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Tiffany finally came to a realization, “Oh… I think I know who sent this. Then I don’t want it either. I’ll leave mine here too.”

Many stalls in the market were not open during Christmas time. Arianne shopped for ingredients here regularly, and one shop owner whom she was well-acquainted with happened to be around. After choosing her items and making her payment, the shop owner suddenly pulled out a black plastic bag, “Here, it must be difficult for two young girls to be all alone during the holiday season. My son brought this back from another country. Have some, it’s my gift to you.”

Arianne’s first instinct told her that it probably wasn’t anything too expensive. After declining a few times, she ended up accepting it anyway. Once they’d paid and left, Tiffany turned around and viewed their surroundings again.

“It’s strange. Everyone’s packing up to go home after we’ve finished making our purchases.”

Arianne turned around to look as well. It was true. It was still early, but that shop owner who had just given her a gift was getting ready to leave as well. She looked into the black plastic bag and suddenly realized the peculiarity of their situation. On the surface, the item was wrapped in a cheap, black plastic bag. It didn’t seem like anything expensive. However, inside lay a high-quality steak that was no less than one kilogram in weight!

It was difficult to find this type of steak anywhere in the country. It was imported and had a high market value, sealed in a vacuum pack. No one would be silly enough to just give something so expensive away. If the shop owner had actually managed to get ahold of this grade of steak, she’d need to be a high society lady. Why would she have to set up a stall and sell vegetables, or dress in such simple clothes if that was the case?

“I think… This seems to be Jackson’s style. After all, no one has a better grasp of ingredients than he does. I’ve had this steak in his restaurant before…” Arianne wore a complicated expression on her face.

Tiffany was suddenly enlightened, “Then were those scarves from him too? Are you sure that he’s the only one? Is Mark here? I’m kind of panicking… I’m too scared to go home now…”

Arianne’s shoulders sank, “Mark won’t come. At least, not yet. Since Jackson’s here, you can give him a call. This steak is too expensive. My cooking skills wouldn’t do it justice. Tell him to come over and cook it for us.”

Tiffany did not expect for Arianne to make such an arrangement, but it had been awhile since she'd had Jackson’s cooking. She was now craving for it, so she pulled out her phone and gave Jackson a call, which was received within seconds, “I know you’re here. You had someone arrange for us to get that steak, right? If you’re here, stop hiding. Come out and make us a meal!”

“You’ve caught me so soon? Alright, I’m coming out then.”

Jackson’s voice rang out from behind them. The pair turned around at the same time. Jackson was dressed in a black windbreaker, and his face was the picture of innocence, his aristocratic aura drawing a stark contrast against the filthy market.

Before leaving the capital, they had made it very clear they would not contact anyone who had anything to do with their past. Now, they had actually yielded for the sake of steak. This was really a slap in the face. It seemed that no one could run away from or resist Jackson’s cooking skills.

“Where did you come from? Have you been following us the whole time? That’s so scary! Are you a stalker? I have a question for you — are you alone or is Mark with you?” Despite having stayed away from Jackson for the past few months, Tiffany’s tongue-lashing skills were as sharp as ever.

“I am not. My mom threw me out of the house. I had nowhere to go, so I came here to ask for your sympathy. I came on my own. Mark isn’t here,” Jackson replied in a joking manner, but glanced at Arianne instinctively.

Arianne lowered her head and feigned nonchalance as she walked ahead. She was secretly disappointed. Yes, despite not wanting him here, she still felt disappointed when she found out that he really wasn’t here. Humans were a contrary species. They always want the same thing they claimed to despise.

Remembering the scarves at the door, Tiffany asked, “Were those scarves from you too?”

Jackson nodded, “That’s right. It’s impolite to visit someone’s house empty handed. It’s Christmas, after all. Don’t you agree?”

Tiffany’s eyes shone, “I knew that they were from you! I’m keeping mine. No hesitation! You really are a ladies’ man. But you’ve got good taste, those scarves are very pretty…”

Jackson wasn’t modest about it either, “Of course. Come on, let’s go home and start cooking.”

Tiffany took her scarf when they arrived home. Jackson walked straight into the kitchen and began preparing the ingredients. Making a sumptuous meal wasn't easy, time and effort were needed when preparing ingredients.

Consumed with boredom, Tiffany went to their takeaway app to check on the reviews for their restaurant. After all, they couldn't rest for too long during their Christmas break, as they would have to be open for business again soon. It had been a while since she had last read their customers' reviews.

It would have been better if she never looked at all. One glance and she plunged into panic, "Ari, look at this, why are there so many bad reviews?"

Arianne inched toward her to get a closer look. She frowned, "Too many bad reviews will affect the number of orders we get. What's going on? Haven't you been keeping tabs on this?"

"I've had to take care of the beverages and finances, so I haven't been paying attention to it for a while," Tiffany replied with a sullen face.

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Arianne carefully went through the bad reviews. Soon after, she noticed a problem, "Something's not right. These are blatantly malicious reviews. While most of them have complained or claimed that the products are questionable, or that they just don't taste good, there's one review ridiculing the hygiene standards of our restaurant. It talks about how messy and dirty our kitchen is. No one but our staff could have been able to see this. But Tanya's clearly been cleaning the kitchen every day, and the cups and cutlery have all been sanitized. This isn't a simple slanderous review, it's personal!"

Tiffany widened her eyes, "I'm pretty sure that Regina's behind all of this! Look! The earliest date of these reviews is on the day after Regina's dismissal. Then, we'd receive a few of these reviews every

day, three to six on a steady average. I'm pretty sure that Regina's asked a few of her friends to help out. She's crossed a line!"

Although their review page still had 90% of good reviews, this would still affect business over time. Arianne carefully pondered this, then replied to one bad review using the restaurant's account: Malicious reviews like these aren't exactly interesting. Instead of wasting time on these dirty tricks, why not think about how to grow into a good person?

She did not call Regina out on purpose, because there was a possibility that this wasn't a review by Regina. After answering every review that might be related to Regina, she held onto Tiffany's phone for a while and waited. As expected, twenty minutes later, she received a message from Regina: I'm going to crush your dishonest shop! You've offered a high salary when employing others, then used all sorts of excuses to fire an employee not too long after. Then, you've refused to pay them with the salary they deserve! If that's not dishonest, then I don't know what is. As long as I breathe, I will order every single thing in your shop and give you bad reviews! I can afford that much!

Tiffany was angry, mumbling under her breath as she typed out her reply, "That b*tch! I put everything into starting this shop. How could I possibly stand having this trash ruin our reputation? She should say it to my face if she's all that great. Why hide behind a computer screen?"

Arianne was calmer than Tiffany, "Forget it. There's no point in fighting with her now. Regina is very vengeful. I think the latest bad review was from yesterday, before we closed the restaurant for the holidays. Regina could have ordered takeaways every day after her departure, and left reviews. We missed out on them, so we didn't respond. She must have noticed that, which explains why she replied immediately after my response. This won't end until she's appeased her anger."

After sending the message, Tiffany lifted her head, staring straight at Arianne and grumbling, "I'm aware of your thorough analysis, but what's the use? Are we supposed to let her do whatever she likes? These bad reviews will overrun the good ones over time. When that happens, our business will be badly affected."

Arianne shook her head, “Actually, not many people would be willing to move around during the hot summer or cold winter seasons. We’d still get quite a lot of takeaway orders. Let’s put a small card in every takeaway order once our store reopens, stating that we’d like to thank their good reviews with a small gift. The gift will be sent along with the card. I’m sure people would be happy to move their fingers a little. After all, we have quite a lot of repeat customers. Think about it, I’ve been experimenting on new desserts every day, but I’ve never officially put them on our menu. I can’t sell them and throwing them away would be a waste. We can’t finish eating them ourselves, so let’s use them as gifts. We’ll kill two birds with one stone. Then we’ll get tons of popular reviews. I refuse to believe that someone like Regina would have the ability to send a thousand or ten thousand people after us. She’ll give up once reality slaps her in the face.”

Tiffany threw her arms dramatically around Arianne and pouted, “I’ve always known that these brainy ideas should be left to you. I was wondering about those desserts you’re always making. There’s always such a big batch yet we can’t sell them or eat them all. Most of it is given away to our neighbors or sanitation workers or thrown away. Either way, it’s such a waste. It’s a great idea to turn them into freebies. Seriously, we have so many orders but not enough reviews. How can these customers be so lazy? They should at least tell us if it’s delicious or not. If everyone leaves a review, we’d definitely be a hit. Has your brain been heavily influenced by Mark?”

Arianne pretended to look sullen and pushed her away, “This is the one hundred and eighth time that you’ve brought him up since our arrival here. You don’t usually talk about him, but it’s like you’re deliberately trying to annoy me ever since we’ve moved here, bringing him up at every possible moment. What are you trying to pull? Do you want to lose your best friend?”

Tiffany zipped her mouth, “Alright, I won’t talk about him. I’ll definitely stop bringing him up. You can slap Jackson if he ever mentions him!”

Jackson poked his head out from the kitchen, “What? Who’s slapping me?”

Arianne and Tiffany shared a look and smiled, “Get back to work!”

At noon, Jackson filled the table with a myriad of dishes. Arianne and Tiffany were usually too busy at the restaurant, so they only managed to rest when they arrived home at night. This was the first time in a long while since their small house was truly filled with warmth.

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At the dinner table, Tiffany was solely focused on inhaling her food. There was so much to do at the restaurant, that she and Arianne usually never had the chance to sit down for a good meal, and they rarely cooked their own meals. This meal was a rare treat, but she ended up getting full before eating much of it. Arianne and Jackson, on the other hand, had just started eating.

Jackson was stunned when he saw her putting her knife and fork down, “Did it taste bad? There weren't a lot of condiments in your kitchen so I did the best I could. If it’s not good enough, I’ll buy all of the necessary ingredients and cook all of this again next time.”

“She doesn’t have a big appetite anymore,” Arianne explained in Tiffany’s place. “This is how much she usually eats these days. No need to be alarmed.”

Jackson did not tease Tiffany as he used to do in the past. Strangely, he felt bad, “I see that you’ve only got four people in your shop. Aren’t you exhausted? How can you live like this? Is this really the kind of life you want? Even a casual job as a fashion designer in the capital would be enough to support you. Why do you have to torture yourselves? Don’t tell me that it’s your dream. If desserts were your dream, you wouldn’t have chosen to study art and start a career as a fashion designer. If you’re exhausted, come home.”

Arianne smiled, “It’s exhausting, but it’s fulfilling and freeing. We’re so tired after working all day that we just want to sleep at night, and we don’t have the time to think about anything else. It’s pretty good. Why should I go back? I don’t want to be a fashion designer anymore, and I don’t want to be Mrs. Tremont either. I did not ask for a divorce because I promised him I’d never mention it. Should he want a divorce one day, he can meet up with me and do it any time. Jackson, if you’re here as someone’s mouthpiece, please give it up.”

Tiffany noticed that the conversation between the pair had surpassed her expectations. She couldn’t get a word in edgewise and didn’t understand the subtle meaning behind their conversation. She quietly picked up her knife and fork again to avoid feeling awkward.

Jackson pursed his lips, “Yes, I confess. I’m here to persuade you in Mark’s place. And I agree with him. You can both continue working on your shop if you want, but at least hire two more people. Please think about it.”

Arianne did not argue with him, “I’ll consider hiring more staff once we reopen. Let’s eat.”

Tiffany, who had been silent the entire time, suddenly spoke up, “Jackson, how are things going for that financial company that you and Mark have started in the office building across the road from our shop? Why did you decide on opening up an office all the way here? Knowing Mark, wouldn’t a big city have been a better choice?”

Jackson shot Arianne a complicated look, “Do you think it’s all because of you two? To find an excuse to look in on you from time to time? Don’t worry, Mark and I aren’t that free to keep an eye on you 24/7. You don’t have to consider moving again,” he replied as he ate.

His tone contained hints of reproach towards Arianne. He had never met a woman who could forget and give up on a man despite living with him for more than ten years, one who'd managed to free herself from him without any hesitation.

Mark had refused to tell her the truth, so he was stuck too. However, as a result, everyone was suffering. Most importantly, Tiffany had lost weight. She could no longer gobble up three large meals. Her cheeks were not as plump anymore, and while her weight loss had made her even more attractive, it had happened out of exhaustion. That difference was very important.

Jackson left after dinner. He was staying in a hotel nearby and did not mention how long he'd be there.

Afterward, Tiffany said, "Ari, things were kind of prickly between you and Jackson. I couldn't understand what the two of you were talking about. What's going on?"

Arianne was unperturbed, "He considers me fickle; he thinks that I was too carefree in my decision to leave Mark. They probably thought that I'd come back once I'd had enough of my life away from him. However, they did not expect for me to remain resilient, and I have no intentions of going back. I'm not moving to a new place. I've decided. Even if Mark were to stand in front of me, I'd face him head on. Hiding or running away isn't the best way to truly sever all ties."

Tiffany was still muddled and confused, but she did not pursue such a deep topic.

At night, the pair made their way to a bar, as planned. Expenses in a small place like this were not as extravagant as the capital. So, a little splurging to have some fun wasn't too expensive.

The bar was holding an activity in conjunction with Christmas. Everyone would be given a mask and two glowsticks upon entry. There was nothing else to do during the holiday season, so there were quite a lot of people in the bar. They nearly ran out of places to sit by the time Arianne and Tiffany arrived.

It had been awhile since she had enjoyed such a bustling party. Tiffany headed for the dancefloor straightaway. Dancing and booze were her usual activities when it came to getting high.

Arianne's scalp felt numb as she watched the crowd on the dance floor. She sat quietly at their table, watching Tiffany having the time of her life. She did not join her.

Suddenly, a tall, slender, and fashionable-looking woman in a fox mask approached her, "Let's dance!"

Arianne guessed that she might have been one of the staff members in charge of hyping up the atmosphere, so she promptly refused, "No thanks. I'm good here!"

The woman didn't care if she wanted to go or not. She reached out and dragged her onto the dance floor.

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Actually, everyone was in a mask. No one knew what the other looked like, so there was nothing to be embarrassed about. Everyone could pretty much let loose, even more so than usual. The lights in the bar were exceptionally dim today too.

At some point, the woman who had led her to the dance floor disappeared. Everyone around her had lost themselves in the music. The specious dance floor was completely crowded, with zero space in

between people. It was difficult to avoid rubbing against a stranger, and many people who were stuck together were complete strangers.

The dance floor shook along with the booming music, making it difficult for anyone to stand still. One had to sway their body along to stabilize their footing. Arianne couldn't find Tiffany at all due to the obscene crowd. She couldn't even leave the dance floor, even if she wanted to. She had been squeezed into the center of it for some strange reason.

Suddenly, she felt a pair of arms wrap around her from behind.

She panicked, thinking that she had run into a pervert. There had been too many cases of these kinds of things happening in places like this! Her first instinct was to push him away, but she was weak and helpless, so he could manage to take advantage of her regardless. All she could do was to stop him from touching her as much as possible.

"Ari, it's me…"

An extremely familiar voice came from behind her, rich, warm, and magnetic, tainted with the satisfaction of a man who was finally reunited with his long-lost treasure.

Her body stiffened. He's shown his face in the end, in this kind of manner, in this sort of a place. Despite wearing a mask, which concealed his face, his embrace brought her endless nostalgia.

No one could see them anyway, so no one would care about what was happening at this point. She pretended as if she had entered a wormhole in space, as if she were in a dream… Reliving a sentimental memory.

A few minutes later, the music stopped, and the bar's regular girl band walked on stage. The crowd on the dance floor dissipated and Mark released her as well.

When she turned around to look for him, he had disappeared. It was as if he was never here in the first place, as if it were all a figment of her imagination.

Was he really here? Why did it feel so surreal?

Tiffany somehow managed to shuffle out from nowhere, "Ari, what are you looking at? Didn't you say that you weren't going to dance?"

Arianne's heart was still in turmoil, "Nothing… Let's rest for a while. I'll dance with you later."

Outside the bar, Mark pulled off his mask. He was too afraid to linger a moment longer, fearing she might end up feeling disgusted by him. It was only a fleeting moment, but he had held her at least. The real her, in the flesh and not a figment of his dreams. That was enough.

He received a call from Jackson, "Mark, where are you? We're going to miss our flight. Hurry up and get to the airport, now!"

He mumbled back a reply and ended the call. He had come all the way here just for those precious few minutes. Jackson wasn't alone when he bought the scarves for Tiffany and Arianne. He and Jackson had chosen them together, then each had bought them, Mark buying Arianne's. Jackson had paid for

Tiffany's scarf, as it was Jackson's personal request, but they acted as if Jackson had bought both. He refused to let Jackson reveal the truth, as he was afraid that Arianne wouldn't want hers.

Back in the bar, the night was coming to a close. Arianne never saw the man who had embraced her again. She couldn't help but search for any hints of his presences, over and over again. Unfortunately, it all ended in disappointment.

On their journey home, Tiffany exclaimed, "Why does this small-town bar seem more enjoyable than the ones in the capital? Don't you feel the same, Ari?"

Arianne's mind was distracted. She was fiddling with the mask from the bar, "It's alright… Did… Did you bump into anyone?"

Tiffany took a swig of her liquor. Utterly clueless, she asked, "Who? There were people everywhere. That bar was packed with people, who are you talking about?"

Arianne paused in silence, "Mark Tremont."

Tiffany was taken aback, "Ari… If you miss him, just go home. You're like family after all. Can you really cut off all ties with him, despite everything that's happened? I'm sorry if I'm speaking out of turn but I have to say this. It's awful that your father suffered an injustice, but he's gone. You'll only torture yourself at this rate. If Mark really did it, he was only eighteen at the time, right? He was in the prime of his youth and probably dazed and confused. It was a little extreme, but if he knows his mistakes and is sincerely repentant, then…"

“Stop it!” Arianne cut her off before she could finish, “That’s the most basic of baselines. What difference does it make if I go back? I admit it, I love him. I admit that I’ve been thinking about him every single day. So what? My mom abandoned me when I was a kid, my dad raised me all on his own until I was eight. My dad was such a kind man, and he’s dead… Because of Mark… He even ended up becoming a scapegoat, scorned till this very day! I’m already feeling guilty enough for failing to reverse the verdict on my dad, how could I possibly go back? You’re wrong, Mark and I aren’t family. We’re enemies! He’s been atoning for his crimes for the past ten years! It was all part of his repentance! He’ll never wash himself clean… There were so many more lives aside from that of my dad’s, how could he possibly wash them all away?”

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By the end of it all, Arianne’s face was covered in tears. She had been screaming hysterically. Her voice echoed with helplessness and hurt throughout the silent night, crashing into Tiffany’s heart.

Back when the situation unraveled, Arianne simply wept. She did not display too many emotions. Now, Tiffany understood how much hurt Arianne had to endure, “I’m sorry, Ari… I shouldn’t have said those things. Don’t cry, okay? We’re not going back; we’ll stay right here. Pretend that I never said anything. I’ll stay with you from now on!”

…

The dessert shop was due for a reopening in six days. Arianne had decided to go on with the reopening on New Year’s Day. Mark’s sudden appearance in the bar had affected her mood. She didn’t want to remain idle and have her thoughts preoccupied by people who should not cross her mind. It was best to keep herself busy.

She had initially thought that she could let it all go, say goodbye to her past, and forget that man. On the contrary, she ended up thinking of him even more frequently as time went on.

She had always thought that she regarded him as “family”, which was a ridiculous connection at this point. Now she knew that she was in love with him. It’s just that she never understood what love was in the past, and he never taught her how to differentiate her feelings.

Business on New Year’s Day was slower than usual. The first order that they had received was a takeaway meal. Tanya and Lynn were still on vacation, so she took up the responsibility of making deliveries and told Tiffany to stay and look after the shop.

Once she had arrived at the address for the delivery, she called the customer’s number based on the order form. The call was answered very quickly, and she heard a very impatient woman’s voice, “The takeaway order, right? Downstairs? Bring it up, eighth floor. There’s no elevator. Walk upstairs yourself. You’ll get a bad review if you don’t send it up!”

The call ended as soon as the customer had finished speaking. Arianne may be good natured, but she couldn’t stand people like her. Usually, if the customer lived on the fourth floor or below, she would tell Tanya to send the delivery directly to the customer. However, if the customer were on a floor above the fourth, the customer would have to come down and collect the delivery themselves. Based on the customer’s tone, this wasn’t her first order. Was Tanya forced to climb up to the eighth floor every single time?

This was their first order of the new year. So, she gritted her teeth and began climbing the stairs. By the time she arrived, her legs were trembling. She knocked on the door for a good few minutes before it finally opened. It was a young woman in pajamas and messed up hair. She snatched the order away from her without even looking at her.

Something flashed across Arianne’s mind. Just as the door was about to close, she reached out and stopped it, “Hold on, does Regina McKaren live here?”

Only then did the woman actually look at her. Her eyes seemed to flash with guilt, “No… Not at all. What’s wrong?”

She didn’t believe her at all. A single glance inside told her that this was an apartment shared by a group of youngsters, seeing as it was extremely messy. Regina must be staying here as well, and the bad reviews directed at her business must have come from this group of youngsters. She smiled and replied, “Nothing’s wrong. I’ve noticed that you’ve been making regular orders from our shop, but you’re always giving us bad reviews. I’d like to understand what we’ve done wrong. Could you give our products a try? I’ll stand right here and watch. Don’t forget to leave us a good review if they taste good.”

The woman gathered her courage, tore the packaging open and sampled the dessert, “Not… Not bad… Can you leave now?”

Arianne paused, “You’re going to leave us with bad reviews regardless. I’m not here to cause any trouble. Tell Regina to come out here and have a chat with me. I just want to understand her point of view. If she has something to say, she should just say it. Holding it in is pretty damaging to one’s health.”

After a small moment of hesitation, the woman turned around and called for Regina, probably because she realized that Arianne was all alone and that there was nothing to worry about. Regina emerged with messy bed hair, looking as if she had just woken up. It was a stark contrast to her usual exquisite image, “Who is it? Has the delivery arrived? Don’t forget to leave a bad review…”

No one answered her. Regina instinctively turned towards Arianne, feeling slightly guilty, “Oh… The boss herself has come to deliver our order to us… Has that hardworking spendthrift, Tanya, finally quit?”

Arianne frowned, “Let’s talk business. Spare me your trash.”

Regina dropped all pretense, “Alright, since you’ve brought it up, then I won’t hide anymore. I simply wanted an outlet to vent. If you want to resolve this, pay us back for all of the money we’ve spent on takeaways from your restaurant, and include a compensation fee for mental damage. Then, I’ll back off. Otherwise, I’ll just keep on poking at you. I’ve found an easy job now, and the salary is comparable to what I earned at your place. I have plenty of money to order your deserts and leave a bad review while I’m at it.”

“How many of you are there?” Arianne asked, deadpanned, “You have to confirm the total number for me, so that I can calculate the number of items and reimburse you all at once. I’ll show you the platform and back end of the application, so you can point out your individual accounts. I’ll only reimburse you once everything is confirmed,” Then, she pulled out her phone, opened the website platform, and gave it to Regina.

Regina did not expect for her to agree so readily. She took the phone and pointed everything out to her, secretly feeling delighted, “There, that’s the six of us.”

She was afraid that Arianne may not believe her, so she added, “The six of us have been exchanging numbers and taking turns making orders. If you don’t believe me, check the records. I’m not trying to fool you.”

Arianne took two steps back, got her phone back, and tapped it a few times. Then, she waved her phone in front of Regina, “It’s not a question of whether or not you can fool me again, you can’t fool me at all. It’s impossible to think that I’d reimburse you. I’ve blacklisted all six of you. From now on, you’ll never be able to order from us again. That’s all.”

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Arianne was already starting down the stairs by the time Regina finally understood her.

Regina went ballistic. “You think this is it, b*tch?! Did you forget that I can always buy a sh*t ton of SIM cards and rotate them in use and dislike-bomb you every single goddamned day? And then I’ll demand refunds from your stinking shop by telling everyone that the quality of your food is sh*t! B*tch, you drag me to hell, imma do the same!” She fumed. “Oh, and FYI? I’m sick of eating your stuff!”

In contrast, Arianne was more tranquil than fuming. “Go ahead, Beautiful. Youths gotta’ dream big, so if this is your break, go for it! Besides, it’s not like I’ve just taped everything you’ve screamed, which is about enough evidence to sue you for slander. I guess being sent into prison at such a ripe young age is pretty legendary, so hey! I’m rooting for you achieving the impossible, Regina. Don’t hold back!”

Regina’s clique quickly reconsidered their plan. “Um, Reggie? We kinda always finish everything we’ve ordered from this shop, don’t we? And to be fair — they don’t exactly taste as bad as we say. It’s also probably not very helpful to keep bombing someone’s rating like that, and even if you planted a dead roach in it and took a photo and then demanded a refund, the odds aren’t in your favor. She just admitted to taping what you said and that can be used against us!”

“Yea, girl. If you’re gonna carry on with that plan, count us out! Besides, none of us has that much money to spend on luxurious desserts every day. Like, it’s nice every once in a while, but we ain’t gonna have enough money to eat this stuff all the time!” another chimed in.

Regardless of what her pride thought, seeing her clique brazenly backtracking was enough to shake even Regina’s meanest core. “You know what? Fine! We’ll talk about this later. I bet there are ways to punish these losers through some other cheaper ways, anyway!”

A very pleased Arianne returned to the shop while humming a merry tune. Her glee was so palpable that it emboldened Tiffany to implore, “Um, Ari? I was thinking — how about we take two more days off? We’re working immediately after New Year’s Day! I’m sure we’ve already won ‘Most Hardworking Café of the Month’ like this.”

Arianne waved dismissively. “If you wanna take the day off, fine by me. Business isn’t that plentiful today, so I can manage it alone. Takeouts will have to be unavailable for the time being, though,” she replied. “Oh, and by the way, you won’t hear any trouble from Regina McKaren anymore. As it turned out, our last order was from her.”

Tiffany flashed her friend a big thumbs-up. “Babe, you’re the queen. If it were left to me and my dumb ass, all that’d happen would be a shouting match! Oh well, if you’re not taking the day off, then neither will I. Doing my own thing in the shop is technically close enough anyway, so I’ll just continue watching my drama over here. Call me if there’s any customers!”

Arianne nodded before crossing into the kitchen to start inventing new dessert recipes. Before she could put on her apron, however, she heard Tiffany shrieking from her spot, “Ari, Ari! We’ve got a big one! It’s from the office building opposite us!”

Ariane frowned questioningly. The opposite office building? “I didn’t think any company in that office building would open so soon. What happened?”

Tiffany gulped audibly before gingerly answering, “Only one has opened… And it’s Jackson’s financial company. They’re starting today.”

Arianne shot the building in question a look. “How much are they ordering?”

Tiffany sniffed. “Beverages like milk tea and coffee alone rack up to forty orders, and we haven’t even looked at the number of desserts they want — oh my gawd, stop ogling and get to work right now! We’ll have to deliver them in batches while making them, ‘cause they’ll probably be driven mad by the wait if

we only deliver their orders after we finish preparing… Oh, if we're that short on hands, we'll have to bring in Tanya. I hope she doesn't have any other plans; we'll pay her thrice the amount of her usual wage."

The two young ladies quickly turned to that resort. Tanya could undertake the task, but she was stuck keeping an eye on her grandfather since the lived-in nurse was taking a New Year's Day break, as well.

Tiffany's quick-thinking saved them from the bind. She told Tanya to bring Old Anderson to the shop before shutting the door and flipping the door sign to "Shop's Closed". That would effectively deter future walk-in customers; at this point, the girls would not be able to take any more orders anyway.

Ultimately, they just wanted Old Anderson not to wander off while under their watch.

Tanya arrived shortly after. After making her grandfather comfortable in the shop, she immediately sprung into action, delivering the first batch of freshly-prepared desserts and drinks straight to the office. Arianne, meanwhile, found herself in a frenzy. Desserts were always more challenging to make than drinks; the winter air was still crisp and cool, yet her head was already wet.

Tiffany and Arianne felt exhausted when they finally finished the last of the orders. Tanya, meanwhile, was relatively better-off — her only job was to deliver the food to the office building, after all, and it was only a stone's throw away from their shop.

Arianne produced two extra desserts she had specially made for her employee. "Here you go; for you and Grandpa. We'll give you extra wages by the end of your shift, too, as thanks for your immense help. Honestly, I didn't expect us to be so busy upon our first opening after the holidays."

Tanya thanked her sweetly, topping her gratitude with a sweet grin baring her adorable canine teeth.

Tiffany was drinking a glass of water at the side before suddenly spitting it out and crying, “Ari! I-I-It’s not over yet. There are forty orders more! My god, is their boss treating the entire company or what? How many people are there even? More than a hundred? And they have the galls to explain why they divided their orders; they were worried that stating the overall quantity in one go would daunt us! And here’s them reassuring us that we can take our time and not be too daunted — ‘not be too daunted’? Are you kidding me? We are super daunted right now. We don’t even know if we could make it!”

Tanya instantly rose to her feet. “How can I help? I’m happy to take up any task. It’ll help speed things along!”

Arianne placed her hand on her forehead. “It’s alright, Tanya, go keep your grandpa company. I can handle it. As for you, Tiffie — please call Jackson for me. Even if he’s not physically in the office, he must know how many employees are working today. Ask them how many they want in total so that I can proportion the materials to be used.”

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The girls’ bustling day finally ended with Tiffany gleefully counting their earnings. “Oh my god, Ari, we hit the jackpot on the very first business day of the year!” she exclaimed. “Honestly, that office building across us alone will keep our shop afloat forever. In fact, I’m sure we’ll be hiring more hands a few days from now! Oh, by the way, having people order from a takeout app rather than directly from our shop made us lose some revenue to the middlemen. If they’d ordered directly, we could have earned even more! I’ll have Tanya give them a little contact card next time.”

“Already done that, Tiffany,” Tanya interjected. “I’ve presented them with our business cards during today’s deliveries. Told them that they could give us a ring the next time their cravings struck them.”

On cue, Tiffany brought the girl's bonuses, wrapped in a nice little packet, to her. "Here's a little something for you, our little smart alec."

At first, Tanya was delighted to receive her reward, but then her mind registered its overt thickness, and she began to feel a little sheepish. "Um, this… This is a bit too much, isn't it? It's way more than three times my usual wage. Like, way, waaaay more."

"Aww, just accept it, you!" Tiffany replied jocularly. "Ari and I already decided to give you this earlier today. All we're asking is that you do your best with us, ok?"

Tanya's eyes welled up. No one, saved her grandfather, had treated her this kindly. "I won't fail you. Thank you so much!"

No one in the room would mistake the gesture as a sign of pitiful charity. It was an act of genuine camaraderie among friends.

In the distance, the night sky draped over a very brightly-lit Tremont Estate. Mark was sitting on the floor of his room with his face toward the floor-to-ceiling window, while Rice Ball spread itself lackadaisically on his lap, happily slumbering. He combed its back gently, and the cat occasionally purred to express its contentment.

One would be hard-pressed to find a scene like this in the past. Ever since Arianne had left him, Mark's adoration for Rice Ball had only grown. Perhaps it had become a stand-in for his true object of affection.

His phone, located nearby, suddenly beeped. A new message.

He eyed it and replied quickly: ‘Return to work tomorrow. Do your best at your job while making sure that no other men get close to her.’

He placed the cat on a chair after that and walked downstairs for dinner. Mary had laid out the dishes on the table; it contrasted sharply with his lonesome figure, exuding a sense of emptiness.

Henry stood behind him. “Ethan has escaped abroad. Tracking him down has become a little bit more onerous now.”

“I blame the weakness of my heart for letting him slip away,” Mark remarked impassively. “Every time I toyed with that decision, those cursed words my father said the night before he died haunted me, pleading me to let that illegitimate offspring of his off the hook. But he keeps crossing the line over and over again. He keeps trampling over my limit. What should I do at this point, Henry? What do you think?”

Henry’s downcasted eyes accompanied his silent contemplation. “Had he never committed any transgression, I have no doubts that you would have left him in peace. But he has stooped to such atrocious lows that you have no obligation to be soft-handed with him. The late Mr. Tremont’s promise was just that; a promise. You have already honored it to the best of your abilities,” he answered.

A smile shadowed Mark’s lips. “Your wisdom is always appreciated, Henry. Hearing those words ease me.”

Henry knew the words Mark most wanted to hear. As a lifetime retainer to the Tremont family, he should have honored his late Master’s last wish and halted Mark’s attempt to harm his own brother.

However, the stalwart butler had witnessed Ethan's deplorable deeds. He had no grounds to be partial, and so he spoke against what he was allowed.

After Arianne left him, Mark had taken steps, both publicly and underhandedly, to demolish Ethan's company, brick by brick. In the end, the crook had to sell Tiffany's plot and the unwanted building erected upon it to cover his eventual escape to a foreign country.

Ethan had exhausted too much of his resources to get back at him so soon, but it was only a matter of time. Mark, meanwhile, would ensure that he left the former no chance to recuperate and return.

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Arianne and Tiffany slept until ten in the morning before unhurriedly opening shop; the holiday mood had managed to bite them into surrendering to a bit of listlessness. To their shock, they found Lynn in the shop finishing a round of cleaning. The floor practically reflected their faces.

"Didn't we tell you that we're taking a one-week break? How come you're here before the break ended?" Arianne asked, surprised.

Lynn replied while meticulously wiping the cashier, "I got nothing to do at home. Tanya told me that you people started opening shop yesterday, so I thought, 'yea, I'm coming to work.' Don't get the wrong idea; I'm not here to earn thrice my wages or something. The usual amount is enough."

Now that she paid careful attention to her accent, Arianne noticed, for the first time, that she was not local. "You aren't from around here, are you? Are your parents living here, or do you live alone?" the girl asked instinctively.

Lynn froze in mid-action for a second before recollecting herself. “My parents aren’t here, and yes, I’ve been living alone for a very long time. I don’t go home during the holidays, but it’s also really boring to stay in my rented flat. What is it?”

Arianne reeled in realization. “Now I get it. You’d most likely be spending your time with your parents if your parents were closeby rather than diving into work head-first despite the holidays. Oh, well. Carry on, I’ll be in the kitchen.”

After watching Arianne’s back disappearing into the kitchen door, Lynn let out a quiet sigh.

A watchful Tiffany sneakily sidled to her side. “Whoa, aren’t you frazzled. Is that a sigh of relief I see?” she teased. “Don’t tell me you’re scared of Ari… are you? Who on earth would find Ari frightening?”

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Lynn let loose a quick curl of her lips. “Oh, no, no. Held my breath when I was bending down just now.”

While the two were bantering, a group of twenty-something men strode through the front door, all of them donning business suits with their nameplates pinned to the chests.

Strangely, there was no woman among them; this curiosity hooked Tiffany’s attention. Experience told her that men didn’t typically visit cafés in throngs, and women were usually better appreciators of all things sweet.

Instinctively, she reasoned that these men were here to buy for their girlfriends. “Welcome! What would you like? Here are our latest goods, and they are guaranteed to be a favorite among the ladies. Would you like me to introduce them to you?”

A clean-shaven man leading the troop was a little bashful. “Um, well… Just giving all of us a set of your recommendations will do.”

Tiffany cocked an eyebrow. “Hmm? Dining-in? You’re not buying for your girlfriends or female friends?”

The man’s friends had already taken their seats when one replied, “What girlfriend? We’re looking at them right now! Or rather, this shop that’s filled with beautiful ladies — hey, where are the other two?”

Smack! Lynn struck the menu hard on the table before Tiffany could answer them. “Please be patient. Your food will be served soon.”

There was not a hint of a smile anywhere on Lynn’s face, and with the grimace she wore, it might even be dangerous to provoke her ire. However, one of the men was foolhardy enough to pipe up, “Got Instagram, miss? It’s for ease of contact in the future. We would loooove to order directly from you in the future whenever the mood for sweetness kicks in.”

Lynn turned steely. “Calling the number of this shop will do. Look, it’s right there staring at you from the wall.”

A measly rejection was hardly a humiliating blow to the man, who continued to tease, “And who’s usually the one answering? You?”

Lynn had already started back to the cashier. “The one who’s pitifully free at the moment, I’m afraid.”

The clean-shaven man had said not a word after his exchange, though he occasionally shot glances in the direction of the kitchen.

As expected, Tiffany slipped into the kitchen to report this exciting find to Arianne. “Hey, Ari? I think someone’s got the hots for you,” she began. “There’s a bunch of guys having dessert out there right now; I think they work in the office building opposite us. Anyway, this is the first time they’ve been here, and already they’re saying crap like how this shop is filled with beautiful girls, or how they’re here for them, blah blah. Oh, but that’s not all. One of the really good-looking ones seemed to be preeeeetty interested in you, ‘cause he just wouldn’t stop looking in this direction. He didn’t even look at any of us! God, if he knows you’re already married — he might need an ambulance!”

Arianne, however, was disinterested. “Wow, cool story,” she intoned. “Now, can you please spare me the idle chit-chat? I’m kinda busy here!”

Bummed, Tiffany had no choice but to return to making drinks.

A moment later, the clean-shaven man stopped dilly-dallying and came to her, asking, “Apologies, but… May I have Arianne Wynn’s contact number?”

Hearty, coy laughter burbled out of Tiffany’s throat as she chortled, “Holy crap, you’re a very meticulous one! You even know our little Ari’s name! Oh, but unfortunately, it’s not up to me whether to give it to you. May I suggest you ask her directly when she’s done with her work?”

“You’re too late,” Lynn suddenly interjected. “She’s already married.”

The man was taken aback. “M-married? But all of you look like you’re in your early twenties! Who would marry this early? Are you pulling a fast one on me? Besides, it’s not like I’ve seen any men frequenting your shop…”

Lynn forewent explaining their situation and nudged Tiffany with her elbow, who immediately understood her and added, “We might not be as young as you think, you know. Besides, is it that uncommon to marry as soon as you’re legal to do so? But here’s my advice: in delicate gardens, there’s always great varieties of desirable flowers. Why squander your precious youth on a single bloom?”

Visibly dejected, the man returned to his seat, hanging his head.

Later, after the men had left, the girls found out that the only two companies in the office building that had started working were Mark and Jackson’s — which meant that these boys were their underlings. It was a revelation that tickled Tiffany’s humor to no end. She exclaimed, “Oh Lord, the looks on their faces when they realize they have been pining for their boss’ wife! By the way, Lynn, how’d ya know that Ari’s married? I don’t think we’ve ever mentioned it.”

Nothing in Lynn’s features was suspicious when she replied, “Oh, you definitely did. You forgot.”

“I did?” Tiffany echoed, her confidence wavering. “I can’t recall.”

Lynn’s lips quivered. “Yes.”

It was always so easy around her. Tiffany was simple-minded and guileless; she would believe just about anything if anyone said it with a straight face.

The holidays ended a few days later, and the café assumed full operation with Tanya's official return. The Help Wanted sign was put on display once again, and this time, they were looking for not only a cashier, but also two waitresses.

The men from before always ordered a couple of desserts and coffee every day through the phone, throwing in a few casual banters with whoever happened to be at the receiving end. The only person who would brook none of it was Lynn; it seemed that she might have the fiercest temper among the girls.

One day, during another usual delivery to the office building, the man who was pining for Arianne stopped Tanya. "Hey, um... Do you have anything that would allow me to contact Arianne Wynn?"

Tanya, having the mind of an ingenue, did not think much about it. "I only have her phone number. Why?"

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The man fumbled out an excuse, "Makes takeouts more convenient."

Tanya mused between reciting each of Arianne's numbers, "Don't you guys always ring up the shop directly? Ari may be one of the two bosses, but she's always busy in the kitchen, so she rarely manages orders. I think directly calling the shop is a better idea."

The man stored the girl's number gingerly while replying, "I see, I see. Thank you very much for your help."

Tanya thought of telling Arianne about the little exchange regarding her phone number once she returned to the shop, but the bustle of the day kept coming, and soon, she forgot about it altogether.

Night fell. The café was near its closing hour when Arianne's phone beeped: 'A cup of warm milk. Less sugar.'

It baffled her to see someone ordering through her number, but she replied patiently, 'Please tell me the address for delivery.'

The other side was quick to respond. 'The office building opposite your shop. I'll send you the details when it's ready.'

The process of preparing milk was simple — all it took was heating a packaged one and serving it in a glass. Despite the drink's availability in the café, it was not at all a common choice among customers.

Arianne asked for the mysterious sender's details once she was done, only to receive this: 'No, it's not for me. It's for you. Please give me your Paypal; I'll pay.'

A jolt coursed through her brain suddenly and conjured an image of Mark Tremont in her mind's eye. Just as quickly, Arianne shot the thought down for being unlikely; after all, this did not align with his character. So who could this be?

She called the number. She was sure that the sender had the phone right beside them, but it still took quite a while before it was finally picked up.

"Excuse me," she asked politely. "May I know to whom I am speaking to?"

At first, there was only silence. She could hear the faint sounds of someone's breathing. Then, a man's voice came through, "You might not remember me, but… I've visited your café quite a few times. Ordered quite a lot of takeouts, too. P-pardon my boldness, but I would like to befriend you. Is that… Is that alright?"

The confirmation that it was not Mark made Arianne release the breath she was holding, though little drops of glumness crept into her too. She could almost ascertain the man's identity as one of the guys who had visited their shop in person a few days ago. "Yes, we could be friends. I appreciate your kindness, but you don't need to pay for this one. Our café is about to close, so… Next time."

Arianne did not think she should put herself above making friends with the opposite sex. Any enterprise, no matter how big or small, would need a fair amount of social-networking and customer base. Their interaction would be a normal exchange at most, Arianne was sure, which could not possibly be a bad thing.

Besides, she had to commend the man for trying his best to get her phone number before proceeding to order a cup of milk for her. The word was that warm milk could help one sleep better, and so his choice informed Arianne that the man was a pretty kindly, decent guy. It was quite a shame that he would waste it on the wrong person and a rather trivial act.

When it was time for the door to the café to close, Arianne held a long gaze at the office building across them. Its lights had all gone off, as quiet as the silent desolation in her mind.

Tiffany gave a dramatic stretch. “Finally! I can go back to the warm embrace of my bed! Seriously, my bed is my only best friend after you right now. I gotta go back and grace it with my presence; don’t want it to feel cold and left out!”

The way back home was enveloped in biting cold gales. Under the severe chills of the night, every breath escaped became a fog of its own.

Streetlights stretched the girls’ shadows into drawn-out silhouettes, prompting Tiffany to prance and play with hers.

Arianne could not help but break into a smile that a mother would give to her children’s shenanigans. “Why are you acting like a kid, Tiffie? What’s with the chipper attitude?”

“Nothing big, really. I’m ecstatic because we’re earning so much again today!” she replied, thus revealing how low the threshold to her happiness was. “We’ve earned, like, way more than those days with that boring designer job in that boring office! Can’t blame me for being super happy for earning lotsa ka-ching, can you? What, you’re not happy?”

Arianne could not resist dampening her spirit. “Your optimism is a tad bit too soon, hun. Remember the amount of investment you put in? You’ll notice that we haven’t earned enough to cover it back yet, so what’s there to be excited about, idiot?”

On cue, Tiffany's grin faltered and vanished. "Crap, when you put it this way, you're right. Buuuut! I bet we'll cover our investments in two or three months, tops. And then we'll really start to earn, and then we will set up branches — they gotta be big and grand — and we'll become filthy-frickin' rich! And then, I'll set up a harem of hot boys however I like! Hahaha, just thinking about it pumps me up!"

The road back home was not a long one, and a silly banter later, the girls reached it. They had rented an apartment unit in a small, satisfactory neighborhood. The unit boasted a large commons room and a smaller bedroom, and the girls were not at all miffed at the idea of sharing a single room.

The girls saw it simultaneously—hanging on their door knob was a bag containing a takeout box. Tiffany took it down and sniffed it, remarking, "It's still steaming. I wonder if it was delivered to us by mistake."

Arianne examined its exterior. "No, there isn't an invoice attached to it or anything — it's for us. Plus, don't you think this smells familiar?"

Tiffany paid more mind to its smell and exclaimed, "It smells… It smells like Jackson's cooking or something. Hmm, I'll give him a call."

The girls entered their room. Tiffany began displaying her skill at opening the bag and unpacking the food with one hand while the other was hooked to her phone; evidently, no trials could keep a foodie away from delicious food.

Soon, the call was connected, and Jackson's sober voice came through, implying that he was not roused from his sleep. With a juicy piece of fish in her mouth, Tiffany mumbled, "Hey, did you come from the capital to see us or what? Did you hang your cooking at our door?"

“What? I didn’t cook that,” came his confused reply. “That wasn’t me.”

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Tiffany was so startled that the fish fell out of her agape mouth and bounced off the table. “W-wait, this isn’t from you? Then someone… Someone delivered this to the wrong room, and I opened it and ate it clean!” she cried. “O-or worse, if this wasn’t a wrong delivery, then it’s an assassination attempt through poison — and I fell for it! I’m gonna dieeeeee!”

Jackson suddenly roared into laughter. “Enjoy your meal, Dum-dum. Of course I didn’t cook it — I ordered someone else to do it instead! I’ve opened a branch around your corner and thought that you girls might be hungry after work, so I asked the cooks to prepare some dinner before the restaurant closed and had them deliver it to you. You girls must have worked really late into the night if they decided to just hang it on your door instead of waiting.”

Tiffany heaved out a long sigh of relief. “Gawd, you naughty, naughty devil! You could have told me right away instead of setting me up like in a horror movie! You know what, screw you. I’m hungry, so I’m gonna eat. Over and out!”

She hung the phone — and Arianne promptly halted her from reaching for her food by holding Tiffany’s forehead with a well-placed hand.

“Do you have any idea how you sounded while you were talking to Jackson just now? ‘Gawd, you naughty, naughty devil!’ — what the hell was that? Is there something going on between you two that we all don’t know? And why do I get this sneaky suspicion that he’s opening a new branch in our area purely for your eating convenience?”

Something in Tiffany's eyes wavered. "N-no way! Don't create theories out of nowhere, girl. Besides, I always talk like that. There's no way he would go through the trouble of opening a new branch for me or anything. But of course, I mean, that'd be pretty great too. Makes it easier to find a place to eat. I didn't even know I would miss eating this after a while. You don't feel the same?"

Arianne was not easily persuaded. "There's nothing between the two of you? Really?"

Her friend's expression fell. "No. There's nothing between us, and there never will be," she answered, her voice palpably heavy. "We… we're not meant to be. Come on, let's finish this and go to sleep."

Seeing Tiffany's sudden somberness convinced Arianne to stop teasing her, so she took a seat, grabbed her utensils, and began digging in. She clicked her phone on and eyed the screen, noticing a new friend request from Facebook.

He looked like a local; a man with clean, unrugged features who looked about the same age as her. Arianne searched her memories and realized that this man might have visited their café before — a fact that was confirmed when she scanned through his personal information and found the same phone number belonging to the man who had ordered the milk.

When they talked over the phone earlier, he had asked for her Paypal account, and she demurred. It seemed like it did not daunt him after all, because here he was with a friend request.

Arianne accepted it and turned away, browsing some other pages. It was then that the man messaged her: 'Hey. The name's Nick Miller.'

She replied to him with a smiling emoji and replied, 'Noted.'

It was a courtesy reply; Arianne had not expected anything more to come of it. However, unexpectedly, Nick started inviting her to a meal.

It unnerved Arianne. She quickly sidled to Tiffany and flashed the screen at her. “I think this is the same guy who came to our café with his pals the other day; now he’s asking me out! I don’t wanna go, and I don’t have the time to go. But what should I say to not make things awkward?”

Tiffany shot a cursory glance at the screen. “You tell him we’re so dead busy in the café every frickin’ day that nobody ain’t got time for dates. We have our own desserts as breakfast, we have takeout for lunch and dinner, and when we return home, it’s already midnight — there, we can’t spare any time for him,” she announced. “I’ll be honest, babe, the guy’s too blatant in his attempt to court you. Almost like he’s got an ulterior motive. I told him that you’re married, but he’s still trying his luck, as though he thinks I was pulling his leg. My advice? Don’t reply to any of his messages unless it’s related to our business. If he asks why, just say you’re too damned busy — which is true, by the way — and a couple of times later, he’ll know to give up.”

Arianne nodded and followed Tiffany’s advice. Nick, to his credit, did not trouble her any further and bid her good night.

The next day began with a furor within the office block: Mark was coming to inspect the fledgling company. This would be the first time he ever comes to visit them, as the two previous visits were from Jackson.

Everyone in the office block was galvanized by the prospect of seeing the legendary Mark Tremont. After all, it was not every day that some bigshot decided to grace them with his presence.

As Arianne and Tiffany's café was right across the block, they got to witness the hustle bustle from their spot. Nosy as ever, Tiffany wondered out loud, "What on earth is going on there? Who's coming? They're making quite a big scene for it."

"Must be Mark Tremont, I bet," Lynn piped in. "He's the celebrity among the CEOs in that building; no one else would call for such a grand entrance. Look, the people standing there to welcome him are from the finance companies. The rest are just curious bystanders."

Tiffany instantly spun on her heels and entered the kitchen. "Ari, I think Mark's coming to the office building opposite us. Probably here to check how his new company's doing."

Arianne squeezed out a nonchalant hum despite instinctively walking outside.

Just then, a Mercedes-Benz strode into a halt in front of the block. Naturally, it was not Mark's private car but one the company had arranged for him. Soon after it stopped, a man hurried out of the car and tentatively opened the backdoor for the esteemed figure inside. Arianne held her breath.

Mark disembarked.

Her hands clenched on the fabric of her clothes. Her eyes were nailed to his body. The road between her café and the office block might put enough distance to obscure his more delicate features, but Arianne could pinpoint the man from his frame alone. His iconic grey business suit and his natural command over the crowd surrounding him, too, made missing his presence nigh impossible.

Then, sealed within the deepest recess of her mind, a voice cried out, "Over here! Over here…"