

TMBA 1191

CHAPTER 1191 MATTHEW LIKES RIKA

That evening

Blair put the asleep Ethan on his small bed and went back to the big bed. On a whim, she said, "Wesley, you have a good eye for people. Do you think Chantel and Gifford are good together?"

Wesley frowned slightly. He had never thought about it before. Finally, he shook his head and said, "Not really. She's too young." Gifford was twelve years older than Chantel.

"You got that right! Chantel's only 20, and Gifford is 32. There's a generation gap right there. They won't share the same interests." Blair was concerned. All she wanted was for her son to be happy.

"But..." Wesley hesitated. "Gifford doesn't even like hanging out with girls. Since he chose to bring Chantel back home, it means that he's interested in her. If you want to try and play matchmaker, go ahead."

Wesley knew Gifford well. He worked from dawn until dusk. Whenever a young girl came over to him and tried to talk to him, he would ignore her.

He wouldn't even acknowledge she existed.

Wesley was anxious for his son to start dating. He didn't care about the age gap between Gifford and a potential girlfriend, as long as he was willing to date her.

In his opinion, it was okay for the boy to be older. At least older boys knew how to take care of girls.

"But Chantel decided on an acting major. She wants to work in show biz. If she becomes a star and gets caught in a scandal, won't it hurt us?" Blair's concerns were valid. After all, the Leonards were a military family. They had always avoided any drama and never got involved in the entertainment industry.

"Take it easy. Chantel's only been here for a few days, but you already have her career set up and are marching her down the aisle already. You must really want another grandkid. Isn't Ethan enough for you? Just call Rika. I'm sure she'd be willing to squeeze another baby out for you."

Blair rolled her eyes at him. "You think I won't?"

Wesley chuckled. "Of course you will. My wife is the most important person in this family. There's nothing you won't do!" His tone was playful, and not meant to be taken seriously.

"Cut it out. I'm going to call Rika!" Saying that, Blair had already begun dialing Erica's number.

"Hi Rika, it's Mom. When are you going to give me another baby?" Blair asked.

After grumbling a few words to her, Erica hung up the phone. Blair stared at her phone, dumbfounded.

Wesley frowned. "What's wrong?" He didn't hear much, but he swore he heard Rika mention "the woman Matthew likes."

In a gloomy mood, Blair recounted what Erica told her. "Your daughter said since the woman Matthew likes is pregnant, maybe she should bring that one home. That way, Matthew will be happy and we can take care of it..."

Wesley snorted, "I've never known anyone as silly as your daughter. Matthew must have the patience of a saint." She even believed Matthew had feelings for someone else. If Matthew really had a relationship with another woman and the woman was pregnant with his child, there was no way that Matthew would send the kid elsewhere.

And Carlos would never allow Matthew to have an affair.

Blair was still wondering about one thing. "Weren't you having second thoughts about Matthew marrying Rika after their engagement? Are you on his side now?"

"Can't you see that Matthew likes our daughter?" Wesley asked. Women were usually more attuned to love than men. He thought Blair could tell Matthew had a thing for Erica.

"Not really. Didn't Erica just say he's in love with another woman?" Blair actually wasn't crazy about Matthew and Erica getting married, either. But Erica did have a kid out of wedlock, and her reputation was ruined. An arranged marriage would ensure she had a good life. Blair was thankful anyone was willing to marry Erica, let alone Matthew. She could do worse—the man was handsome and loaded.

Wesley looked at Blair with a faint smile. "Well, I know Matthew has fallen for someone. And I can even tell you who she is."

"Okay...who?" Blair asked curiously.

"I'll tell you later. I need to make sure first."

Blair rolled her eyes at him. "You did that deliberately. You always like to appear mysterious."

Wesley just smiled without saying anything.

He still remembered when Matthew visited them long ago, Erica was still a little kid then, covered in mud like—well, a little kid. Then she barreled into Matthew and stained his white shirt.

Blair asked Erica to buy a new shirt for Matthew.

Erica left the house with the ten thousand Blair had given her.

But she stopped off at the farmer's market. When she saw another shirt there, she snatched it up, not realizing it was not up to par.

It was cheap, so she took the rest of the money and bought snacks and a piggy bank.

She put the remaining money into the iron piggy bank and buried it under a tree in the yard.

Wesley knew Erica would somehow screw this up, so he checked all the surveillance videos from the cameras along her path. It was not until then that he realized that she bought a shirt for 30 dollars for Matthew and wrapped it in a package worth 20. The shirt was not worth 8999 dollars like she claimed.

Noticing that there was a mini-garden under the willow tree where the piggy bank was buried, Wesley thought it was so obvious and silly, as if Erica was testing his intelligence.

He pulled out the vegetables and dug, and soon the piggy bank was exposed. Then, he went off looking for Erica.

When he found her, the girl was playing with Yvette on the slope behind the villa.

Erica had a smug look on her face as she stood on the slope with her hands on her hips, and then she burst into laughter. She said something, but it was lost to the wind.

When Wesley was about to drag the girl back home and teach her a lesson, he saw Matthew standing nearby, pointing the camera on his phone at Erica.

If he was right, Matthew had snapped a pic of Erica in secret.

Thanks to Debbie, Erica was able to escape her father's discipline. She was out of the house for three days.

Wesley knew where she was hiding, but Matthew pleaded on her behalf before he left. "Uncle Wesley, it's just a shirt. And she's still a child. Please don't be angry. There's no harm done."

In the dark night, Wesley smiled as he thought of his naughty daughter.

Damn! He missed his precious daughter. Without Rika by his side, it was quiet, but there was always something missing. It felt wrong.

He turned over and gathered Blair in his arms. Luckily, the woman who would be there for the rest of his life was right there. It was some comfort, at any rate.

Downstairs, in the Leonard family's house

Gifford quietly opened the door to the villa, and closed it behind him. After changing into his slippers, he walked into the living room.

At the same time, a young woman padded downstairs. When she saw him, she greeted him with a smile, "You're back!"

Gifford was puzzled at first. "Who—? Why are you here?" And she acted so excited. She was wearing pajamas, as well. 'Is that who I think it is?' Gifford thought.

"It's me—Chantel!" Chantel could understand why Gifford didn't recognize her. Her face was dirty before she came to live with the Leonards. Bathed, and wearing the new pajamas Blair had bought her, she looked like another girl entirely. And a pretty one, to boot.

'It's really her, ' Gifford thought. He looked her up and down and finally nodded. "You clean up nice! But you're too thin. You should eat. We have plenty of food here."

Rika was already quite thin. Gifford couldn't imagine someone skinnier than his sister. Well, now that someone was standing in front of him.

Chantel smiled and her eyes lit up. "So, Gifford, are you busy every day?"

CHAPTER 1192 I CAN MARRY YOU

"What a coincidence. I'm almost never here. I come home about every six months or so to visit." Gifford walked towards the kitchen, trying to find something to eat.

Chantel followed. "Oh, I see. Sounds like you're really busy."

"Yeah, but I'm used to it! Where are Mom and Dad?" Gifford opened the fridge and started piling food on the counter, taking out everything he thought he could eat.

"They thought you weren't coming back today, so they went to bed early." She stared at the ever-growing pile of food on the counter. "You must be hungry." Chantel curiously looked at the man who was eagerly devouring a steamed bun.

He didn't say anything for a moment, working on swallowing what he was eating. "Sorry. Haven't eaten anything since noon."

"Hey, don't dig into the leftovers. I can cook, you know. What do you want? I'll make it for you."

Gifford was surprised. This girl was much nicer than Rika. He asked in disbelief, "You can cook?" She already told him that, but apparently he wasn't paying that much attention. How would she have taken care of her grandfather otherwise?

Erica was two years older than Chantel but was still very childish. She couldn't even hold a pan steadily. Fortunately, she married Matthew. She was his problem now.

Most girls in the Leonard family weren't particularly adept with stove or pan. Yvette only knew how to boil eggs, and almost nothing else. Gifford was a little worried for Yvette. She was going to marry into the Baker family. He wondered if her inability to cook would hurt her chances of domestic bliss.

But as spoiled as Rika was, her marriage to Matthew seemed pretty solid. If she got on his nerves, Matthew never let that show.

Thinking of this, Gifford had to admit that Erica was really lucky to marry into the Hilton family.

"Yes, I can cook. What do you want to eat?" Chantel asked again.

Gifford shook his head. "I'm not picky. Fix whatever you want. You make it, I'll eat it." After all, it was almost midnight. He didn't want to keep her up half the night cooking for him.

"Okay."

So Chantel turned on burners and started to prep a basic meal. Gifford had nothing to do, so he watched her.

People always assumed that kids who grew up in the countryside learned how to take care of their family. Now it looked like that was true.

Chantel was good at everything from washing vegetables to cooking. Meanwhile, Gifford made small talk. "Did you cook at home a lot?"

"Oh yeah. My grandpa would feed the chickens and cattle, and I'd have to fix the meals."

"So how do you like it here?"

Chantel turned around and nodded at him seriously. "It's nice. Your parents have been good to me. And Ethan's so cute!" Chantel wondered about Ethan, like who his mom was. She guessed it had to be Erica or Yvette. But when she tried to confirm these guesses with Blair, she shut the young girl down.

So, finally, she stopped asking.

"That's cool."

Soon, the kitchen was filled with the delicious odors of a freshly cooked meal. She'd fixed a large bowl of braised noodles with tomato and egg.

Chantel brought the noodles to the table and told Gifford with a smile, "Eat it while it's hot! Sorry if it

doesn't taste good, but that's what we have."

Gifford picked up a few noodles with his chopsticks, blew on them, and put them into his mouth. He chewed them quickly and nodded. "Mmm! This is amazing! Much better than anything my sisters ever made. I guess you can cook."

After hearing him rave about the food, she smiled and sat next to him, watching him gobble down the noodles.

When he had almost finished his meal, Chantel suddenly said, "I heard that your mom's eager to set you up with someone."

Actually, Blair had set Gifford up on blind dates so many times that it was almost getting trite. "Yeah, she's like that," he admitted. Frankly, he was lucky enough she didn't force him to go. That way, if he went on one of her blind dates or not, it was up to him. It was not like they led anywhere serious.

"Are you really single?" Chantel asked, resting her chin on her hands.

"Yes."

"Anyone you have your eye on?"

"No." He was too busy to think about women.

Chantel put down her hands and lowered her voice. "What do you think of me?"

Gifford was a bit slow on the uptake. He swallowed the egg in his mouth and asked, "What do you mean?"

"I've got a surefire plan to make sure your mom won't send you on blind dates anymore. Look, I don't have a boyfriend. There's no one I'm crushing on. If you want, I can marry you and your mom won't bug you..."

"Koff...koff...koff..." Gifford's food went down the wrong pipe. He began coughing uncontrollably, and it took him awhile to recover. By the time he was done, his chest and throat were sore. He thought he was going to die.

"I'll keep your parents company for you and take good care of them." Chantel meant it. She'd thought about this for a long time.

Yes! Of course she wanted to stick around. Blair and Wesley were like the parents she never had. She didn't know what she was missing.

But she could also promise to be good to them. To be a good daughter-in-law.

She was young, after all, so she hadn't considered all the angles. She thought they could get married as long as they were together.

If Gifford had known that he would have such a shocking conversation after eating the bowl of noodles, he would definitely stick with leftovers. "I'm sorry, Chantel. I'm 12 years older than you. I'm not right for you. You're really just like a sister to me. Better than my other sisters, but still..."

Chantel knew how to advance and retreat. She suppressed the disappointment in her heart and said, "It's okay. It's just a thought. If you don't want to, then that's fine by me."

Her words relieved Gifford. He looked at her and sighed, "You're so sweet. Not like Rika at all!"

"So, I take it she's not very nice?" Chantel asked in confusion. They kept saying it all the time.

"Yeah. If she comes here, I'd stay away from her, if I were you. Wait. Maybe not, because you're a girl. She'd probably try to get on your good side."

Chantel couldn't help laughing. "I really want to meet her!" She was really curious about Erica.

"Just wait. She'll be by sooner or later. Either she runs away from home, or comes here to visit my parents during the New Year. Anyway, she'll be back."

"Okay," Chantel replied.

Early the next morning, when everyone was still asleep, Gifford left the Leonard family's house.

The sun rose slowly. In Alorith, in the Pearl Villa District, it was half past nine before Erica got downstairs to have breakfast. She was surprised to see Matthew sitting at the table in his pajamas and reading a financial newspaper. He apparently didn't go to work today.

Hearing her footsteps, Matthew looked at his wife and said indifferently, "I'm staying home today."

"Oh wow. I won't be home today."

"Oh? Did your class schedule change?" He specifically took time off today so he could relax at home with her.

Erica took a sip of milk and said, "No classes. I have the day off, so I'm going out."

"For what?"

"That's private."

"Where are you going?"

The girl blinked. "Matthew, you're just full of questions."

Matthew was so astonished he couldn't speak.

After breakfast, Erica's phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID, she quickly stood up from her seat and answered her phone. "I'm on my way."

Then she grabbed her backpack and ran towards the door.

"Stop!" Matthew called out to the girl who had ignored him.

Erica turned around and asked, "What's up?"

Matthew walked over to her and said, "I'll see you out." He wanted to see who was picking her up!

Puzzled, Erica didn't refuse. She changed into her shoes and walked out of the villa.

A silver SUV was parked right outside the villa. A man in a dark blue windbreaker left the car.

CHAPTER 1193 SHE'S REALLY ALIVE

Tam was about to open the car door for Erica, but when he saw who was standing behind her, he greeted Matthew first. "Hello, Mr. Matthew!"

Matthew glanced at Tam indifferently. If he remembered correctly, this man was the third son of the Watts family, a powerful family in the city.

The Watts family was comprised of two sons and one daughter. The eldest was the Deputy Secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection; the second one was a daughter, the president of the High People's Court in the city, and the third one, Tam, was general manager of the operations department of a publicly traded company.

But... 'Why is Erica with Tam?' Matthew wondered.

He nodded at Tam silently.

Tam had met Matthew before and knew that he was a cold, arrogant man. So he thought Matthew was just being his usual self, nothing unusual at all. "We're taking off now, Mr. Matthew."

Erica had already climbed into the car and sat patiently in the back seat, waiting for Tam to start the car.

When Tam opened the driver's side door, Matthew stopped him. "Wait a minute!"

"Yes, Mr. Matthew?" The man stared at Matthew in confusion.

Ignoring his question, Matthew brushed him away. He went straight to the car, opened the back door and told Erica, "Get out of the car!"

"Why?" Erica asked.

Matthew answered her question with another. "Where do you want to go? I'll ask the driver to take you there!"

He didn't like this arrangement, and all the alarm bells were sounding in his head. Erica shook her head. "Thanks. But Tam can give me a lift."

Matthew just stood there. Decisively, he took his phone from his pocket and dialed a number. "Yes, I'm where you expect I am. Get down here. Take Erica wherever she wants to go."

Erica knew that Matthew had called the driver, so she had to get out of Tam's car. "Why are you bothering him? Tam and I are going the same way. It's convenient for him to take me there."

As a man, Tam understood why Matthew did what he did. "Mrs. Erica, it's not a bad idea for you to let a driver take you there. I still have work to finish up after I drop you off at Alorith University. I'm not sure I can take you back home," said Tam with a smile.

Erica nodded. "Okay!"

'Why is Matthew acting all weird?' she thought.

The driver got there fairly quickly. Matthew opened the door for Erica and let her in.

The two cars roared to life and sped off, gradually disappearing from Matthew's sight.

'Tam and Erica both go to Alorith University? Tessie likes a man who's in his 40s?

I wonder if Ethan is Tessie and Tam's kid?'

Thinking of all this, Matthew sent a message to the driver. "Keep tabs on Erica."

At Alorith University

The two cars stopped at the roadside. Tam wasn't going to get out of the car, but Erica knocked on the window of his car and insisted that he go along.

Tam reluctantly left the car and came to the gate with her.

Because classes were still in session, very few students came in and out of the school gate.

They waited for a few minutes, and Tam had been frowning the whole time. Erica told the man next to her, "Tam, we can't keep waiting like this. Ask Julianna if she knows Tessie's phone number."

Tam didn't answer. The only reason he didn't want to come to Alorith University and tried to stay in the car was that his daughter, Julianna, was also studying here.

He was afraid he'd bump into her. And Tam didn't want things to spiral out of control. She didn't like Erica at all. It was embarrassing, and just letting her go to class like normal was the best thing for it.

But since he was already here, he knew he had to do it.

Tam silently took out his phone, found Julianna's WeChat account and shot her a message. "Do you have Tessie's phone number? Send it to me. A friend of hers asked me."

Julianna quickly sent him a question mark emoji and asked, "Who asked you?"

"One of my friends," Tam insisted.

Just as he was waiting for Tessie's phone number, Erica suddenly shouted, "Tessie!"

Hearing the name, Tam looked up subconsciously. There were two girls walking towards them. The one in a white coat was Julianna, and the girl next to her was Tessie, whom Erica hadn't seen in a long time.

Tessie's long golden hair had been styled into a layer cut, which shone in the sun. She wore a dark red plaid short coat, a pair of skinny jeans, a silver anklet on her ankle, and a pair of black canvas shoes.

At the sight of Erica, Tessie's smile froze. Especially when she saw the man beside Erica—all the color drained from her face.

What Tam feared most had finally happened.

Tessie, Erica, Julianna and Tam eventually formed a motley band but there was none of the typical it's-been-too-long banter. It would have been happier, if certain members of that group were not extremely uncomfortable.

It was understandable that Julianna was unhappy when she saw Erica. After all, the two of them had fallen out before. But Tessie's reaction was unexpected. She suddenly hid behind Julianna.

Erica wondered whether she was unwilling to face Tam or her.

Seeing her standing in front of her safe and sound, Erica was surprised and excited. Eyes red from tears, she said, "Tessie... It's really you! You're still alive!"

The Campbell family didn't lie to her.

But why was Tessie hiding behind Julianna when she saw her? Why didn't she answer?

While Erica waited for a response from Tessie, Julianna looked at the silent man in confusion and asked, "Dad, why are you here?"

Tam clenched his fists in his pockets in nervousness. After a while, he said in a low voice, "I... Erica is here to see Tessie. I'm here to see you."

"Dad, are you serious? Erica? Why would you date her? She's so bad! She bullied Tessie so much that the poor girl had to transfer to another school!" Julianna glared at Erica while she said that.

The excitement and joy in Erica's heart vanished like specters at Julianna's words. She asked coldly, "What? What the hell are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about? Why don't you remember what you did? Tessie transferred to another school to get away from you. Why are you here? What do you want? Look what you did to her! Can't you see how scared she is? That's all you, girl!"

Tessie, who was standing behind Julianna, looked pale and trembled as if she had seen something terrible.

Erica walked past and grabbed Tessie's wrist.

Tessie screamed and struggled violently before Erica could even say anything.

Her fierce reaction completely confused Erica. She had no choice but to let Tessie go. "Tessie, what's wrong with you? Look at me. It's Erica."

After a moment of silence, Tessie said in a timid voice, "Please, leave me alone. Go away, Erica! Just go!" At that point her already shaky murmurs were choked with sobs.

Erica was shocked to hear that.

Julianna got between Erica and Tessie, shielding the other girl with her body. "You should leave now. We don't want to see you!"

"I'm not leaving! Tessie, come here and talk to me!" Erica would not leave until she found out what was going on.

In order to ease the tension, Tam said to Erica, "I think Tessie's afraid of you now. You should probably get back in the car. Let me have a talk with her first."

Tessie's reaction completely broke Erica's heart. She was very sad at the moment, and she needed to salvage her mood.

Erica nodded and walked away, leaving them alone.

CHAPTER 1194 TAKING BLAME

Erica walked away, leaving behind a silence that stretched on and on until Tam took a deep breath. With a casual air, he turned to his daughter. "Julianna, would you mind going too? I need to speak with Tessie about something."

Julianna didn't move, looking with suspicion at her father and her friend. "Dad, you... What do you two need to talk about?" Privately she wondered, 'Did my father know Tessie before? If so, why didn't I know about it?'

While Tessie's eyes stayed on the ground, Tam made the best excuse he could think of. "It seems there's a big problem between her and Erica. Since I just happened to stumble across it, I can't sit by and do nothing. If I'm able to have a talk with your friend, maybe I can help her resolve the conflict."

Julianna had her doubts, but she nodded and left in the opposite direction Erica had taken.

When only the two of them were left, Tessie finally raised her head and looked at Tam, her eyes deep with longing and love.

It was impossible not to see her feelings; they were present in every gesture. For his part, Tam would be lying if he said he had no feelings for this woman. Nonetheless, he kept his calm. "I have only two choices now," he explained. "One is to take our son home and raise him with my wife. The second is to divorce my wife and marry you, and then we raise our son together."

Tam had seen baby Ethan before and liked him very much. It was hard to say why; maybe the Leonard family had raised him too well, or perhaps it was just the fact that they were bonded by blood. Whatever the case, Tam couldn't simply forget the baby. He really wanted to take him back home.

His love for that child even exceeded his love for his daughter, who had accompanied him for more than twenty years.

Tessie flashed a lonely, bitter smile. "You think clearly enough about your own future, but what about mine?"

"You have two choices, too," he said. "One is to apologize to Erica and marry me. The second is..." He paused, and for that brief instant looked just a little pained. "...is to give me your son and devote yourself to your studies."

"Don't you want to know what happened?"

Tam shook his head. "It doesn't matter. Whether you're alive or dead, you were not lying to me, but to Erica." In fact, that was the reason he wanted her to apologize to Erica. "I admit that I flinched when I knew you were pregnant with the baby. But I regret it now." Indeed, he had found that no matter how busy he was at work, he couldn't help thinking of Tessie's child.

So he'd hired some people to monitor everything that happened with the Leonard family. As soon as he'd heard of Erica taking the child out of the Leonard family house, he had contacted her and gotten the chance to meet Ethan.

Tessie's eyes turned red. She looked at Erica, who was rather obviously watching them from the distance. She said, "I'm afraid... it'll be very hard to get Erica's forgiveness." Tessie was sorry for what she had done to Erica, but the way she saw it, she'd had no choice. The pregnancy had been an accident, but she hadn't wanted to abort the baby. She could only use Erica's kindness to rearrange her life.

Tam knew that it was indeed hard to get Erica's forgiveness for anything. It was clearly the biggest problem for Tessie at the moment. Erica had essentially been her scapegoat. Neither the Leonard nor the Hilton families would go easy on them if they learned the truth.

"You should have thought of it back then," Tam pointed out. Truth be told, he was a little disappointed in Tessie. After all, she had gotten a good deal out of all that had happened; she'd been able to transfer to a new school and begin a new life. But her good friend had been left behind to deal with this whole mess despite being totally innocent.

Because of the baby, Erica's life had been totally changed. She had been forced to marry a man she didn't love. Fortunately, Matthew loved Erica so much that he didn't seem to care whether she had a child or not.

However, it was exactly Matthew's love for Erica that made Tam worried. From what he knew of the man, there was no chance he would let Tessie—or Tam himself—off the hook for anything...

Tears streamed down Tessie's face, and she repeatedly wiped them off with the heel of her hand. "I should've thought of it?" she repeated. "Don't you remember how you treated me back then? You asked me to have an abortion. Have you ever thought of what's good for me?"

This was an ordeal for Tessie. In spite of everything, she really did love this man, who was much older than her. After all, she'd been willing to have a child with him.

"I don't want to talk about this," Tam said carefully. "If we really can get married in the end, I'll make it up to you. The problem now is patching things up with Erica. Avoiding her is not an option. If you don't give her an explanation today, she's sure to be back tomorrow." He knew Erica wouldn't give up until she found out the truth!

Likewise, Tessie was Erica's old friend; she and Rhea knew her the best. They were well aware of how

stubborn she could be.

Tessie took a deep breath. "Erica is from a rich family. She's kind and simple, and her parents have always doted on her. If she had a child out of wedlock, or if anything else happened to her, her father could always just solve the problem for her. But what about me? If my parents found the truth, they might kill me! I'd at least be driven out of the Campbell family. I thought I could rely on you. After all, you have more power and status in Alorith than the Campbell family does... But of course, I couldn't get in touch with you after I was pregnant. You should take some responsibility for all that's happened. I'm not at fault for everything, and I do feel bad for Erica. But so should you, Tam!"

She had taken advantage of Erica's kindness and successfully tricked her into believing that she had died of difficult labor.

However, she had never expected that Erica would end up marrying Matthew. After all, Erica and Matthew only knew each other because of their parents, and prior to their marriage, they had barely spoken or spent any time together.

Tam was willing to agree with Tessie, but only to a point. He knew that she hadn't seen Ethan since giving birth to him. "You're right. I do feel sorry. I'm sorry for letting the Leonard family raise our son. But Tessie, you let that happen too—and you're his mother! How could you be so cruel as to just give him away to someone else? If the Campbell family had disowned you, do you really think I would just sit by and do nothing?"

"It's useless to talk about it now," Tessie retorted. "I have no choice but to move on. I'll apologize to Erica, but you have to play along with me now!" If she didn't continue the deception, she would be doomed.

She wasn't ready to die.

Tam frowned. "What do you mean? Erica is right over there, seeing that you're alive and well. How can you still want to keep lying to her?"

Tessie crossed her arms and said, "I told everyone that Erica was vicious to me at school—that she bullied me, so I was forced to transfer somewhere else. It was the best story I could come up with. Everyone knows she's always been a troublemaker anyway, so they all believed it. You have to pretend you believe it too. It's the only way we can get through this."

Despite himself, Tam cast a worried glance Erica's way. "Tessie, you're kidding yourself. Who do you think the Leonard family will believe—you or Erica? Then there's Matthew. Even if you had evidence on your side, I'm afraid that wouldn't make a difference. He'd still take Erica's side. What will happen then?"

"There's nothing to worry about. Erica is softhearted. I will beg her and ask her to give the child back to me. We can still be on good terms, like we were before. As for Matthew, he has a good relationship with

my sister. Phoebe always wanted to marry him. She must hate Erica's guts now, since she suddenly stepped in and married him instead. Phoebe's sure to take our side, which means so will Matthew."

This struck Tam as naive. "Oh, come on. Who do you think is more important in Matthew's heart—Erica or your sister?"

"My sister! Matthew and Erica were like strangers before they got married. Phoebe may be married to Nathan, but Matthew still cares about her. As long as we work together, we can turn this situation around quickly!" It was unfortunate, but now that things had gotten this far, Erica would have to continue to bear everything.

Tam was uneasy about this plan, but he couldn't think of a better one, so it seemed best to do as Tessie said. Still, there were more problems he could see. "Then how are you going to explain to Erica why you're not dead?" he asked.

CHAPTER 1195 TAKE YOU TO COUR

Tessie bit her lower lip and made a choice.

After parting with Tessie, Tam walked towards his daughter. Julianna immediately grabbed his arm and pulled him to her side. "Dad, stay away from Miss Troublemaker, okay? You don't know how much of a bitch Erica is. Look at Tessie and the state she's in. That's thanks to Erica!"

"Erica?" Tam glanced back at the car, where Erica was waiting, leaning against the passenger door. "What did she do?"

"Erica got Tessie drunk, took her to the sink and tried to drown her. She even took off Tessie's clothes and took pictures of her to blackmail her. Erica did even worse shit, but Tessie wouldn't tell us! She said it hurt too much to remember!" Julianna said angrily.

Tam said nothing. He was listening, and mentally trying to poke holes in Tessie's story.

After waiting for more than ten minutes, Erica finally saw Tessie come over. She looked into Tessie's eyes, red from crying. After a tense moment between them, she broke the silence. "I didn't do anything to you! Just what the hell is going on?"

Tessie's voice was a bit shaky. "I'm sorry, Erica. This is all my fault. You remember how difficult labor was, right? After you took the kid away, I got better, but..." She lowered her head and looked at her shoes. "I lost my memory. I couldn't remember a thing until three months ago. I could remember how to do basic things like tying my shoes or getting dressed, but I didn't know who I was..."

Tessie had thought about this a lot. She'd gone over it a thousand times. She had to make sure her story was perfect, even if it was made up.

"You lost your memory?" Erica was dumbfounded by her explanation. She didn't know whether to laugh

or cry.

"Yes, the doctor said that I lost my memory because of a screw-up when they gave me the epidural. They said I moved too much and the needle slipped and damaged the nerves."

Erica chose to believe her, mainly because her story seemed to make sense. "Well, then why is everyone saying I hurt you? What's up with that?"

Tessie burst into tears and sobbed, "I'm sorry, Erica. If I didn't say that, my parents would have found out what happened. They'd never let me stay here if they knew I had a kid. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry. Please forgive me!" She grabbed Erica's hand, a pitiful expression on her face.

Erica felt bad for her. After all, they used to be so close. They slept in the same bed, shared food, wore the same clothes, and used the same cup.

They laughed and cried together.

She suppressed the sadness in her heart and asked, "Then why didn't you call me? Text me? You got your memories back, right? You must have heard I was going to marry Matthew." Three months ago, she had been engaged to her current hubby. The whole world knew about it. She was viral news for awhile.

Tessie's eyes flashed with guilt. "I was afraid... afraid you'd try to give the kid back to me. My parents would kill me if they found out I had a baby! No father in the picture, no husband, either!"

"That's it? That's why you didn't try to get a hold of me? I thought you were dead! I cried every day! Do you know what I went through?" Erica couldn't hold back her tears anymore.

Tessie's "death" hurt Erica to the core.

The year she vanished, she was really living with Tessie, who was pregnant at the time. She was taking care of her, the both of them living in a basement. Erica never left the country—she knew the place like the back of her hand. It was the perfect plan.

Tessie was very thin. Even at five or six months, the baby bump was not obvious. And she knew how to hide it. She wore bigger clothes, bulky, shapeless sweaters, leggings, black tights, and skinny jeans. Even a scarf. She draped it just right to cover her expanding belly. People couldn't tell she was pregnant, so she could still go to school.

On the other hand, Erica didn't dare go out for long because Wesley and Gifford had their people looking for her ever since she disappeared. One slip and everything would unravel.

Sometimes when she ventured out in the middle of the night, she would still bump into the men they sent. They were quite good at their jobs. She had to be better.

Tessie figured out the ideal place to have her baby. It was a tiny hospital.

After the baby was born, Erica took him to the basement and went back into hiding for a month before she finally came back home.

Those short weeks were a nightmare for Erica.

She burst into tears at the thought of it. "Do you think 'sorry' is going to cut it? Like I can forgive this easily? Tessie, do you know what I had to do? I had to take care of your baby alone!"

Erica didn't know how to take care of a baby. When the baby cried, she didn't know what was wrong or how to help him. Sometimes, he'd cry for hours. She tried her best to calm him down, but he still kept crying. That made her cry.

She knew she couldn't keep doing this, so she gave some money to an elderly mute woman upstairs and asked her to buy formula, change his diapers and bathe the kid.

She ate takeout every day, and sometimes the old lady would give her a bowl of rice. She made do for a month before finally returning home with the baby.

Tessie took two steps forward and hugged her. "Erica, it's all my fault. I'm sorry. I'll make up to you in the future. Don't be angry, okay?"

Erica quickly wiped her tears and pushed Tessie away. "We can't go back to the way things were. I've got a kid to take care of. I know you don't want him, and that's fine. I don't want to give him back. He's with my parents, and they love him like their own. I named him Feb Watts at first, and Dad changed his name to Ethan. He's taken our family name. So, from now on, he's a Leonard. He's not really yours anymore. Even if you want him back, that's not gonna happen."

Tessie murmured, "Ethan Leonard, Ethan..." She also missed her baby.

After a long moment of silence, Erica decided to let it go. She was stupid and made friends with the wrong person. Life was too short to spend time mad about it.

'I've learned a lesson from Tessie, and I will never do something like that again. I've suffered too much for this, ' she comforted herself.

She walked away, and didn't spare Tessie another glance.

Tam ran over and stopped Erica who was about to get in the car. "Mrs. Erica, I still want Ethan. Can you tell your father when you have time?"

Erica glanced at him and answered expressionlessly, "No, you can't have him. I lived in a basement for

nearly a year. I ate takeout for a month and borrowed money to raise the baby. My parents have tried their best to take care of him since I came back home. From now on, he's mine! He won't be going anywhere, except with me!"

Then she got in the car, ignoring Tam.

Tam anxiously stopped the driver who was about to close the door for her. "Erica, I know it's unfair to you. But I really want that child. If anyone misses him, they can come see him anytime. You, Mr. and Mrs. Leonard, anyone! What do you think?"

"No way! Where's your sense of justice? I paid dearly to do something nice for you and Tessie. And what do I get in return? Spit on by my classmates. My reputation ruined at home. An arranged marriage. So something's going to go my way. You'll never get your kid back. That's the price you'll have to pay for ruining my life."

Tam had been calm up till now. But now his voice was on the edge of hysterics. His eyes were wide, his speech too rapid by half. "I'll take you to court!" he threatened. "My sister's a chief justice in the city. You won't win this one...I'll make sure of it!"

Erica always hated being threatened. "Oh, really? You think the Leonards are afraid of you or your sister? Or the Hiltons, for that matter?"

Tam felt like he was being strangled. It became harder and harder to breathe. He had to have that child. He said without thinking, "Aren't you afraid we'll sue you for stealing our child? We can do a DNA test, you know!"

Erica felt that her anger was boiling in her heart. The anger instantly devoured her reason. She pushed the door open and got out of the car. Smack! She slapped Tam without even thinking about it.

Tam was taken aback. He was more than forty, and this was the first time a woman hit him. Just to add insult to injury, the person who slapped him was the same age as his daughter.

For a moment, he didn't know how to respond. He stood there with a blank expression, his head tilted from the slap.

CHAPTER 1196 ASK HER TO KEEP CHANGING SCHOOLS

When Julianna saw Erica slap her father, she ran over quickly, grabbed the other girl's clothes tightly and shouted, "Erica, don't hit my dad! You ungrateful bitch! He helped you out of kindness, and now you do this. I'm going to beat the shit out of you!"

The driver rushed to grab Julianna. She was about to hit his boss's wife. "Please let go of Mrs. Erica!"

"Are you high? She hit my father! I need to teach her a lesson!"

Tam was normally a rich, successful, handsome man. Julianna was her father's biggest fan. She admired him a lot.

If someone slapped your idol, you'd probably have much the same reaction. Besides, it was a matter of honor. Julianna had to go after Erica.

Hearing what Julianna said, Tam finally came to his senses. He held his daughter's hand and said, "Julianna, let go of her."

"Dad! She hit you! That's not cool. I need to slap her too!"

Erica glared at Julianna and answered, not to be outdone, "He deserved it. Ask your father why I smacked him, instead of blaming me! Go on—ask him!"

Julianna thought her words made sense. She let go of Erica and looked at her father. "Okay, Dad, why did she hit you?"

Tam put his arm around her shoulder and said, "Julianna, don't worry about your old dad's business. Let's get out of here, okay?"

Then Julianna was forcibly taken away by her father. Erica got into her car.

The two cars left, leaving a woman standing nearby, watching them drive away.

Tessie watched Erica's car speeding off and felt uneasy. She was afraid her lie would be exposed and everyone would hate her, instead of Erica.

'No, no! I can't let that happen. But what can I do about it?'

Determined, she took out her phone and dialed Phoebe's number. As soon as her sister picked up, Tessie sobbed, "Hey, Phoebe! You'll never guess who came to see me. Yeah, that's right. Erica. I'm scared."

Phoebe frowned and asked, "Did she try to bully you again?"

"Yes, she also warned me not to tell anyone. She said even if I did, she wasn't afraid, because we don't have any evidence for what she did..." 'I'm sorry, Erica. I'm so sorry! I really have no choice. I have to keep lying,' she thought to herself.

Phoebe was so angry that she pounded the table and said, "She's gone too far this time!"

"Erica's always been like that, you know."

Reminded by Tessie, Phoebe remembered she'd known Erica for awhile. Each time she got together with

her, she came away with the impression that Erica was a bad apple. Stubborn, intractable.

"Don't worry. Next time she shows up and tries to push you around, just call me." Phoebe had made up her mind to let Matthew know what kind of person Erica actually was! He should know exactly who he married!

"Okay, thanks. You're the best."

After the phone call with her younger sister, Phoebe immediately called Matthew. "Hi, Matthew. It's Phoebe. Listen, did you know Erica went to see my sister?"

"Yes."

"She threatened her. Told her that she didn't want to see her face again in Alorith. Said she would beat Tessie every time she saw her. My sister even transferred to a new school to get away from Erica, but why can't she stop bullying my sister? What should she do?"

Matthew said calmly, "Ask your sister to keep changing schools, until Erica is satisfied."

That was not the answer Phoebe wanted. Embarrassed, she said, "Matthew, are you going to let Erica bully other girls like this? She's my sister, dammit!"

"That's between Tessie and Erica. I'm not going to get involved." The way Matthew saw it, Tessie was a woman who didn't even want her own child and pretended to be dead to deceive everyone. She deserved to be beaten!

Taking a deep breath, Phoebe tried her best to suppress the anger surging in her heart and said, "Well, I see. I'll try to learn the truth first."

"Mmm hmm." He gave a simple reply and hung up.

At the Pearl Villa District

Erica walked into the villa slowly and put on her slippers without even thinking about it. Before she entered the living room, a sweet smell caressed her nostrils.

And that drew her interest. She took a few steps towards the kitchen and saw Matthew busy cooking in there.

He heard her come in. He looked up at her without saying anything and continued fixing the meal.

Erica wanted to ignore Matthew, but she couldn't because whatever he was cooking smelt so good.

She had to walk over to him and asked, "Hey good-looking. What are you cooking?"

"You got here just in time. Go to the fridge and get the sugar out. Hurry up," said Matthew.

"Okay!" Reflexively, she walked towards the fridge.

It was not until she entered the walk-in fridge that she snapped back to her senses, wondering why she had to listen to him.

But she had already spotted the bottle of sugar. Pouting her lips, she reluctantly took the bottle and walked out of the fridge.

In the kitchen, Matthew was stirring something in the glass container. She leaned her head over and saw that the mix in the container was chocolate-colored. "What are you doing? Is that chocolate?"

Matthew took the sugar bottle from her hand and poured some sugar into the mixture. "Smart girl. Got it in one."

"So you know how to make chocolate?" Erica thought Matthew was a great guy. He was rich, that much was true, but he kept surprising her with how much he knew how to do.

"Yes." He figured he'd defray any other questions before she had a chance to ask them. "Gwyn liked this dessert, so I had the cook teach me how to make it."

Erica's eyes were fixed on the bowl. "Wow, you're so good to Gwyn."

The man glanced at her and didn't deny it.

He cut a pat of butter and dropped it in, letting it melt into the mixture. "Do you want me to teach you how?"

In fact, Erica also wanted to have a try. She nodded immediately, "Sure! Sounds like fun!" With just a few words and a pleasant scent, all the stress she felt from Tessie and Tam melted away. She was focused on making chocolate.

Matthew just stood there. He looked at her in disgust and said, "Go wash your hands."

'Oh... I haven't washed my hands yet...'

She went to the sink, turned on the tap and quickly washed her hands. Then she took out a few tissues to wipe her hands and ran over. "I'm all washed up now. Let me at it!"

Matthew put down the tools in his hands and moved over.

As soon as she got the spoon, Erica started to stir the mixture in the glass container like him. "Do I need

to put anything else in it?"

"Yes. The rum. I'll go get some."

"Okay, go ahead. I'll take care of this." Erica continued to stir the mixture enthusiastically.

Matthew wanted to tell her to slow down, but then he decided against it. He went upstairs to get the rum.

When Matthew came downstairs with the rum, he heard a loud bang from the kitchen.

He was sure the sound came from there.

Suddenly, he had a bad feeling. He quickened his pace and went back into the kitchen.

There was no sign of Erica there. He took a few steps forward and saw the dumbfounded girl squatting on the ground.

The ground was a mess. The glass container had fallen to the ground and broken into several pieces. A gooey mess met his eyes, spreading over the kitchen floor.

Seeing Matthew come over, Erica apologized in a timid voice, "I... I didn't mean to." She stared at the broken glass container. Someone had to clean this up. She figured that was her job.

As soon as she reached out for the shards, Matthew immediately stopped her. "Don't move!"

CHAPTER 1197 THE WEAKER BRANCH BREAKS FIRS

But it was too late. The glass fragment scratched Erica's hand. She cried out, "Ah!"

Blood oozed out from her finger.

Matthew grabbed her hand and walked her away from the broken glass.

But then, Erica stepped on the chocolate, slipped and fell back awkwardly. "Argh!"

Matthew pulled her up towards him, and Erica stumbled into his arms.

The kitchen floor was a complete mess.

Frowning, Matthew inspected Erica's hand. The cut was small, but the bleeding hadn't stopped.

"We should take care of that," he said, looking at the blood on her frail finger.

He swooped her up in his arms and strode out of the kitchen.

Surprised, Erica wrapped her hand around his neck and said, "Matthew, I can walk..." She only cut her finger. Her legs were still very much in working condition. There was no need for him to carry her.

The man glanced at her coldly. "Do you want to draw a chocolate map on the carpet?"

She looked at her chocolate-stained feet. 'Oh, right.' The living room was fully carpeted. She would create a mess of it if she walked through. 'Oh well, ' she thought, stealing a glance at the man.

He gently placed her on the sofa in the living room. Taking off her dirty shoes, he threw them into the trash can. "Wait here. I'll go get the medical kit."

"Okay." Erica casually placed her bleeding finger into her mouth and sucked on it.

Matthew grabbed her hand and scolded, "What are you doing?"

She gaped at him. "It hurts. If I suck on the wound, it would hurt less. Besides, sucking on it will disinfect the wound and stop the bleeding."

Matthew sighed. "Who told you that saliva stops bleeding?"

"It doesn't?" she asked, her eyes widening in question. She did this every time she hurt her fingers.

Matthew shook his head. "No, it doesn't. There's nothing in the saliva that could cure a wound or disinfect it. On the contrary, the moisture and the protease in the saliva would most likely slow down the clotting. Your ideas are not scientific at all."

Erica felt kind of stupid. But she stood her ground and said, "It doesn't matter. I do this all the time..."

He had to explain further. "Let me tell you something. I once read in 'The New England Journal of Medicine' that a man with diabetes hurt his finger while riding a bicycle. He sucked his thumb, hoping to stop the bleeding. As a result of that, he was infected with an oral bacteria called *Eikenella Corrodens*. Finally, they had to cut off his thumb to stop the infection."

Erica's mouth fell open. "No way! You are just exaggerating." But Matthew looked very serious. There was no trace of humor in his face.

"Well, if you don't believe me, continue to suck on the wound. If the cut is deep, you'll need tetanus shots. And if it's not properly handled, the wound will be infected, and if it becomes serious, you may have to cut off your finger as well."

Erica's eyes went wide in fear. It was just a small cut in her finger, and it only bled a little. Why was he threatening her with finger removal stories? She stammered, "Wh—what are you waiting for? Go and get some band aids!"

Matthew was satisfied with the fear in her eyes and went upstairs to get the medicine.

He was back in two minutes with the medical kit, and squatted in front of her.

He opened the kit and took out the disinfectant spray. The action reminded the two of them of the time when Erica had disinfected Watkins' wound at that very spot.

Erica didn't give it much thought. The memory just popped up, but she continued to watch Matthew disinfect her cut.

He, on the other hand, scowled at the thought. This woman couldn't even take proper care of herself. Why did she have to take care of another man?

After wrapping a band aid on her finger, Matthew put away the medicine box and asked her gently, "Does it still hurt?"

Erica nodded honestly, "A little." But it was nothing she couldn't handle.

Matthew knelt down on one knee in front of her. He placed his hand on the back of her head and pulled her towards him. Before Erica could say anything, he kissed her.

His lips fell softly on hers. It caught her by surprise and she didn't know how to react.

Sensing her distraction, Matthew withdrew. He looked into her confused eyes and asked, "Didn't you say it still hurt?"

"Are you saying that you are trying to ease the pain by kissing me? Is that scientific?" she asked playfully.

He replied seriously, "Yes, it is. Kissing promotes the secretion of happy hormones, which can relieve pain. Also, the longer you kiss, the less pain you will feel." His voice was low, deep and magnetic.

But he sounded serious as well. 'Is he telling the truth?'

But before she could decide, he pulled her in for another kiss.

She felt like he was taking advantage of her injury.

Matthew refused to let her wear any shoes in order to prevent her from entering the kitchen and causing more trouble.

Erica had no choice but to sit on the carpet and watch the man clean up the kitchen. "Are you angry?"

Removing the mess on the floor, Matthew answered without raising his head, "Not everyone is as petty

as you are."

Erica wasn't happy to hear that. 'Humph! I'm petty, am I?' But this time, it was really her mistake. She had no right to argue. "Matthew, can I ask you a question?"

"Ask."

"If Na—" She was about to use Nathan as an example, but on second thought, realized it was inappropriate. So, she quickly revised. "Imagine that one of your good friends dies, but then suddenly comes back to life one day. He doesn't contact you, but the reason is that he has lost his memory. Will you forgive him and still be friends with him?"

This time, Matthew stopped what he was doing and looked up at the depressed girl. He knew what she was talking about, so he cut right to the chase. "Is Tessie still alive?"

"Yes." With a sigh, Erica cupped her chin with her hands. She was really upset now. She just had to talk to someone about this, or she would go mad. "Phoebe said that I had cursed Tessie on purpose. But I just found out that Tessie is still alive. Whom do you believe—me or her?"

Matthew threw the dirty rag into the trash can and washed his hands. He was getting ready to make chocolate again. "The truth is laid out in plain sight. She is still alive."

Erica asked, "So, you believe me?"

"Yes."

Her eyes lit up and her expression was lighter. "What do you think I should do now?"

"That depends on whether you want to pursue the matter or not."

"What if I do? What if I don't?"

"If you want to pursue it, investigate and find the truth. If you don't want to run behind it, just let it go and forget it ever happened." Matthew only wanted her to be happy. He would respect her choice, whatever it was.

But he wouldn't let her know what he would do.

Erica's face fell again. "What if I can't handle the truth?"

She had just found out that Tessie was no longer the same Tessie she used to know. She didn't know when she had changed to this new person.

"There is nothing you can't handle. Don't be too kind to people who hurt you. Fight back, no matter who

it is. If you don't, they will continue to bully you. You don't need me to tell you this, do you?"

'If she doesn't fight back, she would be taken advantage of again. People would hurt her, just like what Tessie did,' he thought, gritting his teeth. He had to guide her to be ruthless, so that she could gradually become stronger.

Matthew was well aware of how the society worked; the weaker branch would break first.

Erica sighed. Of course, there was no need for him to teach her this. Erica had always known how to handle bullies. But this time, it was Tessie. The girl who used to be her best friend. That was why she was hesitating to fight back.

She looked at the man in the kitchen. "So, you are saying that I should dig up the truth, and if Tessie had really hidden something from me, I should get my revenge?"

"Smart girl," Matthew said.

CHAPTER 1198 MEN ARE NOT AFRAID OF SOURNESS

In the kitchen, Matthew methodically added some ingredients into a glass bowl and began to stir.

As soon as Erica stood up from the carpet, he snapped, "Sit down! Don't move!"

He had no intention of letting her into the kitchen again!

His wife pursed her lips and spoke in a low voice. "Don't get all excited. I just wanted to ask you one more question." In fact, what she really wanted was to learn how to make chocolate. Why couldn't he teach her?

"Well, go ahead and ask. Just stay where you are!" Matthew insisted.

"If I'm sued, will you help me?"

Matthew stopped what he was doing. Pressing his hands against the counter, he fixed his sharp eyes on the woman and said, "Remember your identity, no matter when or where you are!"

"Huh?" Erica's confusion was plain in her face.

"You're Mrs. Hilton, and I'm Mr. Hilton. If Mr. Hilton doesn't help Mrs. Hilton, who else should he help?" Matthew asked. 'Not Tessie,' he added silently to himself. 'I'm not crazy!'

His explanation drew a smile out of Erica. "So if I'm in trouble, you'll help me out? I mean, without telling my father?"

"The same answer as above!" Matthew declared.

"And if I want you to help me investigate something, you'll help me then too?"

"Same as above!"

Erica thought his choice of words was odd. Still, she was glad he seemed so willing. "Then can you help me investigate Tessie?" she asked. Tessie had been away for so long, and Erica had been taking care of Tessie's son for all this time. She deserved the truth. If nothing was done, Tam would not give up custody of Ethan, and Erica wouldn't be able to eat or sleep well for the rest of her life.

"Sure," Matthew answered.

Erica hadn't expected Matthew to be so easy-going this time. So she decided to keep going. "Can you do me another favor?"

"Of course."

"Great. Remember you said yes!" There was a cunning look in the woman's eyes. For his part, Matthew suddenly had a bad feeling that he shouldn't have answered so quickly.

His wife's next request was as terrible as he feared. "Teach me how to make chocolate!"

"Forget it!" he blurted. That was a bridge too far! He wouldn't agree to anything that involved her entering the kitchen.

"Oh, come on. Just let me try!" Erica pouted, looking just as gloomy as her husband.

Matthew ignored her and went back to stirring.

There was a pause as Erica decided to change tactics. Blowing him a kiss, she said, "Matthew, if you teach me how to make chocolate, I'll accompany you to watch a horror movie tonight!"

Matthew looked up, thoughtfully studying her sweet expression. Did his father-in-law know how good she was at turning black into white?

'She made it sound like she is doing me a favor. Seriously, who accompanies whom?' he thought.

"Come on," she went on. "Just stand right by and watch me and tell me what to do. If you're so worried about me making a mess, well, hold my hand and teach me how to do it right."

'Hold her hand?' Matthew wryly thought it was good enough just to imagine the scene.

Still, the more she used her charms on him, the harder it was to say no. "Come here!" he said, his mouth barely moving.

Erica started to run over, and then, realizing she was barefoot, went to the porch and put on a pair of slippers.

A moment later she was at the counter with Matthew behind her, teaching her how to stir.

It was fun at first, but her arms started to tire after a few minutes. As they went on, Matthew started to take over, holding her hand.

"Matthew, when will you compensate me for my macaroons?" she asked.

Matthew had her hold the bowl in both hands, and then started stirring with one hand. He put his free arm around her waist gradually pulling her closer. "Now, why should I compensate you for those?" he teased. "I'm the one who made them."

Erica explained, "Yes, you did. But you made them for me, so when they were done, they were mine. It was my food. So shouldn't you compensate me?"

Once again, Matthew found no way to refute her logic. But he could be just as stubborn as her. "No, I don't think so!"

Nodding at the bowl, where the batter was now becoming recognizable as chocolate, she warned, "Then when you're done making this, I'll eat it all."

Matthew was deadpan. "Go ahead. I wasn't going to have it anyway." In fact, he didn't care for desserts.

Erica was so surprised that she could have discovered a new continent. She couldn't help but stare at him over her shoulder. "So, you made this for me?"

Matthew raised his eyebrows. Why else would he have made it? Not for himself, certainly. Still, he decided to tell half a lie. "Not exactly. For you and Gwyn."

"Okay!" Erica's feelings were mixed. At first she'd been intrigued by Matthew suddenly starting to make chocolate for her. But now it seemed he was making it for Gwyn, and just giving her some by the way.

She was silent for a moment as she gripped the bowl. Matthew sure seemed to like Gwyn a lot. He had mentioned her several times! But he never mentioned Godwin or Godfrey.

Matthew went and fetched a mold, poured the chocolate batter into it, and placed it in the refrigerator. When it had cooled and hardened, then it would be ready to eat.

While he did that, Erica went to the living room and sat down in front of the TV. Joining her moments later, Matthew took a black plum from the fruit tray on the coffee table and offered it to her. "What's your plan tonight?" he asked.

Erica took the fruit but didn't eat it. "Nothing. I have a class in the afternoon. I'll beautify my pictures tonight." She had taken a lot of photos recently but hadn't retouched them.

"Are those photos very important? Are they your homework?"

"No, just some pictures I snapped," Erica said, shaking her head. In order to practice focus and exposure, she had taken a lot of photos. At least seventy of them were no good and would eventually be deleted.

"I'm going to attend a charity auction tonight," Matthew suggested after a moment. "Let's go together."

Erica looked from the television to his face. "What am I supposed to do at a charity auction?" Wesley and Blair had attended many similar occasions, but Erica never went with them.

Casually, Matthew drummed his fingers on the sofa's armrest. "To see if there is anything you like. If there is, you bid and get to bring it home."

Erica finally took a bite of the black plum, made a face, and offered it back to him. "I don't like this. It's too sour."

Matthew frowned down at the fruit. "What do you want me to do with it?"

"Just eat it. Men are not afraid of sourness!" As Erica said this, she was thinking of Wesley, who always was willing to eat whatever she disliked.

"Who told you that?" asked her husband.

"My father will eat whatever I don't eat. Matthew, are you afraid of sourness too, just like I am?" Realizing this possibility, she couldn't help but snicker.

Matthew was left speechless. He didn't mind sourness. What he did mind was another person taking a bite of something, and then expecting him to finish it.

Only Erica dared to do this to him!

Steeling himself, he grasped the plum with confidence, took a large bite, and choked it down. "Men are indeed not afraid of sourness!" he declared, though inwardly he was screaming.

Erica nodded. She had been right all along!

Pointing at the fruit tray, she put on an exaggerated, commanding tone. "I want to eat a banana! Hand me one!"

Matthew, the powerful CEO, instantly turned into a humble servant. He silently picked up a banana,

peeled it deftly, and handed it to his wife.

Taking a bite of it, Erica said, "I'm not going to this charity event. I'm not interested in that kind of thing. If you see anything I might like, you can buy it for me. But it's okay if there isn't anything."

Matthew glanced at her. "I'm not getting you anything if you're not going with me."

Her brow furrowed. "Um... Well, fine, then. I don't really need anything." She was sure Matthew would have plenty of acquaintances at this event, but they'd all be strangers to her, so she would rather not go.

Matthew's face turned hard as he tried to restrain his anger. When had he ever been turned down by a woman again and again like this? Never! "Well, I won't force you to go," he said at last. "But men usually go to this kind of activity with a female companion; it's not proper to just go alone. So if you won't come, I'll just have to find someone else."

"Okay then," she said. Her tone was a bit testy. Even so, she seemed more interested in finishing her banana than the conversation.

Matthew was even angrier now, and he stewed in his frustration, trying to think of a way to coax her into coming.

Suddenly she turned to him, her eyes wide. "Are you going to take Phoebe with you?"

CHAPTER 1199 LITTLE PRINCESS

Erica figured that if she didn't go to the charity auction with Matthew, her husband would definitely ask Phoebe to accompany him.

Matthew didn't answer right away. Phoebe's name hadn't even crossed his mind at that point.

Nonetheless, he nodded calmly, "Well, yeah. I wouldn't want to waste my time looking for someone else."

Erica handed him the banana peel and said, "If you throw that into the trash can for me, I'll go with you."

It was really childish, but she just didn't want to leave her seat.

"If you don't want to go, don't force yourself to do so." He remained in his seat.

"I want to! Why wouldn't I want to go? How could I refuse such a good opportunity?" If she didn't go, she would be creating an opportunity for her husband to spend his time and money on Phoebe! 'No way! That woman had treated me like that. Why should I create opportunities for Phoebe to be with Matthew?'

After getting the answer he had hoped for, Matthew stood up to dispose the banana peel.

He took out his phone and made a call. After making some arrangements, he returned to Erica and watched TV with her for a while.

Half an hour later, the doorbell rang. Erica, who had dozed off in Matthew's arms, woke up with a start when she heard the doorbell. "Who is it?"

Matthew checked his phone and then answered, "I'll get it."

Erica sat up straight and watched as he walked to the door.

She heard Paige's voice. "Mr. Matthew, we've brought everything that you had asked for. And the chefs are here too."

"Good." Matthew entered the living room first.

Paige walked in after him, followed by several others, all carrying boxes in their hands. The two chefs at the back of the group went straight to the kitchen.

Matthew called out to Erica, "Come and have a look."

Four people carried in two racks of clothes—evening dresses of different styles and colors.

Paige opened one of the wooden cases which was filled with stylish shoes, and several brocade boxes beside it were filled with all kinds of jewelry.

All Erica had to do was choose.

She looked at Matthew in astonishment and asked him in a low voice, "Is the auction that grand? Do I need to be dressed so formally?"

"Not really. These are simple dresses." In Matthew's eyes, these were not the kind of evening dresses a woman would wear at a grand banquet. It was suitable for special activities and small parties.

'Whatever you say,' Erica thought with a smile. She walked to the clothes rack and tried to choose the best one. She asked the man behind her, "Isn't it still too early? I have classes this afternoon."

"Pick the dress now. You won't have to do it in a hurry later. After class, you can have dinner and then do your hairdressing. I think you can make it in time that way." Matthew had arranged everything in advance.

"Alright!"

With his help, Erica carried a few dresses upstairs and tried them on. Finally, she decided on a light pink Korean dress with a short front and a long back hemline.

It was a halter dress, with her collarbones and shoulders slightly exposed, and the hemline was embroidered with flower petals.

She chose crystal stilettos to go with the dress.

Erica didn't pay much attention to the jewelry. She didn't need to wear a necklace since it was a halter dress, and she preferred the earrings which she was already wearing. She also picked out a platinum bracelet to go with the crystal shoes and the pink dress.

Post lunch, the chocolate batter in the fridge was frozen. Erica took out a chocolate bar and bit into it. Matthew's handmade chocolate was yummiier than the ones sold outside!

She grabbed a square piece and brought it near Matthew's mouth. "Have a taste of your own cooking. It's so delicious!"

After hesitating for a moment, he finally opened his mouth.

"I'll give some to Gwyn when I pass by their place," she said.

Sheffield's villa was less than a kilometer away from Matthew's.

"You don't have to," Matthew said dismissively.

"Why not?" she asked, chewing on another piece of chocolate.

"I just called Evelyn. Gwyn is at the Thompson family house."

"Oh no! But you made so many chocolates. Such a pity!" Staring at the dozens of chocolate bars of different sizes, Erica sighed. She felt sorry for Gwyn.

"Eat them all yourself."

"No way! How about I bring some to Godwin and Godfrey?"

Matthew sighed silently. "They are not home either. Godfrey is at the Martin family house, and Godwin is with Gwyn." 'I made the chocolates for her. Why is it so difficult to make this woman understand that?' he wondered in resignation.

"Are you serious? So... I'll have to eat all this by myself?"

"Yes."

She tilted her head and suggested, "How about I bring some for Hyatt?"

Matthew was speechless. He didn't even want to give the chocolates to the kids; why would he let Hyatt eat the chocolates he made? Why did this woman have to share the things he gave her with someone else? "No! Keep them for yourself!"

"But why? Hyatt is my good friend!"

"Well, he is not MY good friend! If you want to share chocolates with him, make some yourself!" Of course, if she did make chocolates, Matthew wouldn't let her give them to anyone either. He would eat them himself!

'Humph! What a mean fellow!' Erica thought grumpily. She had no choice but to eat all those delicious treats herself.

After their little spat over the chocolate, Matthew drove Erica to school.

As soon as the car stopped in front of the gate, she unfastened the seat belt. "Thank you for the ride! Bye!" Just as she opened the door to get out, he grabbed her hand.

Confused, she turned around and asked, "What's wrong?"

Matthew looked at her, expressionless. "Aren't you going to thank me for dropping you to school?"

'I just did. Didn't he hear?' she wondered. She repeated anyway, "Thank you!"

"That's not what I want." So he heard her thanks, but that did not satisfy him. "Then what do you want?" she asked, confused.

Matthew pulled her closer to him. He looked down at the girl in his arms and accused her softly, "I thought you already knew my needs very well."

'His needs? Oh!' Erica understood immediately. She sat up, held the man's face and kissed his lips gently. "Thank you, Matthew!"

With a smile in his eyes, he decided to let her go for the time being.

He kissed her forehead and said, "I'll pick you up after class."

"Okay, bye!"

That night, at the tenth autumn charity auction in Alorith

The auction hall was filled with hundreds of people when Matthew arrived at the venue with Erica.

The other guests had to pay a deposit, but Matthew was the only one who didn't need to go through this procedure.

The person in charge led Matthew and Erica to the exclusive VIP seats. Along the way, many people walked over to greet Matthew.

Erica was in the spotlight as well. She looked very young in her light pink evening dress, and her long black hair was combed into a princess style bun.

She wore light make-up and had an innocent smile on her lips, revealing her lovely canines and her adorable dimples. She looked lively all the while as she held on to Matthew's arm and followed him obediently.

Her image that day was not in line with her title of "Miss Troublemaker" at all. She looked like a lovely, noble princess from a royal family.

Two seats were open for them in the front row of the auditorium; they were the best seats to appreciate the items on auction.

But... Erica's smile froze at the sight of the woman sitting next to their seats. It was Phoebe! Didn't Matthew say that he wouldn't bring Phoebe?

CHAPTER 1200 GENEROUS MRS. HILTON

'It's just an auction. Why did Matthew invite both Phoebe and me? What does he want?' Erica thought.

While the crowd watched, Phoebe waved at Matthew gracefully and called his name enthusiastically. But she knew she had to at least acknowledge Erica, so she reluctantly nodded to her.

Erica gave her a fake smile and thought, 'This woman is really annoying. It's like she's stalking Matthew.'

Matthew held Erica's hand and helped her sit down first.

Erica wasn't playing that game, though. She was about to take a seat, then suddenly moved one seat over. Now Matthew had to sit next to Erica, no matter what. Phoebe would be on the end.

And Erica was there, smiling smugly. She wasn't going to let Phoebe get any closer to Matthew than she already was.

After the person in charge of the event walked away from them, Erica whispered in the man's ear, "You told me you weren't inviting Phoebe along. Why is she here?"

Matthew looked at her, a hint of a smile in his eyes. "She isn't here because of me."

If his suspicions were correct, Phoebe might be attending this charity auction representing the Campbell family.

"Then why is she here?" Erica said, in a demanding tone. If she hadn't chosen a seat first, Phoebe would have sat next to Matthew.

After thinking for a while, Matthew answered honestly, "Hard to say. Maybe the organizer knows that Phoebe and I are friends, and invited her along." After all, he had attended quite a few events with Nathan and Phoebe before.

What he said made sense. Seeing that she couldn't win this one, Erica dropped the topic. She didn't care why Phoebe was there as long as Matthew hadn't specifically invited her.

Many people saw Erica and Matthew sitting together in the first row and whispering intimately. While they didn't know what was being said, this helped bust the rumor that Matthew was in love with another woman.

Soon, the auction formally began. It was held once a year, and the guests were famous people in the city. The items on auction were real rarities.

The first item was a jade pendant from the Qing Dynasty with two fish as decoration. Its final price—six million—shocked Erica.

Matthew handed the bidding sign to Erica and said, "Bid on whatever you want." Knowing that his wife was loath to spend money, he added, "I'll pay for it. Consider it a gift from me. Use my credit card!"

Sure enough! His words excited her. "Really?"

"Absolutely!" He had never lied to her.

Erica nodded her head and said excitedly, "Wow! Okay, thanks!"

"No problem!" As long as she was happy.

However, Erica was not interested in the first few pieces, and Phoebe didn't seem all that intrigued either. Matthew sat there, dispassionate, bidding on nothing, as if he were there just to watch.

So far, the auction seemed quite boring to Erica. Finally, when she was about to fall asleep, the item in the auctioneer's hand woke her up.

It was a bookmark made of gold, a historical item from the National Museum of Mipburg whose collection had fallen in private hands. The bookmark was very thin and delicate, fashioned in the shape of a leaf, and engraved with rather elaborate patterns.

The starting bid was ten thousand. Erica was interested and was about to raise the bidding sign, but Phoebe was one step ahead of her. "Thirty thousand!" Phoebe said.

Erica was deliberating as to whether to raise the price or not. Someone else took advantage of her silence and shouted, "Fifty thousand!"

She knew she had to act now. She raised the bid sign and said, "Sixty thousand!"

A smile flashed across Matthew's eyes. 'Ah, something she's interested in.'

However, next to her, Phoebe stared at the item displayed onstage and increased the price again. "Eighty thousand!"

Erica turned her head to stare at the woman who had just bid against her. She felt this woman was competing against her deliberately, outbidding her at every turn. Was it real, or just an illusion?

So she did something that was a bit out of character. Erica decided to let Phoebe have the final bid. Phoebe was pregnant. Why should she compete against a pregnant woman?

At last, the deal was closed at eighty thousand dollars and Phoebe got the bookmark.

The second item that aroused Erica's interest was a butterfly brooch. The starting price was one hundred thousand. As soon as she raised the bidding sign, Phoebe decided to step in and raise the price. "One hundred and fifty thousand!" Phoebe declared.

Erica was surprised. But she chalked it up to sheer coincidence. She wasn't that paranoid, after all. It was an auction, right? And people went to auctions to bid on things.

And the same thing happened with the third item. Erica's suspicions were confirmed. She was sure that Phoebe was deliberately trying to outbid her. One time is coincidence, twice is suspect. Three times is deliberate.

She gritted her teeth, her anger boiling in her heart. Finally, she asked Matthew, "Do you care how much I spend here?"

The man looked into her eyes, and he could tell that the girl was obviously angry. Although he didn't know why she was so angry, he still answered her question. "That depends."

"Well... How about this? There are about twelve items left. Can you bid on them and give them to me?"

Erica was angry, so her voice was a little louder than normal. Phoebe heard every word she said.

She looked at Erica in disbelief and exclaimed, "Erica, are you nuts? You trying to drive Matthew into the

poorhouse?"

Erica glanced at her coldly. "Why do you care how I spend my husband's money, Mrs. Green?"

Erica stressed the words "Mrs. Green." Of course, she was reminding Phoebe of who she was and warning her not to go after someone else's husband.

As if unaware of the hostility between the two women, Matthew replied calmly, "Sounds good."

Phoebe was angry, but there was no reason for her to stop Matthew from agreeing to Erica's request, so she had to curb her anger and bite her tongue.

Then, Matthew started to bid on the items in person.

When he got the sixth one, Erica couldn't stand it anymore. She tugged at the man's sleeve and said, "This isn't fun anymore, can we stop..."

Her heart ached for the money he spent. The items became more and more extravagant and expensive as the auction wore on. The jade bracelet Matthew had just bid on was worth over ten million!

Matthew held her hand and gave it a comforting squeeze to calm her down.

At the end of the auction, Matthew's action shocked everybody. The twelve items topped 70 million. Matthew acted nonchalant about it, like he burned through that amount every day.

Then came the charity dinner. Matthew took Erica to the table and sat down, and Phoebe sat with another woman nearby.

Erica heard two ladies sitting opposite her talking to each other. "I like those earrings a lot but Mr. Matthew snatched them up!"

"So why are you bitching about it, Mrs. Green? Your husband's the head of the city hall. Why don't you let him talk to Matthew in private to see if he can get you the earrings?"

"Well... I don't think it's a good idea."

"Why not? Money can work magic. I like that vase too. I'm going to ask my husband to do the same thing."

Erica overheard the whole conversation.

She rolled her eyes and came up with an idea.

Matthew was busy with logistics and organization at his own company, tapping a message out on his

phone. Erica leaned in and whispered in her husband's ear. "Can I give the items we bid on to someone else?"

"They are yours now. Up to you."

"But you spent so much money on them!"

The man laughed. 'Since she owns the items, shouldn't I be asking that question?' "And? It's only money."

'Wow. What a nice guy, ' Erica thought.

When she was at the auction she noticed the oohs and ahhs by the rich women in attendance. They were excited by the items Matthew bid on. But they knew there was no way to put up more money than him, so they gave up.

Erica made a note of who wanted what, then had the auctioneers hand out the items to each one of them, under the name Mrs. Hilton.

The women's mood turned from disappointment to elation, and not a little surprise. They didn't need to bid on the treasures they wanted, and someone even arranged for these precious items to be given to them directly. Who could turn down an offer like that?

So, Erica, or rather Mrs. Hilton, earned a reputation for being generous. She impressed the other aristocrats. And all before the charity dinner had even ended.

In the evening, when they returned to the villa, Erica wept silently holding two of the treasures. She felt sorry for herself for being so generous. She had just given total strangers gifts worth tens of millions.