## Ruling 871

Chapter 871

Tiffany pretended to be blind to Jackson's presence and affected composure. "I… I, uh, I'm not in the Capital. I'm at Ayashe right now and will probably be back only by tomorrow night. So maybe some other day? Yeah, we'll meet up some other day."

Jackson inhaled long and hard before moving away from her body. He strode toward the window, a cigarette lit.

When the call ended, Tiffany acted as though nothing had happened by uttering a quick mumble. "I… I'll hit the sack now."

Jackson replied nothing; he did not even look back at her. In his silence, she bolted out of the room as though she was escaping from a fire.

It was her fortune that Arianne called her suddenly. She could not fathom what could have happened otherwise.

Back in the Tremont Estate, a somewhat listless Arianne sank into the couch, mulling over the boredom that had now permeated her life since she got pregnant and had a son. She was reluctant to be so devoid of work in her life, and every day, she found herself more and more compelled to find just about anything to do.

Back when she still had a job, her life was eventful, and she had a dedicated circle of friends. Now? Now, she passed the time doing nothing but being a gigantic, walking milk bottle, since the bulk of childcare had fallen on Mary's shoulders anyway. She was practically unneeded and useless at other times.

Worst of all, she could not even go out shopping with her best friends whenever she felt like it because her friends had a life and might not have the time for it.

Mark was acutely aware of her seeding restlessness. “You’re thinking about working again, aren’t you?”

Arianne had no qualms about being upfront. “Damn straight I am. I’m bored out of my wits cooped up at home! I never wanted to be some rich sheltered bum who has everything served to her on a silver platter. No, I want my own life, my social circle, and a place outside the domains of family. If this keeps up, I’ll be less and less motivated to care for my appearance, and then before you know it, I’ll turn into the textbook example of a dowdy housewife. Do you really want me to turn into that? I know you don’t… So, why not let me out of the house and take om a job, huh?”

Mark was a little hesitant. “If what you have in mind is setting up your own shop, know that you’d be so exhausted and mentally-occupied that you won’t have any energy to mind our kid anymore. But if you just want a job for the sake of enriching your life and you don’t really care about how much you earn, I guess I have no reason to oppose that. So… Want to work in my company?”

Arianne’s rejection was swift. “What? What’s the point of working in your company? Everyone knows who I am. I would be barred from touching the damn vacuum cleaner even if my job was to clean the office! How’s that ‘work?’” she rebutted. “Frankly? I wanted to work in Eric’s company because that’s where Tiffie and Tan are. But his company is too far from home, so I guess that’s not an option anymore. Whatever, I’ll just look for some other job, then. Hey, don’t panic, dear; I won’t so soon forget our son’s needs just because I have a job. I’ll make sure that I prepare enough milk to last him for a day before I go to work.”

Obviously, Mark disapproved of Arianne’s wish. As she spoke, the man’s expression gradually darkened as his silence became all too evident. In the end, he gave a shoddy excuse of being too tired and sleepy to think and terminated the discussion entirely.

Watching him ascend the stars, Arianne felt a little discouraged. Without explicit approval from him, it would be impossible to get anyone to hire her within the Capital. Arianne knew that for a fact, which was why she must work hard to make him nod.

She waited until their son had fallen asleep before entering their bedroom. Mark was lying on the bed, but instead of sleeping, he was scrolling through his phone.

She laid down beside him. “Come on, just let me have this one thing, please? I’m dying out of boredom here! Look at me, I’m still young. I don’t want to retire into the same life some women are content with; you know, going out shopping every day, spending money on the most luxurious stuff they could find, doing nothing else. I hate that kind of life. It’s a frivolous existence. I want to go out there and be bold…”

Chapter 872

“You women don’t make a lick of sense,” Mark grumbled. “Every other woman out there would dream of having your life, yet you keep wanting to play the life of an everyday person. Do you know just how many women out there are dying to live this comfortably without lifting a finger? I’m inclined to believe that you’re having all these thoughts precisely because there’s nothing else in life for you to fret about. Frankly, I’d like for you to spend your days caring for our son at home, sometimes going out shopping if you get bored, and waiting for me to come home around the evenings. In fact, I would very much rather you act like other housewives, frequenting beauty salons and being patrons of luxury shops instead of being obsessed with going out to work.”

Arianne lost her patience. “But that isn’t what I want. I never wanted that at all! You can’t control how I live or limit what I can do just because we’re married! I don’t want to live the rest of my life in this unhappy stupor, Mark. That life you described just now is the very definition of meaningless existence to me. Of course, I know we’re super-duper-rich; I know that the money you make is enough to last us for, I dunno, generations, without ever going out to work. But so what? I’m not gonna become a soulless husk going through the motion, so I don’t care if you agree or not. I’m going to look for work tomorrow! God, I always hoped that you’d be different from all the other men, but it turned out you’re just as fuddy-duddy as the rest of them! You don’t know me at all!”

Mark tossed his phone aside and turned to face her. “And that’s completely true — I don’t know you. You know why? Because when you were only eight-years-old, I was legally turned into an adult! What I told you just now? That’s the life I want. I want you to stay at home and be the best mother I know you can be. I don’t want my wife to go outside breaking backs for a couple of bucks! But when I offered you a spot in my company, you said no! What do you even want? Besides, as long as I keep my lips stiff, no one would dare to hire you.”

That set off the fuse. “Oho, so now you’re blaming me for not choosing a guy who’s around my age, are you? You know what, you’re completely right about this. I should have stuck to someone my age! At least, then we’ll better understand one another and not get bogged down by this stupid generation gap and communication problem!” she fumed. “But hey, if I remember correctly, it was you who left me no choice!’

Mark was sure she was insinuating something, so he bit back. “What, drawing this back to Will Sivan again? Fine, you once had this guy who’s about your age, and it was I who forced the two of you apart! Still holding grudges, are we? Listen, Arianne Tremont. Stop provoking me before I get angry!”

Arianne was already furious herself; there was no space in her heart to care if Mark was too. In a flash, she sat up from bed, grabbed a pillow, and smacked him with it. “That’s it, I’m not talking to you anymore! Lord, all that gentlemanliness is a façade, isn’t it?!”

Mark raised his hand to guard himself against the blow. “Excuse me, princess! Do you kiss me with that mouth? I’ve never pretended to be anything. Heck, all I’m saying is I disagree with you going to work! So don’t go and make up stories about ‘facades’!”

It was then that Mary’s voice suddenly blared out from behind the door. “Excuse you yourself! Can you please not anger Ma’am? If she gets too angry and stops lactating, who’s gonna feed your son — you? Lord Above, how could someone who calls himself a man know nothing about self-control?”

Her outburst made Arianne quiet.

Meanwhile, Mark took a deep breath. “Never mind. You just can’t go a week without having a tiff with me, can you? We’ll settle this tomorrow. Now, sleep.”

Of course, Arianne could not possibly retire gently into slumber. She mustered all of her courage to ask for permission, and this was what she got? Hence, she swung her legs out of bed and wore her slippers, declaring, “You’re sleeping alone tonight, Mark Tremont! I’m going to sleep with Smore!”

Mark’s hand shot out and gripped her wrist. “How dare you! Come back here!”

She swung his hand off of hers furiously. “You wanna bet? News flash, I’m not afraid of you! Did you really think I would gleefully stay at home and be nothing more than a housewife and mother for the rest of my life just because I had my baby? No way. My life’s only getting started! As long as I don’t neglect my son, I have good reasons and the right to seek out what I want!”

“Okay, okay.” Mark backed down a little. “Can you at least let me think about it a little longer? We shouldn’t just go anywhere whenever we feel like it. I’ll give you my answer tomorrow, okay? Come on, just come back here and sleep.”

Arianne sneered. “Good. If this proves to be a lie, well… You best be prepared to sleep alone forever!”

Chapter 873

The corner of Mark’s lips trembled a little. After being patient for so long, he was finally allowed to sleep with the woman he loved and enjoy her at night without holding back, which was why nothing could be

less horrifying than the prospect of sleeping alone for the rest of his life. Yet, at the same time, he frowned at the idea of Arianne going out there for work.

It was not that he was chauvinistic or old-fashioned. He just did not want his sweetheart to break a sweat, ever.

Fine, maybe the other teensy-weensy factor was that there were too many men out there who could fall for her beauty, and Mark was not okay with that at all.

Arianne had not the slightest bit idea of the direction Mark's thoughts had taken. She was too excited to hear his answer tomorrow. Naturally, she was sure that he would, ultimately, consent to her request and let her get a job.

Then, in the darkness, she heard the unmistakable sound of a plastic packet being ripped open.

A shiver ran through her body. "What the hell are you doing?"

He rolled to his stomach, pressing her under him. "What else do you think I'm doing? What, will you stop me? How about this, if you could take care of both our baby's needs and mine, then yes, maybe you do have the mettle to work. Don't go around complaining about being exhausted by then!"

Arianne was speechless by the "surprise." Indeed, she remained silent even as he roved through her body.

It was hard to tell if it was deliberated, but Mark seemed to eschew putting brakes on himself this time. Usually, he limited himself to one round, but tonight, he went on and on, to the point that Arianne was so exhausted, she fell asleep mid-action.

When Arianne finally roused from her sleep, it was already close to eleven o'clock in the morning. Mark was already off to his company. Crossed, she grabbed his pillow and pelted it as hard as she could with her fists as though she was hitting the man himself.

Before her steam was entirely let out, Mary pushed open the door, Smore in her arms, asking, "You're up, Ari? Master Aristotle has been bawling. Seems to me that he misses his mommy."

Seeing her son instantaneously doused her flames as a lump of sadness formed in her chest. Catching glimpses of Smore's glistening tears in his eyes filled Arianne with a profound sense of guilt. She regretted waking up so late in the morning. "Bring my baby to me, please. I'll feed the poor thing. By the way, when did Mark leave? Did he say anything before he went out?"

Mary brought the baby forward. "He left around half-past-seven. Told me he'll be late tonight but didn't say anything else."

Abruptly, Mary's attention zeroed in on the hickeys on Arianne's neck before a meaningful smile blossomed on her lips.

"Ari, please remember that the doctors had advised against bearing another child, okay?" she advised. "It was pure luck that got you through delivering Master Aristotle, but you need to be more careful from now on and make sure that Mr. Tremont doesn't get you pregnant anymore. Men aren't always so mindful, so you need to watch it yourself. Otherwise, you're the one who'll suffer, you know?"

Mary was not exactly shy about these conversations, so Arianne did not feel strange when hearing about it from her. It could still feel quite embarrassing, though. Quickly, she nodded and said, “I understand the concerns, Mary. I’ll be extra careful. Speaking of, I’m a little hungry. Is there anything for me?”

“Oh, yes! I made you some soup,” Mary supplied hurriedly. “Mr. Tremont told me that your milk is a little insufficient, so he had me make something traditionally used to stimulate a woman’s lactation. I think that it’s a great and sweet idea. We shouldn’t let our Master Aristotle go hungry, right? Once you finish breast-feeding him, come on down. I’ll bring the soup out.”

Her words threw Arianne into a loop. Since when was her milk “insufficient”? True, prior to her delivery, she worried that she might not have enough milk to squeeze out of her A-cups. However, after the baby was born, Arianne quickly realized that the amount of milk produced never depended on her breasts' size. In fact, the milk she produced naturally was enough to feed two babies simultaneously! How would Mark know if she had enough milk or not? It was not like he was the one who drank it… right?

Smore’s previous teary tantrum might have depleted much of his energy because after suckling for a while, he fell asleep. Mary was quick to grab the baby away from Arianne’s arm.

“Okay, wash yourself up and come downstairs for your meal. I’ll be bringing your son to the nursery right away,” she said. “Mr. Tremont is against holding a sleeping baby in arms, right? Says it might foster a bad habit in the kid.”

Arianne responded with a soft sneer. Mark had made it clear that he wanted his son to be independent as soon as possible, and one of the ways he believed could help was bringing the child to the nursery alone as soon as he fell asleep. Subsequently, he was very much against the notion of holding a sleeping baby in one’s arms.

Smore was always going to sleep in a separate room; it was a habit that could start since he was a baby. In other words, he was probably never going to enjoy the warmth of nestling in between his parents.

Chapter 874

Despite everything, Arianne didn't oppose Mark's "preferred method". For her, the reason was more straightforward — she was just worried that Smore's midnight tantrums might disturb his daddy's sleep. Arianne could replenish lost winks in the day, but Mark would have to go through work in a state of sleep deprivation, and that would be quite terrible.

After washing up, Arianne tidied the bed for a bit and accidentally found an opened box of condoms. There were only three packets inside, but the packaging said there were originally twelve…

She had no idea that the man had secretly prepared something like this. Stirred by this finding, Arianne did a quick count and realized that Mark had been letting his carnal desires run loose more and more often.

Her phone suddenly rang. She looked down and was met with Tiffany's name on the screen.

"Hey, Tiffie. You're back in the Capital?" she asked.

Tiffany's voice sounded a lot more despondent than usual. "Hey, Ari? Just calling to say I might have done it this time. Yeah, I might have hurt Jackson real bad. He… He kinda left Ayashe by himself and left me and Tan with a plane ticket each. It started like this: uh, he asked if we could go back together, and I was like, well, I didn't say yes, so he got real mad about it. And then he was like, you gotta do something that could force my heart to give up instead of being all 'maybe' and continuing to torment me! But I couldn't say sh*t, Ari. I just didn't have the courage. And then… Yea. I effed up."

Arianne froze. “Wait. So he left on his own and left the two of you in Ayashe? Oh-kay…? Er, how about we save an in-depth discussion for after you two come back? What time’s the flight?”

Tiffany sighed. “3PM. I agree; we talk when we get back. That’s all as a prologue, if it counts. ‘Kay, bye.”

Arianne descended the stairs for her lunch after the call ended. A few moments later, Smore woke up with a loud, unstoppable bawl.

Mary had tried to mollify him but to no avail, so Arianne paused her meal and took the baby from the former’s arms. Strange enough, he slowly stopped crying.

Mary was surprised. “And I thought Master Aristotle was crying because he’s feeling sick or something! But it turns out it’s because he thinks I’m a stranger? But why? I've always carried him around! Why is he suddenly rejecting me?”

Arianne planted a kiss on Smore’s cheek. “He’s grown attached to Mommy’s scent, I bet. It’s alright, Mary, I don’t mind. I could always wait until he falls asleep before I resume my meal. Oh, right! I have to go somewhere around three in the afternoon. If my son’s a little too clingy, I might just bring him with me. Henry’s at home, right? Have him drive, please. I’ll outfit the car with the baby seat and its straps.”

“Henry’s at home at the moment,” Mary replied, nodding. “But I don’t know when he’ll suddenly run off to complete Mr. Tremont’s errands. Mr. Tremont always has a ton of things for him to do, so he rarely stays put. That said, I’ll give him a heads-up and tell him to be at home by three. Meanwhile, you better appease Master Aristotle and make him go to sleep, or you’re never getting around to finishing your food.”

By two in the afternoon, Arianne had a bright idea. She was going to visit Mark right in his office and confront him to answer her question. Otherwise, that sly man was only going to bide his time and elude her through his work.

She put the idea to work, asking Henry to drive her to Mark's company. The subsequent plan was to wait for Tiffany's flight home there, then asked Brian to send her to Tiffany's place afterward.

The weather today was far from sunny, but neither was it raining. Arianne thought it was high-time she brought her son out on a trip.

The mother-and-son pair soon arrived at Tremont Tower. Arianne pushed the baby-buggy into the elevator until she reached Mark's office level, then proceeded to frighten Davy when she and the buggy emerged.

"M-Ma'am! Why are you here alone with the baby?"

She arched a brow. "What, am I not allowed to? Never mind. Is Mark in his office?"

Davy forced himself back to composure and answered quickly. "Yes! Yes, of course. But he's going to be in a meeting a while later."

Chapter 875

Arianne nodded her head as a sign of understanding and proceeded to push the buggy into the office.

Mark was drinking his tea. When his wife and son entered, he almost choked on his drink. “Cough! What the heck are you doing here? And why did you bring the baby? Did you come here alone?”

She sneered. “Alone? What, your son doesn’t qualify as a person? It’s not raining today, so I brought him out for a walk. Later today, Tiffie will return from Ayashe, and I’m going to go meet her,” she replied. “The main point, though, is you. What did your ‘intense contemplation’ tell you, hmm? You promised me an answer today, and I’m not waiting until you come back home. I want you to tell me right now.”

Mark put down the cup and rubbed his chin. “Hmm. My head’s blank. Answer tonight.’

She knew it. She knew this jerk would use this obvious tactic, so she pushed the buggy closer to him. “Stop bullsh*tting me, Mark. If you don’t give me an answer now, I’ll leave our son right here and go on my own. Don’t say I didn’t warn you!” she cautioned. “He’s asleep for now, but when he wakes up, he’s not going to lie down quietly, I can tell you that. By then, you’ll have to babysit him while having your meeting!”

Mark ruled that Arianne was not the type to leave her son cruelly and walk away, so he smirked and goaded her. “Whatever. Do it, if you even have the heart.”

His provocation stung her. After one last look at Smore in the baby buggy, she clenched her jaw, summoned her will, and spun on her heels.

Mark was a little shocked, but he did not stop her from leaving. He was confident that the woman would soon return.

It was Davy who expressed concerns as he watched Arianne leave the child behind. “Mr. Tremont, the meeting is about to start. Ma’am has gone and left the baby here. What are we to do with him?”

“She’ll have second thoughts very soon and come back. Just you watch, if you don’t believe me,” Mark replied confidently.

Twenty minutes passed. Davy turned his head very slowly to face Mark and his stormy mien. “Mr. Tremont? The meeting is awaiting your arrival. Everyone else is present.”

Mark massaged his forehead. “Let’s go. Bring that little one.”

He had underestimated the depth of Arianne’s determination. She did leave her son behind just as she had threatened!

When he joined the conference, baby buggy in front of him, the whole room turned silent. No one dared exhale a breath as they unanimously wondered if this was, indeed, the same Mr. Tremont they had grown to fear. Was this the same Mr. Tremont in the office, the one who never smiled?

“What are you looking at? Don’t any of you know what to do during a meeting?” Mark scolded with a frosty expression. He took his seat in the meeting and parked the buggy next to him.

The planning department representative began after composing himself, drawling on about the focal theme of their meeting. Only a few words in and Mark suddenly interjected snippily, “Can you turn your volume down? The baby’s writhing, for goodness’ sake! Should I expect you to pacify him if he wakes up, hmm?”

The whole room turned dead silent. The representative's mouth was sealed so hard, nothing came out of it. Unfortunately, even with their gingery measures, Smore woke up and immediately launched into a bawling fit.

Mark held the baby up and began feeding him milk in a wooden, unpracticed maneuver. "And now he's awake. Jolly. Keep it short."

Chapter 876

The representative proceeded to recite his piece as gingerly as possible while hoping that this meeting would end soon.

Smore, meanwhile, appeared to be quite taken by his surroundings. Anytime anyone talked, he would stop drinking, listen, and resume his meal only when everyone was quiet. It went on for a while, melting his father's heart. He cooed, "What's that? Something interesting catch your fancy? D'aww, do you even understand what we're saying? Hee hee. Come now, finish your milk quickly and then chill in your buggy. Dada has work to do."

The softness in Mark's features right now was so overwhelming that it stunned everyone else in the room. Was their stonecold boss… actually radiating Big Daddy Energy?!

Meanwhile, Arianne and Tiffany met up in a café without Tanya, who claimed that she was too tired to go on and returned earlier.

Tiffany had ordered the most bitter coffee on the menu and refused to throw sugar into it. However, she almost passed out from a sip. "Urghh, this is… the most bitter sh*t ever…"

Arianne giggled at her friend's antics. "Don't drink it if you're not into bitter coffees, alright? So, what now?"

Tiffany shook her head, clearly at a loss. "I don't know… I don't know. If I look for him, it becomes obvious that I want us to be back together. If I don't, he and I will probably never cross paths again. The pickle I'm in right now is that I can't lose him, yet I also can't have him. What a paradox, isn't it? Do you think I'm crazy? Because I really think I am," she began. "Oh, uh, where's your son? Did you leave him alone at home?"

Arianne was a little smug when she replied, "No, I brought my kid with me and then left him in no-good Mark's care. He's probably hosting a meeting with the baby, haha! I told him I want to work, but he kept saying no, so I got mad and decided to rebel."

Tiffany chuckled for a second before the same agony and moroseness weighed back onto her. "I'm going mad, Ari. I'm losing my f**king marbles — and the person who does this to me is me."

Arianne mulled her friend's situation over for a moment before she started, "I think… I think you shouldn't torment yourself like this. You aren't just hurting yourself, Tiffie — you're hurting Jackson too. Think carefully and be mindful of how you are feeling. If you could have just one thought of wanting to be together with him, do it. Stop biding your time like this! You're only going to regret it for the rest of your life if you miss him. To be very frank with you, Tiffie? I really wish you'd end up with him for the rest of your life. This is my genuine wish."

Tiffany stirred the coffee in her mug with the teaspoon, creating a whirlpool that echoed the elusive thoughts in her head. After what seemed like forever, she finally replied, "I'm just terrified of the possibility of yet another nervous breakdown when I'm with him. I don't want to be the kind of woman who keeps thinking the world's out to steal her man. I don't want to keep wondering if he is having an affair with someone else behind my back. I don't want to feel inferior and helpless. He's a good man, Ari. He's so good, to the extent that I fear the day when I'm suddenly not good enough for him. I won't be

able to stomach that disparity! Oh, God, what the hell is wrong with me? Why am I so… so confused? What am I being confused about? I'm crazy, Ari. I'd rather believe I'm crazy, and I wish I could slap myself right now."

Arianne was sure that what Tiffany needed the most right now was a shove in the right direction, or else she would never be able to make a decision. "Tiffie, what will you do if Jackson suddenly marries some other woman?"

Tiffany's answer was swift. "Then I won't ever date anyone again. You know why? Because no one could be better than him!" she declared. "Please don't ask me hypothetical questions like these again, Ari. Just thinking about the prospects is like a knife to my chest. And now I wonder… He mentioned that he doesn't believe in marriage, right? Then fine, let's not get married! We'll remain who we are right now. What's wrong with that?"

Arianne frowned. "You mean you're content with being his friend-with-benefits forever? God, Tiffany, that's a precarious relationship there, you know? Too many variables with too many stakes tied to them. No one will feel secure about this relationship! Besides, from what I know about Jackson's character, he only wants to be with you because he loves you and wants you to be his wife. He would never agree with your harebrained arrangement!"

Tiffany was now embroiled in an intense mental battle. In the midst of the struggle, she unconsciously finished the entire mug of bitter coffee. "Do you think I can still try to bet on this? If I win, I win everything I truly wanted. If I lose, the worst that could happen is that I end up no different from now. I… I love him. Because of that, I cannot be a milquetoast! You and Mark managed to hold hands together till death do y'all apart, even after all the sh*ts you two had gone through! A little misunderstanding between Jackson and I is, in comparison, so tame and trivial! Right?"

Arianne nodded in agreement. "Right, and that is why I support you, always. You must be temerarious; your will must be firm. You need to believe that Jackson is someone you can rely on for the rest of your life. You need to believe that you'll soon walk out of this looming shadow of trauma! No matter what happens, I'll always be with you. Even if you lose the bet, turn around. I'll be there, guaranteed."

Chapter 877

A relieved smile finally shadowed Tiffany's lips.

"You know, I was wondering… Had my womb been just a little bit better when Jackson and I were trying to conceive a child, maybe our baby would have been born sometime not too far from now," she said. "I really am an a**. I torment myself and drag him along the pain selfishly. I wonder if he would be mad at me for what happened last night. But I'll wait. I'll prep myself mentally tonight, and then in the morning, I'll knock on his goddamn door after requesting work leave. Then, I'm gonna do it. Speaking of which, there's other good news! All thanks to your wisdom, Ari. I think the Lord above is finally opening doors for me!"

Arianne was very pleased. "I'm delighted just to hear you finally cheering up, Tiffie. What's the good news?"

Tiffany pulled out a fashion magazine from her bag and flashed it to her. "I'm within the top ten! Okay, I mean, I'm at the very tail end of the list, so my creation didn't get to grace this magazine's cover, but still! This means so much to me, Ari — I feel like I'm being acknowledged! My life is meaningful!"

It was a bolt out of the blue, and Arianne was struck. "You actually made it into the top ten? You. Actually. Made. It. Into. Top. Ten! That was the creation that jerka** Beckett accused you of plagiarizing from him, right? This is awesome, Tiffie! With this achievement under your belt, all those companies out there are going to want to hire you! It doesn't matter which you join; your wages are only going to go up! I mean, I'm not telling you to quit your position in Eric's company; I just wanted to say that the door to your career has opened wide. You are a talented star, Tiffie! Go, go seek Jackson tomorrow and claim love as another win!"

After her meeting in the café, Arianne returned home immediately. Part of her worried that Mark was a terrible caretaker for her precious little Smore, yet other parts of her agreed that she must not yield. Her

goal was to defeat the evil force that was Mark Tremont — the villain who thought that just because she turned into a mother, she couldn't be anything more than a humanoid milk bottle!

Later, Mark appeared by the entrance at six in the evening sharp, despite telling Mary earlier that he was coming home late. Hanging from his neck and settling on his chest was Smore, tucked in a baby sling. He would have looked like a mommy kangaroo carrying its joey if not for the tempest swirling in his mien.

Arianne had just finished her bath when he came home and was applying body lotion on herself calmly. "How was it? Did Smore give you any trouble? Hmm, I thought you were coming home late tonight. Why are you back already?"

Mark placed Smore down before grouching, "You did this on purpose. You left him on my lap, and I couldn't do anything with him around! He's only a few months old, for God's sake! He wouldn't go to sleep even after he was full. He just wanted his Dada to hold him all the damn time! How was I supposed to work with a deadweight? Honestly, the two of you are God's tests for me, aren't you?"

Arianne tucked her Schadenfreude deep within her chest so that none of it showed in her pate. She took the baby back into her arms and started to coo. "Did you torment your daddy back there? Aww, don't be too harsh on him! He has never taken care of you on his own, so he knows nothing about how tough it is. Unlike your Mommy, who has to go through this every day…"

Mark, fuming, stormed up the stairs. When he finally vanished, Arianne let out her true feelings. "That's my boy, Smore! You did very well, young padawan. This is how we're gonna fight the force of evil from now on!"

Mark's rage did not dissipate even during dinner, as he ate his meal with a perpetual stink eye. Arianne pursed her lips and tutted, "What, mad that a few billion-dollar businesses got lost? So what? You're earning all this money for us, anyway! Plus, who told you to cross me?"

Mark turned to her, his eyes narrowing slightly. "That's not it, but never mind that. You, come to our bedroom after dinner posthaste. We have something to discuss…"

She sensed danger in him, but she thought better of it. He had so many rounds with her last night that he must be too taxed to do anything today, right? He was not the same twenty-something lad he used to be anymore. He could not possibly still be that "energetic."

Arianne coaxed Smore into sleep after dinner before retiring into their bedroom with Mark.

She expected him to discuss her work. Instead, the guy yanked his shirt off almost immediately, causing a shudder to course through her. "What the hell are you doing..?"

Chapter 878

Mark pushed Arianne into the corner and tilted her chin upward with his hand. His eyes penetrated hers.

"What the hell am I doing? Well, for starters, I noticed that you have been challenging the line quite frequently lately. You came up with a prank to torment me a little, didn't you? Now, if I don't punish you right now for it, I'll soon find out one day that I'm completely under your whims!" he hissed. "You want to go out to work? You should be the one pondering more deeply about me because work should not jeopardize your role in Smore's life and mine. This is how we live now, Arianne. If you can fulfill our needs, I'll let you work."

Arianne's heart thumped wildly against her chest. Her eyes glided from his handsome face down to his Adam's apple, then to his collarbones, then to his hardened, toned chest. Finally, that infatuation young girls got when a man first nabbed their hearts crashed onto Arianne like a deluge.

She could not fathom why — despite the two of them already having posterity — his action still managed to make her face flush and her heart refuse to be still. Was it because they never had actual, consensual intimacy before? The sort of intimacy between two people who willingly surrender to each other? How many times had they had sex since their marriage? Arianne could not tell. Whatever the number might be, it was probably one reason why having sex with Mark still felt as exciting as a first-time could get.

Feverish lips rained down on her. Her heart shuddered at the touch, and before she knew it, she had begun to raise herself tall by standing on her feet, her hand slinging around his neck. He pushed her to the bed, and suddenly, she wondered out loud, "You had a lot of rounds last night, though. Are you sure you even have enough energy to spare for tonight?"

Mark's motion suddenly froze into place. A look of shock and a tad bit of hurt crossed his face. "Arianne—!"

Unfortunately, the woman was a little too intoxicated by his action that her foggy mind could not figure out why he sounded so offended by her words. "What? Oh, I knew it, you're tired! You must be tired during the day, too. I understand. I guess we'll go to sleep tonig—"

His expression darkened before he pushed her legs up into the air. "That's it! If you're not a screaming mess tonight, I'll renounce my name as a Tremont!"

Fast-forward to one in the morning. Tiffany Lane suddenly bolted up from her nightmare with a lingering profound dread that was reluctant to leave. She sat up on her bed, her hand on her chest, and found sleep had evaded her completely.

She could not even remember the dream that had woken her up.

The bitterness of that coffee she had in the late afternoon was still tart in her tongue. After the meetup, Tiffany had skipped dinner and slept until this hour.

Peckish, she rose and dragged herself to the fridge, scouting for something to eat. When she passed by the living room, she noticed Tanya's shoes were missing. In other words, she had not come back.

Tiffany pushed open Tanya's room to confirm that it was the case. She had not come home — but why and how? She was a goody-two-shoes from head-to-toe, and this would be the first time she had not returned home late at night. Neither had Tiffany heard of Tanya having a new boyfriend. She became more and more anxious, so she gave the girl a call.

Tanya's phone appeared to be off.

Tiffany's mind wandered to the unsettling dread she woke up with earlier, and suddenly, her body froze in mortification. Had something happened to Tanya?! She was just a girl. Which meant there were plenty of terrible, cruel things that could befall her.

The last thing Tiffany wanted was to have Tanya go through what she had gone through. She wanted to call for help, but she struggled to find the right person. It was so late right now — Arianne must be sleeping, and she definitely needed the rest to take care of her son in the day.

Arianne was not an option. After a two-second debate with herself, Tiffany chose Jackson. She had wanted to start talking to him tomorrow morning, but this was an emergency. Plans always bend for emergencies.

Strangely enough, Jackson's phone was also unreachable.

Panic possessed her. She hopped into her car and drove to White Water Bay Villa in the hopes of seeing him. She had the keys to his house.

Even if Jackson was still mad at Tiffany, there was no way he would balk at helping her over something like this, right?

Chapter 879

Tiffany opened the door and froze. She found herself eyeball-to-eyeball with Tanya, the same Tanya who did not return home tonight.

Before Tiffany could release a sigh of relief, the transient but palpable panic that zipped through Tanya's eyes caused every muscle in her body to tense intuitively. She found herself murmuring, or rather, demanding, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Tanya said nothing. She hung her head as she continued to clean the dishes and food off the dining table.

Tiffany's eyes wandered toward two emptied wine bottles and felt her legs turn wooden, as though they had turned to lead. Against her wishes, her attention began to magnify on Tanya's matted hair and her haphazardly buttoned clothes. She dared not imagine what happened before she opened the door.

But Tanya's silence was deafening; it was pushing her to madness. Hysterical, Tiffany yelled, "Talk, Tanya! Talk, god-f**king-damn it! What the f**k were you doing here?!"

Jackson hated having strangers in his home — Tiffany knew that more than anyone else! There was a reason why the two of them had their phones turned off at the same time!

"I'm sorry, Tiffany. I didn't want it to happen… After the two of you fought in the hotel, I thought he must have been distraught, so I thought I should keep him company and chat a bit. I was just scared that the two of you would sever your ties with one another. I did all of this for you guys' sake. But he drank a little too much and… I'm so sorry…"

Every utterance of "I'm sorry" was another slice on Tiffany's heart. No amount of Tiffany's simple-mindedness could shield her from coming to a sick conclusion.

"So, for my sake, you had sex with him. Did you? Hmm?"

Tanya said nothing, and that was an answer in and of itself.

Tiffany felt a daze. She clambered up the stairs. She pushed open Jackson's room and found him knocked out on the bed. She found clothing items on the floor, one belonging to him and one to Tanya — the latter being the woman's bra.

Even with the sheet over him, Tiffany could tell that Jackson was wearing nothing.

What she could not tell was how this unimaginable thing could happen. Tiffany thought she would leap onto Jackson and pelt him with her fists, screaming at him about having sex with yet another person within his social circle, shouting about why he was not strong enough to wait for daylight, to wait for her to come. Tiffany blamed herself for taking too long to make a decision; had she put her foot down earlier and moved, this thing might not have happened. But everything was too late.

God never did care for her. He did not open any door — that was all just her baseless fantasy. In the end, she lost the thing she never wanted to part with.

Tiffany had sunken into the abyss. Yet, just a few feet away from her, Jackson slept peacefully, oblivious to the agony that now ravaged her soul.

Tanya hurried up the stairs, exclaiming, “Tiffany, I can explain! It’s all my fault, not his! I can pretend that this never happened! He drank a little too much; he wouldn’t remember it. This could stay here, never to be said out loud. No one would know—”

Tiffany closed the door, her expression blasé. She was not going to let Tanya step into his room one more time.

“Let’s talk,” she said.

Chapter 880

With that, Tiffany turned around and went downstairs.

Tanya's gait was not normal — it was slow and awkward.

Tiffany considered her from her spot on the couch and watched the woman inch toward her. Then, she gibed, "Can you be a tad bit more artful and not make it so obvious? I know you had sex with him, honey. No need for the visual reminder. We're all women here. We all had our first time. What, you think only you know how much it hurts?"

Tanya's eyes met hers before she sat across the couch. "What's your point?"

The subtle change in her attitude was not lost on Tiffany. "Oho, not going to continue your innocent girl act now? So you weren't joking with me back then. You changed your target from Eric to Jackson; you even put it to action. How ironic that I was the one who taught you, and now it's backfired on me. I think I made it clear to you before — use all the wiles and tricks you have, but never cross the moral horizon. You knew he was my ex-fiance, Tanya, yet you did it anyway. You utterly disgust me."

Tanya was done with keeping up her act. Instead, she raised her head defiantly and looked straight into Tiffany's eyes. "Good, you remember he's your 'ex'. Me and him? We're both single. What's wrong with two single persons doing this, huh? Don't you use that tone on me as though I've snatched away your possession or something, 'honey'. It was you who squandered a man like Jackson. If you don't want him, then I'll take him. Weird, isn't it? I know it's weird. When it happened, I knew we were friends no more, if we were ever even friends in the first place. You never did see me as one, did you? To you, I'm nothing more than a destitute hillbilly with nothing to her name. A low, pathetic schmuck you've taken in for free labor. A pet monkey for your entertainment.

"Here's what I don't understand the most. You're no longer the great heiress to the Lane fortune or whatever highfalutin hoo-ha. Now, you're just a has-been who was cast out of heaven and fell among us

normal folks. A fallen grace is always lower than us plebs, so what makes you think you still have the right to act like a princess and order others around? Jackson treated you with nothing but love and kindness, but how do you repay him? God, you deserve all the sh*t you brought yourself."

"Free labor? Pet monkey?" The last ounce of Tiffany's goodwill crumbled. "Tanya, did you hear what you said? Did you filter them through your conscience? If it weren't for me and Ari, you would still be washing dishes! Well then, go ahead! Tell me everything you've hated about me. I want to see just how ugly people like you can be!"

Tanya clenched her teeth before proclaiming, "Everything I have today was earned through blood and sweat! It's got nothing to do with you or Arianne! Stop imagining yourself as some noble saint, could you? Every chore at home since we lived together was done by me — always! And you… You enjoy all of my services like it's your birthright! If you're feeling it, you throw me a bone. If you feel like sh*t, you won't even look me in the eye! Aren't we supposed to be friends? Then why do you always make me feel like I'm the sore thumb sticking out, that I'm being ousted? I never belong. I'm just an ugly duckling whenever I'm with you people. None of you care about how I feel! And I am sick of it!"

It was at that moment when Tiffany understood the reality a little more clearly. Some people would never know how to be grateful. "Oh, I get it. You think Ari and I have been bullying you, don't you? You're the one who offered to do those chores, and you do them before I even know they need to be done. While I admit that I never cared about those trivial little things, I know how to be grateful, unlike you. The things I've given to you that you called 'throwing a bone'? Those were gifts between close friends. You're the only one who saw it as charity!

"Second point? Whatever it is between me and Jackson is up to us; you don't have the right nor place to lecture anyone. Now, if you think you could leap from your origin as a penniless nobody to some rich b*tch by sleeping with Jackson, I'm here to tell you how dead wrong you are. You're welcomed to try, of course, but I can tell you this much: those who always look up to others will grow so envious that their souls become twisted. You'll never leave the quagmire whence you originally came, Tanya. You'll forever be a pathetic, sad little existence."

Livid, Tanya grabbed an ashtray from the coffee table and flung it toward Tiffany. “Shut the f**k up! You’re the pathetic one! You had Jackson, and then you gave up! I did nothing wrong!”

Warm, red liquid rose out of Tiffany’s bruised forehead and ran down, mixing with tears streaming out of her eyes before wetting her lips. It was part raw, part bitter, and part putrid.

Tiffany’s lips quivered into a smile. “Now I understand why Ari told me that you aren’t the same as the both of us. Only people of the same circle could ever be together and understand each other — because we share the same values, come from the same social class, and have the same mindset. I’m not at all threatened by you because all I feel is disgust and contempt. By the way, it’s not that I don’t want Jackson; you’re just incapable of understanding us. Oh, well. If you think you can pry him away from me, I’d like to see you try.”