Ruling 391

Chapter 391

What fueled Arianne's dallying had less to do with it being a hard choice and more to do with Mark's sudden change of outlook in the matter. It was enough to make her second-guess herself and wonder if she had taken her conclusion too far. Could it be that reconciliation was possible? Were there indeed sound reasons to look the other way for Ethan?

Ultimately, this was a private matter between Tiffany and Ethan; the last thing Arianne wanted was for it to spark an argument between her and Mark.

"Alright, I'll mull it over," she relented, before adding, "You know, if it was meant to end this way, then you shouldn't have told me anything in the first place. I mean, how do you expect me to pretend I know nothing now? Gosh! Anyway, it's getting late, and I wanna go home. You coming?"

Mark was never the kind to spend the night in his office, and now that she had come to him personally, it threw his only reason to do so out of the window. "Let's go."

Meanwhile, inside a hospital ward, a fatigued Tiffany Lane was dozing off on the armrest after spreading herself wide over the couch.

Going through work during the day followed by taking care of Ethan at night in the hospital would be toilsome to a superwoman, let alone plain old Tiffany. She counted herself lucky that it was a private ward furnished with a couch, or she would have no place to catch even a wink of sleep.

Shrouded in the dark, Ethan watched her with a pensive side-eyed glance. A moment later, he straightened his back and sat up. "Tiffie," he crooned.

She raised her head blearily. “What’s wrong? Bathroom?”

He shook his head with a smile. “No, I’m fine, thank you. I think I’ve recovered well enough to be discharged tomorrow, so why don’t you go home? I feel bad seeing how exhausted you are.”

Tiffany eyed the time and decided against staying. “Okay, then. Call me tomorrow once you’ve returned home.”

He nodded. “My car’s in the basement parking lot — it’s the same car you gifted me; I’m sure you’ll recognize it right away. Drive home with that. I can arrange my ride for tomorrow.”

She took up the offer straight away, grabbing the key before leaving the hospital in her groggy state. It was only after the cooling night breeze washed over her face that she finally became more lucid.

Tiffany stared at the car key in her hand as mixed feelings bubbled in her chest. He was driving the same car she had gifted him back then even after he had earned more than enough to replace it. Then, the first thing he had done after it was wrecked in the car crash was to repair it. That just made doubting the sincerity of his proclamation of love even less apt, right? Yet, Tiffany just could not seem to conjure the same ardor and passion she used to have toward him not too long ago.

She arrived at the ground floor of her residence. Shortly after disembarking from the car, Summer West suddenly materialized from the shadows. “Tiffie, dear, please tell me you weren’t just fooling around with Jackson.”

Tiffany jerked. Why on earth was Summer standing here in the wee hours?! “Uh-um, h-hi, Auntie Summer! Why… Um, why are you here?”

It was actually rather evident that she had driven here, as her black Bentley was parked at the side of the road. “He came home in the middle of the night mumbling about the two of you breaking up, and I can’t help but wonder. Really? This soon? Why break up all of a sudden? I was like, ‘I thought you were bringing Tiffany home. Why isn’t she here?’ And he just — that boy was just acting so damn strange! He wouldn’t answer me even when I asked other things that are fairly innocuous, so I had no choice but to come to you,” Summer rambled. “No one seemed to be home when I got here, so I guessed you hadn’t returned yet and decided to wait. But don’t get intimidated; I’m only asking why the two of you broke up.”

Tiffany never expected Summer to confront her like this, so it took her an awkwardly long while to blabber, “W-w-well, I, uh, I’m just not good enough for him, I feel. My family’s bankrupt, and we’re dirt poor. Had Mark Tremont not been so forgiving, we would be stuck with millions and millions of dollars of debt.”

Unfortunately, Summer was not as gullible as Tiffany’s own mother. “Please, young lady, do you think I’ll believe that? You already knew about our social status before you started this relationship, and you’re only now thinking you’re not fit for him? Besides, I’m sure I’ve made it clear that I don’t care about your social status. You mean a lot to me because you’re the first girl he has ever brought home, which is why I’ve decided to drive all the way here — to hear the truth.”

It was only thanks to the tenebrious night that Tiffany could avoid the piercing glints in Summer’s eyes. She had always been rather guileless, and to make up a lie on the fly in front of discerning adults was an uphill task. “B-b-but I’m not lying! Um, I’m sure he told you everything about us already. And everything he said is true! We split up because we, er, realized that we’re not meant for each other. It’s true!”

Summer fell into an uncomfortable silence for about half a minute before turning toward her car. “I guess the two of you just aren’t fated to be, then.”

Tiffany watched Summer’s car disappearing in the distance, feeling her chest tightening in guilt. She might have agreed to join Jackson in constructing the façade, but when it came to the time to complete her lie, she could not fend off that sting in her conscience.

She silently promised herself to never pull something like this off again in the future.

Tiffany’s return was greeted by an empty nest where Lilian was nowhere in sight. After a bath, she threw herself onto her bed and checked her phone, only finding Ethan’s text message that said, “Text me when you’ve reached home.”

She replied to him and cast her phone aside. When lethargy gradually and finally displaced her simmering consternation, she drifted off to sleep.

Tiffany was roused in the early morning by the news from Lilian’s radio: “The heat is predicted to rise for these few days, so the public is advised to take extra precautions in protecting yourselves…”

Lilian appeared to be in an ecstatic mood. She had dressed herself up nicely and was applying a thick layer of sunscreen on her face, wearing the look of someone preparing to have a great time outside.

Tiffany blearily hoisted herself up from her bed. “Are you going out, Mom?”

“Mm-hmm!” Lilian replied between humming a tune. “I’ve got something to do today. You take care of yourself. Don’t run around places after work and just go straight back home, ‘cause this heat can kill!”

Tiffany had not seen her mother acting so convivial for ages; she could not help but be suspicious. “You’re awfully chipper today, Mom. Did you win the national lottery or something?”

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Lilian produced the title deed for her daughter to see. “This, right here, pertains to a plot of land your grandfather owns. It’s super-valuable right now, and guess who wants it? None other than Mark Tremont himself, and he’s coming to sign the agreement today! How do you expect me not to be chipper? Thank god we forgot about that piece of land, which is still legally your grandpa’s, and that we didn’t list it as one of our assets when we declared bankruptcy. Now, if you’d excuse me — Mommy’s got several places to be to carry on with the procedures. Tata!”

Tiffany was bewildered. For a while, she could not collect herself at the thought that Mark had his eyes on a plot, which, of course, automatically affirmed its value, that belonged to her family. It was very darn near a dream come true, especially when it could very well be their ticket out of poverty!

After Tiffany had sluggishly washed herself up, Ethan had called her to inform her that he was on his way home from the hospital.

The conversation made her tardy to work. By the time she reached her office with sweat dripping down her skin, she was already late by fifteen minutes. Nonetheless, she managed to get to her seat without anyone seemingly noticing her, allowing her to draw out a long breath of relief.

Then, suddenly, a tall, straight frame dashed past the entrance of the office — it was Jackson West, who broke his tradition of never being tardy to work today. Of course, being the boss of the entire company, no one was going to deduct his wages.

Jackson, seemingly sensing eyes on him, turned to face Tiffany's direction. Their gazes met for a single second before he averted his away dismissively.

Tiffany was mildly surprised. The way she saw it, the two of them shared a relationship way more profound than the typical acquaintance between the employer and his employee, so why the cold shoulder? This was a far cry from how he had acted when the two of them were playing pretend-couple!

She saw a chance to give a jab at him when she delivered a document to his office, "Wow, our bridges burned already? And to top it off, with that long face!"

A very groggy Jackson lifted his bleary face to hers. "Oh, give me a break. You were paid for that ploy. Now put down that document and — yawn — go on with whatever it is you're supposed to do."

Unthinkably, Tiffany felt her heart sinking just a little lower. "W-well, you're mad if you think I wanted to be around you at all!"

Jackson watched her fume as she left before lowering his eyes to the documents and letting loose a faint sigh. Only the Devil would understand how much of a battle it was to wake up on time; Summer had bolted out of the house in the middle of the night, only to come back and rob him two hours of precious sleep by nagging non-stop.

The afternoon break came. All of Tiffany's coworkers had gone to lunch, but being too lethargic, she decided to steal a nap instead. Honestly, missing out a meal in a day was not that big of a deal to her.

Unexpectedly, Ethan called. She rolled onto her chest on her office desk and answered the call, intoning, “Yellow?”

“Come down here. I’m taking you out for lunch.”

Her body stiffened a little before she moved to the window and peered downward. It was a futile move — the floor was too high up for her to see anything down there clearly — but she was sure Ethan was waiting at the ground floor.

Tiffany swept everything into her handbag haphazardly and sprung toward the elevator without paying mind to her surroundings. She accidentally butted into someone in the process, but before an apology fell out of her mouth, she raised her head and found herself staring into Jackson’s aloof eyes.

Any apology she had conjured a split-second ago went back down her throat. Instead, she feigned ignorance of her folly as she hung up the call and slipped her phone back into her bag.

Jackson leered at the caller’s name before it dimmed and recognized Ethan’s name. His eyes darkened a little. “Lunch with Ethan?”

“Mm-hmm,” came a rather soft response.

He paused for a moment before asking, “So, you guys are getting back together then?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “What’s this got to do with you? Gosh, I feel bad for you, Boss — you have so darn many important matters to mind, including your employee’s private life!”

Jackson said nothing more. When the elevator door opened, he marched out of it as quickly as possible, leaving Tiffany to harrumph loudly behind his back, “What’s with you acting like a stoic wannabe? Urgh, what did I do? Spit in your breakfast?”

After getting into Ethan’s car, the man beat her to buckling her seatbelt, closing in the distance between the two of them by looming over her. They were so close that any casual observer might mistake their action as cuddling or kissing — a thought that greatly put her at unease.

Luckily, Ethan straightened himself after he did what he had set out to do. “Anything in mind for lunch?”

Before she could answer, she suddenly noticed Jackson West warily driving past them, his eyes hooked on her.

“N-none in particular,” she answered as she averted her gaze nervously.

Ethan, too, noticed Jackson. He playfully brushed the tip of Tiffany’s nose and said, “I guess it’s up to me, now. I hope your favorite food hasn’t changed, because it’s time to check how well I remember you.”

Back in Tremont Estate, Arianne felt like she was being cooked on a very heaty couch.

Mary was very concerned about her recovery, so she did not allow the temperature in her room to stoop to the coolness Arianne desperately hoped. As a result, the room was only slightly cooler than the blazing heat outside; poor Arianne could occasionally feel surges of heat traveling through her body and forcing sweat to pool out of her.

She had already taken two showers, yet it hadn't even been half the day.

Once again, Arianne could not help but protest, "It's! So! Hot! In here! Maaaaary! Please, lower the temperature a little!"

The woman's head popped out of the kitchen. "No can do, young lady! You have only a few more days left… Once the confinement period is over, you can turn this place into the frickin' North Pole all you like! For now, maybe if you stop squirming about so much, it'll become much cooler! See, I hardly feel anything!"

Arianne was at her limit, though, which was not helped by Rice Ball relentlessly burying into her side and worsening the situation with its overtly-puffy fur. "Stop — stop getting close to me! Or else… I'll make you fur-free and naked!"

The cat purred and continued to defy its master's wish gleefully.

Arianne finally decided to crash Mark's office — or specifically, enjoy his AC. Since his heat-tolerance was even worse than hers, Arianne had no doubt that he was blasting his air-conditioning at a very low temperature right now.

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“Mary, I’m heading to the office,” Arianne said and left. She was going to go crazy if she stayed at home any longer.

When Mary heard that she was going to the office, her first thought was that Arianne was going to Eric’s company. “It’s so hot and all you think about is going out to earn money? Is sir being stingy with you? No way!”

Arianne said helplessly, “I’m going to find Mark Tremont, your master! Not to work. Besides, I don’t plan to go back to Eric’s company anymore.” She had thought about doing something else. She felt bored after working in the design industry for so long.

Upon hearing this, Mary finally relented. “Sure, have Henry send you. The weather is too hot.”

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Henry sent Arianne to Tremont Tower, and she arrived at the forty-sixth floor without any hiccup. Ellie knew that she did not like following Mark’s rules of changing out of her shoes so she did not offer Arianne the disposable slippers and only greeted her, “Madam.”

Arianne nodded in reply, opening the door after knocking on it. The moment she felt the cool air from the air-conditioner, she was bubbling with delight. “Don’t mind me. I’m here for the AC.”

Mark took the remote control and increased the temperature. “Mary called me and asked me to increase the temperature of the AC. Isn’t it too much work to come so far just for the AC?”

Arianne deflated at once. “Don’t do this to me! I brought my jacket. I can’t stand the heat…”

Mark glanced at her and said, “Put on your jacket, and I’ll lower the temperature.”

She obediently put on her jacket before she fished a book out from her bag. She had prepared it in advance to kill time.

Mark who was used to solitude could not focus on his work now that there was an additional person in his office. He gave up on working. “Coming here just for the AC, you’re no longer afraid of me?”

Arianne answered honestly, “I am, but I’m more scared of the heat. Mary is too strict with me when you aren’t home. I hope she keeps her words and won’t torture me as much after one month is up.”

Mark did not reply. After a month meant it would be a month since her miscarriage. When the babies were mentioned, both of them would inevitably feel upset.

As if realizing something, Arianne focused on her book without making any more sound.

Due to the scorching weather, they did not go out for lunch, opting for takeout instead. After the meal, Arianne asked Mark, “You’ve been donating to the city’s orphanage, right? Let’s take some time to visit those children?”

“And adopt one?” Mark arched his brow.

“No. I just want to have a look.” Arianne shook her head.

Mark nodded. “This weekend then.”

Arianne smiled at him and went back to reading. She could only read quietly here, there was nothing else she could do. Otherwise, she would be chased out. She had mustered up her courage to come to his office because she truly could not stand the heat. Mark opening up to her last night was also one of the reasons. Since she was young, she had lived by adapting to his moods. She would retreat when he was in a bad mood and try to push the line if he was in a good mood.

When afternoon came, Mark kept looking at his watch. Guessing that he had matters to attend to, Arianne said, “Do you have something to attend to? Am I being an inconvenience?”

He was distracted. “No. I need to go to another floor for something else later. You can stay here.”

“Oh.” Arianne could care less about him being around or not as long as the air conditioner was here.

When it was time, Mark got up to leave his office and went to the resting area downstairs. Lillian was already there with the documents. “Mark, I’m done with the procedures. Can we sign the contract now?”

Mark nodded and presented the contract to her. “Have a look. Sign it if you have no issues with it.”

Lillian was cautious with anything to do with money so she carefully went through the agreement and said with a smile, “No problem. I’ll sign it then. You’re really generous. I didn’t expect the price to be higher than what I imagined.”

Mark kept quiet. After the contract was signed, he called the finance department and said, “The money will be transferred to your account latest by tomorrow.”

In that instant, Lillian felt like she could finally walk with her head lifted high. “Sure, sure. Then, I won’t bother you any longer. I’ll take my leave now.”

“Thanks for coming.” He nodded stiffly with a smile.

Mark retrieved a briefcase that he rarely used and stuffed the contract inside without a change of expression when he returned to his office. If Arianne knew that he had bought the land and was giving it to Ethan, she would probably pick a fight with him.

Not expecting him to be back so soon, Arianne asked casually, “So fast?”

“No, I still need to head out. We can go home when I come back.”

She nodded and continued reading her book.

Mark sighed softly in relief and left his office again. He only called Ethan after he left the building and got into his car. “I’ve bought the plot of land. Come over now. We’ll meet at the Book Bridge Café.”

After he hung up, he punched the steering wheel. He knew this plot of land was only the beginning. The end was far from sight. What would Ethan’s next demand be?

After he arrived at the Book Bridge Café, he waited for nearly fifteen minutes before Ethan showed up.

In contrast to Mark’s sour expression, Ethan was grinning widely as though he was meeting an old friend or perhaps, a brother whom he shared a good relationship with.

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“I didn’t expect you to be so efficient. This is for the best. I can propose to Tiffany as soon as possible.”

Mark was not at all interested if Ethan was going to get married or not. “Sign the transfer agreement now. I don’t have time for a chat.”

Ethan leisurely signed his name on the document and looked up as he asked, “If I get married, as my elder brother, you’ll be there, right?”

“Don’t cross the line!” Mark stared at him dead in the eyes.

Ethan shrugged as he smiled meaningfully. “Am I? I asked you to give me everything related to the Tremonts, but since you’re reluctant, I don’t want to force you either. I can have everything by depending on myself. However, it also won’t do me any harm if I announce that I’m a Tremont as well. In fact, it would be advantageous to me. You won’t disagree, right? After all, you’ve told Arianne everything I’ve done. How you explain yourself and how sticky a situation it is for you has nothing to do with me. You have to act like we have a close relationship and accept me as your younger brother.”

Realization dawned on Mark. Ethan did not only want to announce his identity, but he wanted Mark to publicly acknowledge him as his half-brother! To perfect the lie and to keep the ultimate secret now that Arianne had known what Ethan had done, he had to accept this younger brother in front of the whole world and pave a path of success for him.

“Change your condition. You’re not allowed to announce your identity!” Mark growled in a low voice, suppressing his rage.

“No can do. I’m informing you, this is not a discussion. Or you can just hand over Tremonts’ assets to me?” Ethan’s words were clearly meant to provoke Mark.

Handing over everything related to the Tremonts was impossible. Mark could never forget the choice his mother had made the night before the plane crash. She had done it to make sure everything from the Tremonts belonged to him. Everything she had done was to retain the Tremonts’ assets for him. He would never hand it over to Ethan. Ethan knew he would never do it that was why Ethan kept pushing his bottom line.

Seeing Mark remaining silent, Ethan kindly suggested, “I know you’re troubled with Arianne. I have an idea. Why don’t you tell her what happened with the Lanes had nothing to do with me? Take back

everything you've said. It's good for you and good for me. Otherwise, I'm worried she'd tell Tiffany one day when she can't hold it in anymore. At that time, I'll be forced to expose your secret as well. What do you think?"

Mark remained silent as he rose to his feet and left.

Ethan was not bothered. He picked up the cup of coffee in front of him and took a sip. He knew Mark would do as he had suggested. There was no doubt about it.

…

When Mark returned to the office, he saw Arianne had fallen asleep on the couch. He suppressed the exasperation he felt and took a blanket to cover her. He had been careful, but he still woke her up.

She rubbed her eyes and looked at him blearily. "You're back? Can we go home now?"

Mark inhaled deeply before he said, "About Ethan… I seem to have gotten it wrong."

Arianne was confused. "Hmm? Gotten it wrong? What did you get wrong? He's not your younger brother?"

He shook his head. These words he had to say were truly difficult for him to say but he had no choice but to say them. "No, I mean, with the Lanes. It's… As it turns out, it has nothing to do with him. I was

suspecting the legitimacy of the money he used to set up his company and bought the land with, and it led me to the Lanes. I thought it was him, but upon further investigation, I found out it's not him. The death also… has nothing to do with him. The materials are still nowhere to be found."

The abrupt reversal of things caught Arianne off guard. "Are you sure that you've gotten it right this time? It sounds absurd…"

Mark forced himself to calm down, and he said rationally, "I thought he was involved in the Lanes' case because he could've cost me the loss of millions. Moreover, he would have benefitted from it. Since it fits the narrative, that's why I was mistaken…"

Arianne did not doubt Mark's words. She even felt slightly relieved that Ethan did not do those things. However, she was still puzzled. This was not Mark's way of doing things. He would not have told her those things if he was not certain. However, she did not dismiss the possibility that he had made a mistake due to his inability to accept the fact that his family had an illegitimate son. "Then… Where did the money that he used to set up a company and buy the plot of land come from?"

Mark did not meet her eyes as he walked to the glass window. His eyes were cold. "It was probably left to him by his old man…"

Arianne did not notice that Mark had said 'the old man' instead of 'my father'. She said, "That's a relief. Fortunately, I didn't say anything to Tiffie yet. Otherwise, it would be awkward. What a relief! Shall we go home?"

The only thing Mark was grateful about at this moment was Arianne was still by his side, asking him if they were going to go home with her clear eyes. Somehow, this lessened his guilt for going against his conscience and saying the things he did earlier.

During the weekend, Arianne and Mark were not deterred by the sizzling heat and visited the orphanage. After all, they had planned this in advance.

The largest orphanage in the capital was equipped with good facilities. All the buildings were built in recent years, and without an exception, they were all donated by Mark.

The moment they stepped into the orphanage, the children who had been playing under the tree ran to them. They were not familiar with Arianne, but they were certainly familiar with Mark.

“Mr. Tremont!”

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Watching the bubbly and chattering children, Arianne could not help chuckling. “I didn’t expect you to be so popular among the kids. I thought they’d be afraid of you.”

Mark was not wearing a suit today. He was suitably dressed in white short-sleeved sportswear and a pair of light violet sunglasses. Compared to how sharp he looked in his suit and leather shoes, he looked gentler and more casual now. He bent down to carry a little girl around four years of age and asked Brian to retrieve what was in the trunk.

As if knowing what would come out from the trunk, the children’s cheer grew louder. “Mr. Tremont, did you bring us books and toys again?! And yummy snacks! We wish you’d come every day. Madam says that it hasn’t been a month since you last came so you won’t be coming so soon. I can’t believe you’re here!”

Arianne was surprised. She did not expect that Mark frequently visited the orphanage. It seemed like his donation and kindness were not only for show. He was really practicing what he preached.

“Girlie, you’ve gotten heavier. I can’t carry you anymore. Go have fun, and get some snacks.” Mark beamed as he placed the little girl in his arms back down on the ground.

Arianne fanned herself with her hand, it was extremely hot, but she was not bothered. The children’s innocent smiles and laughter were contagious. Their sweet delight seemed to have infected her as well. “Do you know… When I saw you smiling at others when I was a little girl, I wished for you to smile at me too. But you were always cold and fierce to me.”

Mark suddenly said something that he would never have said in the past. “The hand that beats you and the mouth that scolds you is the one who loves you. Besides, I didn’t even beat or scold you. I was only a little stricter with you.”

Arianne mused over his words for a moment before concluding that it was not a bad thing that he treated her differently. Did it mean the more special she was, the more different the treatment was?

Knowing that Mark had come, the director of the orphanage came out carrying a child around one year of age who did not know how to walk yet. “Mr. Tremont, you didn’t tell me in advance that you’re coming. We could’ve set up a welcoming party for you. It’s too hot nowadays, thank you so much for making this trip.”

The director of the orphanage looked like a kind middle-aged woman. Arianne had a good first impression of her.

Mark smiled slightly. “No need to make a fuss every time I’m here. I can come whenever I want and bring more things for the children.”

The burning ball of sun above them prevented the adults from fully opening their eyes. The director squinted as she carried the child with one hand and used the other to shield the child’s face. “Let’s head inside. We’ll feel much better with the AC.”

Mark did not refuse and entered with Arianne. All the basic spaces here were installed with air conditioners so the environment was generally comfortable.

This shocked Arianne. In her impression, most orphanages were not in the best condition. It was a miracle that this place was so well equipped.

“Mr. Tremont, this is…” The director asked while pouring them tea since she had never met Arianne.

“My wife,” Mark answered naturally and stretched his arms out to take the small child in the director’s arm into his own.

The director looked at the child affectionately. “Mrs. Tremont looks as kind as you do, Mr. Tremont. This kid is really pitiful. He was abandoned in a hospital by his mother. He was sent here since there’s nowhere for him to go. He’s quite healthy, and we’ve contacted a family for adoption. He’ll probably be picked up after a while.”

Arianne was mildly upset when she looked at the child. She wanted so much to have children of her own, but there were people out there who abandoned their own child. “Madam, he’s not even one, is he? He’s so small…”

A hint of sadness appeared in the director’s eyes. “You’re right. He’s not even one yet. He’s only nine months old. He doesn’t even know how to walk yet.”

The little boy looked at Arianne and Mark with his big eyes, not at all intimidated by foreign faces. His fair chubby cheeks had a healthy flush, it was evident that he was well taken care of. Even his little arms were chubby and stubby like potatoes. He was adorable.

Arianne suddenly recalled Mark’s words about adopting a child. She was honestly tempted by the suggestion right now, but her rationality stopped her.

If she adopted a child now, the child would be her and Mark’s child. She did not know what the future would be like with him, how could she adopt a child? Taking care of a child was not like taking care of a pet. A pet already required a lot of responsibility, let alone a child.

“I saw the kids playing in the yard despite the hot weather. It’s burning. Build an indoor activity area.” Mark was truly observant to have noticed this.

The director looked troubled. “We have too many kids here. Their living cost and education fund each year takes up a large amount of money. Many who come here don’t even get adopted. If we’re building an indoor activity area, it has to be incredibly wide. How much would it cost? We can’t afford it.”

Mark's long fingers pinched the cheeks of the boy in his arms lightly. "I'll take care of the cost. Continue without worry."

The director's eyes reddened immediately. "Mr. Tremont… You've really helped these children a lot. I don't even know how to thank you."

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The little boy suddenly cried, perhaps, frightened by Mark's gentle pinch.

Arianne instinctively took the child into her arms. "Hush, baby, hush. Who's the best baby…"

The little child stopped crying immediately, but there was still a sad pout on his face, and his eyes were red.

Mark asked softly against Arianne's ears, "Why don't we adopt a child?"

Arianne glanced at him. This was not the first time he had mentioned this. She pretended not to hear him. She said to the director, "There's no need for thanks as long as these little angels are well taken care of."

After spending the entire morning in the orphanage, Arianne and Mark politely rejected the director's invitation for lunch.

During their journey back to the Tremont Estate, Arianne was thinking about the feeling of the baby boy in her arms. The child was so soft and cute that her heart felt as though it was going to melt.

Mark seemed privy to her thoughts as he asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to adopt a child? I can see you’re reluctant to let the boy go.”

Arianne looked outside the car stiffly. “I didn’t… No adoption. I can’t even take care of myself.”

Mark continued to entice her. “I can take care of you and the child. It’s not that difficult. You can stay home and raise our child while I make money for our family.”

This was Brian’s first time hearing Mark say something like this. He could not help but laugh.

Mark glared at him. “Brian, you’re getting really bold, huh? How dare you eavesdrop on me and laugh? Didn’t you go on a blind date recently? I heard from Mary that it was successful. You finally have a girlfriend now?”

Brian did not expect the conversation to shift to him so he quickly suppressed his laughter. “Yes, sir.”

Mark was in the mood to chat. “How are things going? Are you planning to get married?”

Brian thought about it and said, “We’ve only gotten together. Girls these days are not easy. They want a house, a car, and a dowry. She doesn’t like the fact that I’m a chauffeur and asked me to switch jobs. I don’t think we’ll stay together for long.”

“What’s wrong with being a chauffeur? I didn’t mistreat you even though you’re my chauffeur. Your salary is much higher than an office worker. If you really like her, and you want it to work, then, go work in the company. I’ll arrange for someone else to drive me around. Your education qualification is not low. I can arrange a position for you in the office.” Mark was considerate toward his employee. After all, Brian had worked for him for years.

However, Brain had no intention of complying with the girl’s wish. “It’s okay, sir. They don’t understand my work. I like driving you around. I don’t want to change jobs. You’re right. The girl’s salary isn’t even half of mine, and I’m provided with insurance and other benefits. She doesn’t even have anything. I’m quite vexed with her family’s requests. The house and car that I buy must be under the girl’s name, something about a sense of security. Moreover, the dowry can’t be meager as well. I can already feel a headache coming on.”

Mark was unable to empathize with an ordinary person’s perspective. “Then, just put it under her name. This can be negotiated.”

Brian knew this was foreign territory for Mark. He explained patiently, “It’s not so simple, sir. For someone like you, you’d agree without batting an eye if madam asks you to put the properties you own under her name. In fact, you’d probably give her a few properties on your own accord. We, commoners, are different. We purchase houses and cars with all our parents’ and our savings. We might even have to take a loan. Marriages nowadays end in divorce. At that time, wouldn’t I be giving that girl my house and car for nothing?”

“If she marries me, I definitely won’t mistreat her. I don’t even mind putting the assets under both our names. We can even bear the mortgages together. However, to give her all of my assets? That’s impossible. I don’t really mind about the dowry, they don’t even have to reciprocate. If we can spend

the rest of our lives together peacefully with everything that belongs to us, it would be great. This is just common people's worries. You won't understand it, sir."

Indeed. Mark could not empathize with Brian since he had never experienced such things. Since there was nothing he could say or do to help, he did not continue the conversation.

While Brian was speaking, he kept an eye on Mark's expression, afraid that he had spoken too much. After all, Mark rarely spoke to him. When he saw Mark keeping quiet, he stayed silent as well.

When they returned to the Tremont Estate, Mark said before heading upstairs, "Ari, come with me."

Arianne started when she heard him call her Ari. It seemed that he had changed the way he addressed her since that night in his office?

Arianne was jolted out of her daze by Mary. "Madam, sir's asking for you. Since when did you two become so chummy with each other? He called you Ari…"

Arianne replied, embarrassed, "Mary, stop it. I'll go see what he wants. We haven't had lunch. I'm a little hungry. Have the kitchen cook something, Mary."

Looking at Arianne running upstairs, blushing, Mary felt like a proud mother. She had been waiting for this day, and it had finally come.

In the bedroom.

Mark opened a cabinet that had always been locked under the wardrobe. There was a mini-safe inside. Not knowing what he was up to, Arianne turned around in self-awareness when he opened the safe. She was not curious about what treasure he had kept in the safe.

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Soon after, Mark approached her from behind. “These are all the properties that the Tremonts’ own. See if there’s any you like.”

When Arianne turned around, she saw a huge stack of property ownership certificates in Mark’s hands. The thickness nearly made her jaw drop. “Wh… What? I don’t want…”

Mark frowned. “Don’t women want a sense of security? Brian’s words reminded me of this…”

Arianne gulped before she shifted her eyes away from the deeds. “Are you serious? Why do I feel like you’ve been acting strangely for the past few days? I’m your enemy. Isn’t it strange for you to give your enemies properties? Moreover, I don’t lack anything. I have meals and clothes in the Tremont Estate, and you give me money to spend. I’m content with it. Put them away. I don’t want any properties.”

Mark’s eyes dimmed a little as he tossed the stack of deeds on a couch next to them. “I don’t see you as an enemy. You’re my wife. If you don’t like these properties, we’ll pick ones you like. I’ll buy them for you.”

Arianne finally realized he was serious so she said, “Mark... I really don’t want those things. I’m not like the others… And, we’re not like the others either. It’s fine, really.”

Mark looked at her skeptically. “Is it really fine? No more divorce?”

Arianne pursed her lips. “You won’t agree to it even if I want to anyway. I’m starving. I’m heading downstairs for lunch. Come down quickly.”

Mark could not figure out her thoughts. He had watched her grow up so he thought he knew her inside and out. However, as she grew older, things were no longer under his control.

She was a woman too. However, she did not want the sense of security that other women wanted. There could only be one reason for this; she did not love him. That was why she did not need any security from him.

Upon realizing this, Mark thought the deeds were an eyesore and swept them to the floor. He leaned against the couch silently. He was angry. It felt as though what he had done earlier was just a joke.

Since Mark did not come down yet, Arianne did not dare to start the meal first. In the end, she went upstairs again to check on him. She saw him leaning against the couch with a dark expression on his face. Her heart skipped a beat upon seeing this. “What’s the matter? It’s time for lunch…”

Mark did not even spare her a glance as he went to change in the walk-in closet before leaving.

Arianne stared at the scattered deeds on the floor in confusion. Based on her years of experience, Mark was definitely angry. However, why was he angry? Was it because she rejected his gifts? She did nothing to earn it, and she did not have the habit to ask for things. Was it wrong of her to have this mindset?

When she went downstairs, Mary looked at her gloomily and asked, “What’s wrong now? You were both in a good mood when you returned, and now, he left the house fuming. Why are you so incompetent?”

Arianne looked aggrieved. “It’s not my fault… He asked me upstairs to pick properties from a whole stack of deeds. Why should I accept his things when I haven’t done anything to earn it? I don’t want it. That’s all. I didn’t intentionally make him angry.”

Mary was puzzled. “Maybe… he’s not used to being rejected? Just take it if he’s giving it to you. Nobody complains about having too many properties. Any property in sir’s ownership is in a good location and costly. Just take it as making him happy and making the house a peaceful place. Can’t you just accept it?”

Arianne was bewildered. “As long as I’m Mrs. Tremont, those belong to the Tremonts. This means they’re also mine. What’s the difference? What’s with the fuss?”

“If you get divorced, you’ll have what he has gifted you. If sir doesn’t want to give you anything from the Tremonts, you won’t even be able to take away a cent. There’s a difference. Of course, I don’t wish for both of you to divorce. However, I’m just pointing out the difference to you,” Mary said.

“If we get divorced, I don’t want anything from him. He doesn’t owe me anything nor does the Tremonts. I’m not that greedy,” Arianne said nonchalantly.

Mary held her tongue. As an outsider, she could not say much. She was the Tremonts' servant but she on Arianne's side. She was in a truly awkward position.

After lunch, Arianne took a shower and petted the cat resting in the living room. When Mary saw her indifference, she quietly turned off the air conditioning.

By the time Arianne felt the rising temperature, she was already sweating. "Mary, what temperature did you adjust the AC to? Why do I feel so warm?"

Mary feigned ignorance. "Oh… Uh… Henry said that the AC needs some cleaning. I think he's cleaning it now. If you can't stand the heat, go to sir's office. He's in the company now. If you're at home in the afternoon without the AC, you'll be swimming in your sweat in this sweltering heat."

Cleaning the air conditioners in the entire Tremont Estate was basically a huge project that would not be done in a short time. She would definitely die from the heat at that time.

After considering it for a moment, Arianne decisively packed up her 'AC must-haves'; her phone, a book, and some snacks. She decided to go to the office. There was only a handful of people working overtime in Tremont Tower during the weekend.

The tower stood majestically under the scorching sun, dazzling in its golden reflection.

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Once Arianne thought about Mark being angry, she became a little timid. However, she did not give up. After all, there was a difference between enjoying the air conditioner in a cafe and enjoying the air conditioner in Mark's quiet office.

When Arianne arrived at the forty-sixth floor, Ellie stepped forward to remind Arianne, "Madam, Mr. Tremont has a guest."

A guest? She mulled over Ellie's words for a moment before she asked, "You mean… It's inappropriate for me to enter now?"

Ellie shook her head. "No, I'm just letting you know."

Ellie was not stopping her from entering but giving her a reminder? What guest required such formality?

Arianne could not help but feel skeptical. At the same time, her gaze fell on Ellie's chest. She had always known that Ellie was a true beauty with the figure of a supermodel. She was tall and had curves in all the right places. Even when she was dressed professionally, her bosom was straining against the buttons of her shirt. Even as a woman, Arianne could not help but stare at them.

How did Mark remain so unruffled when he faced such a beautiful secretary every day? What was even more ridiculous was he placed Ellie's desk on the corridor outside his office. This was a waste of Ellie's beauty.

Ellie asked, "Madam? Are you not entering?"

Arianne awkwardly shifted her gaze away from Ellie's bosom. They were both women, but she still thought that it was inappropriate. Nonetheless, she could not help her gaze that drifted toward the woman earlier. She coughed unnaturally and said, "Yes, yes, I'm entering."

Ellie's red-tinted lips curled up as she opened the office's doors for her with a light chuckle. "Please enter, madam."

Arianne felt her cheeks heating up from Ellie's smile. Was she caught for staring? When she went into the office with her head lowered, the entire place fell silent. When she looked up, she saw Mark's dark eyes and Ethan's relaxed expression

The guest whom Ellie had referred to was Ethan.

After what happened previously and the twist that reversed things, Arianne did not know how she should act around Ethan. Instead, she sat down carelessly on the couch and announced, "I'm here for the AC. Continue talking, don't mind me…"

Ethan wore a black tailored suit and was standing straight in front of the glass wall with a cup of coffee in his hand. Compared to Mark, he looked a little more rough around the edge, like Mark when he was younger. It was only then that Arianne discovered that the brothers actually looked quite alike. She had not thought about it in the past nor did she take note of it. However, now that both of them were standing together, the similarities and contrasts were obvious.

Mark leaned against the edge of his table, looking displeased. "You can leave if there's nothing else."

Ethan made his way to Arianne. “My sister-in-law is here. I’ll have to chat with her, don’t chase me off.”

Sister-in-law? This caught Arianne off guard. She felt awkward. Logically, this was what Ethan should address her, but Mark was visibly upset. Did he really despise this younger brother of his?

Mark returned to his seat, no longer wanting to engage with Ethan. His gaze was focused on the computer screen in front of him, but no one knew if he was working or stewing in anger.

“Arianne, do you wish for me and Tiffie to be together?” Ethan switched the topic and pulled Tiffany into the conversation.

“Of... Of course…. As long as Tiffie likes you, and as long as she’s happy.” Could Arianne actually say no to Ethan’s face? Could she curse at him for being a jerk? Of course not!

“I know there are some misunderstandings between me and Tiffie previously, causing you to misunderstand me as well. I’ve already explained it to her so I won’t repeat myself. I hope that you’ll be able to put in a few good words for me when you speak to Tiffie. I really want her to agree to my proposal as soon as possible. I owe her a perfect wedding.” Ethan sounded sincere when he spoke.

Not knowing what to say, Arianne could only smile awkwardly.

Ethan suddenly glanced at Mark. He narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice as he said, “Arianne, my big brother supports me and Tiffie. He even bought Tiffie’s family’s land and gifted it to me…”

Although Ethan had lowered his voice, Mark clearly heard him.

Arianne was shocked. When did this happen? Why did she not know about this?!

Mark said coldly, “Ethan, do you have nothing better to do?”

Ethan arched his brow and rose to his feet before patting his tie down. “Fine, fine. I’ll take my leave now lest I become a third wheel. I’ll treat both of you to a meal next time so be sure to come…”

As soon as Ethan left, Arianne instantly asked the question that had been stewing in her mind, “When did you buy the plot of land and give it to Ethan? Why don’t I know about it?”

Despite Mark’s calm front, inwardly, he had cut and tortured Ethan countless times. “A few days ago. I can’t let Tiffany think that he’s approaching her for that land, right? It’s just a land. It doesn’t matter…”

Arianne felt something was amiss. Mark had agreed to look for Lillian with her previously to buy the land before Ethan could. However, he had changed after receiving that call. Now, he actually bought that plot of land for Ethan without letting her know about it? Based on Mark’s character, he would not care for the kinship nor would he acknowledge an illegitimate half brother. It was absolutely impossible for him to purchase the land for Ethan out of goodwill.

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Naturally, Arianne would not ask Mark about it further, given that he seemed reluctant to talk about it.

After Ethan's mention of a dinner date, he soon decided to have that dinner with them that night.

Mark's expression worsened when he received that message. "We'll go to White Water Bay to have our dinner tonight."

Arianne subconsciously guessed that Ethan was the one who was treating them to a meal. "Did Ethan invite us?"

Mark was clearly reluctant, but he still nodded. He even pulled at his tie in annoyance. It puzzled her even more. Why was he acting as if he was threatened by someone? She knew what kind of person he was. If he was unwilling, certainly no one could force him to do anything.

His facial expression became better when he realized that she was staring at him. "I'm extremely busy, but I still need to deal with him. It's annoying…"

She remained quiet. Then she took out her nuts and started eating them loudly.

At half past five in the evening, Mark and Arianne went to White Water Bay Café. Ethan booked a table for four in the large hall. It was true. There were indeed four of them, including Tiffany.

Tiffany sat beside Arianne directly when she came. She was slightly confused as to why Ethan wanted to treat Arianne and Mark to a meal. Given how busy Mark was, it was shocking that Ethan managed to ask him out on a meal.

Ethan did not let Tiffany be left in the dark for long. After he ordered the dishes, he said, “Tiffie, let me introduce them to you again. This is my elder brother and sister-in-law.”

Tiffany was confused. “Hmm? When did you find out? Why was I unaware of this? Are you serious?”

Ethan ignored Mark’s fierce look. He explained, “It’s a long story. I used to live with my mother when I was young. I never lived with the Tremonts. But it’s still an undeniable fact that I’m a part of the Tremont family, isn’t that right, brother?”

The atmosphere became tense. Mark made no response. Arianne became nervous too.

Ethan did not pay mind to it. “The elders of the Tremont family are no longer alive. I want to bring my girlfriend to meet the elders, so I can only bring her to meet my brother. Will you approve of our relationship? By the way, Tiffie is my sister-in-law’s best friend.” He spoke the last sentence distinctly. It seemed as if he was reminding Mark so that he would give his full cooperation. In fact, they were tied with secrets.

Mark lowered his eyes with an unknown emotion. He sounded rather cold. “Certainly.”

Arianne was secretly relieved. It was because Tiffany was there with them. No matter how much Mark hated his younger brother, he needed to do her a favor. It was better not to create any argument there. If Ethan truly wasn’t the one who plotted all those vicious schemes, it would be quite nice for her if Ethan could be with Tiffany. She could become a real family member for her best friend, and their relationship would become much intimate.

Tiffany could guess at how awkward Ethan's situation was no matter how naive she was, so she did not ask him about his identity before them. When Ethan claimed that she was his girlfriend, she had a weird feeling. She promised to give him a reply after he was discharged from the hospital, but she had not thought it through, and Ethan had already admitted that she was his girlfriend. Hence, she could not bring herself to say anything about it.

The dishes were served gradually. Ethan carried out his duties as a boyfriend by helping Tiffany with the food. "This was your favorite before. You should have some more."

Tiffany looked at the table that was filled with all her favourite food. However, she lost all interest and her appetite. "Don't put so much food on my plate. I won't be able to finish it…"

Ethan promised not to, but he still continued to put more food on her plate. He only stopped his endeavors when her plate was full.

Compared to their romantic scene, both Arianne and Mark appeared quite cold and distant. They ate their own food without any intention of helping each other with the food.

"By the way, brother, doesn't this cafe belong to your friend? I talked about business with him during a party once. Is he called Jackson?" Suddenly, Ethan brought up Jackson's name. It seemed unintentional, but there was an unknown solemnity in him.

Mark peeked at him once. He wondered whether Ethan was reminding him about the fact that Adam was the one who asked Jackson to take his hair for a DNA test.

"Yes." He replied lightly without any guiltiness. In fact, he should not be guilty about it.

It appeared like Ethan was just inquiring about it casually, as he then spoke no more about it.

Tiffany was unable to calm herself down. If her memory did not fail her, she remembered that Jackson would always go to the cafe on the weekends. Further, Ethan booked a table in the large hall instead of a private room. If Jackson was here, they would certainly bump into each other. Why did she feel slightly awkward?

The inevitable happened anyway. Five minutes later, Jackson walked out of the office and headed straight toward them.

Tiffany was so nervous that she lowered her head and ate her meal with a flushed face. She did not dare to raise her head.

“Mark, why didn’t you tell me that you were coming here for dinner?” Jackson did not show any emotion as he greeted Mark casually.

“It was a last minute decision.” Mark put down his fork and spoon. Then, he picked up a napkin and wiped at his mouth gracefully.

Jackson looked at the people present. He soon understood what was going on. “This meal is on me. Enjoy yourselves. I’ll leave now.”

Suddenly, Ethan stood up and poured a glass of red wine for Jackson. “I heard that you’re Tiffie’s boss. You’re also my brother’s friend. Please take good care of Tiffie in the company from now on. She’s rather slow. Please be more tolerant toward her.”

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Tiffany clutched the hem of her shirt under the table with one of her hands. It seemed like she was engulfed in an invisible stress, and it prohibited her from looking up at Jackson.

The silence lasted for a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity for her. Jackson took a glance at Tiffany before taking the glass of red wine from Ethan. “Sure.”

Even though she might not understand much about the relationship between men and women, Arianne could sense that something was wrong. She looked up and observed the facial expressions of the men present. Mark still appeared cold and distant. On the other hand, both Jackson and Ethan were polite to each other. She really could not see anything out of place.

Tiffany was finally relieved after Jackson left. She had not eaten much, but she felt like she was already full. She put down the fork and spoon. “I’m full now. Enjoy your meal slowly. I’ll go and take a walk outside.”

Arianne also stood up and said, “I’m done too. I’ll go with Tiffie.”

When they walked out the door, Arianne asked her, “Tiffie, what’s wrong with you? You usually have a much better appetite…”

Tiffany stared at her gloomily. “Do you mean that I usually eat a lot? I don’t know why either… I’m feeling blue. When Jackson came, I was slightly embarrassed, especially when he was talking with Ethan. What’s wrong with me?”

Arianne was indeed quite ignorant when it came to things like that. She did not understand it either. “How would I know what’s wrong with you? Don’t tell me that you’ve fallen in love with him? Aren’t you Ethan’s girlfriend now?”

Tiffany’s face darkened. “Don’t talk nonsense… I haven’t even agreed to be together with him, yet he thought that I’ve given my approval. I don’t know why either. I don’t feel for Ethan as I did before. Before, I could risk everything for him even though he was never gentle or nice toward me. I still managed to persist in my endeavor. But now, I seem to be… unable to have that kind of passionate love for him anymore no matter how good he treats me.”

Arianne was puzzled after hearing this. “So, have you decided whether you want to be with him or not? You better think it through. Otherwise, you’ll cause quite an awkward scene. You now know that Ethan is Mark’s younger brother. You still need to address me as your sister since I’ll be your sister-in-law. You’re also my best friend. You better think about it carefully.”

Tiffany was quite lost. “So, are you saying that I should be with Ethan?”

Arianne was slightly helpless. “What I mean is that you should think about it carefully and make a decision as soon as possible. It depends on you solely.”

At the dining table, the atmosphere became quite tense after the women left.

Mark saw through Ethan earlier on. “You came here purposely and booked a table in the large hall so that we would be seen by Jackson. Isn’t that right?”

Ethan did not deny it. “Since Jackson is your friend, it’d be rather weird if he competed for a woman’s love with your younger brother, correct? I’m lending a helping hand to you so that you’ll be excluded from such an awkward scene. You should be on my side.”

Mark replied coldly, “If Tiffany is really willing to be with you, you won’t have to do such things to get the same result. If she’s reluctant, all that you’ve done will go to waste. Don't plot such little schemes. I won’t give you my cooperation. There’s a limit to my patience.”

Ethan sneered. “Your patience is just your love for Arianne. I thought that you would rather enjoy it. Don’t worry, I don’t particularly favor the idea of meeting you either. I certainly won’t invite you for dinner without any purpose in mind. We’re the same because we’re disgusted by the sight of each other. This should only be a once or twice kind of incident.”

Mark’s facial expression darkened. He got up and left to go to Jackson’s office.

Jackson was currently playing a computer game. He did not appear gloomy at all. “Is the meal over?”

Mark leaned against his work desk and poured out his annoyance. “I’ll make him pay for it sooner or later.”

Jackson laughed softly. “Not so soon. You still need to endure it for the time being and let him do whatever he wants. I’m afraid that you won’t be able to think of a resolution before you reveal the secret to Arianne. If he really plans to marry Tiffany, you’ll barely be able to hold each other back.”

After a moment of silence, Mark changed the topic. “Is there nothing between you and Tiffany?”

Jackson’s smile froze slightly. He seemed to be forcing his smile. “What do you mean?”

It would be impossible for Mark not to understand Jackson after being his friend for so many years. “Don’t play dumb with me.”

Jackson switched off the game and leaned against the chair casually. He looked at Mark. “Are you asking me whether I like Tiffany? You’ve got to be kidding. Have you ever seen me fall in love with anybody before? If you really want to talk about love, I’ll tell you that I like all of them just the same. I fooled around with them because I liked them. But love is different. You become serious when you love somebody. However, love is such a far-fetched thing for me. I’ll never let myself be in love for the rest of my life. Tell me, wouldn’t you be in a difficult position if I snatched her away from Ethan now? The balance between you and him would break if he’s infuriated. Don’t worry, I won’t betray you.”

Mark remained quiet. He understood Jackson well. That was why he knew that Jackson was lying to him, saying exactly the opposite of what he felt. In fact, Jackson wanted to act generously and ask Mark not to bother about him. However, Mark did not have the courage to face the upcoming disaster if and when the letter in Ethan’s possession was given to Arianne. Everything would be over for him, and he could not afford to risk it.