Ruling 671

Chapter 671

Tiffany guffawed so hard in Schadenfreude that she could almost be mistaken as having a seizure. “Oh my god! Oh. My. God. So you’ve lost your personal agency now? Come on, bae, you’re the one with the crowned jewel in your tummy! You’re the boss now, not him! You could lynch Mark to death, and he still wouldn’t be able to harm a single hair on your head in defense, get it? You gotta’ be ruthless right now, like right frickin’ now, cause’ you aren’t getting that chance anymore. Don’t you know that a woman is at the height of power during her pregnancy? So hell yeah, be a tyrant, sis! Once that child’s born, you ain’t never getting that power back!” she reminded. “Now, if you manage to obtain his ‘permission,’ tell me, and I’ll ring up Tanya. We’ll have hotpot together at night! We’ll get the spicy one, and you can have the non-spicy broth. I mean, I heard that food that is too spicy could harm an expecting mother.”

Just mentioning hotpot made Arianne swallow her saliva. Few things in life are as fulfilling as having a big pot of warm broth with one’s closest friends during winter! Quickly, she found herself bursting with longingness. Not a single part of her even tried to resist the temptation.

“You know what? Okay. I’ll call you a little while later,” she said finally.

She hung up the phone and shot a contemplative look in the direction of the bathroom as she wrote scripts on asking Mark’s permission. Her appetite had dwindled so much that this sudden craving for hotpot was killing her. If she was denied permission to fulfil it, she might die!

Mark came out of the bathroom with his towel, rubbing his still-wet hair when he immediately sensed a change in the air. When he looked up, his eyes met with Arianne’s hopeful ones, which caused his heart to thump a little bit harder. “U-um, what’s the matter?”

“I want to eat hotpot with Tiffie and Tan tonight. It’s the only thing I want to eat now,” she declared before audibly swallowing an uncontrollable surge of saliva.

Her palpable display of craving both worried and amused Mark. “But, well, are pregnant women allowed to have hotpots? I should probably look it up online. If it turns out that eating is allowed, then I’ll have it delivered to our doorstep,” he suggested. “The venue doesn’t interfere with the taste and quality of the food, yes?”

Arianne’s eyebrows furrowed. “But eating at home is so different from eating out there! It’ll take away that… that… that vibe! C’mon, Mark, I just wanna have fun for once. Can’t you let me do that without injecting your commentary into it?”

Mark had to admit that she was right. Since her pregnancy was confirmed, Arianne had been more circumspect than Mark himself. This would be the first time she had ever voiced out the whim to have hotpot outside the estate — a fact that made rejecting her hard. “Oh… Alright. But! I must dig up expert opinions about this from the internet. If pregnant women are indeed allowed to eat this, then we’ll go together.”

With that, he pulled out his phone and began to tap and scroll as though he was a detective examining evidence.

Arianne’s eyes were nailed to his face and every little change of expression that crossed it. When she noticed his eyebrows inching closer and closer to the center, she panicked. “Whoa, what’s with that face? I can’t eat hotpot, not even if I have the non-spicy one? That can’t be right!”

Mark handed his phone to the girl. “You should take a look. It says it doesn’t recommend —”

Arianne snatched the phone away from his hand and gobbled up the article before glaring at Mark in annoyance, “That’s not what the article says at all! It says here that the hazard I have to worry about is undercooked food because it might cause problems to my guts like tapeworms or other parasites and stuff. No one’s ‘not recommending’ anything, especially when I can eyeball my food and gauge if it’s thoroughly cooked or not! My God, I never knew you could be so damn literal!”

“You never try to get to know me, anyway,” came his murmuring protest.

His rebuttal left her speechless; somehow, she felt a poignant prick of chagrin nestle within his reply. Was it true that Arianne did not try? If it were, then it was only because she was so downright terrified of him. She’d only managed to piece together Mark’s preferences and peeves by living with him and watching him for more than a decade, after all. She was never given a chance to see what kind of heart beat under his ice-cold persona, just as the world at large was never given a chance to see Mark’s demonic wrath in action, only ever seeing his angelic, beatific smile.

Arianne was the only person in this entire world who had the “privilege” to live with the demonic side of him for many, many years.

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Ultimately, the final deal was Mark approving Arianne’s hotpot hangout with the compromise that he tagged along. He did not particularly like hotpots, but he joined in as Arianne’s companion anyway.

With a tack-on bodyguard she did not want, Arianne felt as though she was put on a leash, and her excitement naturally plummeted. But when she reached the destination and saw Tiffany mirroring her expression, she perked up — Tiffany was not exactly given the liberty to party hard either, for Jackson was with her.

Finally, Tanya brought Eric — who was probably looking for a place to spend his free time — along, and the ensemble was complete.

Since they disembarked, Mark's hand had never once left its protective position on Arianne's waist, making one wonder if he would gingerly place the girl right in the center of his palm if he could help it. That was not all; he punctuated between every few steps with a "The floor is slippery, please be careful."

Arianne relied on his directions so much that she gradually bought into the illusion that she was so frail that she needed his intensive handling. By the time she took her seat and she went about the process at a snail-like pace, a startled Tiffany quipped, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's inside your tummy, the Messiah?"

Her joke broke Arianne from the spell, who quickly let go of Mark's hand and shot him a stern but meek glare. "Things are more festive than I'd expected! I'm so glad I managed to be let out; I hadn't gotten the room to relax for too long."

Tiffany grabbed a pair of chopsticks and knocked on the edge of her bowl slyly, her eyes trained onto Tanya and Eric. "We're all coming in pairs, yes, but two annoyingly single people just decided to be non-conformist and ruin the theme, didn't they? — God, why don't you two just pair up?"

Eric had gotten used to Tiffany's brand of jokes, so it incited no response from him. Tanya, however, smiled bashfully and murmured, "D-Don't say that, Tiffany!"

Tiffany was already on a roll. "No, seriously, why don't you two just pair up already?"

Eric shot her a side-eye glance. “Bruh, you really think people would pair up ‘just because’? Give me a break; you gotta see if the other person is right for you, too. Honestly, rather than taking jabs at us, why don’t you focus on the fact that it’s your time of the month, huh? Are you even allowed to have something spicy? Or maybe you should give up and go for the non-spicy broth with me and Arianne this time.”

“Ooh, making fun of me for failing to conceive for yet another month, huh?” Tiffany grumbled. “Oh, okay, joke all you want, jerks. I’m thick-skinned as hell, and I’m not letting you guys stop me, cause’ honey, I don’t give a damn about the time of the month. Even if I ended up having cramps so bad I became bedridden, I’m still gonna force Jackson into picking the spiciest ones for me.”

Jackson did not chime in her proclamation, but the way his eyes beamed with a little twang of unrestrained doting said it all. Of course, the man knew his Tiffany — she could defer to Jackson for almost all other decisions, but good luck trying to rule her over food. If Tiffany craved something, she would exhaust every mean under the sun to make sure it ended up in her mouth, and nothing Jackson said could deal a dent in that resolve.

Besides, what was the worst that could happen? She would probably bawl loudly like a baby as the cramps punished her recklessness, which was nothing Jackson and his coaxing skill could not handle.

Everyone’s chopsticks got into a frenzy when bubbles began to burble from the bottom of the boiling broth. Mark, in particular, took it upon himself to boil all of the dishes for Arianne. Her gaze lingered on a particular dish for a moment longer, and the man automatically picked its cooked counterpart from the bottom of the non-spicy broth and placed them in her bowl.

The food was quickly built up into a mound. Arianne had to stop him before he went overboard, so she cried, “Alright, that’s more than enough. You should mind your own rather than mine, Mark. It’s a bit too much.”

The truth was that Arianne wanted a taste of the dishes cooked in the savory, spicy broth. She had never cared much for sour or spicy flavors in the past, yet today, the insipid nature of the non-spicy broth was a letdown to her taste buds. Besides, watching Tiffany gleefully wolf down the spicier dishes just fanned her longing even more.

Mark took note of her gaze that frequented the crimson broth and hesitated for a second. Then, he placed two slices of beef into it, waited until they were well-cooked, and put them into her bowl.

“You still need to control yourself, please,” he said, as a caveat.

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Arianne’s eyes darted to Mark for a millisecond before she lowered her head and focused on her food. Thoughts ebbed in her mind like ripples.

Once again, Mark terrified her with his abnormal perceptiveness. It was as though his eyes always bore through her skull, allowing him to read every thought that took form in her mind.

With his “assistance,” Arianne had the most fulfilling meal she ever had since becoming pregnant. For some reason, she was exceptionally voracious today.

When the dinner was nearing an end, Tiffany dragged Arianne and Tanya to the washroom.

She could not wait a moment longer before japing, “God, I thought Mark was gonna offer his companionship to the bathroom! Just look at that ‘I-must-be-alert-at-all-times!’ butler mode he’s been

in throughout the entire hangout; I almost believe he's been replaced by someone else! Real talk, though: watching him right now reminds me of the way Will treated you back then."

This would be the first time Tiffany ever ruled one of Mark's aspects to be on par with Will's. Mentioning the name drew a face into Arianne's mind's eye, but unfortunately, it was just a featureless, blurry silhouette. It seemed that not even the man who once caused her heart to race was safe from being eroded by the sands of time.

"Who's Will? Is he Ari's ex?" Tanya wondered out loud.

Tiffany mused on her words before answering, "If we're being technical, no, he never was. But he was quite the perfect first-love, ya' know? Too bad Mark sabotaged it."

That took Tanya by such surprise that she stared at them with her mouth agape.

Arianne returned a weak smile. "Alright, that's enough. It's all in the past," she said. "By the way, Tan, you look gorgeous!"

She was right. Tanya had put on some makeup for the occasion and changed into something more striking than usual. Still, Arianne's compliment brought a blush to the girl's sheepish face as she tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear. "It's all thanks to Tiffany for teaching me how to, um, use makeup. I'm doing my best to get used to my life in the city, and well, Tiffany said that I need to start with how I look. A woman's appearance could do wonders to her confidence."

“That’s right,” Tiffany chimed in, beaming. “You’ve learned the spirit of cosmetics well from your master, young padawan. Now, our Tanya is all glowed-up! If I were a guy, I’d push her against the wall and look at her real close right now.”

After entering the toilet, Tiffany went to the hand washing basin and rinsed her hand. It was then that someone abruptly yanked her from behind. As it was a sensor-activated tap outputting a pretty strong current, Tiffany’s sudden jerk had caused the water to spout against her cardigan.

Vexed, she spun, a rant readied.

Instead, she was pulled into a bear hug. “Tiffany Lane! Oh my God, I can’t believe I would see you here! I heard that your family had gone bankrupt a while ago; are you okay? You do look like things are looking up for you, though! I’ve seen that video of Ethan proposing to you in social media, and it’s just — so sweet? Like, are you two married already? But I also heard that he’s gone bankrupt too; weird, huh? And he’s like, in a foreign country right now, right? So what exactly is going on with you two??”

The questions sucker-punched Tiffany so hard that for a moment, she could only stare at the girl in dumb silence.

Nosy Nancy was actually a fine arts coursemate of hers back in the university, whose real name was Angel Lane. While the girls coincidentally shared a surname, their relationship was tepid and not at all intimate.

To be the subject of overt attention — by an acquaintance who was never close to her — did not bode well for Tiffany. After collecting herself, she delivered a pointed repartee, “Gee, Angel Lane, I didn’t expect you to be this nosy! We hadn’t talked to each other since graduation a long, long time ago, but it turns out you’ve been stalking my every move all this time. Gee whiz, can you see how touched I am now.”

Angel, who bore the most typical “homely everyday girl” exterior, appeared to have not aged a day since her high school years. The smile grazing her face just made her look even more innocent and childlike. “Whaddaya mean, Tiffany? We were coursemates, weren’t we? And you kept getting into the news; it’s really hard not to follow your stories closely like that. Anyway, c’mon, don’t keep me in suspense! How are you and Ethan Connor?”

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With a frown, Arianne pulled Tiffany beside her and answered on her friend’s behalf, “That thing with Ethan has been over for so long, Angel… And for a good reason, too; Tiffany is way out of that bastard’s league. As a matter of fact, she was just recently engaged with Jackson West — which, judging from your voracious consumption of news, I’m sure the name rings a bell, doesn’t it? Had you reconnect with Tiffany sooner, she would definitely invite you to the engagement party too.”

Truthfully, before Arianne spoke, her presence had escaped Angel. But now, her attention turned the spotlight on the person most famously known as Mark Tremont’s woman. Angel was well-aware of her story — again, it was all through the news.

She sized Arianne up for a while before replying in a suspect tone, “Oh, no! I missed the engagement party; what a pity! Curious, isn’t it? Both you and Tiffany ended up marrying someone who aren’t the ones you loved in the beginning, once again proving that nothing in this world is ever set in stone. Which reminds me: you used to be with Will Sivan back then, right? Someone even rattled out those intimate photos the two of you had taken together, too, if I recall correctly, but they’re all virtually gone from the internet now. I always wondered — were those photos genuine or what?

“Oh! I remember now, I went to the party that night, and you left Will’s house wearing his clothes. I saw it with my own eyes! Does that mean it was real? God, so Mark did not mind all of that history at all? Damn, I envy you girls so much. For some reason, you people manage to find quality simps who would accept you even after everything that happened.”

Simps?! Tiffany's face instantly twisted into a wrathful glower. "Ex-cuuu-se me, ma'am, who you calling 'simps,' exactly? So what, just because we've gotten an ex and have been through some pretty complicated sh*t, the guys we date after all that mess are 'simps'? You can call me whatever you want, but don't you dare smear Ari like that, 'cause b*tch, you're not qualified to say anything! – You know what, you're just here trying to troll, aren't you? You're looking for a fight, huh?"

Angel laughed forcefully. "Jesus, chill, that wasn't my intention at all. Honestly? I'm offended that you see me that way. Look, millennials like us rib on each other all the time, so what's with the allergic reaction? I only got casual and comfortable because I saw you girls as my old friends, so I didn't think we needed all that formality crap. Besides, none of these is super-exclusive-secret tea, anyway. Here I thought you two would be cool about it!"

Arianne tugged Tiffany's wrist firmly to halt her from causing a scene. Then, she flashed Angel an unperturbed smile. "Oh, I can assure you, we're actually cool about it. You're right; none of these are a secret, but still, most people don't go around spilling tea with someone they barely know. Good friends can rib and banter with no holds barred, but people who are less than that? They shut up. Oh, and you mentioned being in Will's beachside villa party that night? I honestly don't remember seeing your face there. Of course, it could be because no one's noticed you at all, since it was a packed party, while you never had a commanding presence."

It was Angel's turn to look peeved. "Oh, wow, look at you! I get it. God forbids plebs like me from hurting the 'feewings' of anyone who married into the top 1%, huh? Some people are just born lucky. It doesn't matter how many mistakes they've made in the past — consequences never befall them! BTW, Tiffany, your Ethan was once really into me, you know. He only came to you because I rejected him. Then, I heard that your family went broke and the two of you split, and I counted my blessings for narrowly dodging the fate of being Ethan's financial support. I didn't expect him to become a rising star soon afterward, though he didn't make it last. Ah, well. Anyway, I think I've talked enough. I got things to do, so this is it. Bye."

"Seriously, who let their rabid b*tch roam out of the doghouse today, huh?" Tiffany bristled after she was gone, her face red and hot. "As if I was ever her friend or anything! Christ, I almost forgot her

goddamned name! This insane mofo; she managed to piss me off within one stupid conversation! The f**k?!”

Arianne patted her shoulders to comfort her. “There, there. She’s just one level higher than a total stranger, so don’t get worked up over someone that insignificant. Maybe obsessing over rumors is just her miserable little hobby, and so in her ignorance, she mentioned names that shouldn’t have been said. Don’t get too worked up, ok?”

Tiffany took in a deep breath and feigned nonchalance before turning back to the washbasin. “Oh ho, I’m not worked up over what she said about me; I was just super goddamned pissed when she smeared you, Ari. There was never anything between you and Will! Hell, even Mark frickin’ Tremont had let that sh*t go, so who the hell is she to bring it up again? And seriously! Why the f**k did she tell me about Ethan once liking her, and her spurning him, and all that crap? Was she insinuating that I was just picking up her rejected trash? The nerve! What’s so f**king cool about that, huh? God, who the f**k even knows if she was telling the truth or just making sh*t up?!”

Arianne said nothing, well-aware that under no circumstances should anyone bring up Ethan in front of Tiffany. Despite it being a thing of the distant past, the very mention of the name would still trigger Tiffany.

A beat later, Tiffany suddenly mused out loud, “But where has Ethan gone to? I know Mark never planned to let him off the hook, but… I just… I wanna know if he’s even alive. If I could hear news of him suffering for his deeds, I’ll feel better.”

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“If that’s the case, then it’s in your best interest to regard him as dead,” Arianne said, straightening Tiffany's collar. “No use dwelling in the past. All that matters now is your happy life with Jackson; everything else is lost to the sands of time. More importantly, your future will never be tainted by that douchebag’s presence ever again. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

It was at this moment that the door to the next cubicle creaked open, revealing Tanya gingerly walking out. “U-um, I…! I mean to say…” she stammered. “I didn’t hear a thing! I mean… Um, I’m sorry I overheard some things?”

Tiffany placed her hand on her forehead. “Oops, almost forgot about you. You hid for so long; I almost thought you got stuck on the toilet bowl or something. Think nothing to it, really; if you overheard it, you overheard it. Who was I with, who was she with — who the eff gives a damn? Anyway, let’s go. If we don’t come outta here any sooner, Mr. Tremont’s gonna FBI-bust in!”

Tanya nodded in silent approval. She had not dared to come out the moment the conversation started because neither Arianne nor Tiffany ever mentioned these past secrets. It was only after Angel left that she finally dared to go outside.

The girls strode toward the exit until Arianne abruptly fell into a step, her eyes staring right into Mark’s pensive ones.

A pang of panic struck her. The washroom was purposefully located in a more remote, quieter area in the restaurant, which meant that any conversation from inside could be easily picked up by a man standing guard outside. The worst of it all was that Will Sivan was a taboo topic between Arianne and Mark, so to bring him up around the latter was to light up the fuse to a bomb.

Jokes aside, Tiffany had not at all expected Mark’s appearance, so she panicked. “Holy sh — ‘sup? Er, we, er, met this old coursemate of ours from uni and had some casual banter and all. Um, I might have had a little too much of that spicy broth! Ow, cramp; it hurts! I gotta go home now!”

With a deadpanned expression, Mark ignored Tiffany and strode toward Arianne, placing his arm around the latter’s shoulders. “Let’s go.”

Outside the restaurant, Tiffany pelted Arianne with a barrage of meaningful glances before being lugged into Jackson's car with her arms around her lower abdomen. Apparently, the girl's cries of having menstrual cramps were more than an excuse, though the spicy dishes were probably not the only factor to it. Angel Lane triggering her temper was a co-factor, as well.

Tiffany's coded gesture was not lost to Arianne: she was telling her not to rile Mark up even more should he ever get mad.

After Jackson's departure, Eric and Tanya left, leaving only Arianne with Mark. He pointedly eluded the bathroom conversation and opened the car door of the passenger's seat. "Let us get home early. It's getting cold."

With docility, Arianne did as told.

A pervasive fog of silence subsequently dominated the journey back home, but the two did nothing to break it. Then, the first thing Mark did after reaching the estate was to dive into the bathroom — one of the problems of hotpots was that an amalgamation of food odor could stick onto a diner without signs of subsiding, which agonized hygiene-freaks like Mark.

Arianne was perceptive of the changes in his mannerism and had thought of clarifying herself during their trip home. Nothing came up, and now she was even more at a loss of what to say.

She decided that if he was going to dance around the topic, then she would echo his choice and pretend that he had not heard anything. After all, it was not her idea to mention Will, let alone her intention to have Mark hear it. She never wanted to aggrieve Mark in any way.

Mark came out with only a towel wrapped around his waist, prompting Arianne to turn away. She took her pajamas, went into the bath, and thought of a goodnight's sleep that would come afterward, as some of the earlier signs of sleepiness were beginning to creep into her.

Rising vapor from the previous occupant's time in the bathroom remained when she stepped inside. Everywhere she turned, she was surrounded by the fresh fragrance of his shower cream.

Narrowly after she took off her clothes, Mark suddenly opened the bathroom door from outside, causing her hands to shield her breasts in bewilderment. "What are you doing?!"

Mark, who had changed into his nightshirt, watched her response in blasé. "I got worried that you might find the bathroom too stuffy. Saw an article from the internet that pregnant women need optimum air circulation when bathing, or the fetus might not get enough oxygen. Hence, I think it's best if we let the door open wide. I'll be lying down on the bed; I'm not gonna look."

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Seeing that he really had gone to lie down on the bed, she relaxed. She was still shocked. She truly wasn't used to leaving the door open during a shower. Although the bathroom door was quite transparent, it got fogged up and could conceal her figure in the shower. But now, with the door open, she felt awkward even if he wasn't looking…

She closed the door just a little more when he wasn't looking, leaving half a crack in the door.

Mark turned off the light once she had finished washing up and laid down. It was easier to fall asleep in the dark.

Arianne was in a strangely good mood and did not feel sleepy. It was likely because she had managed to eat something that she really craved after having zero appetite for a long time, and then having the refreshing shower. It was a cold winter's day and the blanket was nice and warm. There was nothing more comfortable than this, throwing one's worries to the back of their minds and enjoying some peace and quiet.

Suddenly, Mark reached out and hugged her, "I'm sorry."

She stiffened. She thought that either he was seething and would be fine after going to sleep, or if he did open his mouth, it would be to pick a quarrel. To her surprise, it was an apology. She calmed herself and asked, "Why are you apologizing?"

She could feel his breath on her neck, "I've always thought that you and Will Sivan… did it."

So that's what he was thinking? He never believed her in the past. Did he believe her now, after Tiffany revealed in the hotpot restaurant washroom that nothing ever happened between her and Will?

She mumbled a reply and did not continue the conversation. Mark seemed to be worried and held her even closer, "T-that time… Why wasn't there a sign? I never touched you before then."

She knew that he was referring to their first time. She felt helpless at the thought of this. Being considerate over his germaphobia, she had cleaned the bedsheets before he woke up. In the end, he assumed that it wasn't her first time, since there was no blood. She had tried to explain it to him before, but he refused to give her that chance. Now that he was bringing it up again, she was calmer about it, "There was. I was afraid that you might become irritated because of the mess, so I cleaned it up before

you woke up. Besides, your germaphobia can drive a person mad. Believe me if you like, or don't. That's what you've always thought anyway. That matter isn't important to me anymore."

Mark stayed quiet for a very long time. He did not expect that at all. He would be very upset every time he thought of it, assuming that she and Will actually had sex. In the past, perhaps he wouldn't have believed her, but now he did, wholeheartedly.

At the time, she left without another word to another city. He thought that she had run away, so he went after her despite his fever. Their first time… wasn't perfect. He had done it out of rage, so of course, he wasn't gentle about it. Despite her torment, she was still mindful of his germaphobia… He felt really uncomfortable when he thought about this.

"Let go… I can't breathe."

Arianne's sudden protest snapped him back into reality. He reluctantly released her, "Is this better? It was my fault for everything in the past. I was a jerk."

Arianne wasn't going to take advantage of his apology and point out his shortcomings. Of course, she accepted his goodwill, "You have done many wrong things, and if I were to bicker with you about it, it would never end. Besides, I never really minded. You don't have to feel so guilty. Sleep. It's rare for you to be able to sleep so early."

"Mm," he replied softly, reached out and tucked her in.

After a long pause, Arianne suddenly felt a soft sensation on her ear. It was Mark… kissing her! He was very gentle, but she wasn't asleep yet and felt it very clearly. He probably thought that she was asleep. Otherwise, he wouldn't have done it.

Chapter 677

She tried her best to steady her breathing, to seem like she had fallen asleep. She thought that he would be done after stealing a few kisses, but his hand began to wander. Her mind was a mess. Was this… normal? They were husband and wife, regardless. It's not like they hadn't been intimate, but that this was his first time… secretly doing things to her.

"Ari?" he suddenly called out her name softly. The tone was not loud enough to try to wake her; he was simply trying to determine if she was asleep.

Arianne was double minded over whether to comply or not, and tell him that she was still awake… As she mulled it over, he went a little further and kissed her on the lips. She suddenly felt that perhaps it wasn't the best idea to perceive him based on her impressions of him in the past. No matter how distant he was, he was still a man. They rarely ever had sex, despite being married for many years. It was normal for him to have certain urges, right?

Mark was surprised that she was still awake. After all, after getting pregnant, she would usually fall asleep straight away and become dead to the world. He stiffened and pulled her into his arms.

Meanwhile, in White Water Bay Villa.

Tiffany sat on the couch, soaking her feet. The pain from her churning stomach paled her. However, she still had the energy to whine, "Jackson West, I'm in pain. Why hasn't it ever hurt this badly before? It must be your fault. This only ever happened after I started dating you!"

Jackson, who was next to her, calmly rubbed her tummy with his hand, “Oh please. I told you not to eat spicy food, but you wouldn’t listen. What could I do? Why are you blaming me? Rome wasn’t built in a day. Haven't you heard of that?”

Tiffany narrowed her eyes at him, “That’s right, Rome wasn’t built in a day. It’s your fault for humping me every night. This is a result of my exhaustion!”

Jackson suddenly realized that her IQ was beyond saving, “You should go and do some proper scientific research and figure out why it hurts so much. If you really are set on blaming me, I won’t quarrel with you. Enough whining. I’m going to make you some ginger and red dates tea. Drink it and lie down. If it still hurts tomorrow, take the day off and rest at home.”

Tiffany conveniently lounged on the couch, “It’s a lot busier during the end of the month. Everyone has to do overtime. I’ve already taken some time off because of my period. I don’t think this’ll be a good idea. I’ve asked for the afternoon off. I’ll be fine once I get some sleep.”

Jackson served her the ginger and red dates tea once it was ready, “Nothing’s going to be delayed just because you’ve taken a day off. I just won’t be able to keep you company at home. I still have to do overtime myself. I’d still be in the office if I didn’t have dinner with you. Be good, go to sleep after drinking that. If it’s too painful, call me. Leave the water for your foot bath here. I’ll throw it out when I come home. You don’t have to do it.”

Tiffany lay down, motionless. She gave him an air kiss, “You’re the best. Go on. Come home early. I’m missing you already.”

Jackson smiled, put on his coat, and walked out the door.

Chapter 678

The next morning, Mark walked downstairs with a smile on his face. Mary saw how happy he looked and asked, “Did something good happen today, Mr. Tremont? You’re in a good mood this morning. Is Mrs. Tremont awake? Shall I call her down for breakfast?”

Mark straightened out his tie, “Nothing much, I just like the weather today. She’s awake. Tell her to come down.”

Mary glanced out the window suspiciously. It was snowing. How was this good weather?

Arianne shivered the moment she arrived downstairs. She wondered who left the door open downstairs. Snowflakes were being blown in by the cold air. Mary quickly shut the door, “Are you cold? Put on more layers; you don’t want to catch a cold. You always wore thin clothes to school during winter when you were little, so you’d catch a cold every winter and would only recover after the season changed. You’ve always had a frail body, and it’s only accumulated over the years. It’ll take years before you rebuild your health.”

Arianne glanced at Mark. Of course, his expression had changed. He knew how harsh he used to be towards her, right? He would never give her anything nice, unless she pitifully asked for it. She could wear one piece of clothing for many years, for all he cared.

“Don’t you have anything better to do, Mary?” he asked in a muffled voice.

Mary suddenly realized that she shouldn't have brought up the past, "Uh… Yes! I'm busy. I'm boiling soup in the kitchen. I've got to go!"

Arianne didn't mind. She smiled as she sat at the dinner table and ate a warm bowl of oats, "What? Feeling sorry? Have you finally become aware of how horrible you've been to me? You were just like this winter, so cold that people only ever wanted to run off to somewhere warm, preferring to avoid seeing or touching you."

Mark put a boiled egg that he had peeled into a bowl in front of her, "That was then, this is now. By the way, did you perceive Will Sivan as a fresh spring breeze because you saw me as winter personified? It's my fault for not being good enough; that's why you ran off with someone else. That won't happen again."

Her hand, which held a spoon, stiffened. She was stunned. He was actually bringing Will up on his own, and there was no resentment or iciness in his tone… Had this weight on his mind been inadvertently lifted?

After breakfast, Mark planted a kiss on her forehead before heading out, "Wait for me to come home."

She nodded stiffly and watched him walk out into the blustering snow. She felt a little confused. Why did this feel so perfect to her? Was this temporary? Or was consistency possible? Could she really enjoy all of this with peace of mind? Could she really… live happily ever after with him? In that moment, a myriad of thoughts flooded her mind — her father's death and the things her grandmother had said. Could she really let it all go?

Chapter 679

"Ari, Mr. Tremont seems like a completely different person, have you noticed?" Mary's voice suddenly chimed in from behind her.

Arianne returned to her senses and carelessly replied, “Nope. It’s too cold. I don’t feel like moving. I’m going upstairs to sleep. By the way, if Henry goes out, tell him to get two books for me. Just the kind that I usually read will do. You can tell him to ask me if he isn’t sure.”

Mary grunted a reply, waited for her to go upstairs, then called Mark, “Sir, Mrs. Tremont has asked for two more books, could you get them on your way home? Just her usual series will do. She just said… Okay.”

White Water Bay Villa.

Jackson had forced Tiffany to stay home today. Actually, her stomach wasn’t hurting anymore, but she couldn’t get past his insistence.

She remembered that it had been a while since she visited her own home. Lillian was staying alone and she rarely contacted her. She should pay her a visit.

She drove back into her condominium, got into the elevator, and went upstairs with ease. She had even bought Lillian’s favorite breakfast and a present. Just as she opened the door and changed her shoes, she noticed a pair of men’s shoes. Her father was dead. What were these shoes doing here?

Just as she grew suspicious, Lillian rushed out of her bedroom, “Tiffie, what are you doing here? It’s so cold and you’re here so early… Don’t you need to go to work?”

Tiffany knew that something was up, “Do we have a guest?”

Lillian glanced towards the bedroom, “Well… I haven’t had time to tell you…”

Based on the look on Lillian’s face and her expression, Tiffany knew that it was a complicated situation. Lillian was only in her early forties, so finding a new partner wasn’t exactly detestable. She just felt that it was too fast. Her dad’s death wasn’t too long ago, and Lillian used to say that she would never love another man…

“You don’t have to tell me… I… I don’t think I really want to know. If you think it’s appropriate, then I won’t object. It’s just that… you can be pretty simple-minded. Don’t be fooled. Also, please don’t let strange men stay overnight before marriage. It’s not good.” Tiffany felt her emotions intensify. She then put down her things and left.

When she got into her car, she did not leave immediately. She sat quietly alone for a long time. For some strange reason, the thought of her mother being intimate with a strange man repulsed her. She had even brought him home. She knew that she shouldn’t be so selfish, so she was already giving leeway by saying those things that she had said. As long as Lillian wasn’t conned or did not decide on a remarriage, she would not object.

She felt a twinge of regret after calming down. Perhaps the things she had said were inappropriate? Did it make Lillian sad? She should have been the bigger person and stayed back to meet the man and help check him out. She shouldn’t have been so cold and distant… However, she had already left and didn’t plan on going back up again.

She didn’t feel like going back to White Water Bay Villa either. After some consideration, she went to the Tremont Estate to see Arianne. Mary was very welcoming to her when she saw her, “Tiffany, are you

here to see Ari? She said she was going back to bed. I'm not sure if she's asleep yet, but you can go upstairs and have a look."

Chapter 680

Tiffany knew Arianne's daily habits. She would never be able to go back to sleep after just waking up, "Sure. I'll go upstairs and have a look."

She knocked on the door and opened it. Arianne was surprised, "Tiffie? Aren't you working today?"

Tiffany was reminded of the scene she had encountered at home. She couldn't contain herself, "Come downstairs, I have something to tell you. I'm not setting foot into your room 'cause your man is a germaphobe. I don't want him to be annoyed with me."

Arianne was helpless against Mark's germaphobia too. She took Tiffany by the hand and went to the living room downstairs, "What's up? You look rattled so early in the morning."

"I hadn't gone back to visit my mother at her house in a while, so I thought of paying her a visit this morning," Tiffany said with a sour look on her face. "I even brought her breakfast and a present, afraid that she would nag me for forgetting about her after finding a man. Can you guess what happened? She has no need to nag me anymore; I don't think she'll ever have anything to say if I don't come home. There was a man at her home! I didn't see him, just a pair of shoes at the door. I feel quite dejected."

Arianne was taken aback as she listened, "Are you saying… that your mother plans on remarrying? Actually… it's best to play these things by ear. You can't stop it anyway."

Tiffany sighed, “I know. That’s why I don’t intend on stopping her, but I feel so upset. One, my dad’s death wasn’t too long ago. Two, she brought a man into the house and let him stay the night, before marriage. That’s my house too. It’s disgusting, okay? I’m just annoyed. In all honesty, I won’t mind as long as she isn’t being conned or rushing to the altar. I was just shocked, since it’s early in the morning. It’s just too sudden, you know?”

Arianne wasn’t sure what to say. After all, this was Lillian’s business. She agreed with Tiffany’s view, “If you’re worried, take some time out and meet this guy. If you don’t feel like seeing him, use some other way to get to know him. That way, you’ll have greater peace of mind and you won’t have to feel awkward.”

After a bout of consideration, Tiffany decided to take Arianne’s suggestion, “Fine, I’ll contact that private eye. I’ve truly become one of his regulars. This is my third time hiring him. First it was for you, then to investigate Bernadette, and this time… it’s for my mom. This guy isn’t cheap. My nonsensical affairs alone are enough for his survival.”

This matter wasn’t as prickly. Tiffany received the private eye’s reply while hanging around the Tremont Estate until noon. It was only some information on the man. However, she was shocked to discover that she knew the man — he was her father’s old partner, Grant Jackson. She used to call him Uncle Grant, but now he was going to become her stepfather?

Grant had visited her at her house many times, and he had had many meals with her. She couldn’t exactly say how close they were. At least, she knew him when she was a little girl. Of course, he was married, if she remembered correctly. He even had a son, and he certainly wasn’t widowed.

The information from the private eye stated it very clearly — Grant was divorced and his son lived with him. He had always been in the jewellery supply business, and he was still in the same industry.

Based on previous impressions, Grant was no better looking than her father. In fact, he was actually pretty ugly. He had the belly of a middle-aged man and very little hair, and he was kind of greasy, but he was very good with words. This was her impression of Grant. Her mother had probably fallen for Grant's words!

"I'm really giving up on my mother. Grant Jackson used to have a great relationship with my dad. I just think it's weird for her to date him… It would have been fine if she were dating someone she didn't know. I wonder if my dad would crawl out of his grave in anger if he found out?"

"Try to have a little perspective," Arianne consoled, "Since you know each other, your mother probably understands Grant a little more. Chances of being deceived are lower when you're with someone you know. Isn't this good? What do you think of him?"