Ruling 731

Chapter 731

Jackson's chest was heaving. After a long silence, he finally said, "Is that what you think of me? I've made it very clear to you that I'm not in the habit of cheating…" Why would she not believe him?

Tiffany stared at him with tears in her eyes as she forced herself to stay calm. "Yes, you've mentioned that. I remember. But the truth is, you did. Don't worry, I don't plan on fighting with you. It's useless at this point. I'll return the money from the dowry to you as soon as possible. I don't want anything from the Wests. I'll tell everyone it's a mutual decision. After all, we were once in love. I won't breathe a single bad word about you to anyone."

Jackson did not expect Tiffany who was usually carefree to have such a determined side to her. She made a clean break when discussing canceling their engagement and had even planned on how to deal with the aftermath. Her deathly calm expression told him it was truly over. There was no turning back. Her pressing on at every stage, her distrust, her maddened torture upon him. He never thought that all of it would end because of one misunderstanding. His voice was shaking when he spoke as though every word that passed his lips took his strength away from him. "I'm going to ask you one last time, is there no turning back? Not even a chance for me to explain?"

Tiffany did not look at him. She picked up her bag, walked right past him, and left. "There's no need."

He had lost the courage to chase after her as he watched her leave. He felt as though his legs had turned into lead, they felt extremely heavy.

Arianne did not know what to say at that moment.

Mark frowned and softly sighed. “What on earth happened?”

Jackson smiled bitterly. “Is the truth all that important? She has never trusted me. If she wants to cancel the engagement, then, let it be. I’m exhausted as well.” He left the Tremont Estate, leaving Arianne and Mark, who had witnessed the entire scene, staring blankly at each other.

Tiffany hurriedly packed her things before Jackson returned to White Water Bay Villa. Since she had decided to leave, she would not allow herself to linger. She went back to Lillian’s place.

When Lillian, who was in the middle of a facial, saw her with all of her bags, she knew something was wrong. “What are you doing? I’m behaving myself, and you still insist on coming home to watch over me?”

She put her bags back in her room with a grim expression on her face. “Mom, how many things did I receive from the engagement? Give them all to me. I need to return them.”

Lillian immediately stiffened. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re canceling the engagement? Have you gone completely insane? Everything was fine, what happened? Did Jackson cheat on you or something?”

The word ‘cheat’ reminded Tiffany of the scene that she had just witnessed. She instinctively balled her hands into fists.

Chapter 732

Her silence confirmed the truth to Lillian, who began a garrulous spiel. “You saying that he used to be a playboy was bad enough; he’s only been an honest man for a short while. Your father and I have always hated this sort of thing. Your father has always taught you to be honest from a young age and never to fool around until you’re married. Even when you have someone, you should never be indecisive. I’d been with your father for many years and I never noticed anyone else. I only thought of marrying again after his death. How could Jackson do this? But… Are you really canceling the engagement? It makes sense… These kinds of things are intolerable. You aren’t even married yet and already he’s doing such things. There will be many more days ahead, so how could you possibly stand this? I can’t watch you jump into a fiery pit. I’ll give you the ATM card right now!”

Tiffany forcibly held back her tears. She did not cry at the Tremont Estate, and she couldn't cry now. At least, Lillian understood her decision and supported her. She did not argue with her.

Lillian brought out the ATM card, and Tiffany smiled as she accepted it, with tears in her eyes. “Thank you, mom. Actually… Jackson hasn’t done anything to hurt me. It’s not his fault but mine. We’re just not compatible. Thank goodness we hadn’t gotten married and that we’re only breaking up now. We won’t hold each other off.”

Lillian was shocked. “What do you mean ‘it’s not his fault and that it’s yours’? So you’re the one that cheated? Tiffany Lane, are you trying to dig your own grave? What have I been teaching you? What man could ever compare to Jackson West? I think Mark Tremont is probably the only good comparison. But it can’t possibly be Mark. Who could it be? Who would have that much ability to make you stray?”

Tiffany really wasn’t in the mood to discuss this again. She transferred all of the money back into Jackson’s account then typed out a long message and sent it to Summer. These were all stirring words, but the point of it all was to inform her that the engagement had been cancelled.

She was afraid that Summer might call and ask, so she turned her phone off immediately after sending that message. The more she thought of it, the more she panicked. Then, she took out her SIM card, snapped it in half, and threw it in the trash can. From now on, she would have nothing to do with the Wests.

Having arrived home, she stayed in the house and wouldn't step out. Lillian knew that she was emotionally unstable and was afraid of saying too much, so the entire house was shrouded in gloom, frighteningly silent.

At night, there was a sudden knock on the door. Lillian opened it with a dour look on her face. When she found Atticus and Summer standing on their porch, she burst into tears and wailed, "Summer, Atticus, I can't seem to understand what's happened between our children. Tiffie has suddenly moved back in with all of her luggage, saying that she wants to cancel the engagement. She hasn't said a word since she asked me for the ATM card. She's shut herself in her room, refusing to come out. She won't eat or drink. I'm going mad with worry. What on earth happened?"

Summer and Atticus looked extremely depressed as well. "We're not sure either, which is why we're here to try and talk to Tiffie. You know what our Jackson is like; he's so tight-lipped. I can't make him talk if he doesn't want to. Canceling an engagement isn't a joke. If our Jackson has done anything wrong, I'll compensate and apologize as his mother, in his place. Then I'll beat him to death when I get back. We have to give you some form of justice!"

Lillian stammered and stumbled over her words, too afraid to speak. What if it was Tiffany's fault instead? She hadn't been able to find out herself. It had only been a few simple words. What if her own daughter was in the wrong? The Wests would never live it down…

Summer marched straight towards Tiffany's room and hollered at her for a very long time before Tiffany finally relented and opened the door. She looked pale, as if she had lost her soul. "Mrs. West…"

Summer sniffed. "Why aren't you calling me 'mom' anymore? I haven't agreed to your cancelled engagement… If there's something wrong, let's talk in private, just you and me. Don't hide from me. If you really can't be together, I won't force you. I just want to know what happened."

Tiffany let her in her room. She shut the door, and they began their conversation. Tiffany hugged her knees close to her chest as she sat on the bed and mumbled, “It’s not Jackson’s fault. It’s mine. Just let the matter go. I’ll hand in my resignation after the New Year holidays. We’ll live our separate lives from now on.”

Chapter 733

Summer wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye and sobbed. “Can you at least tell us why? Even if you don’t want to be together, you can still keep working at the company. It’s fine… You’re like a daughter to me.” At this point, something hit her. “Are you angry at me? I’m aware of the issue between Lynn and Jackson. I let Lynn into the house to provoke Jackson into bringing you back to the house to visit me and the sad old man. I was only acting; I’ve already sent Lynn away…”

Tiffany shook her head. “That’s not it… It has nothing to do with you.”

Summer’s eyes brimmed with tears. “Then why? I couldn’t seem to call you, and I was completely stupefied when I saw your message. I went to see Jackson, but he’s been holed up in that villa in White Water Bay, like you, as if he’s lost his soul. I talked to him for nearly half the day, yet he still refused to answer me! I’m not leaving until you’ve given me your reason!”

Tiffany took a deep breath. “I was raped. This happened before Jackson and I got together. He knows and I never kept it from him. Even though he’s accepted it, I can’t. My family background is already incompatible with his, and this has happened to me. I feel inferior… I’ve always thought that he and I would never make it to the end. Every time I saw you, I’d feel like a liar. How could the West family possibly accept someone like me? That’s it. It’s my fault. Don’t blame him.”

Summer held her breath when she heard all of this, staying silent for a very long time. Tiffany was too afraid to even look at Summer's face. She must be disgusted with her. An affluent family would never be able to accept someone like her… She knew this long ago. Now that she had confessed, she felt a weight lift off of her shoulders. It no longer mattered anyway.

Suddenly, Summer wrapped her arms around her into a hug. "Tiffie… How could you even think that? It's not your fault, it really isn't… Jackson's heart only aches for yours, and so does mine. Don't cancel the engagement, please? Let's forget that foul incident and pretend it never happened…"

Tiffany finally burst into tears. "How can I pretend that it never happened? It did happen… It's a fact… I can't wash it away…" Just like how she had witnessed Jackson kissing Lynn with her own eyes. How could she wash that away?

Summer and Atticus finally left at 12AM. Summer's decision — even though Tiffany had made herself very clear, she would like to give Tiffany some time to calm down and carefully reconsider.

By the end of the holidays, Tiffany handed in her resignation. She staggered the time during morning working hours on purpose and gave the letter at around noon, just to avoid bumping into Jackson. It would be best to avoid meeting each other, since they had broken up. She did not even say goodbye to the only friend she had in the office, Aye, because she didn't want to explain herself all over again. She went to the financial department straightaway and collected her salary.

When she noticed that her lateness and days off were not on record for a pay cut, the weak spots in her heart took a hit. Jackson would always threaten to cut her pay, but he never really acted on it. This time, she really didn't need him to give her special treatment. She took out the portion of her pay that should be cut and left it. Then, she turned on her heel and left. From this day onwards, they would go their separate ways.

After receiving news from finance about Tiffany's resignation and her having already left, Jackson angrily kicked his office desk and smashed it to pieces. Not even the files and the computer on his desk were spared. When women wanted to be heartless, they could be more cruel than men. She didn't even want to see him one last time and left nothing behind.

Tiffany did not hail a cab to go home after leaving the company. Instead, she walked aimlessly along the straight road. She knew that she needed a stable job right now, but she really wasn't in the mood for an interview.

Suddenly, a black Bentley stopped on her left. She recognized this car; it was Alejandro's.

Jett winded the window down. "Miss Lane, Mr. Smith has extended an invitation to meet you."

In the past, she would have refused without hesitation, but now, the man who would restrict her was gone. No matter who she was with or what she was doing, no one was going to be jealous… She mechanically got into the car, her mind completely blank.

Chapter 734

Smith Manor.

Alejandro seemed to be in a pretty good mood. He delicately sipped on the different red wines in front of him as Lynn carefully served him by his side.

“I never expected for this matter to be settled so quickly. Now, I have a whole new level of respect for you, Lynnie.”

Lynn smiled. “I was just lucky. I never thought that it’d be so quick either.” What surprised her even more was how sensitive Tiffany was towards this “betrayal”. Alejandro actually knew Tiffany like the back of his hand.

The bandages on Alejandro’s face had been taken off. He wore a baseball cap that covered half of his face. Faint markings of surgery could be seen on his face, as he wasn’t completely healed. “Looks like starting the attack from Tiffany was the right decision. Much easier than destroying Jackson’s ego. Everyone has a deadly weakness. How very interesting. Lynnie… What do you think my weakness is?”

“You have no weakness,” Lynn replied instantly.

Alejandro smirked and gently swirled the wine in his glass. “You’re wrong, everyone has a weakness, as do I. You just haven’t noticed it. Once you know enough about someone, you’ll know.”

Lynn remained silent. Alejandro never let anyone get to know him, so he would never display his weakness in front of anyone. She simply did her job. She had to leave this dangerous man, sooner or later.

When they heard the sounds of a car engine outside, Lynn brought a surgical mask and put it on for Alejandro. He could never meet a guest with his bare face like this. She promptly left the living room after that. She could not run into Tiffany right now. It might end up in a catfight.

Tiffany soon walked into the living room. “You asked for me?”

Alejandro's eyes smiled. "It was nothing much; I only heard about your canceled engagement to Jackson West. You must need some consoling. Don't overthink it, I have to leave the country next month for surgery, so it might be a while until our next meeting. Consider it a farewell meal."

She did not answer and simply walked to the dining table and sat down. Alejandro lifted his hand, gesturing for an employee to serve the meal. He was certain that she would come and had already had everything prepared.

He wheeled himself forward and poured a glass of his favorite wine for her. "Give it a try. This is high class red wine. It'll certainly delight your taste buds."

She accepted the glass without hesitation and downed it. She certainly did not manage to enjoy the high class taste of the wine. She wasn't interested in wine tasting. To her, alcohol was merely a tool to get drunk.

Alejandro did not expect for her to down it all in one gulp. This was expensive wine and not even he would willingly "abuse" it. "You're the same as ever, downing alcohol in one sitting, regardless of what kind it was."

Chapter 735

Tiffany eyed him suspiciously. "'Same as ever'? I don't think we've met before. Don't act like you know me so well. Not even my own mother knows me that well…"

Alejandro didn't answer and simply stared quietly at her.

They locked eyes. Tiffany's heart skipped a beat. Why did those eyes look so familiar to her? She couldn't quite describe this feeling. It was as if… they had known each other for a long time. She instinctively lifted her hand to take off his mask, but he turned away with a straight face. "My face hasn't completely healed, so I'm afraid that I might scare you. I'll let you look at me as much as you want when I come back to the country."

Tiffany lowered her head, realizing that she had forgotten her manners. "I'm sorry… The last time you treated me to a meal, you only watched me eat. Would it be the same this time as well? You've really interpreted the words "treating me to a meal" perfectly…"

Alejandro refused to comment, tacitly agreeing to her statement.

Tiffany wasn't a fool. She remembered Jackson's warning — whenever a man ingratiates himself upon a woman, he would certainly be harboring an ulterior motive. She boldly asked Alejandro, "What's your game? You gave me a bottle of liquor at the bar, then researched everything there is to know about me, and helped me get rid of Grant Jackson. You've treated me to a meal time and again. What are you trying to do? I wonder if you're aware of your underling seducing my ex?"

Alejandro was very calm about it. "Heard it long ago. But Lynn and Jackson are long acquaintances. You've been well aware of this yourself. I can't possibly manage my staff's personal affairs. If I had to concern myself with that, I'd be too busy to even fix this face of mine. Just say the word, and I'll fire her at once."

"No need," Tiffany replied blankly. "We're not that close. The staff under your command are none of my concern. I have no right to make you do that. Besides… It doesn't matter to me anymore. I don't have much of an appetite, and since you're not eating either, I'm leaving. By the way, great wine."

Alejandro did not insist that she stay, just like the last time. “You like it? I’ll give you a bottle. Promise me that you’ll slowly enjoy it when you go back; don’t mindlessly gulp it down. It’s such a waste of a precious treasure.”

The pair smiled at each other. Tiffany stared at the bottle of wine in her hand glumly when she walked out of the manor. She had unwittingly been confounded by Alejandro. She had clearly wanted to question him on his motives for getting close to her but failed to get an answer in the end.

When she arrived home, she put the bottle of red wine on the shoe cabinet, just as she was changing her shoes. Lillian poked her head out when she heard her from the living room. “Where have you been? Gone on a job hunt? It’s almost Easter. There’s no rush in finding a job now. You must be in a bad mood. Take some time off and search for one after Easter. Who’s that wine from?”

She walked towards the couch and sat down. “Someone. Take it and drink if you like.”

Lillian picked up the bottle, inspected it, and widened her eyes in shock. “Who? Was it that… that guy? You couldn’t have actually cheated on Jackson. Is that why the engagement got canceled? Who’d be so generous to give you such expensive wine, aside from Arianne?”

Only now did Tiffany realize why Alejandro had asked her to slowly enjoy the wine when she got home, and why he told her not to mindlessly finish it all in one gulp. He even mentioned that it would be a waste of a precious treasure. So, it seemed that it was because it was… expensive!

She took a deep breath. “Mom, can you please stop bringing up the past? I did not cheat. It’s over. Stop talking about it. If you like the wine, drink it yourself. Let me have some peace and quiet…”

Lillian tactfully shut her mouth. However, she couldn't bear to drink that bottle of red wine and carefully put it away instead.

Chapter 736

Time flew. Onward came the night before Easter — a time when some families gather for a lovely, hearty meal. At Arianne's insistence, Henry the butler and Mary sat around the table for dinner together with her and Mark.

It was important to Arianne. They were her family, people who had raised her since childhood.

As usual, she also received a sum of money from Helen as a gift and some well-wishes under the backdrop of distant church hymns and occasional fireworks. With a pang, she realized that Easter this year was different from its previous iterations. She could not pinpoint the exact differences, but she wondered if it was because the festival felt homelier than it used to be.

After replying to Helen's text, she looked up and considered Mark. "I wonder how Granny iss doing," she wondered out loud. "I haven't been able to contact her for such a long time that I'm starting to worry. There's no way Zoey and the rest could keep that act for this long, but somehow they pull it off this time…"

It was one of Mark's most dreaded scenarios all over. For some reason, every festival automatically reminded Arianne of her grandmother, forcing him to come up with new lies to explain it away every now and then.

“Don’t you think this silence holds the best implication? It means Granny is living pretty well and the Harris’ are treating her well,” he fibbed.

“Indeed,” Henry chimed in. “You shouldn’t worry about it, ma’am. Just focus on taking care of yourself and the baby. After the child’s born, you’ll have a lot more energy to pursue these matters.”

She sighed. “Right, right.”

“After the child is born” — it would be summer by then. For now, though, the sky was still usually grey with dancing white flurries. No matter how far she looked, summer seemed so far beyond reach.

After dinner, Mark accompanied his wife to gaze out of the French window in their bedroom to watch the firework shows. As the Tremont Estate was located at an elevated terrain, their vantage point offered a broader view of the wondrous aerial spectacles above the distant cityscape.

Somehow, watching the fireworks drew an image of Tiffany and Jackson in her mind, prompting her to murmur, “What happened to Tiffie and Jackson is just… Christ, it’s disheartening. I really believed that they would be together to the end.”

“I haven’t seen Tiffie for a while, and it seems like nothing has happened on Jackson’s side, either. It boggles me that these two would be so… extreme; once they split, they cut ties so cleanly that there is no way back together,” she added. “I… I better call Tiffie and see if she’s alright.”

With that, Arianne turned away from the view and pulled out her phone.

Immediately after the call was connected, she heard Tiffany's bubbly voice from the other end. "Haaaaaaaappy Eaaaaaaaster! I'm out here playing fireworks with Mom, thinking to myself, aww, too bad you can't go outside, huh? Buuut! We'll be able to celebrate together next year with your little boo!"

Arianne backed out of her plan of mentioning Jackson and instead replied, "Yea… Speaking of which, what have you been up to, lately? You haven't paid me a visit, so I wonder if it's because work's gotten busy. Well, what's next?"

"I haven't been looking up any jobs, to be honest. Kinda just chillin' at home, too damn lazy to leave the house, typical lazy Tiffany. Your little tummy's been growing, though! And I started thinking that if I keep disturbing your rest around this time, Mark might murder me!" Tiffany said with the conviction of someone who had everything thought out. "Actually, I've made plans with Eric. Imma start working in his company after Easter! Tanya's there, so I thought it'll be nice to have a friend around. Seriously, Ari, I'm doing super. No worries."

Arianne could not tell if her apparent bubbly attitude was a deliberate act, but she preferred not to poke it either way. "Oh, that's a relief. Well then, have fun! I'll be off."

After that call, Arianne sent some virtual gifts to Tiffany and Tanya — for the sake of festivity as well as a tacit well-wishing gesture. For someone who was stuck at home, she could only do this much.

When Arianne turned back to Mark, she noticed that he, too, was texting his friends. She could even hear Eric and Jackson replying to him with their voices.

At that moment, a quiet pang of melancholy crept into her chest. While Tiffany was talking to Arianne, Jackson was also chatting away with Mark. Their world had always been so, so small — yet two people, who once loved one another, had cut out the other's presence from their world.

Chapter 737

A short while after Easter, Mark decided to travel overseas. It was a somewhat surprising departure from his typical habit; every overseas business was always handed down to his inferiors if he could help it. This time, however, he was left no choice, so he expected to be separated from his wife for about half a month.

The day of his flight began with him reciting a long, drawn-out list of instructions to Mary and Henry, encompassing diverse domains including Arianne's daily life schedule and dietary plans to her sleeping and workout hours. One would begin to wonder if an apocalyptic event was going to befall him after he left, especially after one looked at the palpable trepidation all over his face. Had Henry not reminded him that the plane was going to take off soon, the man's incessant nagging might never stop.

Arianne sent him off by the gate, where the poor man could not stroll toward the car without looking back every three steps or so.

"Okay, there's enough; just stay there. Yep. Because it's freezing here. You know what? Go back into the house right now, okay? I promise I'll come back as soon as I can, so be good and stay at home and listen to their instructions and wait for my return before going for your health check, you hear me? Should you feel even a single sign of discomfort, report it to Henry and Mary, pronto, okay? And — "

All that, to Arianne, was as good as hearing a mosquito buzzing in her head. Men undoubtedly nag just as well as women, she reckoned. "Yes, 'Mom'," she replied in a sing-song manner.

The car finally faded out of her sight. Arianne let out a long breath of relief but was soon quickly alerted to a strange new feeling in her chest.

She felt a little hollow. And if she understood it correctly, this meant that she was actually missing Mark. She was so accustomed to him that his absence felt foreign, even if it had only just begun a few minutes ago.

Arianne willed herself out of her sudden lapse and felt a little helpless. This automatic response could not bode well to her — she must remember that she had only returned to Mark for the sake of the child and that accustomedness is a dangerous drug. It could slowly coax a gradually relaxed Arianne into enjoying her life peppered by his warmth and existence, until she grew so dependent on how life had always been with him that the alternative ceased to become acceptable.

Back in the car, Mark, whose anxiety was hardly mollified, kept sniping glances at his phone on the seat beside him. “Brian? I’m getting antsy…”

Brian’s first thought was that he was nervous about his overseas business. “Come now; it’s hardly something worth worrying. You’re well on your way there.”

Mark furrowed his eyebrows. “That’s not what I meant. God, how much longer before the boarding begins? Do you think I can afford to be a little tardy to boarding? Can we, I don’t know, return to the estate for a sec? I want to see Ari real quick now.”

Through the rear-view mirror, Brian scanned Mark thoroughly as though he was examining a curious creature. “You’re antsy about Ma’am’s welfare, Sir? But haven’t you given enough instructions to Henry and Mary, two of whom you have entrusted the roles of a caretaker? Besides, you’re only away for half a month, and if everything goes smoothly, you could even return home early. All of these, Sir, prove that

everything’s going to be fine. Might I remind you that the family physician’s already standing by, ready to swoop in at a moment’s notice? Honestly, Sir, relax.”

Brian made a lot of points, but Mark’s heart seemed to refuse to settle down. He hadn’t left his wife alone since her pregnancy was confirmed and she was taken back to the Tremont Estate.

Fortunately, as the car drew closer and closer to the airport, his urge to make a U-turn back home waned, though he still managed to sneak in a call home before he boarded. “Remember to sleep and rise early, Ari. Lay down as much as possible so as not to overstress your body. If you’re bored, I’ve prepared some books for you to pass the time — it’s right there close to the headboard. Have Mary accompany you when you go out for walks; don’t ever do it alone — ”

“Oh my god, I heard you, Mark. I heard you the first time as well as the millionth time. Any more of the same stuff, and I'll tune your voice out of my ears,” Arianne intoned.

Still, despite her complaints, Arianne could not deny the surge of fuzzy warmth blooming within her chest.

Tiffany reported herself to Eric’s company shortly after the break.

Tanya, as it turned out, was still in the middle of her crash course and had remained in probation. That was not all; it seemed that the girl had changed a lot since the day she first came to the Capital. Not only had she adjusted the way she dressed and presented herself, but much of her understanding of the world appeared to have expanded.

It was to no one's surprise that Tiffany became Tanya's mentor immediately after she joined the company. Their seats were also placed side-by-side, so the two were frequently caught exchanging ideas and experiences in designing or gossiping about the latest rumors. Life was enjoyable.

As Jackson's hombre, Eric thought he had the duty to report Tiffany's presence to his best friend. So, after a quick, furtive snap of Tiffany at work, he sent the picture to Jackson with the caption: 'She's working under me now.'

Jackson tapped on the photo and eyed the woman in the picture before replying uncaringly: 'None of my business.'

Eric pursed his lips, a little bummed at his lack of reaction.

Right after Jackson finished his most urgent errand, though, the man could not help but clandestinely fish out the same photo and stare at it again. God, she was grinning like the sunniest day, free of clouds and storms of worry…

All of their beautiful, sweet memories were so vivid, it was as if they happened yesterday.

He hadn't erased any contact information he had about her, even though he could not use any of them anymore. It was as though an unseen but potent force had made it its mission to rend their bond asunder.

Chapter 738

The only one who wanted to break up had been her. Her alone.

The top notification bar, displaying an incoming call, suddenly slid down and blocked her face from Jackson's view. A little peeved, he answered the call snippily, "Yes?"

A sickly-sweet, coy voice struck his ear. "Hello, Mr. West. Fancy meeting us old friends tonight? News of your recent 'emancipation' has been going around, so — tee hee — congrats!"

Jackson's automatic response was a firm no; however, before the word left his tongue, he stopped himself. This was his past catching up to him. When was the last time he had allowed himself to indulge? He almost forgot how liberating his old lifestyle was.

"Sure," he said.

The woman did not attempt to hide her excitement. "Oh. My. God! This is great! Don't keep us waiting, Handsome."

Since Jackson was not the type to enjoy a good night without bringing his best friend along, he texted Eric immediately after the call. 'You, me, party tonight.'

Just the thought of alcohol made Eric feel sick. 'Ain't going anymore, k? Can't do beer. No dying young.'

'Order a juice. There will be women.'

‘Mad f**king lad! Newly single for a few days and your wild side is out already?’

‘Yes or no. Not interested in other crap.’

‘Fine. Yes.’

When it was time to go home, Eric informed Tanya to make dinner only for one since he was not coming home. Curious, Tanya asked, “Oh, where are you going? Bonding with customers?”

Eric shot a sidelong glance at Tiffany as she tidied her bag. “Er… Well, Jackson invited me for a drink.”

Tiffany froze for a split second before feigning placidity in the smile she leveled at him while bidding farewell. “Well, I’ll be going before all of you first, then. See you tomorrow.”

Tanya stopped her. “Um, how about we visit Ari’s place? She said her husband’s overseas, so… Wanna have dinner with her?” she suggested. “I’ll be honest — I’m not in the mood for making a meal for one person, so I figure we could just have a free meal at Ari’s…?”

Tiffany hesitated for only two seconds before answering, “Sure, let’s go. I’m driving today, so I’ll give you a lift.”

Eric watched the two women walk away, leaving only the sounds of their chuckles and chatter in the air, his mind whirring into thoughts. Did Tiffany truly not care? She heard Jackson's plan to go back to his old hedonistic self, yet she looked like she couldn't care less.

Eric soon arrived at the destination and saw that Jackson had started without him. The room was filled with almost all women except him, with every single one of them boasting a deliciously voluptuous body. Eric almost couldn't find a place for himself.

He finally squeezed the women aside enough to make himself comfortable, but before he could settle down, a slender, skilled hand snaked out of nowhere and caressed him. Goaded by the ambience, Eric's old nature surfaced, and he wrapped his arm around the woman's waist. "You can't just touch anywhere, you know? That's naughty."

The woman leaned herself onto his chest, breathing, "Men like me naughty. They say they want otherwise, but that's not what they think, is it? Mr. Nathaniel, do you really not drink? That doesn't sound fun at all…"

Chapter 739

Eric, too, thought it would be a waste not to drink. "Oh, yeah? Then pour me a full one, and I'll stop when I'm near death!"

The corner of Jackson's lips curled. Despite being surrounded by women doing their best, his eyes reflected a sober mind. "Hey, no dying, please. Don't make me lug your corpse around."

Eric drank in one finish and placed it down with a look of one not yet satisfied. "I haven't had alcohol for so long; Lord knows how good it feels! Don't fret, Jackson, I won't fall dead. I ate something on my way here, so it's gotta help mitigate some of this beer. What's more interesting is you, though! Suddenly

struck by the mood to go out and play, are we? And here I thought you were content to be a good boy who doesn't swing around now."

Jackson said nothing, but the smile on his lips faded.

A voluptuous woman with a face that might have undergone a fair bit too much plastic surgery suddenly rose with her phone in hand. "Mr. West, I've brought one of my friends for the night! She's very new to the scene — no, I should say she's practically untouched. She's just arrived and is now asking if she could come in and say hi. Curious?"

Jackson gave her a side-eye and nodded.

The implicit meaning was not lost on him. The women surrounding him were, in the day, either minor celebrities less bankable than D-listers or glamor models. The only thing that drove them was money. It was not all surprising that these women would tout a new girl to him, and neither did he have any reason to say no.

A few moments later, the woman brought her little friend back to the room. Just as the woman described, she was an innocent young bird who could not possibly have frequented such an establishment. Her movement was a little rough and forced, while the jitteriness in her eyes clashed strongly against the striking makeup painted on her face. Despite all that, Jackson could see that she was naturally curvaceous and rather beautiful.

The woman shoved the girl to the space beside Jackson. "This is Sasha. Girl just turned sweet eighteen! And she's still in college."

Sasha tugged on her dress nervously. “P-Pleased to meet you, Sir…”

Jackson chuckled. “C’mon, this ain’t college, and I’m not your lecturer. Relax with the greeting, will you?”

Sasha lowered her head sheepishly and poured him a glass. “I’m sorry, I just… This is the first time I’ve ever come here. I don’t know the rules.”

Jackson grabbed the glass and drank it empty.

Eric, watching him, opened his mouth and shut it before he could say anything. If Jackson’s old habit was any reference, then the act of him finishing the drink meant that he was inviting the girl for the night.

The woman who introduced Sasha breathed out a sigh of relief as excitement burst into her eyes. Everyone knew what Jackson meant: ‘The deal is sealed.’

A bit apprehensive that Sasha might mess it up, she made an excuse to visit the bathroom with the girl and dragged her to a quiet corner.

“Remember, you’re the one who begged me to bring you over, so don’t you f**king botch this, okay, Sweetie? You saw him finish the cup you poured? That, Sweetie, means he wants you for the night,” the woman said. “Now don’t you get all p*ssy and back out on me. He’s got no disgusting kink; in fact, he’s f**king good at f**king, and he looks like a bae doing it. F**k, if not for the fact that he never dates the same woman twice, I’d be introducing myself instead of you. But you know how he’s like — none of us has ever stayed by his side for more than three months, so do your best. Every extra day with him is another win — but how long you can go is all on you.”

Sasha bit her lips. “B-But, Desdemona? I… I don’t feel up for it anymore… C-Can I call it off — ”

“Call it off? You’re f**king telling me you wanna call it off?!” The woman raised her voice, a little vexed. “Then why the f**k did you beg? Look, Mr. West doesn’t bite, and all you have to do is to have him put on that tiny little sh*t I gave you. You can’t turn back no more, little girl; we’re all slaves to money and we’re not getting out of this system. Now go back out there and give him a good time!”

Sasha closed her grip around her pocket, where a tiny pack of condom hid. Even now, she could not believe that she would one day find herself in a place like this, with something like that in her hand.

The group only partied till eleven. Eric had gone straight back home, while Jackson brought Sasha to the hotel above the bar.

After a few drinks, Sasha had lost much of her initial sheepishness. Mustering enough courage, she helped Jackson out of his clothes just as Desdemona had taught her.

Jackson had gotten a little tipsy from the night, but he was far from completely losing his senses. While he considered the stranger working her way up his body, he found himself perfectly unaroused. “So, you’re here for the money, too?”

Chapter 740

Sasha’s hands stiffened for a second, shame halting her. Nevertheless, she answered candidly, “Yes, Sir.”

Jackson batted her hand away from him. “Take a shower and then lie down on the bed.”

A shade of pink rose to Sasha’s nodding face. Obediently, she went for a quick shower before exiting with only a towel around her. She checked Jackson for any response while lying down on the bed as he had instructed her.

Jackson watched her movement with a poker face and tidied his tie. “Put on some clothes, please. I’m not doing anything tonight. Just want you sleeping next to me.”

Sasha was taken aback. “W-wha—?”

Jackson, however, did not repeat himself. What he desired was not sex but sleep — since Tiffany left him, he had not enjoyed the respite of the night.

Eric returned home to find Tanya, not in her room sleeping, but waiting in the living room with a tummy-warming soup she had made for him. Knowing Eric could not resist drinking if he went out, she had prepared the soup for his possible stomachache.

Amidst the ensuing tête-à-tête, Eric sighed. “I think Jackson’s let it go already. He’s brought a girl to bang for the night!”

Shock dawned on Tanya’s face. “You serious?!”

Eric, realizing a little too late that Tiffany now worked under him, quickly hushed, “Psst, not a word with Tiffany about this, you hear? I’m just saying.”

Tanya’s eyebrows were all crunched up. “Well, not that Tiffany ever mentioned Jackson when she’s with Ari and me. Still… You can count on me,” she replied. “It’s just… I pity her. Anyway, you should go to sleep after you finish that soup. I’ll be heading to bed now; I’m beaten.”

The next afternoon, Tiffany’s old co-worker, Aye, texted her. ‘What happened between y’all? And why didn’t you tell me that you quit? And there’s this new woman in his office since morning, still hasn’t come out yet!’

Tiffany ignored her. She did not tell Aye she was leaving precisely because she did not want to bother explaining anything to her.

A while later, Aye sent an image displaying the aforementioned mysterious woman. She was young, gorgeous, and came with an aureole of youthful innocence. The background made it clear that this photo was, indeed, taken in Jackson’s company.

The mere sight of her spoiled Tiffany’s mood, who snapped in her reply, ‘I don’t give a damn. We’re over. His business is none of my concern.’

Aye had not said anything afterward — perhaps she was shocked by the woman’s outburst.

Tiffany found her working mood deflated beyond expectations; she felt as though a lump was pressing against her chest. Seeing her like this reminded Tanya of what Eric said last night, so in a surge of pity, she comforted her. “It gets better, Tiffany. I might not have any experience in relationships, but I know

time stitches all wounds. My heart broke in grief when Grandpa died, you know, but now, I feel a lot better. When I think about it now, I don't feel that much pain anymore."

Tiffany's lips quivered into a mirthless smile. "Here's the thing, I don't even wanna think about him, but somehow, someone will always tell me about… his bloody everything! And that's what stabs the heart the most. Why can't people understand that it's over for both of us? We're now on our separate ways; we don't talk anymore, we just… Can't we just be two parallel lines, never intersecting with one another? Why even bring him up? Why would I care if he got himself a new woman? I don't give a sh*t, do I? I don't give a sh*t. He was like that before he met me anyway."

Back inside the office, Jackson stared at Sasha with daggers in his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I… Um, I saw that you rushed to work, and um," Sasha replied gingerly, "I thought you might have skipped your breakfast, so I brought some for you. It's fine, I know; I will leave now…"