**Ruling 931**

Chapter 931

Her heart gripped with tremors.

“Whatever you do, don’t go home. Stay hidden nearby and don’t let them know that you’re there. Send me your address, I’m coming over with reinforcements!” Arianne replied with a tremble. She rushed into the bedroom immediately after the call. Mark had just slipped into the bathtub, naked. He smiled when she burst in. “What are you doing? I guess I can manage a good f*ck, if you really want to…”

She couldn’t be bothered with feeling embarrassed at this point. “That’s not it. Something’s happened to Harvey. I think the kidnappers have gone to their hotel. That can’t be good; you need to come with me and bring reinforcements. I’m afraid that something might happen! Aren’t we trying to find out if Ethan is behind all of this? You’d better hurry. Get out of the bathtub!”

Mark’s smile faltered. He put on a stern face and reluctantly got out of the tub then pulled on a robe. “Get some clothes for me. I’ll call Henry.”

Arianne turned around, headed into the closet, and pulled out a random set of clothes. “You get changed. I’ll call Henry. The bodyguards are readily available at home. Now, I know why we have so many bodyguards. They’ve finally become of use!”

Mark methodically put on his clothes in front of her. “Why else? Do you think that my money is just for showing off?”

Arianne lost her patience at the sight of him. She strode forward and buttoned up his shirt for him. “Can’t you move a little faster? What if they’re gone by the time we arrive?”

“Don’t you know that mistakes are easily made in a hurry?” he mumbled. “Of course, I have to take my time putting on my clothes. What if I make a mistake and walk out looking like a joke? I can go alone. You stay home and take care of the baby.”

“Mary can do that,” Arianne refused instantly. “I have to go. Don’t order me around.”

She knew how much Mark valued his image. Based on her experience, he was always slow and methodical when putting on clothes or eating his food. He seemed particularly delicate and paid extra attention to aesthetics. She heaved a sigh of relief after finally dressing him up. “Can we go now?”

He stared at her calmly then turned around to walk downstairs. “You’re getting a lot bolder these days. You’re even telling me not to order you around. I don’t think you need me to give you any instructions. You’re the one giving me instructions instead.”

Arianne was already going mad from worry at this point, but she giggled at his ability to argue at a time like this. “I just don’t seem to see any urgency on your end. What would make you pay attention? What would make you feel anxious? I’m curious.”

“Anything involving you or Smore would make me panic. Everything else can wait.”

This answer made Arianne’s heart skip half a beat. However, she didn’t have the time to make baseless accusations on details from the past.

They quickly arrived at the address provided by Harvey. Arianne looked all around and soon saw Harvey, who had hidden himself in a convenience store. She rushed forward and asked, “Are they gone?”

Harvey was in shock, traumatized by his previous kidnapping experience. “Th—they l—left… P—probably ten minutes ago,” he stammered. “I’ve been too scared to check upstairs, so I waited here for you. I don’t know if my parents are alright…”

Chapter 932

Arianne was disappointed. She had hoped to see who the kidnappers were, perhaps even find clues on Ethan. In the end, they were still too late.

They led everyone upstairs and found Zoey and Mr. Harris’s room door wide open. Everything was a mess inside. The hotel’s lady boss was calculating their bill and scolding them with cutting remarks, demanding compensation for the damages. The pair were still in shock, so they couldn’t retaliate. They submitted to the lady boss’s criticism. Zoey was fine, but her husband was not. He looked as if he had endured a heavy beating.

Arianne stepped forward and stopped the lady boss. “That’s enough. I’ll foot the fill. Henry, go downstairs with her and calculate her losses. Pay her back for whatever’s due.”

The lady boss, who saw the amount of people Arianne had brought along with her, was too afraid to lash out any further. Instead, she meekly followed Henry.

Zoey looked at Harvey and immediately understood why Arianne had come here. “We’re fine. I’m sorry for causing you so much trouble. We’re all fine.”

“I know,” Arianne calmly replied. “I can tell. I have good eyes, you know. What happened? Why did they confront you? Did they… threaten you into something again?”

“No no, that’s not it,” Zoey quickly replied. “I don’t know what they came here for either. They just… asked us about your previous visit, afraid that we’d exposed anything that we shouldn’t have. Honestly, we don’t know anything. They left after interrogating us and warning us to behave ourselves in the future… I’m fine, but your uncle got beaten up… Luckily, Harv wasn’t around. Thank goodness for that.”

Arianne glanced at Mr. Harris. “You deserved that beating. That should serve as a good reminder, so I don’t have to do it. I told you to leave the capital, but you insisted and ended up with a beating. I’m pretty sure that you won’t be seeing the kidnappers anymore. You’d better behave yourselves from now on and don’t cause any more trouble. Who knows if you’ll end up dead? I came here for Harvey’s sake. You’re his parents, so buck up.”

Zoey and Mr. Harris had been scolded so badly that they couldn’t get a word in edgewise. Harvey stepped forward and said, “Thank you, sis. I wouldn’t have known what to do if you hadn’t come. Thank goodness everything’s fine. I’m sorry for troubling you and my brother-in-law.”

His mention of “brother-in-law” put Mark in a good mood. He had initially planned on keeping his mouth shut, as Arianne had been handing this very well. “Work hard in your studies once you’ve left the capital. You can come and work for me once you’ve achieved excellence.”

Harvey’s face filled with glee. “I’ll do my best. I will!”

Arianne was in a bad mood when they arrived back in the car. After all, she had suffered a fright and entered a dead end. The best way to solve one’s fear was to face it. Now, they couldn’t even be sure if Ethan was behind all of this. It was only a rough guess. No one could feel safe with the perpetrator still at large. She was afraid of running into some huge disaster that she might not be able to endure.

Mark reached out and pinched her cheek. “What’s with that face? I’m the one who got called out of the shower. It’s fine if we’ve reached a dead end. There will be other opportunities. No need to be so pessimistic. I’m still around.”

Arianne pinched him right back without hesitation. “I’m not being pessimistic. I’m just not happy. If I’m not even scared of you anymore, why should I be scared of anything else? After all, you’re my childhood trauma.”

The corners of Mark’s lips twitched. “What are you saying? You’d better be nice. What childhood trauma? Wasn’t I nice to you during your childhood? You’re the one who’s been treating me like a fearsome tiger. How is that my fault?”

“Pfft.” Brian, who had been driving, couldn’t help but giggle.

Mark took a deep breath. “That’s enough, Brian. There’s a reason why you’re still single at this age. Don’t you dare laugh; this isn’t the time! And so loudly too!”

Chapter 933

Brian tucked his smile away. “Yes, sir. There’s a reason why I haven’t had a girlfriend. For example, my busy work schedule, having no time, that sort of thing…”

“Would you like a long holiday then?” Mark asked in a soft voice. “Or perhaps you’d like to bring your retirement forward, say, twenty or thirty years?”

Brian shook his head vigorously. “No no no, I’m happy to serve you. I’d happily drive you around for ten more years during my retirement years, as long as I’m capable of doing it.”

…

The West family residence.

Summer had been confined to her bed ever since Tanya’s strangulation and would suffer from bouts of fever from time to time. The doctor had concluded that it was a result of shock and that she would be fine after a good rest.

Jackson had been paying frequent visits to the West family residence because of this, mostly out of guilt and because he felt sorry for his mother. He had a slight change in his impression of Atticus after seeing how much personal care and concern he had given Summer. Although he still refused to greet him, at least he no longer showed up with a blackened face.

“Jackson, you don’t have to worry about me. Your father is taking care of me. It’s not a big deal. I’m just too old, so I’m less resilient now. By the way, you should pay more attention to the company branch in South Park. They have a solid foundation and their profits are second only to the main office. It’s in the capital too, so you have to pay special attention. I can’t handle that now, and your dad isn’t good with this sort of thing. It’s all on you now.”

“I understand,” Jackson replied, helpless in the face of his mother’s nagging. “I’ll take a few days’ trip there once I’m done with work here. Don’t worry about it and get some rest.”

A complacent smile formed on the corners of Summer's face. "Alright. You should go home. You don't have to visit me all the time; it'll get in the way of your work. Thank goodness nothing happened between you and Tanya. That thing is her belly has nothing to do with you either. That's the greatest relief. I'm in a great mood now. I should be able to get up and walk around tomorrow."

Jackson nodded but said nothing else. He turned around and left straightaway.

Summer leaped energetically from bed from the moment Jackson left. "Have you noticed how quiet our son has become? He never used to be like that."

Before Atticus could speak, Summer stopped him. "It must be all your fault. You are so quiet, he must have caught that bug from you!"

The corners of Atticus's lips twitched. "You can't say that, Summer. Jackson and I have only met not too long ago. If there's a bug, he would have caught it from you first. He must be troubled in some way, so he's feeling depressed. It's not my fault. Haven't you been arranging something? We'll see if it comes to fruition soon."

"Haven't I been worried about that?" Summer grumbled. "I deliberately put Tiffie at our subsidiary branch, then persuaded Jackson into going there too. Something's bound to happen as long as they see each other and talk. I'm just worried that he hasn't straightened this out yet."

Atticus, on the other hand, was confident. "He's a very sensible man. Don't worry. He'll get things straightened out if he wants to. You should take a walk downstairs. It's bad enough that you've been faking it for Jackson. Little Bean's been standing guard by your bed for an entire day."

Summer was fine. She had deliberately built a tense atmosphere for Jackson. Otherwise, he wouldn't have taken her words seriously. She spiritedly got down from bed, scooped up the dog, and headed downstairs. "Let's go. I'll give you a treat. You've suffered a lot for my sake, haven't you? I didn't even get to hold you. You poor thing."

Chapter 934

Less than half a month later, the weather in the capital had reached its yearly scorching peak. It was so hot that people simply wanted to stay indoors. No one wanted to move.

Arianne and Aristotle were close to falling sick from the humidity. Aristotle's resistance to heat was very low, and Arianne was afraid that he might get heatstroke if she took him out of the house. She rarely brought him out to the garden these days and would only walk around it in the evening around sunset. Regardless of how large the Tremont Estate was, it seemed much smaller during this time. It was rather boring to stay inside all day.

Lately, Mark had gotten so busy that they hardly managed to see him. He left before Arianne woke up and arrived home when she was asleep at night. She was beginning to wonder if Aristotle would forget his daddy if this continued. After all, they stayed in the same house but never saw each other. Babies did not have good memories, so it was no surprise if he forgot his face.

Tremont Tower, CEO's office.

Mark's face seemed enveloped in an icy aura. He reclined against the office table with his hands against the edge of the table. The tense atmosphere made the staff in front of him tremble in fear.

"You've been searching for a plot of land for ages, and it ends up in someone else's hands. Do you really think that Alejandro would spit out whatever he finds? He snatched the land that we've been eyeing. Are you idiots? Are your brains made from paste? Why don't you use that paste to build a wall, then!"

That's right, after some market research, they realized that all potential business properties had been snatched up by Alejandro. Not a single one was left. They were only left with average properties, which no one would want anyway. They were the kind of properties that one would get on a whim. There was no use in buying those.

Alejandro was very careless with his expenses, every time. He would buy it all, regardless of the cost, as if he were buying sweets and not exorbitantly expensive properties. He did it without blinking. His movements were difficult to read, but he was rich and willful. He would act aggressively, as long as he could monopolize a large amount of properties. Money certainly dominated the world.

Mark was growing increasingly frustrated over the matter and couldn't find a good solution at all. He had a feeling that this was done on purpose, but Alejandro wasn't exactly singling him out. There were property agents and people interested in purchasing property too. The capital had descended into turbulence from the moment Alejandro had arrived. This was not a good sign.

"Maybe… we should speak to Mr. Smith?" one man suggested. "He's being completely ruthless at this point. He's not giving us any room for survival. He's not afraid of exploding from consuming so much either."

Mark's grim's face broke into an eerie sneer. "Talk to him? Do you know what that means? It means that we're giving in, that we're begging him for mercy to give me property. Or do you really think that he'd spit out his own food?"

The office was immediately silenced. No one dared to say a word.

Mark could see it; relying on these people wouldn't do him any good. He waved his hand in frustration. "Dismissed. Put this matter aside, no need to concern yourselves with it anymore."

At this point, there was no way for him to go through Alejandro. He had no choice but to try a different route. If memory serves, the Wests had a rich amount of land under their thumb. Perhaps Jackson would have some empty land on his hands. Of course, he'd choose to ask his best friend.

He called Jackson, who quickly answered the call. "Jackson, do you have any good properties under your company?" he asked straight away. "I'll buy them at market price. You can increase the prices if you want to."

"What a coincidence," Jackson answered thoughtfully. "My secretary just informed me that Alejandro wants to see me, and then I get a call from you too. I won't lie, there is a good piece of land. He's probably heard of it. There's no harm in listening to what he has to say."

Mark's breath caught in his throat. Soon, he overheard Alejandro's voice from Jackson's end. "Mr. West, I trust that you've been well since we've last met?"

Chapter 935

Jackson placed the phone on the table, with the call still connected. "We've only met once. What could I have possibly done to deserve your visit today? Tell me." He had deliberately put emphasis on their previous meeting. Both men had gone to see Tiffany. The angry sparks between them remained fresh in his memory.

Jett pushed Alejandro, seated in a wheelchair as usual, forward. "You have a pretty good piece of land in your hands. Name your price. I want it."

Jackson narrowed his eyes. "Oh? Your information network is certainly efficient. I just haven't decided on what to do with that piece of land; I haven't set it aside just yet. After all, it's pretty valuable. You

have a lot of land on your hands now, so why are you buying more? Do you intend on monopolizing the market in the capital? Unfortunately, my friend has just called me and I've already agreed to give him the land."

"I'll give you double of whatever he's offering. What do you think?" Alejandro instantly replied.

Jackson raised his brow in surprise. People usually evaluated how much a piece of land costs. This was his first time encountering such a wanton purchase. Twice the price of the land was enticing, but he wasn't that greedy. "Mr. Smith, do I look like the kind of person who'd betray a friend over money? Please leave."

"Hehe, who cares about sentiment?" Alejandro chuckled. "Money rules all. I'll pay triple the highest price. Think about it. I won't keep you. Looking forward to your reply."

Jackson took a deep breath after Alejandro had left, then picked up his phone again. "You heard that? He's taking a shot at you, isn't he? Triple the price, I almost agreed. I've suffered quite a lot of losses due to that plagiarism scandal. If I can sell that piece of land off, I'd regain some of those losses at once."

Mark fell momentarily silent and replied. "Sell it to him for three times the price, since he's feeling so generous."

Jackson wasn't sure if Mark was being serious. "You're kidding, right? You can't possibly think that I'd be that greedy? I can sell it to you at its original price if you need it. I won't charge it to you at its appreciation value. We're best friends, remember? Do we really need to discuss this?"

“I’m not kidding,” Mark replied seriously. “Sell it to him for triple the price. You have plenty of land, and as it happens, the one he likes is the one I want too. It won’t hurt you to give it away. As for me… My main industry isn’t land. I can’t let you suffer so much loss for my sake. Give it to him. Besides, no normal person would be willing to pay triple. Since he’s bent on challenging me, you might as well reap some benefit from it.”

Jackson pretty much understood what he meant. “Fine, I’ll do as you say. I’ll give it to him for three times the price. If he wants to blow off his cash like a maniac, I have no qualms. I have a few more pieces of land on hand anyway. You can have them if you want, just say the word. I’m taking a trip to our office at South Park, and I’ll probably stay there for ten days to half a month. I won’t be around, so call me if you need anything.”

The call ended. Mark paused in thought for a very long time before calling Henry. “Do a background check on Alejandro Smith. I want everything about him, especially everything that’s happened to him over the last few years. Make it detailed and leave nothing out.

He had ordered this background check on Alejandro because his constant challenges against him seemed suspiciously personal. Furthermore, he was beginning to suspect that Ethan was still alive, based on everything that had happened recently. He had a growing suspicion that Ethan was somehow related to Alejandro. This theory seemed faint, but in troubled times, it was best to remain vigilant.

By the time he returned to Tremont Estate at night, Arianne and Aristotle had already fallen asleep. He had been very busy lately and hadn’t had time for them. He felt very guilty. He tip-toed to the bed and planted a soft kiss on Arianne’s cheek, then gazed at Aristotle. The little one had a very strange sleeping position, like a mantis shrimp sprawled on its back, funny yet adorable.

Just as he was about to head to the bathroom, Arianne woke up. “You’re home?” she asked softly.

Chapter 936

Mark halted his steps. “Oh, did I wake you up? I’ll take my shower downstairs then.”

Arianne rubbed her bleary eyes. “It’s alright, take your shower here. I’m so sleepy right now, I’ll have no trouble going back to sleep. But please bathe quickly and go to sleep. Don’t tire yourself.”

Despite her okays, Mark still took it upon himself to be as featherlight as possible during his shower to make as little sound as he could. Once he came out of his bath, he took the space next to Arianne.

The pair had singled Smore out aside, who pitifully only had his comforter as his company.

Arianne had yet to slip deeply into slumber, so instinctively, she wrapped her arm around his neck and drew herself close into his embrace before adjusting her position. “If you continue to come home late from work every time, Smore’s gonna forget how you look sooner or later,” she teased. “You know how bad kids’ memories are. He sleeps in the same bed as we do, yet he never sees you… If he ended up forgetting that you’re his father, that would be the joke of the century! Come on, spend some time with him, would you?”

Mark sniffled a few strands of her hair until he was dizzy and groggy. “Mm, got it… I’ll go to work late tomorrow and come home early. Goodnight.”

Jackson’s car was hurling toward South Park throughout the night. He planned to reach there tonight, rest until morning, then head straight to the branch company.

Just as Mark had advised, Jackson sold that plot of land to Alejandro for three times the price it should have fetched. It was quite an underhanded thing to do, and because the other party seemed to have no

problem paying him the exact amount regardless of how ridiculous it was, Jackson felt unnerved by what he had done. It felt like he had stumbled upon a free lunch.

Jackson had only begun his journey to South Park after he signed the contract with Alejandro. The man had sarcastically asked Jackson if he finally used his head rather than his “everything-for-my-bros” heart. In return, Jackson eschewed telling him anything remotely related to the truth and instead gave the excuse that he was desperately in need of money.

To see Alejandro mock him so glibly baffled Jackson. Did the guy even know who exactly the real moron deserving of mockery in this bargain was?

Regardless, never in Jackson’s wildest imagination would he expect Alejandro to also be in South Park right now, enjoying a late-night hangout with Tiffany.

Due to her lacking experience, Tiffany had been sitting on pins and needles these days. She was always on edge during work and had to spend some of her downtimes after work learning new knowledge, lest someone tease her for occupying a position way above her merit and capability.

After spending her time under such high pressure for the entire day, Tiffany was begging to unwind and chill. It was then that Alejandro invited her to have late-night snacks with him, so she accepted his offer.

Most people in the crowd visiting street food vendors were wearing little more than flimsy tank tops that exposed their arms as they drank and chomped on their food. Alejandro, however, stood out like a sore thumb by donning a full business suit.

It made Tiffany laugh between sips of beer. “And here I thought you’re the kind who would only drink your high-class red wine in your high-class garden back in your high-class estate, mister. Who knew you wouldn’t mind sitting here, drinking beer and having barbecued food! So, I bet beer is no better than red wine, right?”

Alejandro was very frank. “Spot on. Beer has such a horrible texture. Of course, it also depends on whom you’re drinking with. That alone could bring out a different vibe.”

It was such an obvious flirt that Tiffany could not possibly ignore it. “A different vibe, huh? Seriously, dude. Why are you here? You didn’t come all the way here just to see me, did you?”

Alejandro stared intently at her, his piercing eyes twinkling with joy. “What if I admit to that?”

Chapter 937

Tiffany brushed her nose. “’Chia right. As if you’ve got that much time on your hands.”

Alejandro took a sip of the beer in front of him. “As we were saying, I just bought a plot from Jackson today. He’s quite adept at holding grudges, it seemed, because the way he treated me was the same as he would a love rival. He sold that plot with three times its supposed price.”

Tiffany’s fixed the table with slightly downcast eyes. “Oh. So? You could have, I dunno, not accepted his offer if you thought it was too expensive. Or do you have so much in your pocket that you just want to burn off some of it?”

Watching her feigning indifference made Alejandro chuckle. “Hee hee. It’s so obvious that you care a lot about this, so why pretend otherwise, hmm? Come on, there’s no need to fake anything when you’re with me, alright? Just be yourself. I won’t lie; I thought it was pretty expensive, but I needed it, so I said

yes," he explained, before adding, "Oh, and by the way, he's coming to the branch company where you're working right now. Just thought of giving you a heads-up.'

Tiffany suddenly found the barbecued meat in her mouth flavorless. "Why the hell is he coming here? What, the HQ not comfy enough for him? And to run across so many miles under hot weather like this? Bruh has too much time in his goddamn hands."

Alejandro raised an eyebrow. "If you really hate the idea of seeing him again, then why did you say yes to joining his branch company? I offered you to join mine, and you declined."

Tiffany found her tongue failing to come up with a defense. After a large gulp of beer, her mind finally cleared up, and a reason formed. "Look. I, well, I didn't want to come, okay? It's his mom who was being too eager and persistent. His mom had always treated me super kindly, so I really can't say no to that… Okay! I get it, Jackson and I have split, but that's no excuse to cut her off like she's a stranger overnight! Uh, honestly, why am I even explaining this to you? You won't understand all these murky, complex human relationships anyway. And I don't need you to help me manage them. It's kind of just the typical messy affair of your dime-and-dozen plebeian."

Alejandro said nothing, his attention now falling onto the wine cup in his hand. It seemed that Summer West was still holding out on the possibility of Jackson bringing Tiffany back home again, so she ensured that Tiffany would always be within Jackson's reach no matter how far she ran.

Suddenly, Alejandro found that old woman quite abhorrent.

Tiffany, meanwhile, noticed a blue-black spot on Jett's face. "Whoa, Jett, did you get punched by someone or what? You're quite the looker, hun, so you gotta protect that pretty face, okay?"

Jett lowered his head. “It’s nothing. I accidentally hurt myself some time ago, but it should recover anytime now.”

Indeed, it was one of the holdovers from the incident involving Tanya. Despite the passing of time, it seemed that some of his wounds remained as stark as ever.

Alejandro, of course, instantly changed the subject. “Come now, finish your food. Then we’ll send you home. I’m going to be around this area for two days, and since your job’s giving you a lot of stress, maybe I should bring you out for meals after work. How’s that? It would be a great way to de-stress.”

Alejandro appeared in Tiffany’s life more and more frequently for a long time now. He was always so kind and gentle—always there for her, even when she felt like she was in the nadir of her life. The flames in Tiffany’s heart might have dimmed, but she was still not above feeling touched by a kind gesture or two.

It is human to fear loneliness. So, when another person appears to you at your most lonesome moments and lavishes you with gentle, attentive care, it is only a matter of time before you become susceptible to certain kinds of reveries and imaginations.

What else could be a bigger wrench in a long-distance relationship, if not the lack of chance to be with one another in their daily lives? Then, a third-wheel would be able to hijack that absence in companionship—and before one knew it, love had lost to something as mundane as distance.

When Tiffany returned to the lobby below the little apartment she was renting, she asked out of courtesy, “Would you like to come in and have a cuppa?”

Alejandro stared at her with a strange look in his eyes.

Finally registering the weird implication in her invitation, Tiffany quickly explained, “No! No, please don’t misunderstand me! I meant exactly what I said!”

Alejandro smiled. “Well, it’s very late at night right now, so under normal circumstances, it would not be too far-fetched for anyone to think there’s more to the invitation. Therefore, it’s not my fault for having a risqué imagination,” he said. “But since it’s just a simple cuppa, I guess there’s no reason for me to reject it.”

Chapter 938

Jett stood outside Tiffany’s room instead of entering and took a watchful spot beside the door when the group reached Tiffany’s unit upstairs. Tiffany thought it strange, but she pushed Alejandro’s wheelchair into her unit anyway. He was a disabled man whose legs could no longer function—how dangerous could being with him be?

Tiffany thought that she needed not to be too concerned.

She only moved in recently, so she had yet to sort many of her things into place, thus leaving a mess. “I haven’t had the time to tidy my place, so… yeah,” she admitted sheepishly. “Er, I’ll go make you a cuppa tea now.”

She went to the drinking station and began, but it was clear from her unpolished action that she was not very good. After a slip when she almost hurt herself with boiling water, a hand suddenly appeared next to her. “Allow me.”

Tiffany froze. Why did Alejandro's voice come from above her head? He was wheelchair-bound, so his voice should be coming from below her neck, right?

She whipped her head backward, and her forehead bonked into his chin.

With her hand covering her aching forehead, her jaw slackened, and she cried, "Y-y-you! B-b-but—how the—you're not crippled at all?!?!"

Alejandro leveled her with a steady gaze. "Yes. Are you surprised? Pretending to be more feeble than I really am is a survival mechanism in the Smith family, but you're someone I trust a lot. Besides, I don't want you to genuinely believe I'm 'crippled'."

Tiffany was made aware that her outburst had been a little too insensitive. "I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything bad about it. I spoke without a filter; please don't take it too hard!"

Alejandro placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed her gently aside. "Hey, no worries. I can do it myself."

Watching him suddenly assuming a towering, strong stature made her heart thunder. Now would be an excellent time to feel a little bit more concerned now, would it not? As it turned out, Alejandro was never disabled; he had always been able-bodied. She was stuck with an able-bodied young man in the middle of the night in a small little unit. She should definitely be very concerned, right?

The reveal had severely disquieted Tiffany. Once again, she hoped that plant she took care of could flower as soon as possible because more than ever, she wanted to know just how earth-shattering

Alejandro's secrets could be. The fact that he was never actually crippled alone was enough to shock her out of her shell!

As though taking notice of her discomfort, Alejandro did not stay for long. He left without a sip.

Still, the revelation had shocked Tiffany enough to lose a night's sleep over it. According to him, only a selected few knew the truth, yet he debunked his protective disguise, all on his accord, to Tiffany. That implied an alarming amount of trust—and it drove Tiffany a little nuts.

Even now, she never understood why Alejandro insisted on befriending her and getting close to her. Yet, she could not possibly reject his friendship based on some—admittedly—mildly narcissistic conjectures, either. Whenever she was sure he was doing something for her, seemingly motivated by an ulterior motive, he would then subvert her expectation and make it look like he had no such intention.

Alejandro was an enigma to her.

Surprising no one, Tiffany was late to work on the next day, once again bursting into the office with the force of a gale. The first thing she noticed was Amy's absence, and the second thing that popped into her mind was to wonder if the Director herself was also late today.

Before she could indulge in this delightful what-if, the intern from the design department, standing close-by the entrance, looked at her with earnest shock. "Miss Lane, why are you still here? Don't tell me you just arrived! Mr. West himself is in our office today, and Amy is already in the conference room. They're having a meeting!"

Tiffany's mind plunged into chaos. Alejandro had told her that Jackson was coming, yes, but she did not expect him to be here this soon. And to realize that she was late right on the day when he visited them! Today!

She was close to losing whatever grip she had over her facial expression. "R-right! I'm gonna head to the conference room now—"

Tiffany scrambled toward the conference room with her laptop, passing by a reflective wall that was good enough to be used as a makeshift mirror. She stopped dead in her tracks and tidied her look.

The fact that she had become the Assistant Director to this branch alone should be jaw-slacking enough for Jackson, yet she had to top it off by being late. He was going to subject her to public censure, wasn't he?

Well, whatever. Tiffany would brace it bravely!

Chapter 939

Tiffany quietly pushed open the door of the conference door, trying her best not to draw attention to herself. However, almost instantaneously, a talking Jackson's attention drifted to her face the moment she stepped in. It lasted about two seconds before it casually left her.

Tiffany's mind had only one remark: that was it? That? Was it?

She had not expected such a placid reaction. Had he really let her go or what?

Amy was quick to remind her, “Miss Lane, despite being the Assistant Director, you’re late by a good whole twenty minutes.”

An unnatural expression shadowed Jackson’s mien. He had been mildly surprised when he saw Tiffany coming into the room, but he remembered that all was per Summer’s arrangement and got over it. But now, it seemed that his dear mother appointed Tiffany as the Assistant Director, too.

He should probably be glad that she was just the “assistant”…?

He faked a cough before interjecting. “Take a seat, Miss Lane. Let’s resume this meeting—we’ll discuss you being late later.”

Tiffany pursed her lips. She took her seat as far away from Jackson as she could manage, evidently sullen. She would be okay if all he did was pretend not to know her when so many others were surrounding them, but to not look at her and to wear that infuriatingly blasé expression? She found his response unbelievable. She had spent at least some time in anxiety when she first heard that he was coming!

Worse of all, that man was not going to let up the fact that she was late!

None of the content in the meeting had made it through Tiffany’s ears. Being new to the company, she knew close to nothing about its operations, so everything sounded alien to her. As her bored attention mindlessly wandered, she noticed that everyone in the meeting was a woman except Jackson. He really stood out like the moon among the stars!

The meeting finally ended, and most of the participants gradually left the room. Soon, all that was left were Amy, Tiffany, and Jackson.

Since Amy and Jackson were still discussing the company's current situation, Tiffany began to think that her presence was unnecessary. She was just about to slip out of the door when Jackson suddenly called out, "You, wait. I'm getting to you shortly after I talk to Amy."

Tiffany had no choice but to take a seat close by and stared into space while waiting through their twenty-minutes long drabble. When Amy left, she did nothing to hide her impatience and questioned, "What? Be quick. I got things to do."

Gone were the days when Jackson was all smiles and jokes when he was with her. Right now, he was unprecedentedly dour, almost as though the only relationship between them was that between a boss and his inferior. "You, the assistant director… Are you always late to work?"

Annoyingly enough, Jackson's serious expression radiated a slight but attractive air of power and dominance. Unfortunately, it also made him look like a stranger to Tiffany.

Seeing him being so severe made Tiffany very anxious. She began to stutter as she stammered, "N-N-No, n-not at a-a-all. T-This is the f-f-first!"

Jackson cast his eyes downward as he shut a folder close. "I don't remember you having a stuttering problem."

Tiffany's eyes watered a little. "N-No, I don't. B-But you… You were n-n-never so dour and m-m-mean to me before…"

“No more,” Jackson said, rising to his feet. “Since you took up this position, Miss Lane, then prove to us that you deserve it.”

With that, he turned and left.

Tiffany laid her head on the meeting desk, dejected and demoralized. What did he mean by that? Was that meant to be his censure?

In the past, Jackson would force her to take a day or two off even when she insisted otherwise. So to say what he said—did that mean he had, indeed, let her go?

Jackson’s reprimand had only fanned Tiffany’s wish to resign. Her job was too taxing for her, and she did not plan to continue it for long. Maybe she really was not meant to do this.

Tiffany returned to the office and found Jackson colonizing her desk! Instead of taking Amy’s, he made himself comfortable at hers. Was this a covert message to kick her out of the company?

On top of that, he was playing with the little cactus plant on her desk! What, the prickly needles were too tame a tactile stimulus to his manly fingers?

Chapter 940

Tiffany placed her notebook down on her desk before snapping pointedly, “And where am I supposed to sit?”

Jackson replied without raising his eyes to hers, “Grab a chair yourself, duh. How the hell did you end up as ‘assistant director’ with that brain?”

His retort chaffed Tiffany enough that she snickered, placing her hands on her hips. “It’s not that I wanted to be one, you know. I came here thinking I was going to be a mere supervisor! Anyway, you already know that I got my job through my connection, so why even bother asking, Einstein?”

Perhaps a little worried about her tone, Amy quickly interjected with feigned coughs. “Er, Miss Lane? You could grab a chair and move to my desk.”

Tiffany stormily yanked a chair to where Amy sat, took a seat, and glowered at Jackson. “Can’t keep your hands to yourself, huh? Don’t you dare kill my cactus with those poisonous fingers of yours!”

Jackson immediately retracted his hand from the prickly plant and assumed a more serious, upright position. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it dying—it’s a tenacious little thing. Kind of like you.”

Kind of like her? Was he implying that she was as plump as the cactus or what? Jackson must be blind not to notice that Tiffany had slimmed down. Heck, she had worked hard in keeping herself fit these few days, yet he was just going to ignore her changes?

Amy pointed at the document shelf behind Jackson and instructed, “Alright, Miss Lane, please pick those documents out for Mr. West. He’s here to check up on the company, and the most important files and documents are shelved there in the cabinet. The ones at the top are the latest, though, so just grab those in two of the middle rows.”

Tiffany glanced at how tall the shelf was and dragged her chair to it, a motion made effortless by its rollers. After placing the chair where she wanted it to be, she took off her shoes and stepped onto it.

She did not expect the office chair to be the spinning type, so immediately, the chair reacted to her weight by swivelling abruptly, causing her to fall backward.

She let out a loud, surprised yelp—and crashed right into Jackson's embrace.

He stood behind her at just the right spot at the right time. Now, his arms were protectively wrapped around her while he leaned closer and muttered in a voice only the two of them could hear, "You've gotten slimmer…"

His breath stung her cheeks and turned them into a burning scarlet. Panicked, she struggled out of his arms and slipped back into her shoes before standing a few steps away from him, retorting, "God! Aren't you tall enough to grab those files yourself? Why even ask me to do it? Uh! Just grab whatever interests you by yourself."

Jackson said nothing. He moved in to swipe two of the thickest folders down from the shelf effortlessly before returning to the desk to begin reading. The way he acted was as though what happened a mere minute ago was just a dream.

Tiffany breathed out a sigh of relief, but her racing heart refused to calm. Either way, she told herself that his presence was temporary and would last only for a few days, tops. Harmony would be restored to the world when he finally left!

Back in the Tremont Estate, Mark had consciously delayed going to work by two hours in the morning. Apparently, he worried that Smore was going to forget how he looked.

Smore woke up early today. Since the morning was cool, Mark brought the baby out on a stroll in his yard. To his delight, Smore met everything he said with a string of typical baby's babblings as though he understood his father.

This exciting discovery was soon eagerly shared with Arianne. "He can talk! He talked to me! He replies when I talk!"

Being Smore's daily caretaker, Arianne was already acclimated to many of Smore's developments. "Uh, duh? Did you just notice that? He didn't recognize human beings when we brought him home, but now… Our boy doesn't just look at people but laughs and babbles too!"

Could he laugh? Mark was intrigued enough to give it a go. "Okay, mah boy, give Daddy a bright smile!" he said enthusiastically.

Smore's eyes were glued to his father, yet he refused to smile.

"Please, you have to tickle his funny bone first," Arianne supplied flatly. "Gee, you're pretty bad at playing with kids. Either way, your time's up, Mark. You still need to get back to work, right? Don't let Smore keep you. Don't worry, it seems that he hasn't forgotten who you are, after all."

Mark looked like he was not satisfied with his meager playtime with his son, but ultimately, he obliged and returned Smore into Arianne's arms docilely. "Fine, I'm heading to work, then. Sorry for leaving all of the troubles at home to you."