

TMBA 1171

CHAPTER 1171 THE PUNISHMEN

"What are you talking about?" Erica asked. As her eyes quickly glanced at Matthew, who was busy cooking for her, she was charmed at how handsome and thoughtful he looked while cooking.

"Do you really not understand what I am trying to say?" Blair's annoyance was getting obvious at this point. Even as a mother, Blair was beginning to have doubts as to whether her daughter really belonged in the twenty-first century or not.

"Understand what? Mom, why are you being so weird? What are you trying to say?"

Putting down the kitchen knife in his hand, Matthew looked at Erica and said calmly, "Mom wants to know if we've had slept together yet."

"Oh! But I told her that we sleep..." Erica paused, finally realizing what her mom was trying to say and quickly explained, "No, we haven't. I mean we share the same bed every night. That's all. We didn't do anything else."

It was just as Blair had guessed. "Why have you not slept together yet?" she asked.

'Huh? Why?' Erica, ridden with guilt, looked at Matthew and said, "Here is the thing. Matthew is a gentleman and he said that he would respect my boundaries!"

Matthew put the bowl of freshly washed vegetables aside and drew closer to Erica without being noticed. Then he said, "Don't make me sound like such a good guy. I'm not as good as you think."

Erica was dumbstruck. "But that's exactly what you said!"

"Yes, I said it, but in that situation, I had no choice!" Matthew turned around and grabbed the bowl full of vegetables.

Blair had heard Matthew's words clearly and she closed her eyes, trying to suppress her anger. "Erica!"

Sensing her mother's displeasure, Erica's eyes widened. She glared at Matthew and said, "Mom, I heard you. You don't need to yell!"

"Are you trying to piss me off? Why haven't you consummated your marriage yet? Were you pretending to be shy the whole time? Matthew is your husband. I don't understand why you're behaving like this! Listen, I want you to get pregnant in two months!"

Blair spoke in a tone similar to Wesley's. Perhaps in the years they had spent together, some of their traits had rubbed off on each other.

"Two months?" Erica couldn't believe her ears.

"Yes!" Blair said firmly.

Erica stood still in a daze. "Mom, I'm still a student..." She wondered why her mother had come up with such a terrible idea all of a sudden. Most importantly, why was she rushing her to have Matthew's baby?

"That's not a problem. College students are allowed to have a baby. Believe me, your studies will not be delayed because of your pregnancy!" Besides, everyone knew that Erica never studied hard in school. Therefore, having a child would make very little difference to begin with.

Erica's response proved to Matthew again that Ethan was not Erica's child. If Ethan was indeed Erica's child, she would have used him as an excuse to defend herself.

"Mom, let's talk about this another day. I'm going to have dinner now!" Erica hung up the phone before Blair could say anything else.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Erica came to Matthew and stood across him. "Why do you think Mom is pushing us to have a baby?"

Matthew put the chopped vegetables into a plate and said, "Well, Mom is right!"

"Why? I'm not even 22! I'm just a child myself. How can I have a—" Erica swallowed the rest of her words when she met Matthew's eyes.

'Damn! Did I slip again? I told everybody Ethan is my biological son. What do I do now?' She quickly lied to cover her slip-up. "I mean I already have Ethan. I don't want to have another child right now. I think we should wait."

'That's brilliant! Why didn't I think to use Ethan as an excuse when I was talking to mom?'

Matthew glanced at her indifferently. "So you would rather have a baby with your ex than have a baby with me?"

Matthew was right about her not wanting to have a baby with him, but the first part of his remark was wrong because Erica and Tam were never lovers. However, in order not to expose her lie, she turned around and walked to the living room, pretending not to care. "Let's drop the topic. I'm not interested in it. If you want a baby, go give birth to a baby yourself. I want to wait. Besides, I'm not done having fun yet!"

Matthew didn't fixate on the topic either.

An awkward silence permeated the air between the two at dinner. Matthew had prepared four sauteed dishes and one soup. After a bountiful meal, Erica rubbed her stomach and wailed at the table, "I'm so

full. I'm so full!"

The dishes cooked by Matthew were so delicious that she couldn't help herself from overeating.

Matthew cast a scornful glance at her and said, "Get up and clean the table!"

"Can't you just hire a maid?" Unfortunately, the three maids had left with the baby when Ethan was taken back to Askor.

Erica couldn't understand why Matthew wouldn't hire a maid to help out at home. Was he waiting for her to do it?

"I'm not used to having outsiders around me all the time," Matthew responded.

"But I didn't marry you to do the housework for you..." Erica sounded like she had been wronged somehow. In truth, she never thought she would ever have to do housework.

Glancing at her, Matthew asked, "Are you saying that I was wrong to ask you to contribute in housework?"

"Yes!"

"You think I should hire some maids then?"

"Yes!" 'Isn't it normal?' Erica thought. There must have been five or six maids in the Hilton family's manor. Why did Matthew not keep a single maid here in the villa?

Suddenly, something occurred to Erica. She stared at the man with a look of surprise in her eyes and said, "Are you worried about having to pay their salaries?"

Matthew was rendered speechless. 'Does she really think so badly about me?' He stood up silently, rolled up his sleeves and began to clear the table himself.

Erica felt a little embarrassed when she saw him, so she stood up almost immediately and picked up the dishes. "Why don't I hire the maids, and I pay them?"

"No need!" The man refused straightaway.

Erica decided to shut her lips and watch him clean up the kitchen and dining room.

One day, after Erica had run up and down the stairs barefoot twice in the villa, she noticed that every corner of the villa was covered with soft carpet.

The cost of maintenance and upkeep alone would have been a hefty price. After all, imported carpets on

all four floors was no simple matter.

Stepping over the white and soft carpet in the bedroom, Erica took out her camera and took a selfie. She also poured herself a glass of red wine.

When Matthew came back and found the girl, she was sitting on the carpet and looking through her work on the camera. Next to her was a glass of red wine she had just taken a sip out of.

When she noticed him, Erica greeted him casually. "You're back home early today."

"Hmm." The man loosened his tie and threw the bag in his hand to her.

Erica looked at him curiously and said, "What's this?"

"Your punishment!"

"Punishment? What did I do wrong? I've been nothing but a good girl!" Erica rummaged through the bag and found some plastic straws.

'Where did the mighty Mr. Matthew get these?' she wondered.

The man half squatted in front of her and looked at her. "Erica Xitala, now you have two choices. One, fold 999 stars, two..." He gestured at the bed with his eyes and continued, "...sleep with me."

'Xitala?' Erica's face was stuck in an incredulous expression. 'Did he figure out what Matthew Xitala meant?' "Sleep with you? I don't think so," she replied. Despite Blair's insistence, Erica had no intentions of fulfilling her mother's wishes just yet.

"Then make 999 stars with these straws," Matthew said.

The punishment seemed pointless to her as folding stars was a very easy task, but the only problem was that she didn't have the patience for it. "No problem! But what do you need so many stars for?"

Matthew looked at her in silence. After a long while, he said indifferently, "I want to give them to somebody as a gift!"

Erica pursed her lip disapprovingly. 'So he wants me to make something for his sweetheart, but he doesn't want to do the hard work. No wonder the woman he likes hasn't agreed to be with him yet!'

CHAPTER 1172 LAUGHING WILDLY

And so it began; Erica began to fold stars every moment of the day she got.

Except for when she was in class, she would always carry those plastic straws with her and fold stars whenever she got the chance.

After folding about 200 stars, her fingers began to turn red due to the effort. By the time Matthew noticed her red fingers, Erica had already made 519 pieces.

He took her hands into his own and looked at her fingers carefully. Without hesitation, he took away all the remaining plastic tubes from her. "That's enough. You don't need to fold the rest," he said.

"But I've already made more than 500 of them. I am at 519 now. If I don't complete the set, my efforts will be wasted."

Hearing that, Matthew took two plastic tubes and handed them to her. "Alright. Then you can fold only two more. But that's it!"

"Why two?"

"Then they'll be 521."

'521? The number means "I love you." Is he finally going to confess his love to his goddess?' she thought.

Anyway, whatever was going on had nothing to do with her. He was just going to give them to his goddess, and most likely, that mysterious woman was Phoebe. All Erica needed to do was finish her task.

To be more considerate, before handing over the stars to him, Erica even went out and bought a glass jar. She put all the folded stars into it, and they looked really beautiful.

Satisfied, she ran to the study to find Matthew with the glass jar in her hands.

She could see very clearly that Matthew was very satisfied with the finished work. There was even a trace of smile in his eyes.

"Leave it here. You can go get some rest now."

'He didn't even thank me! He just said go away?' Erica pouted her lips.

After the door of the study was finally closed behind her, Matthew looked at the glass jar Erica had brought with tenderness in his eyes. He opened the safe and carefully put it in.

But instead of locking the safe after it, he took out a photo from it. It was a photo of a girl with her hair tied in a ponytail; her face was a bit baby fat and she appeared to be a teenager. In this particular photo, she could be seen standing in the sun with her hands on her hips and laughing wildly at the sky.

The bright and lovely smile went straight into his heart.

At that moment, the door of the study, was suddenly opened once again. A little head stuck out from the crack. "Hey, I have something else to ask you," Erica called out with a mischievous smile.

Matthew calmly covered the photo with his big palm and indifferently said, "Fire away!"

"Didn't you say you know how to make macarons? If you are free tomorrow, could you make some macarons for me? I mean I did fold so many stars for you!" She raised her still red hands. She wanted to eat a dessert cooked by him.

The man's eyes were full of incomprehensible emotions in response, and he merely snorted, "You're gonna bargain with me for your own mistakes?"

Erica was always so confident of herself. Matthew wondered what had made her think he would agree as soon as she said it.

"What? So there's no room for discussion?"

"No!"

Erica walked in, fully raised her red fingers and looked at the man pitifully. "Forget it. I'll just go to the manor and ask your dad's chef to cook them for me." She looked so pitiful and aggrieved while saying this. Her voice seemed soft, and it would have easily made people feel sorry for her.

Matthew's face darkened a bit. "There's no one in the manor these days." Carlos and Debbie had gone on a trip again; Evelyn and Sheffield were living in a nearby villa; Terilynn and Joshua were at their own home.

Erica sighed, "Well. Looks like I'll have to go out and buy some macarons myself from some random dessert shop!" Why was it so hard for her to ask Matthew for something?

Anyway, she put down her hands, turned around and slowly walked towards the door with slumped shoulders. She looked pitiful and dejected in her retreat.

"Stop!" the man said abruptly.

Unknown to him, Erica opened her mouth wide and laughed silently instead of turning. She didn't dare to look back at the moment, fearing that her facial expressions would betray her. She tried her best to control her emotions and make her voice sound normal. "Anything else?"

"Don't randomly eat anything from outside." His voice was a little stiff.

"Why do you have to make things so hard for me? You don't cook for me and you also don't allow me to eat anything outside. Do you think everyone can survive without snacks like you? Maybe some people can, but not me!" When Erica turned around, her expressions had returned back to normal.

Rubbing his eyebrows, Matthew finally agreed, "I'll come back early tomorrow night." He couldn't do anything else!

"Really? Hahaha!" Erica finally couldn't hold it in anymore and burst into laughter.

Matthew's face darkened when he saw her reaction. "What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

"You're so gullible! I mean I'm really happy. I'm laughing because you're kind and nice to your wife!" Erica kept on laughing wildly in her heart, unable to close her lips.

Matthew rolled his eyes at her. Could he believe her words? This woman was impossible! But he didn't want to argue with her. "Just go and get some rest. It's too late now. Don't watch a movie tonight!"

Erica immediately stood up and saluted him. "Yes, Mr. Matthew!"

He was a bit amused by her look.

When Matthew finally came back to his room from the study, Erica had already fallen asleep.

She was sprawled out slap-bang in the middle of the bed, and there was a one-meter-tall Wuba doll clutched into her arms. Matthew didn't want to wake up the sleeping girl, but if he didn't move her, he would have to sleep on the edge of the bed.

Therefore, he gently picked her up and moved her to one side.

Unexpectedly, Erica wrapped her arms around his neck and said in her sleep, "Don't touch me. I want to sleep with Matthew in my arms!"

He smiled and asked, "Tell me who you want to hug?" His voice sounded unusually gentle in the dark night.

Erica yawned and whispered a name. "Matthew..."

Matthew lay down on the bed, held her closer and let her head rest on his arm. He then lowered his head and kissed her forehead. "Good night."

Erica turned over and pulled him into her arms tightly as if he were the Wuba doll. Then she continued to sleep soundly.

In Askor

In a remote village, a large number of criminals had just been taken away. At the crime scene, only a group of policemen and a little girl were left at the spot. The entire place was in a mess.

"Chief, what about her?" one of the uniformed officers pointed at the girl who was sitting on the stone bench by the side and asked.

Gifford glanced at the girl. She seemed to be in her early twenties. Her clothes were torn and disheveled after being held hostage by the gangsters for three days.

Her face was covered with mud, and her face could not be seen clearly, but the stubbornness in her clean and clear eyes would have reminded anyone of Erica, if they knew the latter.

Gifford stubbed out the cigarette in his hand, exhaled the last smoke and asked the girl, "What's your name?"

The girl was drawing circles on the ground with a branch. Hearing his question, she looked up at him and said, "Chantel Rodgers."

"How old are you?"

Chantel frowned slightly, but still answered, "20."

Gifford noticed her impatience. He smirked. She looked exactly like his little sister. "Where is your family?"

Thanks to Erica, he had developed quite an understanding of dealing with little girls. In his opinion, there was no other girl in the world more difficult to deal with than Erica.

This time, after a pause, she replied expressionlessly, "Dead."

"Dead? All of them?"

"Yes."

After a short silence, Gifford asked, "What are you going to do now?"

Staring at the green military uniform he was wearing, Chantel said softly, "Bury my grandfather first; then feed his chickens at home."

"Your grandpa just died?"

"Two days ago."

"Are you going to feed the chickens for the rest of your life?"

CHAPTER 1173 CHANTEL RODGERS

"Well, yes. I don't know anything else. I never went to college," Chantel replied. She grew up in a remote village, and her family was one of the poorest in that community. She didn't have the money to attend college in the city. Her parents had passed away long ago, and she'd been taking care of her grandfather until he died two days ago. So, she simply gave up on the idea of going to college.

After pondering this for a while, Gifford blurted out, "Do you want to go with me?"

Chantel's eyes widened in surprise.

Gifford explained to her, "Let's get out of here—the village, I mean. I'll help you find a place to stay. It's better than staying here and feeding chickens."

"But... I can't do anything except farm work."

"Can you wash clothes, cook and clean?"

"Of course. I mean, yes!"

"Those are basic maid skills. You could draw a paycheck on those."

"But what about Grandpa's chickens?" Chantel's grandfather had raised hundreds of chickens, and they were almost mature enough to be sold.

Gifford said helplessly, "Give them all to the villagers. Do you want to take all those chickens with you?"

The girl didn't know what to say.

Soon, Gifford asked someone to bury Chantel's grandfather, and then gave all her chickens away to the other villagers. He didn't have to ask twice. At last, he left the village with the girl—and without the chickens.

Chantel left the village with Gifford. On that fateful day, she never would have imagined that she'd move to a big city. And never in her wildest dreams would she expect to become an international figure in the future.

At Leonard family house

The moment Blair saw Chantel, she suddenly lost her interest in the baby Ethan. She immediately handed off the boy to Wesley, who had to struggle to adjust his arms to cradle the child. He'd been caught off-guard. Blair half-walked/half-ran over to her son and the girl, a big smile on her face. "Son! You finally have a girlfriend! I'm so excited!"

Gifford was already 32 years old, and hadn't found a girlfriend yet. She was close to arranging blind dates for him.

Although the girl in front of her was dirty all over, she might look pretty after a good shower.

Wesley couldn't help blaming Gifford, "What did you do to her? Why don't you show her where the shower is?"

His mood now gloomy, Gifford tried to explain. "It's not what you think. I was on a mission, and she was taken hostage. I rescued her, but that didn't make things much better. Her family's dead, she's homeless. So I took her back here so she can live with us. She can be the new housemaid."

"What... She's... not your girlfriend?" Blair was visibly disappointed. 'Dammit! When do I get a daughter-in-law?'

Chantel immediately summoned a smile and greeted the two elders obediently, "Uncle, Aunt, nice to meet you. I'm Chantel Rodgers, just a country girl. You know, I'm a hard worker and can do anything you want. I don't need anything other than a place to stay and something to eat. Let me stay and you won't be sorry!"

Blair was satisfied with how polite she was, and how innocent she looked. It was so sad she wasn't her son's girlfriend. "I see. Chantel, right?"

"Yes, Aunt."

Blair called a servant over and told Chantel, "You need a shower first. I'll get you some of Erica's clothes so you have something nice to wear. You can come downstairs and catch some dinner after you're changed."

"Thank you!" Chantel followed the servant upstairs.

Downstairs, Gifford took a sip of tea and told Wesley, "Dad, I'd keep an eye on that girl, if I were you. She's as naughty as Rika. Be careful."

Wesley frowned. "What are you talking about? You brought her here, and you don't trust her? What's up with that?"

"No, I just want you to be careful. Don't let her make mistakes or cause trouble like Rika. I'm afraid you'll start getting headaches again."

Blair disagreed with him. "I think she's much nicer than Rika. And she knows how to do housework, too. Your little sister doesn't seem to know anything. I'd take Chantel's word over hers any day."

"Mom, don't let Rika hear you say that. She'd be so mad!"

Thinking of Erica's tantrum, Blair felt a dull pain in her head. "Well, she's Matthew's problem now. Poor

guy!"

After drinking a cup of tea, Gifford put on his military cap and said, "Well, I'm taking off." Then he pinched Ethan's tiny face and said, "Little guy, next time I come back, I hope you can call me Uncle!" He said this, knowing full well the kid had to be 18 months before he even started doing anything other than babble. On the other hand, he wasn't here that often.

Ethan grinned at him.

Gifford's mood was instantly brightened by Ethan's cuteness. "Can I hold him again?"

Seeing him like this, Blair sneered, "Why don't you find a wife to give you a cute child? Why do you always hold other people's babies?"

Gifford sighed, "You don't think I want one, Ma? But it's hard to find a girl I like."

"Well, our neighbor's daughter is back home. She just finished up a degree in the U.S. She's very pretty. Hey, I could fix you up. Just let me call them— Gifford! I wasn't done! Where are you going?" Before Blair finished talking, Gifford was already out of the door.

She couldn't help complaining to her husband, who was busy playing with the baby and making cooing noises. "Look at your kids. Only Yvette is worth a damn. The others think we're running a motel. Erica brought a baby with her, but isn't married to the dad. Gifford brought a girl back here, but he's not married to her. Just once I'd like a proper grandkid. Is that too much to ask?"

"Well, Erica could probably do it. She's married now, and Matthew probably wants a kid of his own," Wesley said.

So, Blair called Erica again.

"Rika, Debbie and I were talking, and if you have another kid we'll take care of it. You don't need to worry about anything."

Standing at the school gate, Erica looked up at the sky with a camera in her hand. "Mom, what's with all this talk about babies? Why do you tell me to have a baby every day? We've been over this—I'm not having another one for at least another year. It's dangerous. Don't you have your hands full with Ethan? Aren't you tired?"

"I like playing with Ethan. He's lovely. I just want you to have another baby so that Ethan can have a playmate."

Erica didn't know what to say. She and Matthew weren't in love at all. How could she just ask him for a kid? "Since you love kids so much, how about you and Dad go for number four? It would be fun to have a sister to play with when I'm there. Or a brother...I'm not picky."

"Erica!" Blair was so angry that she wanted to beat Erica with a broom.

Before her mother said anything they'd both regret, Erica had hung up the phone immediately.

At Hilton Group

Erica pointed the camera at her husband, who was hard at work and didn't even lift his head. "Matthew, come on, say cheese!"

The man didn't raise his head. "I don't like having my picture taken."

"But my teacher asked us to hand in some portrait studies by tomorrow. Just one pic. Pleeeeaase!" She'd never met a more photogenic man in her life. It was like he made love to the camera. If she got a pic of the ultra-handsome Matthew, she'd get high marks for sure.

"No way!" Matthew refused bluntly.

Erica thought for a while. 'Wait. He told me I should be more persuasive if I ask him for help.'

At the thought of it, Erica put the camera on his desk, sat on his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips.

In fact, she felt so gloomy. Why couldn't Matthew just help her once without asking anything in return?

'Damn it! No wonder he's a businessman. Everything he does for someone has a price tag of some sort. But no! It's not equal at all. He takes advantage of me every time! He's such a horn dog, ' she thought angrily.

Satisfied with what Erica had done, Matthew wrapped his arms around her waist in response.

Three minutes later, Matthew whispered in her ear, "Mrs. Erica, do you want to wrap me around your little finger? And you can do whatever you want?" His voice was hoarse and tempting.

CHAPTER 1174 I'M PREGNAN

'I can have him wrapped around my little finger? And I'll be able to do whatever I want? Is that even possible?' Erica wondered suspiciously. Nonetheless, she nodded eagerly. "Of course I want to!"

Matthew tightened his arms around her waist. As he stared at her red lips, his Adam's apple bobbed in his throat. "Mrs. Erica, if you give birth to a baby for me, I'll make you the most powerful person in Alorith in everyone's eyes, even mine. What do you think?"

"Well..." Erica trailed off thoughtfully. After a moment of hesitation, she said, "But I don't want to have a baby now." The truth was, she was afraid of death.

Tessie had died while giving birth to Ethan. What if Erica met the same fate as her? Who would inherit her billions of wealth if she died?

"It doesn't matter if you don't want to have a baby right now. I won't force you. But...we can start practicing for it."

Erica, of course, knew what he meant by "practicing." She shifted uncomfortably on his lap like she was sitting on pins and needles. "No, no, no. I just want to take pictures of you!"

Matthew wasn't in a hurry. He just played with her hand and said, "Think it over, Mrs. Erica. If you become the most powerful person in my eyes, you can not only take photos of me with clothes on, but also with them off. You can make me your nude model."

Erica stared at him with her mouth agape. 'Mr. Matthew, can't you be more reserved?' she thought to herself.

It was not until then that she realized how badly he wanted to sleep with her. However, she was really not ready for it now. She pinched his cheek in mock-anger and said, "Matthew, you just want to trick me into having your baby!"

Her mother had already been nagging at her to have a baby recently, and now, this man was also doing the same. There was no way she would fall into their trap!

Matthew shook his head. "How can you say I'm tricking you? Isn't it normal for a woman to have her husband's baby?"

"It's normal, but..." Erica didn't know how to explain the uneasiness she felt in her heart even after pondering it over for a while.

'Forget it.

I don't want to think about this anymore!' she thought and finally decided to change the topic. Out loud, she said, "Forget it. I won't take pictures of you anymore. Have you finished your work? Make macarons for me once you do!"

Matthew felt helpless all of a sudden. As far as he knew, Erica was usually a little naive and stupid. Why was she being so wary this time?

Later, in the villa

The moment the oven was opened, the sweet smell of freshly-baked macarons wafted through the house.

Matthew brought a plate of delicate macarons to the girl in the dining room. Feeling intoxicated by the smell, Erica immediately picked up a pink-colored one and took a bite. "Huh, it's not too sweet. It's so delicious!"

Matthew sat down opposite her and smiled. "You are really like a kid who always likes to eat snacks, you know that?"

Erica didn't mind him making such comments about her. "When did you learn how to make macarons?" she asked curiously. After all, it was out of character for a bossy CEO like Matthew to make dessert.

"The same time I learned how to cook," Matthew said casually.

"Is it because you wanted to cook for a particular woman?" Erica teased.

Unexpectedly, Matthew didn't deny it. "Yes," he said with a nod.

Upon hearing this, Erica's heart immediately sank. 'He must have learned it for his goddess,' she thought gloomily. All of a sudden, there was a bad taste in her mouth. The macaron she was eating wasn't sweet anymore.

There was a moment of awkward silence in the dining room. Just as Erica decided to suppress her displeasure and picked up another macaron for Matthew to taste, the latter's phone rang.

He answered the phone in front of her. "What's up?"

"Matthew."

Recognizing Phoebe's voice on the other line, Erica became quiet at once.

"Yes?"

"I'm pregnant."

After a pause, Matthew said, "I see. I'll come by later."

"Okay."

The words "I'm pregnant" had rung out clearly through the quiet dining room. Erica was so dumbstruck that she forgot to swallow the food in her mouth and just listened blankly to Matthew's conversation on the phone.

It was not until he put away his phone that she came to her senses. Forcing a smile, she asked, "Is Phoebe pregnant?"

"You heard that?"

"Yes." Trying to hide the panic in her eyes, Erica said, "You have to take responsibility and take good care of her. Don't worry about me. I don't care, really!"

Matthew frowned; it seemed that she had misunderstood. "It's not—" But before he could finish, Erica interrupted him and said, "I know you want to help me save face. But it doesn't matter. I don't care. You should treat her well, I mean it." As soon as those words left her mouth, Erica took a deep breath like she had just finished running a race. She dimly wondered if the macarons weren't fit for eating. Why did she feel suffocated all of a sudden? There was a dull ache in her chest like there was something lodged there.

Matthew pursed his lips and asked in a low voice, "You mean you don't care even if I were the father of Phoebe's baby?"

"Of course I don't care." Why should she care? It was not like she loved Matthew...

In an instant, the face of the man in front of her changed, seeming to be covered with a thin layer of frost. "Stop eating them," he said coldly, pulling the plate of macarons away.

Erica was confused by his sudden temper. She pursed her lips and complained in her heart, 'Why are you so angry? Shouldn't you be happy that you're a father now?' "Why aren't you letting me eat? Do you want to eat them by yourself?" she asked in bewilderment.

Instead of answering, Matthew got up with the plate and strode toward the trash can.

"Matthew, what are you doing?" Erica asked anxiously.

Matthew remained silent as he emptied the plate into the trash can before throwing it into the sink.

Looking at the macarons in the trash can, Erica felt so upset that her eyes turned red.

'So now that Phoebe is pregnant with his child, he doesn't care about me at all anymore? She's the most important person to him now?' she wondered bitterly, biting her lip.

Then, she turned around and ran upstairs without saying a word.

Two hours passed, and Matthew still hadn't come upstairs to look for her.

It was only then that it occurred to her that Matthew had told Phoebe that he would visit her soon, and that he must have already left the house.

At Orchid Private Club

When Harmon returned to the table after taking a phone call, he found Sheffield trying to persuade Matthew. "Since you're already married to Rika, why don't you try to like her?" Of course, no one but Sheffield knew the true motive behind his words.

Glancing at Sheffield, Matthew put down his glass and said, "She was willing to have another man's baby, which means that she loves him very much. Do you think I will humiliate myself?" That was what he had thought at the beginning.

"No, Matthew, you're wrong!" Sheffield argued.

When Matthew didn't reply, he continued, "How can you say that you're humiliating yourself? It's true that Erica gave birth to another man's child, but that's in the past. Everyone has a past, right? We all know that she is a simple-minded woman. The biological father never showed up after the child was born, so it's obvious that she fell for a bad man. As long as she is willing to let go of the past and live happily with you, you should cherish her."

"You're wrong. Ethan's biological father did show up. He just met her and the baby a few days ago," Matthew corrected Sheffield with a thin smile on his lips.

Sheffield was taken aback after hearing this. "He showed up? So your rival in love has appeared? Were you there then? What happened?"

"Guess."

Sheffield rolled his eyes at him. "You're so childish. Fine, I'll entertain you. I think that you were there too. Your rival probably said that he came to see the child, but in fact, he wanted to get Rika back."

Harmon looked at Sheffield with a smile. "How dare you poke your nose into Matthew's private affairs? You haven't had enough of kneeling down on a keyboard?"

CHAPTER 1175 THE COUNTRY I HAVE BUILT FOR YOU

Sheffield was often punished by his wife to kneel on the keyboard, which was known to all of his friends.

He put his hand on Matthew's shoulder and told Harmon with a cheeky smile, "I'm doing this because I care about Matthew's happiness! He'll understand, I'm sure."

"Take your hand off me," said Matthew, deadpan, as he looked at the hand.

"Geeze. You're such a neat freak, just like your sister. You two have got germophobia, I tell you. You're sick in the head." With that, Sheffield shuffled a ways off, retrieved his glass, and took a sip.

As soon as his back was turned, Matthew took out his phone and sent his sister a text. "Sis, my brother-in-law said that you're a germaphobe, and that you're probably a neurotic."

When Evelyn saw the message, she replied, "It doesn't matter. I'll have a talk with him when he gets back home."

Meanwhile, Sheffield, who knew nothing about this, was still chatting happily with Harmon.

At eleven o'clock that evening, Erica was lying on her bed, playing with her phone.

Out of the blue, she got a call from Sheffield, who said, "Rika, Matthew is drunk. Can you come by and pick him up?"

'Drunk again?' thought Erica, frowning. She took no time at all to decide what to answer. "No, not a chance. I can't drive. Ask his assistant to come pick him up." The memory of what had happened the last time she'd gone to pick him up loomed large in Erica's mind. Trying again would surely lead to disaster.

Besides, she was still angry and didn't want to see Matthew.

Meanwhile, Sheffield wished the best for Erica and Matthew. He saw this as a good opportunity for the couple to improve their relationship. Since Erica didn't seem to realize this, he said, "Rika, why are you being silly? You know, if you don't come and see him, what if that gives other women the chance to do so? Just come over! When you pick up Matthew, I'll arrange for someone to drive you both back."

Erica's words were heavy and gloomy. "It doesn't matter whether I go see him or not. Other women will have the chance to get close to him either way."

That made Sheffield feel anxious. "How could that be possible? There are only the three of us here right now, all men. Now come here, quickly. I will keep an eye on him until you arrive. I promise no other woman will come near him."

Erica grumbled something and hung up. A moment of fretting came and went, and she slid from the bed. She went to the walk-in closet, changed into the first top she saw, and left the villa.

It was really a pain to have a husband who was incapable of holding his liquor.

After hanging up the phone, Sheffield looked over at Matthew, who had his eyes closed. "You're so pitiful," Sheffield said quietly, trying to sound sympathetic. "First your father doesn't love you, and now your wife doesn't either. You poor wretch."

Matthew and Harmon were rendered speechless.

By the time Erica finally reached the Orchid Private Club, Harmon had left to deal with something, leaving only Sheffield and Matthew in the private room.

Sheffield's face brightened the minute she walked in, and he waved at her. "Rika!"

Erica came over and nodded at him. "Hello, Sheffield."

Beside him, Matthew was still sprawled out on the sofa, his eyes closed. From his lack of reaction to Erica's arrival, she wasn't sure whether he'd known she was coming or not.

Sheffield came up to her and whispered, "You know, Matthew's drunk. Seize the opportunity tonight and take good care of him."

Erica hesitated, sure that he was trying to insinuate something. But she was still angry and didn't bother trying to figure it out. "Don't worry. I will take him to his woman," she said icily.

"His woman?" echoed Sheffield, who had no idea whom she was referring to.

Erica only nodded and brushed past him. Giving Matthew's shoe a kick, she snapped, "Get up!"

But remembering then that Sheffield was still watching them, she realized that she had to save face. With a great effort, she softened her voice. "Matthew."

Slowly, Matthew opened his eyes and met Erica's. There was a trace of coldness in his look. "What do you want?"

His hand drifted to the nearby end table, toward a half-full glass beside a bottle of white wine. Despite nearly knocking the glass over, he managed to get it to his lips and took a long swig.

Erica took a deep breath. "I've come to pick you up. You've had enough to drink."

"No—I haven't finished yet," he grumbled. "I'm not going anywhere. If you want to talk about something, it'll have to wait until later."

His refusal kindled Erica's smoldering anger into an open flame. Before her husband could react, she snatched the glass from his hand and refilled it almost to the brim.

As the two men watched with some confusion, Erica sniffed the glass, then gulped it down in one go.

Matthew's face darkened. However, Sheffield's stunned look gave way to a smile, and he gave a brief round of applause.

"Rika, I had no idea you were so good at drinking. You really are a credit to the fairer sex!"

Gritting her teeth, Erica held down her frustration, refilled the glass, and downed it again and again until finally the bottle was empty. Practically throwing the glass onto the end table, she spat, "Oh, look, there's none left. Can we leave now?"

Matthew slowly stood up from the sofa and put his hands in his pockets.

For a moment he could only take in his wife's blank stare. "I didn't think you were such a good drinker."

Erica said nothing. One could hear a pin drop in that room.

Unable to bear the silence, Sheffield came over and clapped Matthew on the shoulder. "Well, look, Rika's come to pick you up. It's late. Why don't you two go home now?"

Glancing at the drunk woman, Matthew grabbed her hand and led her out of the room.

The trip home was mostly quiet. Erica seemed her usual self, except that she was as silent as their driver.

They were almost there when Erica suddenly leaned forward and cried, "Stop the car!"

Matthew had a look out the window. Outside was the East River, sparkling in the moonlight as it wound its way beside the Pearl Villa District.

"You want to do something here?" he asked. By way of reply, Erica just looked at him and gave a serious nod.

At Matthew's order, the driver brought the Emperor to a stop on the curb.

Straightaway, Erica exited the car and hurried toward the river. Past a little tract of grass, a waist-high stone wall stood between them and a ten-foot drop into the swift current. Matthew followed his wife, who stretched her arms wide as if to embrace the cold gusts that swept over them. "Balala, the fairies, transform!" she exclaimed, seemingly believing that she had come to transform into an immortal.

Struck speechless, Matthew began to feel nervous about her behavior. The thought that she might be about to throw herself into the river pulled him onward. Otherwise, he would have stayed in the car and pretended not to know her.

What happened the next moment brought him running.

Before his astonished eyes, Erica scrambled up onto the stone wall and gazed down into the waters.

"Erica, come down!" Matthew ordered as he came up behind her.

Hearing his voice, Erica slowly turned around. With an eerie grace, she stretched out her right arm and pointed at the high-rise buildings that glittered on the other side of the East River. "Matthew Xitala, look!" she shouted over the wind. "That's the country I have built for you!" Then she put her hands on her hips and laughed wildly.

Her husband stared at her, mortified. She had come to pick him up in the midst of his drunkenness, but

now look at her. Compared to this madwoman, Matthew seemed completely sober.

For a moment he stared up at her in silence, and tenderness began to show in his deep eyes.

A blast of cold wind brought him back to himself. "Erica, come down!"

Erica stretched both arms out to him. "Carry me down!"

"Are you..." Matthew started. He was meaning to say, "Are you trying to earn a good beating for yourself?"

But even as he spoke, Erica began to lean backward on the balls of her feet, as though to let herself fall over the edge. Matthew's heart practically exploded as he leaped onto the wall beside her, where he caught her around the waist.

"How dare you jump!" he scolded, furious.

But Erica was not afraid of him. "If you dared to catch me, why should I not dare to jump?" She giggled, having never doubted that he would catch her. After all, if she got hurt, both of their fathers would hold him responsible, regardless of the circumstances.

That was why she felt confident enough to push Matthew's buttons.

Matthew helped her back down to the ground, only then to sweep her up in his arms and carry her back toward the car. "I'm going to settle accounts with you when we get home!" he hissed.

"Then I don't want to go home!" Erica retorted, squirming to get out of his arms.

Sighing, Matthew gave in and softened his tone. "No, I was just kidding. I won't settle accounts with you."

"Now, that's more like it!" With that, Erica closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and buried her face in his arms. He didn't miss the triumphant smile on her face.

CHAPTER 1176 I LIKE YOU

At the Pearl Villa District

As soon as they arrived home, Erica was ready to crash. She kicked off her shoes and rushed upstairs like a freed husky.

By the time Matthew changed into his slippers, Erica had already disappeared at the corner of the stairs.

When he got up the stairs and reached the third floor, there was pin-drop silence. As he pushed the bedroom door open, suddenly a figure jumped out of the corner and shouted, "Ha!"

Matthew leapt in the air as he had not expected that, and his heart palpitated nonstop.

Erica felt overjoyed as she realized that her trick had worked.

The man closed his eyes in resignation, gnashed his teeth and snarled, "Erica Leonard!"

"What? I'm going to bed!" Erica disregarded his anger and ran for the bed. Every time she laid eyes on the bed, she found it harder to keep her drowsy eyes open.

She unbuttoned her coat and hurled it on the sofa, closely followed by her sweater and trousers.

It was almost as though Matthew wasn't standing in front of her the whole time. Perhaps she trusted him so much that she had no problems of sleeping in the nude even when he was there.

Matthew's eyes darkened as he watched this scene unfold before his very eyes. The girl threw the last piece of clothing she had on the sofa and quickly jumped into bed.

'How could she fall asleep just like that? I don't know how she can be so carefree and frivolous!' Putting his tie aside, Matthew went straight to the bed and sat down. "Erica?"

Erica opened one eye and looked at him. "What?"

Grabbing her hands, he leaned over and kissed her luscious red lips.

A few minutes later, the sound of someone crying in the bedroom was heard. "Didn't you say that you would respect my boundaries? You promised that you wouldn't force me. What do you call pressing me down now and not allowing me to resist? You are a liar!"

Matthew loosened his grip on her wrist, kissed her on the corner of her eyes, and said nothing.

"I want an apology! Don't try to take advantage of the fact that I've had a few drinks. It'll take more than a couple of drinks to get me drunk. In fact, I'm very sober right now!" Although she wasn't particularly good at drinking, Erica was able to handle her liquor better than most women. She never had trouble sleeping after a night out and unlike her mother, she wouldn't ask for Wahaha after drinking.

Matthew wiped the tears from the corner of her eyes and whispered in her ear, "Don't cry. I like you so much that I want to treat you like this..."

Erica's mouth was agape in shock and bafflement.

"I don't believe you!" She knew he was just bluffing. Erica would be incredibly stupid to believe what Matthew said in bed.

'I can't believe he's trying to get me to sleep with him after he got Phoebe pregnant! Why is he acting like such an irresponsible man?'

Matthew remained silent. Which was more important, dignity or getting laid? Did he even have to think about it? Of course, the answer was getting laid!

Without any explanation, Matthew kissed her again.

Suddenly, just as Matthew was starting to lose control over his desires, Erica, who was shivering with fear, bit him on the shoulder.

When the man stopped because of the pain, she took the opportunity to push him away and ran into the walk-in closet.

When everything returned to peace, Erica sneaked out of the closet fully clothed. When she passed by the bedroom, she saw Matthew standing in front of the window with his back to the door, wearing only a pair of boxers.

He had a figure to die for! All of a sudden, Erica felt pangs of remorse. Why didn't she touch him just a few more times just now when they were in bed?

As soon as he turned around and saw Erica staring at him, she panicked and turned around to run away.

'She seems a little drunk. If she goes out like that at this hour...' Thinking of this, Matthew immediately grabbed his silk robe, put it on, and took the elevator downstairs as fast as he could.

When Matthew found Erica, she had already climbed onto the wall of the villa, leaving behind the only criminal evidence—the rope.

Without even looking at him, Erica jumped onto the big tree just outside the wall and slid down the tree. Then, she ran away.

Matthew called in for help and asked as many people as he could find to help him locate Erica. Before long, however, he received a call from Erica.

As he watched her name on his phone screen, Matthew wondered why Erica was calling him. After all, she was not one to give up so easily. As such, he concluded that it must have been something really urgent, or else she wouldn't have called him.

Thinking of this, he immediately slid the answer button.

Before he could say anything, Erica's panting voice came from the other end of the line. "Matthew, help!"

It was just as he had anticipated. "Where are you right now?"

"I'm... I'm running and there's a few people chasing me."

Matthew asked again, "Which road are you on?"

"I don't know. I'm not familiar with the street names of Alorith!" Fortunately, Erica was a fast runner, or she would have gotten caught a long time ago. Unfortunately, she was running out of energy.

Matthew asked the driver to pull over first. "Is there any landmark around you?"

"A landmark? Oh, I ran past our family's office building."

'Our family...' Erica deliberately said the words "our family" so that he would rush to her rescue. This was just moments after she ran away from him. "What else?"

She answered breathlessly, "A pharmacy, a supermarket... Why aren't these guys giving up yet? And... Ah! I got it! I'm near my school!"

It had taken her so long to recognize the neighborhood her own school was in. Matthew felt defeated, and he ordered the driver to turn around without hesitating. "Go to Mrs. Erica's school now!"

It took about ten minutes before he found Erica standing and gasping for air, while four men were approaching her, just a mere ten meters away. Three of those men were so tired that they were rolling on the ground while one of them was barely standing straight.

Matthew got out of the car and pulled the woman into his arms. "Why didn't you just call the police?"

The moment Erica saw him, she wrapped her arms around him with excitement. "I wasn't thinking right. My mind went blank and the first person I thought of was you."

Matthew was pleasantly surprised to hear that. What Erica had just said now was more heartwarming and real than ten insincere apologies she had given him in the past. The man sighed inwardly, and his eyes returned to their usual cold selves as he glared at the men in front of him.

Although the distance between them wasn't a lot, under the dim lights on both sides of the road, Matthew could only vaguely make out a blonde-haired man in his twenties.

When the other three men who had been lying on the ground saw Erica's rescue party, they helped each other up and shouted at Matthew, "Hand that woman over to us!"

Erica snuggled in Matthew's loving embrace and raised her head to look at him. "I caught them dealing on the streets." Erica's misfortunes just wouldn't give her a break! Just before she could hail a taxi and make her escape, she accidentally bumped into this group of thugs engaged in some kind of illegal

activities at the end of the bridge.

The poor girl was spotted staring at them and that was enough to warrant her capture.

Matthew put his arm around her shoulder and gently patted her on the back. "I see."

The four men on the other side began to approach the outnumbered couple with confidence. "Do you hear me? Hand her over to us!" one of them demanded.

Matthew stood still, completely disregarding the man's words as he kept patting on Erica's back.

Despite the advantage in numbers, the men felt a sense of apprehension when they looked at Matthew's soul-piercing eyes.

Suddenly, Matthew said, "I dare you to say that again!"

The men looked at each other in utter bafflement. Frightened by Matthew's cold eyes, they contemplated their next course of action. "Ted, why don't we just let it go?" one of them whispered.

CHAPTER 1177 EXPERIENCE THE ORDINARY LIFE

"Fine. Forget it!" The man called Ted, cast a sideways glance at the black Emperor car not too far away. He caught a glimpse of the man standing in front of them and a sudden chill went down his spine. Tiny beads of sweat breaking out of his hands and face indicated his earnest wish to retreat.

However, a tall, lanky figure from one of the men standing behind him persisted. He gave Ted a pat on the back and whispered, "We can't just let her go. If that woman calls the police, it's all over!"

Just as the four bandits were hesitating, about seven or eight cars pulled over right in front of them. In an instant, more than a dozen bodyguards, all dressed in black, burst out of the cars, guns fully locked and loaded.

The man in charge ran over to Matthew, while his subordinates followed and bowed his head before him. "Mr. Matthew, I apologize to you on behalf of my men for being late."

Glancing at the four bandits, Matthew ordered in a cold voice, "These guys have made the big mistake of scaring my wife. I want you to get rid of them all!"

"Yes! Mr. Matthew!"

Matthew then guided Erica, who kept looking back, into the Emperor car.

On the way, Erica repeated the same question a few times. "What are you going to do with them?"

Matthew didn't answer her at first. After his patience had run out, he finally answered, "That's none of

my concern."

"What do you mean, it's none of your concern? You're the one who gave the order!"

He looked at her with indifference and said, "I'm not getting my hands dirty. What happens to them has nothing to do with me."

Erica sighed in defeat. It seemed pointless to go around in circles on the matter.

When they returned to the villa, Erica suddenly remembered what had happened in the bedroom just now. She blushed and clutched at the corners of her dress, seemingly ashamed. "I want to sleep in the dormitory tonight." She was quite shaken up by him. She was so out of it at the time that he almost succeeded in doing what he wanted to do.

"There's no need to avoid me. I'm going on a business trip tomorrow. I won't be back until next week. Go upstairs and get some sleep!" Matthew wanted to tell her about his trip, but he didn't have the chance to tell her as they had ended up getting into an argument.

"What?" 'Why is it so sudden?'

Ignoring her this time, Matthew turned around and went upstairs with an extremely cold attitude.

Just as Matthew had said, they slept as usual that night, and he disappeared the next morning.

Soon, it was time to hand in her coursework. Since Matthew didn't allow her to take pictures of him and Erica didn't have any other friends in Alorith, she decided to ask Hyatt to be her model.

It took her just a few minutes to finish the photography side of things, but she spent a good few hours editing them on Photoshop.

Erica retouched the photos for three hours before sending them to her monitor's e-mail address with satisfaction.

In the afternoon class, the professor selected ten outstanding works and showed them on the big screen, two of which were the pictures of Hyatt taken by Erica.

However, the signature under the photos was not Erica's, but someone else's name.

Before the final analysis of the outstanding works, Professor Faulkner looked at more than one hundred students from the stage and said, "These pictures on the screen are excellent pieces of work, but before appreciating them, I have to criticize a few students among you. The first one is Tommy Richards. This student handed in a very perfunctory photo of character, and he didn't even know how to find the right angle."

With a single click, the professor showed Tommy's work on the screen. His model was a male classmate and indeed, the picture showed no impressive techniques of photography at all.

After criticizing several students in succession, Professor Faulkner's eyes fell on Erica. "The last one is a student with the surname Leonard. For her assignment, this person submitted photos of the superstar, Aaron, conducting some kind of business. Not only has this student completely disregarded the standards of our esteemed establishment: her teachers and classmates, to be very honest, but she is also in violation of the law for using Aaron's picture without his consent. Having considered the fact that this was her first mistake, I won't hold her legally accountable for her actions, but I hope that this student will respect this chance. Don't make such a mistake again in the future!"

The professor then opened a folder, containing high resolution photos of Aaron which was taken when he was advertising milk for a company.

The professor was a well-known photographer in Alorith. He knew well about Erica's background, but as a teacher, he had to be responsible for her. Since he didn't want her to face any trouble, he deliberately kept her first name a secret, mentioning only her last.

Erica, however, wasn't one to go down without a fight!

Just as the professor was about to move on to the next work, she stood up from her seat and yelled, "Please wait, Professor Faulkner!"

Everyone's eyes fell on Erica. Everyone heard the girl's next words, loud and clear. "This is not my work. The third and eighth pictures on the big screen are the ones I've handed in."

Countless whispers filled the classroom, as all the students exchanged rude remarks about Erica for handing in Aaron's photos.

"So the professor was actually talking about Erica. How could she do that?"

"She is the wife of a CEO. Do you think she comes here for studies? She is just here to experience the ordinary life."

"I pity Mr. Matthew for having to be married to such a troublemaker!"

"How shameful!"

Professor Faulkner hesitated for a moment and clicked the page of the PPT that showed the top ten works.

Then he enlarged the third photo. This time, Erica saw clearly that the signature at the bottom right corner of the work was Kaitlyn Dawson.

'Kaitlyn Dawson?' Erica searched this person in her memory. 'Oh, it's her!' She recalled the name belonging to a girl who slept in the bunk bed below hers.

The one who accidentally used her cleanser! Erica had no idea that they were in the same department until now.

She looked around and saw Kaitlyn stand up from her seat at the back. "Professor Faulkner, Erica is talking nonsense. This is clearly my work!"

Erica's face went red the moment she heard Kaitlyn and she screamed, "Your work? Excuse me, do you have any evidence to prove that this is indeed your work? Who is the person in the photo?"

Kaitlyn glanced at the boy next to her and said, "The man in the picture is my boyfriend. He can testify for me!"

The boy sitting next to her had the same hairstyle as Hyatt. Aside from very minor differences, even the clothes he was wearing were the same color as the clothes Hyatt had worn when Erica had photographed him that day.

As Erica had retouched the pictures a lot, it was hard to tell whether it was Hyatt or Kaitlyn's boyfriend in them.

Professor Faulkner's face darkened. "Erica, please sit down first. I want to see you in my office after class!"

But Erica wouldn't give in. She continued to ask Kaitlyn, "Where did you take the photos? What kind of lens did you use? Who can testify?"

Kaitlyn answered her questions smoothly, "Well, if you have to know. It was taken on the Archaic Street near the school. I can tell you the house number, it's No. 88. No one has lived in that small yard for a long time, so I filtered the photo into the retro film style. I used the new universal zoom lens T14 produced by Blue Sky Technology."

Everything Kaitlyn had said was true, word by word. Indeed, Erica and Hyatt had taken the photos at the exact same address Kaitlyn had mentioned.

After all, Hyatt's generally shy and meek disposition wouldn't allow him to be a model in public. As such, Erica had to find a quiet place for him to shoot. Therefore, she chose an abandoned courtyard.

Erica remained unfazed. "Can you show us the original pictures?"

"Of course! And what about you? Since you're claiming that it's your work. Why don't you show yours to everyone?" Kaitlyn looked at Erica with eagerness as she picked up her camera.

Erica responded immediately by opening her camera directory and finding the album.

However, when Erica scrolled through her camera, she was stunned, as though struck by lightning.

All the photos of Hyatt in her camera were gone!

CHAPTER 1178 SOMEONE HAD FRAMED MRS. ERICA

Unfortunately, while Erica still couldn't find the original photos in her camera album, Kaitlyn had already asked Professor Faulkner to connect her camera to the big screen.

After a thorough comparison between Kaitlyn's original pictures with the retouched ones on the screen, everyone was convinced that she wasn't lying. The photo chosen for one of the ten most outstanding pieces of work in photography undoubtedly belonged to Kaitlyn.

There was another reason why Kaitlyn was able to copy Erica's photos. When Erica took pictures of Hyatt, she kept his face out of focus as he felt shy most of the time, showing hardly even the side of his face.

Erica was scrambling to analyze the facts in her mind. Eventually she came to the conclusion that Kaitlyn must have copied her original photographs, then recreated them with her boyfriend.

Kaitlyn had it all planned out. She knew that she couldn't simply claim ownership over Erica's photos because even if Hyatt and Kaitlyn's boyfriend shared similar facial features, they weren't identical.

Also, since Erica had edited and retouched the pictures before she handed them in, the end result looked far different from the original ones. From the looks of it, these factors made it easier for Kaitlyn to put her own signature under Erica's work.

Professor Faulkner looked at Erica and asked, "Kaitlyn has shown her evidence. So where are your original pictures?"

Erica answered honestly, "Someone has deleted my pictures!"

She racked her brains but couldn't figure out who had touched her camera besides Hyatt.

Of course, Hyatt couldn't be the one who had set her up, as he was now sitting next to her, looking more anxious than anyone in the room. He might have been a little simple, but he wouldn't conspire with others to frame her.

There were, however, other potential suspects. Erica had sent the photos to the monitor first, who had sent them to Professor Faulkner. Could it be the professor, or could it be the monitor who had been holding a candle to the devil?

All of a sudden, it occurred to Erica that Kaitlyn's boyfriend was none other than Luther George, their

class monitor.

Erica was now, without a shred of a doubt, certain that Luther and Kaitlyn were in cahoots together.

Burning red with anger, Professor Faulkner threw the remote control on the desk. His eyes looked like they would pop out of their sockets. "Let's move on and continue with our class. You two sit down first!"

Judging by the way the professor looked at Erica, it was clear that she was the culprit in his mind.

However, Erica stood her ground. She might have not been the smartest student in the class, but sure enough, she wasn't stupid enough to let another person frame her like this.

She was certain of one thing—Luther would never testify against Kaitlyn and even if Hyatt were to tell everyone that the model in the photos was him, there was no guarantee that everyone would believe him.

Therefore, the only person Erica could rely on was herself.

But what could she do?

She fidgeted desperately and asked to be excused from the class. "Professor, I need to get my laptop. The Photoshop on my laptop should have the records of my editing." Finally, a chance to prove her innocence!

Professor Faulkner didn't even try to stop her as she exited the classroom, bolting out like lightning.

Erica's laptop was still in the villa.

In order to save time, she called the driver and asked him to bring her the laptop over as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, Matthew, who was in Mipburg, just finished a meeting. As soon as he stepped out of the conference room, Owen rushed over to him. "Sir, Mrs. Erica seems to be in some kind of trouble at school."

"Tell me what happened!"

Owen's younger brother who was also studying photography in the same department as Erica witnessed the whole incident in that classroom. "My younger brother said that someone had framed Mrs. Erica. She's been accused of handing in a superstar's business photos as her coursework. And Mrs. Erica claimed that another classmate had plagiarized her own work, but she had no proof."

Matthew stopped and looked back at Owen with an unresolved look in his eyes. "Erica submitted a superstar's photos without his consent?"

Owen nodded. "Yes, that's what she has been accused of."

Matthew continued to walk forward. "What is Erica doing now?"

"Apparently she ran out of the classroom saying that she needed to get her laptop."

"I see."

Could Erica really do such a thing? Matthew wanted to burst out laughing, but he kept his composure. Erica was a nuisance; a troublemaker among many other things, but she was also a good person at heart. She would never do such a thing!

The person framing Erica must have had everything planned down to the tiniest details. As such, Matthew feared that even if she had her laptop, Erica might still fail to prove her innocence.

Matthew decided to wait until Erica came to him for help.

Before long, the driver brought Erica's laptop to the school. The moment Erica got her laptop, she wasted no time and ran to the classroom.

She walked past all the harsh gaze her classmates threw at her and returned to her seat. When she passed by Kaitlyn's row of seats, she squinted her eyes at her nemesis angrily. 'Just wait, Kaitlyn. I'll make you regret for doing this to me!'

Professor Faulkner continued his lecture, disregarding what Erica was doing.

As soon as Erica sat down, she turned on her laptop and opened the Photoshop.

However... Erica's mind went blank in an instant, because there was no trace of the original pictures in her computer; not in the Photoshop or the Recycle Bin.

'What the hell?'

She stared at the computer screen with an incredulous look in her eyes as she couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Her face turned pale and she was completely dumbfounded.

The look on Erica's face made Hyatt feel even more anxious. He tugged at Erica's sleeve and whispered, "What's wrong, Erica?"

His voice brought Erica back to her senses, who looked back at Kaitlyn with resentment, wishing to smash her laptop on that vicious girl's face.

Erica took a deep breath and tried to calm herself down. There had to be a better solution!

The moment she thought of Matthew, Erica took her phone out to ask for help, but when she remembered what he did last night, she put her phone back inside her pocket. She was still giving Matthew the silent treatment because he threw away her macarons.

Thinking of her pride, Erica decided to rely on other sources first before running to Matthew for help.

'Yes! That's it.'

So while Matthew calmly sat in the office and waited for Erica's call, the girl was in the classroom, racking her brains to find out who else she could turn to for help except Matthew.

It only took three minutes for Erica to think of someone else who could help her!

Her brother-in-law—Evelyn's husband! Erica was so glad to have thought of him, she almost burst into tears.

A long time ago, Terilynn accidentally told her that Sheffield was actually a very talented hacker.

Erica wasn't able to think of Sheffield because Terilynn had made her promise not to tell anyone about his hacking skills.

Clutching the laptop to her chest, Erica ran out of the classroom again, without word or warning.

Before leaving, however, she looked at Kaitlyn and said, "Just wait! I'll make sure everyone sees your real face before the end of the class!"

The smile on Kaitlyn's face froze. Erica seemed quite confident; it seemed as though she had found a solution.

After Erica left the classroom, Kaitlyn took out her phone and sent a message to her cousin. "It looks like Erica has found a solution. What should I do?"

Two minutes later, her cousin replied, "If you really think that she has the evidence to prove it, you have to apologize to her as soon as possible. She is a person who can be persuaded by reason but not be cowed by force. Remember to say that you only did it because you weren't as good a photographer as she was..."

Kaitlyn disagreed. "How will I ever show my face in front of Erica if I apologize to her?"

"Listen to me. I'll take you shopping tomorrow. I'll buy you whatever you want."

"All right!" Kaitlyn reluctantly agreed.

Erica found a quiet place and dialed Evelyn's number, slowly putting down the laptop from her hand.

"Hey, it's me, Erica!"

CHAPTER 1179 JEALOUS AGAIN

Evelyn knew it was her. "What's up, Erica?"

"Is my brother-in-law around? I need his help," Erica said urgently.

Matthew was on a business trip, so Evelyn was filling in for him at Hilton Group, while Sheffield was at Theo Group. "No. What's going on? Something happen?" Evelyn asked.

"Yeah, someone messed with my computer. Something important is gone. I'm betting Sheffield could fix this."

"Oh, so it's about the computer. Yeah, he's the guy to call. Since you're a relative, he wouldn't mind if you called him directly. You have his number?"

Erica thought for a while. Sheffield called her the other night. So she figured she should be able to find his number in the call log. "I do. Thanks, Evelyn. I'll give him a ring."

"Okay!"

Five minutes later, Erica finally understood what had happened.

Someone hacked into her computer. They got in through the webcam, and had unleashed some malicious code on her system. It crawled through her hard drive, stealing her photos and deleting the email to Luther.

She walked back into the classroom, laptop tucked under her arm. The moment she stepped into the lecture hall, the class was over, and the bell rang.

Damn it!

Everyone had to be there to hear her explanation. An explanation does little good if there are no ears to hear it.

Erica quickly ran to the back door and closed it. Then she went back to the front door and walked into the classroom to tell everyone who was about to leave, "Everyone stay where you're at. I've found the evidence!"

A classmate expressed his dissatisfaction loudly. "So what? Why do we care anything about evidence? Let me outta here. I got things to do."

"Right! You're so weird!" another classmate shouted.

Putting the computer on the podium, Erica said loudly, "I'm going to clear my name. I don't want people dragging my name through the dirt! I didn't hand in Aaron's photos, and my work was stolen. I can prove it now! Listen up, okay?"

The people who were protesting all fell silent. They knew Erica was right. They would spread it about, like any other rumor. After all, it was related to Mrs. Hilton, and she was a person of interest.

Erica turned to Professor Faulkner and threatened him. "Professor Faulkner, you're our teacher. Because of this, you're responsible to the students. You could have shut this down, and you didn't. If I can't get this matter resolved right now, I'll have to report you."

She was right. The teacher couldn't sit by and watch something like that go down without stepping in. Professor Faulkner opened his mouth but had nothing to say back. Finally, he had to say, "Erica, if you have evidence, show it to us, then."

Then he raised his hand to the students who had stood up and said, "Sit down, class. This should be educational. Please be patient."

With Professor Faulkner's help, Erica plugged in her laptop, and connected her HDMI cable to the big screen. Sheffield was controlling the computer remotely, and all the photos on the computer and camera had been restored.

Erica opened the first photo she took. It was about nine o'clock yesterday morning.

The caption on the photo also included the model of the camera she was using, the T14 by Blue Sky Technology.

And the email she sent Luther was also restored. That was time stamped at two o'clock in the afternoon.

She then opened the original pictures Kaitlyn shot. The first one was three twenty in the afternoon, and the time gap was enough for Kaitlyn and Luther to arrive at Archaic Street to take photos.

After that, Erica asked Kaitlyn when she emailed Luther, but Kaitlyn refused, "I didn't bring my computer with me."

Erica wasn't going to give up. "You mean you can't get email on your phone? Come on, who doesn't do that?"

Knowing she was going to be found out, Kaitlyn bit her lower lip and told Erica, "Sorry, I wasn't thinking clearly. I saw your homework on Luther's screen once. I'm not as smart as you, so I came up with this idea..."

When Erica released a slew of evidence to prove her innocence, everyone basically knew that she was in the clear. But still, when they heard Kaitlyn admit it herself, they couldn't control themselves. The noise level in the room had gotten pretty bad.

Hearing the accusations leveled against Kaitlyn and Luther, Erica finally breathed a sigh of relief.

She looked at Professor Faulkner and asked, "Professor, I have a question. Now that we know what he was up to, can you really say Luther is the best guy for class monitor? I think we need a better role model to represent our class."

Someone immediately seconded, "Yeah, teach. I totally agree. He shouldn't have done that. We need someone else. Lucky for us, Erica's smart and knows some pretty good people. I don't think we'd be able to dodge the bullet if they decided to frame us."

"That's right, Professor Faulkner. How can a person like Luther be a monitor?"

Professor Faulkner thought for a while and announced to the class, "Don't worry, students. I need to tell the head teacher about this. That's his decision to make. I trust he'll make the right one."

Hearing what he said, everyone calmed down.

Professor Faulkner packed up his stuff and left the classroom. Many students surrounded Erica and exclaimed, "Erica, you're awesome. I always thought you were a bitch, but it looks like you're the hero here."

"Those people trash-talking you were so wrong. I was wrong. I'm sorry. Can we be friends?"

Erica had always been outgoing and friendly. She was lonely in the city. She was glad so many of her classmates were willing to be friends with her. She nodded with a smile, "Sure!"

After leaving the classroom with Hyatt, Erica went to the dormitory first and waited for Kaitlyn there.

Soon, Kaitlyn showed up. Seeing Erica walking towards her, Kaitlyn knew what she wanted. Just as her cousin had told her, she kept apologizing to Erica, pretending to be weak and miserable, and promised that this kind of thing would never happen again.

She really was just over it all. Finally, Erica gritted her teeth and warned her, "This is the last time. You hear me? If you do something like this again, you'll regret it!"

"I will never do it again. I swear. Thank you, Erica."

Just like that, the matter was settled.

Matthew waited until evening, but still hadn't heard from Erica. He called Owen to ask about it, and then he realized that Erica had solved it by herself. Owen also told him exactly how things played out.

As soon as Owen was done talking to him, a name popped into Matthew's head. The remote control of Erica's laptop, the restoration of files...

Matthew knew who had helped her. He took out his phone and called Sheffield. "Do you have too much time on your hands?" he growled into the phone.

Sheffield was confused. "Not really. I'm getting busier and busier these days. Looking forward to Godwin growing up and taking my place so I can focus on being a professional gigolo."

"Well, what you do on your own time is your business. And I suggest you mind your own business, or I might just make you busier!" Matthew said coldly and hung up the phone.

'Mind my own business? When did I get involved in his business?'

he wondered. After staring at his phone for a long time, Sheffield finally figured out why Matthew was sullen. He helped Erica out and Matthew got jealous!

Matthew's technical skills were just as good as a professional hacker. The trouble that Erica ran into was a piece of cake for two men with their skills. But Erica went to him for help. He'd be surprised if Matthew weren't jealous. He wanted to be the one his wife relied on.

Shaking his head helplessly, Sheffield thought, 'Erica, I knew you'd be trouble, and I was right!' Matthew was definitely not the forgiving type. He'd find a way to get back at Sheffield for this.

CHAPTER 1180 ARE YOU THE DEVIL

With Matthew not at home, Erica simply did not have the courage to watch horror movies by herself. She would be alone in the villa and therefore, horror wasn't a good idea. Apart from focusing on her classes, she mostly hung out with Hyatt, who was the only good friend she had.

Matthew had left on his business trip four days ago, and Erica was yet to receive a call from him. He hadn't even texted her once. The more Erica thought about it, the angrier she became.

But this anger was all she had. There was nothing else for her to do.

Without Matthew around, she was bored.

Some respite from the loneliness came in the form of Debbie and Carlos's return to Alorith. That evening, Debbie came to see her.

The two women hadn't seen each other in a long time. They hugged each other and then walked inside, talking excitedly and choosing a new topic every step of the way.

Debbie was carrying a suitcase full of gifts for Erica. She couldn't wait to show her everything she'd got. And when she found out that she was going to have to repack and get it upstairs if she opened it downstairs first, she directly took the elevator to the bedroom. There was no point opening it twice and ruining the surprise.

"Come and see what I got for you," she told Erica excitedly.

"What is it?" Erica asked, curious.

"So... many... things! Come on. Tell me you like them or not?"

Erica watched her mother-in-law open the suitcase and saw that she wasn't lying. There really was everything in it. Food, clothing, knickknacks, everything she could need!

"Try this camisole on. Do you like it?" Debbie excitedly brought out a nightdress in the color of red wine and handed it to her.

But the color seemed a bit dull and formal. Erica hesitated for a second. After seeing the style, she refused, "Mom, this is not my style. I think Evelyn would like it more..."

It was obviously a mature woman's style.

But Debbie stopped her from saying anything else. "No. I bought it for you. I know it's not your style but hear me out, okay? Every man wants his woman to be sexy and charming. You can't always wear cartoon-based pajamas in front of Matthew. You have to change your style occasionally..."

"But, Mom. I won't even look good in this dress..." And to be honest, even if she didn't wear anything at all, Matthew might not even look at her, because he didn't like her. It didn't matter what kind of pajamas she was wearing, or whether she was wearing pajamas at all.

"Don't tell me you won't look good. My Rika is very cute and good-looking. She looks good no matter what she wears. Now be a good girl and try this on!" Debbie shoved the dress back to her and pushed her into the closet.

Inside, Erica stood in front of the mirror and looked at the cartoon pajamas she was still wearing. For the first time in her life, she wondered if it really was not cute. Had she been wrong the whole time?

After hesitating for a while, she finally changed into the wine-red camisole. It was a bit strange to wear a new style, but she walked out anyway.

Debbie's eyes lit up when she saw her daughter-in-law. She walked around her and said, "The size I chose is just right. And you look so beautiful in it. But I guess one thing could be better..."

"What is it?" The dress seemed remarkable enough as it was.

"Too much cloth! It would be better if it were a bit shorter!"

Erica was speechless. Was she too conservative? Or was her mother-in-law too outgoing?

The hem of the dress was already above her knees. Would it still be a dress if it got any shorter? Just like the wedding dress she had tried before, the V-shaped neck was so low it was about to reach her belly. And yet Debbie thought there was still too much fabric? What more, or less, could she want?

It had to be said that Debbie really was Matthew's mother. She knew exactly how to make her son happy.

Debbie handed her something else and said, "Come here and have a look at this. Don't be shy." But then, she lowered her voice, "Don't worry. I bought it secretly. You two can use it during sex to add some fun."

Erica was confused, "What's this?"

"Ha ha, you'll know it when you see it." Debbie smiled mysteriously.

The box was all in English, and the picture was an oval object that seemed weirdly like... No!

Erica really didn't know what it was. She wanted to open it to have a look, but was stopped. "To be honest, Erica, I'm embarrassed. Best wait until I am gone and study it at your own pleasure." And if Debbie was being honest, she would never have known what it was either if it weren't for Carlos.

Erica was rendered speechless. She had a bad feeling about this, even though she laughed a bit.

Ah well, let's forget about it! She decided to open the box when she was alone!

Later that evening, the two of them agreed to go shopping the next day after Debbie was rested. And then Debbie went back to the Hilton family's manor.

Left alone in the villa, Erica looked at all the things Debbie had brought her. She knew exactly what everything was and where to keep it, except for the last one. Debbie had been mysterious about it.

Erica didn't bother to translate the words one by one. She merely took a photo of the box and uploaded it to an image search app.

Pretty soon, a similar object popped up in the search bar. The brand was different, but from the photos, it looked like the same thing.

Erica clicked on it and read the description carefully. Her face flushed.

She almost threw her phone away after she had read more about it, especially after she found out what it was used for.

She knew it wasn't going to be something good, and she was right!

In fact, she had heard about these things before, but she was still very young and had never seen one in reality, let alone use it.

Now Debbie had given her one as a present, to let her and Matthew use it to have more fun... What was the woman thinking!

Holding the box, Erica rushed into the closet as if she were holding a hot potato and hid it in the most remote possible corner.

She didn't feel relieved until she had made sure that Matthew would never find it.

That night, Erica tossed and turned in bed, but couldn't fall asleep. Her mind was full of what she had hidden in the closet.

Before finally falling asleep, she had made up her mind to throw that ridiculous thing away on tomorrow, so that Matthew had no chance of ever seeing it. Then she wouldn't have to explain it ever.

However, when she woke up the next morning, she'd completely forgotten about it.

It was not until she was in the car and headed for the Hilton family's manor that she remembered her agenda. But it was too late to just go back home only to throw the box away, so she decided to throw it away after coming back.

When they arrived at the Hilton family's manor, Carlos wasn't there. Debbie was wandering around the living room still in her pajamas. When she saw Erica, she was surprised. "You're ready so soon?"

"Yes. Didn't you suggest half past ten?" Now, Erica realized that it always took Debbie much longer to get ready.

But now that she was here, Debbie hurried upstairs and waved at her. "Come wait for me upstairs. I'm going to change. We'll leave soon."

There was no one else in the living room. Erica would be bored sitting there all alone, so she agreed, "Okay!"

Then she followed Debbie to the bedroom. Before going to the walk-in closet, Debbie pointed at another door and told Erica, "If you feel bored, go inside and have a look around. If you like something, just take it!"

"What's in there?"

Debbie explained, "That's the lipstick room your father-in-law made for me. Go ahead and have a look."

"Oh!"

The moment Erica pushed the door open, she was shocked to her core. So many lipsticks! There were at least a few thousand in here. All from extremely popular brands!

When Debbie finally finished changing her clothes and came in to find her, Erica was examining a gift box.

And when she came in, Erica was still in shock. She exclaimed in admiration, "Mom, are you the devil? This collection is amazing!" And undoubtedly, it all must have cost a fortune! Every single item here was from a reputable brand! This was worth too much to just exist!