mom get a head injury?”

“She suffered a great shock,” he cut off abruptly, his brows knitting into a frown as if suppressing something, his eyes becoming even more unfathomable, hiding a storm of emotions.

Whitney dared not probe further, sensing she had touched a nerve.

Natalie must have suffered greatly to choose to forget.

Living with L in their luxurious estate, his mother was kept close and protected. What about L's father? Whitney felt it was a taboo subject, the sudden restraint in L's expression, the storm beneath those seasoned and profound eyes—was there hidden pain?

Placing down the cupcake, Whitney said nothing, merely wrapping her tiny arms around his lean waist.

Ludwik paused, looking down at her tiny head, her exquisite features softened with tenderness.

It was as if something silent was communicating with him, trying to find a way into his heart.

After a while, he lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom upstairs.

The night deepened.

Whitney, having freshened up, sent a Facebook message to Tiana. She realized she could not quite capture the night's dramatic twists or L's flirtations, so she simply burrowed into bed, exhausted and soon asleep.

From the bathroom emerged a man draped in a bath towel, his lean form accentuated by water dripping from his hair, darkening his piercing eyes.

He glanced at the little woman snoring softly on the bed, the bath towel slung so low.

The sight of a makeshift bed beside hers turned his expression dark.

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Stepping out onto the balcony, clad only in a shirt against the chill of November, he dialed Parker, his eyes narrowing coldly, "Handle the thug who hit Whitney. But leave Monica breathing."

Parker sensed the eerie calm in his tone and chuckled. "So you two made up, huh? Ready to continue your sweet post-wedding romance?"

After finishing his cigarette, Ludwik returned to the bedroom and scoffed, "She begged me to make up. What

could I do?"

Speechless, Parker's lips twitched uncontrollably.

Felix had spilled the beans about someone's groveling attempts to appease his wife in the car, detailing each cringe-worthy moment to their amusement.

With a look of disdain, Ludwik kicked aside the makeshift bed on the floor, his slim frame intending to slip into the sheets and hold her close. He planned to claim he was cold in the morning, and the little naive girl would buy it, he thought.

But just as he swung his legs onto the bed, Whitney, groggy with sleep, saw him and kicked him right off, even sitting up to scold him in a soft, whiny voice, "Who said you could get up here? L, don't you dare try anything funny. I'm pregnant, and we've just started dating. If you act like an animal, I swear I'll tattletale to your kid."

There he was, a grown man dumped onto the floor.

Parker and Nolan were howling with laughter on the other end of the phone. Parker spoke with feigned sorrow, "I can feel it, Whitney's pitiful plea for reconciliation."

"Parker, you're such a jerk, man. Doesn't Bro have any shame? Whitney's fierce and adorable, whining to a little sprout. Haha."

Ludwik hung up in a dark mood while Whitney had already rolled herself up tight, untouchable in her cocoon.

He could not help but chuckle, patting the spot on the blanket where her rear would be, his voice rumbling. "You're asking for it, little troublemaker. The baby's hitting three months; I'll do you right then."

Buried under the covers, Whitney muffled, "What did you say?"

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The next day. Whitney strode into Skye Gem to preside over the shareholders' meeting.

Monica was a no-show. Meanwhile, the news of her being beaten to a pulp, with three broken ribs and a fractured leg, was trending all over social media.

Whitney's lips pursed lightly, recognizing this as L's handiwork.

A slight sense of satisfaction curled in her heart; the man had exacted revenge for her. At the meeting, she decisively cut Monica out of the picture, firing her cronies as well.

With the company reeling from the scandal of purchasing counterfeit gemstones, Whitney called for an urgent overhaul. She spent the morning laying down new policies and procedures, effectively conducting a corporate blood transfusion.

The shareholders witnessed Whitney's decisive action and dared not object to her authority.

Her capability was, after all, evident to all.

"Moving forward, I'll personally oversee the raw materials procurement department. The entire team is being replaced, and I'll be taking charge. Any objections?" Whitney tapped her pen and lifted her chin, her gaze sweeping the room.

It was common knowledge that the cornerstone of any jewelry company was its raw materials.

Its reputation could be ruined if the raw gemstones were substandard, even with the finest design and craftsmanship.

The shareholders unanimously agreed to entrust the procurement division to her.

Whitney smiled, "Meeting adjourned!"

Monica, incapacitated in the hospital, was fuming with rage when she received the news. Her face was a mess, a tooth missing, and her body ached unbearably. She wailed to Yvonne, "Mom, she dared to sideline me when I was down. Why isn't that wretch behind bars? Should we go to our cousin for help?"

“Who do you think had you beaten up? Who else but Mr. Lippert?” Yvonne spat resentfully, “Your cousin may have the connections, but we’re the ones who end up paying the price. We can’t even hint at a threat towards her. We still need her for the upcoming jewelry contest...”

Only then did Monica realize they were at the mercy of a ruthless woman, and a chill ran down her spine.

Yvonne’s heart ached; they were now firmly in someone else’s grip, and her days were no longer peaceful.

Bitterly, she hissed, “Your grandma, Violet, bringing the love child back to the Valentine family, always cross with me. I’ll destroy them.”

Whitney stepped out of the Skye Gem building, having received a call.

Across the street, at the coffee shop, Violet was waiting for her.

Whitney was a bit surprised; it was not every day this matriarch sought her out. Still, she made her way over.

Violet’s expression was dour, but she managed a strained thank you. “Thanks for your suggestion. I’ve brought my grandson back to the Valentine family. You were right that day. That snake Yvonne, riding high because she’s got a protector, even tried to assassinate your brother! Instead of letting her push you to the brink, I took the risk and brought the kid back to stir the pot.”

Whitney’s eyes narrowed; her suggestion that day had been self-serving. Monica had wanted her in jail, so she instigated Violet to return home with the child, hoping to cause Yvonne some trouble.

Firstly, it might push Yvonne and Monica to desperation, possibly revealing their benefactor.

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Secondly, with Violet in the Valentine family, she might learn something about this mystery protector.

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“Grandma, has Yvonne’s benefactor shown up at home?”

“No, Yvonne’s cautious. But you helped me, so I’ll keep an eye out for you,” Violet answered, her steely gaze fixing on Whitney.

Whitney had grown into a striking image of her mother, dangerously intelligent. Violet thought about the deaths of Whitney’s grandfather and mother; Preston was just a small player in the grand scheme, but even he could not escape.

A flicker of fear crossed Violet’s eyes. Worried Whitney might uncover something, she probed, “Whitney, has your uncle been in touch?”

Her uncle...

Why would Violet suddenly ask about him?

Last time, Simon mentioned that the contact book could lead to her uncle.

Did her uncle know something about her grandfather and mother’s deaths?

Whitney frowned. “Grandma, do you know where my uncle went when he left all those years ago?”

“I haven’t the faintest! Haven’t you reached him? Well, it’s just as well. There’s no love lost there.” Violet’s demeanor relaxed as she grabbed her purse and swiftly departed.

Violet’s attitude was telling. Her uncle might know the cause of her mother and grandfather’s deaths. Whitney pondered as she walked back to the Skye Gem building.

Simon’s Lamborghini pulled up, and he emerged with a quick stride, holding a small cake, his gaze softening as he looked at Whitney. “Heard you had a shareholders’ meeting? I just got back from a business trip. Whitney, try this; it’s your old favorite mousse.”

Whitney snapped back to reality, initially not planning to engage him.

But then something clicked, and she looked up, her eyes devoid of warmth. “Simon, you weren’t the one who saved me that night. Why pretend, causing me such a misunderstanding?”

Simon stiffened, his handsome face contorting with discomfort, "I... I thought my father had spoken to the Lutz family for you."

Of course, he knew his father had not. Wyatt had refused him.

Whitney's cold laughter chilled the air. "You guessed it was L, yet you didn't clarify in the restroom. Your tactics are despicable."

"Whitney, it's because I love you! I'm afraid of losing you," Simon pleaded, grabbing her arm, "And what can your man do? He's powerless. Why would you believe him?"

"Yes, he's much more powerful than you." Whitney's sarcasm stung as she shook him off, "No more disgusting lies. We're done. If you insist on clinging to Skye Gem, I'll soon take back your shares. And that contact book of my grandfather's, I want it."

She needed to find her uncle.

Simon frowned. "I'm not giving you the contact book now."

If he did, he would lose his leverage.

"Then I'll find a way to make you give it to me." Whitney's words were icy as she turned back to the company.

Simon watched her go, a rueful smile in his eyes. He thought mentioning the contact book might bring her closer to him, but Whitney was never one to be threatened.

In the CEO's office of the Imperial Gem Corporation.

Elaine handed over the signed document, her gaze flitting from the computer screen on the expansive desk to the strikingly handsome man seated behind it. With a teasing smile, she quipped, "Bro, are you really checking out Skye Gem's stocks? Ignoring the stock market of your own companies? Looks like Whitney's really your darling."

Ludwik's brows arched at her words, 'darling? That reminded him of the little lady who had expressed a desire to be his darling that evening at the hot springs resort.

A soft smile played on his lips, unbidden.

Elaine lifted her eyelids slightly, steering the conversation forward, "Skye Gem has been quite aggressive lately. The stocks are recovering. Whitney's doing pretty well. I hear she's in the market for some raw gems, scouting for suppliers."

Ludwik had been considering giving the little lady's Skye Gem a boost.

"Is she planning a big sell-off?" He inquired.

Elaine nodded, analyzing, "Looks like it. After the counterfeit gemstone fiasco, Skye Gem is desperate to restore its reputation by replacing them. Whitney must be anxious to get her hands on raw materials."

"Do we have suppliers under Imperial Gem Corporation who can provide top-notch quality gemstones?"

Elaine had been waiting for just that question. With a smile, she passed him a file, "I've already taken the liberty of shouldering this concern for you. This is Banyan City's finest raw gem supplier, currently under contract with one of our subsidiaries. The quality is assured. And most importantly, the owners are women. They often discuss partnerships with Whitney, so you can rest easy that no men are involved."

She winked, skillfully anticipating and playing to Ludwik's jealous

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Whitney was a knockout—a real head-turner—which made her a magnet for unwanted attention in the business world, and Ludwik was acutely aware of it.

He nodded satisfactorily. "Let's steer those two clients her way; give her a little boost."

"Sure thing." Elaine flashed a grin.

The man leaned back, his well-tailored suit and tie highlighting his muscular frame, his chiseled face irresistibly handsome. His deep eyes seemed to drown anyone who gazed too long.

Despite seeing him daily, Elaine felt her heart flutter and warmth spread to her ears hidden beneath her hair.

As she was momentarily lost in thought, Ludwik's piercing gaze unsettled her, asserting a silent pressure.

Without betraying his thoughts, Ludwik probed, "Elaine, you've been putting in quite the effort for Whitney's sake!"

Elaine smiled softly, then paused, catching a glimpse of the sharpness in his eyes, realizing he might be testing her.

Her hand stiffened beneath her sleeve, but she quickly rebounded with a coy smile, "Bro, when it comes to matters concerning you or Whitney, I naturally take them to heart."

Ludwik furrowed his brow, recalling Whitney's lukewarm attitude towards Elaine the night before.

Elaine had no reason to chase after someone who gave her the cold shoulder.

Noticing his frown, Elaine's eyes softened.

"Bro, don't you see? I just want to be good to you. Whitney and you are quite the match. You can't force feelings, and you two have genuine attraction. I've said it before. I've let go. I see you as a brother now, and still, I want to help you from the bottom of my heart. Seeing you and Whitney happy makes me happy, and when you argue, and you're upset, it hurts me too."

She sighed lightly, the picture of innocence and gentleness, smiling with eyes that curved. "You've known me for years. You should know I'm steadfast, protecting someone no matter the capacity. Your happiness is so important to me. Possessing someone? That's not so important. Do you still doubt me? Maybe my fondness for Whitney is just an extension of my fondness for you."

Ludwik saw the unmistakable sincerity in her eyes and the touch of melancholy in her brows, which he did not

miss.

Over the years, she had greatly helped the Imperial Gem Corporation; whenever Kaden applied pressure, she always stood by his side, playing her part in the charade.

Their relationship was more entangled with family interests than personal affection. Ludwik had never been fond of her, previously cold and indifferent, believing her kindness was just a means to please him.

But now, even with Whitney in the picture, Elaine remained kind. Perhaps, as she said, she expected nothing in return.

His icy demeanor thawed slightly, touched by her devotion. All he could offer in return to such a girl was cold comfort. "You see me as a brother. I'll give you a raise and help you find a suitable husband."

A chill washed over Elaine—this was not the first time. His heart was as cold as stone, and yet why did it warm for Whitney? Her fingers clenched tightly, knowing he was again using money to brush her off. With a forced soft smile, she retorted, "Deal. But I'd need someone even more mature and perfect than you."

Ludwik's pen paused, and he felt reassured. His doubts about Elaine were unfounded; they stemmed from his insecurities concerning Whitney.

"You may go," he said, an infrequent smile gracing his face.

Elaine knew her strategic retreat had alleviated his suspicions. She endured the humiliation all to get back at

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Whitney.

Elaine's eyes gleamed with cold determination. Next, she had a special plan in store for Whitney, and she was confident Whitney would take the bait.

Back in her office, Elaine dialed Whitney's number with a smile.

At that moment, Whitney was in a meeting at the procurement department of Skye Gem. The company's gemstone supply was inconsistent, and she needed to find a reliable vendor.

Elaine's call came at just the right time. "Whitney, do you have a minute? I've got a surprise for you."

Blinking against the bright sunlight, Whitney's eyes carried an unreadable meaning.

Elaine's surprise?

Her demeanor remained calm as she asked, "Sure, Elaine. Where shall we meet?"

Elaine was already near Skye Gem, and the two arranged to meet at a nearby café.

Stepping into the café, Whitney spotted Elaine, who delicately raised her hand, her eyes innocent and inviting, "Over here, Whitney!"

Whitney sat down, placing her bag beside her, and looked up with a smile. "What's this about, Elaine?"

Whitney's eyes were like pools, luminous and dark, a sweet naiveté in their liquid depths. Elaine's eyes, slightly down turned, easily conveyed a sense of vulnerability.

"Still treating me like an outsider, Whitney?" Elaine sighed softly but quickly shrugged it off with a smile, pulling out two files. "I noticed Skye Gem has been struggling, so I thought maybe you could use some resources? These are two vendors I know with excellent quality gemstones. If I help negotiate, we could get better prices. What do you say about sourcing from them?"

"Oh?" Whitney flipped through the files. She was familiar with these vendors; their gemstones were top quality but pricey, and they were selective about their clients, usually not supplying to just any jewelry company.

Elaine offering a connection?

Whitney felt a pang of appreciation, “Elaine, you’re too kind! My company’s in trouble, but I didn’t expect you to take such an interest, let alone actively recommend vendors to me. Considering our recent acquaintance, I wonder, are you always this generous with everyone?”

Elaine, taken aback, her eyes fleeting with hurt innocence, waved the notion away. “Of course, I’m not this generous with everyone. I’m only this way with you, Whitney, because you’re Bro’s lady. Why would you think otherwise? I just wanted to help you out, so I reached out without a second thought. I didn’t mean to burden you.”

Her implications were clear: accepting her help meant Whitney understood her good intentions; rejecting it would signify a misinterpretation of her kindness.

The issue of sourcing gemstones for Skye Gem was something Whitney had yet to seek assistance with. Elaine took the initiative to knock on the door with a business proposition, eager to lend a hand to Whitney. But was this help, or was there a catch? That night in the private booth at the club, Elaine seemed to be speaking up for Whitney, but it felt more like she was lighting a fuse with Hannah or stoking a fire with L.

And then there was Elaine’s performance at the hospital—like some high-society damsel, all grace and poise. Whitney’s heart was filled with suspicion. She was already on guard against Elaine, so naturally, she would not accept such overzealous ‘kindness.’

Elaine did not miss the ripple of distaste beneath Whitney’s serene exterior.

Was she had deliberately played up her enthusiasm, even the urgency in her recommendations and she made

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sure to mention they were her personal suggestions.

Elaine purposefully left out mentioning her bro. Whitney would trust him. But with Whitney’s hostility against her, she would never trust her.

Now, all Elaine had to do was wait for the rejection.

“The raw gems from Skye Gem aren’t that pressing, Elaine. I appreciate the thought, and I’ll consider the supplier you’ve recommended. After all, I’m not familiar with them. Thanks for coming by today!” Whitney declined with a polite smile.

Elaine’s eyes drooped slightly, her displeasure barely concealed. “Guess I got a bit ahead of myself. No worries, Whitney. Take your time to scout other suppliers.”

Whitney stood up gracefully to see Elaine out, standing still afterward with a contemplative squint. If she had signed that contract, there were bound to be traps ahead, though she had no idea how many.

Elaine was not likely harboring good intentions.

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Elaine slid into the car, a sly chuckle escaping her as she leaned back into the plush seat. Whitney had tried to outplay her, but she had played the wrong hand.

Not that it was entirely wrong – had Whitney agreed to those two female suppliers, Elaine could have easily set her up for a fall in the future.

But right now, Elaine’s triumph lay in Whitney’s refusal. The diamond suppliers in Banyan City were few; only those two were run by women; the rest were all men, and Elaine had them wrapped around her finger long ago. Her phone rang, and she answered with a lazy smile.

“Elaine,” the voice on the other end reported, “Whitney called a quick meeting as soon as she returned to the office. She’s roped in a college buddy, one of those fancy jewel material traders.”

Elaine’s laughter was soft and dark. A young college friend, huh? She could just imagine what kind of trouble Whitney was in now with Ludwik...

As dusk turned the city skyline neon, a sleek Bentley stood out with understated luxury in the plaza below Skye

Gem Ltd.

Right on time, Whitney emerged from the building, a faint blush tinting her cheeks as she spotted the luxurious car. She thought of the man waiting inside and wondered, "Is this a date?"

Felix, ever the dutiful chauffeur, promptly opened the door for her.

The Bentley glided away, leaving Simon on the company steps, his gaze darkening as he watched the taillights disappear. He had caught a glimpse of the masked man inside the car.

That was a limited edition Bentley, and Whitney claimed the masked man had been her savior that night...

Could the enigmatic, powerful Ludwik be the man behind the mask?

Simon clenched his fists, jealousy gnawing at him, feeling utterly powerless.

Inside the car.

Whitney found the man beside her, frowning at some documents. She pouted – was she not more interesting than paperwork?

Nonchalantly, she slipped off her coat.

The man next to her gave a dry chuckle. "Can you not try to seduce me while I'm working?"

Her? Seduce? She had not even disturbed him.

Whitney felt wronged. The man glanced at her with amused eyes and cleared his throat before saying, "Don't you know you're still quite a sight?"

"Alright, I'll forgive his smooth-talking ways. Men and their silver tongues." Whitney thought.

Her face flushed. "You don't have to look at me."

"My peripheral vision just can't help but catch you," he quipped, smirking.

Whitney felt a sweet warmth inside. "Okay, then I'll try not to distract you."

Speechless, the man put away his documents, his handsome face turning stern. He was already seduced, and with a mature gesture, he beckoned, "Come here."

She moved closer, her elegant outfit of the day – a trench coat, a chic sweater, pencil pants, and ballet flats showcasing her delicate feet.

Whitney gazed at him, too. As usual, he was dressed in a sharp suit, his tall, imposing figure exuding authority.

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His pristine white shirt was topped with a beige waistcoat, complementing her coat – they looked the part of an elite couple. Her lips were full and tinted with warmth. As she reached his side, he murmured in a deep voice, "Let me hold you."

She settled onto his sturdy lap.

Ludwik's gaze lingered on her oval face, naturally beautiful, without a hint of artificiality – one look could captivate any man.

His warm hand lifted her chin as he spoke in a husky tone, "Kiss me."

Whitney's hands clenched his shirt, her heart racing as she glanced at Felix, who might as well have been invisible.

She quickly pecked his chiseled cheek.

"Why do you smell so good?" Ludwik asked, his grip tightening around her slender waist, his breath tickling her neck. "I used to say you must get close to a woman to know if she smells nice. Now that I'm close, it's almost unbearable."

"Stop talking nonsense," Whitney scolded, her ears burning.

"Are you carrying this fragrance around the office, luring men?" His brow furrowed slightly, a touch of displeasure in his voice.

Whitney was speechless. "Mr. L, are you really that petty?"

"I'm not petty where it counts," he retorted with a sly grin, then grew stern again as he said, "I don't like the idea of you working, attracting all sorts of attention."

Whitney's neck flushed, sensing that he was probably still bothered by her working with Simon.

She wrapped her arms around his, sweetly coaxing, "I have my career, and besides, you're the man I like. We're dating, aren't we? What's there to worry about? My heart is all... yours."

Her voice was soft, mimicking his tone from the night before, and Ludwik's expression softened.

Men indeed needed to be coaxed, Whitney thought to herself with a silent sigh, shaking his sturdy arm. "Where are we going for dinner?"

Felix was about to say, "Madam, Sir has reserved the entire top-tier Russian restaurant in Banyan City for the evening..."

But then, Whitney suddenly pointed to a twinkling eatery across the street and said, "Ah, I want that spicy food! L, can we go there, please?"

Ludwik and Felix were both at a loss for words.

Glancing at the red tent on the roadside, dust swirling around, Ludwik's handsome face was as cold as ice. Whitney saw his displeased expression, and though, as a socialite, she rarely indulged in such street food, the craving was irresistible. Occasionally, she and Tiana would sneak out for a treat.

"Please?" She begged, her eyes already gleaming with anticipation.

"I won't go! And I won't allow my child to eat junk."

"But it's your child who wants it. I've been having morning sickness for days, and you don't even care," Whitney complained, convinced that pregnancy was to blame for her cravings. As he remained unmoved, she blinked back tears, looking pitifully hurt. "You don't love me anymore, and you don't love our baby."

Ludwik, exasperated by the noise, stepped out of the car with a frosty demeanor. Dating was troublesome, and dating someone younger was even more so – especially one who required constant pampering.

He strode out, his tall figure a striking presence on the sidewalk.

Whitney cheered up, crossing the street. She did not choose the roadside stall, fearing his wrath, but opted for

23.30

a cleaner-looking restaurant.

Standing on the curb, Ludwik was a mature and imposing sight, attracting the attention of passersby.

He glanced up at the sign that read, “Destiny Barbecue.”

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A smirk tugged at his lips as he teased her, “Even for a simple meal with me, you chose to come to Destiny Barbecue. Women and their whims.”

Whitney was speechless.

She felt he might be reading too much into it. “L, it’s just the name of the place. Haven’t you dined out before? Look around there’s Romance Inn, Cupid’s Kebab House... There are plenty like that.”

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Ludwik’s handsome face stiffened. “Of course, I know! We could swing by the Romance Inn later.”

Okay, she thought, best to drop the subject.

They entered the cramped restaurant, and Ludwik looked around with evident distaste, showing no desire to sit until Whitney tugged him over to a window booth.

She meticulously wiped down the table and chair for him before speaking; her voice laced with exasperation. “For your girlfriend’s sake, you can put up with it, right?”

The term 'girlfriend' sent Ludwik giving her a suggestive glance, causing Whitney's cheeks to tint with color. She quickly turned to Felix, "Felix, take a seat."

Just as Felix was about to sit down gingerly, he caught Ludwik's murderous gaze and sprung up like a jack-in-the-box.

"He doesn't like this kind of unhealthy food. Go next door and grab yourself a salad," Ludwik said coldly, eager to have a meeting without distractions.

Felix thought silently, "I don't particularly fancy a salad either."

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Felix left with a sense of grievance.

Whitney rubbed her hands together, relishing the feast before her. She reached for a skewer of konjac, followed by some spicy beef and mushroom balls sitting on his side of the table. As she eagerly dived into the meal, she directed him, "Grab me some of this, that, and oh—more of those, please."

"Are you a pig?" The man glanced up, his aristocratic hands remaining still. "Waitress, could you get some veggies for this little piggy here?"

His voice, too magnetic and pleasant, immediately drew attention from the nearby diners.

Whitney's face flushed with annoyance as she looked around enviously. "Look at everyone else's boyfriends. They're doing so much for their girlfriend."

Her gaze wandered, observing the young couples around them, some still in their school uniforms, with the boys diligently serving their girlfriends and cooing endearments like, "Sweetie, careful, it's hot."

"Sweetie, want some bubble tea?"

It was all about pampering.

The more Whitney watched, the more she envied, especially compared to the icy glacier beside her, who seemed clueless about doting on a lady.

Ludwik, looking unimpressed, finally picked up a skewer and methodically placed meatballs into her plate. "That's as far as I'll go. Eat."

He was not one for such feminine displays of affection.

Deep and commanding, his voice drew near with a dangerous warmth, his clean, masculine scent enveloping

her.

His fingers, long and strong, moved with purpose.

Whitney's cheeks warmed under his care, especially as she caught the envious glances from other girls around

them.

Every woman has a touch of vanity, desiring their man to show care and affection, especially in love.

Content, she continued eating.

Unable to stomach his food, Felix walked past their window and was stunned. There was Ludwik, holding a cup and a napkin, tenderly helping his lady with her drink and wiping her lips clean. Was that really the stoic Mr. Lippert they all knew?

Felix could not resist taking a sneaky photo and quickly sharing it in the gossip group and the secretaries' work group.

[Check out our high-and-mighty Mr. Lippert, catering to his wife at a barbecue joint. I'm getting slaughtered in broad daylight here.]

Parker: [...]

Nolan: [Holy smokes, that's a slap in the face of romance. Ludwik at a barbecue? Wake me up!]

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The secretaries' work group exploded with excitement, begging Felix for more. [Mr. Lippert and his lady look so in love! Felix, we need more!]

Meanwhile, the spice overcame Whitney, and Ludwik cautioned, "Stop with the spicy meatballs. Have some seaweed; it's good for the baby."

"I want bubble tea," Whitney pouted.

"Quiet."

He carefully wiped her lips with a napkin, and as he leaned closer, their eyes locked, her flushed lips tempting

him.

Whitney looked up, catching Felix's reflection in the window, his phone aimed at them. She suspected that Elaine might see the photo. With a coy glance, she teased, "I want my bubble tea. Otherwise, I'll have to drink something else."

"What?" Ludwik was losing patience.

Suddenly, her plush lips met his, her eyes soft and seductive.

He took a deep breath and kissed her back passionately, his grip tightening. "Drink something else?"

He wrapped his arm around her waist, his whole body reacting, "You're quite the flirt, aren't you? Damn it, I want to take you right here..."

Whitney's face flushed deeper, her playful seduction working all too well.

Felix, heart racing, captured a discreet photo, sending it to the group.

The secretaries were ecstatic at the sight of their CEO kissing his lady, causing a frenzy of excitement.

Elaine, busy with work, paused when she heard the screams and could not help but glance at the secretary's phone, only to see Ludwik kissing Whitney, with a barbecue restaurant in the background.

Ludwik, of all people, at a barbecue joint? Unthinkable.

But for Whitney, he had clearly made exceptions more than once.

Elaine clenched her fist at the sight. In the photo, the gorgeous Ludwik was kissing the petite woman in his arms, a sight any woman would be envious of. Plus, Whitney's eyes were barely open, as if looking through the lens and smiling at her.

Envy was boiling within Elaine.

Was this how Whitney enjoyed his affections?

She dialed Ludwik without hesitation.

The phone rang. In the corner of the barbecue restaurant, amid the warmth and intimacy, Whitney saw the name 'Elaine' flash on his screen.

Ludwik glanced at it, uninterested, and set it aside.

Whitney narrowed her eyes, feeling the sting of his kiss as the onlookers stared. She buried her face in his chest, crumpling his shirt.

He reluctantly released her, though his gaze lingered. At that moment, the phone stopped ringing.

Back at work, Elaine saw the call go unanswered. She imagined them locked in an embrace, cursing inside, "Whitney, is this a challenge? You can flaunt your love now. Marking your territory, huh? Enjoy today because tomorrow you'll cry your eyes out."

Elaine smirked coldly. She would not let Ludwik fall for this vixen. He was hers, forever hers.

And the vixen and her cursed offspring deserved a fate worse than death.

Elaine's gaze settled on the Elate City construction site accident, where a worker's death was causing an uproar. With Ludwik gone abruptly that night without providing a solution, the managers had taken a hard line with the family.

Now, one was seeking vengeance against Ludwik in Banyan City....

Elaine quietly shredded the report meant for Ludwik and smiled to herself.

After a satisfying meal, Whitney returned to the villa, took a relaxing bath, and prepared for bed.

Ludwik strode in, tossing the blankets aside and cornering her in the doorway, laying down his terms. "Tonight, I want to hold you as we sleep."

"Why?" Whitney's cheeks flushed.

"You ate all those chilies. If you don't let me sleep with you, I'll tattle to Mom."

"Damn it. So underhanded," She thought.

Whitney gazed at the man before her, his justifications ringing with a certain righteousness. In her mind, she admitted that he hadn't done too badly tonight, even deigning to join her for a spicy street food feast.

Reluctantly, she nodded in agreement, feeling a warm blush spread across her face as she tacitly accepted his request.

The man wasted no time hopping into bed, fearing she might change her mind. He reached out, brushing her hair with his hand, saying, "There you go, sweetheart. Maybe put some ice on those lips to bring down the swelling."

"Mind your own business," she thought, "It's all your fault anyway."

Whitney went to fetch a towel, only to hear him grumble discontentedly, "If our baby ends up with eczema, I'll never forgive you."

Whitney's lips curled into a sly smile. How could that happen? She was well-versed in medicine and planning to have some cooling herbs tomorrow to balance out the heat from the spicy food. And she always made sure to press the right acupuncture points after indulging in such fiery delights.

Carrying their child had not been too tough for her. Thanks to her youth and vigor, the only real challenge so far was the morning sickness.

Quietly, Whitney slipped into her side of the bed, only to be immediately scooped into his embrace.

Chapter 95

Ludwik flicked off the main lights, enveloping her in silence and his undeniable warmth. Sensing something was not right, Whitney's cheeks flushed as she caught a glimpse of his toned midriff under the covers. Yet, he made no further moves, merely gazing at her with a bemused expression as she lay there, stuffed and nearly delirious from the hearty barbecue dinner. He gently tapped her forehead and murmured, "Time to sleep."

She smelled wonderful. Nestled beside her, he finally had a good night's rest.

The comforting scent that lulled him to sleep was a mystery, reminiscent of the girl who had saved him that night years ago, magical almost.

His phone screen lit up silently as he was about to drift off. He switched it to mute—it was a call from Elaine.

Ludwik propped himself up slightly, causing Whitney to murmur in discomfort before turning over to continue her slumber.

He smiled softly, tucking her in before stepping onto the balcony and closing the door behind him to take the call.

"What?" Elaine only called for work-related matters, he knew.

On the other end, Elaine detected his icy tone and felt a mixture of relief and a tinge of jealousy. She had intentionally called at this hour, hoping to interrupt intimate moments. But his voice betrayed no hint of such activities. Had he really not touched Whitney again?

Elaine's frown eased as she got to business, "I'm sorry to bother you this late, Bro, but there's something about Whitney. She turned down the two vendors you recommended for her. Maybe she doesn't want your help, or she's looking for someone else?"

Ludwik paused mid-drag of his cigarette, his brows furrowing as he exhaled into the night.

He said nothing more than a curt, "I see."

Elaine could sense his displeasure. "Do you want me to find out which vendor Whitney's in touch with?"

“Yeah,” Ludwik responded before ending the call.

He put out his cigarette and returned inside. His towering form approached the bed where Whitney lay; her delicate features softened in sleep.

The furrow between his brows deepened. He had good intentions in helping her; why had she refused?

He did not understand. She had not mentioned it in the car earlier. The Imperial Gem Corporation was already a rival to Skye Gem Ltd. He had lowered his pride to assist her.

Did she not trust him? Was she afraid her small business would be harmed?

He gently pinched her cheek, his expression still tender. Perhaps it was time to let her get to know him better and dispel her suspicions.

The next morning, Whitney awoke to prepare for work.

Ludwik finished tying his tie, his imposing figure emerging from the dressing room, his masked handsome face portrayed seriousness in the early light.

He was off to work, but before leaving, he tossed her a smile and said, “Come by my office after work.”

“Wow, you’re letting me know what you do now?” Whitney was surprised.

“There’s a lot to my business. I don’t mind you knowing some of it, seeing what I’m up to.” He flicked a business card her way.

Whitney looked down at it: United Realty Corporation, complete with an address.

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Chapter 95

United Realty Corporation was the largest real estate firm in the country! Almost every upscale mansion in Banyan City was built by them.

Holy cow, was her husband really this loaded?

Whitney did a mental calculation. Skye Gem Ltd. was worth 20 billion dollars, but the market value of United Realty Corporation was beyond her comprehension.

With her heart in turmoil, Whitney arrived at the office and shared the news with Tiana.

Tiana was stunned. "United Realty Corporation is one of Banyan City's most mysterious companies, aside from Imperial Gem Corporation and Skyfaith Electronic Tech, the technology giant! I can't believe United Realty Corporation is your husband's. Madam, you've got my respect!"

"What do I do? Suddenly, him being so wealthy seems kinda hot. I think I'm falling for him," Whitney confessed, touching her cheek.

Tiana's lips twitched. "Whitney, your love for money is so blatant!"

"But I love the person too, okay? He even joined me for a barbecue dinner last night... When I first met him, I had no idea how wealthy he was. Didn't you call him a thug leader?"

"How much do I have to pay you not to snitch to 'L'?"

Whitney burst into laughter. "Enough, I'm hanging up. I've got an important partnership to discuss today." She immediately dialed her college buddy, Cooper, who had handed her his business card at the bar.

Cooper had returned from overseas to start a precious gemstone business, and Skye Gem urgently needed new supplies after recalling a batch of fake jewelry. Whitney naturally thought of him.

Cooper picked up promptly when she called, and the conversation took an unexpected turn. "Whitney, the thing is, I'm just the director, a small fry. Our chairman heard I was closing a big deal with Skye Gem and wants to oversee it personally. He'll be joining us for lunch."

Whitney's mind raced, instantly switching to professional mode. "If the chairman is coming, I should pick a different restaurant. How about the Lotus Clubhouse? I'll prepare thoroughly."

“No need. Our chairman prefers to keep it low-key. Just come as planned,” Cooper chuckled.

After a polite goodbye, Whitney hung up.

Cooper turned to his boss, the tall man standing by the desk, with a slight smile.

Whitney arrived early at the Lotus Clubhouse, only waiting a few minutes before guests arrived.

Cooper entered first, and as Whitney stood to greet him, she froze at the sight of the refined man trailing behind him.

Bryce wore a sharp, dark gray suit that accentuated his distinguished air. His handsome features complemented his tall stature and outstanding demeanor. His eyes lifted in surprise, a smile creeping in. “Ms. Valentine?”

“Mr. Lutz?” Whitney was genuinely surprised.

Cooper glanced at the boss, instinctively asking, “Whitney, you know our CEO?”

Whitney was modest and did not want to boast, so she did not know what to say momentarily.

Thankfully, Bryce’s deep gaze locked on her, and he said first, “I’ve met Ms. Valentine once before because of my mother’s situation.”

His voice was warm and pleasant, quite approachable.

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Whitney quickly extended her hand with a smile. “Mr. Lutz, I had no idea you were Cooper’s boss.”

“Small world, isn’t it?” Bryce returned the handshake, maintaining a cool and courteous demeanor, yet the softness of her hand caught his attention as he looked down.

She withdrew her hand gracefully, calling out, "Mr. Lutz, Cooper, please, everyone, take a seat!"

Once seated, Whitney presented the contract, highlighting the details of the gemstone supply partnership.

Bryce was seated across from her, resting his chin on one hand, his eyes glancing at her several times.

Whitney was nervous, worried she might have undercut the price.

Unexpectedly, he waved, locking eyes with her, "Skye Gem is impressive. I'm sold on your designs, and the price is fine by me. Cooper, whatever amount of gemstones Whitney needs, we'll supply."

Whitney's eyes went wide, astonished at how smoothly the deal progressed.

Cooper, ever observant, stood up to gather the documents. "Since we're set on the partnership, I'll head back

and finalize the contract. Whitney, will you stay and finish the meal with Mr. Lutz?"

Whitney nodded, relieved, her thoughts drifting to the jewelry design she had in mind for Claire.

"Mr. Lutz, I actually have been meaning to discuss something with you as well ..."

"Ms. Valentine, have you found inspiration for the jewelry piece for my mother?"

They spoke simultaneously, Whitney startled, and Bryce followed with a chuckle.