Ruling 591

Chapter 591

The duo's arrival at the West family residence was immediately welcomed by a banquet-sized feast that almost exclusively served Tiffany's favorite dishes.

As Tiffany's eyes took in the food laid before her, she realized how much she enjoyed being cared for by someone. The notion of being seen as important warmed her heart.

Time passed, but Atticus West continued to be absent. Knowing Jackson was avoiding the question, Tiffany took it upon herself to ask Summer, "Where's Uncle Atticus, Auntie Summer? I don't see him."

Summer snuck a glance at her son. "Oh, he's around alright… All cooped up in his study upstairs. He's concerned that Jackson might be upset if he shows up, so that stubborn old man has shut himself in after ignoring my advice. Well, Tiffie dear, would you take Jackson with you and invite him over for dinner?"

Jackson did not attempt to hide his repulsion. "Nope, no can do. I'm not gonna beg him to eat with us. To eat or not to eat — it's none of my concern."

Tiffany jabbed his leg with a swing of her foot under the table. "What are you talking about? This isn't what you promised on our way here! We are going right now. To-ge-ther."

Knowing full well that he could not win, Jackson (very) reluctantly followed Tiffany upstairs and stood woodenly outside the door, clearly balking at the idea of going in. Tiffany, quietly enabling his compromise, reached out and gave a knock. "Uncle Atticus? It's me, Tiffany, with Jackson. Come have dinner with us!"

The door opened, revealing Atticus's kindly, amicable smile. "Ah, hello! I'll be joining you shortly."

Jackson turned on his heels and left without a word. A little embarrassed, Tiffany flashed the older man a quick smile before following Jackson downstairs.

Atticus took his seat soon enough, completing the picture of a facilely happy family with an unstable undertone. The air had gelled so much, Tiffany could not come up with anything to thaw the growing frost.

She bit the tip of her fork and stared blankly. If this frightening atmosphere was what was in store for her in the future, then she would rather have no part of it —

Summer placed a spoonful of mashed potatoes on her plate. "Oh, Tiffie sweetie, please do come have dinner with Jackson and us more often, okay?"

Tiffany had become Summer's only hope now. Without Tiffany, Summer knew that her husband and son would not even attempt to sit at the same table and have a meal together.

Tiffany met Summer's incredibly loaded gaze and felt the weight on her shoulders. "R-Right! Will do! I mean, it's bothersome to cook our own meals anyway, so yea, we'll definitely come around for food… If you don't mind us, that is."

Summer smiled. “Oh, Lord, no! Family provides among themselves, don’t they? But more importantly, I genuinely like you, Tiffany Lane. I like you enough that I don’t want us to stay as mere mother- and daughter-in-law. No, it would be great if you could see me as your mother as I see you as my daughter!” she said kindly. “It’s a shame that Jackson doesn’t have a baby brother or sister. I have always wanted a daughter myself. Now, it looks like my dream is finally coming true!”

Summer’s proclamation made Tiffany a little self-conscious. Did she sincerely harbor no trenchant comments about her? Did she really mean it when she said she “genuinely liked” Tiffany?

Amid her embarrassment, she noticed that neither Atticus nor Jackson had spoken. Naturally, she took it upon herself to be their bridge. “So, Uncle Atticus, you must be a whiz in art, right? I’ve dabbled in it myself, but I ended up graduating as a designer instead of working on fine arts. Now, I work under Jackson.”

The very mention of his pride drew a countenance of confidence and self-assurance out of Atticus. He subverted his usual terse self and replied at length, “Ah, I’m handy enough, thank you. The key to perfecting your art is perseverance, after all; the road to mastery is always a long and arduous one. I’ve taught so many students, but alas, many abandoned their craft with only a very few stickling true to their passion. Nonetheless, what matters the most is that you do what feels right for your soul.”

As the man spoke, hints of unreadable sentiments bobbed and bubbled in Jackson’s eyes. Sometimes, his eyes appeared to be jeering at Atticus; other times, they seemed to be masking an even stronger emotional undercurrent.

Jackson could not help it. His father had abandoned them — his wife and son — for twenty-odd years just because he wanted to paint some pretty pictures. The expression that surfaced to Atticus’s face whenever he talked about art disconcerted Jackson, and right now, it was suffocating him. Even after returning to them, Jackson suspected that deep within the man’s heart, art was still more esteemed than family.

In the end, Jackson broke his promise. With frost claiming his mien, he rose and stormed off to his car for a smoke. He was ready to leave.

Summer's expression stiffened. Atticus abruptly sank back into silence.

A quiet blizzard had seized the air once more.

Tiffany was simply not trained to defuse this. Unable to bring herself to sit through one more second of it, she stood up, excused herself, and went outside.

"Jackson West! How could you do this? Didn't we just establish the need to look forward and stuff?" she chastised him. "Can't you just be a smidge better to your dad for once? We're gonna be married, for Christ's sake! Going to your parents' place for meals is gonna be a thing — a very frequent thing! If this is how you'll act every frickin' time, you're gonna doom me, the middlewoman, to endless awkwardness! Please, sweetie. Your mom really looks to me to help you forgive your dad, and I want to help her. I want to make that happen, but you… You're making this so damn hard!"

"I'm not asking you to adore him or respect him. I'm not even asking you to be all smiley or friendly with him," she muttered. "All I'm asking is that you stop making things awkward for everyone. Please?"

Jackson could insert jocularity in their banters if it was about virtually any topic under the sun — but this was the sole exception. The trauma gnawing at him was more than two decades old, for crying out loud. No matter how much strength he managed to muster to forgive him, none of it ever survived the moment he laid his eyes on his father.

Jackson puffed smoke after smoke to hide his complete loss of explanation.

He wondered if the conflict he was experiencing was something dear Tiffany could ever understand.

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Watching him go into a stone-like silence abruptly sparked an ugly blaze within Tiffany. Suddenly, she despised the man standing in front of her. She despised him so much that it harkened back to the last time they had an altercation that stung enough to make her consider splitting.

It was not like she wanted Jackson to surrender to her demands or go through hell to make her happy or even completely absolve the faults Atticus had made as a deadbeat dad. All she wanted Jackson to do was to put at least an ounce of forbearance; to summon a little bit more grit — just enough that when he was in the same room as his father, no one had to feel terrible.

Among the four of them, Tiffany was the outsider, the tack-on. That alone was enough ground for trepidation that could easily escalate into crippling anxiety. The last thing she wanted was to be stuck in the middle of a cold war while already embroiled in discomfort. It mortified her. It made her want to quit and never bother with it again. However, she could not possibly do that because the man before her was the love of her life. They were going to get married.

Tiffany needed him to let go of his baggage and all of the past attached to it, so that they could face the future together. But now, Tiffany felt as though she had poured her heart and spirit into an unfillable abyss. Tried as she might, she'd changed nothing.

The worst part of it was that Jackson-bloody-West was not even going to try talking to her about it! She hated it when people retreated into silence. Everyone was obviously nursing some opinions in their minds right now, so why did they not just voice them out altogether? Was communication not the staple of human interaction? How could people expect anything to be solved without any communication?

“Jackson West! What is it that you’re thinking?” Tiffany fumed. “I, at least, tried walking in your shoes, so why can’t you show the same empathy for me, huh? Can you, at the very least, start with some baby steps? I don’t know, maybe treat your father like he’s a total stranger for a change! Because at least, you wouldn’t give a stranger an ugly glare when you’re eating with him before suddenly storming out of the door, would you? My God — I’m not asking much, Jackson. I just wanna make sure that every frickin’ time we eat with your parents, this goddamned awkward environment isn’t what’s waiting for me. Can you do that, at least?”

Unfortunately, Jackson had become just as uncharacteristically crotchety as she. Right now, Tiffany’s words had become trying noise in his ears, while his brain was too exasperated to reflect on any of them.

“Lay off. This was never any of your business!” he snapped coldly. “And here’s a fact: I never wanted to come here.”

Bitterness welled up in Tiffany’s chest. They made a promise just a few hours ago amid cheerful banters and chatters! But now, their dynamic had twisted into something beyond recognition. For the first time, he had snapped at her with an attitude he had never used before.

What went wrong back there that stung his sore spot? Tiffany had not the slightest clue. What she knew, however, was that he had exhausted all of her patience.

“Oh, so that’s how it’s going to be? Fine! I’ll lay off. I’ll lay off forever! From now on, if you hate going somewhere, then count me out too. In fact, I’m not even gonna accompany you even if you want to go to your parents’ place!” She seethed. “God knows how tired all of this is making me. I’m going home.”

She spun and started down the road, not intending to ride in his car. Luckily for her, the neighborhood was an accessible area much frequented by public transports.

All Tiffany wanted to do right now was to separate herself from him and cool off.

People sometimes fight purely at the behest of their emotions. Sometimes, what starts an argument may turn out to be a mere excuse rather than an actual reason. People accumulate stress from their lives, after all, and all that stress bids for the right moment to break out. Ultimately, many of one's most quotidian arguments were really just dramatized outlets for pent-up steams.

Tiffany disliked conflicts. Clashes of emotions drove her away. To her, it did not matter what was going on — if she sensed that a discussion was coming to a heated standstill, she would automatically excuse herself. She always thought it was better to solve something only after one had calmed down.

Before Tiffany could reach the end of the road, she heard a honk from behind her. Jackson had followed her.

Sulking, she willed herself not to look back while hastening her pace. After all, did he not just so coldly order her not to care a few minutes earlier?

"My beloved mademoiselle, I've come to my senses and know that I was wrong to speak to you that way! I shouldn't have brought my anger out on you!" came the man's voice behind her. "It's just… That look on that geezer's face when he talked about his art just pisses me off! He rarely talks unless the topic revolves around his 'art'; it is the only time he ever looks alive. That's the case despite the fact that 'art' was the same damn thing that spurred him into disappearing from his family! …Look, I'm sorry that I wasn't strong enough to keep my emotions in check back there. I should have taken you with me before I left instead of abandoning you. Wait, or maybe I should have been better at enduring it until we finished our meals…?"

Hearing his apology did wonders in putting out some of Tiffany's fire, but the girl maintained her pace. In response, Jackson continued to tail her with his car at snail speed.

"Aww, come on! Canst thou talk to me, m'lady? I mean it when I said I know I am wrong. Please, throw me a bone here… I swear I'm not gonna do that again, alright? I really lost it back there; that's the only reason why I was blind to how you feel. But listen, Tiffie — I'm not going back on my promise to you, I swear. I just need time. Would you give me that?" he pleaded. "Frankly, there's no way that old man and I could ever become some sort of happy father-and-son pair, but I'll be damned if I don't work hard to see him as, well, an acquainted stranger. I'll do my hardest to maintain a cordial distance between ourselves. I might not be close to him in the end, but I also won't act offensively, either. Is that good?"

That was more like it, Tiffany thought, before finally turning to him and getting into the car. "I'm in only because I'm wearing heels and it's not easy to walk on them," she said, feigning steeliness. "Send me home — my home, not yours. I'm not in the mood to talk to you, and I'll pay you for the trip."

Jackson, however, pulled over by the roadside. "Oh, such blasphemy! Do you think I'm in need of money? No, mademoiselle, what I need right now is a beautiful wife to warm my cold, cold bed… Seriously, please stop being mad at me. You can vent off your frustration — deck me across the face or shout at me, whatever you fancy — once we're home, 'kay? Wouldn't you forgive a man who apologizes so quickly? C'mon, come to my place, will ya? I mean, when you think about it, what we both need right now is some 'teambuilding'—"

"Dream on, Romeo!" Tiffany rolled her eyes. "You're quick to apologize every frickin' time, anyway. I know you, Jackson 'Master Skirtchaser' West. You always apologize no matter whose fault it was because that usually solves the problem for you. You do it at the drop of a hat; you don't mean it. God, this is so frustrating that I just wanna go home! Seriously, did you take a good glimpse of your mother when you stormed off? And your father, who withdrew into silence with guilt all over his face?"

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Jackson froze. He lowered his eyes as his emotions returned to whence they came. “I’ll call my mom and apologize to her too… right in front of you. Fine?”

Tiffany suddenly found Jackson inscrutable. Worried that he was only trying to make her happy by making things even harder for himself, she demurred, “Look, I didn’t say I want that. But… I guess… I guess I agree that you should give your mom a call.”

Without another word, Jackson dialed Summer’s number and connected his phone to the car speaker through Bluetooth connection. When the call was through, it was loud enough for Tiffany to hear every word Summer enunciated.

“Jackson? Is that you?”

“I’m sorry for losing my cool just now, Mom. I won’t do it again.”

“Oh. Well, it’s alright. I understand. You were acting out against your father’s display of passion, weren’t you? But surely you’re aware that art is… well, art is your father’s lifelong devotion; he can’t help but act the way he did… Listen, I’m not asking you to treat him like he’s the best dad in the world or anything. All I want is that, for your mother’s sake, you try your best to be cordial with him. Please, sweetie, can you do that?”

“You must have realized that acting out like that just now threw Tiffany into a really awkward situation, right? You’re not a kid anymore, Jackson. This isn’t even the first time you’ve been in a relationship. So please, think about how others feel for a change, ok? It isn’t wrong to be more mindful of your loved ones’ feelings… Alright, I think I’ve talked enough. The two of you should get to rest early. Don’t worry about me, Jackson. I’m okay.”

Jackson drew in a shaky breath. The usual suaveness in his eyes had vanished, with resignation and surliness filling up the vacuum. “Yes, Mom. I get it.”

The call ended, leaving silence to permeate freely within the car. Neither of them tried to break it.

It became clear to Tiffany right now — Jackson might have chased after her and mollified her with an apology, but that did not mean he genuinely felt it. All he did was shove his emotions to the deepest recesses of his mind. Honestly, the one who brought up the topic that set him off was Tiffany herself, and now she was apprehensive that she might detonate his other bombs as well.

In the end, it was Jackson who broke the ice. “Please come to my place instead of going home. I… I don’t want to spend tonight by myself. Please?”

Tiffany found rejecting him a painful option, so her resolve wavered. “Um, how about… Ah, but I still think I shouldn’t come to your place tonight…? We're both in a bad mood right now, and we need some personal space to chill. Few things in life can’t be fixed by sleep, I always say.”

That was when Jackson suddenly hardened his stance and declared, “No, I don’t need to chill, and sleep isn’t gonna help me. That’s it, you’re coming with me!”

He slammed his foot onto the accelerator, and the car whirred to life.

Tiffany grouched, “You are the worst, Jackson West! You never give a damn about what I think—!”

She did not sound mad; in fact, she sounded borderline coquettish.

Jackson ignored her grumble.

The door to White Water Bay Villa was swung open. With a surprised yelp, Tiffany was shoved onto the couch in the living room before the lights were even on. In the dark, a frenzied Jackson began. He was long past the need for foreplay.

Tiffany felt as though she had figured out another part of him — he seemed to get on by intense emotional turmoils. In contrast to their usual, more-romantic sessions, these moments were exclusively meant to liberate whatever had built up within him.

She was suddenly reminded of back then — before they were together. He had paid her just to sleep with him (literally, of course). That was how they started to become close, though it also sparked a sneaky suspicion that the guy must have a kink.

Now, however, Tiffany felt a profound sense of pity. Perhaps he had led a hedonistic life not because he was libertine by nature, but because he was seeking his hearth in a partner. What tormented him the most was not the hunger of the flesh, but the thirst of his soul.

And the one who had bereft him so much was none other than his father. Had Atticus not abandoned his family, Jackson would not have felt so alone since he was a kid.

This was why some seeds had such indestructible roots that it became impossible to uproot the ugly tree that grew out of it. This was why he just could not seem to let go, to forgive.

He was even more beastly than usual tonight; Tiffany felt close to being torn apart just after a few minutes. She wanted him to be gentler, yet the few things that managed to fall out of her mouth were broken gasps and words so shattered that nothing intelligible could be pieced.

Jackson was nearing his limit. He lifted her scarlet face and croaked, “I love you so, so much, Tiffie… Please be by my side forever, please… Tiffie, I… Love… You…”

He was coming, she realized. So, she complemented him.

“I’m yours.”

….

The song of the morning birds outside stirred Tiffany from her slumber. The best part of White Water Bay Villa was not its striking architectural design, but its breathtaking view of nature’s most verdant sights.

She sat up and drew a long stretch, breathing in the fresh, humid aftermath of the rain. It poured last night, leaving the air cool for the morning.

Tiffany had a nagging feeling that something was amiss. Her eyes trained on her phone — and found out that it was already eleven in the morning.

Jackson had not tried to wake her up! And since she did not ask for leave from her superior, it effectively meant that she was skipping work, which was a punishable folly!

Tiffany swiftly swung off the bed, determined to pack up as quickly as she could before making a mad dash to the company. However, right when her feet came into contact with the surface, her legs turned into jelly and she plopped onto the floor.

The first thought that sprung into her mind was that she was officially crippled. After that, all she could think about was how much of a goddamned animal Jackson was — he did not try to control himself at all last night, did he? Any fiercer and Tiffany could kiss ten years from her life expectancy good-bye!

The doorbell rang. Tiffany gritted through her body's discomfort and rose to answer the door.

She froze when it turned out to be Summer. "Good morning, Tiffie. Jackson told me you're at home, so I thought I should come over and check on you. You haven't had your breakfast, have you? I brought you some snacks and fruits to fill up that empty tummy for the moment."

Allowing herself in, Summer placed the food in her bag onto a coffee table nearby while Tiffany sheepishly scratched a lock from her matted hair.

"Um, er… I gotta' head to work, Auntie," she admitted. "I guess I'll bring the food on the go."

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Summer took a seat on the couch as she remarked, “What’s the rush? It’s not like anyone’s gonna deduct your wage over it or something. Now, about last night… Thank you. I have no doubt that you did something to convince Jackson to apologize to me over the phone. It’s hard for him, I know. I don’t blame him.”

As Tiffany had only just woken up, she was not precisely at her most sober. “Huh?… I mean, just doing my job! Yeeeeap.”

Suddenly, Summer’s expression changed before pulling out a bra from underneath her. “What the…?”

Tiffany froze. If she remembered correctly, her bra should not have been the only thing tucked inside the couch cushions — there should have been something else that was way, way more embarrassing! God, last night, they took such a direct dive into their passion that neither of them had the thought of tidying things up!

Her thoughts returned to the present, and she lurched forward, snatching the bra from Summer’s hand. “Oh, I’m so, so sorry about this! Um, this place can be a little pigsty because I, um, haven’t tidied it up lately! Oh, look at the time, you must have something waiting to be done too, right, Auntie Summer? Don’t worry about me, I’m doing super! A-a-and Jackson’s doing super, too! Oops, gotta wash up and go to work, haha!”

Summer pressed back the embarrassment that had aroused well enough; she did not show any outward signs. “A-ah, I see. I’ll be off, then. Oh, you don’t need to worry. I saw ‘nothing.’ Besides, I know what it’s like to be young — this is relatively mundane, so don’t feel bad about it, especially since I’m not some stranger, either. Anyway, remember to take the stuff I’ve brought for you to work, okay?”

Tiffany could only nod in response because what she really wanted to do right now was to find a hole in the floor to hide inside — wait, scratch that, she would have to give Jackson a tremendous beating first! She did not have the habit of throwing clothes all over the place; that was Jackson's quirk!

She let out a sigh of relief when Summer finally left before preparing to go to work.

By the time she arrived, everyone else had gone out for their lunch break, leaving the office empty.

Tiffany walked straight into Jackson's desk. He was absent, so she placed Summer's fruits and snacks on his table.

She was just about to leave when a curious face peeked out from the edge of the door. "Hoooooo! What do we have here? A secret lunch for Mr. West? Oh my god! Et tu, Tiffany? You also have a crush on Mr. West?"

Tiffany did not expect to be noticed. "What? No! His mom told me to bring these for him, man. Don't make up a story over it now."

Her colleague, Aye, pursed her lips in disbelief. "Oh, I know you and Mr. West go back a long while, but why didn't you give him food when he was around? Why do this in secret as if you can't be seen doing it, hmmmm? Besides, I totally saw that little 'oh-my-god-I-got-caught' expression on your face when you found me here, so come on, don't deny it! Mr. West is a fantastic guy. Who wouldn't have a crush on him? Seriously, almost every female colleague in this company drools for him, man."

'Drool for him?' One end of Tiffany's lips twitched. Nope, she was not drooling over him — not anymore, and not after last night. She cared about her life too much to risk it again!

Ever since Aye caught her delivering food in Jackson's absence, the nosy fellow had been shooting Tiffany meaningful gazes frequently as though the latter had officially joined the Jackson West Secret Fan Club. Tiffany wished she could tell Aye to her face that she was not 'crushing on him' since she was straight-up his bae.

Jackson only returned to the office with his secretary half an hour later after lunch break ended. A bit miffed, Tiffany hurled surly eyes in his direction.

Aye, sitting next to her, elbowed her in the waist. "Wow, jealous much? Don't be. Miss Lang has been Mr. West's assistant for years now. You know what they say, 'first come, first served'. We latecomers just gotta queue up and watch his radiance from afar… But hey, until Mr. West is married, we all have a shot. So cheer up, babe, don't look like a wronged housewife."

Aye's words sent a pang through Tiffany's chest, and she had to muster all of her willpower not to show it. "Alright, that's it, Miss Rumor-mill! By the way… Why does everyone call you Aye, again?"

Aye straightened her buxom-less chest beamingly. "I'm pretty used to being called this by now, so yea, 'Aye' and proud. It's quite an endearing nickname, too."

Tiffany did not expect that at all. It made her look down and examine her own chest.

At this point, Jackson had come around her desk and asked casually, "Finally here?"

It was a double-entendre with its deeper meaning meant only for the two. Rather sourly, Tiffany gruntled, “Well, of course I’m here. I still need to work to live, right? Meanwhile, Mr. West seems to have it easy, doesn’t he? He’s even got this beautiful woman as his companion for lunch!”

Everything was a-okay and going well for him, including the companionship of a hot secretary. Meanwhile, Tiffany was so knocked out that she slept till mid-noon and could only fill herself up with the fruits and snacks Summer bought for her.

The look on Jackson’s face stiffened. Quickly, he turned to his secretary and dismissed her, “Please, move on without me.”

Shooting Tiffany a nonplussed glance, Lianna Lang replied, “Sure.”

The more Tiffany watched her, the more irritated she became. That gait she assumed while walking was positively brimming with seduction! Slowly but surely, her lips became so pursed that they looked like a beak.

The look she wore made Jackson chuckle, but he did not explain himself. “Good luck with your work. I gotta’ go.”

Tiffany was broiling and spent the rest of the evening, imagining all kinds of risqué scenarios between Jackson and Miss Lang. Since he used to be quite libertine, it was reasonable to suspect that he might have done the tango with this particular secretary who followed him around — so what if he did? What was she going to do? There was no way she was going to let this pass! Which woman in their right mind would feel okay seeing the woman their man once had sexual relationships with standing right in front of her?!

It was a grueling wait, but it was finally past work time. Per tradition, Tiffany waited for Jackson at the intersection. Almost instantly as she stepped into his car, she blurted out fumingly, “Did you or did you not have sex with that Miss Lang? Aye told me that almost every female employee has a crush on you, especially Miss Lang, who… who swings her hips like a pendulum in front of you all the time! So you be candid with me right now — did ya do it?”

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Jackson had imagined their eventual confrontation to be a severe one; however, the sight of jealousy pouring out of her mien was somehow a pretty enjoyable sight. “Well, what do you think?”

“What do I think?” Tiffany was on the verge of an eruption. “‘What do I think?’ I’ve been fuming at the idea for the entire evening, Buckaroo, and here you want me to think about it even more? I ain’t playing this game… You tell me yourself!”

Jackson could not stop himself from laughing. “Oh, Lord, what did that brain of yours cook up, huh? Alright, I admit, I used to swing around a lot, but! My escapade never involved people of my inner circles. Perhaps you should ask Aye about this; she would tell you that I only have relationships with women outside our company. Everyone knows that I’ve never slept with any of the female employees,” he explained. “Sure, Miss Lane is bodacious, and that body is pretty damned sexy, but too bad! She is my secretary, which according to my rul — ”

“Too f**king bad?” He had not finished his sentence before Tiffany launched a kung-fu chop to his face. “You bastard! And don’t crap with me about not involving your inner circle. What the hell was Lynn Brooks’ case, huh?”

Mentioning Lynn darkened his mood significantly. “That was the point. She broke my rule, and terrible things happened.”

Tiffany was still pretty peeved at heart, but watching storm clouds on his face daunted Tiffany from dishing out another playful wallop. “Hmph! Had I known about this, I wouldn’t have joined your goddamned company in the first place. Now it looks like I’m trying to snatch a slab of meat from a den of hungry female colleagues!”

Jackson tilted his body and helped Tiffany with her seatbelt. “Hey now, don’t be mad, alright? I’ll get myself a male secretary tomorrow. ‘Course, I can’t just fire Miss Lane for no reason, so I’ll probably move her to one of our branch companies. Either way,” he said assuringly. “These are small matters. I used to be a womanizer, yes, but the emphasis is on ‘used to.’ From now on, the only one I care about is you. Only you can stir my heart — and Little Jackson down there. How’s that?”

He was so eager to assure her that Tiffany felt a little ashamed for jumping to jealousy at the drop of a hat. Her stance softened significantly. “C-can you please stop connecting everything to sex? You may have the face of a prince, but damn, you have the appetite of a beast!… Which reminds me, I haven’t made you pay for last night! You tore my clothes off and flung them onto the couch, where your beloved mother found one of them just this morning and held it in her hand! Do you know how much I wanted to crawl into the deepest trench on Earth and never come out? Also, why didn’t you wake me up for work, huh? I really thought I was gonna get penalized by my superior!”

“C’mon, Tiffie. Ain’t nothing to be ashamed of. What’s so scary about being caught by my mom?” Jackson replied before planting a kiss on her cheek. “As for work — I’ve already notified your superior on your behalf, so you’re not skipping work, and no one knows you’re late. Don’t worry about your wage! I guarantee you, not a penny has been deducted. Now, let us do some grocery shopping, and I’ll make you something nice for dinner later.”

The revelation that he was going to play chef today turned Tiffany into a different woman. Her mouth watered so much that it was close to dribbling. “Ooh, I want risotto! Scallops! Chateaubriand!…”

Watching her dewy eyes widening in anticipation, Jackson could not help but pinch her cheek. “Alright. Your wish is my command,” he answered dotingly. “I’m yours to command in the day, but you’ll be mine when night falls. The price for a full-course meal is to be my company for the night. No backing out of payment now!”

It was such a bare-faced bait, but Tiffany bit it willingly, anyway. It was what it was — Tiffany was a slave to her man’s cooking.

….

The day of Tiffany and Jackson’s engagement drew closer and closer. Tiffany, too, was steadily plunging into a mire of anxiety and nervousness. Although most of the preliminary preparations were thankfully not hers to manage, she still needed to handpick the dress and jewelry to be worn on that day.

Tiffany had wanted to find something simple, but Jackson was adamant in picking the most extravagant ones — her jewelry, her dress, and their engagement ring, which came with a price that could make a man shriek. His excuse? “Only the best could befit my woman.”

Technically, Jackson was not alone, since Summer and Atticus both shared the same philosophy. The two had made their mission clear: no daughter-in-law of theirs was going to get anything that was second-best.

The night before their engagement was finally here. Tiffany had become so restless that she lost sleep. Even after the night had eased into the wee hours, she was still in the middle of a video call with Arianne.

“Ari, I’m suuuuper nervous right now. I can’t sleep! And it’s past midnight now, awwwwwww…” she whined. “What if there are dark rings around my eyes tomorrow and my face becomes, like, super puffy? Ooh, I blame you for not wanting to return to the Capital sooner and keep me company! Without you, I feel like I’m teetering on a tightrope...”

“Come on, Tiffie, don’t get yourself worked up over an engagement. And you’re right! You do need to squeeze some sleep in as soon as possible; otherwise, you might look like hell, and then no amount of makeup’s gonna be enough to cover that,” Arianne comforted. “I wanted to come to you as early as possible, but the café’s been so busy that I couldn’t leave. Hey, I promise I’ll arrive on time tomorrow, m’kay? I'll give ya a surprise, but you gotta promise me you’re going to sleep.”

Despite her reluctance, Tiffany terminated the call and threw herself onto the bed, tossing and turning.

She made such a racket that Lillian started nagging outside her room, “Oy, what are you doing in there, young lady? What, had your engagement been called off? It’s getting late. You should go to sleep right now!

“You’re an adult, Tiffie; you should know what’s good for yourself,” she added. “It will be terrible if you botch one of the biggest moments of your life because of a little sleeplessness tonight. Look, if you must, Mommy’s got Ambien to help.”

Tiffany gave a loud sigh. “Alright, alright, Mom! I don’t need it. I’m going to sleep, promise. You gotta’ go to sleep soon, too. Then tomorrow, you put on your most gorgeous look that the world’s ever seen and make your daughter proud!”

Honestly, Lillian herself was just as enthused as her daughter. Like Tiffany, she could not sleep, either. How could she, when the thought of the West family being so close to becoming their relatives after tomorrow galvanized her to no end?

Lillian used to zealously push her daughter into hooking up with sons of affluent families, but the only thing those efforts brought was a widening gulf between the mother and daughter pair. In the end, she stopped, and now the daughter — on her own accord — ended up making the mother proud by tying her knot with one of the nation's most promising young lads.

Chapter 596

Jackson appeared by the steps leading to the Lanes' residence the next morning while it was bright out. Behind him, a striking procession of cars lined up in a neat row outside the entrance to the complex.

Tiffany had only (reluctantly) rolled out of bed after a call from her beau before dragging herself to wash up. Lillian, in contrast, was much more excited for the event. She was already all dolled up, so she lent her daughter a hand with the latter's make-up.

"Uh, youngsters nowadays! I told you to head to bed early last night, but did you listen? Now look at you — your eyelids are practically glued close!" she chastised. "Jackson's waiting for you downstairs, young lady. Just look at all those cars lining up outside — pooh! Now that's the Wests for you. But if all of this is for a mere engagement ceremony, then how grand would the wedding itself be?"

Tiffany cracked yet another jaw-breaking yawn in front of the dresser. "Can't we do this at, uh, a later time or something, Mom? As long as we, uh, make it to the diner for lunch, right?" She slurred. "I'm like, so sleepy right now. I wanna go back to sleep. You slept pretty late last night, too, right? How did you manage to — yawn — wake up at all, huh?"

Lillian grabbed hold of the girl's ear and pinched hard. "That's because a proper adult like myself knows that there are more important things in life than sleep! Unlike you, young lady — you youngsters have zero ideas of priority! Jackson's been here since ages ago, yet you see no problem lazing around in your

bed. What foul manners! Ugh, be quick with your dressing up so we can meet him as soon as possible already. By the way, I didn't hear any news about Ari. Is she not coming?”

The mention of Arianne served as a small wake-up cue for Tiffany. “Oh, I should call her and ask. She should reach the Capital’s airport by noon today; said she’s gonna rush to us at full speed because she doesn’t wanna miss out on something as momentous as this. She promised me this much during our video call last night.”

Tiffany called, but a robocall answered and informed her that she could not engage with Arianne. Reasoning that her friend was still in the middle of the flight, Tiffany set the issue aside.

While all of this was going on, Jackson had been anxiously waiting for more than an hour downstairs. He was getting more and more restless. “You guys wait here. I’ll go and see if everything’s alright.”

Lillian answered his door and quickly supplied, “Oh, it’s you, Jackson! Er, we’re almost ready, so — don’t worry, okay? Tiffie is doing her make-up. She’s gonna be done very soon!”

A rare moment of Jackson’s cheeks turning sheepish pink ensued as the man realized his relationship with Lillian had upgraded to in-laws. “Oh, uh, that’s cool. Yeah. I, uh, will go in and say hi and come back out there with the two of you afterward. I mean, after she’s done.”

Unfortunately, his good mood took a little dip the moment he stepped into Tiffany’s room, for lo and behold, his bride-to-be had fallen asleep right in front of her dresser. He had been losing a whole night’s sleep waiting for today and leaped right into a flurry to see her, and this was how Tiffie chose to welcome their engagement day?

Lillian lifted Tiffany off her desk briskly. “Oy, what in the world — Jackson‘s here!”

The girl’s eyes immediately snapped open, though her bleary, glassy eyes took some time to focus on the man standing next to her mother.

The world suddenly dazzled her. Jackson was donning his usual business suit not unlike the one he wore to work, but he managed to convey a brimming sense of formality that his quotidian appearances lacked. His hair, which was evident of careful, deliberate dressing, was oozing out a gallant, mature air, and now Tiffany’s screaming fangirl side was threatening to come out, and — hold on. Why did he look a little bit miffed?

“Tiffany Lane, I’m giving you five more minutes,” Jackson intoned, his expression a bit stormy. “If you’re not done by then, so help me, I’ll… I’ll… I’ll remember this for the rest of my life!”

He turned on his heels and marched to the couch in the living room while Tiffany reeled back from her daze. In a dash, she tidied her hair into tidy locks, painted her lips cherry-red, and lifted her skirt a little before hurrying out of her room. “Oh, I’m all prepared now! I was just too excited for today that I didn’t manage to sleep much, alright? This is why I couldn’t get up… C’mon, you’re not gonna be angry with me today, of all days, right?”

“You’re lucky I’m not in the mood to be angry with you.” Jackson shot her a snide glance in faux anger before stepping forward with his arm bent toward him. “Besides, I didn’t sleep a wink out of excitement, either…”

A beaming grin pushed Tiffany’s eyes into two happy curves before she hooked her arm into Jackson’s and went out of the door.

The sight outside shocked Tiffany, as her eyes recognized a seemingly-endless row of fine, luxurious cars—all of them in black—waiting for her. There was no way any of these was rented, so she guessed that some belonged to the West family themselves while Mark lent some of his to complete the assemble. It was not an impossible conjecture, as Tiffany had been to the Tremonts' garage and witnessed its glorious additions before.

"Holy crap, don't you think this is a little bit… well, over the top?" she remarked. "It's just an engagement ceremony, right? Do we even need all this pomp?"

Jackson tugged a car door open and beckoned. "Make yourself comfortable. I've told you that I'll give you nothing but the best, so no, this isn't over-the-top at all. You wanna see what actual pomp looks like? Then wait till you see what we have for the wedding."

Though bewildered, Tiffany felt relatively neutral about it. Lillian, however, found her vanity sated by the grandeur. She had dreamed of rising back up like a phoenix since the Lanes' downfall, and now her wish was finally coming true.

The procession arrived at the five-star hotel by half-past ten in the morning. There, members of the upper-class made for a serried crowd within the hotel's otherwise capacious hall. Summer and Atticus, who had long arrived since earlier, were already waiting.

The hall was flawlessly decorated. Two of the most basic romantic yet pompous hallmarks of ceremonies — fresh flowers adorning every awning and corner of the doors and the most premium white roses blanketing the steps — were already in place. If one must describe the sheer magnificence of the arrangement, the best they could describe was that it was the stuff of high society, grandiloquent, elite, and without any fault nor foible.

All of it was urging Tiffany's anxiety. As she watched the deluge of people in front of her, her hand tightened around Jackson's cuff and refused to let go. "Jackson? I don't think I can handle this. Um, c-c-can we like, find somewhere quiet with nobody but us?"

"Huh, what's wrong?" Jackson said, surprised. "Is the grandeur making you nervous, or is it because of our engagement? I mean, it's not like you've never been through ceremonies and events as grand as this one in the past…"

Chapter 597

Tiffany was just as confused about her sudden anxiety. Her family's affluent past had acclimated her to grand events like these, and she was never one to shy away from social interactions. However, somehow over time, the girl had begun to shrink from people-centric events.

Nevertheless, Jackson and Tiffany were the stars of the show today. She could not possibly weasel her way out of attention despite herself. "I-I don't know why. Aww… Can't Ari be any faster? I'll feel soooo much better if she's around," Tiffany murmured. "Without her, I feel so, well, vulnerable…"

Jackson patted the back of Tiffany's hand reassuringly. "God, you can't live without Arianne, can you?" he teased. "Now, now. Have no fear, for I'm right here with you, right? In fact, let's bring you to the lounge for a breather and a little surprise that I have in store for you."

Tiffany was secretly unexcited for whatever Jackson was gearing up to do. How could any "surprise" be of any help to her multiplying anxiety?

The first thing that abruptly sprung onto Tiffany's face the moment she stepped into the lounge was the bursting confetti, which gave her quite the shock. The subsequent chorus of familiar laughter and chatter, meanwhile, brought hints of redness to her eyes.

“So you’d already arrived, Ari! And you both too, Naya, Tanya!” Tiffany cried. “You people are the worst! Why didn’t any of you inform me earlier? Especially you, Ari — You could have returned to the Capital sooner!”

Naya had brought her kid, Lulu, along. “I had to bring my sweetie with me while Tanya’s got her grandfather. Our time here would become a little bit too troublesome if we’d come here earlier and waited a little longer. So yeah, we decided to rush the destination when the time drew near,” she explained, before adding, “Congratulations, Tiffany. Seriously, you and Jackson are a match made in heaven. You’re just unbelievably gorgeous today — Jackson, too. Looking good!”

The man in question was quite glad to accept a compliment like this. “Thank you. Well, then, I’ll leave you ladies to chat among yourselves. I have some guests to attend. Busy, busy, busy!”

Tiffany waited until Jackson had left before throwing herself onto the lounge and spread her leg wide without caring for the image she was creating. Just like that, Tiffany hurled the etiquette of a fine lady of standing into the fire and looked more like a delinquent. “Damn, do you girls have any frickin’ idea how tired I am out there? Like, I had to brace through a bunch of people I don’t even know, and it’s just — gods, it’s so nerve-wracking!” she ranted. “Urgh, just the thought of me having to go out there again and pretend-smile to a bunch of highfalutin strangers and pretenders is enough to make me quake. Ah, well. Gotta’ relax right now while I still can! Hey, Lulu, why don’t you pass that piece of cake to Auntie Tiffany? ‘Cause I haven’t taken my breakfast yet, and I’m frickin’ famished!”

Naya chuckled and took the cake from her daughter’s hand and passed it to Tiffany. “It’s a blessing to be engaged, honey, so don’t sour your own mood by imagining it as some kinda war to fight, ok? Relax, we’ve got you. Oh, speaking of which — is your husband coming, Ari?”

Arianne’s expression instinctively stiffened for a second. “Him coming or not has got nothing to do with me,” she declared under her breath.

Because that rascal had abducted her sweet old granny from her, Arianne was not going to look for him, just for that. Fine by her, if Mark wanted to take care of her grandma for her. Regardless, she was not going to take the obvious bait and rejoin the Tremont family!

On the other hand, Tanya was saddled by Old Anderson's deteriorating mental awareness. By now, he had fully regressed to the mind of a young boy with an insatiable appetite and an illegible, slurring speech pattern. Facing this development, Tanya had no choice but to bring her grandfather along to the ceremony, which also doubled as checking off the old man's wish to visit the Capital. It was especially important because her grandfather's days were very likely numbered.

Just as the girls were happily chatting away, the door to the lounge suddenly swung open, revealing Summer and Atticus West in their most polished forms yet.

Summer was as decorous and elegant as she ever was. Atticus, meanwhile, was the spitting image of Jackson, though with the added nature of being taciturn. It did not take more than one look for any bystander to recognize him as Jackson's father instantly.

Tiffany straightened her back awkwardly on cue. "Oh, er, Uncle — er, excuse me, Father. Mother. I-is there a matter?"

"You silly child. Why are you cooped up in here?" Summer said, her eyes soft and doting. "Bring your friends out there, sweetie! Oh, by the way, Arianne? Your Mark is looking for you right now. You should meet him, shouldn't you? He even brought an older woman with her — said she's your grandmother, I think?"

Mark brought her aging granny to the party?! Arianne could not believe the man's gall. Her granny was having trouble walking, for goodness' sake; why even bring her here?

Arianne walked out of the lounge with a coy smile and looked over. Mark, being a magnet for attention, was easy to find even among the serried crowd. She found him with one look.

Just as Summer told her, the man had brought Arianne's grandmother along. To her wildest bewilderment, the old lady was walking on her own two feet and appeared to be walking normally!

In addition to that, the old lady was wearing what looked like a fusion between an oriental qipao and a gorgeous evening gown. Everywhere from her head to toe was meticulously dressed to complete her aura of extravaganza.

She was so perfectly in control of the impression and air she projected that Arianne thought about how well-off her family might have been a long time ago. Her grandmother had once, by chance, mentioned that the Tremont Estate was about as big as the Wynn's old family house. It would explain why Arianne's grandmother could exude the aura of a lady of standing — it was ingrained in her bones.

Arianne collected herself before approaching them. "Has granny's legs healed, Mark? Why did you think it was a good idea to bring her here?"

She was dressed relatively noncommittally for the occasion — hurrying to the airport had bereft her the time to choose an apt evening gown. Besides, Arianne knew that neither Naya nor Tanya would buy a gown just for the event, and so to lessen whatever embarrassment the two might feel, she had decided to look as homely as they were.

Of course, this resulted in a style that was discordant to the overall look of the ceremony.

Before Mark could answer her, Arianne's grandmother butted in, "My legs are good, dear. Mark had summoned the best doctor overseas just for me, and my legs have never been better. It's a good thing that I didn't choose to stay with you back then — would have taken forever to get these legs fixed! Speaking of which, why are you wearing rags? This doesn't bode well with the prestige of the Tremont family. Honestly, you should be ecstatic that Mark never once thought that you're below him."

Arianne pursed her lips. So, Mark did not just abduct her granny, but he brainwashed her too, and now that old lady was completely in his pocket.

"Fine, fine! I can't be caught standing together with esteemed people like you, right? Fine, I should get going and part ways from you both. But honestly, Granny, I'm happy that you're enjoying your life so much. It puts me at ease. In fact, I think you will be the happiest if you stay with the Tremonts from now on."

Chapter 598

With that, Arianne spun on her heels, palpably sulking.

Suddenly, Mark reached out and hurriedly tugged on her wrist. "Granny was kidding. Please, don't pay her words any mind," he explained. "Listen, how about you come home to the Tremont Estate with me after this party's over? It's been a while since you've come back to the Capital — spending time with your grandmother is something that's long overdue between you two. Besides, Mary and Henry both expressed wishes to see you home."

Arianne swung her hand away from his grip in a fit of discomfort. "We'll see, okay?" she fumbled an answer, her eyes avoiding him. "I'm going to accompany Tiffie. She's nervous."

Mark let her go in silence. He knew how much Tiffany meant to his wife.

Summer and Atticus had both left by the time she returned to the lounge. Tanya, upon seeing her return, suddenly piped up, “Um, Ari? I get this feeling that we’re very different from everyone else out there… Everyone’s wearing suits and tux and gowns and stuff, and here we look so, um, homely? Are we a little embarrassing?”

Tiffany swung her arms in dismissal. “Oh, who the hell cares? Clothes are just glorified second-skins, man. Had this not been about my engagement, you bet I wouldn’t wear this annoyingly complicated gown I’m stuck in right now. Do you know that I have to lift so much of my skirt just to walk a few inches, or else risk slamming my face onto the floor? Ri-di-cu-lous. Besides,” she added. “It’s not like any of you would ever have any business with those people in the future, so who gives a damn about what they think? We live only once, people! We eat, we drink, and we play to our heart content! Then when this party is over, I’ll get changed before we have our very own girls’ hangout!”

Arianne was not the least surprised that such a thought would creep into Tanya and Naya’s minds. “Tiffie’s right, it’s no big deal. See? I’m not wearing any gown or dress either, just like the two of you! Lemme tell you, those people out there aren’t here to celebrate Jackson and Tiffany’s engagement so much as to look for profits and whatnot. You know, typical shticks of a typical upper-class party. All they talk about is business, which has got nothing to do with us, so we don’t need to care.

“C’mon,” Arianne beckoned. “Let’s not coop ourselves in here and enjoy some good food out there.”

As the group joined the crowd outside, Tanya and Naya became noticeably queasy about the world around them since one had an old man in tow while the other was bringing her daughter along. Tried as they might, their appearances quickly became oddities garnering everyone’s questioning gazes, which furthered their discomfort.

Tiffany, however, felt not a modicum of unease. She carefreely hooked her hand with Lulu's before asking, "So, Lulu, wanna have that cake over there?"

The little girl cast her dewy eyes to a delicate piece of cake in the distance and nodded with a longing look. "Yes!"

Tiffany took a piece and handed it to Lulu. "Here you go, I'm repaying you for the cake you gave me back in the lounge. If you like it, don't be shy and have some more!"

The little girl grinned sweetly, showing off beads of pearly whites. "Thank you, Auntie Tiffany!"

Her mother smiled at the interaction and ruffled her daughter's hair. "I envy you, Tiffany. The Wests clearly held nothing back for this engagement ceremony. I can only imagine the amount of money all of this must cause. Just the venue itself must have fetched a hefty price; half the time I can't even believe the things I'm seeing!" she remarked. "The lives of the rich and elites are really something normal folks like us can never imagine, which is why I don't understand why you and Ari aren't content with enjoying your privileges and managing a café instead."

"Maybe it's because we seek freedom?" Arianne replied after a pause. "I personally think having enough to spend is good enough. Having excess money is pretty useless to me. Also, I'm definitely not one of those rich people; I'm dirt poor here! It's Tiffie here who's one of the wealthy elites, especially since she's now married into high society. Meanwhile, I'm only a rich man's wife in name."

"'In name only?'" Tiffany echoed snarkily. "Who here doesn't know you're Mrs. Tremont? Mark would hand over the absolute right to his wealth with a 'yes, Ma'am!' if he ever overheard you wonder about it

out loud one day. You wanna bet on that? Honestly, the only reason why this hasn't happened is because you are reluctant to accept it! This is why you're the most high-rolling woman among us, girl. You can afford to cast a limitless gold mine like Mark aside and never worry about wasting your chances! Now, that's the pinnacle of wealth!"

Arianne shot Tiffany daggers through her eyes. "Shut the eff up! Don't put me under the bus with you!"

Tanya suddenly cried in terror, "Grandpa? Grandpa! One second of not looking at him and now he's gone!"

The group paled. It was so packed with attendees here; how on earth were they going to find her grandfather among a sea of people?

Quickly, they scanned their surroundings, but Old Anderson was nowhere to be seen. Seized by panic, Tanya began a desperate search with Arianne and the rest. They scoured the entire building, but still, the old man eluded them.

Tanya was in anxious tears. "It's all my fault! I was so focused on listening to my friends talking that I hadn't noticed Grandpa running off on his own! Oh, God… The Capital is such a big place. If he somehow left this hotel, we'll never be able to track him!"

Arianne was relatively calmer. "Don't panic, Tanya, don't cry. I'll go talk to the hotel security and tell them to stop an elderly man from going outside and to contact us instantly, okay? As long as Old Anderson doesn't leave this hotel, he'll be fine," she suggested. "Now, I'm gonna head downstairs while the rest of you continue your search. Tiffie? Get Jackson to arrange someone to help."

Crimson shades of panic had already overtaken Tiffany's mien. "God, I can't!" she wailed. "I don't know where Jackson went, too! I didn't see him anywhere when I was looking for Old Anderson. I did see Mark though. Should we get his help instead?"

Desperate times call for desperate measures, and desperate measures demand that Arianne cast aside her personal sentiments for the time being. Hurriedly, she found Mark among the partying crowd.

"Tanya's grandfather has gone missing. He was last seen on this floor. We looked everywhere, but no luck. Can you help recruit a few more people to help search again?" she asked. "Her grandfather is not exactly in a clear state of mind, so if he's really lost out there, all alone, well…"

"Go down a floor and tell the security to halt any elderly person trying to exit this building," Mark replied instantly, apparently having the same idea as Arianne. "After we made sure that her grandfather hasn't left, I'll enlist help to search for him."

Chapter 599

Arianne nodded curtly before springing toward the escalator to the floor below.

Firm confirmations from hotel security that no elderly man had ever left the building was relieving news. After giving the security some instructions, she took the stairs and scoured floor by floor.

A few floors later, she was panting hard.

Mark had ordered his guards to look as well, but they were hamstrung by the need to remain discreet to avoid disrupting the ceremony.

The clock was going to strike twelve soon. A few more minutes, and Tiffany, the star of the day, would have to go through the rites with Jackson, yet Old Anderson was still nowhere to be found. At this critical moment, Arianne received a call from Eric, who promptly asked, “Didn’t Tanya follow you to the Capital today? And didn’t she bring her grandfather with her?”

“How did you know?” Arianne questioned. “Are you booking tables for the wedding or what? Hold on, where are you, exactly?”

Eric sounded a little upset. “Does she have any idea that her grandfather has left her? I’ve been under the weather these days, and the meds I took this morning left me even less ready for the event. So, I was resting in the guest room on the eighth floor and her grandfather somehow made his way here! Apparently, someone hit him, too,” he recounted. “God, if I weren’t around, this thing could have escalated, big time. Fortunately, he remembered his granddaughter’s name… Anyway, it’d be best if you people come to him right now.”

Arianne felt a pang in her head. Someone hit a harmless old man — how on earth could anyone look at such an aging man and not think twice about hitting him?

She immediately dashed to the eighth floor with Tanya and Naya. Just as Eric told her, Old Anderson was with him, his state evident of physical abuse. His cheeks and arms bore palpable cuts. Luckily, they proved to be relatively innocuous scratches.

“Who — who could have done this?!” Tanya sobbed breathlessly. “He’s just an old man! Even at his worst, he wouldn’t — no, he couldn’t have hurt anyone! What kind of person would have the heart to injure a harmless old man?”

A very bleary Eric did his best to explain between coughs and occasional blank stares, “Uh, ‘was a woman. I don’t know her — probably here for Jackson’s engagement thingy. By the time I found them, your grandpa was already, uh, beaten. I asked her why she’d hit an old man, and she said it’s because he was reaching for her purse? I dunno the details. But figured you guys could log into the CCTV and see what happened. Anyway, I gotta’ go. The ceremony’s about to start.”

Before he left, he added, “Er, please keep this incident on a low profile or something? Don’t make it too big of a deal, I mean.”

Arianne took some time to calm poor Tanya down before they implored the security to show them CCTV footages.

Old Anderson had run up the stairs to the eighth floor, where he came face-to-face with a young lady in a bright red dress. The aisle was too narrow, and Old Anderson was too befuddled to let her pass, so the woman — likely encouraged by the old man’s quotidian appearance and docile nature — pushed the old man aside with a stomp in disgust.

Old Anderson lost his balance and fell back onto his bottom. Panicked, he tugged on a corner of the woman’s skirt, which infuriated her enough that she began kicking him multiple times. Eric appeared a few seconds later, and the same woman slickly assumed her most demure lady act as she explained herself.

The footage recorded no sound, but one could guess the lies that fell off her lips.

Eric was later seen bringing the Old Anderson into the guest room while the woman went on her way. After that, Arianne and the girls appeared.

It was self-evident that the woman had abused Old Anderson without rhyme or reason, despite the old man doing nothing to provoke her ire. As she watched, Arianne felt flames flaring up from within her chest. Even the ever-so-meek and gentle Naya broke her character and cursed, “B*tch! What a bloody b*tch! He was just passing by, for God’s sake. Didn’t see him scratch any part of her disgusting skin!”

Arianne took a deep breath before instructing, “Tan, you bring Old Anderson with you to the lounge and let him take a breath. Naya, you’ll follow her with Lulu. I refuse to let this just pass like this. I’m going to find this woman.”

Naya nodded and took Tanya, Old Anderson, and Lulu to the lounge, as the injuries the old man had suffered required basic attention.

Arianne herself returned to the party and was immediately reunited with Mark. “I heard from Eric that he’d been found. Is he alright?”

“Oh, he’s alright,” Arianne seethed, her eyes furiously combing through the crowd.

Mark pursed his lips. “That’s good to hear. I’ll go check on Granny right now. Come with me once the party ends, okay?”

Arianne gave an absent-minded hum without heeding to a word he said. Right now, she was a woman with a mission — to look for a certain red dress.

About ten minutes later, Arianne found the same woman in the footage — the one who dared hurt an old man. She appeared to be a woman of the elite upper-class; a few signs in her face suggested going through some adjustments through plastic surgeries, but she was, nevertheless, quite appealing to the eyes.

If only she had a modicum of that beauty on the inside.

Arianne stepped forward, her voice hard and stoic, “Hello, Ma’am. I would like to have a word with you, so please, come with me.”

The woman glanced at the handsome young men eyeing her. Disgusted by Arianne’s casual — or more accurately, peasant-like — appearance, she was quick to put a wide berth between them both. “Who’s this, guys? Pssh, I don’t know her.”

In that instance, Arianne understood who she was dealing with: a gold-digger who cared only for materials and money, who gave verdicts on others’ character based purely on what they wore. Smirking, Arianne grabbed the woman by the wrist into a tight clutch. “That’s right. We don’t know each other yet, but that would be rectified soon enough,” she bristled. “I’ll say this only one more time: come with me, or we’ll have to solve it right here, right now.”

The woman swung her grip off as contempt poured into her eyes. “Okay, who the f**k are you? Why should I come with you just because you said so? For f**k’s sake, someone clearly doesn’t belong to this esteemed event, don’t you think? Like, the price of the rags slinging around your body combined is probably worth less than $1,000 — sorry, that’s too high a standard — I meant, less than $500. Must suck to be so cheap, huh? So get the hell out of my face and don’t dirty me with your welfare queen’s stench.”

Chapter 600

Had Arianne not worried about ruining Tiffany's engagement ceremony, she would have swung her fist right there and then.

Honestly, even Arianne was boggled at how cantankerous she had become. Ever since the Aery Kinsey incident back then, it seemed to her that the best way to solve a problem that might require her fists was, indeed, to use her fist without saying another word. Sometimes, actions do speak louder than words… literally.

She gulped a deep breath to calm herself forcibly. "Tell me: did you or did you not hit an old man on the eighth floor earlier? And before you insult me by trying — no, I'm not gonna buy your crap. I have CCTV footage with me, and honestly, I want this solved today, or you're not going anywhere. Wanna bet?"

A hint of consternation from being exposed flitted through the woman's eyes. Still, she quickly regained her composure. "What the hell are you yammering about, b*tch? That old man started it by bumping into me!" she rebutted. "Besides, I can't stop wondering — who let you talk to me like this, huh? You think I'm gonna be stopped by some random b*tch? Or what, you're gonna tell me that that old man is your grandpa? I mean, he has that same welfare-queen stench like you do, too," she gibed. "God, you people don't understand that you don't belong here, do you? You guys should like, GTFO, before you embarrass yourselves."

Arianne knew that if push came to shove, she would not be able to stop the woman from going anywhere purely because Jackson, not her, was the boss of the entire event. Arianne had intended her words to stay as a threat, but Jackson was too busy to worry about meddling into this personally while she believed she had to take things into her own hands.

Hence, Arianne lurched and grabbed a fistful of the woman's hair, slapping her hand over the latter's mouth before she could scream.

The men standing around her turned pale. They were all too appalled to break them up.

Arianne lugged the woman toward the door leading out of the event hall. “Well, shall we solve our issue now?”

Vex turned into wrath, and the woman launched into a counter-attack, yanking a fistful of Arianne’s hair, too. “F**k you, you f**king hysterical b*tch out from f**king nowhere! So what if I kicked some old a** beggar, huh? Do you know who the f**k I am?!” she shrieked. “B*tch thinks you can do this to me — imma make sure you don’t live to see the next day!!!”

Arianne was so not in the mood to talk, so she let her fists do the talking. In a flash, the two women had thrown themselves into a melee.

As the woman wore a gown, her movements were restricted. Arianne, however, had the advantage of being in casual streetwear, which made throwing punches easier. By the time the woman was cuffed badly enough that her dress was as much a mess as her make-up, Arianne still managed to look largely like herself.

The young men, who witnessed the incident happening since it started, finally reeled back from their shock enough that one of them wondered out loud, “Guys, are they… are they fighting? One of them looks kinda familiar. Any idea?”

One of them espied Mark standing out from the crowd before horror dawned onto his face. “Sh*t, I think one of them might actually be Arianne Wynn — I mean, Arianne Tremont! F*******k!” he whisper-shouted. “Don’t just stand there, you nimrods! We gotta’ break them up right now — I’ll tell Mr. Tremont about it!”

When Mark first heard that Arianne had started a brawl, he could feel his temples pulsating. Arianne was never the violent type, was she? Could this be the ramification of binding her so tightly when she was a kid that now, all of the pent-up anger hidden deep within her chest burst out for liberation? He had only taken his eyes off her for a while, and now she was beating people up at a party. For some reason, he felt like he was witnessing his kid going through the onset of her teenage rebel phase.

Nonetheless, he rushed to the scene and watched the men fail to break the two women apart. With a swing of his arm, he pulled Arianne away by her waist, “Stop it, Ari! Calm down!”

Arianne growled hotly between heavy panting, “I’m calm, alright! If I weren’t, you’d see her in the goddamn hospital by now!”

Quite a deal of the woman’s dress had been shredded pretty badly, but it looked much better than her hair, where a few locks had been torn off. One of her stilettos had come off. She looked incredibly pathetic.

She fumed, “Not even my parents have ever laid their hands on me, you f**king c*nt! I’ll kill you—"

“Excuse me?!” Mark suddenly bellowed, his expression darkening upon hearing the woman’s barbed retort.

For the first time, the woman noticed him. She had been so apoplectic just now that she was oblivious to Mark’s presence — but now, the implication of their bond was clear from the way he wrapped his arm around Arianne.

She could not fathom how someone as nondescript as this hysterical b*tch could be related to Mark Tremont in any shape. Suddenly, she found herself at a loss for explanations.

The young men quickly launched into awkward rescues. “H-hey now, Mr. Tremont, she didn’t know that was your wife, yes? Mrs. Tremont rarely comes to events like these. Even we almost didn’t recognize her! Look, if Chloe offended Mrs. Tremont anywhere, well — they fought it out of their systems, right? So maybe we should… uh, call this even?”

Mark’s eyes were sharp with killing intent. He ran his finger down the bloodied scratch on Arianne’s cheek before countering with a voice nipping enough to cut through flesh, “You think Chloe’s the only one who got hurt? Are you suggesting I stand here and let my own wife get the shorter end of the deal? Heh. I do not make it a habit of forgiving anyone who crosses me — ever. Since this is Jackson West’s engagement party, I’ll leave this woman alone for the time being. But once the ceremony ends, well… I’ll show you how real adults even things out.”

The woman, Chloe, felt her legs failing her as she crashed onto the floor. “S-sorry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t know, Mr. Tremont — please, have mercy on me!”

Mark ignored the woman pleading from the floor and shot a look at his guards. After that, he carried Arianne to the lounge.

The girl did not try to put up a fight. With a defeated expression, she looked like a troublemaker who had thrown herself into a foofaraw and was now being dragged home by her disappointed parents.

Once she entered the lounge, Tanya and Naya were startled by how terrible she looked. “A-A-Ari?! What the heck just…? Why do you look like this?”

Arianne tucked some stray locks back into place nonchalantly and answered, “Well, I found the woman who hit Old Anderson. She’s some trash named Chloe or whatever. Anyway, I wanted us to chat over it civilly, but she was being pig-headed, and so I used my fists, ‘cause you know, you gotta fight fire with fire sometimes. What else could I do? She’s a trust-fund kid. Even if you sent her to the cops, she would probably get a stern talking and then be bailed. It’s useless. Urgh! Just thinking about her feeling no qualms in hitting a harmless old man makes me furious! She’s such a Class A b*tch!!!”