Ruling 561

Chapter 561

Tiffany couldn't shake the feeling that Jackson was lying to her, "You're covering up for him. What do you mean by 'you were not aware'? I'm sure you knew about this. Ari, get a divorce, right now. You can't get past this!"

Arianne nodded in agreement, "I kind of agree. Let's just get a divorce…"

Jackson was lamenting internally, "Enough. Both of you. Don't start. I'll speak to Mark myself. Don't you need to manage your business? You two, stay right here!"

"I'm sorry, Ari…" Naya apologized timidly after Jackson had left, "I had no idea that that woman was acquainted with your husband… I even helped carry her baby…"

Arianne was feeling strangely delighted over having Mark take all of the blame. She was in a particularly good mood now, "It's fine. Go back to work. I'm going back to the kitchen…" she replied in a sing-song voice.

Naya was under the impression that she was simply putting on a brave front and that deep down, she was feeling extremely hurt. She furrowed her brows and felt even more guilty.

Jackson briskly made his way over to Mark's office. Realizing that Georgina was nowhere to be seen, he carefully asked, "What happened? Where is she? How did you manage to take care of this?"

“It’s done,” Mark calmly replied. “I’ve agreed to transfer the money to her by tonight, at the very latest. You can decide on the amount yourself. Consider it a means to get rid of a troublesome pest. It doesn’t matter if you’re the father of the baby. You’re probably not. Besides, the paternity test results will be sent directly to you once they’re out. You can decide on what to do then. She won’t be knocking on your door. Next time, please try to avoid bugging me over these matters.”

Jackson heaved a sigh of relief, “It was best to have you solve the matter this time. It’s been bugging me for many days, but you’ve managed to settle it in a matter of moments. I should’ve come to you sooner. Don’t worry, I’ll remember this. I owe you one!”

Mark thought nothing of it, “Aside from buying a few more meals for me, how else can you expect to repay me?”

Jackson was beginning to feel guilty, “Well… I know how Arianne is the most important thing in the world to you. I’ll reunite you with her. However… There’s just one teeny, tiny, little problem at the moment… After your grand act of whisking Georgina and her baby away from the café, Tiffie kind of came under the impression that you’re the father of Georgina’s child. I never thought that this would happen. She’s currently hatching a scheme with Arianne to… uhm… fix you. But don’t you worry! Arianne is aware of the truth, so there won’t be any misunderstandings between you. It’s just that… you’ll have to be the scapegoat!”

Mark lost his cool. He grabbed a random file on his office desk and whacked Jackson with it. “Am I that kind of a man? I could never do such a disgraceful thing. Quit tarnishing my reputation. I’m going to sell you out if you don’t give a damn good solution!”

Jackson grinned and giggled as he bounced all the way to the doorway, “Fine, fine. You can have anything you want in my restaurant from now on. You get a lifetime of free meals. Will that do? I’ve gotta go. If you ever need my help in anything, anything at all, just say the word. I’ll definitely do my best to help you out!”

“Hold it,” Mark suddenly stopped Jackson.

Jackson stopped, listening with rapt attention, “What is it?”

Mark paused then said, “Help me persuade Ari into having dinner with me tonight.”

Jackson gave him an “okay” sign and disappeared through Mark’s office doors.

By the time he had arrived back at the café, Jackson had already formulated a plan, “Arianne, would it be alright if I came over to cook dinner at your place? Let’s close up early today, around six o’clock? I’m going back to the capital soon, and Tiffie will be coming along. Consider it a kind of farewell dinner. I’ll cook, and I’ll shop for the ingredients later.”

Arianne felt a little disappointed upon hearing that Tiffany would be leaving as well, “Sure… Sounds good.”

Jackson smirked once she had agreed. He owed Mark for helping him out. Of course, he had to give his all into returning the favor.

The café closed for the day at 6PM, sharp. Tiffany was still complaining about Mark on the way home. Arianne simply listened to her quietly. In all their years together, the only woman who’d ever been with Mark, aside from herself, was Aery. This matter really wouldn’t have happened to Mark.

Noticing Arianne's silence, Tiffany balefully stroked her cheek, "Ari, are you speechless with rage? Mark's definitely going to join us for dinner tonight. I'll give him a good piece of my mind for your sake then!"

The corners of Arianne's lips twitched, "I'll… deal with him myself. Don't get involved. He's kind of like a block of wood. He won't answer you, even when he's being scolded. It's not fun at all. Jackson has told me that he's taking you back to the capital. Eric should be discharged tomorrow and Tanya will be coming back as well, so you don't need to stay back and help out at the café. Let's all just enjoy a good meal tonight. Don't concern yourself with anything else."

Tiffany still felt indignant. However, when she remembered their imminent separation and the uncertainty of their next reunion, she did not want to spoil their last meal together, "Fine… I'll let him off the hook, for now. You'd better make him give you a good explanation. If he really is the father of that baby, you'll have every right to ask for a divorce!"

Arianne nodded helplessly, "I know. Let's go back and get ready. Jackson will be back with the ingredients soon. We should help him out. It must be tiring for him to cook for all of us on his own."

By the time they had arrived back home, Jackson was already busy in the kitchen. Mark had actually arrived before they did and was sitting on the couch, fiddling with his phone, looking as if nothing had happened at all.

Chapter 562

Tiffany glared at Mark. Feeling a gaze on him, Mark looked up just as Arianne quickly pushed Tiffany into the kitchen. "Go help out!"

Suddenly, Jackson's phone, which was on the living room's coffee table, rang. Mark picked it up for him; Summer's loud voice came through the speaker. "You brat, what did you do with $150,000? I didn't hear about the company needing funds recently, what did you spend it on? You aren't up to no good, are you?"

Mark pulled the device away from his ear, feeling his eardrums crying a little. "Mrs. West, it's me, Mark. Jackson's busy. I know about this. He isn't spending it unnecessarily, so don't you worry. He's not a kid either, and $150,000's not a lot."

When Summer heard Mark's voice, her tone became much gentler. "Oh, it's you, Mark… Sure, I'm at ease with you watching out for him. Isn't he with Tiffany now? I'm just worried that he's out with questionable women again. I can't keep my rein on him usually. You're his bro, help me out. You're already married while he's still like that. I'm worried. I don't usually keep an eye on his expenditure."

After the exchange, Summer hung up in delight. When Mark put down the phone and looked up, he met gazes with Arianne's gentle one and was surprised. "Why are you looking at me? Is there something on my face?"

Arianne shifted her gaze away awkwardly. "No, just thinking about how you can lie through your teeth while facing an elder. You didn't even bat an eye…"

With elders mentioned, Mark asked casually, "Did your mother look for you recently?"

"No." Arianne's expression turned chilly subconsciously. She then made her way into the kitchen.

After a while, she was pushed back to the living room by both Tiffany and Jackson. “Take a break. We’ll take care of dinner.”

Arianne did not know what was up with the two of them. Tiffany was thinking about letting her and Mark resolve the ‘baby’ issue, but why was Jackson going along with it too? She did not want to sit by Mark and chat with him. Considering her options, she cleaned the house. When she got to mopping the floor in front of Mark, he lifted his legs naturally. “Can’t you just take a break?”

She glanced at him. “I can’t sit down quietly. The laundry in the washing machine still needs to be done. I’ll go hang it. Wash the mop for me and put it back.”

Mark looked slightly affronted. He had never done chores like this, yet Arianne was ordering him around! Nonetheless, his physical response was honest. Without even a word of complaint, he picked up the mop and went to the washroom obediently. Until he finished what he was told to do, he still had yet to figure out if a spell was casted on him…

Each of them minded their own business ‘happily’ until it was time for dinner. The first thing that Jackson did when he picked up his cutlery was to scoop dishes into Tiffany’s plate. “Here, your favorite. Try it.”

Tiffany tasted it happily. “Not bad. Your cooking is still great. Now I’m worried that you’ll despise me after making me fat.”

Jackson was unabashed with his sweet talk, “I won’t. My goal is to make you so round and plump that others will not even look at you. Then no one will fight over you with me. I won’t dislike you. I’ll feel a sense of accomplishment to be able to feed you into a little muffin!”

Arianne and Mark shuddered simultaneously, goosebumps racking through them. They had not even started to eat, but already they had lost their appetites from the blatant display of affection.

Noticing the 'disgust' in their eyes, Jackson kicked Mark under the table with indignation. Understanding what he meant, Mark copied Jackson and scooped some dishes for Arianne; however, he could not bring himself to say anything sweet. Arianne froze and stiffly began to eat, but she did not touch what Mark had given her, earning a frown from the latter. "It's not like I'm poisoning you…"

Jackson thought that he was hopeless. People said that one would be influenced by what they saw and heard. He had already demonstrated so wonderfully, but why was Mark unable to emulate it?

When Tiffany was done eating, Jackson seized the chance and pushed her into leaving. "It's late now. We're going back to the hotel. Mark, clean up for Arianne. It's a menial chore, so it won't be a challenge for you!"

Tiffany did not manage to catch on. "What are you doing? We're leaving when it's not even eight yet. Let me chat with Ari…"

Her voice was soon blocked outside the door as Jackson lowered his voice and said, "Why isn't your brain working? Let them talk in private; we shouldn't act as the third wheel. Let's just go."

Tiffany finally understood. "Oh, oh… I see now. Could have told me earlier. You didn't even notify me in advance. How am I supposed to know what you're thinking?"

Jackson wanted to say that even if he made eyes at her blatantly, she would not have understood it. Her intelligence was only enough to understand what was said explicitly. She could not catch any hints or signals. He did not dare to say this out loud, however. He would definitely be beaten up if he did.

On the way back to the hotel, he texted Mark. “Mark, I created the opportunity for you. You’ve got to hold tight. To catch the heart of a woman, you must first own her body, you know? I believe that you can do it!”

Chapter 563

Upon receiving the text, Mark deleted it after reading it. Something improper like that did not have a place in his phone…

He rolled up his sleeves to help Arianne with the dinnerware. When Arianne saw that he was actually getting to work, she quickly stopped him. “No need to help me. It’s just washing the dishes. You don’t know how to anyway…”

Mark spoke seriously, “I can learn. I’m not that dumb. Just leave them to me.”

Giving him the benefit of doubt, Arianne allowed him into the kitchen alone, checking in on him occasionally out of worry to make sure that he could really do a good job.

The floral fragrance from the shelf spread into the house from the air conditioning. Looking at the overflowing roses at home, Arianne felt speechless. Mark had not listened to her; she had asked him not to send her flowers anymore, but he still sent her a bouquet every day. If this went on, she would run out of space at home to keep them, and the shop did not need that many flowers too.

Mark's phone rang suddenly. He had put his phone in his dress pants' pocket; it was inconvenient to fish it out with his hands wet and occupied. He could only ask for Arianne's help. "Help me with the call."

Arianne did not reject him since he was helping with the dishes. Entering the kitchen, she was hesitant when she saw where he had kept his phone. She would have to stick her hand into his pants pocket. That did not seem very… appropriate.

When Mark saw that she was frozen, he urged, "Quick."

Snapping herself out of it, Arianne wiped the unhealthy thought in her mind away and retrieved the device from his pants pocket. The caller ID was one word – home.

It was from the Tremont Estate.

Pressing the answer button and putting it on speaker, Henry's voice rang, "Sir, your order is completed."

Mark hummed and the line went quiet, leaving the sound of water running as Mark washed the dishes to fill the silence. Perhaps it was out of curiosity, for Henry asked, "Sir, what are you doing?"

"Doing the dishes," Mark answered naturally.

Henry went quiet again before he caught up. "Okay… I'm hanging up now."

With the line cut, Arianne joked. “Everyone in the Tremont Estate knows that you wash dishes now.”

Suddenly reminded of Jackson’s ‘reminder’, Mark scooped Arianne into his embrace and pinned her in front of the sink. “I’m washing them for you. Don’t be mean.”

Arianne’s heart skipped a beat and she was subconsciously too timid to meet his eyes. “Let go of me…”

It had been years, but Arianne was still shy when facing him.

Mark could not get enough of her embarrassed look as the corners of his lips tugged upward. He intentionally stuck his face close to look at her. “You’re blushing.”

With her hands on his chest, Arianne stopped him from coming closer. “No! It’s from the warmth. Stay away…”

Mark would never let her go this easily. “I don’t simply take orders, you know that.”

Arianne’s heart was thumping. “Then what do you want? I’m warning you, don’t go out of line!”

Her warning was mellow, useless. Instead, it roused Mark's desire. "So what if I go out of line? What can you do? You accept my flowers every day and let me in so easily. This means that you don't actually dislike me. What you're offended by is the past that cannot be changed. Why don't you face reality? Is it very hard to admit that you miss me?"

Arianne's mind was everywhere. The pheromones from him could easily disrupt her thoughts. Just looking at his face and his eyes was enough to make her heart rate pick up. It was amazing that she did not get bored of looking at him after more than a decade!

"Don't… I told you not to send me flowers, didn't I? I just think that it's a waste to throw them away. I wasn't thinking about anything else. You came with Tiffie and Jackson. I couldn't have stopped you from coming in, now could I? Don't think too much about it and let me go now! The water in the sink will be overflowing soon!"

Mark stretched his arm out to turn the tap off and switched to circling her with both of his arms. With a slight tug, she was against him without any gap between them. He was slightly disgruntled. "So, are you saying you only let me in because of Tiffany? How sad. But you didn't chase me away after she left too."

Arianne was close to crumbling. What was up with this guy! Since when did he speak with a hint of bad boy in him? She had never come across a man like this, let alone Mark himself when he was acting like this. Recalling what he did to her in the car back when they went to the water park and realizing that they were in her house right now, Arianne panicked. "Mark! Let me go now! It's too warm in the kitchen. I'll clean up the rest. Go back to the hotel earlier and rest!"

"I can't sleep without you."

The hint of sadness in Mark's voice was apparent to Arianne. She was stunned, not knowing how to react.

Seeing that she was no longer refusing him, Mark lowered his head to kiss her. Her soft lips felt like the most lethal poison he was addicted to. Once he kissed them, he did not want to ever let go. He only wanted to kiss her deeper to explore the pleasure.

When Mark's tongue had easily pried her mouth open, Arianne broke out of her daze. "Mm… Let me go… Mm!"

Chapter 564

Her voice was muted by him.

Arianne was unable to get herself out of his grasp. When Mark's kisses moved to her ear, she blurted, "Are you sure you love me? Or do you just want to do it? Mark, if you really wanted to be together with me, you'd give me time to accept you and accept the past, not force me to do this all the time! For now, I can't accept that I'm together with someone who caused my dad's death!"

Mark froze. "Will you accept me if I give you time then?"

Arianne did not know the answer. If he gave her enough time, would she really be able to accept him and what had happened in the past? She thought that she was most likely unable to do it because every time she saw him, she thought about her father's wronged death and found it difficult to let go. The person whom she had once thought of as the most important person became the person who caused her to lose everything. How could she let it past?

Her silence unnerved Mark. "Speak up! Will you try to accept me if I give you time?"

Arianne bit her lips. “I don’t know… I don’t know if I can do it… Don’t force me…”

If… If she had given him a duration, even if it was just a rough estimation, some sort of promise, Mark would wait without any hesitation. Yet, she did not give him anything that could let him wait in patience. He was scared of a life without her, he was scared of her suddenly having someone else, he was scared of her disappearing out of the blue. He could not do it!

Mark had always been extreme when it came to Arianne. Even when he had tried his best to be gentle, only to her, she was still able to strike a chord in him!

He abruptly carried her to the bedroom. “Then that’s a no, isn’t it? It’s okay… Since there’s no foreseeable future, then we’ll just live in the present! I won’t ever let you go, I can’t. If it means that we have to torture each other, so be it…”

Arianne’s heart lurched as she blushed. She could not ignore what she was currently feeling, nor could she ignore his presence. Toward this man, she could only relent, always. She had never once won by aggressively going against him.

Mark forced her to look at him. “So, is this it? Do you want to be this way with me for the rest of our lives? Unless I die, we’ll stay at loggerheads then!”

Arianne clutched the bedsheet under her to keep her sanity. If she let herself sink into it, there was no coming back. “You’re an utter jerk!” Her voice shook. Mark seemed to be pleased with her reaction, as he grabbed her wrists to place them on his hips. His cold eyes had a complex emotion. “I’m fine with being a jerk too, as long as you like it…”

Arianne flushed, noticing that he was nearing climax, and panicked. “You can’t… No!”

Mark pinched her chin with a hint of teasing in his gaze. “Can’t what? Hmm?”

…

After that, Arianne forced herself to get up despite the desire to curl in on herself at the edge of the bed, covering herself with a thin blanket. Mark had never acted as crazy. She couldn't take it. “Are you done now? Can you leave? I don’t want to see you!”

With a stretch of his hand, Mark caught the blanket and yanked her to himself. Meeting eyes, he wore a smirk. “That’s not what you were saying just now.”

Arianne’s face was burning as she pushed him away, feeling a little wronged. “You’re shameless!”

Afraid that she would cry if he kept teasing her, Mark stopped himself just in time and went back to his usual self. “Do you want to talk? I’ll tell it to you straight—I can give you time if that’s what you want; I’m willing to wait. But at least… give me something to anticipate. If you aren’t considering this, I’ll take you back to the Tremont’s by force. The rest of our lives… we’ll live it out as it is then…”

Arianne knew that Mark would be relentless if she did not give him a reply. The last thing she wanted was to be brought back to the Tremont’s, just like that. Just thinking about it was terrifying. Nevertheless, she did not want to choose the former option. She had thought that she could live in

peace when she left the Tremont's and came to this city. Even when her heartache was a torment of its own, at least her life was carefree. Now, he was forcing her to choose.

Only now did she realize that leaving the Tremont's back then was only running away from her problem. She discovered with sadness that what he had done just now did not even make her thoroughly angry. She was more helpless and regretful, if anything. It meant that she loved him. There was no doubt.

Since she had to make a choice, she could only pick one that seemed to have an exit to her. Biting her lips, Arianne said, "Give me time."

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Chapter 565

As if seeing through her mind, Mark said, "I can give you time, but not so that you could dismiss me and drag my time along. You have to consider our relationship seriously. If you can't do it, I'll just take you back. Don't ask me to give you up, I can't."

Arianne felt like something was not right here. She frowned. "This isn't fair. Either I agree to be with you in the end, or I'll be forced to go back with you. Don't I have the right to refuse? If I still can't do it after consideration, I'll have to go back with you, regardless—then what was the point of giving me time? To let me persuade myself to be with you? Don't you think that your request is unreasonable? Normally, shouldn't it be you giving me time to consider, and if I can't get it past myself, we'll go our separate ways?"

Mark looked at her and pronounced each word clearly. "That's right. Me giving you time is only for you to get used to it, to recognize the fact that you won't be able to leave me. Ever. It's not for you to consider whether you're staying or leaving."

Although she had known that this was the case, Arianne still felt helpless. If she rejected him now, he would take her back to the Tremont Estate then and there. After all that had happened, she still had to opt for time. At least, she should solve the issue at hand first and stop him from being reckless to her…

"Okay. Then during the period of my consideration, you can't… you can't be like this again… If you can do that, I'll consider things properly and try to… persuade myself. You don't have to keep staying here to guard me too. Go back to the capital. Because I don't know how long I need either."

Mark was never one to wait for things. Of course, he would not let her prolong his 'penalty' for nothing. "Since you can't be sure of the duration, I'll fix it. It's been so long since you've left the capital too. One year from now, if you still can't make your decision, I'll make it for you."

Arianne wanted to fight back, but her words got stuck in her throat when she saw his heated gaze. She clung onto the thin blanket in front of her chest and spoke through clenched jaws. "One year it is. Leave!"

Mark heaved a sigh of relief in his mind. After a moment, he got up to go to the bathroom. "I'll leave after a shower. Sleep. I'll go back to the capital tomorrow."

Only then did Arianne relax, but she suddenly felt a little down. Everyone was leaving tomorrow; Jackson, Tiffany and… Mark. Her sudden slump in mood must be due to Tiffany, it had to be…

In the hospital, Tanya rushed to Eric's ward with supper. When she entered, she looked around for the doctors in case she was found out. Making sure that there were no doctors or nurses doing their rounds at this time, she closed the door carefully. "You… The doctor said that it'd be best for you to not have supper and to have milder food, but you just can't watch your mouth. If you have to go for any surgeries in the future, that won't be fun. Will you only be subdued when you're forced to have an operation?"

Eric was nonchalant. He sat with his legs crossed on the bed, ready for a feast. “Stop nagging. I’ll be discharged tomorrow. Why should I still have to watch out for my diet? I’m going mad from having plain congee day after day.”

Tanya sympathized with him and helped him open the takeout box. “That’s true. I’d break down too if I had to take plain congee for days. Eat slower though. Make sure you bite enough times so that it’s easier to digest. No need to be in a hurry. I’ll be on the lookout for you. I’ll let you know if any doctors are coming and you can keep all the food. I made all of these myself and didn’t add too much seasoning. Don’t critique them.”

When he saw that she did as she promised and really went to the door to be on the lookout, Eric chuckled. “Alright, come in. They did the rounds for today, so they won’t be coming in tonight. Since I’ll be discharged tomorrow, you won’t have to come take care of me anymore. I’ll sum up your wage and transfer you the money now.”

Tanya was a little embarrassed. “Tiffany and Ari asked me to take care of you back then. I didn’t know what you guys agreed on. Just give me what you think is fair. It’s not a lot of work to take care of you anyway…”

Eric gestured for her to check after the transfer. “I know. They didn’t talk about money with me either. I’m paying you how much you’re worth.”

Tanya was shocked when she saw the amount. “Why is it so much? I’ve only taken care of you for a few days. This is too much. It’s basically three months of my salary!”

Eric was quite surprised. “Three months’ worth of salary? I thought that you weren’t earning a lot in the desserts shop. It’s just three months’ worth? Then I’ve given too little. I’ll transfer you a little more.”

Tanya quickly stopped him. “No, no, you don’t have to! It’s enough! I’m taking on two jobs in Ari’s shop, so I’m paid two salaries… Thank you, Ricky.”

Eric nearly choked from the food. “Cough… just call me Eric. My parents don’t even call me that, it sounds weird… Oh, yeah, hold on for a bit. I’ll finish this and you can take the lunchbox back with you. I’ll see you then.”

Tanya previously assumed that Eric was someone who was hard to get along with and hard to please. Her impression of rich people was as such. After getting to know him, she thought that he was easygoing and nice. She did not feel as distant and was no longer restrained in the way she carried herself anymore. “It sounds distant. I’ll just call you Ricky. I’ll see you around then.”

Eric did not correct her anymore, for he was occupied with eating. The so-called “see you” would not be happening anyway. It was more like “see you not”. He would not be coming to this city for nothing; this trip was only an accident in the first place.

After some time, Tanya asked with anticipation, “Ricky, is your hometown the capital too? Is the capital huge? With skyscrapers everywhere and looking incredibly grand?”

Eric had never seen someone asking such a dumb question and answered casually, “More or less. It’s fine. It’s much larger than this place anyway and much better. It’s densely populated too. You’ve never been there?”

Tanya shook her head sadly. “No. I’ve never left here ever. Actually, I want to take my grandpa around, to have a look at the world outside, but I don’t have much money. I’m working hard to save some. Grandpa’s old now, and he’s ill. He can’t recognize his way anymore and he might not be able to recognize me soon too… I want to take him to visit the capital while he’s still here. With the money you’ve given me, it’s a big help to me. My plan to take my grandpa traveling is taking a big step forward!”

Eric suddenly felt that the supper he was relishing did not taste so good anymore. He had always thought that he was pitiful. There was no difference between having family and none to him. He had to work his ass off for everything and was always bustling. Now, he finally got to meet someone having it worse than him and his perception of poverty was updated as well. In spite of it, Tanya was luckier in the family department compared to him. It was what he envied too. “Actually… that’s a good idea. Do what you have to when your family’s still around. If you go to the capital, call me. I’ll treat you to a meal. If I’m free, I can guide you around too. I’m much better than a GPS.”

Tanya did not take his words as courtesy or perfunctory reply. “Really? That’s great. I’ll definitely contact you when I go to the capital. You can’t not pick up my call, pinky promise!”

Looking at Tanya’s outstretched hand, Eric was awkward. “How old are you to be doing pinky promises? Are you a kid?”

Tanya was relentless. “My grandpa’s always treating me like a kid. A pinky promise isn’t childish either. It’s a promise!”

Eric was speechless and could only stretch his hand over to hook his pinky. Tanya beamed. “Eat up, the food’s getting cold.”

The next day, Tiffany, Jackson, Mark, and Eric went back to the capital respectively. Tanya was back to work at the desserts shop too. To Arianne, it somehow felt less lively than it usually was.

Returning to the capital, Tiffany did not go home at once but went to Jackson's villa in White Water Bay. After the breakup, their relationship improved a notch.

While Jackson was unpacking, Tiffany flipped through his phone and noticed the two transfer records, asking curiously, "Who did you transfer $150,000 and $30,000 to? You were at Ari's with me for the last two days. Why did you have to spend so much?"

Jackson's heart thumped. "Uh… it's the company… I spent it on the company."

Tiffany was not skeptical. She hummed and put his phone aside.

After this episode, Jackson realized that he was unable to stand it if there were any more accidents. He had to push marriage forward. Sitting himself down beside Tiffany, he held her hand and looked at her sincerely, "Tiffie, I'm thinking of arranging for both our parents to meet and confirm things between us. It's fine if you don't want to get married so quickly, but can we get engaged first? Other than the marriage certificate, we're no different from being husband and wife now…"

Tiffany shuddered involuntarily. "You… really plan to do this? Will your mom… have any objections?"

Jackson shook his head. "Don't worry. I can handle my mom. As long as you give me a nod, I'll arrange it."

Tiffany was hesitant, but looking at how serious Jackson was, she did not want to upset him. She braced herself to agree. “Alright… let them meet then, although your mom’s already met my mom. Oh yeah, why haven’t I heard you talk about your dad?”

Jackson’s expression stiffened almost unnoticeably. “My father… went overseas years ago. It’s been years since I’ve seen him. All this while, my mom and I have assumed that he’s no longer in the picture. No need to be bothered with him.”

Tiffany noticed his subtle change in reaction but something like this should not happen without letting his father know. “What do you mean no need to be bothered with him? My dad’s not around anymore, but isn’t your dad still alive? You aren’t even letting him know that you’re getting married? Or… is there something going on with your dad? We’re already at this stage of our relationship and you’re still hiding it from me?”

Jackson honestly did not want to bring up his father, but there was no reason for him to keep it a secret from Tiffany. “My parents’ nuptials were a marriage of convenience back then. They didn’t have any feelings to start with. When both their parents passed, my father told my mom the truth. He’s not a business-minded person and he doesn’t want anything, so he left to chase after his dream. They didn’t get a divorce, but there’s no difference. He’s left the West’s residence and me to my mom. I was very young back then. After so many years of not seeing him, I actually don’t feel much toward him. It doesn’t matter.”

Chapter 567

Tiffany was quite astonished. “That works too? They didn’t get a divorce, it’s been years since you saw him, and you don’t even know if he’s dead or alive. Isn’t that too much? If there’s no feelings between them, isn’t it better to get the divorce? They’d both be free then. This, right now, is wasting away your mom’s time… Wow… Alright, I understand. If that’s the situation, we’ll leave your father out of this then.”

Jackson was quick to shift the topic. “Since you’re fine, should I arrange it for tomorrow? Stay and keep me company today…”

Tiffany glared at him without malice. “I’ve only just gotten back and you’re not letting me go home to my mom? We’ll still meet tomorrow. I’m not staying tonight. Behave!”

Surprisingly, Jackson did not insist. “Okay… Go back to spend time with your mom. After tomorrow, it’s going to be ‘our mom’.”

In the afternoon, Jackson sent Tiffany home and went to the West’s residence.

Summer was home reading a book, carrying her dog. She did not show much of a reaction when she saw her son come home. “Change out of your shoes. Don’t leave your footprints everywhere.”

Jackson switched into slippers at the door before going forward and carrying Summer’s dog. “Mom, let’s have a meal together tomorrow, and we’ll consider things between Tiffie and I to be set.”

Summer finally gave some reaction. She looked up at him. “You’re not bluffing this time?”

Jackson nodded. “I’m not lying to you. It’s real. I want to get married now.”

“Your marriage is big news. You have to tell your father. I don’t want to contact him, so you give him a call,” Summer said faintly and flipped a page of her book, although she did not manage to pick up any content.

“Don’t bother. This family’s the same with or without him. Why contact him? That’s it then. I’ll go pick up Tiffie and her mom tomorrow. We’ll eat at home. It’s more appropriate to discuss an important matter like this at home,” Jackson said and put the dog down on the floor before turning to head upstairs to his room.

Closing the door, he opened the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a family photo. He was just a young boy and the person carrying him in the photo was his father, whom he could no longer remember what he looked like. His mother was beaming at the side. No matter how he looked at it, they did not look like a family of three that had no feelings for each other.

This man had abandoned his wife and son for his dream, leaving to a faraway place that he yearned for and becoming a famous artist. But so what? It did not help the reality, which was that he was ruthless.

Yet, the son was like his father. Jackson looked incredibly like that heartless man. This was also the reason Summer did not care much about him since he was a small boy. How he was fooling around, whether he was coming home, Summer had never interfered. He was free to live how he wanted. He had moved out to stay alone when he was eighteen years old. Being dissolute was probably because he lacked love from a young age too and he could not take the loneliness. Now, Jackson finally found the right one. He would not be alone anymore in the future…

He did not return to White Water Bay at night, deciding to stay at the West’s residence. Thinking about the meeting tomorrow late in the night, he felt restless and wanted to remind Summer to prepare well. Just as he got to her room, he vaguely heard her talking to someone on the phone.

“Jackson’s planning to get married. I’m letting you know in advance. It’s up to you whether you’re coming back; doesn’t really matter to us mother and son. We’re just informing you.”

The person on the line said something and Summer scoffed, “Hah, you’ll see? Alright, you don’t have to say that, you don’t have to see anything. We’ll assume that you won’t be back. If the in-law asks, I’ll say that you died a long time ago, saves me the embarrassment. I, Summer West, have been successful my whole life; you’re my only failure. When I think of you now, I become repulsed. Best if you don’t appear, saves me and Jackson the misery. That’s all.”

Making sure that the call had ended, Jackson composed himself before knocking. When Summer opened the door, her expression had recovered. “It’s so late, what is it?”

Acting like he heard nothing, Jackson tugged a corner of his lips. “Nothing, just… reminding you to prepare better tomorrow. I’m quite nervous… It’s different from the last time after all. It’s serious this time.”

Summer glared at him with a smile. “You have times when you get shy when you’ve been so shameless, huh? Alright, I know what to do. Are you still worried when it comes to your mom? Sleep earlier, I’m exhausted. Pick up Tiffie and her mother earlier tomorrow.”

Saying good night, Jackson returned to his room but got no sleep. He was vaguely aware of the fact that his mother loved his father. It was just that she was prideful and had never spoken about it, not even holding back the heartless man back then.

The next day, his eyes were still bloodshot when he left to pick up Tiffany and her mother. Jackson had only slept for two or three hours. It was bound to take a toll on his state.

They were together most of the time, so Tiffany could see that something was amiss with him right off the bat. “Didn’t sleep well last night? Did you go party somewhere?”

He smiled helplessly. “You can ask my mom. I didn’t go out but stayed with her last night. I just couldn’t sleep and didn’t get a good night’s rest because I missed you…”

Chapter 568

Tiffany pinched the inner part of his arm slightly. “My mom is still here. Could you please stop being all clingy?”

Lillian said immediately, “It’s fine. Just enjoy your sweet romantic moment. Pretend that I’m not here.”

When they reached the West family’s residence, Lillian’s back went stiff. The family residence alone was worth more than a million dollars. She was rather satisfied with her future son-in-law.

Summer commanded the servants to clean up the entire estate thoroughly. She even asked the gardener to trim the plants in the garden. Further, she also had her Little Bean changed into an adorable white dress with a bowtie around its neck.

When they entered the estate, Little Bean rushed toward Tiffany directly. Surprisingly, she found herself favored by the small animals. She then picked up Little Bean carefully since it was Summer’s pet dog. Summer always adored her pet dog, and she did not dare to be rough with it.

Lillian looked at Little Bean and found herself drawn to it too. “This dog is quite beautiful. It’s dressed very lovely! Festive.”

Summer smiled and led them to the living room. “I’m always free and Jackson is not always home, so all I can do is keep pets with me. Otherwise, I’ll be bored. Take your seats and make yourselves at home. After all, we’re family.”

When Tiffany saw that Summer was being nice to them, she breathed a sigh of relief. At first, she thought that Summer had a problem with her. Now, it seemed like Jackson had done his part well, and he did not make it awkward for her. When she pretended to be Jackson’s girlfriend before, she acted rather recklessly before Summer. She was Jackson’s real girlfriend now, but she’d become rather uneasy with Summer. Even when she was sitting there, she found herself rather tense.

Jackson noticed her uneasiness. Out of consideration, he pulled her toward him. “Mom, just have a nice little chat with Mrs. Lane. I’ll chat alone with Tiffie in my room.”

When they reached his room, Tiffany heaved out a long sigh after they closed the door. “I find this kind of occasion rather awkward for me. I was too nervous back there. I didn’t even dare to look at your mother or talk to her. Why was I so calm when I put on a show with you before? It’s excruciating…”

Jackson smiled wickedly and pushed her onto the bed. “Don’t be nervous. This is my home, and it’ll soon be yours. Do you want to try it out beforehand?”

Tiffany held onto the hem of her dress tightly. “Nonsense! How dare you think of such a thing now? I don’t want that! What if my mom looks for me later on? Don’t mess around…”

Jackson put her earlobe in his mouth and caressed it softly. “They won’t be looking for us. Don’t worry. I find that I’m having insomnia now without you by my side at night. Why don’t we try living together after today? I want to stay by your side always. Please say yes…”

Tiffany felt like she was struck by lightning. She went limp and weak. Luckily, she was still conscious and persistent. She pushed his chest with both of her hands. “Let’s talk about the living arrangement later. Don’t you touch me now. I dressed up and made up nicely today before I came here. Don’t you dare ruin my makeup and dress. Besides, you didn’t have a good rest last night. You better rest now. I’ll wake you up at noon for lunch. Please, listen to me.”

Jackson was disappointed. He turned around and lay down beside her. “Fine, I’ll sleep for a while now. Remember to wake me up later. And don’t leave afterward. After dinner tonight, go to White Water Bay with me.”

Tiffany nodded and snuggled up to him. “I’ll stay with you. Just sleep.”

After a short pause, Jackson turned around all of a sudden and supported himself above her. “I did plan to forget about it, but why did you have to be so seductive? How could I sleep with you snuggling up in my arms? No, I’ll sleep later…”

This time, Tiffany did not manage to persuade him out of it. She submitted to him after a short while. However, she prohibited him from kissing her body anywhere he liked. She also took off her dress beforehand for fear that she might appear quite messy with ruined makeup and a crumpled dress at noon.

He might have indeed been tired because after it was over, Jackson fell asleep immediately. Tiffany covered him with the blanket in resignation. He was sleepy and exhausted, yet he still thought of enjoying himself with her. He was indeed an odd one...

It was almost eleven in the morning when she heard some noise downstairs. Out of curiosity, she put on her dress and went downstairs to check it out. She saw a strange man in the living room. It puzzled her. However, he seemed like a rather handsome and cool middle-aged man. His facial expression resembled Jackson's a lot, and he was tall and lean too. She did not assume that the strange man was Jackson's father since he told her that his father was living abroad and they had not contacted each other for a long time. However, Summer appeared even stranger to her.

"Tiffie, this is Jackson's father," Summer sounded quite tense.

Tiffany was stunned for a short while. She collected herself quickly. "Mr. West, nice to meet you…"

Jackson's father smiled. "Nice to meet you too. I heard that Jackson is going to marry soon. I rushed back here for some business I have to deal with. I came in a rush, so I didn't manage to prepare some gifts for you. I'll prepare them for you in the future."

Tiffany clenched the corner of her dress restlessly. She was much more nervous than before. "It's fine… Jackson is still sleeping upstairs. I'll go and wake him up."

Chapter 569

She headed back to the room and shook Jackson up from his nap, "Hurry, get up and get dressed. Your dad's back!"

Jackson jolted up, "What?"

She nodded vigorously, “I’m not lying. It’s true. He’s downstairs. Hurry up and come downstairs with me. I’m too nervous to do this on my own…”

Jackson frowned. He leisurely made his way to the bathroom and took a shower, put on some clothes, and went downstairs. His expression turned to ice when he laid his eyes on his father. He did not greet him but pulled Tiffany to a seat on the couch next to him.

“You’ve grown, Jackson.”

Jackson lifted his gaze and stared at the man in front of him. “People grow. Am I supposed to remain a child in your memories?”

His father lowered his eyelids, the depths of his gaze filled with guilt, “It’s all my fault.”

Lillian felt curious, but it was still a family affair so she kept her mouth shut. The breadth of Summer’s patience was shocking. She might seem upset on the surface, but she did not fly into a rage. The family was considerably civil during the meal, except for Jackson, who had a grim look on his face and didn’t say very much.

After the meal, Summer finally lost it and screamed at her husband when they returned to the room, “Not a single letter in all of these years, I thought you were dead… Instead of a divorce, you’d gone completely missing! Did you plan on stringing me along for the rest of my life? Let me tell you this — if you’d divorced me long ago, Jackson would have had another father by now!”

Atticus looked slightly remorseful, “Summer, I’ve been horrible to you over the past few years. I was wholly focused on achieving my dreams in the beginning, but after a while, when I finally decided to come home, I lost my nerve… If you hadn’t called me and told me that Jackson was about to get married soon, I probably wouldn’t have been able to find any excuse to come home. It’s true that I was entirely focused on living my dreams in my youth and I did not consider you or Jackson’s feelings. Now, I know that you and Jackson are more important than my dreams.”

Summer smirked as she stared at him, “You’ve certainly honed your skills from a ‘mute’ to a sweet-talker. Who’d be dumb enough to believe you? Your dreams are most important to you. A wife like me, shoved onto you thanks to an arranged marriage, is nothing compared to your paintings. It’s funny, but now that you’ve mentioned it, you've barely said ten words to me ever since we got married. I, an inelegant daughter from an illustrious family, could never live up with you, an artist. Apparently, we had nothing in common. What bullshit! Why? Do you suddenly have something to say to me?”

Atticus let out a long sigh, “It’s not like that… I’ve been too selfish. I stubbornly insisted on doing whatever I wanted… Suppose that I want to come home now, would you accept me? If not, we can get a divorce. I’ll let you go.”

After waiting for her husband’s return for more than twenty years, he was going to let her go now? Summer’s eyes brimmed with tears of rage, “Atticus West, you’re a ba*tard. I’ve waited for you for twenty years. How could you say such things so easily? I know you’ve made it; you’re not a businessman, but you’re pretty adept at churning out a few useless paintings. You’ve even managed to establish yourself as a famous artist. You’ve achieved your dreams, so now you want to come home and be a good father? Even if I agree to this, what makes you think Jackson would welcome you?”

Atticus was able to speak plainly among his equals in his circle of artists, but when faced with family, he rarely managed to get a word in, edgewise. Especially when faced with Summer. His “selective mutism” suddenly returned. He stayed silent for a long time before he could answer, “I’ll prove it, in time… I’ve been alone over the past few years; you and Jackson have always been in my thoughts. I’d long achieved my dream ten years ago, but I didn’t come back home immediately because… I just couldn't face you… I’m not good with words, I’m not a cheerful person. I’m always fumbling over my words, please don’t be mad.”

Summer reached up and wiped off a tear from the corner of her eyes. Her gaze had long returned to calm, “If only you had said these things to me long ago, I wouldn’t have given up on you. It’s true that our marriage was arranged, but it was undeniable that you were handsome, so I fell for you and willingly bore your child. I waited for you, willingly. Many, many days passed… And I couldn’t take it anymore. I gave up on you. Now, you’re suddenly asking to come back, not just for the sake of Jackson’s wedding. I’m confused. Let’s just play by ear. This is your home anyway, I can’t possibly throw you out.”

Despite being a middle-aged man, there was still a shadow of Atticus’ youth on him. Like father, like son. Jackson had god-given outstanding good looks, which meant that his father would obviously have good looks as well. At his age, he now held the kind of maturity that suited his years. He was still perfectly capable of attracting Summer. She was once in love with him. Of course, it would be difficult for Summer to be cruel to him.

Aside from resentment and obliviousness, Jackson held no special feelings for his father. He certainly wasn’t going to call him “dad”. He refused to even speak to him. After dinner, he sent Lillian and Tiffany away from the West family residence. He hadn’t cracked a smile from the moment of Atticus’ arrival.

When they arrived back at White Water Bay Villa, Tiffany carefully consoled him, “I can tell that you and your father don’t have a good relationship, but at least he’s still alive and well. My dad… I can never see him again, no matter how much I want to. It’s good that he’s here. You should be happy. You’re always smiling and laughing with me, but you’ve suddenly turned sullen. It scares me…”

Chapter 570

Jackson truly couldn’t bring himself to smile at all. He pulled her into his arms, “It’s alright. I’m not angry at you. Don’t overthink it. I knew that my mother called him, but I never expected for him to actually show up and so soon too. I was kind of hoping that he’d never come back; I’ve always treated him as if he were dead. It wouldn’t be too bad if he really did come back to live a peaceful life with my mom, but she wouldn’t be able to take it if he leaves again.”

Tiffany was at a loss for words, “I’m not really good at comforting people. You should probably try to calm down though. I’ll go and wash off my makeup and get showered. Since you haven’t slept since yesterday, you should get an early night in. I still have to search for a job tomorrow.”

She had just gotten up when Jackson pulled her back, “Let’s shower together…”

Tiffany blushed from his advances, “What… I’m not used to that. Let’s shower separately. I’ll be done very soon.”

Jackson refused to comply. He carried her into the bathroom, turned on the shower head, and pushed her up against the smooth wall.

The gradually warm water trickled down from both their bodies then slid all the way down to the ground. Soon, a white mist engulfed the bathroom mirror, which reflected a blurry image for their intertwined bodies…

He never spoke to her about anything that upset him and always displayed a frivolous look on his face, as if nothing really mattered to him, acting as if everything was just fine. Who knew how much pain weighed on his mind?

The pair finally collapsed on the bed, late in the night.

“Let’s have a baby.”

Tiffany shivered, “Isn’t it a little too early? I’m only twenty. Everything will change once we have a baby. My world would revolve around the kid, and I won’t have any free time. Did you lose control, just to get me pregnant? Let me tell you this, I’m not done with living my life. No way!”

Jackson lowered his head and kissed her on the lips, “Don’t worry. You can focus on giving birth, I’ll take care of the baby. If it’s freedom you want, you can have it….”

At the end of the matter, Jackson got up and realized that Tiffany had fallen asleep. That explained why she hadn’t made a sound, no matter what he said. He pinched her plump cheeks indulgently and got down from the bed gently to smoke in the living room. He unlocked his phone and found a new message — it was from the DNA department.

He hesitated for just a short moment. After a bout of hesitation, he decided to open the message. He heaved a sigh of relief when he saw the paternity results — he was not the father of Georgina’s baby. That $180,000 that he had given really was used to get rid of a nagging problem. He couldn’t be bothered to get that money back and considered it his bill for his preposterous past.

He deleted the message and sent a message to inform Mark of the results. Mark was still awake when he received that message. He did not reply to the message and simply smiled.

When Mark lifted his gaze and looked out the window, he saw the tree that happened to be placed right outside his bedroom window. Its leaves seemed to have yellowed. Had the tree aged, or had autumn arrived? This winter, Arianne was far away from him, once again. He wondered if she had received the package he had sent her.

…

The next morning, Arianne was woken up by a call from the express delivery man. She yawned as she walked to the door to sign for the package. When she saw the mid-sized package that came from the capital, she knew that it was from Mark. However, she did not know what was inside the package…

He had stopped sending her flowers, so she thought that he had finally begun to listen to her. Then, what in the world was this?

She opened the package to find an exquisite black gift box that was wrapped with a ribbon. However, there was no brand on it. This couldn't be an expensive item, could it? She opened the box hesitatingly, ready to refuse the item if it turned out to be expensive. However, she was perplexed when she saw the gift inside — it was a dreamcatcher, delicately laced with white feathers, with a transparent crystal around the size of a thumb hanging in the middle of its weave. There seemed to be some kind of fine white-grey powder sealed in the crystal.

She held up the dreamcatcher and scrutinized it. This would be a nice decoration to hang above her bed. However, she wasn't sure if it was expensive. As she closed the box, she found a card at the bottom of it, with Mark's handwriting: 'I'm sorry, it's my fault that Rice Ball's left you. It'll always be with you from now on, catching all of your nightmares. I believe that it will be very happy to be able to stay by your side forever.'