Ruling 471

Chapter 471

Mark Tremont never did turn toward her direction. He just melted into the gathering crowd.

A morose smile shadowed her pale lips. She wanted to not be seen, did she not? It was for the best, she told herself. That embrace in the club? Forget it. It was for the best.

At the highest floor of the block, flanked by his company's higher-ups, Mark visited every department in the building in turns. Behind those glasses, dour eyes coated in a thin film of frost scaled his nervous employees while they did their best to ensure no slips came to pass.

Narrowly after ordering two cups of coffee through Messenger, Nick's periphery vision caught Mark approaching his direction. He quickly placed his phone down and went back to work. His superior had already informed him earlier that the boss was coming today. If Mark found him fiddling with his phone, Nick would lose his job right there and then.

His fortune, however, took a dip. When Mark was passing by Nick's aisle, the steely man suddenly stopped and grouched, "This walkway is too narrow."

The superior beside him was a quick-thinking slick who instantly supplied, "Oh, yes, very true, sir. I'll have someone adjust it as soon as possible."

Right then and there, Nick's phone suddenly came alive with Arianne's message: 'Alright. I'm on it.'

The ping sound of his notification attracted Mark's attention; his gaze was immediately met with the name of the sender.

Mark's eyes turned cloudy, though he continued to hurry toward the office in front of him without any other changes in his expression. The superior tailing him quickly shot Nick daggers, hissing in a low voice, "Don't you dare do that again! You better keep that thing away from your desk next time!"

Nick was sitting on pins and needles. It was only a message; it was too trivial to put him in trouble, right?

Once he stepped into the office, Mark suddenly spoke, "I want that guy in here now."

The superior quickly hummed a response and sent a message in the department's group, accentuating his point by directly mentioning Nick in name.

A ballooning sense of foreboding instantly hit Nick the instant he received the notification. Hurriedly, he rose to his feet and headed to the office.

"Mr. Tremont?" Nick asked.

Mark gestured to the superior to go toward the door, and the slick exited with a buttery smile while secretly having a cold sweat.

Nick looked on gingerly while Mark, standing behind a large desk, turned his back against the former. “Is there something I can help with, Mr. Tremont?” he asked again.

Mark loomed slightly over the desk, holding a document in his hand while his other hand propped against the table’s surface. His expression was blank. “Is Arianne the owner of the café across this street?”

Nick let out the breath he was holding. “Oh, so you’ve heard of the café as well, sir? Her desserts are insanely delicious, and she made all of them herself! My colleagues and I are her daily patrons! Just a while ago, Mr. West bought all of us a treat from the café, too. Would you like to try it, Mr. Tremont? I can order one for you now!”

Mark, however, furrowed his eyebrows slightly. “How are you talking to her directly through Messenger?”

Nick stiffened for a second. He had thought Mark was just interested in the desserts — he did not expect him to focus on the person herself.

“I… Um, well, I asked for her phone number from one of the workers and then used it to find her on Facebook,” he answered. “Is something the matter?’

Mark suddenly spun around, his eyes zeroing on him, his voice stone-cold, “Excuse me, her phone number?”

Nick nodded. He was so baffled by Mark’s reaction that he instinctively let out a glimpse of truth, “Well, yea. I mean, it wasn’t really easy…”

When people talked about their object of affection, their eyes often twinkled — and right now, Nick's were practically shining as he mentioned Arianne.

Mark caught the light in his eyes, and his ire skyrocketed. "How far has your conversation gone?" he bristled in a low growl.

Nick was reluctant to rattle out his private life, yet he could not help but cave under his boss's oppressive mien. "Not much has happened between us," he admitted unwittingly. "I… I intend to date her, but someone told me she's married. Who would believe that? So I thought… I should at least start a casual chit-chat of some kind and see where it goes. Um, Mr. Tremont, pardon me asking, but do you, er, happen to know her?"

"I'll say this only once. Back off from her!"

The frigid glint in Mark's eyes sent a shiver through Nick's spine, yet love made fools out of men. Nick would not remove the only connection he hitherto had with Arianne, and he would absolutely not "back off". He, like any other person, was entitled to love, and he would not so soon surrender that innate right for the sake of his career.

"My deepest apologies, Mr. Tremont, but I cannot assent to that. There is a clear line between work and private life, sir. Unless given clear reasons, this is an impossible request."

With two heavy steps, Mark marched to Nick's face. Every word that subsequently fell out of his mouth was a cutting stab reaching deep into the other's bones, "I. Am. Her. Husband."

Nick froze.

He could not, for the life of him, confound Arianne Wynn — the owner of a sweet little café — with someone of the likes of Mark Tremont. Now that he realized his fatal mistake, all that was left for him to do was to back away as much as possible, “I’m very, very sorry, sir! I didn't know! I had no idea that she is your wife. I will amend this at once.”

Thankfully, Mark’s veiled threat was the most he had decided to do to Nick. With a wave, he dismissed the shaken man from his office.

In truth, had Nick’s progress with Arianne reached the point where the two were actively hanging out or dating, Mark would not have left the man unscathed.

Outside of the office, Nick heaved out a long sigh. His long-awaiting superior tugged him aside and questioned him hurriedly, “What happened? What did Mr. Tremont say?”

Nick was almost too chagrined to speak. “I… I didn’t know that Arianne Wynn, the owner of the café opposite us, is Mr. Tremont’s wife. I… I wanted to date her, and he… um, he found out about it —”

“What the hell have you done, you moron!” his superior screeched, exasperated. “So, what did Mr. Tremont decide to do with you?”

Nick shook his head, lost. “I don’t know, sir,” he muttered. “Maybe he will fire me. He didn’t say anything to my face, but maybe he decided to inform you instead…”

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A senior executive rushed into the office, “Uh… Mr. Tremont, Nick’s told me about your misunderstanding. You can’t blame an ignorant man. Now that he’s aware, he’ll keep in line. Nick is a very capable member of the team. Have a look, Mr. Tremont…”

Mark sat at his office desk and calmly looked through the company report. His previous cold exterior had completely disappeared. “I never said that I wanted to dismiss him. It’s just as you said, I can’t blame an ignorant man. From now on, I’d like everyone in the company to understand that Arianne is my wife. You may like her desserts, but not her. Or else…”

The senior executive nodded and bowed, “Yes sir, yes sir! Everyone knows now. But… Why has Mrs. Tremont opened a dessert shop in a place like this?”

His question received a glare from Mark, “Is that any of your concern? Get a box of desserts for me and a cup of americano.”

The senior executive wiped the sweat off his forehead, “From Mrs. Tremont’s shop?”

Mark stared at him as if he were looking at an idiot, “What do you think?”

The senior executive was too afraid to dawdle any longer. He mumbled a reply and headed for the hills. Still panicking over the possibility of losing his job, Nick stepped forward and asked, “Sir, has Mr. Tremont mentioned anything about firing me?”

The senior executive shook his head, “Mr. Tremont did not mention anything of the sort. Ignorance can be forgiven. You won’t be dismissed. I’ve got to go to Mrs. Tremont’s shop to buy some desserts for him. Now, don’t bother me now, and get back to work! I’ve always heard about how casual Mr. Tremont is, and now I know that it’s all a lie. I’m sweating here!”

The senior executive scurried off to Arianne’s shop. His chubby figure and beer belly proved cumbersome to him, as he was huffing and wheezing, “Lady boss… I’d like… I’d like a box of desserts and a cup of americano!”

The newest member of staff in the shop was a cashier, Naya Palmer, a young mother. Her three-year-old son had just started kindergarten. She felt rather embarrassed after being addressed by the senior executive in that manner, “I’m not the lady boss. We don’t actually have a male boss here, let alone a lady boss. The bosses are two young girls. What kind of dessert would you like?”

The senior executive racked his brains. Mark never mentioned anything about the desserts he wanted, only Arianne would know, “Tell your lady boss… No, Arianne Wynn. I’m looking for Arianne Wynn, she’ll know.”

Naya went to the kitchen to summon her. Arianne poked her head out, “What is it?”

The senior executive was one step away from hugging her legs and bursting into tears, “Lady boss, the boss has asked me to get him a box of desserts and a cup of americano, but he didn’t mention which ones he wanted…”

Arianne glanced at the senior executive’s office tag, then connected the dots according to the desserts and americano that the latter had mentioned. She could pretty much guess the customer’s identity, “I’ll have it all ready as soon as possible. Please wait a moment.”

Since this was a snack for Mark, she knew what he wanted. She whipped up the most expensive desserts, similar to the ones that he had first ordered for her. Then, once they were done, she served them personally and warned the senior executive, “Do not address me as ‘lady boss’.”

The senior executive could tell that something wasn’t right between Arianne and Mark but couldn’t pinpoint what it was. He simply guessed that the couple had a falling out, “I’ll be on my way then.”

He dashed off, leaving a puff of smoke when Arianne nodded.

When Mark had a taste of Arianne’s dessert, he casually commented, “Still lacks something.”

The senior executive was crying internally and did not dare make any further comments. Thank goodness Mark wasn’t here all the time. His only focus now was to send this looming presence away, or he might end up going mad someday.

At four in the afternoon, Naya left the shop early to pick her child up from kindergarten. This was the agreement they had made before she accepted the job — she would not be at the shop from four to six in the afternoon. Arianne was very amenable. It was only a two-hour absence for the sake of her child after all. This was also Naya’s reason for accepting the job.

Halfway through her journey, someone stopped Naya. It was none other than Mark!

Despite being happily married with a child, Naya felt nervous at the sight of this tall man with outstanding good looks, “Can I help you, sir? You look like… Mark Tremont. It’s Mr. Tremont, isn’t it?”

Mark pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper from his suit pocket, “This is for Arianne.”

Naya hurriedly took it. When she glanced up towards him again, Mark had already turned around and walked away.

Back at the shop, she handed Mark’s piece of paper over to Arianne, “Here, Ari. It’s for you.”

Arianne unfolded the paper and glanced at it, shivering internally. “Who’s it from?” she asked.

Naya pointed at the office building across the road, “I think it’s from Mark. What is it? Why didn’t he give it to you personally? Do you know each other? I’ve seen him on television, but I never expected to meet him in person. Honestly, he’s quite handsome.”

The paper contained a secret recipe and instructions for desserts. Anything from Mark must be good. However, Arianne hesitated over using it. Of course, she wanted to make her desserts even tastier, but she had no reason to accept his goodwill.

Tiffany, who was right next to her, glanced at the writing on the paper and let out a dry cough, “Ari, be realistic. There’s no conflict of interest in this. Don’t let this go to waste. Haven’t you always wanted to make the best desserts? You have to consider our future.”

Arianne cast her a sidelong glance, “If we were in the middle of a war, you’d be a traitor.”

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Tiffany promptly shut her mouth while shooting Naya a look at the same time. Naya understood her subtle gesture and went back to work.

When they arrived home that night, Arianne stared at the piece of paper for hours on end. Tiffany munched on the food that Jackson had delivered and grumbled, “Come on. Use it if you want, throw it away if you don't. I'll support your decision either way. Stop staring at it already. It’s going to possess you.”

Arianne put the piece of paper away, “Eat your food. I think Jackson must be raising a pig, and by that, I mean you. You fat pig. If you keep eating supper every day like this, you’re going to gain weight. You’ll blow up like a balloon!”

Tiffany, on the other hand, was very optimistic, “Why should I be scared? I’ll never find a good man to marry anyway. I’m much more comfortably living life on my own. I can do whatever I want. Life is short, carpe diem. You shouldn’t mistreat your appetite and stomach. Besides, you can’t have anything to eat when you’re dead.”

That did not sound like Tiffany at all. They were both women, and Tiffany used to be afraid of getting fat and hated being called fat too. After a bout of hesitation, Arianne asked, “Tiffie, be honest, did anything happen while you were kidnapped? I know you, and you’ve changed a lot since then.”

The relaxed expression on Tiffany’s face promptly disappeared. Her hand tightened its grip around her cutleries, “N-nothing… I just suffered a little thanks to Aery. Nothing else. Why would you bring that up?”

Arianne was overjoyed when Jackson found Tiffany. Nevertheless, she hadn't had a good rest and was in a bad state, so she didn't manage to get a closer look at how the wounds on Tiffany's body were caused. However, after some careful thought, she realized that something wasn't right. If the wounds came from a beating by Aery's cronies, there would have been large patches of red swelling and black bruises. However, there were obvious small red marks on Tiffany's neck at the time. Those didn't look like they came from a beating but more like…

It was difficult to talk about these kinds of things, and Arianne could understand if Tiffany wasn't willing to talk about it. However, if it really did happen, she shouldn't be keeping it all inside. She had to at least talk about it, "Tiffie, I know that you don't want to be reminded about it, but it's been a while since then. Haven't you thought of getting justice for yourself? It's your reputation as a woman."

Tiffany lifted her head and looked at her, then replied to her in a joking manner, "What are you talking about? Isn't that a little perverse?"

Arianne felt slightly awkward, "No… I just want to know if Ethan did anything to you… He did lock you up for two days…"

Tiffany shook her head, "It wasn't him. He didn't." That's right, Ethan didn't. Aery made her cronies do it. She had considered making a police report, but she had too many misgivings. Besides, she did not get a medical check up immediately after the incident, and the evidence at the time was in Ethan's hands. Hence, she had no choice but to drop the matter.

At this point, she'd be the only one getting hurt if she brought it up again. Besides, she didn't want Arianne to find out about everything she had endured in her place. She considered the unbearable torture from the past as a means of exchange for her currently peaceful and quiet life. It was always a good thing to remain optimistic.

Arianne caught the subtle meaning behind Tiffany's answer. Ethan didn't. It wasn't him. Then who else could it be? She thought of Aery, "It wasn't him? Then Aery…" She had always known Aery for crossing the line, but she thought that she would simply flip out with violence once and be done with it…

Tiffany knew that Arianne was smart and was afraid that she might see through her lies. She did not have the nerve to look her in the eye, "I've told you, stop coming up with silly theories. Must something happen to my body in order for this to be considered normal? Alright, enough. Get an early night's sleep if you're not going to eat."

Arianne convinced herself to calm down. Tiffany never showed signs of a breakdown. Anyone who had experienced those kinds of things would certainly crack. She hoped that it was true, that it never happened. "Alright, then I'm going to sleep. You should hurry up and finish your food then come to bed."

Tiffany buried her head in her food and ate, agreeing. Her tears streamed quietly down onto her plate. She only acted insensitive, but she cared. To this day, she was too afraid to look back on that nightmare.

The next day, the pair went to the shop early in the morning as usual. To their complete surprise, someone had painted their storefront with a slew of abuses. The paint was already dry, which meant that it was probably done last night after they closed the shop. The red paint stuck firmly onto the glass door, and it wouldn't be easy to clean it off. They had to slowly scrape it all off!

Tiffany was in shock, "What the hell? Who'd have the gall? We haven't offended anyone! If I find out who it is, I'll paint their face red!"

Arianne was more rational. The issue at hand wasn't to find the culprit's identity, but to clean all of these words off from the door before traffic increased. Otherwise, it'd certainly affect their business if anyone saw this. Luckily, she'd needed to come in early to make preparations for the day, so they arrived earlier than usual. There weren't a lot of people along the streets at the moment, so they still had time.

"Quick, get some tools! We have to clean this off before people start coming in. We can find out who did this later!"

Tiffany hunted for some tools while swearing underneath her breath. They used a trowel, a cloth and all sorts of cleaning agents, but to no avail. It didn't help much. They had to use a trowel and slowly scraped everything off. This really tested their patience. The words covered a pretty large surface area, and they had to slowly scrape them off. This couldn't be accomplished in a short amount of time.

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Arianne soon realized this, "Forget it. Let's stop. We'll call a door repairman and change the door."

Tiffany's heart ached, "This door is expensive. I'm going to catch that horrible jerk and teach them a lesson!"

It was still early, so the door couldn't be changed immediately. A lot of businesses hadn't opened yet, so Arianne and Tiffany found some tools and tore down the door. They had to keep it, as it would serve as evidence in their police report. This would be considered illegal property damage. The value of their door was enough to file a case.

The police and the door repairman arrived at the same time. When the police saw the state of the glass door, which had been taken down, they took pictures of it as evidence, then left to check the

surveillance cameras. The surrounding area was under surveillance, so it wasn't difficult to extract footage.

By the time everyone else in the shop had arrived for work, the door repairman was still busying himself. They couldn't help feeling surprised, "What's going on? Why are we changing our door?"

Tiffany was still enraged, "Some vandal painted a slew of abusive words all over our door. It's bad enough that they've cursed at us, but we've even had to change our door because of this. I've made a police report. Once they find the culprit, I'd love to see who it is!"

Tanya was feeling sorry for the old door, "It could still be used if we scrape off the paint, right?"

Arianne shook her head, "Forget it. It's done. It's much too tedious to clean it up anyway, and it'd leave a mark. That won't look good at all, unless we hire cleaning specialists. This would draw too much attention and affect business. We might as well wait for the police to find the culprit and make them compensate us. It's not a loss then."

They received a call from the police station in the afternoon, saying that they had found the spray paint culprit. They asked Arianne to come to the police station.

Of course, Tiffany had to come along too. Her anger refused to be appeased. She wanted to see that delinquent with her own eyes! They had no choice but to close the shop temporarily in the afternoon in order to settle the matter. After all, the pastry chef and barista were both absent. They couldn't take any orders.

Once they had arrived at the police station, Tiffany snorted with chuckles despite her rage when she saw the detainee. “Regina McKaren! You’ve got some nerve, bravo!”

Regina never thought that her vengeful spray painting spree would result in her being taken into custody. She was already panicking, afraid that she would end up behind bars. In her anxiousness, she snapped back, “Officer, sir, I had my reasons. Something’s wrong with their desserts! I only lashed out because I couldn’t defend my rights as a consumer, I suggest asking the food safety and inspection service to make them cease operations for a thorough investigation! What if someone ends up dead after eating their food?”

Arianne lost it too, “What did you say? Stop your slander, you know very well what this is really about!”

“Enough!” the policeman roared as he slammed the table. “One at a time. We’ve called you all here to solve the matter, not to watch your squabbles. Here’s the situation; based on surveillance footage, we’ve confirmed that Regina McKaren has vandalized the dessert shop with spray paint. The time of offense was around one in the morning. Regardless of your reasons, Miss McKaren, you’ve committed a crime. Tell us, why did you do it? Don’t get hasty, I’ll be questioning you all one by one.”

Regina twisted the corners of her clothes nervously, determined to absolve herself of guilt. She did not even blink when she lied, “It’s like this, I used to work for them in that shop, but I quit soon after because I found out that they were running a dishonest business. Every dessert and beverage was obscenely priced, and their ingredients were equivalent to trash. The shop’s hygiene standards were horrible, and there were rats and cockroaches everywhere. I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t work for people who didn’t share my beliefs, so I left. Later on, I realized that they'd hurt many others, so I told my friends to leave them bad reviews on their takeaway app to warn customers about them. However, Arianne came to my house and threatened me many times! I had no choice. If I have to bear the responsibility for my crimes, I’ll surrender. However, you must investigate their unethical shop!”

Tiffany would have slapped Regina right across the face if Arianne hadn’t stopped her. Arianne waited for Regina to finish before saying, “Can I talk now?”

The policeman gave her permission. Only then did she speak up, “There were both truths and lies in Regina’s testament. She indeed encouraged her friends to leave malicious reviews and she did work for us before; however, everything else is a lie. She did not resign of her own volition; we fired her because of her lackadaisical attitude at work. She couldn’t accomplish a single thing to a satisfactory level. She would always shift the burden and make someone else do her job. We had warned her many times, but it was useless. So, we chose to fire…”

“Shut up! You’re lying!” Regina panicked and cut her off before she could finish.

The policeman shot Regina a glare and drummed against the table with his pen, “You shut up! Let her finish!”

Regina was terrified and too afraid to speak. After all, she was still in the police station. Anyone would be scared and nervous in a place like this.

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Arianne continued, “We paid her her wages on the day we dismissed her and did not charge her for eating the desserts or drinking our beverages every day. We simply cut a small part out due to her lateness every day. She was extremely unhappy and had an argument with us before leaving. From that day onwards, she’s been asking her friends to make takeaway orders for our desserts, every day. Then, after receiving the order, they’d leave a bad review. No one has ever had any problems with our products, and we certainly don’t have hygiene issues. She’s slandering us.

“Finally, I personally went to deliver their order. However, I did not threaten her. I simply blacklisted her and her friends’ accounts, to stop them from leaving any more bad reviews. I’ve even told them that I’d recorded the whole thing when, in fact, I didn’t. I thought that doing this could make her drop the matter, but it escalated — she spray painted our door. We spent $1,500 dollars on that door during

renovations. I'd like compensation. If she continues slandering our café for its uncleanliness and problematic ingredients, I will file a lawsuit."

The policeman turned to Regina after making notes, "Do you have anything more to say? Is she telling the truth? Should I call your little friends out for questioning?"

Regina panicked. Ever since Arianne's confrontation, her friends had refused to help her in her vengeance spree. She was the only one behind the spray painting incident. If she ended up dragging her friends to the police station as well, they'd certainly sell her out in order to protect themselves.

After some careful thought and an inward struggle, she nodded, "She's right… I was deliberately exacting revenge… I have no money for compensation… Am I going to be put in jail?"

The policeman curled his lips, "No, not to that extent, but you might be detained. This would largely depend on negotiations for the compensation. They've taken the door down, and we've taken pictures as proof of that. It was badly vandalized, so I'm pretty sure you'll have to compensate them. You'd better contact your family members as soon as possible to negotiate the compensation, or you'll never leave this place."

Regina knew how Arianne was like—gullible and kind. She did not want to turn this into a big deal, so she turned to Arianne and said, "I know that I've done wrong. I won't do it again. Will you let me off? I really don't have any money on me, and my parents won't concern themselves with me. I lied to you before; I haven't found a job. I've been borrowing money to get by. I'll clean off the paint from your door, okay?"

Tiffany answered in Arianne's stead, "No way. We're only accepting monetary compensation. We've already changed the door, and you're going to have to provide us with substantial compensation for our loss. We haven't even calculated the rest — you've caused us a lot of complications by having your little

friends leave us those bad reviews, and we haven't even considered the compensation for that. Quit while you're ahead."

Arianne nodded, agreeing with Tiffany.

Regina threw caution out the window, "Fine then. I don't have money anyway. You can do whatever you want. I'll just go to jail. It's not like they can keep me there for that long over this. I'll be out very soon. I'm still young; I don't care!"

Not even the policeman could stand listening to her any more, "Okay, okay okay. I'll contact your parents at once and have them take care of this. You really have an attitude problem. We're going to teach you a good lesson. Also, everyone else can leave now. I'll contact you if there's any follow-up needed. Keep an eye on your phones."

Arianne and Tiffany thanked him and walked out of the police station. They both heaved a sigh of relief. There was no doubt that the police were pretty efficient in solving the matter. Vandalism wasn't exactly a heinous crime, but they paid a lot of attention to it anyway. This was the best part about this country; everything was treated fairly.

They had given everyone else in the shop half the day off, as they weren't sure how long settling this matter would take. They took the rest of their time in the afternoon to get some rest.

Since they had gotten up too early this morning and they didn't have any other plans, they went to the market to buy some ingredients for the café and some to stock up at home. After all, they had to cook for themselves from time to time too. They took the rest of the afternoon off for a nap.

As they lay in bed, Tiffany suddenly asked, “Ari, how are things going between you and Nick?”

Arianne shook her head with her eyes closed, “It’s not going anywhere. I did what you said, and answered a few messages. I didn’t do much else.”

Tiffany began to tease her, “Have you ever considered a hot and passionate romance? I don’t believe that you’ve never thought of it.”

Arianne opened her eyes and stared up at the ceiling thoughtfully, “I used to think of it back in university. Will gave me that urge, but then it was all killed off by Mark. I hadn’t thought of it since. Later… Mark himself gave me the experience of a passionate romance. It really was passionate, and you could even say that it was earth-shattering. So isn’t this question kind of silly? I’ve already experienced it. Been there, done that.”

Tiffany remembered her own relationship with Ethan. Their three year relationship was like a joke. She had been deceived and tricked like an idiot, and still, that wasn’t enough for her. She later fell into Ethan’s honey trap and got back together with him again, nearly marrying him to boot.

Now, the only thing she felt whenever she thought of Ethan was fear and the desire to never see him again. She was curious as to whether Arianne felt the same way about Mark, “Ari, how do you feel about Mark now?”

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Arianne turned her back to her, “I don’t want to think about him ever again.”

They were completely knocked out until past seven at night. Tiffany yawned and got up to cook a pot of instant ramen. Her ramen-making skills were not as good as Arianne's, and the noodles ended up getting stuck together. Arianne did not complain though. She finished the entire bowl.

After dinner, they sat together to binge on their favorite drama series. Suddenly, Arianne made a decision, "I think I'll use that secret recipe from he-who-must-not-be-named. He must have gotten it from that top class pastry chef. I've never liked disappointing other people's good will."

Tiffany laughed until she snorted, "When did you learn how to wiggle out of an embarrassing situation? You were stubbornly refusing to use it at first. Are you finally enlightened? If you ask me, there's no such thing as 'who owes whom' after spending so many years with Mark. It'll never end. In fact, you'll end up complicating things even more."

Arianne ignored her teasing. She had decided to use the secret recipe because it was simply too enticing. It had nothing to do with Mark.

Suddenly, Tiffany's phone rang. She glanced at the screen and answered the call, "What is it? Is this a regular courtesy call to your grandma?"

Anyone would know who was on the other end of the call based on her intonation. It was obviously Jackson.

After finding out that Jackson was here as well, Tiffany asked about his plans for the night, thinking that she didn't have anything better to do anyway. She ended up getting the answer she wanted, as Jackson replied, "I plan on hanging out at a bar. Wanna come?"

Tiffany replied very eagerly. She and Jackson were both very similar in that sense. She ended the call and asked Arianne, “Would you like to come, Ari? We’re going to that bar we went to last time.”

Arianne was reminded of her run-in with Mark at the bar last time; she shook her head, “No thanks. You two have fun.”

Tiffany really wanted to go out but felt bad about leaving her best friend all alone, “It’s not really a good idea if I go without you, is it? You’ll be desolate and all alone here.”

Arianne rolled her eyes at her, “Stop it. I really don’t want to go. This is a rare chance for me to rest. I’ll get an early night’s sleep later. You should come home early too.”

Tiffany realized that she was determined not to go, so she changed and walked out the door.

She stuffed the scarf that Jackson had given to her in her coat before leaving. She wanted to put on a scarf, but she was afraid that Arianne might tease her for wearing the scarf that he had bought for her while going to see him and maybe even say that something was going on between them.

Tiffany found Jackson’s seat at the bar. Her mood sank before she could say “hello” — Jackson wasn’t the only one here. Mark had tagged along too…

She had completely forgotten that Mark was here to check on his new company as well. She secretly let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness she hadn’t dragged Arianne over. Arianne had cried her eyes out ever since she left the Tremont Estate. She remembered it all vividly. Nevertheless, it happened long ago, and Arianne’s emotions were steadier now. She couldn't possibly confront Mark over Arianne and cause a scene right now. She was here anyway, so she had no choice but to sit down and play along.

“Arianne didn’t come along? I thought you were inseparable. You pretty much go everywhere together,” Jackson said as he poured Tiffany a glass of wine.

Tiffany was feeling slightly awkward. “It’s a good thing she didn’t come… It’d be awkward if she did,” she pouted.

Mark’s expression remained cold and distant. He pursed his thin lips, “I don’t intend on not seeing her for the rest of my life.”

Tiffany sensed the subtle meaning behind his words, “What… What do you mean? Are you planning to see Ari? I’d advise against that. It wasn’t easy for her to stabilize her emotions. Don’t rile her up again.”

Mark stared at the scarlet red wine in his glass and calmly replied, “I’m not. At least, not right now. I still have some things to finish.” He could not bring Arianne back into his life until he had resolved the walking disaster in the form of Ethan.

Once all of that was done, he would cast away his unbearable and filthy-handed self.

Tiffany couldn’t figure him out. Mark seemed very strange these days and emitted a frightening, deterrent force. He was even more dreadful than his usual cold and distant self. However, the only difference on the surface was his new pair of glasses. How could he have changed so much?

A short while later, Mark got up and straightened his sleeve with his slender fingers, “I’m going.”

Jackson nodded. Tiffany waited for Mark to disappear into the distance before heaving a sigh of relief, “Is Mark suffering from shock? Why do I get the feeling that he’s changed a lot?”

Jackson was completely nonchalant about it, “He’s still Mark Tremont, no matter how much he’s changed. Life doesn’t adapt to humans. Humans can only adapt to the circumstances thrown at them in life. How can we possibly stay the same? Do you really think that he’d be alright after losing Arianne? That’s enough. I’ve asked you here to have fun, not for you to concern yourself with others. You shouldn’t worry yourself over their relationship.”

Tiffany had long been aware that she was helpless against Arianne and Mark’s relationship, so she never intended on worrying too much about it, “You’re right. I shouldn’t worry about them. I mean, I can’t even fix my own shit!”

Chapter 477

Jackson eyed her beadily, “What do you have to handle?”

His stare unnerved her, “Leave me alone! Is it any of your business?”

He smirked, “It’s pretty warm in here. Isn’t it hot under that scarf?”

She pulled off the scarf around her neck, her face feeling strangely hot. She wondered if she had lost her mind when she decided on wearing this scarf to see him...

“Did you wear this scarf, just for me?”

She stiffened. Damn it, Jackson. Would it have killed him to keep his mouth shut? She was already beginning to think that she had lost her mind; why did he have to say such provocative things to her?

She snapped irritably, “Pfft! It was just a random scarf that I grabbed on my way out! There’s no gaggle of pretty girls in a bar like this to get high with you. You don’t ever change, do you? A man like you is only suited to be a bachelor for the rest of his life. By the time you’re old, you’ll be staring wistfully at old couples dancing around in a public square, while you’ll be all alone, a pitiful sight!”

Jackson paused and narrowed his eyes, “I think a certain someone said this… What was it? Oh, right, I asked you to break up with your boyfriend. You asked me if I’d be with you if you broke it off. I did promise you. Now you’re single, so isn’t it time for me to carry out my promise? You’re right, I have considered. I don’t want to be all alone in my old age. That’s just sad. At least, it’s not so bad if I could have someone to dance with me in a public square.”

Tiffany’s face began to heat up upon hearing his words. She pushed his face away, “Oh, come off it! I certainly don’t want to dance with you in a public square in my old age. I’m going to be a smart, rich man’s wife, sitting in the courtyard of a huge mansion and watching the sunset!”

Jackson removed her hand from his face. “Whether you want to dance in a public square or sit in the courtyard of a mansion and watch the sunset, I can do both,” he said with a serious look on his face.

She looked into his eyes, knowing that he wasn’t joking. She had a feeling that he had long been aware of the things she had endured after her kidnapping. She couldn’t accept this, so she displayed a coquettish look on her face, “Why so emotional? This isn’t like the prodigal Jackson West at all.”

He did not release her hand. “I’m not kidding,” he said, enunciating every word very clearly.

She wedged her hand out of his warm hold. Her tone grew sombre as well, “You’ve known what I experienced after the kidnapping for a long time, haven't you? Why are you turning a joke from the past into something serious? Being with me after I’ve broken it off? You’re just pitying me, aren’t you?”

The tears brimming in her eyes made him feel slightly nervous, “I wasn’t joking when I said those words! I don’t care about your past experiences. That’s not important.”

She refused to believe that any man would be able to accept that filth, she refused to believe that she deserved love after everything that had happened to her, “You’re anti-marriage, remember? You said that you’d never get married. What is this? Do you want to use me as a tool to ward your loneliness away, just like Lisa? Then creep away when you don’t need me anymore? If that’s the case, you can relax. I won’t get angry. Who knows? I might even agree if you can persuade me with a few choice words. We know each other, and your looks are just my type. I’m not clean anyway or virtuous at all. We’re both adults. There’s no shame in being friends with benefits. This will make my freeloading much more convenient…”

Jackson’s expression grew thunderous along with every word she said, “I’m telling you how I feel, and you’re discussing a business deal?”

She quickly raised her hand and wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye, then stared at him heartlessly, “I’m just talking to you in your favourite style. Just like that Lisa. She managed to reap quite a lot of stuff she wanted and money, just from keeping you company for a short while. I just want you to cook for me. That’s not a difficult trade-off, is it? Hmm?”

She was too afraid to look at him by the time she finished her speech. She poured another glass of wine and downed it. The stinging feeling down her throat made her tears surge up into her eyes and stream down her face at an even faster pace. Her hand trembled as she tried to wipe them away.

Jackson gritted his teeth. His expression sank, “You just can’t let go of Lisa, can you? It’s not like I’m f*cking clean either. Can we stop turning each other off? I’ve never been turned off by you! Why are you holding on to the past? I don’t want you to just sleep with me—I want you to marry me! You’re the only woman I’ve ever wanted to marry. Understand?”

Tiffany was afraid. How was she supposed to face his mother, Summer, if she agreed? Summer had seen Ethan propose to her in front of the entire shopping mall. If she found out about how filthy she was, she would never be allowed to set foot into the West family. She did not deserve it!

She grabbed her bag and fled. This was the first time she had ever felt so cowardly and lost her nerve to face something head on. Prior to this, she had managed to joke and chat with Jackson because none of them had tried to venture through this invisible barrier. She didn’t know how to face him anymore. Now, she realized that the reason why she didn’t feel ready for marriage was because her heart already belonged to someone else… And that “someone else” was Jackson West! This was why she had lost all of her feelings for Ethan.

Chapter 478

Jackson quickly ran after her. Just as she had flagged down a cab, he slid into the car first and dragged her in along with him, “Port Le Triomphe Hotel!”

Tiffany’s breathing became unsteady, “Why are we going to a hotel? I want to go home! Sir, Franc Park Avenue instead, please!”

Jackson pulled out a wad of cash and slapped it onto the co-driver’s seat, “To the hotel!”

The driver saw the thick wad of cash and treated this as a lover's spat. Hence, he considerately drove the car to the hotel.

Jackson sulkily dragged Tiffany inside. She knew that he was being serious but didn't dare make a scene. She struggled a little as she said, "Don't… Let's go somewhere else and talk, okay? I won't run away…"

He ignored her and gave her no room for negotiation as he pulled her into the elevator.

Once she saw that there was no one else in the elevator, Tiffany screamed, "Are you insane? Let me go! I'm warning you, if you do this, I'll…. I'll… Are you listening to me?"

He glanced to the side and looked down at her, "I'm listening. Please, continue. You'll what?"

She was close to exploding from rage. He must have been staying in this hotel throughout his visit here. That's why he didn't need an identification card or verification when they arrived. She had no chance of escape.

He carried her into the room when they emerged from the elevator, locked the door, and slammed her against the wall, "Are you going to run away now?"

She hugged her handbag tightly in front of her chest and stared up at him fearfully, "N-no… I'm not running away… Have you had enough to drink? It's getting late, so I'm going home."

With one hand against the wall, he trapped her in between the wall and his body. He lowered his head and stared down at Tiffany, who looked small and fragile. His eyes raged with an impatient thunderstorm, “I didn’t drink that much. We had an agreement. Are you going to break your promise? You’re the one who brought up the whole topic on getting together with me if you break it off. Are you going to take back what you’ve said now?”

She pressed her back firmly against the wall, too afraid to move. Her vision was completely blocked by his chest, “I was kidding…”

He pressed her further against the wall, “And what if I took it seriously?”

Her breath caught in her throat. His unique scent made her head spin; it also fit the descriptions of “walking sex god” perfectly.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Let me go. I’ll pretend that nothing ever happened today, and we can still be friends…” He ravaged her lips, stopping her from completing her sentence.

Taking advantage of her dazed state, he pushed away ever so slightly and spoke in a wildly seductive and husky voice, “Who wants to be friends with you? I want you to be mine.” Then, he sealed her lips once again.

Tiffany felt her strength leave her body. Her bag and scarf slipped from her fingers and onto the ground. She had lost all sense of how they had arrived at the point of no return and had forgotten what she had said to make him so angry. He was usually a devil-may-care rogue with a slight air of grace. She did not expect for him to go beyond her control once he flew into a rage.

She had always thought that she had considerable strength among other women, but when it came to Jackson, she was nothing more than a tiny little chick.

Reluctantly, he finally released her. She tilted her head upwards, trying to catch her breath. Aside from a subtle bout of heavy petting, he did not do much else. Before she could catch her breath, she was suddenly swept off her feet and carried towards the large bed in the bedroom.

The large bedroom was only illuminated by a small lamp by the bedroom door. It was too dim, and the darkness only encouraged further misdeeds. She had to admit that for a split second, she had given in…

After throwing her on the bed, he bent down and descended upon her. She clumsily pushed her away, “No pleasure can come from force!”

“But it does quench one’s thirst,” he smiled.

“You pervert!” she exclaimed, helpless.

He trapped her firmly underneath him, “There are more perverse things.” His fingers made their way underneath her shirt as he said this.

Tiffany reached out and stopped him, “I won’t break my promise,” she pleaded, “I admit it, okay? Don’t do this…”

Jackson stopped then put his forehead against hers. The pair looked deep into each other's eyes, their breath hot and heavy, "You were planning on breaking your promise anyway, who's to say that you're not trying to fool me now? How about you take out your phone and record your promise? Or else, you're not leaving tonight…"

She gulped. His words left her with no choice; she had to comply, "Alright… I'll do it! You have to get up first!"

He got up and straightened out his slightly mussed clothes, then stood at the side, watching her and teaching her what to say, "When you take the video, you have to say that you promise to be mine, that you won't ever deny it. Record every single word of this."

She had turned so red that even the back of her ears had turned scarlet. She reluctantly turned to her camera and faced the lens with a sullen face, "I promised to become Jackson West's girl. I will never go against my word, and if I do…"

Her voice grew very small as she went on to the last sentence. It was so difficult for her to open her lips, and it was all recorded and saved by a powerful technological device.

Chapter 479

Jackson sent the video to his phone. "Would you like to go home or are you staying here?" he asked, gazing at her and feeling rather pleased.

She jumped, "Of course, I'm going home!" What a joke! Wouldn't her recording have been a waste then? Wasn't it all for the sake of escaping from his evil grasp? Previously, when they slept together, he

didn’t touch her because it was all an act. Now, she had become his real girlfriend. She refused to believe that he’d be able to control himself!

Jackson didn’t insist either, “Alright, I’ll send you back home then. By the way, Mark and I will be going back to the capital tomorrow. I’ll come and see you once I have the time. Should you… ever dare play another trick on me, I’ll send this video to Arianne and your friends in that little shop of yours, and have them reason things out for me.”

Tiffany gritted her teeth and internally hurled curses at his ancestors. She had just walked out of the room when they ran into Mark, who had come to see Jackson… They were probably staying in the same hotel. Tiffany hid her face from view and ran away very quickly. Jackson, however, smiled cheekily, “Mark, I’ll see you when I get back!”

Mark watched as the pair entered the elevator, one after another. The corners of his lips tilted into a knowing smile. Then, something seemed to hit him, and his smile immediately faded. His gaze grew cold and distant.

Once they had arrived at the ground floor of Tiffany’s condominium, Jackson shamelessly demanded a kiss, “No goodbye kiss? I’m leaving tomorrow… You won’t be seeing me for a good while.”

Tiffany shivered, “We’ve only just made it official twenty minutes ago, right? What’s with all of this heavy affection and clinginess?”

Her reaction annoyed him. He quickly pecked her on the lips, “Fine. Go upstairs. I’ll watch you leave.”

Tiffany suddenly stopped just before she walked into the elevator. She quickly turned around, ran back to him, and gave him a big, big hug, “I’ll take some time out to spend time with you the next time you come here.”

Jackson stroked her head and naturally straightened out her scarf for her, “Sure. Go on.”

Tiffany’s footsteps felt very light; she was practically walking on air back home. The rhythm felt like a winter day’s love song, disturbing Arianne from her sleep. “Are you experiencing an arousal?” she asked, blurrily.

Tiffany giggled as she buried herself under the covers and hugged Arianne, “I’m dating!”

Tiffany’s ice cold body shocked Arianne out of her sleepiness, “What are you playing at? With who? Jackson?”

Tiffany nodded shyly, “He forced me into it…”

Arianne shivered. That was force? The girl’s face was overflowing with bashfulness. How was that considered forced?

However, she wasn’t too surprised, as if this was completely meant to be, “Alright, alright. I’m not surprised that you’ve both gotten together. Get some sleep already.”

Tiffany simply couldn't fall asleep. She was too excited, even though she had rejected it at first. Now, her mind was only filled with sweetness!

She ended up tormenting Arianne for half the night. Both girls ended up late the next day. By the time they arrived at the café, everyone else had completed half a day's work. Naya noticed the dark circles around their eyes and jokingly said, "Where did you two go last night? This is the first time I've ever seen you come in late. You're usually the first to arrive. Did you accidentally oversleep?"

Arianne couldn't be bothered to explain. She smiled bitterly as she walked into the kitchen. Tiffany, on the other hand, was in an extremely good mood, "No, we sometimes enjoy sleeping in. Just because it hasn't happened, doesn't mean that it doesn't, right?"

At past eleven in the morning, the police informed Arianne that it was time to negotiate with Regina, as her family members had arrived.

Arianne was the only one who went, as the shop was short handed.

When she arrived at the police station, she found that Regina was not as arrogant as before. She hung her head in front of her parents like a reprimanded child and was too afraid to even let out a fart. Arianne did not say much and simply clarified the amount needed for compensation. She had even brought the bill for the door from back when they were in the middle of renovations.

At first glance, Regina's father seemed like an honest and sincere man. He immediately apologized and promised to compensate them with the original price of the door. Regina's mother, on the other hand, was completely different. She was a typical shrew, "What do you mean? That rotten door, $1,500 dollars? You must be lying. It's just a bit of red paint, can't you just clean it off? Are you trying to con honest folk like us? I will only pay for the cleaning fees. I'm not going to pay that much!"

Arianne was not as petty as Regina's mother. It was truly a case of 'like mother, like daughter' in this aspect. Regina must have been spoiled by her mother in this manner.

Thanks to the pressure from the police, Regina's family ended up paying for the full, original amount. As they left, Regina's mother was still grumbling, "What hell was that? You'd better clear your vision, Regina. Stay away from people like these from now on!"

Arianne feigned ignorance and quickened her pace. Since the matter was already settled, there was no use in being conscientious.

Naya's house was empty that afternoon, so she had no choice but to bring her daughter over to the café for the time being. The little girl had just turned three, and was extremely adorable. She had beautiful fair skin and was dressed in a pretty pink dress. Her large, blinking eyes seemed to shine like stars.

Everyone at the café was enchanted by the little thing. Naya was a sweet-tempered girl, so her child was raised the same way. She was very obedient. Arianne gave her a piece of dessert, and she only accepted it after receiving her mother's approval. Then, she thanked her very sweetly.

Chapter 480

Arianne's heart nearly melted into goo, "You must have saved the galaxy in your past life, Naya. Your daughter is too adorable. What's her name?"

Naya gazed at her daughter lovingly, "Her name is Lucy Skye. Her nickname is Lulu."

“That’s too cute. Next time, just bring her here whenever it’s inconvenient for you to leave her at home. It’s no trouble at all,” Arianne was eager to see such an adorable little thing every day.

Naya nodded and said, “You should have a daughter too. You’re so pretty, your children will certainly be very good looking.”

Arianne’s smile froze in place, “I… I can’t have children.”

Naya was shocked, “Why?”

Arianne didn’t want to bring up the past, “It doesn’t matter. You’ve probably heard from Lynn and the rest that I’m married. It’s just that I can’t have kids.”

Naya froze, “Is it your husband?”

Arianne shook her head, “It’s me. I can’t have kids. Alright. I’ve got to go back to work.”

Naya felt upset after hearing this. Arianne was still very young. It was cruel for her to be infertile. She asked Tiffany in private, who simply answered, “Mark Tremont is her husband, correct? You’ve met him. Arianne’s uterus has been hurt after two miscarriages. It’s pretty complicated. I don’t want to talk about it, either.”

After a period of peace, business at the dessert shop prospered. They'd managed to cover their costs earlier than expected. This was all thanks to the secret recipe from Mark. After all, they had been able to provide high class desserts for an average price. Hence, the number of guests came in a steady flow. The shop was officially stepping into the right track and working hours became more consistent, unlike the old days when Arianne and Tiffany had to go home in the middle of the night.

By April, the temperature in the city had grown slightly warmer. The sunny days meant that everyone would begin putting on short sleeves and only needed to put on an extra layer of outerwear when the temperature plummeted during rain days. This city was nowhere near the coast, so seafood was extremely expensive. Arianne couldn't even bear to indulge herself in the most normal of seafoods, no matter how much she loved them. She just couldn't do it.

Tiffany was more particular about her daily essentials, especially her appetite. She would always buy more expensive ingredients to cook at home, even if her cooking skills rendered the ingredients inferior.

Finally, Tiffany exploded after defiling a table full of seafood, "That Jackson promised that he'd come and visit me after a while. It's almost been two months. If he doesn't come, I'm going to go mad!"

Arianne wasn't picky, so regardless of how bad Tiffany's cooking was, she still managed to eat it all. Ignoring the ugly presentation of the seafood, she ate and said, "If you miss him that much, call him. I think you should consider going back to the capital. Otherwise, won't you two be forced into a long-distance relationship?"

Tiffany hadn't considered that. Now that she thought of it, going back to the capital was only a matter of time, "Then… What about you? If I go back, will you come with me?"

Arianne shook her head, "I'm not going. You're going back to pursue love, to get married. What am I going back for? I'll stay here and take care of our business. It's pretty good."

Tiffany certainly wasn't the kind of person who'd abandon her friendship for love, "Then I'm not going either. Besides, I can talk to Jackson everyday. Let it be a long distance relationship. If he wants to see me, he'll come. If not, I can't be bothered with him. I won't leave you here all alone. Either I stay with you, or you come home with me. Besides, I've promised you that I won't have kids so that I can keep you company. I should probably talk to Jackson about this first, so that I can save myself the trouble in the future. However, I'm not sure if we'll end up married; destiny isn't set in stone."

At the time, Arianne thought that Tiffany was only consoling her. She never thought that Tiffany would actually be serious about it, "Tiffie, you can't just make these decisions. Getting married and having kids is a very normal thing. I'm happy that you've consoled me, but you can't not have kids like me. Knowing Jackson, seeing as he's eager to be with you, he's equally anxious to get married too. It's been written in the stars long ago."

"Then if that's the case, I'm going to have another kid, so that you can raise it!" Tiffany exclaimed, randomly coming up with strange ideas at this point.

Arianne choked from shock. She had to drink half a glass of water in order to wash it all down, "Even if you're okay with giving me your child, it'd also depend on whether Jackson's family would approve of the idea too. Besides, my current situation is no different from a divorcee's. If you give me your child, I'd have to take care of the shop and the kid all on my own. Aren't you worried? Alright, that's enough. Don't bring up irrelevant conversations. Hurry up and eat."

Just as they had spoken, Tiffany received a video call from Jackson. Tiffany answered it and directed the camera at the ugly-looking food on the table, "Look at what I've made! Tell me what you think."

Jackson looked around and bluntly replied, "This is no different from a pig's meal. Look at that color! You just know that it's going to taste horrible. I'll give you the number to my restaurant in your area. Order any meal you want around dinner time."

What derision, what snark.

Tiffany was not happy at all. She pointed the camera towards Arianne, “Ari’s eating it too. Are you calling her a pig?”