Ruling 451

Chapter 451

Ethan looked colder as his tone reduced in warmth too. “My patience is limited. If I really wanted to do something to you, I would have done it in the car, and you wouldn’t have been able to resist anyway.”

Tiffany knew that it was futile to keep this up, so she gritted her teeth and got out of the car to follow him into the house.

The house maintained its old look. Nothing was changed. The interior and furniture all held her memories. Ethan had played his cards well, knowing that Tiffany could relax the most when being here. This was also why he had brought her here.

The nanny had already served the dishes on the table. Smelling the aroma of dinner, Tiffany was dazed for a moment, as if she had gone back to the past where her family of three lived happily. It was this man in front of her that caused her to become what she was now, yet in the end, he was taking her back here as the owner of the house. Did he want her to feel touched or agonized? Whatever it was, it was laced with a sense of mocking.

Ethan had an arm behind her as he brought her to the dining table. It was not like she did not want to break free. Ethan had pinned her down with too much force. She could not even escape his grasp.

Thinking that they were a couple, the nanny smiled kindly.

Ethan told her, “You can go back if you’re done. Come again tomorrow.” He did not like having strangers at home, so the housekeeper did not stay here.

The nanny nodded and left after taking off her apron and doing some cleaning. As the door closed, Tiffany became nervous; it was only the two of them now.

“What do you actually… want from me?” she asked with a trembling voice.

Ethan sat down beside her and scooped her favorite dish into her plate, looking at her sincerely, “I want to be good to you like how you were to me in the past. If you want, I can transfer the ownership of this house to you.”

Tiffany sneered. “No need. The only thing I want now is for you to leave me alone for the rest of my life.”

Ethan’s face fell. “This is the first time I feel uncomfortable talking to you. Let’s not talk then. Eat.”

How could Tiffany possibly have the appetite? She barely ate a bit with Ethan forcing her to, not even tasting the food. The fear within her seemed to have spread to her taste buds, as all she could make out was the taste of fear.

When dinner was finally done, she got up and said, “I should go back.”

Ethan did not plan on letting her go just like that. “You’re not going to keep me company? But shouldn’t you at least make me happy? I just want to spend some time nicely with you.”

He was going to drive Tiffany crazy. “But I don’t want to spend time with you! I took the rape in Ari’s place, but what’s next? What do you plan to do to her? Or me? She left the Tremont’s estate and Mark. Stop going after her, okay? Why must you involve Ari for what’s between you and Mark? If you really hate Mark to the core, go to him directly, don’t do abominable things like this!”

Ethan looked like he was persuaded. “Is this what you hope? If it is, stay by my side. I’ll do as you wish. If you can forget everything that’s happened in the past and be with me, I can do whatever you want.”

Tiffany felt that he was being ridiculous. He was never a man who would be manipulated by a woman. Even if she had agreed to stay with him, she could never stop him. “I don’t believe you. Tell me, how much longer are you going to keep a leash on me with those videos? You should know me by now. I can sacrifice anything if you force me into a corner. Even if you post the videos online, I can still live well in a countryside village. I don’t have many strong points, but I am thick-skinned. If that could give me my peace, I’d rather you do it sooner!”

She could really do it, without a care. Even if she bled and was hurt everywhere, she wanted to stay as far away from him as possible.

Ethan clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. “You want me to let you go. How am I letting myself go? Fine, I understand. I actually erased those videos that night. I didn’t save anything, nor do I plan to blackmail you with them. Leave. Don’t ever appear in front of me again; let all my hopes about you be destroyed. Let me reap what I sow! But I’ll warn you, if I see you again, I won’t let go again the next time!”

Tiffany could cry from her joy. Did he say that he was letting her go? Her immediate reaction was to turn and leave, but he tugged her tightly and kissed her.

As she struggled to push Ethan away, he hugged her even tighter. “Don’t struggle…”

If this was really the last time, if they would not be meeting each other ever again after this, she would put up with it…

After a long time, Ethan let go of Tiffany and turned around. “Leave!”

As if being pardoned, Tiffany left as if she was fleeing for her life. Coming to the broad streets, she finally smiled. Her steps were light and gleeful like a child’s. At the same time, tears fell. Turning back, the more than familiar house stood in the dark. It was the ‘castle’ in her childhood memory, but she would not get to see it again.

Chapter 452

Suddenly, a car sped past her and made a swift U-turn to stop beside her. Tiffany wiped her tears. “Jackson? Why are you here?”

The first thing Jackson did after coming out of the car was to grab her and scan her from head to toe, breathing in relief when he saw that she was fine. God knew how anxious he was when he found out that she was with Ethan. He had been cooking but had tossed the spatula aside and rushed off, running red lights and speeding through stop signs all the way. “Ethan has something against you, right? If he looks for you next time, tell me. I won’t let him blackmail you constantly. Did he do anything to you!?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Nothing. He let me go. He has nothing to hold against me either. I can live my life with a fresh start from now on, walk out of his shadow and live well…”

Unable to hold himself back, Jackson pulled her into his embrace. Tiffany widened her eyes. “What… what are you doing? Don’t tell me that you were in such a hurry just to come look for me…”

Jackson let go of her and went into the car first, taunting her with a chuckle. “No, don’t be so full of yourself. I have a lover here!”

If it had been before, Tiffany would have believed what he said, his careless tone tricking her. Now, he could not lie to her.

Deciding not to expose him, Tiffany sat in the passenger seat and spoke in an exceptionally mature tone, “You’re quite nice. You’re handsome and rich too, and your mom wishes so badly for you to get married and give her a grandchild. Stop thinking about putting off the inevitable, or else no one will be able to take over your family business in the future. When you meet the right one, marry her. Live your life like a good honest man and don’t have flings all the time.”

Jackson clicked his tongue. “You sound like you’re older than me. Is this you deciding to friend-zone me? Don’t say that I’m nice. I’m not. I’m the worst. I’m a womanizer and I’m not dependable. Other than knowing how to cook and being handsome, I don’t have many other strong points. The family business is all my parents’ hard work when they were young, it has nothing to do with me.”

This was the first time Tiffany heard someone self-deprecating talk about themselves like this. He sounded like he was putting himself down, but he was singing praises about himself. She kept her head down as she laughed, looking demure.

As if discovering a new continent, Jackson exclaimed, “Did I see it right? Why are you suddenly smiling like a girl? You always laughed freely, acting more like a man than a man. Come on, come have dinner at my place. It’s weird to eat alone with Arianne.”

Tiffany was not full, so she agreed to it. She was always craving Jackson's cooking anyway.

Returning to the villa in White Water Bay, Jackson was stunned when he heard noises in the kitchen. Arianne was actually cooking in his place after he left! Hearing sounds of people coming in, Arianne walked out with a spatula. "You're back? And Tiffie's here too? I'll be done with two dishes, we can eat soon."

Jackson took the spatula from her and said, "You girls hang around. I'll cook."

Tiffany chuckled. "Ari, is your cooking edible? You didn't see his expression just now. He must have felt his heart ache just thinking about the ingredients you have potentially wasted."

Arianne hooked her hair behind her ear awkwardly. "He ran out suddenly without saying what he was up to or when he'd be back. I was starving, of course I had to do it myself. Don't worry, I haven't even completed a dish."

The culinary skills of an ordinary person could never be compared to those of Jackson. A short while later, a few aromatic dishes were served. Arianne and Tiffany did not hold themselves back as they impatiently picked up their cutlery.

Tiffany was never one to keep her compliments to herself. After all, you had to be sweet with your words to get free food. "Jackson, your cooking really makes one content. Anyone who marries you will be so lucky! This beef is so tender; it's amazing!"

Jackson rested his chin on his palm as he looked at the women, who looked like they had been starving for ages, not knowing if he should be happy or troubled. “Look at how much you two love my cooking. One of you can just marry me then; you’ll get free food every day. Arianne is my sister-in-law, so she’s off limits. Tiffany, looks like it’ll have to be you.”

The joke involved Arianne too, so it sounded even more like a joke. No one thought much of it. Tiffany was unfazed as well. “If you don’t mind, I don’t mind. What to do? For my future carefree life and my appetite…”

Jackson’s eyes were shining. “Are you for real?”

When accidentally meeting his eyes, Tiffany realized that he was not joking. What she had gone through suddenly flashed across her mind and she lowered her head in a panic, “Of course not.”

Jackson changed the topic seamlessly, “Where are you girls planning to go for a fresh start? Remember to let me know.”

Arianne said half-jokingly, “I’m just afraid that you’ll let someone else know if we let you know. You’re a mole.”

Jackson pursed his lips. “As if Mark can’t find you. As long as you’re still within the country, or even Earth, he can find you. It’s whether or not he’s willing to. Don’t cut ties. I’m me and he’s him.”

Tiffany, who was digging in, suddenly said, “I have the same idea as Ari. Since it’s a fresh start, it should be a restart, a farewell to everything and everyone in the past.”

Chapter 453

She spoke explicitly and clearly. Jackson would have been an idiot not to have understood it. There was a flash of dejection in the bottom of his eyes as he feigned nonchalance. “Sure, all the best to you girls. Remember to bid farewell to me, someone who lives in your past, before you leave.”

Thinking that he was joking, Arianne chuckled. Tiffany and Jackson, however, felt differently. One was making a resolution while another was respecting the resolution.

After dinner, the two women began to clean up. Jackson added. “Right, Arianne, didn’t you ask me to ask Mark for the cat? He said that he’s not giving it.”

Arianne instantly became upset. “Why not? He banned me from keeping a cat last time. He doesn’t even like it. Why isn’t he returning the cat to me?!”

Jackson quickly replied, “Don’t get upset with me, I’m just the messenger. He simply said that he’s not giving it back. He didn’t say anything else. How could I know why that is? Don’t worry, if you really do leave, it’ll be inconvenient for you to bring a cat along with you. At least someone’s taking care of it if you leave it at the Tremont’s. Even if Mark doesn’t like your cat, there are still Mary and Henry. There are so many helpers at the Tremont’s, how could they possibly fail to care for a cat?”

That was true. Mary would definitely take care of Rice Ball for her. Arianne was slightly placated, “Never mind… I’ll ask Mary to take care of it if he really isn’t giving it back to me.”

Before she left, she was going to see Mary and Henry. Other than to entrust them with Rice Ball, it was to bid them farewell. From a young age, the two of them were exceptionally good to her. They gave her the warmth of a home. She was leaving now, but she could not just leave without saying anything to them. As for Mark, she did not want to see him. There were some things she dared not even recall. For the rest of this life, she could only keep him in her heart, no longer able to talk to or joke with him face to face.

Arianne picked a nice sunny afternoon to go back to the Tremont Estate. She called Mary prior and made sure that Mark was not around.

When Mary saw her, her eyes began to turn red and water at once. She went to hold her hand and refused to let go. “Ari, are you really leaving? I’m worried… I haven’t felt alright during the days you left. Sir’s been staying up all night frequently too, he isn’t doing well.”

Arianne held back her tears and tried her best to memorize Mary’s face. She wanted to keep the memory of this person, who had made such an impact in her life. “It’s okay. I will live well, so don’t worry about me. He can live well too. He and I, we shouldn’t have been put together in the first place. Never mind, I’m back to see you, Henry, and Rice Ball. Also, to pack my stuff and leave behind what doesn’t belong to me.”

Henry carried Rice Ball to her, “This easily swayed little thing. Every time sir is back, it sticks close at his feet. It’s very close to sir.”

Arianne did not know what Henry meant by saying that. Was he telling her that Mark was treating Rice Ball nicely?

She did not ask anything regarding Mark and went to the master bedroom after chatting with them for a while.

All that belonged to her was where it had been before, with nothing removed. The entire room smelled of Mark and it saddened her for some reason…

While she packed her luggage, Rice Ball kept snuggling inside of the suitcase, as if feeling that the cushion of the soft clothes was comfortable. Arianne pulled it off several times, but it was all in vain.

She could not help carrying it out. “What are you doing? Do you want to leave with me? I can’t take you away by keeping you in the suitcase either, you’ll suffocate. I planned to take you too but thinking about it, perhaps you’ll live better staying here. You don’t have to roam around with me.”

As if understanding what she said, Rice Ball struggled out of her hold and went to play on its own at the side of the room.

Arianne continued to pack, leaving the card that Mark had given her. After packing, she checked repeatedly to make sure that she did not forget anything, unexpectedly seeing a photo frame that was placed face down on the nightstand. She remembered that the nightstand did not have any photo frame on it before this. Mark had probably placed it there after she left.

She picked up the photo frame but was stunned when she saw the photo. It was one that Eric had taken for her and Mark when they were in Sanya, freezing the moment in the bustling night market street. That was when she and Mark walked side by side and turned to look at the camera simultaneously. At that time, she had decided to try and love him…

From the beginning, she had owed him. Now, it was the opposite all of a sudden. Over a decade of hiding the truth felt like a long-planned conspiracy. It swallowed her into a dark abyss. She could not

redeem herself, nor could she redeem Mark. Asking herself if she loved him now, Arianne dared not utter the answer. She dared not think about it either.

Suddenly, footsteps sounded behind her. Freezing, she subconsciously placed the photo frame back on the nightstand, facing down once again. She was more than familiar with the footsteps. It was Mark. He was back!

Chapter 454

”Purposefully choosing a time when I’m not around to come back... Are you that eager to avoid me? If you’re going to leave, you should at least say goodbye. “

It was difficult for her to distinguish the emotions in his tone, but great suffering lay beneath the undercurrents of his calm facade.

She did not turn around, as she was unsure of how to face him. How was she supposed to speak frankly to him, acting as if nothing had happened?

After a bout of silence, he took her luggage downstairs.

This surprised her.

She thought that he would stop her from leaving, restricting her in every way, like the madman he was in the past, and force her into staying with him. She was afraid of that, if she was being honest. However, to her surprise, he seemed perfectly calm. She heaved a sigh of relief. At the very least, she could bring herself to say a few kind words to him.

Arianne tucked her hair behind her ear as she followed him down the stairs. Lowering her head, she mumbled, “I’m only taking what’s mine, I’ve left everything that belongs to you on the bed. Would you and Mary be so kind as to take care of Rice Ball for me? You can just pretend that it doesn’t exist if you’re not happy about it. Will you give it back to me when I come back in the future?”

Mark nodded and did not answer. Underneath the calm facade in his eyes lay a billowing storm of waves. He had no way of communicating with her, aside from pretending as if everything was fine, even as he sent her on her way. He could only bring himself to say a few words to her.

He placed her luggage into the back of his car, “I’ll drive you.”

Arianne wanted to reject his offer, but she did not. She considered it to be a way of making one last memory with him, this one filled with gentleness. This type of gentleness did not come easily, and she had longed for it ever since she was a little girl…

Mary and Henry held Rice Ball, standing at the doorway and watching them leave. In the end, Arianne could not hold back her tears. She stretched her hand out the window along the secluded roads. Leaves were falling from the tree branches amidst the autumn wind, briefly swirling in the air before landing on the ground. C’est la vie.

In the end, those leaves would turn into fertilizer, and accompany the larger trees through the bitter winter season. Then, by spring of the next year, a new seedling would be born.

Mark glanced at her through the rear-view mirror from time to time, stealing short glimpses of her for his memory. The yearning in his gaze deepened as they drove further and further away from Tremont

Estate. So many words that he wished to say lingered on the corners of his lips, threatening to slip out, but he swallowed them back down. He knew that he could never change her mind.

With everything going on now, he had no right to make her stay.

There was still much to complete on his end. Once he had finished getting rid of the essentials, and returned everything back to perfection, he would sacrifice everything to bring her back to him!

Mark helped Arianne with her luggage when they arrived at White Water Bay Villa. Arianne thanked him but did not look at him.

The words “thank you” may have sounded polite, but there was a distance in her tone that wasn’t there before.

Mark curled the corners of his lips into a smile tainted with bitterness, “I still need to say what needs to be said. I know that you’re leaving, but if you ever need any help, I’m just one call away. I’ll always be here.”

I’ll always be here…

These words brought tears to Arianne’s eyes again. She was suddenly filled with the urge to bury herself in his arms and burst into tears. She wanted to ask him why he had lied to her for so many years, why did he make her shoulder so many burdens. She also wanted to demand an explanation from him — why did he cause that airplane crash? How could he have been so cruel? Why did he take her innocent father’s life away from him and turn her into an orphan, one who was all alone in the world, then use this fact as a means to give her a home?

In the end, she did not act upon her impulses. She simply nodded, took her luggage, and left very quickly, afraid that he would see the tears in her eyes.

She finally released a long sigh of relief when she walked into the house and closed the door. Unable to help herself, she pulled the corners of the curtains open ever so slightly and sneaked a peek out the window. The man's figure was just as tall and imposing as ever underneath the autumn sun, as handsome and elegant as the first time she had laid eyes on him, back when she was just eight years old. He had taken her breath away for the first half of her life.

He was once everything to her. Now, she wanted nothing more than to throw everything connected to his world away and head towards a new beginning. She didn't know if a beginning without him could even be considered a beginning, however, or if it was just a tragic attempt to escape and muddle through life.

She placed her hand over her mouth as Mark's car drove out of sight and looked away. Her throat was choking with unvoiced cries, sparkling and translucent pearls of tears forming damp droplets on her pure white dress.

On the day of Arianne and Tiffany's departure, Mark, Jackson and Eric went to a nightclub again. They huddled together and there was a silent consensus not to call for a bar hostess.

Three eligible bachelors, all of them practically royalty, would be enough to draw anyone's attention, regardless of where they went. The women in the nightclub were drooling, some even gathering up enough of their courage to hit on them but were quickly chased away by Eric. Once they had gotten drunk as they could, Eric stared at the alcohol in the liquor glasses and asked, "I understand Mark's actions, he should be depressed right now. But why on earth are you following suit, Jackson? You'd usually be high by now, with one woman on each side."

Jackson chuckled, “Can’t I keep Mark company? It’s not appropriate to get high when my brother is frustrated. We’re only here to drink with him. Quit trying to make gossip out of me.”

Mark glanced at Jackson but did not call him out. One thing was certain — Jackson was about to turn over a new leaf.

Chapter 455

Upon their arrival in a new city, Arianne and Tiffany spent half a day trying to find a place to stay. Then they spent the second half decorating their small home. By the time the pair collapsed from exhaustion on their newly set up bed, they were smiling with satisfaction. Arianne turned her head to the side, looked at Tiffany and asked, “Are you really okay with leaving your mom on her own?”

Tiffany paused thoughtfully and said, “I’m a bit worried, but it’s fine as long as we stay in contact. We’ve moved quite a distance away and found a city that’s neither too big nor too small. My mom won’t be interested in visiting me. I’ve told her that I’m here to start a business and want to travel the world, so she can’t be bothered with me. You, on the other hand… Do you think Mark will send someone to watch over you?”

Now that she had mentioned it, Arianne believed that this was highly possible because Mark seemed too calm when she left. Perhaps he never really intended to release her in the first place. Just like what he had once done before, he had released her and allowed her to be free for a year and a half… But she wasn’t interested in overanalyzing this.

“He can do as he wishes. Even if he does send someone to watch over me, I’ll just feign ignorance. Let’s start looking for a place to learn pastry-making and brew drinks. Meanwhile, we have to start searching for a store in a good location. I don’t have much money on me, so you’ll have to pay for the first half, Tiffie. I’ll slowly cover the expenses later.”

Tiffany took out Lillian's bank card, "I've told you; we're sharing everything. If you don't have money, just use mine. When you do have money, we'll spend it together. It's decided. Onwards and upwards to the future!"

Three months later.

Tiffany and Arianne's co-founded dessert shop was finally open for business. Over the past three months, the pair had been training to make desserts while also searching for a place. Once they had found a place, they spent time on the interior design and decoration of the shop. They'd been working very hard and tired themselves out. Tiffany's moderate figure had grown more slender and graceful due to the exhaustion. In fact, her clavicles were much more prominent now.

Business was booming on the first day of business. Their customers mostly consisted of youngsters and white-collar professionals from the office building across the road. Customers would stop by during their free time in the middle of a busy day and get a cup of milk tea, or a taste of their desserts. It was a rare but welcome break.

Due to the overwhelming response, which was vastly different from the average newly opened business, they hadn't had time to hire help. This meant that they had to split the work — one person would be up to her neck in work while the other would be the server. They were too afraid of providing delivery services for the time being.

They hired two employees once their business was more stable — one to do deliveries and the other to work as a server. Tiffany and Arianne split their work between making drinks and the desserts.

Arianne had developed an obsession with making desserts. She remembered the taste of the desserts from Mark's favorite shop and tried to recreate similar types of dessert in their own. Desserts that he enjoyed were definitely made by a high-class pastry chef, but since she couldn't just learn this anywhere, she had to experiment on her own.

It was night now, just around closing time, and the other two staff members had left work long ago. Tiffany said goodbye to the last two customers and walked into the kitchen, "I have to say, you have a pretty good brain, Ari. It would seem that Mark has taught you quite a lot in business. Even if he hasn't, you've probably been influenced by his good business skills. You chose the shop location and decorated it really well. There's a university and a high school nearby, there's even an office building right across the road. It's impossible for us to have bad business at this point. Besides, we have a pretty good variety. Milk tea is just what everyone needs right now. People of all ages like it, aside from old women. And just look at the name you came up with for the shop — Petite Serendipity. It's pretty intriguing."

Arianne pushed a freshly made dessert towards Tiffany for some sampling, then took off her apron. "The shop name was just a random thought, but it's passable. Give these a try. I'll keep on experimenting tomorrow if they're not good enough but it's really late now, It's almost eleven! It's about time to clean up and go home."

Tiffany eagerly took a bite and remarked, "Yummy."

Arianne laughed despite her frustration, "Can you say something else? Take a page out of a food critic's book or something. If we're going to do this, we have to do it right. We've spent a lot of time and effort to start this shop. Although it's taken us three months to complete all of this, we've cut down on every aspect. I don't want our efforts to go to waste."

Tiffany earnestly sampled the whole thing, then began her critique, "Not bad, at least better than all of the previous items on our menu. How did you make this? It could be our signature product once we give it a name. I'm sure it'd be popular. The color is pretty too, similar to the color of strawberries."

Knowing that Tiffany's feedback wasn't exactly useful, Arianne didn't pursue it. The pair had cleaned up and were walking out of the kitchen when someone suddenly entered the shop. Tiffany didn't get a clear look, but instinctively greeted them, "Hello, welcome!"

Arianne stared at the guest and calmly said, "Sorry, we're closed for the day."

Tiffany's eyes were currently in a state where they exclusively saw dollar signs. In her opinion, if there was a business opportunity to be had, they should take it no matter what. She was about to grumble at Arianne when the guest spoke up, "Then I'll come by tomorrow."

Tiffany finally understood the situation when she heard her voice — it was Arianne's mother, Helen. She tactfully stepped aside and gave Arianne and Helen some space to talk.

Arianne did not want to see Helen in this city at all, asking her, "You don't have to come tomorrow. Why did you follow me all the way here?"

Chapter 456

Helen smiled, "You've misunderstood me. I'm only here on business for two days. I heard that you started a shop and I was hungry. I couldn't decide on what to eat, so I came here to have a look. It's alright if you're closing, I'll leave."

Her heart softening, Arianne asked, "What would you like to eat?"

Helen walked to the front desk and picked up a menu. She glanced through it and chose two desserts and a cup of latte, “Just these. I hope I won’t take up too much of your time. I’ll just have my order to-go.”

Arianne didn’t answer. She simply put on her apron and walked into the kitchen.

Tiffany quickly made Helen’s latte and packed it up. Once the desserts were done, Helen left after paying for the items. She did not say anything more to Arianne.

“Ari, I have a feeling that your mom is truly here on a business trip. Just treat her like a normal customer. You’re always smiling at strangers, try to be a bit… nicer to your mother. Okay?” Tiffany suggested, unable to stop herself.

Arianne’s face turned white, not giving Tiffany any explanation. She finally spoke up once they had closed the shop for the night and were on their way home.

“If Helen knows about my newly opened shop, what makes you think that a certain someone won’t? I wanted to start a new life, but how is this any different from living in the capital? I don’t want to run into anyone familiar here. How can you believe her lame? Even if she were actually on a business trip and just happened to find our shop, how would she have known that I started this shop? This isn’t exactly a small city; she’s obviously been keeping tabs on me. She shouldn’t have come to see me.”

Tiffany was suddenly enlightened after hearing her explanation, gasping, “You’re right! Even if she’s really here on business, this isn’t like a coincidental run-in on the street. She actually found our shop. That means that she’s known about our location for a while! Do you think Mark sent her here?”

Arianne's face turned pale. She would move around and set up her shop if needed, at least until they stopped bothering her.

In the morning, the next day, the shop received a delivery order. As luck would have it, the staff member in charge of deliveries was not at work. When Arianne saw the number on the order sheet, she decided to take on the order, "I'll deliver this. I'll be back soon."

"Then you'd better hurry back, I can't handle all of this on my own," Tiffany reminded her.

Arianne nodded. The reason why she wanted to deliver the order personally, was because the order had come from Helen. She was feeling anxious.

The address that of a high-class hotel. She knocked on the door when she arrived outside Helen's room, hearing footsteps from inside. When the door opened, Arianne handed her the items, "Did you order from us because our products are delicious, or did you have another reason?"

Helen was taken aback, "What do you mean? Are you saying…? That I have an ulterior motive for being here? Can you not be so prickly with me? I know that you don't want to be disturbed right now, but as your mother, I have the right to know if you're alright. I only wanted to see you. I made a second order because, as you've said, I liked the taste of your products. I'm going back to the capital tomorrow. Will that put your mind at peace?"

Arianne frowned, "Are you certain that no one's asked you to check on me?"

Helen paused for a second, before answering. "I can't keep this from you. I met up with Mark before I came here. He told me that you were here, but he won't come looking for you, don't worry."

Mark knows that I'm here…

Although she had expected it long ago, hearing it directly from Helen still made her feel uncomfortable. As expected, Mark had never truly let her go. She was like a kite: no matter how high or how far away she flew, her string would still be in his hands.

Her mind was in a mess, "When you get back, do me a favor and tell him this — I am not his property and he should just release me. This is the life I want. Even if I have to be beaten down and broken, I won't have anything to do with him anymore."

Helen hesitated for two seconds, then carefully asked, "What on earth happened between you two? I know that… Perhaps there is no need for me to clarify on this matter, but I am genuinely curious. Logically speaking, things between you two should have developed into the right direction. Why did you choose to leave and sever all contact with him?"

Arianne stared at the woman in front of her. All traces of compassion in her heart immediately disappeared into thin air as she replied, "My breakup with Mark is related to my father's death. I didn't think you'd been interested in anything concerning my father. You don't have the right to know anyway," She stared at Helen straight in the eye as she said this, wanting to see the kind of expressions this woman would make.

Helen felt slightly embarrassed. After all, she had brought up the past, which was a stain in her life. No matter how illustrious and beautiful her life was right now, it would never erase her past. She forced a smile, "Alright… I won't ask then."

Arianne turned around, took two steps and then said, “If you’re just here on business, please don’t ever let me see your face again.”

Helen watched as Arianne disappeared into the elevator. She stood in her spot in silence, then let out a sigh before turning away and closing the door. Now, all she could do was foot the bill for her past mistakes.

Chapter 457

Arianne had managed to fine tune her emotions into the best possible state by the time she returned to the shop. Tanya Anderson, the staff member in charge of deliveries, greeted her apprehensively, “Have I been too slow, Ari?”

Arianne was taken aback. It took her awhile before she realized what Tanya meant. “No, I just happened to have some free time, so I helped you with a delivery. It’s fine, go back to work. I’m going into the kitchen.”

Tanya was born and bred in the city. Her family’s financial situation wasn’t too great, so she could not continue her studies after getting into university. Instead, she started working very early. She had a senile old grandfather at home and was pretty down to earth. She had delicate and pretty good looks, although she was slightly tanned due to constantly being on the move.

Tanya was much more earnest compared to the other employee, Regina McKaren, who was in charge of serving the customers. Regina did not even finish high school and had entered society very early. She had never really enriched her life with diverse experiences but was very well-versed in dressing up. She absolutely had to put on makeup before coming to work every day, thick makeup at that. The clothes she wore were bargain goods, always something different every day of the month, with her nails forever painted red. Usually, Tanya would help Regina out with serving the customers whenever there were no deliveries.

Behind the scenes, Tiffany had been through many discussions with Arianne on letting Regina go. There wasn't much work to do in the shop and the salary that they provided was higher than other shops. Regina was the slowest among the four of them and wasn't much help. Arianne was usually more easy-going and had defended Regina many times before.

Tiffany brought up Regina's dismissal again when Arianne returned, "Look, Ari. Do you see what Regina has been doing? She bosses Tanya around whenever she's in the shop, then sits down somewhere and fiddles with her phone. She's not any younger than we are, is she? Does she not have any sense of awareness? I don't care what you say, I'm letting her go today!"

Arianne glanced outside. There were twelve tables in the shop, eight of which were occupied by customers. Tanya was working hard and taking care of the customers, then standing at the shop entrance to greet the customers. Whenever a customer called for a service, she would move faster than anyone else. Regina, however, stood by an empty spot and played with her phone, smiling foolishly. She was a good-looking girl, but for some reason, did not seem very likeable.

"How about this, you put up a recruitment notice and add on a slot for an odd job staff member? Otherwise, dealing with the cups and plates every day would tire us out. You speak to Regina and pay her for the day," Arianne unclenched in the end. She should take a page out of Mark's book, picking only the best of the best for her staff members, not losing out on that end from the very beginning.

Tiffany had been putting up with her frustrations for a long time, frustrated even with this compromise. "Everyone else does her work anyway, it's like it has anything to do with her at all. I don't even want to give her the money for the past few days. I'll just pretend like it's a way to get rid of bad energy or something. I'll talk to her when we have less customers."

Things became less busy at the shop around noon. Tiffany put up a recruitment notice outside the door. Regina and Tanya saw this, and Regina asked Tiffany with a smile, "Business has been really good. Are

we hiring again? I was just talking about how exhausted I've been with waitressing. We should have hired someone new a long time ago, and another busser too. That way our jobs will be a lot easier."

Tanya's gaze fell on a one line in the description for the busser — the salary would be similar to everyone else's. Something popped up in her mind, but she didn't know how to speak up.

"Regina," Tiffany said irritably, "I think… that you're more suited for working in an office or a white-collar job. This isn't a good place for you. Perhaps you'd prefer to consider a different line of work? I'll pay you for your work over the past few days."

Regina's smile gradually froze in place, "What do you mean? Do you not like my work ethic? This is nothing but a rotten little shop. I wake up at eight in the morning and get off work at nine at night. I'm constantly busy. What gives you the right to fire me?"

Tiffany rolled up her sleeves, put her hands on her hips, and began nitpicking on her, "You're right. You wake up at eight, but working hours start at nine. You take one hour to dress up and we provide breakfast for you, free of charge. You're half an hour late every day and you have the gall to tell me that you wake up at eight? How are your waking hours any of our concern? One more thing, while you are late to work, you're always in the shop. However, peak business hours are in the afternoon. It's usually pretty free during other times of the day, aside from weekends. We pay you enough too. You shouldn't complain about feeling overwhelmed. Tanya's the one who's overwhelmed here. You're more preoccupied with smiling down at your phone! You've never done anything related to cleaning up after your first day here, but you're being paid all the same. Tanya does twice the work you do. I'd rather have someone like Tanya on the team, instead of someone like you!"

Regina was raging with the arrogance of a young teenage girl. She tore off her apron, which she was required to wear at all times during business hours, and threw it onto the ground, "Alright, I'll leave. What's so great about this place anyway? I don't want to waste my time here anyway. Give me my money!"

Chapter 458

Tiffany couldn’t be bothered to fight with her in front of the shop entrance. It’d affect business, after all. She took out her pay and counted it all out in front of her, saying, “Here, this is the full amount.”

However, Regina was not satisfied with this. “That’s it? Are you kidding me? This obviously isn’t right!”

Tiffany pulled out the daily timesheet and thrust it in front of her, “Have a good look. I mentioned this when you first joined the team, but a lateness means cut wages. You’ve been consistently late, every day. I didn't even charge you for the desserts and drinks that you freeloaded off of us. Is there anything else that you’re not satisfied with? If you’d like for me to do a more detailed calculation, you’d have to reimburse me!”

Regina was completely upset, “You have so many leftovers and you’d throw them away than let your own staff members eat them? What have I been eating?”

Tiffany had never met anyone as shameless as this girl, replying angrily, “Leftovers are usually taken care of. But the food you’ve taken weren’t leftovers. You’ve even been drinking the best coffee.”

Regina knew when she had been beaten and had no way of pursuing this anymore. She let out a slew of curses and stormed out.

Tiffany’s rage was pretty much placated, her spirits lifted. She noticed that Tanya was still standing on the side and asked, “What’s wrong? Did you have something you needed to say? Don’t worry, Regina’s the only one in trouble here. She’s really no good for work. You, on the other hand, have been doing a good job. Keep it up. You’ll get a bonus during the new year and other festive occasions. Ari and I will take care of you.”

Tanya bit her lip and mumbled, “I’ve noticed that you’re looking for a busser. What kind of job is that?”

Tiffany paused to think and replied, “Cleaning up, making sure that the place is neat, washing the plates, cups, and so on. It’s a dirty and tough job. Why? Do you have someone in mind?”

Tanya shook her head, “No, but… Can I do two jobs? I’m sure I can do it!”

Tiffany jumped up in surprise. Handling deliveries was already exhausting enough, and she’d have to mind the shop once she had finished her deliveries too. It’d be inhumane to make her work as a busgirl as well.

“No, no, no. You’re still young. While there’s nothing wrong with experiencing life and working hard, this is too much. You won’t be able to handle it. Why are you so short on cash? Your grandfather is the only one you have at home, right? How much money could he possibly spend?”

Tanya frowned, “My grandfather isn’t young anymore. He’s always sick and needs to take expensive medication. Besides, he’s suffering from Alzheimer’s too and I have to work and earn money for the family, so I don’t have time to take care of him. He might go missing one day if I’m not careful. I’d like to hire someone to take care of his food and other necessities during the day. I can take care of him myself at night, and since this isn’t a big city, hiring a nursemaid or a caretaker really won't be too expensive.”

However, Tiffany couldn’t bring herself to make this decision. She was afraid that Arianne might tear her apart. Deciding to hand this headache over to Arianne, she said, “I can’t make the decision, but you should ask Ari. She’s very accepting and easy to talk to. If she’s okay with it, I’m okay with it too.”

Tanya's eyes shone with gratitude as she exclaimed, "Okay! Thank you, Tiffany!"

Arianne was also surprised when she heard about Tanya's intention to hold down two jobs, "Are you sure?"

Tanya nodded seriously, "I've talked to Tiffany about this. I'm not afraid of hard work and trust me, I've thought it through. It might be tiring to wash a large pile of dishes at the end of the day, so it'll be better if I do a little bit at a time during my free time throughout the day. That way, I won't be too exhausted at night. I'll do it well. Please trust me, okay? If I fall short, you can always hire someone else… If the pay for two jobs is overpriced, you can trim a little bit of it off too!"

Arianne waved her hand, "Of course you'd have to be paid double for working two jobs, it's not overpriced at all. Alright, you can give it a try. Tell me if it's too much, don't force yourself to do this if it's harmful to you."

Tanya nodded excitedly, "Then can I start today? I see a lot of dishes in the kitchen. I'm free now, so I can do all of that!"

Arianne nodded. She watched Tanya, busying herself like a hardworking bee, and couldn't help but smile. Regardless of one's family background, birds of a feather usually flocked together when they went out into society. She really liked Tanya.

Soon, a young girl arrived at the shop. Her name was Lynn Brooks and she was much better in comparison to Regina. She looked clean and tidy, and carried herself well. She had a tall figure and didn't put on heavy makeup. Regardless, she had a sort of elegance about her, and she had particularly fair skin. She preferred casual clothes but was very fashionable, with her hair always up in a ponytail. Simple and deft, that was the best way to describe her. Most importantly, she was never late.

The atmosphere in the shop was improving day by day. They never really encountered a lot of bumps along the way and managed to rake in quite a lot of profit. In fact, they were still left with quite a bit of money, even after paying Lynn and Tanya their monthly salaries. Arianne had refused her share, as she did not put in any money for investments during the early phase of their business and had to slowly repay Tiffany. She'd accept her profits after paying her debt off.

Winter arrived soon enough. The number of customers in the shop dwindled down after the first day of snow. They mostly received takeaway orders now, so when Tanya was too busy, Lynn would help out with the deliveries.

Arianne checked the calendar. They were twenty days away from Christmas, so she should probably hold some sort of activity in the shop. However, she couldn't seem to come up with any ideas.

Tiffany had a big grin on her face as she read through the ratings on the takeaway app, "We don't seem to be getting a lot of bad reviews, except for a few malicious customers. Most people find our menu items to be very delicious. In fact, a lot of people have said that eating our food gives them a sense of happiness… Ari, let's open a few branches once our business grows. Let's cover the entire country with our brand. We'll make this big!"

Chapter 459

Arianne hadn't expanded her vision to that stage yet. She was still feeling sentimental over the present. A calm and peaceful life like this was the best kind. "We'll see. Besides, Christmas is coming up soon. We should have some kind of promotion and a small gift exchange to attract new customers and reward our regulars."

Tiffany patted herself on the chest, “Leave it to me! I can do it. It’s good to do these promotions, especially since they bring us minimal losses. By the way, I have something to tell you, but I’m not sure if I should.”

Arianne stared at her, “Mm? What is it?”

Tiffany hesitated for a moment before speaking up, “You have to promise not to get angry first.”

Arianne curled her lips, “Our lives are pretty good now and I’m in a good mental headspace. Nothing could possibly anger me, unless you’re saying that the business has had a loss. Just tell me.”

“Mark and Jackson have formed a partnership and started a financial company in the office building across the road!” Tiffany blurted out, speaking as fast as possible as she observed Arianne’s face apprehensively.

“What? How did you know?” Arianne shrieked, her reaction to this very extreme. Tiffany had expected this.

“I… I saw it in the news, completely by chance. I’ve been going back and forth over whether I should tell you about this. I couldn’t keep this from you for too long anyway, since it’s so close by. We could run into each other at any time. I don’t think they’d hang around here too long though. They’d never abandon their headquarters and set up camp here. I didn’t want to tell you because I was afraid that you might want to move again, and we’d have to start all over again. It’s too exhausting. It wasn’t easy for us to establish our business in the first place,” Tiffany was close to tears. This shop now held sentimental value for her. She really didn’t want to move again.

Arianne was having a headache. The Tremont family's business was big, very big. There was no need for Mark to begin a new financial company, and in the office building across the road from her shop, of all places. His reasons were obvious. Tiffany had made some good points too, however and she was reluctant to abandon this shop and move somewhere else. "Is there anything else? Tell me everything, don't hold anything back."

Tiffany continued on with a strained look on her face, "Mark's international branches that had been closed down have reopened again. One more thing… I think he's announced that he will no longer continue doing charity. These days, there are mostly reports of him flying around. Nothing else."

He was no longer donating to charity?

Arianne was puzzled by Mark's sudden decision to stop all philanthropic activities. From her first day in the Tremont Estate, this had been a constant, going on for more than ten years. This was how he set up his reputation. Now that he had announced that he was ceasing all charitable activities, he'd certainly suffer derision from self-righteous saints.

When a man known for his philanthropy stops any and all philanthropic activities, people would naturally perceive that he was no longer a good person. In contrast, when a villain suddenly started doing philanthropic activities, he'd receive recognition. This was human nature. Mark couldn't possibly have failed to realize this…

Late at night, when all was quiet, she secretly pulled out her phone and searched Mark on the internet, while Tiffany was asleep, everything about him promptly appearing on her phone screen. This was the first time she had ever felt the urge to look for any news about him, of her own volition.

She tapped on an interview regarding his decision to stop all philanthropic activities, in which he seemed very calm in front of the camera. He never used to wear glasses, but now he wore platinum-rimmed

glasses. This gave him a more artsy kind of style and concealed the emotions behind his intense gaze, more than before at least. He seemed colder than ever, having opted against smiling when faced with the camera and the world. He was no longer that kind and warm man. His entire body resonated a cold and grim aura.

“I have a question, Mr. Tremont. Why have you decided on ceasing all charitable activities? What will happen to the people under your charitable organizations now that you’ve stopped? Have you considered this? They need your help.”

“Mr. Tremont, you are held in high esteem among the richest people of the country. Won’t you donate a little money? Aren’t you afraid of everyone’s disappointment?”

“Mr. Tremont, did something happen? Why have you decided to change your ways? Could you give us an explanation?”

In the face of the barrage of questions from the media, Mark calmly answered, “I did not do philanthropy for your pleasure. I don’t need to provide any explanation to my decision to stop and I certainly don’t need to justify myself. It’s always been a personal matter to me. So, the question of whether I plan on continuing my philanthropic activities or not has absolutely nothing to do with you. None of you were involved, so you have no right to ask. Your disappointment has nothing to do with me either. I don’t care.”

His answer made the reporters feel very embarrassed. They no longer dared to ask personal questions or act aggressively.

Most of them were wondering why he had changed into a completely different man — no more smiles, no more warm, sunny gestures.

Arianne turned off her phone after watching this. She couldn't pinpoint her exact feelings.

Despite her discovery of Mark and Jackson's new company in the office building across the road, Arianne hadn't seen any of them for a long time. So, she began to feel at ease and feigned ignorance over the matter as time went on. However, there had been an increased number of large takeaway orders lately, and most of them came from the office building across the road…

Chapter 460

The shop was closed for a while during the Christmas season. Lynn and Tanya went back to their own homes to spend Christmas with their families, but Arianne and Tiffany only had each other. This was their first time spending Christmas in a different city. On Christmas Eve, Tiffany had an hour-long call with Lillian. Arianne was left staring out into the cold Christmas night.

Suddenly, Arianne's phone rang. She thought that it was a simple Christmas greeting and was not bothered. She picked up her phone and glanced at it, then realized that it was from Helen. The contents of the message may have been a greeting, but there was a bank transfer of 1,500 dollars into her bank account. Apparently, it was a Christmas present, to make up for all the presents she had owed her when she was younger.

She felt nothing and simply replied to her with two words: Merry Christmas.

Helen was standing in front of a window when she received the message and smiled. It was snowing heavily outside and her only loved one was out of reach. She felt a sense of warmth when she saw those words on her icy phone screen. This was the best present she could ever ask for this Christmas.

Suddenly, a call notification appeared over the message. Helen frowned and answered the call, "Hello?"

From the other end of the line, Aery's first words were, "Merry Christmas, mother. Where's my present? I'm not in the country, but you haven't forgotten my present, have you?"

Helen paused, "Got it. I'll send it to you later."

Just then, she heard the sound of fireworks from Aery's end. Helen furrowed her brows, "You're supposed to be in Malaysia. It's illegal to release fireworks there. Are you still in the country?"

Aery quickly replied, "Of course I have! Dad secretly bought some fireworks from the market, even though I told him not to do it. I've got to go. Remember to send the money over!"

The call ended very quickly. However, Helen was still feeling extremely suspicious. Jean hated trouble and would never go through the trouble of purchasing illegal fireworks just for fun. There could only be one explanation — she had been tricked! Jean and Aery must have never left the country with the monthly living expenses that she had provided.

She really wanted to investigate this but changed her mind after some thought. Regardless of whether they had been lying to her or not, she would cease all financial support once Aery was done with her studies. She did not care if Aery was studying hard or not. She couldn't bring herself to care. She was extremely disillusioned by the Kinsey family.

After she had sent Aery the same amount of money as she sent Arianne, Aery sent a message to convey her displeasure: Is that it? That's not enough for my meals. When have you become so stingy? Oh right, I forgot. You have another daughter. You've been generous to Arianne, haven't you? I don't want this insignificant lump of money. Send more. At least 15,000 dollars!"

Helen turned her phone off straightaway. She couldn't be bothered. She had wasted so many years caring for two ingrates. This was the biggest mistake of her life.

Arianne and Tiffany's city had no fireworks restrictions, so. many people were releasing fireworks in the public square, each display more elaborate than the next. The bustling atmosphere made it difficult for them to sleep, so they crawled towards the window and watched the booming fireworks illuminate the sky, talking about their plans for the new year. Arianne's phone rang again. It was another message. The previous message was from Helen. She decided to ignore this one, as if it were spam, and left the phone on one side.

Tiffany finished a can of beer and exclaimed, "I'm bored. I really want to go out and have fun. It doesn't snow very much around here, so it's not exactly a winter wonderland. We'd have a prime place to have a snowball fight by now if we were back in the capital. Ari, we have a few days off. You can't possibly want to stay here and stare into space, right? That's a waste of good time. Wanna go to a karaoke lounge or a bar?"

Arianne knew that Tiffany was dying from boredom. They'd been working hard over the past few months; it was time to let loose now. "That's a good idea, but it's too late now. Let's go tomorrow. We'll buy some ingredients tomorrow and make a big meal at home. Then we'll go out at night and have some fun."

All was quiet in the city again during the wee hours in the morning, but Arianne was still awake. She had a habit of checking her phone before falling asleep. That unread message had come from an unknown number and contained two simple words: Merry Christmas.

She was certain that it wasn't a random message from some company, because it had no punctuation marks. Usually, there would be an exclamation point at the end of the sentence. This message did not.

She did not plan on figuring this mystery out and did not think much of it either.

Early morning the very next day, Arianne and Tiffany went to the market to do some shopping. They had just opened the door when they found two exquisitely wrapped presents, both placed silently in front of the door. They were from a well-known brand too. There were tags on the boxes, clearly describing that one box was for Tiffany and the other was for Arianne.

The pair stared at each other, unsure of the sender's identity. They tore the boxes open to find two scarves in the same style but different colors. One scarf alone would have cost around 4000 dollars.

Tiffany gaped, "Have we somehow run into some good luck? I don't think my horoscope of the day mentioned anything about good fortune. Who'd make such a grand gesture? There's no name…"

Arianne sealed her box and put it back in its original spot, "I haven't done anything to deserve this extravagant gift. Let's leave them here, right where we found them. Someone will take them, or the sender will probably take them back. It's not any of our business."