

Standing before Love Chapter 412

The dinner went smoother than expected. Heather was a cultivated woman who had no problem coddling Lisa, but Sebastian didn't fall for it at all.

Fortunately, Lisa wasn't hostile toward the Langston Family and was even fond of Heather. All night long, Heather and Lisa's laughter filled the air and for some reason, Heather was able to amuse Lisa.

After dinner, Heather went to the car to grab the presents. She had prepared gifts for Myra, Tony, Lisa and Sebastian. Before she came back from Italy, she had picked four gifts. She initially wanted to bring gifts to only Myra and her fiancé, but when she was shopping, she decided to get something for Myra's in-laws as well. Now, it came in handy.

Tony noticed that the gifts were worth a lot of money. Curiously, he wondered where she had gotten these customized and premium gifts in such a short time.

The more he thought about it, the more he realized she wasn't a simple character, as if nothing in this world could stop her from getting what she wanted. Furthermore, even Myra didn't know what the gifts were. In order to add a sense of mystery, Heather had stuffed the gifts into the trunk of the car before she could even catch a glimpse.

When Myra opened her gift, she was all smiles. No woman would turn away from pretty clothes. Heather had specially picked a set of outfit for Myra, including a pair of shoes to go with it. In fact, she had hired a top Italian designer to design these clothes.

Custom made clothes weren't only rare, but also had to be booked a long time in advance. Heather had started preparing Myra's gift a long time ago.

"I also helped design this dress!" she said proudly with a grin. After all, she knew Myra's preferences the best.

Meanwhile, Tony received cuff links and a bow tie, things that were essential for formal wear. Since Heather didn't know his measurements, she could only get the little things for him.

Her taste was impeccable. The items she picked for Tony matched him perfectly. Politely, he accepted the gift and expressed his gratitude.

Meanwhile, her gift to Lisa was an oil painting that she happened to successfully bid at an auction held at a painting exhibition at a high price. Although it wasn't a Renaissance painting, it was still a highly valuable collection. She didn't know what Lisa liked, but she thought the elderly certainly wouldn't refuse something artistic and elegant.

Lastly, her gift to Sebastian was a luxurious, Swiss-made, and limited edition Patek Philippe watch. In fact, Heather had taken a trip to Switzerland just to purchase this watch.

Other than that, she had brought a few bottles of Italy's most popular wine. She wasn't familiar with their taste, so she simply bought a bottle at each winery that had good reviews.

As Sebastian held the Patek Philippe watch in his hands, he knew that the watch cost no less than a million. It was too extravagant as a gift.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Miss Langston, this watch is too expensive. I can't accept this." Receiving such a heavy gift from a young lady out of nowhere, Sebastian made up his mind to turn it down.

"Old Master Hart, I went to Switzerland specifically to get this for you, so please accept it," Heather said sincerely. Although it cost her a fortune, she thought it was worth it.

She didn't think too much of it and she didn't want to embarrass Myra. As such, she thought it would be reasonable to get something that cost no lower than six figures, especially for Myra's future in-laws.

After spending a million on the oil painting, she thought since she had bought such an expensive gift for Lisa, then the gift for Myra's future grandfather-in-law should be even more precious.

She had thought long and hard before deciding to take a trip to Switzerland. Men would never refuse a good mechanical watch, and Patek Philippe was the top brand for mechanical watches. If she was buying something, she would, of course, get the best ones.

All in all, she had spent several millions on these gifts. The cheapest was probably Tony's gift. Even Myra's gift cost a lot of money. On top of that, it had taken some time too since she collaborated with the designer. This was why the end product was so gorgeous.

At that time, she didn't realize Myra's fiancé would be from the Hart Family. Since she had done everything with good intentions, the heavens definitely wouldn't treat her badly.

If she could get closer to the Hart Family by spending a few million, then this wasn't a money-losing deal. She was a businesswoman after all.

As Sebastian and Heather were at a standstill, Lisa couldn't watch it anymore. She tugged on Sebastian's sleeve and told him to accept the gift for now.

At night when Heather was leaving, Lisa asked Tony to send her home, but she wasn't a fragile girl. She pulled Myra as they walked out and said, "I drove here myself, so there's no need to bother Tony at all. Myra can just accompany me to my car."

Meanwhile, Tony wanted to tag along, but Myra turned him down and said that she wanted to speak with Heather alone, and that it would be better if he wasn't there.

As soon as they walked out the door, Myra said to Heather, "The gifts are too expensive. How do you expect me to accept it?" The more she thought about it, the more ashamed she felt since she had gone empty-handed to the Langston Residence today.

"It's not too expensive at all. It's only right that I give the best to my best friend," Heather said carelessly. Although it was the thought that counted when giving a gift, the price was another important aspect.

"The watch and painting are too expensive. No wonder you didn't want to show them to me. It's because you were afraid that I would stop you," she said with dissatisfaction. Heather was too smart.

"I was thinking that this is your second marriage after all, and you're marrying into a powerful family. So, I thought I'd make you look good in front of your in-laws." Heather beamed. She didn't know Tony doted on Myra so much and had been worried about her marriage. Also, she was worried that her future in-laws would put Myra in difficult situations since this was her second marriage.

"You don't have to be considerate for me," Myra said and bit her lower lip. After so many years, Heather still cared so much about her and treated her so well.

“You’re my closest friend. Who else am I going to be this nice to?” She patted Myra’s head, just like when they were teens.

“Those are your hard-earned money, and you’ve spent so much on me, I...”

Before Myra could finish, Heather interjected. “Money comes and goes. I can always earn back the money.” She really didn’t care about it at all. To her, it was just a figure. In fact, she was more concerned about the sense of subjugation.

Money was to be spent, and she wasn’t intending to keep the money for her next generation. She liked independent people, so she hoped that her future kids would be as independent as her instead of relying on inheritance.

“Aren’t you planning to start your own business? Now is the time where you need money the most, yet you’re still spending recklessly. I feel bad,” Myra said with a reproachful tone. She even wanted to use her own money to support Heather.

“Don’t be so serious. Remember back then?” She spoke in an unconcerned manner. In fact, she was indeed trying to win their favor and not investing without any regard.

“What?” Myra didn’t know what she was talking about.

“I earned three thousand at my first job, and it happened to be your birthday, so I used up my first salary ever to buy you a gift,” she said with a light voice. “I could spend all the money I made on you back then, so these few millions are nothing.”

Hearing this, Myra lowered her head. Is she trying to make me cry on purpose? How evil! Just then, she gripped on the corner of her shirt. Remembering all the things she had done for Heather, she always felt it wasn’t enough.

“I see you haven’t kicked the habit of grabbing the hem of your shirt.” She teased like an older sibling would. In fact, she had always treated Myra like her own sister.

“When your company is successfully registered, I’ll invest in it.” After holding it in for a long time, Myra suddenly spoke with determination.

“Don’t worry. My money is your money,” Heather jokingly said.

“You can’t spend recklessly anymore.” Myra stressed again. She wasn’t sure how much exactly Heather had, but she was afraid that she would end up squandering all of them with her spendthrift behavior.

“Fine. You can be the financial director and manage the finances of my company, so we won’t go bankrupt.” Heather smiled radiantly and immediately added, “But you’re not allowed to manage my personal finances.” Thinking of Myra’s outlook on spending, she was afraid that her spendthrift life wouldn’t last long if she allowed her to manage her money.

“Here we are.” Myra stopped and observed the car that was a few steps away. As a matter of fact, Heather spent the least on cars, and its value was probably the only thing she didn’t care about.

No matter what car it was, Heather would accept it as long as it worked well. Otherwise, knowing her, the first thing she would buy was a car when she got back to Bradford City.

Heather pulled open the car door and got in. Waving at Myra, she said as she started the car, “I’ll talk to you soon. It’s getting late.”

Just then, she abruptly stopped her movements. “Call Tony. I can’t let you walk back alone,” Heather said seriously. She always treated Myra like a little sister, where she protected and cared for her.

“Don’t worry, he’s not far away. That guy wouldn’t let me send you off alone. He’ll be here as soon as you leave,” Myra said as she waved.

“Alright. Bye, lovebirds!” Heather started to drive away with a delighted mood. She had done well today, and she was relieved to know that Tony was really good to Myra.

On top of that, Lisa and Sebastian didn’t seem to care too much that this would be Myra’s second marriage, and that was the icing on the cake. As long as Myra was doing well, she would be happy.

“Drive safe. Text me when you get home.”

Heather then drove away. Not even a moment later, Tony showed up as Myra expected.

“I knew you would follow us,” she said petulantly with a sweet smile on her face.

“I don’t feel comfortable with you being alone.” He pulled her into his arms and glanced in the direction Heather had left.

He thought that Heather wasn’t as innocent as she looked, and he guessed that there would be drama in Bradford City again since he heard that she was planning to start a business in the city.

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These days, Heather had been extra concerned about Stark Group, more so than Myra herself. She put aside her work on her start-up business and even went to see Myra at Stark Tower.

In the office, Myra was focused on the documents in her hands, while Heather was on the couch looking at the paperwork with a frown. In fact, her expression was more grim than Myra’s.

“Heather, why are you so concerned about Stark Group?” Myra finally couldn’t hold back. Her unusual behavior was baffling.

Clutching the paper in her hands, Heather had an intimidating look in her eyes. Not knowing what she was actually looking at, Myra was a little confused by her unstable breathing.

“What did you say?” Heather didn’t hear what she said at all.

“You’ve been acting weird lately, Heather. I don’t want you to get involved in this mess.” Myra put down the sheet in her hands and gazed at Heather with a grim expression.

Beyond the window, the wind was howling and the weather was gloomy and depressing. Because of this weather, everyone lost their motivation to work. From the tall building, the scene outside looked like the world was going through an apocalypse.

“Have you forgotten the promise I made to you back then?” Heather closed the file in her hand and casually tossed it onto the couch.

“What?” Myra didn’t understand what she meant.

“Stark Group is yours and I will not allow anyone to cause any trouble,” she said righteously. By offering help, other than wanting to obtain Stark Group and Hart Group, she also wanted to help Myra.

“I’ll handle Stark Group myself. I can’t be relying on you for everything.” Myra turned her down. Ever since she came back from Italy, Heather was always in some unexplainable mood. Until now, Myra still couldn’t figure out what was wrong.

Besides, she didn’t like Heather like this. She was becoming more and more business-minded, and the emotions in her eyes were missing. Myra didn’t want her to be a cold and emotionless business person who only had eyes for benefits. Heather’s change was making Myra feel unsettled, and she wasn’t sure that Heather was genuinely helping her by involving herself in Stark Group’s affairs.

Ever since she was a child, Heather had been crowned a genius, but Myra wasn’t a fool either. Heather’s actions were too obvious and Myra had become wary of her.

“I will fulfill my promise to you no matter what. I want you to help you take back Stark Group, and this can no longer drag on.” Heather looked like she was saying ‘I’m doing this for you’, which Myra simply couldn’t refuse at all.

Already feeling burdened by the gift incident, Myra started to have doubts as Heather was trying to get involved in Stark Group’s mess. Perhaps Heather was too eager to get things done. In any case, Myra connected the dots and couldn’t stop feeling uneasy.

“Heather, I hope you’re not getting any ideas with Stark Group.” Myra lowered her head, hiding the disappointment in her eyes. She was afraid to make eye contact with Heather.

Biting her lower lip, Heather thought about what to say. This time, she indeed did not fully prepare and ended up being too hasty, and raised Myra’s suspicions as a result.

Seeing that she did not respond for a long time. Myra wondered if she spoke too harshly and had hurt Heather’s feelings.

“So that’s what you think about me.” Heather put on a disheartened smile. She thought Myra would never hesitate to stand by her regardless of anything. It seemed like she had overestimated the strength of their bond.

“Heather, that’s not what I meant,” Myra hurriedly explained. “Stark Group is a mess right now. If you insist on getting involved, it will only end up being a disadvantage to you,” she anxiously clarified. Heather hadn’t been home for long, and she didn’t want their friendship to be affected by the company’s affairs.

“I know you worry about me, but do you remember what happened that day when you sent me off at the airport?” Heather closed her eyes and asked. The reminiscence in her voice was clear. That day, Cameron went too far, and Heather could still remember it clearly until now.

Recalling something unhappy, Myra shook her head. Back then, Heather couldn’t stand Cameron’s actions, so naturally she had an attitude toward him.

Meanwhile, Cameron couldn’t do anything to her, so he vented his anger on Myra. Even so, she refused to sever her ties with Heather.

On the day Heather was leaving the country, Cameron forbade Myra from going to the airport to send her off. Insisting on going anyway, Myra ended up receiving a severe beating from him.

When Heather saw the bruises on Myra’s skin, she was so mad that she nearly did not get on the plane and went to confront Cameron at Stark residence. If it wasn’t for Myra who persuaded her otherwise, perhaps Heather wouldn’t have gone abroad that year.

To this day, Myra remembered the last words Heather said to her before she left. “When I return from my studies, I will help you take back what’s yours.” Her vow still rang in her ears.

“Heather, it’s all in the past.” Myra’s hatred for Cameron was beyond that. The things he did later on were worse than the last.

“I take to heart all the promises I make. Since I said I would help you take back what belongs to you, then I will not go back on my word,” Heather said with determination. Her face was tense.

Back then, they were young and concerned about being righteous toward friends, but now, they were grown ups and had become business people. Understanding the balance of interest, Myra didn't even want Tony to get involved, let alone Heather.

"Heather, we're all grown up. We can't act on our impulse. You have your own dreams and a career that you would like to pursue, so you shouldn't waste time on Stark Group." Myra was adamant to not let her get involved in this whirlpool of disaster.

Hearing this, Heather's expression darkened. "After all these years, you should understand me," she said painfully. She didn't expect to be rejected so bluntly by Myra at all.

However, Myra was no longer that timid little kid she was back then, and she was no longer the little girl who would always hide behind Heather. After the last few years of hardships in the business world, she had become sharp.

There were many things that she had to do by herself, such as taking back what belonged to her. Something like that was only meaningful if she did it herself.

"Then, Heather, you should also understand me." Myra enunciated each word with a faint glow in her eyes. There were things that she saw through but chose not to speak about.

When Heather went for dinner at the Hart Residence that day, she behaved well, but in a way that almost didn't seem genuine. After she left that night, Myra had lain in bed alone for a long time. She thought she shouldn't doubt her best friend, but her words and actions had raised her suspicions.

On top of that, Sebastian had seen all sorts of people in his life, and when he flat out said that Heather's intentions weren't pure, Myra couldn't help but be suspicious. Tony must have had an inkling too but chose not to say anything out of respect for Myra.

No matter what Heather's intentions were, Myra strongly believed that she wouldn't harm her, although she was no longer the same Heather who had no selfish motives.

The last thing she wanted was any sort of scheming to be present in their friendship. In fact, she only wanted to maintain a simple friendship with her and didn't want their relationship to deteriorate.

No matter what, Myra wasn't going to let her intervene in Stark Group's affairs, regardless of whatever concern she had. After dragging on for a few days, Myra finally spoke up and she felt relieved after letting it out.

"Fine. Since you don't want me to get involved, then I won't interfere." Heather stared at her. From the look in her eyes, she could sense the unpleasant atmosphere, and she knew that if she insisted further, it would only cause harm to their bond.

After Heather left, Myra continued to bury her head in her work with a hint of misery in her eyes. As one grew up, it was almost impossible to have a pure and genuine relationship.

On the other hand, Heather stared into the distance as she sat in her car. It was indeed her mistake. She had been too ostentatious with the gifts the other day, and now she seemed too eager to get involved in Stark Group.

It must have been hard for Myra to hold back for so long and only speak up now. At that moment, she drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. This time, she had acted too hastily and ended up exposing her objective. She cursed herself for screwing up this matter.

As she was distraught, she abruptly thought of a person—Matthias. These few days, she basically figured out the specifics of the situation Stark Group was in. From what she gathered, Cameron was powerless in this situation, and if not for Matthias, Myra would have taken over Stark Group by now.

Since she couldn't break through from Myra's side, she could only seek another breakthrough point from Matthias. With this in mind, she planned to ask him out to have a chat.

Three days later, Bradford City, which had been subjected to heavy rain for days, finally saw the sun. The long-awaited sunny day was just right for meeting with someone.

It wasn't difficult to get a hold of Matthias. After all, he was a popular figure in Bradford City. It didn't take long before Heather reached him.

Truthfully, she had dirt on Matthias, so he couldn't reject it when she wanted to see him. Besides, he had been planning to meet her for a long time.

Matthias booked out an entire Italian restaurant, which was now empty, and sitting across from him was Heather. As the candle flickered, the dim candlelight lit up their faces before it was gone again in a flash. Surprisingly, he had planned a candlelight dinner to entertain her.

"It's been a while, Heather. You have grown more and more beautiful." Matthias spoke with his head down as he cut his steak.

"Should I address you as Matthias or Matt?" The corner of her lips curled into a sly smile.

"A name is just a name. You can call me whatever you like," he said gracefully. Not once did he raise his head to look at her.

"Matt, then," Heather said as she brought the cut steak to her mouth with her fork. At that moment, the two were subtly sounding out each other.

"For you to ask me out, I assume there's something you want from me?" Matthias's movements stopped, and a devious smile appeared.

"You shouldn't get involved in Stark Group's affairs." With her eyes fixed on the knife and fork in her hand, Heather cut her steak elegantly with her head lowered. There was a hint of elusive slyness on her face.

"Coming from someone who has the same intentions as me?" He raised his head and gazed at Heather coldly. There was a faint hint of hatred in his eyes.

"Let's make a deal." She spoke bluntly.

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The dining table was trembling a little as Matthias tapped it with his fingers repetitively. At this moment, the atmosphere became so quiet that one could only hear the crisp sound of his fingers drumming against the table. It almost sounded as if he was breaking down Heather's final line of defense within.

The situation was in a stalemate as he didn't reply to her. He simply stared at her beautiful face, reliving the shameful moments from the past.

“I’m afraid you can’t afford it.” His voice was low in a way that was terrifying.

“Let’s hear it first,” she calmly replied as she put down her utensils and locked eyes with him.

“Be my lover.” He said that word-by-word, and his gaze was filled with hints of insanity.

“Hahaha!” It threw her into a laughing fit. Is he serious about this?

“I remember clearly that the person you like is Mimi. What you have just suggested can be easily misunderstood by others.” She was suppressing the anger that was burning within herself. It was obvious to her that Matthias was just toying with her. Who would have expected him to be so daring?

After getting up slowly, he made his way toward her. She couldn’t read what he was thinking from the look in his eyes. He then stopped right before her before bending down to her level to look into her eyes.

“What rights do you have to negotiate with me? Do you have anything you can offer me in return?” Tipping her chin up with his finger, he said brazenly. He hated the woman back then, and he still did now.

Turning her face to the side, she quickly slapped off his hand before pulling away to distance herself from him. A dangerous aura emanated from this man which made her feel uneasy. Honestly, she was beginning to regret her rash decision of going out with him alone.

“Why? Are you afraid? You used to be all the way up the social ladder. Who knew you would end up being afraid of a commoner like me now?” Matthias’ eyes were bloodshot and he looked like a demon.

“You still remember what happened in the past.” Heather stayed alert as she looked at him. She was worried that she would be on the short end of the stick if they were to get physical.

Though she was pretty agile, she heard that he had a black belt in Taekwondo. In other words, he was a tough competitor, so she was doubtful that she would be able to leave without hurting herself.

“That kind of humiliation isn’t something you just forget. You would remember it too if you were in my shoes.” Standing back up, he was now hovering above

her. With a huge figure standing right before her, she began to feel a little suffocated.

Just like that, the two of them remained their stance without budging. After a while, he said calmly, "Don't worry, I won't do anything to you. You're not my target." Thereafter, he turned around with his back facing her. He simply wanted to scare her a little as he wouldn't go too far for Myra's sake.

"Your target is the Hart Family," she said in response. Heather wasn't one to fight the battle unprepared.

Back when she bumped into Matthias in school, she ran a detailed check on him. Even some days ago, she was still collecting information about him as she didn't buy his business expansion reason for his arrival in Bradford City.

"It's better that you women know less." He then came before her again in a swift movement. Undeniably, he had underestimated her. He didn't expect that she would sense that something was off, which was bad news to him.

Straightening up, she looked up at him before saying, "I suppose I do have the right to negotiate with you now, don't I?" She had to show what she was capable of to be able to win the negotiation.

"Interesting." His voice turned hoarse and the light in his eyes began to waver.

At this moment, he halted the conversation there. "If you're truly sincere, why don't we talk about it somewhere else?"

"My pleasure." With her fist tightly clenched, Heather made a mental note to tread very carefully. After all, she was facing a person who had the potential of threatening her.

After that, they moved over to the balcony of his villa. From the moment she stepped into his house, she felt very uneasy. After all, she had never been to a man's house alone prior to this.

Having noticed her uneasiness, he felt like playing with her. "I heard that you're a rare genius in the Langston Family, and also an untamable virgin." He made sure to emphasize the last word.

Upon hearing that, her face fell. Her rationality was the only thing holding her back from fighting with him then and there.

“Matt, you’ve always been running your mouth ever since you were young,” Heather sneered. He was too simply too daring! If he kept doing this, she would be forced into a corner later on and there would be no space for her to negotiate.

“I learnt it from you.” A smirk was apparent on the corner of his lips as he stared at her like a predator eyeing its prey, irking her to no end.

“Is that it? Unlike you who have no manners, I’ve always been praised for respecting the old and treating the young kindly.” Shooting a smile back at him, she was determined to not let him bully her.

“Let’s cut the crap and get to business,” Matthias said coldly as his face suddenly turned stoic.

The night was still young, but she wished to settle this matter as soon as possible too. It would be a nightmare if it dragged out any longer than necessary.

“What do you want me to do?” Taking the lead, Matthias put his question forward.

“It’s simple. Don’t get involved in any matters related to Stark Group, and let Myra know that I am the one who made you give up on that.” Leaning against the chair, she crossed her leg as she spoke. It was as if she was not the same person as the one who went by a wide range of etiquettes.

“That’s interesting. You’re even involving Myra in your schemes now. Isn’t she the person that you want to protect?” He made a scornful look as he asked that question. He remembered very clearly that Heather was the one who asked him to stay away, saying that she wanted to protect Myra from the bad people.

“Well, we’ve all grown up and things are different now as there are dire circumstances. Moreover, this matter will benefit all three of us and it will not cause any harm to her.” Heather tried to defend herself, unwilling to admit that she was wrong.

At once, his smirk grew more devilish. He recalled how stubborn he was back when he was young. Back then, he was weak and couldn’t beat Heather. There was a long period of time that he took her as his target, hoping to surpass her one day.

“That’s called manipulation. You can’t sugarcoat it. Do you recall just how many times you have manipulated her?” Shifting his gaze toward her with discontentment, he thought that only someone like Myra would bear with Heather who kept controlling Myra’s life in the name of protecting Myra.

“Shut up.” That pricked Heather’s weak spot at once. Her intentions toward Myra had always been sincere, and she had always treated Myra like her own sister. She had never tried to manipulate Myra.

“Are you getting mad?” Matthias continued to aggravate her. He did plan to agree on her proposal, but he wasn’t going to let her off so easily. After all, he had to let her pay back a little as revenge.

“You’re evil and manipulative, but I’m afraid the only person you can fool is Myra. Do you really see her as your good friend? Do you truly see her as an equal?” Continuing to bombard her with his questions, he was eager to see her break down.

Upon hearing his words, her heart sank deeper and deeper. All these years, she still couldn’t quite grasp what she felt toward Myra. In the beginning, she was just surprised that someone had taken the initiative to befriend her. Myra was always unattracted by fame or benefits. Such a dumb person like Myra had let Heather experience genuinity.

After that, Heather was hooked by the little warmth she got from their friendship. Despite everyone thinking that Myra had been on the receiving end as Heather had been taking care of her, Heather did enjoy how she had Myra’s full trust and friendship.

“I didn’t. I just don’t know how to express my feelings. I’m just scared.” At this moment, Heather couldn’t help herself and mumbled. Just as those words left her tongue, she regretted it. She couldn’t believe that she had just revealed her weak side in front of Matthias.

“You don’t have to explain it to me. One day, Myra will see through you. We’ve all grown up, and things are no longer as simple as they were. People may not be as gullible as they used to be. Good luck to you on that.” Matthias commented briefly as if he had predicted a sad ending for Heather.

“Stop trying to fool me! Do you think I will admit that I’m wrong just like that? I, Heather Langston, am not wrong,” she huffed angrily. His words had pierced right into her heart, and it hurt.

“Ha-ha! I can’t believe that you exposed your most honest self in a book. It seems like it’s true that saying things like these can easily break down your walls of defense.” He then started to laugh uncontrollably, joyful that his effort of going through her book, the In-depth Analysis, did not go to waste.

“You read my book?” She was taken by surprise. How could she have forgotten that he surely would have looked into her as she was looking into him.

Obviously, she could no longer underestimate him. Hence, she quickly recollected her emotions. She felt off today. How can I get on the brink of an emotional breakdown because of Matthias so easily?

Her first thought was that he might have added something to her drink. Even though some people have built up their defensive walls up high, things were different under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

At once, her head began to spin as she was slowly losing control of her own body. Looking at him in fear, she could not believe that he would stoop so low. She had truly underestimated him; he was scarier than she thought.

“I’m wondering what tomorrow’s headlines will be.” He then picked up Heather who was now completely blacked out.

Since she dared to scheme against him, she was practically asking for him to do something in return. Because of Myra, he hadn’t gone to find Heather to make her pay back. Who knew that Heather would send herself right to his doorstep?

It made him recall the dark period of time that he went through. It was a past that he could never forget about.

Heather was somehow responsible for what he had become. Hence, he took the chance to strike back as she had come to him herself.

Obviously, Matthias would not let her off so easily. He would let her have a taste of her own medicine. Nevertheless, that meant he was becoming more and more like her. Perhaps they were the same kind of people after all.

Otherwise, why was he feeling a little bad for her when he took a look at Heather, who was quietly lying in his arms? He must be feeling bad for a fellow similar person. Laughing to himself, he thought about how hard he had

tried to change himself through the years. Unexpectedly, he had ended up becoming the kind of person that he once hated the most.

“Heather, would you like to experience losing everyone close to you? No one’s life is forever smooth-sailing.” As he spoke, he left a devout kiss on her forehead. This was the woman who had changed his life!

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It was the next day. Chimes of the windbell hanging from the ceiling could be heard as rays of sunlight shone into the room. As the wind gently blew, strands of Heather’s hair danced in the wind. She even looked gorgeous when she was asleep. Lowering his head to take a look at his watch, Matthias began to contemplate whether he had overdosed her with drugs seeing that she hadn’t woken up yet.

He donned a neat suit that didn’t have a trace of wrinkle on it. He was gazing deeply at the woman who was still unconscious. Heather never thought that he would drug her yesterday, and Matthias only won because he had the element of surprise.

As if on cue, she started to move. It was evident that she was suffering from a bad migraine as she woke up. Obviously, the drug had a strong effect. Rubbing her temples, she felt like her body had been hit by a truck.

Waking up feeling extremely groggy, the first thing she saw was Matthias’ unwavering gaze at herself. Out of instinct, she calmly took a look at her clothes. Watching her action, he couldn’t help but put on a coy smile.

“Don’t worry, I’m not sexually attracted to you,” he casually commented. As a girl, it was normal for her to be more alert about being sexually assaulted anyway.

Trying hard to suppress the anger within, she glared at him with all the energy she could muster. There was definitely hatred in her eyes.

“Why did you drug me?” she asked it loud and clear. As someone who had never fallen into such a trip prior this, Matthias had taught her a lesson this time.

Disregarding her question, he simply walked over to the window and pulled the blinds open before turning back to face her. The look on his face seemed like he was waiting for drama to ensue.

The sudden exposure to sunlight was almost blinding. Covering her eyes, she felt even worse with the sudden brightness on top of her bad headache.

Meanwhile, he started to unbutton his suit while walking toward her. "Since the weather's so good, we should do something good for our health."

At once, she got off the bed and stood in a defensive stance. However, that only lasted for a second because the next thing she registered was that her body was too weak. It seemed that the drug's effects hadn't completely worn off.

"It wasn't easy to make you stay overnight at my place." At that moment, he was only left with his shirt on. Shooting her a smirk, he successfully made her feel alarmed.

"What are you trying to do?" she asked, thinking that it was a futile effort to guess his motive.

"The entertainment news today is pretty interesting," he said as he began to unbutton his shirt from the uppermost button. When she heard that, her eyelid twitched on its own accord.

Looking at him with extreme alertness, she tried to look for her cell phone as she had a bad feeling.

"Sorry, your phone was too noisy earlier so I turned it off." Having said that, he fished out her phone from his pocket, irking Heather to no end.

She then walked right up to him, attempting to snatch back her phone from his hands. Seeing her in such a weak state, he could not help but smirk. After all, it was his first time witnessing her weak moment.

"You want your phone? Here." He simply offered her the phone.

Just as Heather was about to move further away from him after retrieving her phone, she was pulled into his embrace before she could go. Due to the weakness she was experiencing, she had no strength to fight him. What did he drug me with?! How can it be so strong?

Hence, she was now a limp person who couldn't fight back for her own life. Just the thought of it angered her a lot as she could only take what he was about to do to her. How did she end up here?

When she attended the meeting yesterday, she had already sensed that something about him felt odd. However, she did not think that he would stoop so low as she only assumed that they would at least have a civilized talk before fighting each other. It was totally unexpected that he would trick her this way.

Just then, Heather tossed her phone away in annoyance as she failed to turn it on after trying multiple times. Looking at how enraged she was getting, Matthias leaned close to her ear and said in a hushed voice, "It looks like your phone's battery is flat."

That served as a reminder that she was still stuck in his arms, and she was about to blow a fuse because of that. At this moment, she was only left with one way to escape the restraint: play it smart.

"Matthias, let go of me." She was trying her best to stay calm despite feeling all the rage within her.

"You must hate me a lot right now." He guffawed as he let his hands roam all over her body.

"Are you taking revenge on me?" she asked coldly. It seemed that he still hadn't gotten over what happened in the past, so he was using such a despicable way to take revenge on her.

Loosening his grip on Heather, his cold voice could be heard coming from above her. "Do you know that Myra doesn't remember me at all?" The chagrin in his tone was hard to miss. Whenever he recalled that not only did Myra forget their promise, but him altogether, he was bitter.

"What has this got to do with me?" She glared at him at once. Indeed, he hated her because of Myra.

All of a sudden, he pushed her onto the bed. Knowing that she couldn't fight him in her current state, she didn't protest much as she simply stared at him with hatred-filled eyes.

“Don’t look at me like that. Do you know who this stare reminds me of?” After tipping up her chin, he tightened his grip on it. Locking eyes with her, all he was thinking of was his urge to gouge out those beautiful eyes.

“Hmph!” Heather scoffed and shot him a disdainful look before saying, “You’re still suffering from the lack of self-esteem.” Initially, she thought that he was different from the person he was before, but it seemed that he had yet to escape his mental fetters.

“Shut up! Do you really think you’re still the queen who’s all high and mighty?” He landed a hard punch on the space next to her ear, and she could even hear the swishing sound of the air from his swift action.

“Matt, I really feel sorry for you.” She reached out to caress his face, thinking about just how much of filth was hidden behind such a good-looking face,

“Shut your trap! I will make you pay for what you did,” he yelled. Immediately, he turned his face to the side, shaking off her touch that he hated so much.

“I was young and immature back then. I didn’t know that it would leave such a big impact on you. I apologize for what I did.” Giving him a sincere look, she finally admitted her wrongdoings a few years back. Back then, he was a soft-hearted person unlike now.

“Do you seriously think you can solve everything with an apology?” He sneered as he side-eyed her. How could that be possible? He would only be content to see her in the state of despair that he had been in.

“I’m sorry. I’m genuinely apologizing. I was too arrogant and presumptuous back then. It was all my fault. Will you please forgive me?” She took the initiative to show inferiority toward Matthias as she was not the self-centered person that she was a few years back. She honestly didn’t want him to be her nemesis.

“And now you’re even asking for my forgiveness. How hilarious! What right do you have to ask for my forgiveness? I will never forgive you!” He raged upon hearing that. Initially, he thought that he would be able to control his emotions, but he still failed to do so when Heather was right in front of him.

“What do you want then?” Looking at him, she knew that it was inevitable to pay back for her mistakes. It was only logical that way after all.

“What I want is simply for you to have a taste of the depths of despair that you condemned me into.” The corner of his lips curled up as he smiled coyly. He then gave her a soft pat on her cheek before leaving a kiss on it.

Hearing that, she looked at him, puzzled as ever. She was oblivious of the despair that she brought upon him back then. What would that feel like?

“I guess you really hate me to the bones,” she said in a casual tone as things were not salvageable at that point anyway. She was willing to pay back if that was what Matthias wanted.

“Do you know how I pulled through all these years? I was initially the most insignificant child in the Lincoln Family, and now I’ve worked my way up to be the top. I’ve sacrificed a lot.” His tone was laced with malice. He didn’t want all these in the beginning either; he just wanted to be a normal person, grow up in peace and be together with someone he liked for the rest of his life.

Heather was the one who had shattered his simple dream into pieces. If she had not stood in the way, he wouldn’t have missed out on Myra, and she would have been married to him now.

Whenever he recalled the fact that Myra was about to be married to another man and was even bearing his baby, it pained him. It pained him beyond words. It was all because of Heather. She might not know how big of a turmoil that she had caused in his life, and yet he had already revived after going through all the sufferings.

“Isn’t it pretty good now? With your weak personality back then, you never would have become the person with the most power in the Lincoln Family today. Now, you have both the wealth and power, alongside the control over the whole Lincoln Family; you’ve become a successful person. That’s a good thing.” She couldn’t see what was so wrong about the current situation. Was it bad to be successful?

“In your eyes, all you see is success. A self-centered person like you wouldn’t know anything about feelings and relationships. You know it yourself that you’ve always been selfish in your friendship with Myra.” As he spoke, he closed the distance between them, making Heather feel a little suffocated.

“What is wrong with being successful? Do you know how many people strive to be successful? The percentile of successful people is so low after all. How

is it bad to be one of the rare successful people?" She raised her voice to rebuke. Faithful to her theory, she did not want to let him step all over her.

"Very well, you cold-blooded woman. You're just so pathetic. You can stay lonely till death then!" With that, he ripped off the pajamas she was wearing.

At once, her face fell. She gave him a cold, stern look as she warned, "Don't touch my clothes." She was still trying to hold her stance. Even though she was physically incapable of resisting at the moment, it didn't mean that she would let him do as he wished.

"So you do have fears too." Elevating his body with his arm as support, he peered down at her. His eyes were filled with complacency at this moment.

"Are you seriously resorting to bullying a woman with such a dirty trick?" She looked at him with discrimination. In fact, she truly hated men who acted so vulgarly toward a woman. No true man would use their physical advantage to repress a woman.

"What do you want me to do to you then?" He brought his lips close to her ears as he said sotto voce. It made her feel uncomfortable as she didn't have similar prior experience.

Due to the close proximity, she caught the scent from his body. At this moment, Heather's mind was boggled. The androgen emanating off him was making her heart race uncontrollably.

"I can pay back however you want. Fight me fair and square; you shouldn't play dirty like this. It'll only make me look down on you." Her eyes gleamed as she looked at him. She believed that he still had regards for his dignity as a man.

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Matthias's frantic and fearful laughter echoed around the whole room. Heather never truly knew Matthias because ordinary provocation methods were ineffective on him.

"It's been many years, but you haven't made any progress at all." Matthias looked at Heather contemptuously. Over the years, Matthias had improved significantly. Compared to him, Heather seemed to have not changed much.

It was the first time she was looked down at by someone. Back when Heather met Matthias at his speech, she had a premonition that she would meet him again. Back then, she already noticed Matthias's change, but at that instant, she felt his threatening aura even more deeply.

"You thought that I would care about what you think, and you've despised me ever since you were young." As Matthias spoke, he poked Heather's chest, where her heart was. I really want to open up Heather's heart and see what's inside.

Heather directly slapped Matthias's hand away and glared at him angrily. His actions had provoked her.

"You should learn to be respectful." Even though Heather didn't have much strength, she wouldn't allow Matthias to continue to humiliate her.

"Since when have you respected me?" Matthias pressed his body against Heather's to stop her from moving. Their two bodies stuck close to each other.

Heather raised her arm to slap Matthias on the face, but Matthias quickly grabbed her arm and stopped her. "You should've thought about the difference in our strengths before you decided to attack."

As soon as he finished speaking, he grabbed Heather's other hand to stop her from having any chance to attack him again.

"Let go of me," Heather hissed coldly. This is insulting. She glared at him furiously, and her eyes were filled with hatred.

"That's the gaze that I remember. For some reason, you have had a strong hatred toward me since the first time we met," Matthias said upsettingly. When Myra was young, she was Heather's most loyal follower. Heather interfered with Myra's relationship with Matthias and caused Matthias to have many regrets.

"Of course I hate you." Heather glared at him and said, "Myra is my only friend and the only light in my life. Back then, I didn't want anyone to take her away from me, but ever since you appeared, all Myra talked about was you." Back then, Matthias wasn't the only one who was hurt. When Heather was young, she desired to have love and friendship all to herself, and she was not willing to share them with others.

“Myra was very excited to introduce you to me, but I hated you. I hated your face that looked more feminine than a woman and your cowardly character. I still can’t figure out why Myra liked someone like you,” Heather said in disdain. She had a deep hatred toward Matthias since the moment she saw him; he had an aura that disgusted her.

Some people were destined to hate each other. No matter the young innocent-looking version of Matthias, or the grown-up vicious version of Matthias, Heather hated him to the core.

“Good. I have the same feelings toward you. I have hated you ever since I first saw you, and the kind of hatred I have toward you comes from the bottom of my heart,” Matthias replied seriously. Back when he was young, he wanted to please Myra, so he deliberately took the initiative to be friends with Heather. However, he was unexpectedly humiliated by her. From then on, he had an indelible hatred for Heather.

“I will remember the humiliation I suffered today. If you are capable, you should kill me right now. Otherwise, I promise that I will take revenge.” Heather glared at Matthias angrily. I will make sure he pays for what he has done to me.

“We live in a society ruled by law and killing is against the law. As a good citizen, I will never do anything illegal.” Matthias continued to provoke Heather. Although he hated her, he didn’t want to end her life. All he wanted was to humiliate her the same way she humiliated him in the past.

“You still have feelings for Myra and that is your weakness. Matthias, it’s best that you don’t provoke me. Otherwise, the two of us will get hurt.” The corners of Heather’s lips curled into a smug grin. She had used the same method in the past to defeat Matthias.

“I’m no longer the same person I once was, so your little tricks are completely useless,” Matthias replied disapprovingly. I was defeated by Heather back then because I wasn’t strong enough, but now that I have gotten stronger, I will no longer give in to this woman.

“Just wait and see. You will never win Myra’s heart because the man she loves is Tony, and her best friend is me. Meanwhile, you are just someone who only appeared shortly in her life. She doesn’t even remember you. You’ve lost the battle before it even started.” As Heather thought about Matthias’

threat, she decided to mention Myra. Does he really think that I'm a powerless woman who can't fight back?

Hearing that, Matthias pulled away from Heather, let go of his grip on her arms, strode toward the window, and looked out of the window. Good. Everything is going according to plan.

Matthias closed the curtains and the room instantly went dark. Heather was softly massaging her wrists that had turned red from Matthias' strong grip. It hurts. How much does he hate me? He doesn't show any pity toward me at all.

"If you like someone, you will wish that person happiness. You thought that I would steal Myra away from Tony," Matthias said dismissively. That's the difference between you and me. In Heather's eyes, if you like someone, you should fight for him and steal him away. However, all I want is to protect the ones I love. Heather still doesn't understand the true meaning of love.

"Sooner or later, you will hurt Myra. What you are doing now will also hurt her feelings." Heather glared at Matthias coldly. I will not be easily moved by his statements no matter how noble they sound because his actions tell me otherwise.

Matthias grabbed his clothes from the side of the bed and put them on one by one.

I've done what I planned to do. It's time to end this act. There is no need for me to continue pretending.

"I will never hurt Myra. Sometimes, you shouldn't believe in what you see," Matthias muttered as he tugged on the collar of his shirt elegantly. Since when has this man become so noble?

"Bullsh*t. If you didn't interfere with Stark Group's affairs, Myra would've taken over Stark Group long ago. What are your motives for helping Cameron?" Heather questioned Matthias. Why did Matthias go against Myra if he has feelings for her?

"It was my fault for not handling it well. I'll explain it to Myra," Matthias said with a smile. His smile seemed mysterious, and Heather couldn't figure out what he was thinking.

“You can leave now.” Matthias glanced at Heather and said. The show is over so there is no need to force her to stay. Furthermore, I’m in a hurry to head back to the company for a board meeting. I don’t have time to waste on her.

Upon hearing that, Heather looked at Matthias strangely. Matthias is acting weird. Before this, he did everything he could to stop me from leaving, but now, he is letting me go easily.

Filled with doubt, Heather sized up Matthias vigilantly. Matthias probably didn’t keep me here to have sex with me, and nothing happened between us last night. After all, I’m still a virgin, so I would know if we had sex.

“Why are you looking at me like that? If you like my bedroom, you can stay here a little longer.” Matthias leaned over and raised Heather’s chin frivolously.

“F*ck off!” Heather was enraged and furious at Matthias’ frivolous actions.

“You’re a feisty one,” Matthias roared with laughter and said. To him, provoking Heather was enjoyable.

“Give me my clothes.” Heather looked at the torn-up pajamas she was wearing that were barely covering her body.

However, Matthias didn’t reply to her. Instead, he went straight to the closet and opened it. When Heather saw that her clothes were hanging in the closet, she instantly ran over.

“Don’t hang my clothes next to yours. It’s disgusting,” Heather said as she hurriedly pulled her clothes off the hanger. Her clothes smelled like Matthias’ clothes now. If she had other things to wear, she would’ve thrown away those clothes.

Watching Heather’s childish reaction, Matthias couldn’t help but chuckle. Heather has gotten more childish since the last time I saw her. It’s a little adorable.

“I have a board meeting later, and I will talk about Stark Group. If you’re interested, you’re welcome to join me.” Matthias politely invited Heather with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

Heather looked at him doubtfully, wondering if she should join him. Although she really wanted to attend the meeting, she had no relationship with Matthias and was afraid that it would start rumors.

“What’s the matter? Are you afraid?” Matthias asked provokingly with a contemptuous smile on his face.

Heather snorted. He’s provoking me to lure me to attend the board meeting. Logically, I shouldn’t fall for his tricks because there is definitely something up his sleeves. However, I don’t want to be looked down upon... I’ll attend the meeting. After all, what do I have to lose?

At that time, Heather didn’t give it much thought, but she came to regret it later. She never thought that Matthias would do something so deceptive. He did it even at the expense of himself.

“Since you have invited me, I naturally accept your invitation. Director Locke, I hope you remember what you promised me yesterday.” Heather smiled softly at Matthias. She was slowly recovering to be herself again.

“I hope you remember your promise to me last night too.” Matthias stared straight into Heather’s eyes as he spoke, trying to figure out what was in her mind.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone that the reason you are in Bradford City is to target the Hart Family,” Heather replied casually with a slightly threatening tone.

“Watch your mouth.” Matthias glared at her upsettingly. This woman refuses to suffer any loss.

“Your goals are none of my business, but I hope that your feelings toward Myra are true. Tony is the person that Myra loves the most. If you do something to him...” Heather ended her sentence at the most important part and glanced at Matthias meaningfully. In short, Myra will make your life a living hell.

Since Matthias’ goal is the Hart Family, sooner or later, he will definitely do something hurtful toward Myra. When the time comes, I will jump on the opportunity and make sure that Matthias never gets on Myra’s good side.

Now that Matthias had provoked Heather, she would never let him go easily. Heather liked to attack her enemies at their weakest. Even though she was sitting in Matthias' car, she was thinking about ways to deal with him, and she thought about working with Hart Group to deal with Locke Group.

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When the car rolled to a stop outside Skylark Tower, Matthias stepped out of the vehicle and chivalrously opened the door for Heather. It was as though he had become an entirely different person since leaving the house.

"I suppose you have some twisted plan in the works, Director Locke, seeing as you're putting in this much effort," she pointed out darkly. The alarm bells went off in her head and she had a feeling that something was wrong, but she knew it was too late for her to turn around and make a run for it.

"Afraid of wicked schemes?" He smirked in amusement and there was an intimate edge to his gestures.

"Better to be safe than sorry, right? I'd rather have my guard up around you," Heather answered curtly, though she berated herself for being so impulsive earlier; it made it harder for her to get off her high horse.

Matthias offered her his arm, silently indicating for her to take it. She shot him a quizzical look and muttered, "Surely there's no need for us to put up such an act?"

It was as if she could smell a scheme lurking around the corner. Biting down on her lip, she gave him a wary look and her skin prickled at his odd lack of respect for personal boundaries.

"I've told the board that I will be bringing an important guest with me today, so we have to look the part." He arched a brow at her. This was the only chance for him to lure her into a perfect set-up and if he didn't deal her a harsh blow this time, it would only be harder for him to do so in the future.

Much to his surprise, the odds were in his favor this round, but he would not always be so lucky as to have the upper hand every time. Knowing Heather, she would not be tricked so easily the next time.

Nonetheless, Matthias was sure that after today, she would not be able to clear things up between the both of them. He beamed at the thought of this.

Now that he had successfully blurred the lines between himself and Heather, his next run-in with Myra would not be as awkward as the last; he found himself still pining for the latter despite all the time that had passed.

For as long as Tony had not officially been declared as the one for her, Matthias would not give up on his feelings for Myra. He would always try to come up with ways to get closer to her.

Presently, Heather took his proffered arm with heavy reluctance. She looked formal in her cocktail dress, and those who didn't know better would assume she was going to attend a dinner party.

She was still holding onto his arm upon their arrival at the 28th floor of the building and their presence turned heads. Everyone regarded them with curiosity and where the women were jealous of Heather, the men were envious of Matthias. There were also those who were trying to assess their dynamics.

Heather was indifferent as she allowed their appraisal of her, having been used to such attention since young. Her pretty eyes seemed to fall upon everyone and yet, it was as if she was not really looking at anyone in particular at all. She was an enigma, indeed.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting. We were held up in traffic," Matthias explained politely. He might be the one who was holding the reins in the Locke Group but his position as head of the company was a precarious one. He needed to fortify his authority with the support of the elders in the board, hence his courteous front when addressing them in the company.

A brief moment later, his assistant, Nikolai, stepped forward and informed him dutifully, "Everything is ready, Director Locke. The meeting may begin now." Heather appraised the assistant with interest. He was a young man with delicate features and he had a rather feminine air about him.

Who knew Matthias would have such an eccentric taste? She subtly raised her brows as her gaze darted over to the man next to her. I used to mock him for his lack of masculinity back in the day.

She found it amusing how he had managed to acquire an assistant who looked every bit the archetypal pretty boy, if not prettier. A small laugh echoed in the back of her mind. Looks like those days of relentless teasing have left him quite traumatized.

Meanwhile, Nikolai was eyeing her thoughtfully. He had never seen a woman as charming and attractive as her. He felt his face grow hot and wondered if this was love at first sight.

He stiffened at this thought. He didn't think he would fall for someone who could very well be Director Locke's girlfriend. A pang of sorrow seized him, dousing out the initial spark he had felt for her. What was I thinking? A woman who shines as brightly as her would never spare me a second glance.

While Nikolai shrunk back into his shell, he failed to notice that Heather's gaze was still lingering upon him. The more she looked at him, the more he reminded her of a younger Matthias.

She had only just taken her seat at the table when she leaned close to Matthias and asked, "What's your assistant's name?" She had spent a better part of her adulthood abroad, where she had encountered more than her fair share of men. Now, she began to find that pretty boys made for good eye-candy as well, and they boasted a rather refreshing appeal too.

"Nikolai Archibald," Matthias answered as he threw her a puzzled look. He was surprised that she would even take notice of his assistant in the first place.

While this was happening, the board members were casting curious looks at them, zooming in on the slightest of their interactions. Matthias had always been distant and perfunctory—it was rare to see him being so intimate with a woman in public, much less deliberately arrange for her to be seated next to him.

The blurred lines between them piqued everybody's interest. Heather was an elusive character after all, and the board members were all trying to guess who she might be. Her unexplained presence was like a pebble thrown into a pond, creating a ripple effect.

Once in a while, Nikolai would sneak glances at Heather from where he stood next to Matthias. However, he did not expect her to look up at that moment and when their eyes met, she flashed him a smile and nodded at him in acknowledgement.

He tore his gaze away as blood rushed to his face, and Heather clapped her hand over her mouth as she sputtered at the sight of this, thoroughly entertained by his shy demeanor. She couldn't remember the last time she

had seen a boy so pure and so easily flustered. She felt like she was transported back to the simple, puppy-love days in high school. He's really good looking, she admitted to herself.

Matthias used to be like that—soft-spoken and hesitant. Indeed, he had been pure and innocent back in those days and she regretted how horribly she had treated him. She wondered if things would turn out differently if she had shown him just a bit of kindness then.

Is winning that important? Her heart clenched as she asked herself that question, but she quickly repressed the guilt that rose within her. Matthias' cunning ways were honed out of resentment and it probably brought out the best in him, however twisted he might be.

Upon seeing how strategic he was being, she couldn't help the fascination she had for him. As it turned out, men who took their work seriously were irresistibly charming.

As Heather stared at Matthias' fine-looking side profile, she marveled at how much he had changed. He had filled out his frame and was no longer the delicate boy he used to be.

While he kept his extraordinary good looks, there was a masculine edge in the way he carried himself that had not been there before. How did he even give himself such a makeover?

The image of his bare torso flashed in her mind. She thought about his defined muscles, his chiseled abs and strong pectorals, as well as the deep grooves that cut above his hips. He clearly had muscle coiling beneath his lean, towering build.

There was nothing flawed about his looks or his physique. In fact, if they weren't such rivals, she might even develop a crush on him.

On the other hand, their rivalry was made more exciting now that she realized how cunning he could be. It was as if she had finally met her match and the stronger he was, the more driven she became. He made for a very worthy opponent, indeed.

Oblivious to Nikolai's lovesick gaze, Heather stared at Matthias while the latter delivered his speech. He sounded like a charismatic leader, his voice steady and carrying.

It seemed as if he had retained the same charisma from his public speaking days. Admittedly, he was a man with brilliant achievements and his accomplishments alone were enough to intimidate her.

“Nikolai,” Matthias abruptly called out, displeased at how absentminded the younger man was.

He followed Nikolai’s gaze and when he saw that the latter was sneaking looks at Heather, he frowned. This is not a good sign, he thought to himself as he assessed the sight before him.

There was no telling how his plans would be affected if Nikolai were to develop actual feelings for Heather. As far as Matthias was concerned, Nikolai was not merely an assistant to him—he was family.

No one else in the company knew that Matthias and Nikolai were cousins. They carried themselves differently after all, so it was only natural that no one would think of them as sharing any family relations.

Their mothers were sisters and they both took after their mothers’ fine looks. There was an old saying that men who took after their mothers had effeminate tendencies, but equally true was the proverb that said the face was the index of one’s mind. As Matthias’ mindset and temperament changed over the years, he outgrew his pretty looks and now, one might describe his features as ‘handsome’ as opposed to ‘delicate’.

Nikolai, on the other hand, had grown up under Matthias’ care. There were times when he could not stand up for himself and much like how the latter had been back in the day, he lacked a firm sense of self-assurance.

Seeing how similar Nikolai was to his old self prompted Matthias to take him in as an assistant. Perhaps he had done so because Nikolai was a mirror of his past, and this was his way of keeping the boy’s naïvety from being tarnished by the brutalities of this world.

Matthias grew sour at this thought. If someone had been there to shield and care for him the same way he did Nikolai, he might not have turned out this way and he might not be riddled with such resentment.

However, he was no longer the boy who could be easily contented. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had laughed without a care. There was a void in him now that could not be filled with all the riches in the world.

Presently, Heather's gaze flickered over to Nikolai, and she had the feeling that there was a special relationship between him and Matthias that went beyond that of a subordinate and a director.

She did not miss the patience in Matthias' voice when he addressed Nikolai. He did not sound as though he treated the latter as a subordinate—rather, he spoke to him the same way a parent would a child.

This only succeeded in making Heather more curious. If there truly existed a special relationship between them, then Nikolai could be the breakthrough that she had been looking for.

Previously, Matthias had made it seem as though he did not care about anyone, but now might be the time she turned the tables on him. Let's just see how much he cares, she thought deviously. It was one thing to admire him but entirely another to plot against him, and it would require her to suppress whatever fondness she might have developed for him.

"I've called for a board meeting today to go over something important," Matthias said, finally starting to get to the point after he had spent the first part of the meeting talking about company matters.

Heather snapped out of her thoughts when she heard this and she shot him a nervous look. She knew that the matter regarding the Stark Group was an important one, and she would like to see how he was going to bring it up to the board.

"It hasn't been that long since the Locke Group has set foot in Bradford City. Previously, we have been actively acquiring shares from the Stark Group and entered into a partnership with Cameron," he began, giving a recap on how the company had come to work together with the Stark Group.

Then, he wasted no time in delivering his point. "However, in light of the recent downfall in the value of their shares, I am of the opinion that the Stark Group is no longer worthy of our acquisition. As such, I would like to hear from all of you today on how we should deal with this matter." Having said this, he turned and gave Heather a meaningful look, as though silently telling her that he was keeping his word.

The board burst into an uproar after hearing what he had said. After all, Matthias had been relentless in his efforts to convince them to give the green

light on acquiring shares under the Stark Group, and he had been the one to facilitate the partnership with Cameron as well.

And now, he was standing before them, claiming to have changed his mind. The board members began to chatter among themselves, obviously displeased by his fickle behavior. Heather was impassive as she watched the discord happen before her. I can't wait to see how he is going to resolve this situation, she thought to herself and she grew delighted at his predicament.

Standing before Love Chapter 418

A hush descended upon the room and the air grew thick around them. It was surprising that Matthias could hold his ground despite the immense pressure that seemed to have come from everyone else's disapproval of his suggestion.

Seeing as this had nothing to do with her, Heather sat silently off to one side, a placid smile playing about her lips. Matthias, on the other hand, gazed at her with dark eyes. He was likely thinking of ways to throw her under the bus, but others might perceive the expression on his face as one of endearment.

The stifling silence in the room went on for what felt like forever and when Matthias saw that none of the board members had anything to say, he continued, "Do any one of you know who this lady next to me happens to be?" His question made everyone fix their gaze on Heather, making her shoot him a deadly glare.

Why does he always have to cause a distraction? She bristled at the sudden attention that was cast upon her but she wasn't one to be perturbed by a situation like this. Having regained her composure just as quickly, she ignored the collective appraisal from the board members and maintained a nonchalant front.

It wasn't until after the board's interest was sufficiently piqued that someone responded to the question. Heather was taken aback by this because as it turned out, Matthias did not seem to command that much authority in the Locke Group.

Her lips curled into a thoughtful smile as she took in the board members' grim expressions and doubtful remarks—it seemed as if Matthias was not as formidable or esteemed as the rumors made him out to be. She was amused by how these board members were treating him with something close to

disrespect, even though he was supposedly the youngest person to ever become director of the Locke Group.

Now that I've found out just how much power he actually holds over the rest of the company, he probably hates himself for dragging me along to this board meeting in the first place, Heather thought to herself, extremely pleased to see that he wasn't faring well before the board.

In all honesty, if Matthias truly did live up to the rumors in terms of his capabilities, she would need to start worrying about how she was going to take him down. The Locke Group was a titan in the business industry with a long history, after all. In contrast, she had yet to set up her own enterprise, and she knew it was unlikely for her to ever wield command over the Langston Group.

Heather bristled at the thought of her family business. There was no doubt that the torch would be passed down to her eldest brother, Blake, despite his philandering ways.

Needless to say, she did not hold him in high regard. She might not be a feminist but she supported women's rights to some extent. As such, she found her brother's womanizing ways to be derogatory and repulsive, and was affronted by how easily he could move on from one woman to another.

Hunter, on the other hand, was the second-eldest sibling and while he was a devoted romantic, he was a hopeless one nonetheless. Unfortunately, he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed and he would most probably end up with a cushy, unimportant job that made little to no substantial contribution to the business.

Given how problematic both her brothers were, Heather found herself fretting over the future of the Langston Group. She was caught in the misogynistic web of her family's old-fashioned mindset—as far as they were concerned, a daughter of theirs would only serve to be married off someday.

Realizing that the chances of her taking over the company were slim to none, she decided to abandon the thought of succeeding the Langston Group and grew eager to set up her own enterprise. That way, no one could tell her how to run her business and she could do whatever she liked.

Startled by how her thoughts had snowballed within such a short span of time, she quickly snapped out of her reverie, just in time to hear Matthias introducing her to the board.

“This is the beloved daughter of the Langston Family and she also happens to be Chairman Langston’s favorite granddaughter,” he said with a knowing smile. Upon hearing that, the board members were shocked to hear this and gaped at Heather in disbelief.

She had no idea what Matthias was planning to do by making such a bold declaration, but she maintained a courteous smile nonetheless as she played along, wanting to see just where he was going with this.

“I think we can all agree that a well-established behemoth such as the Langston Group is far more valuable than the Stark Group,” Matthias added as he glanced at her meaningfully. She was suddenly overcome with the feeling that she had been roped into some twisted game.

The looks on the board members’ faces were making her squeamish. Having heard how Matthias had described her family business, Heather felt the urge to disagree with him. To her, the Langston Group was not as influential as he thought. Surely a titan like the Locke Group—otherwise known as one of the most elite corporations in the country—would not need to curry favor with other businesses.

“I’ve been in talks with the Langston Group recently and we’re considering the prospects of a partnership,” he drawled in a thoughtful tone, sounding as though he wanted others to read more into the situation.

Upon hearing this, Heather turned to look at him with admiration. Though she had unknowingly become a pawn, she had to admit that this was an excellent maneuver on his part. She was impressed with how Matthias had successfully distracted the board from the matter of the Stark Group and lured them into paying more attention toward the idea of a partnership with the Langston Group instead.

Presently, the board members’ eyes lit up as they stared at her with what seemed like anticipation. She grew slightly self-conscious at this and wondered what the Locke Group was after. Are they trying to take over Bradford City? If they truly are planning to take over Bradford City, can they really avoid an eventual collaboration with or competition against the Hart Group? Heather pondered upon this and weighed all the potential outcomes.

At the end of the day, when it came to Bradford City, the Hart Group remained on top of the food chain. Furthermore, the Langston Group focused its business and operations on the market overseas.

After the meeting ended, Heather linked her arm through Matthias' and whispered into his ear, "You should thank me for not calling you out in front of all those people." There were no talks of partnership between him and the Langston Group and she was thoroughly amused by how he had so smoothly come up with that lie.

"It's only a matter of time before our companies form a partnership anyway," Matthias answered her easily as he cast her a sideways glance. In truth, he had been surprised at how well she played along with the lie he had spurned too.

"Our company focuses on the consumer market overseas; are you perhaps steering your business toward the same as well?" She inched closer to him and Nikolai's heart twisted at the sight of this. So this is what jealousy feels like, he thought glumly.

"Well, obviously I would need help from the Langston Group if I were to target the consumers abroad, but I want to take over the Bradford City market too," Matthias explained, channeling an air of infallibility.

"How ambitious of you! Are you sure you're not getting in over your head here?" A wicked look flashed in Heather's eyes and she couldn't wait to see how things would play out for him. She had grown numb to the drama of corporate rivalry, having been exposed to it from a young age.

He chuckled at her remark and said breezily, "You know how we business types are—we go where the money is." Truth was, she couldn't help but agree with this.

Then, he swiftly changed the subject and offered, "Anyway, I should thank you properly for your help today. I'll buy you lunch; how does Japanese sound?" He hadn't realized how hungry he was until he had brought up lunch, and it was only then he recalled that neither of them had eaten since that morning.

"I don't like Japanese. Let's go get pasta instead," Heather countered brightly. "Oh—and get your assistant to come along too." She wanted Nikolai to come along, because lunch was an open gambit for her to figure out the dynamics between these two men.

“You seem interested in my assistant,” Matthias grumbled in a displeased tone. Deep down, he didn’t want her to get too close to Nikolai.

“Is there anything wrong with that? You were the one who said you wanted to thank me, and I’m only asking for this small favor.” Heather had made up her mind and she was adamant that Nikolai join them for lunch.

“It’s no problem at all. It’s just that I seem to recall you saying you hate pretty boys. I’m just worried that my assistant would...” He trailed off and eyed her meaningfully, expecting her to understand what he was implying.

Heather was perceptive and she threw him a wink as she mused, “Don’t worry. People change, after all. Whatever I used to hate happen to be some of my favorite things now.” That much was the truth.

The both of them were bantering in their own bubble, and it was as if their chemistry was evidence of some private joke shared only between them. Nikolai was presently marching ahead of them, walking quicker than he normally would as he wanted to save himself the heartache of seeing how close Matthias was with Heather.

“Please don’t tell me you’re actually interested in my assistant.” Matthias was only half-joking when he said this. He weighed the possibility of this happening but from what he knew, Heather would never fall for someone like Nikolai.

Conversely, Nikolai appeared to have actual feelings for her and Matthias worried for him. The rest of Nikolai’s days were as good as doomed if he were to have any romantic intentions for her. If only Matthias had known that she could be so alluring, he would have abandoned his plans to set her up in the first place, then she wouldn’t have met Nikolai. Alas, it was all too late.

The course of things had already taken place and it wasn’t as if he could march up to Nikolai and order him to give up on his feelings for Heather. Besides, there’s no conclusive proof that he likes her at all. If I were to approach him with such an outrageous demand, he might just hate me forever.

However, when Matthias noticed that Heather seemed really interested in Nikolai, he grew even more uneasy. If she truly had any romantic feelings for the man and decided to act on them, Matthias hated to think how things would

turn out should they ever get together as a couple. He shuddered as he muttered under his breath, "Cousin-in-law."

"What?" Heather looked at him quizzically as she could not hear his incoherent mumbling.

"Nothing. As you wish," he replied hastily, then turned to glance at Nikolai, who was already a distance away ahead. "Nikolai!" he called loudly.

Surprised that Matthias would call for him all of a sudden, Nikolai spun on his heels and met the former's gaze, but in doing so he inadvertently met Heather's appraising one as well. She flashed him a smile and he found himself drawn to her sparkling eyes.

"Let's have lunch together," Matthias said flatly. He didn't like the interaction between Nikolai and Heather, and he felt his heart twist with dark sentiment. He cast a grim look at the woman next to him, clearly unhappy with how she had eagerly initiated the idea of having lunch with Nikolai.

"Specifically, let's have pasta together," she quipped now, elaborating on what Matthias had said. He felt a twinge of jealousy at how friendly she sounded when she addressed the other man.

Upon hearing this, Nikolai pointed at himself. "Are you inviting me to lunch?" he murmured, feeling rather stunned as he didn't think that a goddess such as Heather would pay any attention to him.

Heather hummed in response and nodded her head solemnly. "You should come with us, though I don't know if you like pasta." There had been a time when she did not care for pasta as well but she had grown to like it over the years.

"I do," he replied, nodding his head earnestly. In fact, he didn't mind the food as long as he could be in Heather's company.

While watching their exchange, Matthias could tell that Nikolai really did have feelings for her. He saw how the latter's eyes had lit up when she spoke to him. There's no denying that he really likes her.

"Then you should definitely come with us!" Heather said cheerily. There was a coquettish edge to her voice that, for some reason, was non-existent during

the times she had spoken to Matthias. He grew sullen at this and wondered at the double-standard.

The jealousy that budded within him was making him irritable. He thought he would be more worried for Nikolai but as it turned out, he was more aggravated by Heather's display of affection for other men.

Meanwhile, Nikolai was blushing furiously. Finding him extremely adorable, Heather let go of Matthias and strode over to him, then took his hand as she dragged him toward the door. It was as if she was pulling a younger sibling along with her, and she liked the shy and unassuming way with which he carried himself.

Matthias watched this with wide eyes, feeling utterly incredulous. How can she hold his hand when she hasn't even held mine?

Infuriated by how brazen she was, Matthias trailed after them in thunderous silence. Nikolai, on the other hand, was so happy that he had to resist the urge to jump up and down, and he even began to feel nervous. Holding hands with her was something close to a biblical experience, and he could only imagine how glorious it would be if they were to move on to something more intimate than this.

"Come on, let's ditch Matthias," Heather teased childishly. She noted how smooth and supple Nikolai's skin was and she grew envious of him.

Matthias was outraged at the scene before him. He hadn't thought that she would have such siren-like qualities and he truly regretted ever letting the both of them meet in the first place. Now that things were getting out of hand, he was going to have a much harder time.

Standing before Love Chapter 419

On the way to the restaurant, Heather and Nikolai held hands and engaged in cheerful banter. Matthias, on the other hand, was sullen as he trudged along behind them. He felt as if he was caught in the middle and he could neither interject nor ignore them. It wasn't as though he could pull Heather away from his own cousin—that would look bad on him, not to mention unreasonably rude.

Upon entering the Italian restaurant, Heather and Nikolai sat on one side of the table, while Matthias took the seat across from theirs. He eyed them

darkly as he grumbled to himself, Is she always this chummy with the people she's interested in?

Throwing her a disgruntled look, Matthias could tell that she was shedding the presence in front of Nikolai. When the waiter came to give them the menu, the latter looked up and upon seeing the baleful gleam in his cousin's eyes, he quickly widened the gap between Heather and himself.

He slid the menu toward her and said courteously, "Miss Heather, you can have the menu." There was a slight note of reverence in his voice and he had an endearing, boyish charm about him.

Heather narrowed her eyes and flashed him an unassuming smile. "I think you may have mistaken something, Nikolai." She didn't like how he had addressed her so formally. He seems to believe that there really is something going on between me and Matthias.

However, just as she was about to explain, Matthias cleared his throat and cut her off, then pulled his chair over so that he could sit next to her. She cringed when he proceeded to wrap an arm around her shoulders and she bristled at their sudden close proximity. Seemingly ignorant of her discomfort, Matthias said close to her ear, "Go on; order what you like." Anyone who saw them would think they were a couple.

Upon seeing this, Nikolai scooted over to the chair on the other side of the table, looking wounded the whole time. Matthias noticed this and immediately felt his heart clench with remorse. He hadn't wanted to keep up the act in front of Nikolai, but he was left with no choice now that the latter had developed actual feelings for Heather. Deceiving him was the only way to convince him that she was already taken, and only then would he stop pining for her.

"Don't touch me," Heather hissed through gritted teeth, completely distracted by the unwanted skinship. Her shoulder tingled where Matthias' hand was gripping her and she squirmed, wanting to nudge her elbow into his ribs.

The both of them were bickering under their breath. Nikolai lowered his head at the sight of this, feeling sorry for himself as he prayed for the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

Matthias managed a nonchalant smile as he restored the gap between them, then murmured softly next to her ear, "I hear that you're planning to set up

your own enterprise. If you play along, I promise you that the Locke Group will be your very first client.”

He knew that the only way to tempt a woman like Heather was to offer her something worthwhile and profitable. After all, the reason behind all her shenanigans was so that she could start her own business and make a name for herself in Bradford City.

Presently, she turned to look at him in surprise. She wasn't sure how he had come to know of her plans but she had to admit that his offer was an incredibly tempting and valid one. He was driving a hard bargain.

“Deal,” she agreed after regaining her composure. It would be silly of her to turn down a potential partnership. As far as she was concerned, it was all about what she could gain at the end of the day. “But—” she added as she lowered her voice. She didn't want Nikolai to overhear their conversation and after she had paused for dramatic effect, she continued, “—I want to know why you're so protective of Nikolai. Is he someone important to you?” It was imperative for her to figure out the relationship between them before this day came to an end.

“He's my cousin,” Matthias answered forthrightly. He knew that he had to tell her the truth if he wanted her cooperation and even if he didn't, he was sure that she would find out on her own eventually, seeing as she was already curious enough to ask. He knew better than to underestimate her sleuthing abilities.

Heather hummed in surprise and she broke into a grin. Aside from the promise of a business deal, she had also acquired the information she needed, essentially killing two birds with one stone.

Looks like I'm getting more than I have bargained for out of this lunch, she thought as she congratulated herself on having such brilliant wit. Things were taking an interesting turn in Bradford City now that the Locke Group had infiltrated the market. She didn't know what might happen after this but she looked forward to it all the same.

Just then, Nikolai raised his voice unconsciously as he unhappily shouted, “Waiter!”

Matthias and Heather pulled away from each other when they heard this, and they regarded him with puzzled expressions as they straightened in their seats.

He flashed them an apologetic look after realizing that he had interrupted them by bellowing for the waiter. He hadn't meant to do so but frustration got the better of him and in that moment, it was as if something in him snapped.

When the unsuspecting waiter came to their table, he was forced to bear the brunt of Nikolai's rage. "Your service is absolutely terrible! Do you know how long we've been calling for a waiter? What took you so long to come and take our orders?"

The poor waiter blinked at him, bewildered that such a fine-looking young man could be so temperamental.

While this was happening, Heather was amused as she watched Nikolai throw a fit. He reminded her of Matthias in his younger days. They're exactly the same, she mused to herself. Matthias used to always sulk and throw tantrums whenever she and Myra hung out, and he would pull all sorts of gimmicks to try and get the other girl's attention.

Cousins, indeed! She appraised Nikolai, then Matthias. The former lowered his head when he met her eyes, looking like a schoolboy who had just been lectured.

She remembered how much she had disliked Matthias because of his tendency to throw hissy fits. He had been so self-centered and emotional, like a child who refused to grow up and face the world. Her impression of him carried over the years and it was no wonder she found it hard to like him even in the present.

Nikolai, on the other hand, was much younger than her. She saw him as nothing more than a junior, to whom she did not attach any specific sentiment. To her, she was supposed to be more tolerant of his tantrum by virtue of the fact that she was older than him.

It wasn't long after Nikolai had lashed out at the waiter that the food was served. While Heather had only ordered pasta for herself, the men filled their carnivorous appetites with steaks.

She dug into her meal with effortless elegance, her posture and etiquette flawless. Matthias had spent years looking up to her and tried to emulate the same grace with which she carried herself.

However, it was only after he was juxtaposed with her that he realized he lacked the natural-born aristocratic grace that she had. After all, she had been living like a princess from the very moment she was born, while he had had to endure hardships in his childhood, however temporary that might have been.

The three of them were quiet as they ate their meal, and the only audible sounds were those of their chewing. The lunch lasted for over an hour and they took their time as any proper lady and gentleman of high society would. Intermittently, they would lift their glasses and all seemed well between them.

When they left the restaurant, Nikolai insisted on returning to the office alone so that Matthias could drop Heather home. Seeing as Nikolai was so determined to leave on his own, Heather did not try to persuade him to come along with them this time. She was content with all that she had gotten out of her excursion today.

Heather looked so pleased on the way home and it was clear that she was painfully unaware of all the terrible things Matthias had done.

As the car pulled up in front of the chateau-like structure that was the Langston Residence, Matthias got down from the vehicle and opened the door for her in a show of chivalry. If they were going on with the act, then he might as well go all the way and be a gentleman.

He was even more determined to put on a decent front now that they had arrived at the Langston Residence and if he could somehow get past the threshold, then it would be the icing on the cake.

As if reading his thoughts, Heather suppressed a smirk as she glanced over at him. "Don't tell me you're actually angling to get into my house," she mused, the snide tone of her voice implying that she had done her part for the day and did not want to be pestered by him any longer.

He shrugged. "I might not go through those doors today but it's only a matter of time before I pay your family a visit." Matthias was not affected by the subtext of her words and he wasn't one to back down easily; he wouldn't give her the satisfaction.

With a resigned smile, she graciously admitted defeat this time and did not waste another breath on arguing with him. Besides, it wasn't as though she had not gained anything out of this ridiculous charade.

She gazed at him steadily and the contempt was clear in her eyes—she would not back down that easily either. “Well, then; we'll wait for the day you decide to visit us, Director Locke.” “On behalf of the Locke Group, we look forward to working with the Langston Group in the near future. If it isn't too much to ask of you, Miss Langston, I do hope that you would put in a good word for me to Chairman Langston,” Matthias said perfunctorily, as though he was genuinely excited for the business partnership.

“I'm afraid you're asking the wrong person, Director Locke. My words carry little weight in the Langston Group,” Heather countered, having no interest in furthering his ambitions.

On the contrary, if one were to speak of a partnership with the Hart Group, she would be more than willing to help out. It would be the most ideal situation for her family to work together with the Hart Group, seeing as they would complement each other well.

She had done her research on the Locke Group too and while she had considered the value of the corporation as a whole, they were still the Langston Group's competitors nonetheless, and the strife between them outweighed the benefits of a partnership.

Even if she were to allow the possibility of a collaboration, she knew that the Locke Group could not complement them as well as the Hart Group would. The wheels in Heather's mind turned rapidly as she evaluated the pros and cons of working together with either one of them.

Given that she could only choose one, she began to consider the importance of maintaining good terms with the Hart Group, who happened to be rivals with the Locke Group.

“Everyone knows that Chairman Langston trusts you the most,” Matthias pointed out, finding ways to keep her from going into the front door. He wanted to make his presence known.

If she won't let me follow her into the house, then I'll keep the conversation going out here. Old Master Langston will surely hear about this one way or another.

“Look—I really have to go in right now. There’s a time and place for everything, and I don’t make it a habit to take a business meeting on my doorstep,” she snapped irritably. Who knows what the maids in the house might think if they saw me talking to him?

“How could you be so heartless after clinging onto me for the whole of last night?” Matthias feigned a wounded look as he teased her.

Heather’s face paled when she heard this. She ought to throttle him for saying something like that on the doorstep of the Langston Residence. She glowered at him murderously. She would never partner up with him and she would do everything she could to get in his way instead.

She was resolute in returning Matthias the favor. If a partnership with the Langston Group was what he had hoped for, then she would let him get a taste of devastation.

“Are you done? If you are, I suggest you get out of my sight this instant!” Heather hissed, no longer playing nice. She wanted to slap the scoundrel hard across his smarmy face.

“You’re just as feisty as I expected,” Matthias remarked as he opened the car door for himself. She felt anger thrumming in her veins when she registered the smug look on his face.

Heather would never forgive him for what he had done to her that morning, and she vowed to teach him a lesson for messing with her.

He flashed her a wicked smile and pulled out a small gift box from his coat pocket. He had chosen this gift for her personally.

“To make up for my behavior today, I got you a gift.” Matthias shoved it into her hand and quickly entered the car, thereafter speeding off, leaving a cloud of dust in its wake.

Frowning, Heather glanced down at the box in her hand, sickened by how he had given her a gift right after he had offended her.

Without sparing the gift another thought, she tossed it to the maid who had opened the door for her and said, “Here; you can keep this.” Heather didn’t want Matthias’ gift and she wouldn’t so much as spare a glance at it.

It wasn't until much later that she regretted handing the box over to the maid—if she could have foreseen how things would turn out, she would have thrown that box into the trash at the very first opportunity.

Standing before Love Chapter 420

Heather made her way into the house as she usually did, doubting that anyone had missed her last night when she did not come home. In her family, indifference and ignorance were household values. However, panic gripped her as soon as she stepped past the threshold, for she saw a couple standing shoulder-to-shoulder in front of her, assessing her with stern looks on their faces—the couple was none other than her parents themselves.

Thinking that they were probably furious about last night, she grew flustered. Nonetheless, she quickly composed herself and tried to brush past them nonchalantly, but was halted in her tracks when her father pulled her by the elbow.

She frowned at this. She was not used to physical contact with her parents, much less being treated with such hostility. There was a clear aggravation in the way they handled her that she couldn't help but bristle at the gesture.

“Is there something wrong, Father?” Heather's expression was stony and the good mood she had been in was completely ruined. She could feel her arm throbbing from where Stephen's fingers dug into her flesh as he gripped her elbow.

“Bold of you to come home after last night!” Stephen thundered and it was a sharp contrast to his usual cheery demeanor. Heather could hear alarm bells ringing in her head as she registered his rage and she instinctively knew that something bad had happened.

Standing next to him, Camille tugged on his sleeve and said urgently, “We'll talk about it when we're inside, Stephen. The doorstep is no place for lectures.”

Feeling irritated, Heather shrugged off his hand and said icily, “I'm going to need an explanation, Father.” She had never been man-handled like this before and her pride was her besetting sin. There was no way she would not retaliate after he had embarrassed her like that.

“Heather, you’re in big trouble,” Camille explained with her brows drawn together, which only made Heather even more bewildered.

“What in the world are you talking about?” she demanded, her tone full of annoyance. Her family rarely interfered in her personal affairs and that had been the case ever since she attained independence from them. She liked to think of it as the glorious age of her rebellion.

Besides, her grandfather—Robert—often sang praises of her to everyone else. Knowing that he would always be there to stand up for her, Heather slowly grew liberal and acted on her own whim and fancy. There was nothing her parents could do or say about her.

“Let’s talk inside,” Stephen said now through gritted teeth as he shot her a dark look. He made it sound as if she had committed some unforgivable crime.

Heather scoffed and did not so much as spare them a glance. “How ridiculous,” she muttered under her breath. Then, she turned on her heel to leave, not wanting to waste another second with them.

In reality, there was nothing surprising about her apathy toward them. Despite her outstanding achievements, Stephen had always been resentful of the fact that she was not a son, and he blamed Camille for her inability to produce a male heir for him.

He held some unresolved grudge against Heather, as though her existence was the sole reason for his lack of authority in the Langston Family. He was also deeply envious of his elder brother, who had two sons and thus had all the authority in the family.

Camille, on the other hand, was soft by nature. She habitually deferred to her husband and was constantly terrified that she would be abandoned by him if she did not please him in any way. Naturally, her yearning for acknowledgement had driven a wedge between her and her daughter.

As for Heather, her personality and temper were wrought by her parents’ lack of affirmation of her. If her grandfather did not mind the fact that she was born a daughter, she did not see why her parents should. At some point, her tolerance toward them began to wither away.

Presently, she sauntered into the living room and saw that Robert was seated in his armchair. “Grandpa,” she called out sweetly. She knew that the only person she had to please was her grandfather.

Robert’s taste and preferences had changed after he had had his heart broken all those years ago, which accounted for the Langston Family’s indulgence in over-the-top, opulent aesthetics.

Nevertheless, he was a man with real knowledge and innate talent. His words and decisions carried the most weight in the family and he had vast experience in the business world. It was no surprise at all that Heather looked up to him as a role model.

Nowadays, Robert was no longer interested in material comforts and grandeur. In what could only be described as a much-welcomed change of style, he began to favor plain and neutral tones that were reminiscent of his good old days. As such, he was delighted to see that Heather, too, dressed in pastel hues, which were part of her wardrobe staples. It only made him like her even more.

“Come here, Heather. There’s something I’d like to talk to you about,” Robert commented heavily. Upon hearing the sullen tone in his voice, Heather couldn’t help but panic.

Meanwhile, after following her into the living room, Stephen chided accusingly, “You ungrateful girl—how dare you disrespect me like this?” Camille, on the other hand, fell in step behind him, looking wary as she kept silent.

Knowing that she was surrounded, Heather did not bother looking over her shoulder as she smiled and said, “What is it that you want to talk to me about, Grandpa?” As far as she was concerned, the only person in the family to whom she respected was Robert.

Robert had to admit that he had been overly-indulgent with her. She had a fiery personality that was similar to Lisa’s—she stood for nobody’s nonsense and she acted however she liked, which he deemed were endearing traits.

While the girl was addressing her grandfather, Stephen bristled at her blatant show of disrespect. He was enraged by how she had deliberately ignored him and grew resentful at the thought of how Robert berated him more than he did Heather.

Unable to contain his anger, he marched forward and brought his hand down on her, intending to slap her across the face. Thankfully, Heather was in a much better state and she managed to dodge in time.

She was enraged at her father's actions and so was Robert. Stephen had as good as doomed himself now.

"Father," she said in a warning tone as she tightened her grip on his wrist. Years of training had resulted in her having enough strength to make men break into cold sweat.

"You ingrate!" Stephen bit out, trying to resist the pain as he lifted his free hand and attempted to strike her once more.

Upon seeing this, Heather shoved him away and snapped, "Don't embarrass yourself in front of Grandpa." Not wanting to appear unruly in front of Robert, she held herself back.

"Don't humiliate yourself here, Stephen," Robert barked. In all honesty, he wondered how he ended up with a son like him. While his first son did not have the brightest of minds, he was still much better than Stephen, who was hopelessly incompetent.

After Robert's terse warning, Stephen did not try to cause a scene once more and instead turned to lash out at Camille. "Look at this mongrel that you've given birth to!" he growled while pointing at Heather.

That statement only triggered Robert and Heather once more but this time, the former was the first to retaliate in anger. "You ingrate! Why don't you ever think before you speak? Are you saying that I'm an old dog, then?" Who would call their own child a mongrel? Could this man be any more idiotic?

Meanwhile, Heather crossed her arms and watched this scene unfold with amusement. Stephen had basically thrown himself under the bus and she didn't even have to lift a finger.

Knowing that he had slipped up and angered the old man, Robert gave his father a look of resignation. At that moment, Camille tugged on his sleeve and muttered gently, "Stephen, don't lose your temper in front of the old master."

“Go away!” he roared and shrugged her off. Heather was indifferent as she took this in. She felt sorry for Camille but that sentiment was soon replaced by apathy.

When Heather was young, she would try desperately to please her mother, angling for even the slightest bit of maternal affection. Over time, she realized that Camille would sell her out within a heartbeat just to placate Stephen. As the years went by, she drifted away from her mother and now she regarded the latter as nothing more than a stranger.

Watching this exchange, Robert grew thunderous and pointed at Stephen as he barked, “You should be the one who goes away!” This ingrate is going to be the end of me!

Stephen glanced at his father and upon seeing the rage on the latter’s face, he knew he was in a precarious situation. He was sullen as he left but he did not forget to shoot a pointed look at Heather along the way.

After banishing his son from the living room, Robert glanced at his frightened daughter-in-law and said exasperatedly, “You should go too, Camille.” This was unnecessary on his part, given that she would have trailed after Stephen anyway.

Now that the two eyesores had left the room, Heather felt the muscles in her shoulders loosen. She gave Robert a grateful look. This was not the first time he had had to speak up for her to save her from conflict.

“Come here and sit down with me for a chat,” Robert invited somberly. With his temperament, he would undoubtedly pass down the torch to Heather, but everyone else in the family disagreed with such a notion and he knew he could not act on his own accord when it came to something as important as this.

Heather immediately walked over to him. He was the only one who offered her kinship, and there were days when she found herself thinking about how he was the only reason why she hadn’t left the Langston Residence years ago and moved out to live on her own.

“I know things have been hard for you all these years, Heather,” Robert said now, his wizened voice riddled with self-blame.

“I didn’t think things were hard for me—not while I have you to back me up.” She leaned her head on his shoulder, just like how she would fall asleep in his embrace when she was young.

Upon hearing that, Robert patted her shoulder comfortingly. He really doted on this granddaughter of his but there was only so much he could give her.

“Heather, there isn’t much that I can leave to you,” he said ruefully. The Langston Family was a large household to preside over and as the years went by, he found that his words carried less weight. The power he once held was being chipped away little by little as he loosened his iron fist.

“You’ve given me the most important thing of all—kinship. That’s more than enough, Grandpa, and I can work for everything else,” Heather replied, and she meant it too. In her younger days, she had wanted her fair share of the Langston Group but now that she was all grown up, she had a much clearer perspective on life.

Life was finite and there was no need for her to constantly chase after perfection. Heather wasn’t bothered by the fact that she could never be in charge of the Langston Group. She was confident that she could make a name for herself in the business industry, even if it meant she had to start from scratch.

“I know you have your own brilliant ways to figure life out and that you’re all grown up now. You’re capable of making your own decisions.” Robert paused in thought and he looked as though he was trying to choose his words carefully.

Being the only person who knew him like the back of her hand, Heather could hear the exasperation and hesitation in his words. Putting him out of his misery, she said, “You can say whatever it is that you want, Grandpa. You don’t have to beat around the bush when you’re with me.”

He smiled at this and relief colored his face. She reminded him so strongly of Lisa all those years ago—determined, forthright, and endearing.

“The newspaper arrived this morning and the headline...” He trailed off, then reached for the newspaper on top of the coffee table and flipped it over to the front page. The headline immediately leapt out at Heather.

She stared wide-eyed at the words, incredulous as she snatched the newspaper from him. She sounded as though she was in a daze as she mumbled, “No; this can’t be. How did this happen? Which reporter even came up with this ridiculous article?”

Seeing her like this put an arrow through Robert’s heart; he had foreseen how hurt she would be. She was a proper young lady after all, and would never involve herself in such scandalous affairs.

“Do you trust me, Grandpa?” She lifted her head and gazed at him helplessly.

How could this happen? Her mind scrambled for answers and after a long moment of thought, she concluded that Matthias was the only person who could have anything to do with this.

“Of course I trust you,” Robert answered assuringly with a firm nod of his head. However, he recalled one of the servants telling him that Matthias had been the one to drop Heather back home earlier on.

With that in mind, he asked tentatively, “But what exactly is going on between you and Matthias?” He needed an answer to know what to make of this situation.

Heather bit her lip, resentment flashing across her features. Not wanting to hide anything from him, she explained, “Matthias hates me, Grandpa. He’s doing this out of revenge.” I didn’t think his revenge would be so quick and ruthless, though.

Robert was taken aback by this. He would never have guessed that their relationship was one borne out of vengeance.

Just then, the butler rushed into the living room and in his hand was the gift box that Heather had tossed to the maid earlier. At the sight of this, she faltered. It looks like things are going to be harder to explain from this point onward.

Standing before Love Chapter 421

As Heather watched the butler approach them, she felt as though the wheels of fate had been set in motion and there was nothing she could do to stop them.

She blanched as the small gift box was carefully placed in Robert's hand, clueless as to what it contained.

However, now that she was thinking about it, she had a bad feeling about what might be in the box.

"I'll open it if you don't mind," Robert said as his fingers clasped the box.

She managed an exasperated smile and answered with what she hoped was nonchalance, "Go ahead." He would only grow more suspicious of her if she were to deny him from opening the box.

In retrospect, she might have been too brash when she explained herself earlier; it was obvious that her grandfather did not completely believe her this time. After all, it was hard to convince anyone that Matthias was trying to exact revenge on her when there was neither a basis to the story nor proof to support her claim.

Suddenly, Robert handed the box over to her and he broke into a kind, affectionate smile. "This is a gift for you, Heather. It wouldn't be right for me to open it."

When she took the box, she winced slightly, as though the gift burnt her. It was impossible for Heather to back out of the living room now and discard the offending object, which meant she was left with no choice but to open it in front of Robert. She knew it was the only way to prove that she had nothing to hide, thereby gaining his full trust.

Her eyes fell on the box. Feigning indifference, she opened it to reveal the diamond necklace nestled within. She couldn't help the small sigh of relief that escaped her at the sight of this, and the fear drained out of her as she thought, Thank goodness it's just a necklace.

But just as she gingerly picked up the jewelry, she dislodged the note that had been tucked beneath it. A grimace twisted her features as she stared at the note, knowing that she would only appear guilty if she did not pull it out. It looked like Matthias had spun an intricate web to trap her.

On the flip side, if she were to read the note and find that Matthias had written something lewd, she would have to come up with a plausible explanation.

Under Robert's watchful gaze, she suppressed her fury and pulled out the note, then assumed an unruffled front as she unfolded it.

On the note were three lines inscribed in careful penmanship, the first of which was a poem, and the following two were his own words. She scanned the words that read, 'I pace around hungry, sniffing the twilight, hunting for you, for your hot heart, like a puma in the barrens of Quitratue; there are few things in the world that could compare to your beauty, and the ruby is one such thing. Fate has brought us together and I hope to only give you nothing but the best.'

Quoting one of the more obscure, sensual poems by Pablo Neruda would have usually been the gateway to capture Heather's attention, but seeing as how things had turned out presently, it was an understatement to say she was not impressed. She wanted to tear the note into pieces and throw the ridiculous ruby necklace into the trash.

She gritted her teeth at the thought of Matthias' elaborate scheme. How could I let my guard down and allow him to get away with all these infuriating shenanigans?

She should have tread more carefully around him after the first set-up instead of underestimating him, and now she had only herself to blame for this predicament. How naïve and foolish of her to have been duped by his charming maneuvers—she ought to strangle herself.

Just then, Robert cleared his throat, the sound of which pulled her out of her thoughts.

Judging from the way things were going, he could tell that there was something complex going on between his granddaughter and Matthias. Surely the latter would not go to such lengths if he had no actual feelings for Heather.

As for the talk of vengeance that Heather had mentioned, Robert found that there was no basis for it. After all, Matthias had only just arrived in Bradfort City, and it wasn't only until a few days ago that Heather had returned to the city as well.

He was skeptical that any feud could have brewed between the both of them within such a short span of time. On the contrary, he would be more inclined to believe that it was an age-old story of love at first sight.

They probably had a fight that resulted in Heather's present denial of any association with him. Or perhaps he tried to force himself on her last night.

As far as Robert was concerned, Matthias had left a decent impression on him after their first and only meeting. Furthermore, the young man appeared to have given some thought into getting a gift for Heather, which meant he was putting in the effort to pursue her romantically. There didn't seem to be anything foul or wicked going on here.

"I'm going to my room, Grandpa," Heather said presently, desperate for some peace and quiet as her energy drained out of her.

Robert nodded without adding anything else to the conversation, knowing that he could not get a word in with her or put his foot into her personal affairs while she seemed so downtrodden.

Having gone into her bedroom, Heather closed the door behind her and shuffled over to the bed. She was exhausted and she hated that she was suffering such a messy defeat. She thought about the newspaper that headlined her non-existent scandal with Matthias and grew frustrated, not being able to figure out why that man had orchestrated this.

She brought her fist down onto the bed and hammered out her annoyance. Then, pulling a pillow over her face, she mumbled grimly, "I won't let you get away after all the despicable things you have done, Matthias Locke."

Heather was so outraged that she would have beaten him up if he were standing before her right now. However, at the thought that he had a black belt in karate, she realized that he could easily take her down. As things were, pummeling him to death would not be a viable option.

And so, the fury gnawed away at her. She couldn't just sit by and do nothing while he turned her into some pathetic piece of pawn on his chessboard. She had to strike back but she was at a loss as to how she could do that, seeing as she had no idea why he was doing all these in the first place. Brilliant as she was, she could not come up with a way to put that man in his place.

It was crucial for her to figure out the purpose behind all his schemes. She could tell that he still had a thing for Myra and judging from the way he behaved, it was clear that he had not gotten over the woman. As such, Myra was the key to this battle.

Going on that assumption, it could mean that he was trying to sabotage her friendship with Myra, and Heather panicked at the thought of this. There was no telling what lengths he might go to just to get what he wanted.

Robert was the only family she had and Myra was her only friend. There weren't many sentiments that tethered Heather to this existence, and she would do everything she could to stop Matthias from taking these away from her.

After a long moment of thought, she realized that she was making no headway in discovering his true intentions, and came to the brisk conclusion that he was doing all these just to spite her. For him to go all out to wage war against her meant that he had taken calculated risks. She might not know what his plans were, but she was certain that the scandal he faked was only a small part of them.

The more Heather pondered on this, the more tired she felt and eventually, she fell asleep. She had slept well under the effects of the drugs last night but the side effects were brutal. Her entire body was sore and her head pounded relentlessly.

When her eyes fluttered open much later in the evening, she saw that it was dark outside. She woke up starving and realized that she had been holed up in her bedroom for close to ten hours. Having missed dinner, she patted her stomach, which grumbled in protest.

There would not be dinner on the table at this late hour. She glanced around resentfully at the darkness that cloaked her room, musing at how it mirrored the abyss in her heart. Her hatred for Matthias continued to burn in her as she decidedly burrowed into bed once more.

She spent most of the night drifting in and out of sleep, feeling restless and hungry. It had been a long time since she felt so miserable, and suffering a defeat by Matthias was the sole cause of her sorry state. When she woke up early the next morning, she strode out of her room feeling rejuvenated.

She noticed that the servants were throwing meaningful looks at her as she walked by them this morning. Bristling at this, she hurried into the living room in search of a respite from their judgmental gaze.

It was far too early for the others in the house to greet the day and upon entering the living room, she saw Robert reading the morning paper. She

bridled at the sight of the newspaper and she had an inkling that something bad had happened again.

She began to sneak out of the entryway, but was stopped in her tracks when Robert said, "Come here, Heather." Hence, she had no choice but to walk over to where he was.

Heather thought she might be able to avoid what was fast becoming a disastrous breakfast, but it looked like she was forced to partake of it anyway. Feeling anxious, she pulled out the seat across the table and glanced warily at the newspaper laid out in front of her grandfather. Needless to say, she was worried that something worse might happen today.

"Take a look for yourself," the older man said, his expression tight as he slid the newspaper over to her.

She scanned the front page news and saw that the large picture beneath the headline was one of Matthias and herself. She didn't even know where the paparazzi had taken this shot.

The caption itself was more than groundbreaking and upon reading the entire article, she felt rage course through her. It hadn't been a big deal when Matthias brought her into the board meeting at the Locke Group as a passive participant, but the newspaper had twisted the narrative entirely. The article claimed that her attendance at the meeting was in conjunction to her upcoming marriage to Matthias, and both his company and hers would join forces following their union.

Heather seethed at this. It looks like Matthias is smarter than I gave him credit for—he's now completely taken over the narrative! She wanted to rip the newspaper into shreds. How audacious of him to claim that my family business will be partnering up with the Locke Group! she thought to herself, fuming at the malicious turn Matthias' schemes had taken.

"Grandpa, I told him that I do not speak on behalf of the Langston Family. This newspaper is spouting absolute nonsense," she explained angrily. How dare they claim that I have signed a partnership agreement with the Locke Group on behalf of the Langstons?

It was infuriating how the article could make such baseless claims and blow them up into groundbreaking news. The person who wrote the article certainly has quite the imagination to spin such creative lies to fill the entire front page.

Heather would not let any one of Matthias' accomplices get away with tarnishing her name, so she made the decision to drop by the newspaper company so that she could find out what other dirty lies the journalist had in store.

Meanwhile, Robert's expression softened after he saw the look of disbelief on Heather's face. He knew she was an ambitious young lady, but she would not go so far as to sign an agreement on behalf of the entire company.

"It looks like Matthias isn't going to give up on his pursuit of you," he remarked. This was what he had taken away after reading the situation as a whole. In some ways, it brought back memories from when he had been younger.

"Grandpa, don't take this the wrong way. I've told you that vengeance is the only reason why Matthias is pestering me in the first place," she reiterated with much more emphasis this time. Heather understood that there were some things that did not make sense at first instance, but all she had to do was keep on insisting that this was the truth and others would start to believe her.

"The both of you have only just met—how could there be any bad blood between you?" Robert was completely puzzled by this and he would only grow anxious if he did not get an answer to this riddle.

"He and I—" Heather broke off, suddenly at a loss for words, knowing very well that she couldn't say that she had known Matthias since their younger days. After all, it wasn't as if her family had any impression of him in those times.

"Forget it," Robert interjected as he assessed her pensively. "Young people have their own ways of doing things." He was washing his hands off this, and had no intentions of interfering in her affairs.

"I can't come up with an explanation right now, Grandpa, and I have no evidence to support my claims either." She was trying to persuade him but she wasn't even sure if her words were falling upon deaf ears.

Upon seeing that he had no response to this, she sighed and leaned into her chair. She wanted to bury her head into the ground; she was growing tired of Matthias' games and she wanted to march right up to him so she could demand an explanation. However, judging from the way things were going,

she knew she had to keep her distance from him. She couldn't risk giving the paparazzi and the tabloids any more ammunition.

"Heather, if that boy from the Locke Family is giving you a hard time, I promise I'll take care of it," Robert said assuringly at last, reaching out to clasp her hand. He liked Matthias, but his granddaughter's opinions came first and there was no good in forcing her to compromise.

Nonetheless, he couldn't help but feel sorry for the young man. Robert was getting flashbacks of his past and speaking from experience, he knew that it would only end badly if one forced a relationship on the other. Women were mysterious creatures after all, and they could make up their own minds about these things, however hurtful it might be for the men who so desperately pursued them.

"I promise I'll give you an explanation soon, Grandpa," Heather said with a steely look in her eyes. She couldn't care less about how powerful or capable Matthias was—she would stop at nothing to clear her name.