

Perfect Match: Irresistible Desire For You – Chapter 51 - Tips

On the second day, the financial crisis of the Synder Group was reported once again on various media platforms, including newspapers and websites. The articles stated that according to the information provided by senior executives of the Synder Group, the last report was in fact an exaggeration of the true position. The articles further expressed the opinion that the Synder Group did not sustain a financial crisis as purported. As per the media reports, the whole event was caused by a manager of the Synder Group with the surname Guzman, who had leaked the relevant confidential company information.

Clearly, these media reports were a method employed by the Synder Group to downplay the severity of the event that had transpired, which would effectively pacify the public. It further redeemed the critically damaged reputation that the Synder Group had sustained due to previous media coverage—at least to some degree. Consequently, the stock price of the Synder Group began to climb as soon as the news broke.

Concurrent with these press releases, more sensational news made headlines: the CEO of Empire Group, Mr. Marshall, declared a press conference to be held that day.

This was unprecedented. Joseph had previously been an elusive character whose name had only been heard. His intention to make a public appearance by holding a press conference caused quite the buzz. Many people began to speculate about the reasoning behind his decision.

Since Ashley had been fired, she decided to hit the sack, even though it was daylight hours. She was knocked out when she heard the unexpected chime of the doorbell. She opened the door and was greeted with the presence of Mike.

Before she could request an explanation for this out-of-the-blue visit, Mike walked into her apartment without invitation. He seated himself on the couch in the living room and pulled out a newspaper clipping. With a grave expression, he asked, “What’s going on?”

Noting the seriousness in her brother’s voice, and unclear about what he was asking, Ashley took the clipping from him. At a glance, she realized it was news regarding the financial crisis of Synder Group. After carefully perusing

the clipping, Ashley felt that much that had been reported was as anticipated. However, there were other parts of the article which were wholly unexpected. Just as she had anticipated, the Synder Group apportioned blame to someone for leaking its classified information. The Synder Group had not dared to flagrantly accuse the Empire Group of causing obstruction to its business, but it urgently needed to provide reasoning for the situation in order to remedy it. To her great astonishment, however, the Synder Group had made its internal affairs publicly known. Ashley scrutinized the situation of the Synder Group as provided by the article. She found herself lost in her own thoughts as she speculated about the report. Inadvertently, she didn't respond to Mike.

Observing his sister, who was clearly ruminating about the article, Mike was certain that his suspicions were correct. As per his usual routine, Mike started the morning by reading the finance section of the newspaper in his office. The news report provided a follow-up on several recent articles which had been published over the past few days, regarding the financial crisis event of the Synder Group. While the Guzman Group had greatly surpassed the Synder Group in terms of growth over the last few years, and it remained that the latter was developing at a slower rate, the Synder Group was still well-renowned. Mike paid special regard to news in respect of the Synder Group due to the fact that Ashley was in its employment. As he perused, he noted that a manager with the surname Guzman was responsible for leaking the company's private information which caused the purported financial crisis. Consequently, the culprit was dismissed.

After reading this, Mike immediately shook off the idea that the offender referred to in the article was in fact Ashley. He genuinely did not believe his sister could be capable of such an act. He could not, however, but note that the manager's family name was Guzman, a rather uncommon surname. 'How many managers with the surname Guzman could there possibly be within the Synder Group? How likely was it that there could be more than one?' Mike had to confirm the position. He rushed to his car, and sped off to Ashley's apartment.

Even though it was during work hours when Mike arrived, Ashley answered the door. This gave Mike an indication that there may be some truth to his suspicions. Nonetheless, he still needed to ascertain what had really transpired. He just did not believe that Ashley could conduct herself in the manner mentioned in the articles. It was crucial that he uncovered the truth.

“Why didn’t you tell me about it? How dare the Synder Group slander you! I will mete out justice for you,” declared Mike in a soft yet firm tone to the silent Ashley. When push came to shove, he could not hold his dear sister responsible. It occurred to him that Ashley may have purposely concealed the truth from him. She was an independent woman and perhaps she did not want him to worry about her. Nevertheless, the Synder Group dared to openly and shamelessly defame her, framing her as the culpable person. He did not see the need to be civil. A murderous, vengeful look flashed across his face.

Noting her brother’s concerned expression, Ashley took a seat beside him, and said in a soothing, calming voice, “Mike, I just don’t want you to worry about me. I can handle it. Your sister is not that easily bullied.”

Mike could sense the determination in her cold tone. Evidently, the Synder Group had indeed caused his sister great suffering. He felt an overcoming feeling that he would never be able to forgive the company. His dear sister was being publicly treated this way. If he did not earn retribution for her, the Guzman family name would be in disrepute. Mike had previously agreed to allow Ashley to work with the Synder Group, not only because she wanted to improve her independence and ability, but also due to her insistence that the company was in fact a quality company. He did not foresee that the Synder Group would have such an ugly side to it, and that it would defame others, ruining their reputations, in order to further its own interests.

Be that as it may, he was well aware that Ashley was an independent thinker. While she did not want his involvement in the matter, she would most certainly avenge herself. Ashley had an outstanding reputation, it would be easy to provide proof thereof and show the Synder Group a point. However, the Synder Group was a well-established and influential company which would not take defeat easily. Mike would have to think this out carefully.

“How dare the Synder Group treat the daughter of the Guzman Group in this manner? I will not forget this. Don’t worry. I’ll support you in all your decisions,” Mike asserted. He rubbed her hair affectionately, comforting her, and encouraging her not to take this attack on her character lying down. He said this to her to show that he respected her independence to decide what course to take in the circumstances. Nonetheless, he wanted to ensure that he was also well-prepared, if it became necessary for him to act.

“Thank you, brother.” The warmth of familial tenderness made Ashley smile sincerely, and thank Mike. She wanted to communicate her gratitude for the genuine and unconditional trust, support and love that he afforded her.

“Silly girl, don’t be so formal with me! Do what you think is right. I’ll help you even when the sky falls,” said Mike. Sensing the emotion in his sister’s thanks, he couldn’t help comforting her right away. Then he got to his feet, and added, “Now, you just see this as a vacation. It’s rare that you ever have time for yourself. Rest, try and get more sleep. I’m going back to work. There are things at the company that need my attention.” It was imperative that Mike return to the office and deal with the issue of the Synder Group, so he bid Ashley farewell.

“Alright. Take care, brother! Don’t fret about me. And be careful and travel safely.” Ashley walked Mike to the door and waved him goodbye with a smile.

After Mike departed, Ashley didn’t feel the desire to sleep any longer. She returned to her bedroom, tidied up her clothes, brushed her hair and washed her face. She retrieved her phone from the bedside table, only to see a list of missed calls, all from Yasmin, who had called repeatedly in the time that she had been discussing the developments in the lounge with Mike.

She dialed Yasmin’s number. The phone rang for a while before Yasmin answered, “Hello, Ashley. Are you okay?”

“Well, not bad. Is something wrong?” Ashley replied.

“Today, I heard that those dimwitted people even wrote about your alleged scandal in the newspaper. They are shameless! The mere thought infuriates me! So I called just to let you know that you shouldn’t think too much of it,” said Yasmin.

“I know. I’m fine. I’m actually having a decent rest... But why are you whispering?” When Ashley heard Yasmin’s voice becoming softer and softer, she couldn’t help but ask.

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Truly, everything going wrong in my life is Lina’s fault! Today, she demoted me at work and had me replaced by someone who doesn’t even like me!” Yasmin’s anger got the better of her for a moment and she paused before continuing, “Well, a new broom sweeps clean. I’m sure Lina hired my new superior to keep a close eye on me. I can’t shake the feeling she’s always watching.”

As she listened to her friend, Ashley realized that Lina would do anything to take down those against her. She had not only driven Ashley away, but had got revenge on her friend. She truly was a ruthless person.

Since she heard no response from Ashley, Yasmin thought that her friend was concerned for her. "Don't worry about me. I will get back at her if I get the chance! Why don't you get some rest before you start your new job? I'll come to see you as soon as I'm free.

Let's discuss it later, Ashley. Take it easy. That old witch, Lina, is coming to check up on me." When Yasmin saw Lina walk into her department, alarm bells began to ring. She couldn't be caught so soon. After all, she couldn't get revenge if she was fired. She quickly hung up the phone.

Before Ashley could reply, Yasmin was gone on the other end.

She put the phone down and headed into the kitchen to make breakfast. Once she'd eaten, she turned the TV on to watch latest news. There was a live broadcast on the Ariosa channel. "The CEO of the Empire Group, Joseph, is holding a press conference. What could he be planning?" Hearing Joseph's name, Ashley sat up attentively and watched closely.

The TV press conference was a lively scene. The venue was crowded with people, and reporters were milling about. The public couldn't wait to finally see the true face of the entrepreneurial miracle, Joseph Marshall. The reporters wanted to be the first on the news, so before Joseph even showed up, the audience was already boiling over with energy.

As she watched the TV, Ashley had to admit that Joseph's influence had an extraordinary reach. Hoards of people were scrambling to watch his public appearance. 'What on earth would he announce?' Ashley herself was curious about this and kept her eyes fixed on the TV screen.

After a while, the bustling crowd suddenly quieted down. Joseph walked along the red carpet through the crowd and up to the podium. His tall and straight figure and domineering aura made him stand out against the crowd. Everyone stared at his handsome face, riveted, and held their breath unconsciously. They gazed at him with the respect worthy of a god.

Indifferent to this reception, Joseph walked briskly to the stand. After the host's speech, it was time for Joseph's long-awaited address. "First of all, thank you everyone for taking time out of your busy schedules to attend this press conference." Joseph's tone was modest, but this did nothing to detract from the nobility of his demeanor. When he bowed slightly to the audience, there was a warm applause.

"I believe that everyone here is informed with regards to the Synder Group's recent financial crisis. I am here to declare that the Empire Group has become a major shareholder of the Synder Group, and that the acquisition of the Synder Group is just around the corner." His tone was calm, but it incited a commotion in the audience.

Everyone was stunned by Joseph's straightforward and domineering acquisition claim. Was it a ruse or something else? Beyond the stage, a heated discussion was underway.

Joseph waved his hand to the audience to silence them. Then he continued, "I want to state now for the record that the rumor that the Synder Group's crisis was caused by someone leaking company information is pure slander."

Before the audience could discuss this amongst themselves, Joseph added, "The fired manager by the surname of Guzman is one of my friends, and the Synder Group falsely claims that she leaked the company information due to some photos of me and her. A big company like this should not be in the business of ridiculous accusations.

The slandering words they fed the media are a crime of defamation. I would like to ask the Synder Group to make a public apology to the victim immediately and to compensate for her losses. Otherwise, I will see you in court." Joseph's voice was calm but dignified.

Having made this statement, he put a portfolio down on the desk in front of him. He had set out all the evidence there for everyone to read. However, they didn't need to read the so-called evidence to feel the cold solemnity emanating from Joseph. They knew this was an unprecedented situation, and they believed the truth of his words. While everyone was blaming the Synder Group for what it had done, they were curious as to who had incited Joseph to make this speech, when he was usually so indifferent. The atmosphere at the scene became tense once again. Everyone was looking to Joseph to tell them clearly what had gone on between them.

However, to everyone's disappointment, Joseph did not continue to divulge. Instead, he abruptly came to a close. "And I mean what I said. That's all." There was clearly an implicit threat in his words. His cold tone made everyone take a deep breath. As he said, the Synder Group would be the target of public criticism.

Finally, Joseph said to the audience, "If any of you have further questions, please address them to my personal assistant, Mr. Estrada. Thank you again for coming." Although the audience was still unsatisfied with Joseph's speech, they couldn't help but applaud loudly in the presence of his powerful aura.

He calmly walked off stage and disappeared backstage. The reporters rushed towards Zachary, who appeared on the stage. Having lost the chance to talk to Joseph himself, they could not let slip the only other person who could answer their questions. The reporters surrounded Zachary, packing him in on all sides.

Zachary's mouth twitched. It was the first time that he had been so popular in front of such a large crowd. It was all due to Joseph. He had mocked Joseph for trying to play the hero and save a damsel in distress. Now Joseph had the cruelty to push him in front of a group of scavenging reporters.

However, despite his complaints, Zachary knew what to do first. He knew why Joseph had done what he had. Having lived in the business world for more than ten years, Zachary could easily answer the reporters' questions (or not when the situation required discretion).

Zachary responded to the reporters' questions skillfully, keeping a genteel smile pinned on his face. He told the reporters all about the Synder Group's financial crisis. Everyone knew it all started when the Empire Group refused to cooperate with the Synder Group, causing the Synder Group to pay a huge amount of liquidated damages for failing to accomplish its orders. In an effort to salvage their own reputation, the Synder Group used a company employee as a scapegoat, accusing her of leaking company intel.

Zachary's high-profile and the confident arrogance of his response made the atmosphere even more intense. Zachary answered almost all the questions and let the audience connect the dots between them. .

When a reporter asked, "What's the relationship between Mr. Marshall and the manager by the surname of Guzman?" or "Why did Mr. Joseph Marshall rush to defend the manager by the surname of Guzman?" Zachary responded,

“They are friends and this is Mr. Joseph Marshall’s private affair. I honestly have no idea.”

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Such an answer not only discouraged further questions but also left them all in suspense. ‘Private affair? How private is it?’ At that response, everyone was filled with a burning curiosity about the answer to this question. Everything was unfolding as Zachary had intended. With the help of others, he believed that the relationship between Joseph and Ashley would be put on the agenda.

The press conference was still going on, but Ashley turned her eyes away from the TV after Joseph stepped down from the stage. What Joseph said at the press conference shocked the audience, and Ashley’s mind whirled with thoughts and unanswered questions.

First of all, she didn’t expect her scandal to be clarified so soon and in such a decisive manner. She had only met Joseph for a few times before, but now he took over and helped her clear her name in public and get justice for her situation. A confusing mix of emotions filled her heart, but what reigned was a profound sense of gratitude, followed by doubt.

‘Why did he take the initiative to help me? Is it because he considers me as a friend, or does he have some other motive?’ After a few moments of bemusement, she arrived at a logical conclusion: the main purpose of the press conference was to officially declare war on the Synder Group. He probably helped her out simply because he was in a good mood and was feeling generous. Besides, he could also take advantage of this matter to reveal the shameless conduct of the Synder Group to the masses and lay a foundation for future acquisition.

This thought pacified Ashley’s confusion somewhat. She had always been a person who knew how to repay, and Joseph had helped her twice in a row without asking for anything in return. Now, she had a better impression of Joseph and was considering how to thank him. Regardless of the unpleasantness during their first meeting, she thought that despite his cold, solemn demeanor, he was a good person to make friends with.

Little did she know that her guess about Joseph’s behavior in the press conference was only partly right. It was true that Joseph’s main goal for

holding the press conference was officially declare war on the Synder Group, but helping Ashley get justice was not by coincidence. On the contrary, the news that Ashley was fired triggered the press conference.

Joseph had always suspected that the death of his parents in the past had something to do with the CEO of the Synder Group, James Synder. He was able to gather some clues after an exhaustive series of investigation, but James was an extremely cautious enemy. He was thorough in covering his tracks, and nearly all traces of that incident had been swept away that declaring their deaths as murder had become almost impossible. However, Joseph had been formulating his revenge plan for a very long time. This time, the financial crisis that the Synder Group was facing was orchestrated by Joseph himself. First, he used his registered company in the United States to sign a big order with the Synder Group, and then deliberately did not cooperate with them so they couldn't take advantage of the extensive resources of the industrial chain of the Empire Group. The Synder Group ended up paying a large amount of liquidated damages for breaking the terms of their contract. Finally, he revealed the Synder Group's crisis to the media.

He had carefully planned the Synder Group's downfall step by step so that James could see the fruits of his labors go down the drain. However, when today's report came out, Joseph's spy in the Synder Group told him that one of the employees was set up to take the fall. That employee was none other than Ashley. At that point, Joseph already considered her as his woman. If the Synder Group touched her, it was equivalent to a personal affront to him. It was unforgivable.

In an instant, Joseph decided to strike the Synder Group openly in business. If he announced to the public that he would acquire the Synder Group, it would inevitably cause a sensation in the business world, and even more so within the Synder Group. Moreover, the incident involving the Synder Group slandering its employee proved to be helpful to his plight—he would be able to deal a heavy blow to the company's image. As to be expected, the stock price of the Synder Group would definitely plummet. At that point, he would definitely take the opportunity to buy a large number of shares and ultimately make the Empire Group the company's biggest shareholder.

Although the reason why Joseph helped to clear Ashley's name was that he wanted to use the scandal to attack the Synder Group, he never would have changed his plans and managed to strike his enemy so swiftly if it hadn't been

her. It was only possible because the injured party was Ashley, his one and only love.

As a stunned Ashley tried to quickly make sense of what was happening, the entire Synder Group had been plunged into chaos. One by one, employees of the Synder Group heard about Joseph's press conference, which was aired specifically to attack the Synder Group. Everyone dropped what they were doing and tuned in to the press conference through all kinds of media. After seeing the proof with their own eyes, everyone was left speechless by the straightforward, dignified words of Joseph. As if the announcement of Joseph's acquisition of the company weren't enough to sow panic in the hearts of the employees, his demand for the Synder Group to apologize to Ashley in public and compensate her for punitive damages was like a bomb dropped in their midst.

Little by little, they became more convinced that Ashley had been wrongfully accused and dismissed. At the same time, they were also disappointed in their senior executives, who failed to take responsibility and passed off the blame to an innocent employee. Most of the employees then fell into a heavy silence, people from the marketing department righteously iterated how they had always known that their manager was framed. They all believed that Ashley wouldn't do anything against her own principles. The fact that she was slandered yesterday and was proved clean in a high-profile press conference today made them feel happy and vindicated.

On the other side, as soon as the news broke out, the senior executives of the Synder Group held an emergency meeting to deal with this unexpected development. At the beginning of the meeting, all of the major shareholders condemned the behavior of the decision-makers of the Synder Group for slandering an employee and even quarreled among each other. After sitting down at the head of the table, James first admitted his wrong decision to the shareholders, and then ordered everyone to analyze the impact of today's press conference and come up with countermeasures for damage control.

Joseph's announcement to acquire the company caught them off guard and went beyond James's expectations. After the previous financial crisis, he himself had investigated why Joseph didn't cooperate with the Synder Group, but his search for clues was in vain. He had initially thought that it was a purely business strategy since there was no actual profit margin to be had. Now, it seemed like the declaration of war against the Synder Group was driven by some other reason. The thought filled James with apprehension, making him tremble in anxiety and fear. Although the Synder Group had a

solid foundation, it would be extremely difficult for them to fight against the Empire Group, which was rapidly growing stronger by the day.

The senior executives were dripping with cold sweat after hearing Joseph's words—I mean what I said. After his announcement, surely he would take action. The mere thought of that already left them to fidget in their seats.

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The senior executives had been in this meeting for quite a while, yet they were still going back and forth regarding whether a public apology should be made and whether she should receive compensation, as per Joseph's demands. The executives argued vehemently and, once again, reached a deadlock.

Part of the group argued for a public apology to be made to the defamed ex-manager, as a matter of urgency. Thereafter, it was proposed she also be compensated. This group thought that it was the Synder Group who was the culpable party in the first instance. Therefore, the company had the onus on it to clear the air. This incident had caused the company's reputation to take a huge knock. A public apology would definitely mitigate some of the damage its reputation had sustained. To make matters worse, Joseph had openly declared war on the Synder Group. It was imperative that he be pacified, as soon as possible, and then the company could employ further measures to completely douse fire that the slander incident had created.

The remaining part of the group of executives, who opposed the proposed ideas, were of the belief that Joseph was all bark and no bite in respect of the threats made at the press conference. According to this group, the Synder Group was a long-standing incorporation, with a growth history comparable to that of the Empire Group. They were convinced that the Empire Group did not have enough clout to degrade the Synder Group. Further, if the Synder Group offered an apology as per Joseph's request, it would give off the impression that the Synder Group was fearful of and subservient to the Empire Group. The way this group perceived this, it would be equivalent to effectively capitulating to the enemy.

Both groups had argued until they were red in the face with frustration. After due consideration, James said, "Stop arguing. Let's take a vote to settle this problem."

According to the tally, the majority voted in favor of the apology and compensation, but the margin was very narrow. James fell within this majority. He was well aware that the strength and economic growth the Empire Group had consistently displayed was evident to all. Further, Joseph was also known for ruling with an iron fist. In the circumstances, it would be unwise for the Synder Group to underestimate such an adversary. It could not afford any further blunders. Yielding to Joseph's requests would cool the heat on the Synder Group for the time being.

In respect of the ambit of the compensation and wording of the apology, this was left wholly to James' discretion. The next item on the agenda for discussion by the executives was the identification of an effective approach to deal with the acquisition plan of the Empire Group.

Joseph's press conference had caused a stir in the city. The public was aware that his acquisition claim had made a direct impact on the Synder Group's stock prices, causing a fall yet again. This caused the senior executives significant distress.

With the developments of the matter in the limelight, Ashley could not help but let out a sigh of relief when she considered the extent of Joseph's influence. His unanticipated and formidable actions had caught the Synder Group wholly off guard. The vindication of Ashley's position in the matter resulted in her receiving endless messages from those close to her.

While she was pondering the intention of Joseph's conduct, her phone lit up, indicating a call from Yasmin. Immediately after Ashley picked up the phone, Yasmin excitedly remarked, "Ashley, have you seen the good news? It's making headlines! Ha-ha-ha! I can't wait to see the vexed look on Lina's face. Humph! This is the payback she must face!"

She spoke endlessly on the phone. Her happiness was apparent from the excitable tone of her voice. Ashley, however, remained silent, quietly taking in her friend's enthusiastic congratulations.

However, Yasmin suddenly changed the subject of the discussion, asking, "Ashley, just be frank, when did you hook up with that magnificent man, Joseph?"

Having seen Joseph's striking appearance on the live television broadcast of the press conference, Yasmin had become quite curious. His chiseled, flawlessly handsome face, and his lofty confidence before the crowd could be summarized by one sentence: a distinctive, stunningly attractive man. Yasmin could not contain her curiosity about the thought of her friend in a romantic relationship with this breathtaking man.

Hearing the excitement in Yasmin's voice as she began her questioning, Ashley could just imagine the exhilarated and inquisitive look on the other end of the phone call. She pulled herself together and responded in an even tone, "Hook up with? We've only met a few times."

"Don't take me for a fool. Don't lie to me! Joseph was known to be indifferent in his dealings with women. He was so distant with women in general, that he was slightly cold. Why would he go above and beyond to help you with the situation in such a bold and public manner, when you two have just met a few times?" Yasmin expressed her disbelief. "Ashley, tell me, what's going on between the two of you? I promise I'll keep my lips sealed!" Before Ashley could even get a single word in, Yasmin had already begun to speak again.

'What I have said is true. I have only met him a few times, our first romantic encounter included. Why did he take such initiative to help me? I cannot make sense of it either,' Ashley thought to herself. However, she could not disclose this to Yasmin just yet, or it would be public knowledge in no time.

Just as Ashley was wondering how to appease her friend's curiosity, her phone rang. Quickly seizing the opportunity, she said, "Yasmin, I have another call coming in. I have to answer it now. I will give you an explanation when I see you."

Noting what Ashley had said, Yasmin sensed that something fishy had transpired. Ashley's voice fluttered anxiously, as if she couldn't wait to end their call! However, before Yasmin could respond, Ashley paused for a moment, before she said, "You know, I also feel that your Zachary is quite attractive." Then, Ashley cut the call.

Listening to the engaged tone from the other end of the line, Yasmin repeated Ashley's last words, "Your Zachary is also quite attractive..."

'He is not mine!' she thought. Yasmin had an overwhelming emotional response to the statement and began to scoff at the thought of it. Yasmin felt irate at that he was brought up in the conversation. A week had passed since

the two of them had shared an unforgettable kiss. Then, he disappeared from her life in totality, without a goodbye or an apology. She had not seen or heard from him until this day, when she watched him on the news broadcast.

Yasmin did not want to admit it, but Zachary had an ineffable effect on her. After her initial anger with him had ebbed away, she found that she genuinely missed the days she had happily spent together with him. However, since the day of their kiss, Zachary seemed to have moved out from next door. He also did not make any contact with her. Yet, every time her mother asked how things were going between Zachary and her, she untruthfully said that things were going smoothly.

When she had seen him on the television today, she had to admit that he had a way with words when he was placed in the lime light. He had a distinctive style and look about him. He looked comfortable and had a natural, uninhibited poise. This made the female viewers swoon and comment on his brilliance. The women did not even take their eyes off Zachary and Joseph for a second. Watching this scene, Yasmin shook her head in disapproval of the number of obsessive and superficial women there were in this world.

All the women, however, were in agreement that, between Zachary and Joseph, the former was the more attractive man. The reasoning for this was two-fold. Firstly, Joseph had a lofty, almost aristocratic air about him. As average, white-collared employees, these women saw him as being out of their grasp. Zachary was comparatively more down to earth and better suited for them. Secondly, Joseph came across as cold, which made him seemingly unapproachable, as if he would freeze anyone out of a conversation. Zachary had a welcoming smile, which added to his beauty. It was for these reasons that Zachary received such support and admiration from many fanatical women.

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Yasmin stood aside, listening to her female colleagues' discussion. She looked at Zachary on the television screen, taking his appearance in. Then, she peered at the women, who had an obsessive, fanatical look in their eyes. With mixed feelings, she morosely thought, 'What a dangerously handsome man. Such a man should be beaten for the stir he causes! This was absolute balderdash. He was neither an ordinary man nor particularly approachable.'

Yasmin was caught up in her own memories due to the comments Ashley had made previously. When she snapped out of it, she couldn't hold her tongue, mumbling to her phone, "How dare you play these tricks on me? You had better tell me what actually happened between Joseph and you, or I will..." Yasmin did not know how to end her threat. She considered her words and then added, "I will never speak to you again. Humph..." Then she cut the call, put her phone aside and buried herself in her work.

On the other end, Ashley also ended the call. She answered Mike's call, which had been placed on hold while she spoke to Yasmin. "Hello, brother. What's up?" she asked.

"Who were you speaking to while you had me on hold?" he queried.

"Yasmin. What's the problem?" Ashley responded, rather directly.

"Alright. Did you know that it was Joseph who helped mete justice out for you in respect of the slander incident?" asked Mike.

Mike was astonished when he first discovered that Joseph had openly demanded that the Synder Group offer apology to Ashley. It was highly unlikely, especially with regard to Joseph's characteristics, for him to advocate so strongly for a person he had met a mere few times. 'Perhaps there is some sort of arrangement between Joseph and my sister,' he wondered. 'Or was there a deeper relationship between the two of them?' Mike wondered.

After watching the news, he immediately dialed Ashley's number. Her number was busy and he was placed on hold. He suspected that it was because Ashley was preoccupied with a call with Joseph. A great sense of relief flooded over him when she told him the call was in fact with her best friend.

To be frank, he preferred if his sister had minimal contact with Joseph. Joseph gave him a sense of unease. He was so young but he nevertheless asserted dominance in the business world. He must have employed various strategies to have gained such influence. In addition, he must have a far-reaching personal network, extensive funds and strong backers. With such a background, one could imagine how complex a character Joseph must be. Mike had always wished for his sister's eventual life partner to be able to afford her a peaceful lifestyle, without the dramatics or complications which often arose from a complex character and background.

Casting aside his doubts in respect of the status of their relationship, Mike nonetheless admired Joseph's grit and courageous conduct in respect of the press conference. He was assertive and clearly delineated his demands. Therefore, both the public and the adversary could have no doubt regarding the purpose of the conference. Further, Mike was delighted at the conspicuous and expeditious manner Joseph had dealt with the issue, which attained his sister's retribution, timeously.

"Yes, I am aware," Ashley replied, briskly.

She felt that her brother's incessant questioning was too intrusive, as if he had something to say, but was biting his tongue. So, she just asked him, outright, "Brother, is there something you have to say?"

On the other end of the call, Mike could not help but let out a sigh of unsettled emotion. He tapped restlessly on the desk with the pen he had been holding. After a pause, heavy with silence, he asked, "Ashley, be honest. What is the nature of the relationship between you and Joseph?"

'This question — yet again.' It was apparent that people were quite intrigued by the relationship between Joseph and her due to the press conference. But how could she provide anyone with an answer, when she herself was unsure?

After giving it some thought, she replied, "It's casual. We have met only a few times."

Hearing this, Mike felt there was ambiguity in Ashley's answer, so he rephrased the question. "Well, do you have any feelings for Joseph?"

'That was too direct! There shouldn't be a romantic relationship between the opposite sexes in this type of scenario. Even though I did feel chemistry with Joseph, it did not change the fact that we had only interacted a handful of times,' she thought. She had to admit that her impression of him had changed in some way, but there were no definitive emotions for him, let alone a romance. She answered honestly, "No. Brother, what is it that you want to say?"

"Nothing. I just care about my darling sister's relationship problems. Joseph helped you out of the goodness of his heart. I am just giving you a heads up that I will be thanking him on your behalf," Mike replied. Hearing the sincerity in his sister's answer, Mike felt certain that she did not in fact have feelings for Joseph. He no longer felt the need to press her on the topic.

Ashley sensed her brother's relief. Just as she was about to speak and continue on the issue, Mike changed the topic. "Okay, then. I'm going to return to my work. Anyway, I will thank him for you."

Realizing that Mike had dropped the call, she thought, 'Mike is truly behaving strangely today.'

There was just so much going on today. Firstly, there had been the press conference, which had caused such a stir. Secondly, the manner in which her defamation had been addressed on the public stage had given her mixed feelings. Thirdly, there were the free-flowing and seemingly endless congratulations from numerous loved ones. She tried to pull herself together. Night was beginning to fall.

She was expecting a visit from Yasmin. Yasmin said she would join her for dinner after work. So, she headed out to pick some food up for the two of them. Apart from this brief outing, she remained at home.

The moment Yasmin arrived, she sprang on Ashley with her immediate hug. "Ashley, I'm so happy to finally see you! What a lovely, sunny day!" she gushed.

Yasmin's excitable tone and demeanor made Ashley uneasy. The two of them had spent some time together, just yesterday, yet Yasmin was behaving as if they had not seen each other for ages. "It isn't sunny now," she said coldly to Yasmin, who was still hugging her in the doorway.

Hearing this response, Yasmin immediately stopped her gushing about her thrill at finally seeing her friend. She restrained herself, walked in a composed manner to the living room, where she took a seat at the table. She retorted, "Ha-ha. It's not funny." She then picked up the set of cutlery on the table and began eating the simple yet scrumptious food which had been laid out for dinner.

Ashley was accustomed to Yasmin's emotional and over-the-top antics. She closed the door and joined her friend at the dinner table, taking the seat opposite her. She picked up her fork and knife, and asked directly, "So tell me, are you going to tell me why you are so excitable?"

"I haven't seen you for a day. Why are you being so difficult? I was just expressing how much I missed you!" Yasmin answered, in a deflated tone, with her mouth full of food as she continued to eat more delicious morsels.

“Well, why is it that you missed me so much?” asked Ashley, ignoring Yasmin’s muffled answer.

“Alas, it’s because I didn’t see you at work today. That old witch, Lina, tyrannized me today,” Yasmin responded. In mentioning this, Yasmin seemed to be caught up in her own misery and continued to vent.

‘As expected. But how could the tough-skinned Yasmin be so easily defeated?’ thought Ashley. Ashley gave Yasmin the go ahead to continue with her story, with an encouraging flash of the eyes.

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Reading the unspoken message in Ashley’s eyes, Yasmin continued her complaining. Laying her fork down, she related to her friend, “By the way, today’s press conference targeting the Synder Group was awesome. Then, Lina’s cloudy face made me even happier.” Giggling at the fond memory, she continued, “Oh, and she demoted me to deputy manager this morning in the name of personnel reshuffling. She was so arrogant in front of me. I didn’t think that she would get reprimanded by the big boss so soon after the news broke out. I’m telling you, when she came out of the boss’s office, her face looked so horrible that it scared people away.”

At that time, the all department team members were speculating among themselves the fate of the Synder Group, as well as the possibility of job cuts. At the same time, they were remarking on the handsomeness of the two men from the Empire Group. When Lina came to inspect their work again, the crowd dispersed as if of one mind.

Seeing this, Lina vented her anger to the whole department. “What do you people think you’re doing during working hours? You’re wasting company time talking nonsense! Why do you even get salaries?”

Her attacks were merciless. Everyone was silent, but they were united in their contempt for her. ‘You’re just hiding behind Mrs. Synder’s name to bully other employees. You’re nothing but a parasite, so how dare you shamelessly scold others...’

Inevitably, the accumulated resentment would reach a critical point and explode. Fed up with the other woman’s attitude, Yasmin retorted, “Tut, tut,

someone here is so conscientious about company's time. By the way, who framed one of our colleagues because she had way too much free time? Now that her actions have been revealed, look who's lecturing? She really should get off her high horse."

Everyone gasped, fascinated by Yasmin's bravery. The team members of the planning department silently cheered for their former manager, and many of them who had hated Lina for her injustice also spoke out. "Who are you talking about, Manager? Who dared to pull such a shameless stunt to slander our colleagues?"

"I really don't know who she is, but I'm sure none of the people who work with her likes her..."

"What should we do now? Who should issue the apology, then?"

"Yes, it's hard to say. Maybe Mr. Marshall can put the culprit behind bars so that they would learn their lesson!"

"I totally agree."

Emboldened by someone speaking out, the group of people expressed their opinions and doubts one after another. The cacophony sounded particularly harsh to Lina's ears, considering how down she was feeling at the time. Every time she tried to speak up to stop them, another wave of voices drowned out her words.

Finally, tired of reining in her anger, Lina snapped with a face as dark as a storm cloud, "Shut up! Everybody, stay here after work today. I'll have a good talk with every single one of you. Now, get back to work!"

Those who were used to Lina's shouting turned to their computers and went back to work, clicking on keyboards and sorting out documents. The room became even quieter than before, making Lina's diatribe sound as sharp as a thunderclap. Just then, the CEO of the Synder Group, James, passed by the planning department. After witnessing firsthand how Lina dealt with her subordinates, he wasted no time in summoning her into his office.

“Yes, sir!” Lina said in a humble voice. Her change in tone was so abrupt, just like turning a new page in a book. Everyone cheered in unison, saying, “Serves you right!”

Half an hour later, Lina passed by the planning department again. This time, however, she only glared at the people with resentment burning in her eyes. There was a collective sigh of relief when she passed by without a word, but Lina’s silence left them puzzled. It was uncharacteristic of Lina to hold back the habit of scolding people. One brave soul ventured out to find out what happened.

Yasmin was dying to find out what caused the shift in the woman’s character, so she sneaked out of a side door and, seemingly by accident, bumped into Lina. Then, she greeted Lina cheerfully, “Hello, Deputy General Manager Synder.”

Given the scolding she had received from the CEO, the last thing Lina wanted to see at the moment was Yasmin’s smiling face.

James had witnessed her castigating the company employees, he immediately summoned her to his office. At first, he gave her an earnest speech about the proper conduct of a manager of the Synder Group. “As a manager, one cannot indiscriminately lose their temper and lash out at employees whenever she wanted. Never cause public outrage over a moment’s comfort, which will only distract the employees of the company.” Then, he analyzed the impact of today’s news on the Synder Group. He had his suspicions about Lina’s involvement in the whole slander debacle, so he asked her to reflect on herself and her actions.

The conversation between the two of them went smoothly. The CEO did not harshly admonish her, but he did criticize her unkind treatment of the employees, for which she had apologized in the most sincere voice she could muster. In the end, James asked her to reflect on what she had done and told her to rest at home for the sake of her baby. Going forward, she didn’t need to interfere in the company’s affairs from now on. Because of his authority, Lina didn’t utter a single word defending herself.

Finally, when Lina nodded in agreement, James asked her to hand over her work as soon as possible before quit.

The dissatisfaction she had been trying so hard to control began to show on her face as soon as she was out the door. “What a hypocrite! He was the one

who gave the go-signal to fire Ashley, and I did nothing but add fuel to the fire. Now, that old bat was actually trying to push all blame to me? How ridiculous!’

After all, she hadn’t even started executing the plan of slowly swallowing up the Synder Group’s assets. “I can’t be dismissed from the Synder Group!’ she thought with conviction. With his cunning personality, that old fox would probably kick her out once the baby was born. It seemed like she had to come up with a long-term backup plan.

As she passed by the planning department, the thought of those team members who had gotten her into trouble annoyed her to no end. However, she was no longer in the position to shoot them down, and she couldn’t afford to disobey James at this point. Thus, she could only vent her resentment through her glare.

To make matters worse, Yasmin was giving her a ‘friendly’ greeting which grated on Lina’s nerves even more. This woman was her enemy, but she couldn’t come to blows with her at this point. With a cold snort and an arrogant toss of her head, Lina walked away.

Seeing that Lina didn’t even rebuke her and just left with an unpleasant expression on her face, Yasmin stared at her departing figure in surprise. ‘Did that b!tch hit her head? Will wonders never cease?’

Trying to remember as best as she could, she later related to Ashley the events that had happened in the company that day, as well as her surprisingly tame confrontation with Lina.

Even though they racked their brains for every possibility, the two women couldn’t figure out what was wrong with Lina. Was she scolded by the CEO, perhaps? “Ah, forget her.” Ashley dismissed the topic. “A toast to you, Yasmin, for your b.ravery today.” With a grin, Yasmin clinked her glass against Ashley’s. After that, the dinner became more pleasant with their lively conversation and laughter.

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It was always a pleasant experience to spend time in her friend’s company. Yasmin’s quirky and amiable personality brought Ashley great joy.

Yasmin flashed a teasing smile, and asked about her future plans. "You are indeed charmed. Just yesterday, you were fired by the company. Today, you attained redemption and broke the company. Tell me, what's next on your to-do list?"

Ashley had already decided what her next move would be. It was rare that she was in a position where she did not need to work for money, and her problem had been solved in such a way. She replied with her plan, "I want to travel internationally. It has been a dream of mine since my youth, and I plan on realizing that dream."

Yasmin could not contain herself when she heard this. This was a great idea. The company was dealing with a crisis, therefore no employees were being granted leave. If it were not for this, Yasmin would have loved to accompany Ashley on her trip. It was thrilling to think about what a time they would have.

In a flash, Yasmin grasped Ashley's hands in hers, affectionately, and said, "Ashley, can't you take me along with you? My life is in your hands."

Realizing that she could not satisfy Yasmin's request, Ashley withdrew her hand from Yasmin's hold, pulled her hand towards her chin, and said, "Girl, I am not into women."

Having just had her legged pulled, Yasmin burst in a fit of laughter, and said, "I did not expect such humor from you! I'm learning something new about you."

'Was it funny?' thought Ashley. She had just been impersonating Yasmin's usual behavior. Ashley reverted to her usual arrogant stance, and said, "He who lies down with dogs will get up with fleas."

Her statement rendered Yasmin speechless. 'How could Ashley insult me to my face?' thought Yasmin, feeling affronted. However, the mention of sexual orientation brought Zachary in mind. He was an example of what she considered an abnormal orientation.

Realizing she had let a thought of that frustrating man enter her mind, she shook the offending, intrusive thoughts from her head. After composing herself, she looked at Ashley's face, which displayed an expression of calmness. It suddenly occurred to her that Ashley had set her up for this when she had made mention of Zachary during their earlier call. Not only had

Ashley failed to provide a response to the question about Joseph, but she had also laid a trap by purposely making mention of Zachary.

With this in mind, Yasmin gave a wicked smile, and asked in a peculiar tone, "Be honest, what is the nature of your relationship with Joseph?" She crossed her arms defensively, and added, "Leniency if you confess, severity if you resist..."

Ashley had not anticipated that Yasmin would push this question, yet again. She had not yet decided on how to respond. If she was truthful, Yasmin may jump the gun and overreact, but she also felt that it was unscrupulous to be blatantly dishonest with a good friend.

As she pondered how to answer under Yasmin's imposing glare, the doorbell chimed. Ashley felt relieved, she could avoid the question further. 'Who would visit at this hour? Perhaps my brother?' thought Ashley.

Ashley noted the expression on Yasmin's face. She was stern, cautioning Ashley not to run away from their conversation. Ashley calmly said, "Perhaps it's my brother. Don't you want to see his handsome face?"

Yasmin considered the position. There would be more opportunities for her to extract the truth from Ashley. Yasmin had been yearning to meet Ashley's brother for quite some time after she had discovered Ashley's true identity. She had searched information about Mike online. One could not deny that he was indeed handsome. Mike's face was strikingly handsome, and he apparently had a temperament comparable to that of Ashley. Yasmin was keen to see what Mike was really like, in person.

Eager, Yasmin jumped out of her seat and rushed to the door. She ran her fingers through her hair, grooming herself. She put on a welcoming and sweet smile to open the door. Ashley stood aside, utterly speechless. 'Why was she so enthusiastic to meet someone for the first time?' thought Ashley.

The doorbell's chimes ended, and Yasmin's smile drooped when she opened the door. The person she expected was not in the doorway. Instead, Charlie, who she much despised and thought to be a jerk, stood before her.

Yasmin's face froze. She was about to close the door on Charlie, when he stretched his arm out to stop her in her tracks. Just as he did this, Ashley called out, "Yasmin, who is it?"

From her angle, being seated on the couch, Ashley could not see the visitor, as Yasmin's body blocked the person from view. It felt as if the two had been motionless at the door for an inordinate amount of time. Ashley had also been preoccupied with putting on her shoes when she had called out her enquiry to Yasmin.

"Nobody. He came to the wrong door, accidentally," Yasmin answered, without a backward glance in Ashley's direction. Yasmin fought against Charlie at the door. She did not want Ashley to see him.

Charlie could see Ashley walking towards the door. He immediately took the opportunity to interject, "Ashley, it's me."

Ashley saw Charlie, she walked towards the entrance and pushed Yasmin aside. She gently laid her hand on the door frame, and frigidly asked, "What are you doing here?"

Noting that Ashley did not invite him into the apartment, Charlie did not say a word. Instead, he looked Ashley up and down, with an unreadable expression on his face. Charlie saw another side of Ashley in her casual attire. Without her out-of-style business suit on, Ashley was the perfect example of a girl next door. She looked charming and effortless. Charlie unconsciously stared at her, obsessively, taken in by her appearance.

From the sidelines, Yasmin could not bear the sight of Charlie's hungry eyes on her friend. She purposely interjected with a cough, "Mr. Synder, if you have something to say, spit it out. If not, please stop being such an eyesore, and leave."

Hearing Yasmin's words, Charlie came to his senses. He had come to Ashley's home in hopes of convincing her to put the defamation incident behind them and bury the hatchet. He wanted to persuade her to come back into the employ of the Synder Group. While he did not want to step on Joseph's toes, if he could convince her as aforementioned, it would dispense with the public apology that had been demanded at the conference. Further, this would clear his name in the eyes of his father, who had given him a task to complete due to his blunders.

As it turned out, Lina was wholly adamant that she would not be the one to publicly apologize to Ashley. She advised James, that since Charlie and Ashley had been lovers in the past, they had a good relationship. Therefore, it should be Charlie who approached Ashley to offer an apology. After due consideration, James decided to hand the task over to Charlie. James needed Charlie to satisfy Joseph's demand posthaste. Plus, Charlie held a high position in the company, therefore no one could say that the company was not showing sincerity in its dealings with the matter. Perhaps Ashley still had some affection for Charlie, and would therefore let the matter go.

Charlie was convinced that Ashley indeed had lingering feelings for him. He was confident in his charm and allure, so he was almost chuffed to accept the task James assigned him. Charlie's intention was to make nothing of this once imposing matter, by speaking to Ashley on her own.

Disregarding Yasmin who stood in his way, Charlie addressed Ashley affectionately and sincerely, "Ashley, on behalf of the company, I would like to invite you back to work. Is this something you are willing to consider?"

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Hearing Charlie's ridiculous request, Ashley and Yasmin were left at such a loss for words. 'When he fired Ashley without having any valid reason, didn't he think that he might end up regretting his decision? Why is he asking her to come back as if nothing happened?'

Unable to put up with it anymore, Yasmin looked at Charlie with such disdain and said, "That's ridiculous! Do you seriously think that Ashley will say yes right away as soon as you ask her to come back? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Charlie had never been treated this way before, so when he heard her say those words, the expression on his face shifted in an instant. As the general manager of one of the most influential companies in the city, he swallowed his pride and pleaded with an ordinary employee to go back to work. Much to his surprise, not only was he given a cold shoulder, but he was also made fun of like this. Yasmin's words got on his nerves, so he said to her in a cold tone, "I'm not talking to you. Please shut up!"

Thinking of the purpose of this trip, Charlie knew that if he wanted to accomplish what he came here to do, he couldn't afford to have any disagreement with Ashley no matter what. For this reason, he tried his best to hold back his anger and just hoped for a favorable response.

Getting an earful from Charlie, Yasmin was about to snap back at him. However, Ashley interrupted her and said, "We have nothing to talk about. Please leave!"

Looking at him with indifference, Ashley asked Charlie to get out of her sight. 'I don't know where he got the audacity to ask me to come back to the Synder Group. Everyone knows that it was just a cover-up for the Synder Group. If I agree to come back, he can avoid making a public apology, and the negative impact of the Synder Group's mistreatment of its employee would be reduced significantly. It's clear as day that he just wants to use me. He should know full well that asking me to cooperate with him is completely out of the question at this point.'

Charlie didn't expect that Ashley would respond like that without a hint of hesitation. After giving it some thought, he decided to increase his bargaining chip and tried again. "If you agree to go back to the company, you will be given a promotion, effective immediately. On top of that, you will also receive a pay raise."

"What makes you so sure that I will agree to go back with you?" Truth be told, Ashley was completely clueless as to why Charlie was still here even though she had already asked him to leave.

If she didn't have anything to do with the issue and urgently needed a job, perhaps she would have considered burying the hatchet with him and seized the opportunity to get promoted. Unfortunately for Charlie, she was not that kind of person. Moreover, she really hated how the Synder Group was twisting her arm with sugar-coated bullets.

"Stop being so stubborn, Ashley. Why do you have to be so against the Synder Group just because of your dignity?" Charlie didn't answer Ashley's question directly. Instead, he replied with another question. As far as he could tell, the reason why Ashley asked him why he thought she would accept his proposal was that she was starting to have second thoughts about it. 'At this point, the only thing that's holding her back is her pride. I don't think she'll be

able to say no to such an enticing offer. At the end of the day, she's just an ordinary employee. How can she possibly turn down an offer from a big company?'

When Charlie tried to put himself in Ashley's shoes, he figured that if he gave her an offer that was hard to refuse, she would surely agree after giving it some thought. In order to get this negotiation over with as soon as possible, he had to bring out his trump card. Without waiting for her response, he insisted, "Ashley, just agree to my request for old times' sake."

Hearing this, Yasmin couldn't hold back her laughter. She couldn't help but sigh, thinking that Charlie thought too highly of himself, which made him no different from Lina. This just went to show that birds of a feather flocked together.

When Ashley heard Charlie say those words, she couldn't help sneering. 'Why on earth does he think that he can change my mind by saying such a thing?'

Ashley looked at Charlie. Seeing the expectant look written all over his face, she flatly replied, "Mr. Synder, things are already over between us. Please don't think too highly of yourself. If my answer earlier wasn't clear enough, let me spell it out for you, I'm turning down your offer!"

Seeing Charlie's face darken upon hearing Ashley's response, Yasmin chimed in, "Mr. Synder, who do you think is better, you or Mr. Marshall? Yes, Ashley was in love with you before, but people tend to make mistakes when they're young, and the same goes for Ashley. Now that she found someone better, someone like you who doesn't know how to appreciate her should just get out of the way." Pausing for a while, she went on and continued, "Please stand aside."

Upon saying this, Yasmin pretended to show Charlie out and closed the door. At that moment, Charlie was so angry for being inferior to Joseph. And before he could even react, the door was closed in front of him.

Ashley's flat-out refusal and Yasmin's rude words knocked the stuffing out of him. He stared at the door in front of him, wearing a long face.

'It turns out that she has really hooked up with Joseph. I shouldn't have let that slip my mind.' Standing in front of the door, Charlie couldn't help but sneer in his heart as he thought of how Ashley pretended to be a pure and lofty woman. 'We'll see about that.'

Just as Charlie was about to leave Ashley's apartment feeling so down in the dumps, Yasmin's ear-splitting voice came from the door, "Mr. Synder, if you really want to apologize, you have to show us your full sincerity. Don't forget to make it public and pay compensation!"

Hearing these words, Charlie hesitated for a moment, then strode away without saying anything. Since the negotiation fell through, he had to think of how he was going to explain this to his father.

Seeing how angry Charlie looked when he left, Yasmin was over the moon. She turned around and looked at Ashley, who was quietly watching TV on the sofa. Then, she shook her head and playfully sighed, "Everyone has probably met a few bad men when they were young. My dear, just take it easy."

"Sis, do I look like I'm taking things too hard?" Ashley replied without looking at Yasmin.

Although Charlie showed up without a warning and said something so unreasonable, Ashley didn't take him seriously at all. Why should she take it to heart?

Thinking that her friend seemed to have been affected by what Charlie said and turned back into her usual indifferent self, Yasmin smiled and said, "I am here for you, so how can you not feel better? Am I right?"

Ashley didn't bother saying anything about her blowing her own trumpet. Instead, she just glanced at Yasmin, looked at the clock hanging on the wall, and then changed the topic, "It's late. Are you going to stay the night?"

When Yasmin heard this, she looked up at the clock on the wall as well and found that it was almost nine in the evening already. She had to go to work tomorrow. Since her apartment was just a few blocks away from the Synder Group, she could sleep in a little longer. After thinking for a while, she nodded her head and said, "I'm going home. I don't want to get up early tomorrow."

'When did you ever want to get up early anyway?' Knowing that Yasmin was a greedy sleeper, Ashley helplessly glanced at her friend and said, "Okay, be careful on your way. I'm not going to drive you home."

Usually, when Yasmin came to Ashley's apartment, she would either stay the night or go back home before it got this late. Otherwise, it wouldn't be safe to

go home alone when it was already very dark outside. Since Yasmin said that she wanted to go back, Ashley didn't want to stop her.

After shooting the breeze for a while longer, Yasmin finally left.

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Two days later, Ashley awoke from a good night's sleep. She planned on spending the day at home, perusing online travel guides, and preparing for her impending trip. She was looking forward to planning this trip. Her plan was to join the Guzman Group once she returned. Her brother had asked for her assistance at the company in order to help him cope with his heavy work load.

Ashley was looking specifically for a travel package for Mexico. When she had been a student, she had keen interest in exploring historical sites. Mexico is where the ancient Mayan civilization had once thrived. The place perfectly suited her interests. She thought this vacation would be a worthwhile way to spend her valuable time off.

As she browsed the web, she made note of the details of interesting spots which she thought she must visit. Her list included various Mayan monuments, the Tulum City, the Pyramid of the Moon, and even a few places which served delicious tequila. Ashley was immersed in her planning and lost in her imagination when her phone rang.

She picked up the phone and saw that the call was from an unknown number. Nevertheless, she answered politely, "Hello. Who is speaking?"

"Ashley, it's me. Leonard. Do you remember me?" said the jovial, warm voice of an old man on the other end of the line.

Ashley quickly searched her mind, trying to recall where she had heard his name before. She recollected the memory: he was an aged man. She had assisted him at the market not too long ago. He had suffered an injury, and she had organized for him to be taken to the hospital for medical attention. While they had exchanged numbers, Ashley had not saved his number to her phone.

"Leonard! Of course, I remember you," Ashley answered excitedly, clearly sensing the enthusiasm of the old man on the other end of the line.

“Ashley, are you free today? I wanted to invite you to my house for a meal to show my gratitude for the kindness you showed me at the market,” Leonard said, getting straight to the point.

“Leonard, you’re welcome. It was no inconvenience at all. Don’t even mention it...” Ashley implored.

“Ashley, I’m an old man who doesn’t have much company. You are such a sweet, kind and beautiful person. Why don’t you accept my invitation?” interjected Leonard, beseechingly. Before Ashley could finish her sentence, Leonard had played the sympathy-seeking ploy. Afraid that she would reject him, he said, “But if you are busy, I will understand.”

Hearing his slightly desperate plight and imagining the pitiful scene of this old man, alone in his home and in the need of company, Ashley immediately responded, “I’m free. When should I come by?”

‘I knew it! Ashley is too kindhearted to refuse an old man like me.’ Leonard was proud of his compelling acting ability. He then praised Ashley with a compliment, “Thank you, Ashley. You are so compassionate...” Realizing that he had potentially begun to overact by speaking a bit too much, Leonard got to the point, asking, “Are you available at 11 o’clock today? I will cook something scrumptious, just for you. Or would you prefer dining at a restaurant?”

Hearing Leonard’s repeated thanks and appreciation for giving him the pleasure of her company, Ashley believed that he must be a lonely man who perhaps took care of himself, preparing his own meals. She was overflowing with sympathy for him. She replied gently, “Leonard, you are so considerate and thoughtful. Let’s have lunch at your house. But I insist that I cook for you as it’s improper for someone elderly to cook for a younger, able person. I will come a little earlier, and prepare a meal for the two of us.”

Unbeknown to Ashley, the state of the man’s life according to her version, could not be further from reality. Leonard lived in an expansive and impressive Marshall mansion. He had learned self-sufficiency during the time he spent in his youth in the army, and Joseph was busy at work for the greater part of the day. For this reason, coupled with the fact that Leonard did not want to be disturbed by any intrusive people during the day, there were not many servants gracing the mansion’s corridors. When it came to his disposition of

wanting to prepare meals, this was his way of showing affection, making people feel welcome and making them feel at home.

Not only was Leonard thrilled because his sympathy-seeking strategy had worked, but he was further elated because he learned that his future granddaughter-in-law was multi-skilled. She had offered to cook, indicating that she was indeed able to cook well.

There was a brief silence wherein Leonard didn't say a word. Prompting a response, Ashley asked again, "Leonard, what do you think?"

Registering her question, Leonard snapped out of his happy thoughts, and replied, "Okay! Ashley, sorry to put you into such trouble." 'This way, we will have more time to spend getting to know each other,' Leonard thought happily.

"It's alright. I'll stop at the grocer and buy some ingredients," Ashley replied.

Hearing her considerate response, Leonard smiled and said, "You don't need to buy any ingredients. My kitchen is well-stocked. You can just come over."

Hearing this, Ashley agreed without hesitation.

After enquiring about the directions to his home and confirming the time she should arrive, Ashley ended the call.

After his pleasant chat with Ashley, Leonard was quite cheerful. 'I cannot let such a wonderful granddaughter-in-law slip away. Not only is she stunning, sweet and kindhearted, but she also has good morals in respect of her dealings with people. I must call Joseph and make sure he comes back to the house soon. Then, I can ensure that the two of them spend some time alone together, and get to know each other on a more meaningful level.' Thinking of his plan, Leonard laughed mischievously.

There was a reason that Leonard was so eager to play matchmaker with Joseph and Ashley. Joseph had caused quite the sensation with what he had said in his press conference yesterday. Leonard kept up to date with current affairs. Therefore, he did not miss the televised airing of the conference. When Leonard saw the passion with which Joseph demanded that the Synder Group apologize to his wronged friend, whose surname was Guzman, Leonard knew that there was something between the two of them.

Leonard was well-acquainted with Joseph's friends, and all of them were male. Furthermore, Leonard had never heard of a friend of Joseph's with the surname Guzman. Also, Joseph currently had a girlfriend, which explained why he referred to Guzman as a "friend", rather than just identifying the person as "Mr. Guzman". Clearly, Joseph referred to her this way, to hide the gender of this person. Just like everyone else, Leonard wanted to see if he could source further information about this "friend" from Zachary. Zachary, however, was good at keeping a secret and kept his lips sealed. Zachary did not give a single piece of information away, which caused the even greater curiosity among the media reporters.

Eventually, Leonard could not contain his curiosity. He was determined to uncover the truth and called Zachary as soon as the press conference came to a close. He asked directly, "Zachary, what is this Guzman's full name?"

On the other end of the line, Zachary was taken aback by the straightforward questioning by Leonard. "Joseph has specifically directed me not to disclose any information about the girl, but since you are his grandfather, and not an outsider, I think that it is okay."

After a moment of hesitation, Zachary disregarded what Joseph had said to him, and asked, "Leonard, why do you want to know?"

Zachary was asking this for theatrics only. Leonard knew that Zachary was just feigning hesitance. So Leonard authoritatively said, "Cut the crap. Just tell me her name!"

Zachary realized his mistake. Zachary knew how cold this Marshall family could be. Joseph could freeze a person to death, with one cold stare. Even Leonard wielded such authority with his strong voice. Leonard should not be underestimated, especially when he was agitated. Zachary immediately complied, obediently. "Her name is Ashley."

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Leonard was shocked when he heard the name. He thought, 'Is she none other than Ashley? As they say, you can wear out old iron shoes in a fruitless search, but by chance, you may find something misplaced, which you hadn't even looked for. I could not have expected such a coincidence: the girl I had independently chosen to be my granddaughter-in-law is already Joseph's love

interest.' Mulling this over in his mind, Leonard felt happiness in heart. He replied in a placating and apologetic tone, "I am sorry, Zachary. I was unnecessarily aggressive in the moment. Please join me for dinner at my home when you have some free time. I hope to see you soon."

The aggrieved Zachary had not yet recovered from Leonard's attitude doing such a one-eighty, before the call was cut.

'He casts me aside immediately after he has used me for what he wanted... I can understand though,' Zachary thought. 'He must be overjoyed that his frigid grandson is finally showing some signs of thawing. He probably just cannot contain his excitement and wanted to express his gratitude to me.'

Then Zachary realized that he had omitted to tell Leonard that this news was a secret, and he had leaked it to him. After careful consideration, Zachary felt that it was necessary to distance himself from this matter, or the consequences would be far-reaching.

To remedy the situation, Zachary called Leonard back posthaste. As soon as the call was answered, he did not waste time in explaining the situation. "Leonard, I forgot to tell you something. Don't tell Joseph what I have just told you. Please!"

On the other end of the line, there was a moment of silence before Leonard responded in an unusual tone, "I understand."

"Thanks. Sorry to have bothered you." Zachary could hear the disappointment in Leonard's voice. It was apparent that Leonard thought Zachary was being unnecessarily difficult and strict about the news. He had to purposely end the conversation and waited for Leonard to cut the call.

Leonard had actually been quite busy at the time. After hearing such great news, he had to make a plan. After hearing Zachary's special instructions, he cut the call abruptly.

Since Zachary had told him that the name of Joseph's "friend" was Ashley, Leonard had been in a state of excitement which lasted the rest of the day. As long as he imagined how wonderful the atmosphere in the mansion would be in the near future, he remained cheerful.

Leonard was apprehensive though. He knew that his grandson had a cold and unapproachable personality, so it would be difficult for him to win over a sharp woman such as Ashley. Therefore, Leonard spent the latter half of the day trying to devise a plan to speed up their romantic progress to ensure they would get married soon.

After carefully planning for the rest of the day and through the night, Leonard decided that the best idea was for him to invite Ashley over for having helped him on the last occasion they had seen each other. Leonard was active in his resolutions and ensured he carried out anything he had decided on doing. After careful execution of his plan, he succeeded in his purpose.

After finishing up her call with Leonard, Ashley had continued with planning her trip to Mexico. When she noticed it was almost time to see him, she neatened herself up and straightened her clothing, before getting into her car and driving to his home.

It took Ashley close to an hour to reach the address as provided by Leonard. Ashley had surmised that Leonard would have an ordinary residence. She thought he would live in the same state as the many elderly people she had assisted when she used to help at the old age home; she thought he would live in a small house. However, she was met by an expansive villa. She could see the sprawling, beautifully manicured gardens as she peered through the gate.

She repeatedly checked the address, thinking she must have come to the wrong place. Ashley remembered her first impression of Leonard, which was that he had an innate extraordinary demeanor. And now she had to admit she had been wrong. The old man was probably materially rich but his mind was in a poor state.

Just as Ashley was going over this in her head and pulled up to the mansion's gate, it opened automatically. A middle-aged woman wearing servant's attire came up to her and asked, "Are you Miss Guzman?"

"Hello! Yes, I am." Ashley greeted her pleasantly.

"Hello, Miss Guzman. Our master has been eagerly awaiting your arrival. Please drive in," the servant said, respectfully.

Heading in the direction that the kindly servant had indicated, Ashley drove towards the mansion. Just as she had parked the car and began to alight from

it, she was immediately met by Leonard who greeted her with a big smile. Ashley quickly finished jumping out of the car, nodded in greeting and said, "Hello, Leonard!"

"Ashley, nice to see you. Don't be shy, come inside with me," Leonard said warmly.

Following Leonard into the foyer, Ashley saw the mansion was richly decorated in a unique manner. From the outside, the house looked as if it were a classic mansion, with everything you would expect from such: a lawn, a swimming pool, a beautiful lake, a playground, and every other facility one could imagine. The inside was decorated in a more modern manner, showing aspects of fusion. There were many well-placed, elegant furniture. It was clear that this was the home of a very wealthy family.

At Leonard's invitation, she took a seat in the lounge and a servant immediately handed her a cup of tea.

Leonard looked at Ashley, who was graciously sipping her tea, and asked kindly, "Ashley, do you like tea? If you don't like it, we have other drinks, including coffee. Please feel at home here. Don't be too reserved or feel as if you are just another guest."

After taking a sip of tea, Ashley expressed her opinion on tea, "The tea ceremony is such a celebrated event. Tasting tea is an entire experience on its own, affecting your inner state of mind. This cup of Biluochun green tea is exquisite and sweet. Thank you for your hospitality, Leonard."

Tea was her favorite drink. In Ashley's opinion, tea was superior and more satisfying than any other drink, including coffee and juices. Not only did tea have health benefits, it was a significant and meaningful part of her country's culture. Due to her love for tea, she had taken keen interest in the tea ceremony and could easily identify a type of tea just by tasting it.

Leonard had deeper understanding of Ashley. Seeing that she also loved tea and had taken the time to conduct research on it, he realized that they were two peas in a pod. He had to express his joy, "I did not expect you to be so knowledgeable about tea. I'm very impressed!"

The two of them began to passionately discuss the tea ceremony, making the atmosphere jovial and lively.

Later, Leonard took a walk with Ashley. The two of them chatted happily, getting along very well.

When it was time to cook, Leonard instructed the servants to leave the kitchen and give Ashley her space to cook. Leonard advised her that she cook for three, as his grandson would be joining them shortly.

At first, Leonard was afraid that Ashley may be tired, so he wanted to offer his assistance. However, Ashley was fond of the elderly and insisted that he relax rather than helping her. They eventually came to a compromise: Ashley would cook with the kitchen maid available for her instruction.