

TMBA 1261

CHAPTER 1261 ERICA'S WEIRD LOGIC

Erica casually patted the bag of fruits and said, "So make your choice now. Who will you stand with: your wife or your goddess? Think twice before you answer me!"

Matthew's answer came back instantly, as sudden as a gunshot. "My goddess!"

Against her will, Erica's hand went to her heart. He might as well have shot her.

Hating herself for even that momentary show of weakness, she steeled herself and told her husband, "Fine! Didn't you say once that you didn't care about the silly trifles between women? Then you will have to turn a blind eye to what I'm going to do. What do you think of that?"

"What do I think?" Matthew raised his eyebrows. "What makes you confident enough to bargain with me after you've beaten me?" Her arrogance astounded him.

Erica held her chin up, her smile full of pride and happiness. "Well, I was born into a rich family. I've been this confident since I was a child!" There was nothing in her life she was more proud of than knowing herself to be the daughter of Blair and Wesley!

Matthew lowered his head in a partial effort to hide the smirk on his lips. When he finally looked up, his face was blank again. "I suppose I'll just wait and see."

"Wait for what?"

He gave a little shrug. "See how you are going to deal with Phoebe."

Erica began, "My plan is simple. First, you have to get her pregnant again."

"What?" That was a far cry from what Matthew would have guessed. What was on this woman's mind? He had dealt with many bizarre and complicated problems in his life, but Erica's weird logic was something else. "Now, why should I do that?" he asked. "Shouldn't I be having children with you?"

"Yes, and you will. But you have to make her pregnant too, so that I can push her to the ground in front of you. You will see how I give her a miscarriage, just like she's accused me. Otherwise, I would be wronged!"

Matthew was usually calm in the face of danger and big events, but here, now, he was utterly flustered and furious. Trying to regain his composure, he sputtered, "Don't you mind if I make her pregnant?"

"Oh, yes, that reminds me," she said spitefully. "I don't want to share a man with others. How about this? You find another man to make her pregnant, and then I'll push her down. How about that?"

"Absolutely not! An unborn baby is also a life!" In the back of Matthew's mind, it struck him as bizarre that he was now the one trying to talk his wife into having a heart. Not only was this an awful idea, but he really had always believed her innocent of what she was accused.

But then again, if Erica insisted on getting Phoebe pregnant again, Matthew would ultimately find someone to do it, though that someone would never be Matthew himself!

Erica flinched; her anger ebbed somewhat, and she realized that her husband was right. An unborn baby was as precious a life as anyone's. In her right mind, she knew that she could never actually make herself do what she'd just suggested. When she could speak again, she said, "Well...how about I force her to apologize to me?"

"Do whatever you see fit to do," said Matthew. He would support her unconditionally, whatever she did.

Suddenly there was a glint in Erica's eyes. "Let's make a deal first! You can't punish me for Phoebe. And you can't protect her or impede my plan!"

"All right, I won't..." Matthew paused, irritation flickering on his face before repeating what he had said before. "I don't have time to care about the silly trifles between you women!"

At that, Erica's anger vanished like smoke. Retrieving a few of the fruits from the bag, she rinsed them under the tap and put them onto a platter.

Under her husband's eye, she brought the platter over and set it on the table before him. "Here, have a taste. You know, I almost fell out of the apple tree when I picked some of these!"

Gritting his teeth, Matthew asked, "Didn't you say you were going to feed these to a dog?" He very nearly asked if she was trying to say he was a dog, but restrained himself.

"Oh, no, no. I think I'll feed them to you instead!" Saying this, she picked up a strawberry and put it to his lips. "Come on, Matthew, have a taste!"

He kept his mouth firmly shut. Once again, he didn't bother to mention the fact that they had no dog, nor did any of their neighbors. For a brief instant he felt so ridiculous that he wanted to strangle her.

But he dismissed that thought. After all, if he did that, who would be there for him to dote on? Who would squander his money?

In any case, he wasn't hungry or in the mood for any of this. He stood up from the table decisively and said, "Go feed a dog with these, like you said. Pick some fresh fruits again tomorrow, and maybe I'll eat those!"

She protested, "I've told you I'm not going to feed any dogs. Come on! Matthew, it was not easy for the farmers to plant these. And I spent a lot of money to enter the fruit base and pick them."

With a dreary look on his face, Matthew produced his cell phone and tapped on it a few times.

Seconds later, Erica's phone rang twice. She opened it and found that Matthew had transferred the money to her through the payment software. She counted.

Every time he gave her money, she had to count it. "Wow! Six hundred and sixty thousand!"

Though she had mentioned spending a lot of money, she hadn't meant to ask him to reimburse her. Now, though, she felt she had to show him some gratitude somehow. Grinning from ear to ear, she rushed back to her husband, an apple in hand. "Matthew, I love you so much! Let me feed you an apple!"

As long as he took care of her like this, she supposed she could feed him every day!

However, Matthew would never eat the fruits that she had said were for the nonexistent dog. He didn't open his mouth, no matter how much she pestered him.

In the end, Erica gave up and just took a bite out of the apple herself. Brazen as ever, she asked, "Can you do me another favor?"

"No way!" He was very nearly shouting.

"Don't be so heartless! Come on, my super idol. Just one bite of the apple!" Saying this, she put the fruit up to his lips yet again.

Matthew gnashed his teeth. "Erica, do you believe that I will tie you to the bed until you are pregnant?"

Privately, he reflected that this woman was only obedient when she was asleep. As soon as she opened her eyes, she became a real troublemaker.

"Honey," she pouted, "no matter how much we argue, we are still family, aren't we?"

Matthew nearly slapped himself in the forehead in frustration. Now she was going on about how they were family! Had she been thinking about that when she was climbing over the wall or giving him a bloody nose?

He would never believe Erica's flattery or sweet words!

Seeing that he was unmoved, Erica set the apple down and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Honey, for our brother's lifelong happiness, can you help me again?" she asked, drawing out her words.

So it was all about Gifford, then. Lost in the moment, Matthew cradled his wife's head in his hands. Then, remembering himself, he pushed her away. "Aren't you very capable?" he asked. "Figure

something out on your own."

"Well in fact, I have figured something out!" she said, undaunted. She leaned in closer and looked up at him. "You help me find a way to make him and Chantel sleep together again, just one more time. It would be great if she got pregnant."

Matthew snorted.

So this was what she wanted his help with? He had to admit that she was smarter now than before marrying him—for the most part. "I'm not God," he told her. "I don't have the power to make sure she gets pregnant after one more night with your brother." If there was really a way, he would get Erica pregnant first!

Her tone turned pleading and pitiable. "You are the god in my heart. Please! To let the Leonard family have a descendant as soon as possible, please help them!"

Looking down at her coldly, Matthew complained, "You are destroying my friendship with Gifford again!" How could he keep falling into these traps? Erica was always putting forward bad ideas, and he was the one who kept going along with them!

Was he really her husband? Why was she always so intent on getting him involved in her schemes?

"That doesn't matter. Even if your friendship breaks, you're still family," she argued. "He's still your brother-in-law, right? Honey, come on!" If he didn't say yes, she would lose her patience.

Matthew pinched her cheek with one hand, her mouth opened. "You're worrying a lot of things," he mused. "You haven't gotten pregnant yourself, but here you are, trying to get everyone else to have babies. Think about it now. How many nights are you going to have sex with me in exchange for this favor?"

"One..." When she was about to blurt out the words "one night," Erica corrected herself, weathering her husband's disdainful gaze. "One week!"

CHAPTER 1262 BITING THE HAND THAT FED HER

'Gifford, you should be happy you have such an awesome sister. After all, I'm giving up about a week's sleep for you.' Erica was almost moved to tears by her selfless act. Sometimes, she even amazed herself.

"Deal!" Matthew agreed readily this time.

Erica grinned happily and presented her husband with the apple in her hand. "To prove you don't hate me, take a bite of this!"

Matthew recoiled in disgust. "Not now. I need a shower."

Erica had to get out of the way and began to eat the apple by herself. She felt so bored being alone.

That night, she was looking forward to making love with Matthew. To her surprise, he went straight to the study after his shower and stayed there till midnight.

A few days passed, but he didn't seem interested in touching her.

In Askor

Gifford was minding his own business when he heard Chantel had been kidnapped. Fortunately, he was not busy and had time to deal with it.

He'd gotten a mysterious phone call from a man saying he wanted Chantel to be his mistress. But she told the mystery man she was Gifford's woman, so the man needed permission. The man gave him an address where they could meet.

So, Gifford saw no choice other than to head there.

He was in such a rush, he forgot to think tactically. He was led by his heart, not his head. The address guided him to a villa. He stood in front of the place, lit a cigarette, and began to wonder whether he was walking into a trap.

He had barely taken two puffs of his cigarette before he heard a cry for help. Thick smoke poured from the villa. "Help! Help!"

The voice belonged to none other than Chantel.

The gate he stood at was locked. Gifford decisively stubbed out his cigarette, and looked for a way inside. The wall that the gate was bolted to was made of brick, and he was able to scale it easily.

The smoke grew thicker and thicker, and the cries for help got louder and more frantic.

In moments, he was at the front door. He kicked it open and knew he'd been tricked.

The door was not locked at all. It shouldn't have been that easy to open it!

But it was too late for him to back out of there. Chantel had been hiding behind the door. She rushed over and held him tightly.

At the same time, she sprayed something onto his body.

When he pushed her away, a spray bottle with no logo fell to the floor.

The fragrance was familiar to him. It was the same scent Chantel had on her in the hotel room. It was a

chemical that numbed the will even as it increased desire. So she could force herself on him and he would have little choice but to surrender.

He knew what it was, and realized he had no time to waste. Gifford held his breath, and made for the door. He needed to get out of there. Chantel rushed to the door and closed it, blocking it with her body. He could tell she was nervous. She fidgeted, and her breath came in short gasps. "I'm so sorry!" she said.

Yes, she conspired with Erica to set him up again. She felt sorry, but she had to.

All the color drained from Gifford's face, He wanted to shove Chantel out of the way, but she was too quick. She grabbed hold of him.

"Chantel!" He gritted his teeth! Blue veins stood out on the arm that gripped hers.

"I only have one chance, and I don't want to miss it!" After saying that, Chantel kissed him on the lips.

Gifford's will was strong, but the chemical Matthew had supplied Chantel with was already taking effect. His pants got tighter, and it was getting more difficult to think straight. Finally, he surrendered to the drug and Chantel's soft lips.

At Alorith Film Academy

Erica was sitting at a snack bar, working on devouring a sausage. Her phone dinged, and she noticed a WeChat message from Chantel. "Rika, I'm pretty sure this is going to work. I won't know for sure till I take a pregnancy test, though."

"What?" Erica was confused.

After a while, Chantel replied, "Gifford and I did the no-pants dance. Twice. I think that should do it." Chantel was satisfied. As long as she got pregnant, nothing else mattered.

She didn't want to piss Gifford off. If he thought she was biting the hand that fed her, he would start to hate her.

'Oh, now I know what's going on. I didn't think Matthew would be on board with this, but he's okay with it. He even handled it so discreetly I never would have known.

We made a deal—he could sleep with me every night for a week. But why is he giving me the cold shoulder? This is his chance, ' she wondered. To be honest, she wanted to make love to him too.

After sending Chantel the cheering emoji, Erica put away her phone and swallowed the last bite of sausage. Then she talked to the man beside her. "Matthew isn't even talking to me now. Tell me the truth, Hyatt; you think he dumped me?" 'Am I going to be his ex-girlfriend? No, ex-wife!

Dammit! I don't want to lose the guy who loves me!

Hyatt was confused. "Now hold on. Didn't you say Matthew was a great guy and you wanted to be his wife forever?"

"Yeah, but that seems like a long time ago." Erica started to wonder if Matthew was tired of her after he got what he wanted—sex—and was ready to kick her to the curb.

"Know what I think? I think you're just being a drama queen. He really loves you," Hyatt reassured her. He took another sip of "U Loveit." He did love it, too. For a moment, he felt like the happiest man on earth.

"Enough about me. You still chatting with that gal on the Internet?" Erica asked. She suddenly remembered Hyatt told her that he spent a lot of time talking to a schoolmate of theirs online. She was curious how that was going, and it might help take her mind off Matthew.

Hyatt's expression turned gloomy, and the milk tea he was drinking wasn't as sweet as it usually was. "I think she has a thing for another guy, but I'm not sure." She usually steered the conversation away from things like that. But she didn't have feelings for him, he knew that for certain.

"Why do you say that? Are you guys still talking to each other?"

"Yeah. She borrowed two thousand dollars from me."

Erica stood there, gobsmacked for a moment. "Wait a minute. She borrowed money from you? How well do you know this girl? That's a whole lot of money!"

Holding the cup of milk tea in one hand, Hyatt scratched the back of his head with embarrassment. "Well, we've been talking for a while. She said she wanted to write me an IOU, but I told her she was good."

"What?" Erica rolled her eyes at her friend. "That was dumb. How do you know she'll pay you back?" "Matthew always says I'm stupid. Hyatt is ten times dumber than I am!"

"Okay. What was I supposed to do? Not lend her the money? But she's a girl," Hyatt stammered, like that explained everything.

The girl cried and said that her parents were mean to her. Now her phone had broken and she didn't have the cash for a new one. He did kind of have a crush on her and wanted to keep chatting with her. So he lent her the money.

"When did you do that? She ever talk about paying you back?" Erica thought the girl might be taking advantage of him.

"Not yet. I haven't asked her for the money. I lent her the money less than a month ago."

Erica pondered this for a bit, and finally came up with a plan. Patting him on the shoulder, she said, "Be a pest. By the time it's two months, ask her about it. If she doesn't get it to you then, ask her again a month later. If she still doesn't have it, leave it to me. I'll track her down!"

Hyatt came from an ordinary family. His mother was a teacher, and his father was a bank manager. They still supported Hyatt, and paid for his college. That didn't leave a whole lot leftover to live on.

"Okay!" Hyatt agreed. That was all she could do for right now, and it seemed to cheer him up.

"Let's go shopping!" She wanted to buy something to make Matthew happy.

'It's nice to have friends. Especially someone like Hyatt. We like doing a lot of the same things. Might as well do them together!'

"Are you going to buy something?" he asked.

"Yeah!" Erica was so clumsy she couldn't cook or make something for Matthew, but she could buy things. Things like couple pajamas, couple water glasses, and so on. She liked spending money on things like that, and Matthew let her. So she wanted to buy something else along those lines.

CHAPTER 1263 A SURPRISING INVITATION

That night, as soon as Matthew stepped inside his house, he saw Erica walking down the stairs, a sweet smile on her lovely face.

She was dressed in a pink night robe, her long hair loose and cascading around her shoulders and down her back. She looked more mature than she usually did.

The smile on her face was far too wide. She looked like the cat who ate the canary. 'I wonder what kind of trouble she's in this time?' he thought. Finally, he asked, "What do you want from me?"

Erica smiled but said nothing. After he changed his shoes, she came over and held his arm. "You must be tired after a long day," she said. "Want something to drink?"

"I'm not tired or thirsty!" he answered. Truthfully, he'd been quite exhausted, but seeing her like this banished all thoughts of rest.

"Okay, honey. Whatever you want. Do you want to go upstairs?" 'After we go upstairs, we can go to our bedroom and have a romantic night,' she thought.

Matthew wondered if he was imagining things. 'Is she trying to seduce me?' he thought. "Why now? What's the rush?" he asked tentatively.

She blinked her eyes and her smile grew wider. "Well, I thought we could...maybe...get some sexy time!" She had just bought a dozen night gowns, all different styles and colors. She wanted to see how he liked them.

'Now I know something's wrong! I'm not getting mixed up in this!' He pulled her hand away and said, "I'm tired. I'm heading to bed."

The smile on Erica's face froze. 'Yeah, he's tired. Tired of me!

I can't run away from home anymore. I have to be the only one in his heart,' she thought to herself.

"Okay! Good night." Erica didn't pester him anymore and went upstairs alone.

Matthew was confused by her every move. "Erica!" he called out and stopped her.

She turned and looked at him blankly. "Anything else, Mr. Matthew?"

'Mr. Matthew?' He hated it when she called him that. She called him "honey" just moments before. It was affectionate and playful. Now she was stiff, cold, and calling him Mr. Matthew.

He strode over and scooped her up in his arms.

Erica was alternately delighted and shocked. She patted her chest to calm her heart.

"I thought you weren't going upstairs, Mr. Matthew."

"When did I say that?" he asked in reply.

'Fine, he didn't say that. But he said he was tired.' "Didn't you say that you were going to bed? Apparently, you have enough energy for this," she opined.

"Is there a problem? I like holding you," he said.

'Of course not. It feels good in your arms.' She was happy he didn't ignore her completely.

Matthew placed Erica gently on the bed, but she still held his neck with her arms. She pulled him down to her with all her might. For a moment, they could feel one another's breath.

She curled her red lips and undid the belt around her waist with one hand. "Honey, I just bought this. What do you think?"

Her robe fell away, revealing a strapless black nightgown. It barely covered her body, and her fair skin was on full display. Matthew's breath quickened.

Seeing his reaction, she giggled. The nightgown was \$1,000, and it was money well-spent.

Facing the vision of heaven in front of him, Matthew gave in to the moment. He had refused her advances for several days to teach her a lesson. But now, he surrendered to her seduction, and kissed her rosy lips.

Two minutes later, Erica, out of breath, decided she needed to move. She squirmed out from underneath him.

She gathered her long locks, bunched them together, and let her hair go; it spilled down her back. Watching her made Matthew's heart skip a beat.

Sitting happily on his lap, Erica slowly bent down and unbuttoned his shirt. "You've been a very bad hubby. You took my virginity, and then you became a sex maniac. But why did you stop? You didn't even touch me for quite a few days. Don't you know women have needs too?"

Matthew raised his eyebrow. 'Is she asking me to make love to her? That's new!'

A naughty glint flashed in Matthew's eyes. "Well, if that's what you want..."

'I'll keep you up all night,' he thought.

In the middle of the night, Matthew carried a groaning Erica to the bathroom. She knew she shouldn't have done that. She should have learned by now she'd be paying for it later.

Now, her whole body ached as if she'd been hit by a truck, and it had rolled over her.

The next day, Erica heard that Phoebe was discharged from the hospital and returned to the Campbell family residence to recover. Her source was a reliable one—eavesdropping on Matthew's phone calls had its advantages.

The neatly-dressed man stood in front of the window of the bedroom with his back to her and dialed a number. As soon as the call was connected, he waited as somebody said something on the other end. Then he asked, "When will she be discharged from the hospital?"

Erica was still sleeping, and the sudden voice irked her. But the words "be discharged from the hospital" immediately attracted her attention.

She didn't open her eyes and pricked up her ears to listen carefully. What were they talking about?

Fortunately, he wasn't bothering to keep his voice low, and she could hear every word he said.

"This afternoon? Where's she going after she's discharged? The Campbell family residence? Okay. Thank you!" Then he hung up the phone.

He quietly turned and looked at the woman in the bed. Erica still had her eyes closed, but her moving eyelids betrayed her.

Now that he was done here, the man took the briefcase beside him and went to kiss her before leaving. But realizing that she was not asleep, he left for work.

As soon as he took off, Erica opened her eyes.

'Phoebe is getting out of the hospital!'

Heedless of the pain wracking her body, she dragged her weak legs to the bathroom to wash up.

In the villa of the Campbell family

A woman hid in a nearby garden. After a long time, she saw a maid coming out of the villa. She quickly followed her.

"Hey! It's me!" Erica ran up to the maid and greeted her warmly.

She was the one Erica met when she went to the hospital to see Phoebe last time. She looked at the girl in front of her in confusion and asked, "I'm sorry. Who are you?"

Erica raised her head so the maid could see her face.

Sure enough, she immediately recognized Erica. "It's you!"

With an innocent smile on her face, Erica said, "Yes, it's me! Who else would it be?"

"Something I can do for you?" the maid asked.

"Yeah! Follow me!" Erica held her arm and looked back to make sure no one saw them. Then she pulled the maid around the corner.

Under the maid's confused gaze, Erica opened her backpack and took out a huge wad of bills, at least a hundred thou. She didn't know exactly how much it was, because she didn't count it. She had just taken the money casually.

When the maid saw so much cash, her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

Erica stuffed a wad of money into her arms. "Hey, do me a favor and the money's yours." After the maid took the money, she took out another wad of bills from her backpack. "And this!"

"Wow!" The maid widened her eyes in amazement. "What... do you want me to do?" She only earned a

couple thousand a month working for the Campbell family. It would take her years to earn the amount that Erica had given her.

CHAPTER 1264 GIVE UP THE TITLE OF MRS. HILTON

With one of her disarming smiles, Erica put the rest of the money back into the bag. Her grip on the arm of the housemaid did not relax. "Please help me..."

She whispered what she had in mind into the maid's ear. As she listened, the maid's face went pale, until finally she tried to return the money. Shaking her head frantically, she stammered, "No, no, no. The Campbell family are not to be trifled with. If they learn of this, they'll make me suffer for it!"

Erica held her gaze and tried to be reassuring. "That doesn't matter. You have nothing to be afraid of. This is more money than you'd get in several years at this job. So even if they fire you, you can just take the money, go somewhere else, and find a new job!"

"Well..." The maid hesitated, her eyes wavering between Erica and the money. "No, I can't. What if they send me to prison?"

Erica stuffed the cash into her hands again. "They can't do that," she insisted. "What I'm asking you to do is not against the law. The worst they can do is drive you out of the Campbell family. I'm telling you, don't worry. I'm Matthew's wife. You saw us together. Even if they do throw you out for helping me, you'll be all right. I will ask my husband to find a better job for you!"

Biting her lip, the maid tried to think it over. She had seen Matthew before. At the time, though, she had thought that Erica was his sister or something—not his wife.

Fearing that she was still not convinced, Erica went on. "Look, I am not asking you to kill anybody or set something on fire. I'll give you my phone number. Call me if anything happens to you."

Another moment passed, and finally the maid nodded in agreement.

At Hilton Group

After getting out of her afternoon class, Erica went to Matthew's office again.

As she navigated the maze of lobbies and hallways, she overheard a number of employees gossiping about herself and her husband. They seemed to think Mr. and Mrs. Hilton had to love each other very much, since she came to see him so often at work.

Erica casually flipped her bangs and traded easy smiles with passersby. It occurred to her then that it would be best if she came by even more often. She needed to find more opportunities to cultivate her relationship with Matthew, so that she would be secured as Mrs. Hilton.

As it happened, Matthew was not in the office. Paige said that he'd gone out to meet a client.

Left to her own devices, Erica produced her camera and wandered about the office, taking pictures of whatever caught her attention. First it was Matthew's ridiculously expensive, gadget-laden desk. Next came the wine rack that most people weren't supposed to know about. Eventually she got bored enough to even start photographing his trophies, one by one.

An hour later, there was the smooth click of the office door opening.

Reflexively, Erica pivoted toward the sound and snapped a picture. Glancing at the screen, she found that she'd taken a rather clean and appealing photo of Matthew striding through the doorway.

It took him a fraction of a second to recognize the loud click of the camera's shutter. Spotting his wife, he gave her a nod. "Ten million for a photo," he told her, deadpan. "Keep taking!" He didn't bother to mention that that was at a ninety-percent discount; she was his wife, after all.

'Ten million for a photo?' thought Erica, not getting the joke. Fumbling, she put the camera away and smiled apologetically. "Oh, Matthew, you know I'm poor—" she began.

"Poor you may be, but you still have enough money to pay for the photos!" Matthew observed.

"Oh, honey..." Sweetening her voice, Erica left the camera case on the desk, drew near, and hugged him. It was best for her to be a flirt now. Erica wouldn't dare to act this way in front of her father or brother; if she tried, they would think she'd lost her mind and probably have her committed. However, she'd begun to think that acting more coquettish with her husband would work to her advantage.

Yet she failed to notice the slight smile that it put on Matthew's face. Not only was this woman becoming more comfortable around him, but she also called him "honey" more often than before. More importantly, it was sounding less forced on her part.

"Honey," Erica said again, "we are a married couple. And I just spent one hundred thousand dollars today—" She stopped as though cut off by the noise of a gunshot. Quite against her original intent, she had let the cat out of the bag already.

To his credit, Matthew didn't look terrible concerned—or surprised. "Oh, really. What did you buy today?" he asked.

"Well, I didn't exactly buy anything..." Erica fumbled over the words. Technically they were true; she had bribed the maid of the Campbell family. But that, of course, would be rather difficult to explain to him.

In general, Matthew didn't care much what Erica spent his money on, but he seemed to find a trace of guilt on her face. This aroused his curiosity.

He pulled from Erica—not roughly, though—and looked her up and down. He saw a hole in her trousers.

Staying casual, he asked, "Where did you go today?"

Erica's eyes avoided his. Nervously, she scratched the back of her head, then indicated the camera on the desk. "I went to school after waking up. After class, I came to see you because I missed you!"

'Missed me, huh?' Matthew thought. He was silent for a while, then asked, "Do you want me to reimburse you ten times over for what you spent today?"

'Ten times? Then it will be one million dollars!' Erica's eyes lit up. "Of course! I-I mean, no...no need for that." It was extraordinary to see: One instant she was all excited and then, mid-sentence, she was back to being her mild, undemanding self. It wasn't for nothing; if Matthew reimbursed her, he would definitely want to know what she had spent the one hundred thousand dollars on. The only way to keep it under wraps would be to just move on, like it hadn't happened.

As Erica inwardly grappled with this, she failed to notice that her behavior had made Matthew even more suspicious than before; now he was certain that something unusual was going on. Turning and strolling toward his desk, he said, "Did you come here for anything at all in particular?"

"Oh no, nothing. I just wanted to ask what you would like to eat tonight. Do you have any appointment for dinner?" She was afraid that Phoebe would call him for comfort, so she wanted to occupy his time first.

"Yes," he said.

Somewhat disappointed, Erica started for the door. "Well, then I'll go home first!"

"Wait!"

She stopped and turned around.

Matthew produced his checkbook, a doubtful look on his face. "You really don't want me to reimburse you for the one hundred thousand dollars?"

Erica's face twitched. She was about to blurt out an affirmative, but held it in at the last second. "No, I don't need it this time. You've reimbursed me a lot already!"

Her husband didn't seem to hear the refusal; his pen was already scratching across the check. "I said that I would reimburse you for all your expenses, and this is no exception. Take the check and leave!"

Grinning from ear to ear despite herself, Erica walked over, took the check, and looked it over. She almost swore out loud when she read it. 'Seven figures! It's really ten times the reimbursement!'

Overcome with emotion, the miser kissed the little slip of paper once, then again. Remembering her

husband, she threw her arms around his neck and cried, "Matthew, honey, I love you so much!"

She planted a fierce, wet kiss on each of his cheeks. Suppressing a laugh, he deftly took out a handkerchief, wiped his face, and pulled away from her.

Trying to look a little disgusted, Matthew said, "Look, why don't you be on your way? I don't want to see you, or anyone, for a little while." Seeing how she had reacted to the check, he wanted to test which was more important in his wife's heart: himself or his money.

Slipping the check into a pocket, she said, "Honey, if you don't want to see me, why don't you give me another million? I promise that I wouldn't go home tonight then!"

Her tone suggested that it was a joke, but it left Matthew speechless all the same. His expression froze in a broken sort of smile—really, it was more of a grimace.

There was no need for a test, he realized. The truth was obvious already. Money was more important in Erica's heart!

His mind spun with confusion. Wesley and Blair were not mean people. Not only that, but Gifford gave a considerable living allowance to Erica every month, despite the fact that his sister routinely drove him crazy. Why did this little woman still carry herself as if she was so poor?

Clearly, whether a person loved money was not solely dependent upon their financial condition.

Finally he spoke, his voice cold—he almost didn't realize he was speaking. "How about I give you a billion dollars? And in return you could give up the title of Mrs. Hilton, and I'd let Phoebe—"

Before he could finish his words, Erica slapped the check heavily on the desk. "A billion dollars? Here's something worth a billion dollars: send Phoebe to the slum!"

Once again Matthew was speechless. It seemed like every word his wife spoke flipped his mood on its head. He asked her another question then. Privately he thought it was a very childish question, but he couldn't help himself. "Erica, in your eyes, which is more important: the title of Mrs. Hilton...or me?"

CHAPTER 1265 HER RICH HUSBAND

Hearing the mention of Phoebe's name stoked Erica's anger into open flame. Her tone rose, growing haughty and commanding. "Matthew, remember, both you and the title of Mrs. Hilton are mine! As long as I don't give up, Phoebe will never have either."

As for Matthew's heart, though...she didn't know if it was possible to ensure it belonged to her. She could only make sure that his body and the title would be hers. She was confident of that because of Carlos and Debbie.

His heart or feelings would never be hers to control.

A new smile crept onto Matthew's face, more genuine than the last one. His tone softened as he said, "From now on, as long as you are obedient and don't leave me, I will give you more of what you want." But if she didn't listen to him and kept trying to escape, that would be another story.

"What do you think I want? Tell me," Erica said warily. Whatever her husband had in mind, she would see if she was interested in it.

Matthew retrieved a black card from a drawer and placed it on the desk before her. He handled it as carefully as if it was a loaded gun. "Here is twelve billion. If you don't run away and get pregnant with my child in three months, the money will be yours."

It was a diamond-level bank card owned by Hilton Group. In fact, the account was already in the name of Erica.

However, Matthew would not tell her the truth, not unless he won her heart completely first.

It was always possible that he would lose both his wife and his fortune in the end. These days, it seemed to be growing harder and harder to ignore.

"What?!" As usual, Erica was too excited to know what to say. Waiting for her voice to come back to her was difficult.

She thought, 'Twelve billion! I have never seen so much money!

Please, can someone pinch me? I need to know if I'm dreaming now!'

"You didn't hear me wrong," Matthew told her almost solemnly. "You will have all this if you don't run away within three months and get pregnant with MY child."

Erica couldn't fail to notice how he emphasized the word "my." Why was he talking nonsense? Did she look like a woman who would have an affair? She couldn't even keep up with Matthew every night. How could she have the energy to deal with another man?

Erica picked up the bank card and kissed it. "Deal!"

She could get twelve billion dollars for having a child with Matthew. Laughter rumbled in her heart, and she struggled to hold it inside. 'Oh my, I'm going to be a rich woman. Hahaha...'

A giddy, whimsical smile took over her face, and it still hadn't faded when she strolled out of the building moments later.

If she had twelve billion dollars, she wouldn't need to go to school anymore. She could buy Matthew's company, let him work for her, and then keep a bunch of young men for herself; he could be just part of

her own personal harem. And if he didn't like it, what did that matter? She would give him the cold shoulder every day, as he had done to her so many times.

Out on the street, wrapped up in her fantasies, she at last was unable to contain herself. Ignoring the other pedestrians, she burst into unmitigated laughter like a maniac.

Everyone nearby dutifully ignored the woman's foolish antics—except for one man who spotted and recognized her as he parked his car nearby. "Hi, Rika!" he called, waving as he walked up to her briskly. "What's wrong with you?"

"Oh, Sheffield!" Erica turned to him, beginning to come back to herself, but her delirious smile had yet to fade.

"I'm glad you recognize me," Sheffield said, hiding his uneasiness. "I thought you'd gone nuts, laughing like that out in public. Did you just come out of Matthew's office?"

"Yes! Sheffield, do you think..." Erica cast a look over her shoulder, up at the towering building she had just left. "Can ten billion buy the whole Hilton Group?" The remaining two billion would be enough for her to squander after that!

Rather than answering immediately, Sheffield leaned in and felt her forehead with the back of his hand. "Hm, you don't have a fever," he remarked. "Rika, don't you know?"

"Know what?"

He pointed up at the building, which shone gloriously as it always did. "You meant, could ten billion dollars buy this company?"

Erica nodded immediately.

"Well," Sheffield explained, "the market value of Hilton Group has just been reassessed. It's worth thirty-six trillion!"

"What?" Erica mouth was open wide enough to fit an egg in.

Sheffield added, "Dollars!" In comparison, despite his hard work, the market value of Theo Group had just reached one trillion dollars.

"Oh! I can't believe it!" Erica was completely dumbfounded.

Was her husband that rich? How could she not have known? She'd been aware that the Hilton family was wealthy, of course. But she'd assumed its value would be somewhere in the tens of billions, maybe.

Reality seemed to have slapped her hard in the face and was telling her, "Erica, your husband is

fabulously rich; he has a mountain of money.

And if you play your cards right, you can sit on the top of the mountain with him."

No wonder that Phoebe was trying to deprive Erica of the position of Mrs. Hilton, even at the expense of her own child! That scheming woman had to have already known how rich Matthew was!

Compared to all that wealth, an unborn baby was probably worthless in Phoebe's eyes.

"Rika, Rika..." Seeing that Erica had spaced out, Sheffield snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "Are you with me? Didn't you know about this?"

He had assumed that everyone would know that the Hilton family was one of the richest families in the world. It seemed odd to him that this would be unknown to anyone close to Matthew—let alone his own wife! Then again, Matthew had always been too low-key, and it sometimes led to misunderstandings.

"Sheffield, thank you for telling me this!" Erica said. With so much money at stake, now she was more determined than ever to drive Phoebe away.

Sheffield nodded. "Oh, you're welcome. It's my pleasure. By the way, I think I should tell you that recently, some women have been acting very, um, restless. They think that you and Matthew don't love each other and have started to covet your husband. So from now on, the two of you should probably show off your love for each other more often! These women are unscrupulous, and are bound to cause trouble for you otherwise. So you have to make sure they know that you two are deeply in love, understand?"

Erica stared at him, somewhat baffled. 'Show how deeply in love we are?' she echoed in her thoughts. Perhaps Sheffield had missed the memo, but Erica and Matthew didn't love each other that much. What was she supposed to do?

Well, she had to admit that she seemed to have fallen in love with Matthew, this extremely wealthy man. But he seemed to be in love with someone else. What should she do to fix that and win his heart completely?

Erica barely noticed when Sheffield said goodbye and headed into the building. All she was thinking about was money, the twelve billion dollars in the black card and the market value of Hilton Group.

At night, in the Campbell family's dining room

It was a rare night, with all the Campbell family members present—the exception being Tessie, who had been sent to the slum.

Fanya and Camille were having dinner quietly. Lyman, who was sitting in the host seat, couldn't help but

complain about Phoebe. "Matthew used to take care of our company from time to time. But now because of you, he doesn't pay much attention to us anymore—just our company, which it seems he's interested in acquiring for himself. If he succeeds in that, we'll be reduced to bankruptcy!"

Hearing this, Camille glanced at Phoebe coldly and hissed, "Loser!" Phoebe was in a low state. She had gone to great lengths to build a relationship with Matthew, but all her efforts had been in vain. What was more, she had even lost a child, which doubled her misery.

Despite being scolded, she didn't dare lose her temper. She bit her lower lip and spoke, her voice low. "Dad, Mom, Camille, it's really not my fault. It's all because of Erica. She's so arrogant—her meddling ruined everything!" As well, she knew that Matthew loved Erica so much that Phoebe no longer had any chance of interfering with their relationship.

CHAPTER 1266 FOR THE TWELVE BILLION

Fanya cut one of the medallions of foie gras on her plate elegantly without looking at her daughter. "Why wouldn't she be arrogant? Erica's one of the Leonard family, a renowned military family in Askor. She's always been a selfish bitch. Now that she got her claws into Matthew, she's even worse," she sneered.

Her words made the food in Phoebe's mouth hard to swallow. Erica's connections made her impossible to touch. Her family was rich and powerful. "If you have any better ideas on how to bring her down, I'm all ears."

'They don't have any better ways of dealing with Erica, do they? Why does it always come down to me?' she thought to herself.

"I had good ideas, but you screwed up everything!" Camille spat. It was an accusatory tone, full of contempt and blame.

She had wanted to build a close relationship with the Hilton family, but she was even further from her goal thanks to Tessie and Phoebe.

After a moment's silence, Phoebe gritted her teeth and said, "We could hire someone to..." She dragged her index finger across her throat. A gesture that indicated murder.

Bang! Fanya dropped her knife and fork. The knife and fork hit the plate and made a sharp sound. She stared at her daughter with an expression of astonishment. "Are you crazy, Phoebe? Are you seriously threatening a member of the Leonard family? Do you have a death wish? Are you out of your damn mind?"

Even if they succeeded, they probably wouldn't get away with it. And if Matthew weren't able to figure it out, Wesley and Gifford likely would.

"They'd find out. Matthew, Gifford, Wesley, it doesn't matter who. And they'd come after us. They

might kill every last member of the Campbell family to get back at us."

Phoebe's body trembled, and her face became even paler, if possible. "Okay, okay. Point taken."

Then silence reigned in the dining room of the Campbell family. Only the sound of knives and forks colliding with the dishes could be heard.

They couldn't even take Erica down after sacrificing the baby in Phoebe's belly. The Campbell family needed to think this over more carefully.

Phoebe complained of being weak from the miscarriage, so after she was done with dinner, she went upstairs. Her mom and dad followed. Camille got a phone call, so she waited downstairs until she was done. Eventually, she started to climb the stairs herself.

However, as soon as Camille reached the second floor, she heard an earth-shattering scream. "Aaargh!"

That was Phoebe! Everyone in the house heard it, too. Then the door to her room opened, and she crawled out.

"Phoebe! What's wrong?" Camille asked as she stood straight and looked at her sister with contempt.

'Now I think I know why Mom and Dad don't like Phoebe or Tessie. Look at her! She's a mess! We're rich and powerful, and she acts like this! She just literally crawled out of the room. Like a lizard! This would be really embarrassing if this got out, ' she thought.

Lyman heard the noise, and rushed out to the hall to find out what was up. He stared Phoebe huddled on the floor, trembling and stuttering. She'd been frightened half to death. But by what?

Concern was evident in his gaze. She was his own daughter, after all. He walked over to her and helped her up. "What's wrong, Phoebe?" he asked in a worried tone.

"Dad, Dad..." Seeing that it was her father, Phoebe rushed into his arms and sobbed uncontrollably. "S-s-snake! There's a-a snake in my room!"

'Snake? But our villa is in a suburb. We're too close to the city for random critters to show up.

How could there be a snake?'

When Camille heard about the snake, a touch of fear flashed through her eyes. She tightened her grip on the phone.

So did Fanya. Panic contorted her normally calm face. She clapped her hands and summoned several maids who were all upstairs as well. "Go to Phoebe's room and see what's going on!"

The maids weren't stupid. They weren't going any further, because they were also afraid of the snake.

Most people had a natural aversion to snakes.

When Camille saw them hesitating, anger gushed out from the bottom of her heart. She ordered coldly, "Hurry up! Didn't you hear me?"

One of the maids in her twenties was pushed forward. She was normally a braggart, but being singled out like this was not something she liked. She had no love for snakes either. She shivered and slowly walked toward Phoebe's room.

When she passed by Phoebe, she asked, "Phoebe, where's the snake? I've been volunteered for reptile duty!"

"It's... on the bed."

When the maid entered the room, everyone held their breath and waited a few seconds. Then a scream was torn from the maid's throat. "Aaargh!"

The maid suddenly rushed out, trembling. Tears were in her eyes. She told everyone standing in the hallway, "She's right! There's a snake in there! A green one... It's coiled up on the bed. Boo...hoo..." In the end, the maid was scared to tears, and she saw the snake's long, thin tongue flickering in and out of its mouth.

Fanya felt her blood freeze, and then calmly ordered, "Quick! Close the door and call animal control!"

"Yes! Fanya."

Half an hour later, a staff member of the animal control came downstairs with a box containing the snake. He addressed Lyman first. "Lyman, we caught your snake. There was no need for all the fuss—it's just a king ratsnake. It's not poisonous or anything. We searched the house just in case, but it looks like you're snake-free for the time being."

"Thank you," said Lyman politely.

"You're welcome!"

Fanya suddenly asked, "Sir, why is there a snake in our villa? We've lived here more than ten years, and this has never happened."

"First time for everything, I guess. Maybe the snake slithered up the gutter and dropped onto the balcony, but this is just conjecture at this point. Well, we've done our job. If you need anything more, it's a police matter."

And Phoebe did have a balcony. The supposition seemed reasonable. But their backyard led to a meadow, left alone by the city to prevent urban sprawl. It was possible it could have come from there. But this was the second floor, and it might not be easy for the snake to make its way up here.

"Okay, I see. Thank you, sir!"

After the animal control staff left, Fanya called the police.

That night, in the Pearl Villa District, for the sake of the twelve billion dollars, Erica stepped out of her dress, used a deeper shade of red lipstick, and winked at the man stepping out of the shower. "Honey, let's do this."

Matthew was thrilled

and pounced on her.

On the second night, in order to get the twelve billion, Erica took some pain medication and choked back sobs. She hesitated to take off her dress this time. "Matthew...are you ready?"

Another sleepless night passed.

On the third night, for the sake of the twelve billion, Erica popped more pills and cried. "I don't think I can... Boo...hoo..."

The man pulled her into his arms and whispered, "Twelve billion..."

"Well...maybe for that much..." Sure enough! Human beings work themselves to death to get a little extra cash.

After getting out of bed the next morning, Erica immediately bought herself an insurance policy worth a ton. She was afraid that she would not get anything if she died in bed.

She wasn't thinking of herself, though. The beneficiaries were Wesley and Blair.

A few days later, when Erica was photographing a large patch of flowers in the suburbs, she received a call from the maid in the Campbell family.

The maid sobbed the moment the call was connected. "Erica, they found out. They knew I let you in. Now they are going to run me in for attempted murder. What should I do?" Her words devolved into sobs.

"The snake wasn't poisonous, right? What makes it attempted murder?" Erica was very angry.

CHAPTER 1267 LITTLE TROUBLEMAKER

The maid answered in a choked voice, "Fanya said that Phoebe was so weak that she was almost scared to death by the snake, so it was attempted murder..."

"All right, all right. Tell the Campbell family that I did this, and it has nothing to do with you. Let them come to me if there is something wrong with Phoebe!" Erica's words were steady; she'd mentally prepared herself for this.

"Okay. Thank you, Erica!" Shuddering in relief, the maid thought, 'Erica is really a good person. She always keeps her word!'

In the meeting room of Hilton Group

Paige followed Matthew into the meeting room, where they found Lyman, Fanya and Phoebe waiting. Standing in the corner like a human statue was a lone security guard, gripping a box in his hands.

Murmured greetings were exchanged, and everyone sat down except for the guard.

Smiling perfunctorily, Fanya asked, "Matthew, hasn't Erica arrived yet?"

Matthew had a look at his watch, then answered, "My wife is busy. When I called her, she was still taking photos in the suburbs.

I imagine she's just gotten into the city at this time." This came as an unpleasant surprise to the Campbell family. They had already been waiting for more than ten minutes.

Now Matthew told them that Erica had only just entered the city itself? It would take her at least another half-hour to get to the Hilton Group!

Despite her best efforts, Fanya's smile evaporated. "Matthew, I don't need to tell you how precious our time is. It will take half an hour for Erica to arrive. What are we going to do until then—nothing? I don't think this is appropriate."

Matthew leaned back in his chair and played with the diamond ring on his ring finger. As usual, his whole manner was relaxed and emotionless. "Why is it not appropriate? I came here ahead of time, didn't I? I'm waiting here, just like you. My time is more valuable than yours. So, Fanya, is there anything you are not satisfied with?"

Fanya was left speechless. She was perfectly aware of the reality behind Matthew's words. The man could make tens of billions of dollars in a minute, while the Campbell family could make at most hundreds of millions in the same time.

So, of course, Matthew's time was quite literally worth more than theirs.

Nevertheless, Fanya really didn't have the patience to wait for Erica. "Then I'll get to the point. Give the

box to me!"

Matthew did not object, and the guard came over to the conference table. With considerable care, he placed the box on the opposite end, two or three meters away from the Campbell family.

The box itself was covered with a layer of black cloth, and it was quite impossible to see what was inside.

Glancing at the box, Matthew said nothing.

Fanya minced no words, speaking with barely-contained fury. "Erica has bribed our maid to sneak in and put a snake on my daughter's bed. Do you know that, Matthew?"

'So there's a snake in the box, is there? How bold Erica is!' Matthew thought to himself. "Do you have any evidence for this accusation, Fanya?" he asked indifferently.

"Of course we do. The maid has already admitted that she had received one hundred thousand dollars in cash from Erica. She's outside in the lobby. If you don't believe me, Matthew, we can bring her in and hear it from her personally."

Matthew was a man who would defend his wife, whether or not this incident was all her fault. "My wife is a weak young woman," he protested, drawing out the words. "It's very hard for me to imagine her doing something as devious as this. Not to mention, the difficulties she would have in practically carrying it out. There might be some misunderstanding!"

Paige was stunned to hear how good her boss was at turning black into white.

Two days ago, Matthew had asked her to investigate Erica's one hundred thousand dollars and to find out where it had been spent. She'd found out that it had been given to the maid of the Campbell family. As for what the maid had done for such a sum, Matthew didn't ask Paige to investigate. Of course, the Campbell family's visit today gave him enough to guess what had happened.

But he admitted to nothing.

Phoebe, on the other hand, did not feel inclined toward restraint. She had kept silence for a long time, only to find that Matthew had been protecting Erica all the while. "Matthew, it's all true!" she blurted. "Erica not only killed my child, but also wanted to kill me too! I don't even dare to go to bed at night."

Indeed, the discovery of the snake on Phoebe's bed had left her traumatized. Every night since then, she'd had a maid search her room from top to bottom to make sure there were no snakes anywhere.

But whenever she managed to sleep, her dreams were full of the vile creatures.

The mere thought of them sent shivers down her spine.

Matthew cast a sharp glance her way, and his voice turned low and dangerous. "If I hear you blame Erica again for your child's death, you will regret it."

Phoebe took a deep breath and avoided his eyes. "It doesn't matter if you don't believe me," she murmured. "We can put that aside for now. But the snake on my bed—that absolutely was Erica's doing! There is security camera footage of her coming to our villa just before it happened!"

Matthew paused, feeling somewhat helpless. If only his wife wasn't so careless and inexperienced! At least then, she wouldn't leave a trail behind every time she went out to cause trouble.

He opened his mouth to say something else in her defense when a series of screams came from outside the meeting room.

Matthew went rigid, and everyone else present shuddered. "Matthew, I'll go see what's going on!" Paige offered.

But she'd only made it two steps when the door of the meeting room was kicked open from the outside.

"Ah, excuse me!" the intruder said hastily. "Didn't mean to cause a stir, but as you can see, my hands are full."

She looked like—and indeed was—a troublemaker.

A camera dangled from her neck. With her hair unkempt, and her face and rumpled clothing stained with dirt, she looked like an amateur hiker or jungle explorer. In her own mind, that wasn't far off from the truth. With childlike frankness, she lifted up the things in her hands.

Paige, who had frozen halfway to the door, remembered herself then. With a scream, she stepped back.

That sound was echoed several times over when the rest of the room's inhabitants saw what Erica was holding.

Even Matthew's stoic countenance cracked. It wasn't actually that he was frightened; in fact, he was proud of his wife. She was a braver woman than he had given her credit for.

Feigning confusion, Erica looked first at Lyman, whom Phoebe and Fanya had hidden behind, and then at the two snakes that were coiled about her wrists and hands. One was green, the other red. Erica smiled and said, "Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, Mistress Phoebe, aren't my pets cute?"

Phoebe didn't seem to think so. She was shivering, curled up in one of the office chairs, her arms locked around her head.

"M-Matthew..." Lyman swallowed nervously. "Don't just sit there—discipline your wife! This is

outrageous!"

Snakes in general bothered him, and colorful ones even more so. 'What a bizarre woman!' he thought in astonishment. 'I can't believe Matthew would like somebody like that.'

Having mastered himself again, Matthew addressed his wife calmly—but also sternly. "Erica, put those back where you found them!" Although the snakes appeared to be docile at the moment, he was afraid that his wife might still get hurt somehow. This was, after all, something of an odd situation.

Erica misunderstood his words, thinking that he was afraid for himself. To the utter mystification of the room, she said, "Oh Paige, would you please close the door behind you when you go out?"

Ashen-faced, Paige decided that that was as good a time as any to excuse herself. "No problem," she said weakly, and took her leave.

After making sure the door was closed, Erica abruptly dropped her snakes to the floor and trotted over to Matthew to comfort him. "Don't be afraid, honey. I'll protect you!"

Startled, the snakes hissed in dismay and wriggled where they had fallen. Meanwhile, Fanya and her daughter forgot their dignity and scrambled atop the conference table.

CHAPTER 1268 THE HEADACHE

Feeling a headache coming on, Matthew rubbed his eyebrows. "I'm not—"

Before he could finish saying, "afraid," Erica had closed in. "Oh, Matthew, it's all right! I know you're a man, but there's nothing shameful in being afraid of snakes. Rest assured, there's no danger at all. In any case, I'm not scared, so I can protect you!" As she said this, she hugged him, patted his chest, adjusted his tie, and fussed over his lapels, thus leaving a copious amount of wet dirt smudged across the front of his suit.

Matthew looked down at her hands, his face hardening with disgust. "Erica," he asked dryly, "did you think of washing your hands after handling those snakes?"

Her face was stricken with what appeared to be genuine shock. "Oh! No!" she stammered, backing off a step.

Meanwhile, one of the two snakes she had dropped was creeping aimlessly about the meeting room. Its companion, apparently unsociable, had withdrawn to a corner and coiled itself up there.

As for the members of the Campbell family, they were huddled together atop the conference table, looking quite ridiculous and pitiable. The security guard they had brought was made of sterner stuff and remained as calm as Matthew. However, since there seemed to be no actual danger, he simply claimed his own corner of the room and waited at attention there.

After taking in the scene, Erica went to one of the snakes and gingerly gathered it up from the floor. She made a show of inspecting the creature; by contrast, the snake seemed uninterested in any of the humans present. "It's so cute, isn't it?" asked Erica innocently. "What are you all so afraid of?" She'd been careful to get ahold of snakes that were not poisonous. Naturally, nobody else in the room knew that.

With a casual air, she approached Phoebe, gently pointing the head of the complacent reptile toward her.

'How dare Phoebe tell on me to Matthew! Seems like she hasn't learned her lesson yet!' Erica thought. In recent days, Matthew had been sometimes warm and sometimes cold to her.

Erica had begun to fear, what if he dumped her because of the Campbell family? Her best chance of preventing that was to scare them all away!

And she seemed to be off to a good start; as Erica neared the desk, Phoebe was already screaming at the top of her lungs. At the last second the poor woman leaped from the conference table and took refuge behind Matthew, who stood like a statue, observing the madness. "Matthew...Matthew, help me! Please..." Phoebe cried hoarsely.

"Honey, don't help her! There's no need for that at all!" Erica countered, trotting after her.

White as a ghost now, Phoebe gave another scream and bolted from the room.

The door closed with a bang.

After a moment of dead silence, Lyman gingerly lowered himself from the table, then helped Fanya down as well. Trailed by the guard, they hurried from the room without so much as a goodbye.

All in all, it was a noteworthy day for the employees at Hilton Group. A great many of them had seen the Campbell family strut into the building like they owned it; now they saw them rushing out, looking mortified and embarrassed!

When the Campbell family had left, Erica was quick to make sure the meeting room door was shut. If either of the snakes managed to get out, they could cause all sorts of trouble and would be hard to catch again.

Matthew watched, impressed despite himself, as his wife rounded up the second snake—the one that had gone to the corner—with her bare hands.

Erica put them in the box which the Campbell family had brought in, adding it to the third snake inside. Arching an eyebrow, Matthew asked, "Aren't you afraid of snakes at all?"

"Oh, of course not! How could I be afraid of such cute little things?" Erica looked down at the box and

tapped the lid, adding, "Isn't that right?"

A weary smile took over Matthew's face. He sank into his seat at the table, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "This wasn't your attitude when your brother tried to get you to eat a peeled snake," he ventured. That had been during some kind of survival training class. In fact, Erica had run away and left the class on the very day of that incident.

"Well, maybe I am afraid of eating snakes," Erica admitted, "but that doesn't mean I'm afraid of live ones!" 'Well, except for the poisonous kind, ' she thought. Now those she did fear. Handling one wrong and getting bitten would be very dangerous indeed.

But she kept that fact to herself. If everyone thought Erica wasn't afraid of any kind of snake, poisonous or not, that was all right with her.

"I think I've figured something out," Matthew said. "You had that hole in your pants—that was from climbing onto the balcony of the Campbell family's house. That was when you put the snake on Phoebe's bed. Right?"

Erica gasped in mock amazement. "Wow! You figured it out? I'm so impressed." Her husband was as smart as her father and brother!

Just then the headache that Matthew had begun to feel moments ago erupted full-force. "Get out of here!" he snapped. He didn't want to see her again for a while.

"Okay, but..." Erica trailed off, looking down at her dirty clothes. "Can I use a bathroom here? I need to get changed."

Matthew sprang from his seat and stalked from the meeting room. "Follow me!" he ordered.

Erica paused to grab the box of snakes, then trotted after Matthew toward the elevator.

All along their route, the various employees milling about kept their distance. They were perfectly aware of what Erica was carrying.

Inside the elevator, Matthew glanced at the box with false casualness. "So, are you going to take the snakes home and stew them?"

"No! Of course not. I'll set them free later, someplace where they belong!" Erica looked stricken at her husband's suggestion.

Matthew sighed quietly. He really couldn't do anything about her. A moment later, he took out his cell phone, dialed a number, and said only three words.

"Send someone here."

Things were changing at Hilton Group, and the CEO's special assistant area was no exception.

Everyone in the company soon heard about the audacious deeds of Erica, grabbing snakes with her bare hands and bringing them into the office. Everyone in the office was afraid of her.

Probably none were more afraid than Paige. When she saw the couple approaching, particularly the box in Erica's hands, she suppressed a shiver. To her credit, though, she offered a professional smile as she greeted them. "Why, hello...Er and Erica!"

Erica smiled back and waved. With terrifying speed she approached Paige's desk. "Hi, Paige..."

In unison, the three female employees in the special assistant area gasped and left their chairs, backing away as if they had seen a beast.

But the male employees were more calm, especially Owen. Although he knew about the snakes, his smile didn't flinch, and there was no trace of fear in his demeanor.

Paige and Owen were both Matthew's right-hand men—so to speak. Paige was afraid of snakes, but she was a woman after all.

Owen, on the other hand, had served in the army before, so he was not bothered at all.

Realizing her gaffe, Paige quickly regained her composure and approached Erica again. "Erica," she said quietly.

Suddenly self-conscious, Erica hid the box behind her. "Ah, I'm sorry. I just want to ask you if you were scared," she said quickly.

"No, thank you for your concern. I'm fine." Paige was still smiling, but the smile was as brittle as glass.

She knew that the young woman in front of her had no malice, but that didn't make the box of snakes any less creepy.

Erica's face brightened, and she displayed the box again. "Oh, that's good! In fact, these snakes are all nontoxic; they're not dangerous at all. Anyway, don't be afraid. I'll have them released now."

"Okay, okay..." Paige wanted very much to cry. Why did this crazy woman have to show them the box again?

Off to the side, Matthew stood watching the scene. Despite the pain in his skull and the spectacle Erica had caused, he was impressed with her. In fact, he was ready to admit that she was quite brave; all women were scared witless by snakes, but his wife could catch them with her bare hands.

Presently, the elevator doors opened again, admitting a security guard who trotted up to them. "Matthew, Erica!" he said respectfully. "I'm Raymond Voventry from the logistics department. What can I do for you?"

Matthew indicated the box. "I'd like you to take these snakes and release them. They don't belong in the office."

Raymond nodded. "Yes. Please leave it to me."

Erica hesitated, feeling a bit reluctant to hand over the box. Finally she said, "Listen, I bought one of these snakes at the pet market, so you'd better return it there. If you set it free out in nature, it won't last long. But the red one and the green one, those were caught in the Great Mountain. You can leave them there."

The snake that Erica had put on Phoebe's bed was indeed from the pet market. It had been nontoxic and its fangs had been treated, so she had known it was harmless. The worst it could do was scare somebody.

CHAPTER 1269 THE BOOK OF ERICA'S WISDOM

"Yes, Erica!" Raymond took the box from Erica, turned, and left the floor where the CEO's office was located.

Seeing this, the female assistants finally breathed a sigh of relief and returned to their desks. Maybe they could get some work done before their shifts ended.

Before entering his office, Matthew instructed Paige, "Paige, I need a change of clothes for my wife."

"Yes, Matthew."

When she heard this, Erica grinned broadly at Paige. "Thank you so much!" she said enthusiastically.

Paige shook her head. "You're welcome! That's my job." She really liked Erica. Although Erica had a mischievous streak a mile wide, she was cute and polite.

Erica followed Matthew into the office.

The couple walked into the lounge together. He changed his jacket, and she went to take a shower.

She was in there for what seemed like forever. Matthew took the opportunity to get some work done. He was sitting at his desk, engaged in some kind of negotiations by phone. Hearing the sound of the lounge door opening, he raised his head and looked in that direction.

Erica was wrapped in a white bath towel, standing at the door to the lounge. She stared at him. There

was meaning in her gaze. Her fair shoulders were bare, and her small feet were covered by his big open-toed slippers. Her small toes were poking out, made more visible by the nail polish she applied. It was the latest style—opaque taupe gray with hints of purple.

It had the intended effect. "I have to go," Matthew said, and ended the call quickly. Erica trotted over.

Gripping the bath towel with one hand and propping her head on the desk with the other, she winked at him and grinned, revealing pearly white teeth. "Dearest Matthew..."

Matthew's hackles raised when he heard these words. "Go on!" He was sure he wouldn't like whatever she was going to say.

With a giggle, Erica walked around the desk, making the movement as sexy and flirtatious as she could. She whispered in his ear, "Well, my period came, but I don't have a pad."

Yes! She finally got her period! She really wanted to shout it out loud, with Matthew right there.

But she felt a little embarrassed, so she decided discretion was the better part of valor.

Matthew could detect a faint fragrance, and he wondered what it was. Then it hit him—that was Erica's scent. As he was lost in it for a moment, he didn't pay much attention to what she said. "What did you say?" he asked.

Erica's face turned even redder. "Well, I'm on my period. Can you buy me some pads?"

'So she got her period? And she wants me to buy her feminine pads?' He decisively picked up the office phone and was about to have Paige do it.

However, as soon as he put his finger on the button, a pair of soft, gentle hands descended on his own hand. When their eyes met, Erica smiled sweetly and lied, "You know, honey, there's a book out that says it's better for a husband to buy this kind of thing for his wife. It goes on to say that if he doesn't want to, then he never loved her. But if he does, then that means he's a keeper and loves her a lot."

Matthew, though immersed in his wife's beauty, still had his pride. "Ridiculous! What book is that? Sounds like the author's an idiot." Whoever published this drivel would pay! He'd have the author blacklisted, the publisher bought out and the company sold off piecemeal.

"Oh, the book is called 'Erica's Wisdom'!"

Matthew's lips twitched. "Clever. I'll have Paige do it," he insisted.

Erica was persistent. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and whispered in his ear, "Honey, you should think about it. Why would you have some other woman do this? Aren't you afraid I'll get jealous?"

"Oh?" He fixed his eyes on her and asked, "Will you get jealous?"

"Of course, I'm also your woman and I have feelings for you. How could I not be jealous?"

"But I haven't done this for anyone!" said Matthew flatly. He couldn't imagine how it would look if he went to the supermarket to buy sanitary pads. The mere thought of it embarrassed him.

"That's good. Then I'll be your first!" she laughed.

Matthew was speechless again. That sounded so weird.

Erica suddenly felt a warm stream sliding down her legs. She knew what that meant. She let go of Matthew, grabbed her bath towel and made to run to the lounge. "Oh, crap!"

Matthew grabbed her wrist before she could run off. "What's wrong?"

This was so uncomfortable and embarrassing that Erica was almost in tears. "I may have stained your bath towel. I should have stayed put. Go ahead and ask Paige to buy the pads. I gotta hurry!"

It was her own fault sticking around trying to convince Matthew to do it for her.

Matthew understood what she meant. He let go of her wrist and stared at her running back to the lounge. But her running posture caught his attention. It looked so strange, like she was loping along with her legs as close together as possible.

Twenty minutes later, Erica almost fell asleep sitting on the toilet. Finally, she heard footsteps at the door.

It was Matthew. He came in, frowning, and handed her a bag. "Here you go," he said.

Erica took the bag and looked inside. There were several brands of sanitary towels inside. "Thank Paige for me."

Matthew opened his mouth like he wanted to tell her something, but decided better of it and said nothing. He walked out of the bathroom without another word.

More than ten minutes later, Erica came out of the lounge again. She had gathered her long hair into a bun and sported the clothes Paige had fetched for her.

She wore a short pink coat over a set of pink sportswear of the same brand. She looked happy and ready to tackle anything.

It was just that she looked like a teenager in that outfit. Even if Matthew wanted to touch her, he'd feel

guilty. The illusion of youth she projected was almost creepy.

Noticing the familiar glint in the man's eyes, Erica shivered. She crossed her arms over her chest and told him proudly, "Sorry. I'm on my period for the next week or so, give or take. Humph."

Matthew rolled his eyes at her. Did he look like a man who was desperate for sex, no matter what?

Looking at the man's gloomy face, Erica thought for a while. "How about this? I'll find you some young hottie. I'm sure they'd jump at the chance to get with you!" She tried to sound him out on purpose.

"Erica!" he warned her coldly.

A figure appeared in her mind. "I know a girl with a perfect figure! Her face's very beautiful! She's a good person, too. Very gentle. She's a bias-wrecker for sure. I'd turn gay for her..."

Matthew asked calmly, "Really? Is that what you're into?"

Erica grinned and scratched in the air, imitating what Matthew usually did to her. "Yup! She is so nummy! I'd love to spend a night with her!"

Oh! He seemed to understand something. His wife was probably bisexual. She loved both handsome men and beautiful women.

To Erica's surprise, Matthew agreed readily this time. "Okay, bring her here!"

"What?" This was not the reaction Erica expected at all.

Was she hearing things?

Didn't Matthew always behave himself? Why did he agree so readily this time?

Before she could say anything, he urged, "Why not bring her by? Get her on the phone! There's no time to waste!"

She was a little embarrassed and she stammered, "Bring her... by?"

"Yes. Here. As in my office."

'Oh my God!' She began to construct a scene in her mind, and she wasn't sure she liked it. "Didn't you tell me the office wasn't a good place to have sex?"

CHAPTER 1270 I'M YOUR WIFE

"I said I changed my mind." Matthew stood up from his chair and walked over to the dumbfounded woman. He raised her delicate chin and said quietly, "Haven't you heard of sleeping your way to the top? I have to keep up with the times!"

"So, you've had sex with someone in your office before?" Erica asked, her eyes wide.

"No." He rubbed her chin with his thumb and said, "But since you seem so keen on the idea, I thought I'd take you up on it. I don't want to let you down!" He was hamming it up deliberately. Hopefully, she'd back down before he had to.

There was no way Erica was going along with this. He wanted to see if she would lose her temper when he talked about being with another woman.

The smile on Erica's face froze. "If you really don't want to, I won't force you."

Why was this man so annoying? She just wanted to test him, and he was failing badly! 'My heart! It hurts!' she cried in her mind.

Without hesitation, Matthew answered, "Don't want to? Of course I want to. Hey, can you get ahold of that chica you were talking about?"

This time, Erica couldn't even fake a smile. She tried to force a smile, and ended up with more of a grimace. "I haven't talked to her in a while. I'm not sure I can get in touch with her!"

"It doesn't matter. How about you tell me her name and I'll ask Owen to find her. As long as she's in the city, I'm sure he can get her here in, say, half an hour?"

All of a sudden, Erica flew into a rage. She attacked his cheek with the fervor of a rabid wolverine. His head rocked, and a red mark appeared on his face, conforming to an angry woman's handprint.

Matthew's face darkened. What did he do in a previous life to deserve this raging banshee? Was she born to plague him?

What was more, he was proficient in Taekwondo and many other martial arts skills. Why did she always manage to slap him?

"Matthew! I swear I'll call your father and tell him about you. If I don't, my name's not Erica!"

She wasn't kidding. She took her phone from her pocket and turned the screen on.

But Matthew snatched it away and asked, "Why are you calling him?"

"I'm telling him all about you! I have to! How could you fool around with another woman?" she yelled. She was about to explode with anger.

He tried to reason with her, "But you're the one who suggested it!"

"I-I... So what? But you didn't have to agree with me! What were you thinking? You should have said no! But you didn't, and you..." Her voice was lost to heartache as tears fell like rain. She tried to stop, but it hurt too much.

The more Erica thought about it, the more resentful she felt. She knew it! Matthew didn't love her! She was just trying to test him. To her surprise, he accepted the suggestion. He knew how she felt, and he ignored her feelings.

Her tears came all of a sudden, just like her temper. When Matthew saw her tears, his heart softened. 'And I'm guessing it's all my fault!' he sighed in his mind. He pulled her into his arms. "Why are you crying? Can you talk to me, honey?"

"No way!" She sobbed in his arms. "You know women are emotional wrecks when they're on their period. You don't understand me, but you still manage to piss me off!"

The thought never crossed his mind. He didn't know anything about it. He softened his tone. "It's my fault. I should have tried to know more about this. But instead, I buried myself in my work. I'm sorry."

The more he comforted her, the sadder she became. "I'm your wife. You refused to buy me pads, for Chrissake! You probably hate me, huh? You've been just impossible recently. You must want to divorce me!" After enduring his changing attitudes to her for several days, Erica finally found an outlet and poured out all her emotions. Just vented to him.

Matthew kissed the woman's forehead and said in a gentle voice, "I bought the pads myself. I don't hate you, and I don't want a divorce." She was the one who climbed over the wall and escaped again and again. He was so angry, so he gave her the cold shoulder.

'What? So he went out himself to buy me feminine products?'

"Then what's going on? Why don't you cook for me anymore, or watch movies with me?" She missed those days. She wanted them back, and wasn't sure why Matthew was acting like this.

"It's because you keep trying to escape! Do you know how that feels?" He was angry and distressed. He thought she didn't love him at all.

Erica wiped her tears on his shirt rudely. "You know why I ran away!"

The man looked at his shirt. Her tears left dark streaks on the fabric. But he said nothing.

If it were someone else who had slapped him and stained his suit jacket and shirt, Matthew would have dealt with the person ruthlessly.

But it was Erica, the woman he loved more than life itself.

When he said nothing, she continued, "It's all because of you. What if I died in bed? I want my own room. But you keep telling me no! It's your fault." She burped and looked very unhappy.

Matthew closed his eyes, held her face and conceded again. "Okay, that's my fault too. It's also my fault you climbed over the wall. Next time you do that, I'll catch you so you don't have to jump down."

"Okay!"

That was unexpected. 'Okay? How could she say okay?' He said that just to make her feel better.

Nonetheless, he wasn't in the mood to argue with her. He knew that wouldn't go well. Matthew wiped her tears lovingly and said, "Okay, honey, don't cry."

She took the opportunity to grouse at him. "And don't even talk to me about what I did to Phoebe. That's between me and her!"

"As long as you're happy." He wasn't planning on bringing it up anyway.

Erica turned tears into smiles and hugged him tight, her eyes still red from crying. "You're not that busy for the next two days, right? Good, you can watch a movie with me, cook macaroons for me, peel fruit for me, drink with me, and feed me snacks."

"Rika, you're asking too— Okay! Promise!" The man corrected himself when faced with her tears again.

'Carlos really knows how to make my life hard. He knew I was busy every day, but he found me this wild child who can't be beaten or scolded, ' he thought to himself.

After a while, Erica went back to the villa like usual. Matthew finished his work ahead of time and started cooking for his wife as soon as he got home.

When Sheffield came to visit Matthew's villa with Gwyn, the couple had just finished dinner.

Erica went to open the door. As she touched Gwyn's head, she gently asked the girl in the light blue dress, "Gwyn, you hungry?"

Gwyn let go of Sheffield's hand and replied obediently, "Auntie Erica, I've had dinner. Dad just took me here afterwards!"

Tonight, it was just Sheffield and Gwyn at home. Evelyn was on a business trip, and Godwin was visiting the Thompson family, so Sheffield took his daughter out to Evefield Restaurant.

When they got back home, he stopped off at Matthew's villa. Seeing that there were lights on, he decided to pay them a visit.

Sheffield entered the living room while whistling. When he saw the man slaving away in the kitchen, he rubbed his eyes in astonishment. "Oh my God, do my eyes deceive me? Rika, come here!"

Holding Gwyn's hand, Erica came over and asked, "What's wrong?"

Under the cold gaze of Matthew, Sheffield asked dramatically, "Who is that guy washing dishes in the kitchen?"

Erica was amused by him, but at the same time, she felt a little embarrassed. "I'm too clumsy to do the housework, so Matthew did it himself."

"Where's the maid?" Sheffield looked around the first floor and didn't see another soul.

Erica was also helpless about this question. "We don't have maids."

"No maids?" Sheffield exclaimed in mock horror. He ignored the daggers Matthew shot him with his gaze.