Ruling 941

Chapter 941

Arianne was warmed to her core, but she remained unaffected on the surface. “Meh, it’s alright. You make way more of a mess out of me than Smore, a baby, ever could,” she intoned. “Come back soon, why won’t you?”

Unfortunately, Arianne’s word choice invited misinterpretation. To Mark, the takeaway was that his wife was miffed by him neglecting her for half a month. Hence, when he saw that no one was around, he leaned close to her ears and breathed, “Hmm. That might just be what I’ll do tonight. We’ll kick Smore into his bedroom so that his Mommy and Daddy can have some privacy. Just you wait.”

Arianne’s face turned as bright as a tomato. “Wait! T-That’s not what I meant!”

He smirked. “Oh, that was exactly what you meant. Don’t play coy.”

Arianne watched him hurriedly strutting away, the corner of her lips slightly quivering.

Could this be what it felt like to have a happy, normal family? Just the three of them living in blithe serendipity, never fearing if any one of them would abruptly disappear from the others’ lives, always free from the dread of being suddenly abandoned. It was all she had ever dreamed of when she was a kid.

The day was still young, so Arianne ordered Henry to drive her to the old Wynn Mansion. She had never seen the Wynns’ old house, and it was high-time she rectified that.

They followed the address listed in the property ownership certificate. To Arianne's surprise, the mansion was quite close to the Tremont Estate, virtually a few blocks away. The mansion sat on a neighborhood nearby a bustling historical street, while the Tremont Estate was in the quieter area.

The Wynn Mansion was as old as she had imagined. Just a cursory look was enough to detect the scars of time on its walls; it looked like an old man, well into his twilight years, sitting alone. No one had spared their time tending the house for so long that it now seemed quite decrepit.

Through the rust-stained gate, Arianne could see the hedges and bushes that had colonized the mansion's untamed garden. Amidst the shrub, a tenacious king sago towered above its grassy neighbors while another great tree of an unknown species stood at a farther end. Years of growing without intervention had allowed its branches to proliferate and expand outside the wall.

Many must have looked up to this mansion in awe and jealousy once upon a time, right? The same house where Arianne's father used to grow up; where Granny spent half of her life.

Now, however, the mansion was emptied of inhabitants and the memories they brought along. Now, it was just an old, deserted house.

Had her father never fallen in love with Helen and left his family home, maybe the Wynn Mansion would still be a prosperous, awe-inspiring sight rather than the decrepit visage that it now wore. But alas, there was always that one decision a person made that changed the course of everything. Time passed, things happened—who still had not made peace with their choices?

"Madam? The weather is a little too hot for Master Aristotle," Henry suddenly spoke up. "We lack preparation, so how about we postpone entering this house to a later date? I suggest a day when Mr.

Tremont is free and could accompany you. As a matter of fact, if you wish to repair this mansion, I'm sure he will oblige."

Repair? The word struck a chord within Arianne's heart. Yes, she would very much like to repair the mansion to its full, former glory. It was the closest way she could relive the house as it used to be, even if she had not yet been born back then. Perhaps her desire was spurred by the veneration of a person's familial history?

Once they returned to the car, she asked the butler, "Henry, how much do you think it would cost to repair a mansion like this? Fixing an old antique house like this must cost a lot."

"Hefty, yes," Henry replied candidly. "Many would love to purchase an old mansion like this just for the quaint atmosphere it evokes. That sort of purchase doesn't come cheap, and neither is its repair. I'd estimate it to be about the same price as buying a new, typical house? Still, if it is your wish to repair it, Mr. Tremont would definitely nod, especially since this mansion belongs to you, a member of the Wynns. However, a repaired house is no good without its inhabitants, and since you're most likely to be averse to selling it, I suggest you get someone to look after your house. As long as someone lives here, the house will always be alive."

Arianne hesitated. The idea of her moving in and living here was out of the realm of possibility. But if she repaired the mansion, she would then need to hire someone to look after it—both things demanded a very high cost. Naturally, Mark would have no problem paying them nor would he reject Arianne's wish, but would these expenses be worthwhile?

Chapter 942

The only reason behind Arianne's wish to repair the Wynn Mansion was that it was her father's childhood home. Hence, she could not possibly stand by and watch it slowly decay into ruin as the passing of time wrangled it. Yet, she was also hesitating because she worried that spending all of this money on the house would make her seem a little immature. The Tremonts' money did not grow on trees.

Neither was she willing to sell it away. From the way Henry described it, this antique mansion's price could rake up to about a few hundred million. Arianne was not terribly in need of that amount in her life, but the alternative—spending a similarly hefty sum on repairing and maintaining this house—also seemed like an obtuse move. Any entrepreneur would immediately recognize this as an investment with no returns.

The dilemma stayed in Arianne's mind on the way home. In the end, she decided to discuss it with Mark once he came home from work to see if he had better ideas.

Several miles away from them, Jackson West was in his office, his eyes trained on a pile of documents on his desk that he had been reading the entire morning. Meanwhile, per Amy's order, Tiffany had done nothing noteworthy but serving Jackson refreshments.

She hated being the busgirl, but it was not like she knew anything else about her work to contribute elsewhere. Everyone might see her as "the assistant director", but in Amy's eyes, she was a dummy occupying a dummy position, a peabrain who got paid for doing nothing, and her direct underling. Of course, the only place right for Tiffany was "anywhere below Amy".

It was a long drag of time, but finally, it was lunchtime. It was joyous news to Tiffany, who saw it as the two-hours respite from her superiors' controls!

When the hour hand struck twelve, Tiffany whisked her bag away from her desk with speedy reflexes, ready to leave and pamper herself with good food. She had not even stepped out of the main door when Amy suddenly halted her. "Excuse me, Miss Lane, but where do you think you're going? Mr. West is inviting everyone to lunch—and by everyone, I mean every frickin' one."

Tiffany stopped in her tracks. “Can I like, excuse myself out of this? I mean, it’s not like there’s a commandment saying ‘thou shalt attend lunch when invited by someone else,’ right?”

Amy looked at her the same way she would at a dunce. “Did you really assume that this was a genuine lunch? God, it’s a meeting in disguise, my dear! What were you thinking?”

Hence, Tiffany could not skip this lunch, either. Catching a glimpse of schadenfreude from Jackson’s expression, she gritted her teeth and grumbled, “Fine, I have no choice but to go, then.”

Suddenly, Jackson rose to his feet and leveled a pensive gaze at her. “I can’t help but wonder if you hold some interesting opinions of me, Miss Lane. Strange, isn’t it? It’s not like your wage has been deducted despite you being late to work this morning.”

Tiffany plastered a smile on her face. “Oh, heavens, no! Mr. West is such a perfect man that I can’t fathom picking up even a single flaw! Gee, only a blind guy would see any faults in you! Oh, and thank God I’m not someone who holds grudges easily. All you did was lecture me a bit, after all; you didn’t deduct my wages! Right? Golly, aren’t we heading out for lunch? So, what are we waiting for? Let’s go as soon as possible, lest we take too much time from the rest of our valuable work time!”

The group reached a restaurant closest to the company soon enough. Amy, behaving like Jackson’s personal secretary, managed everything by herself. From booking a table to ordering food, she did it all by herself.

Amy aside, several other supervisors from different departments joined them, but none were anyone Tiffany knew. Worse, she had nothing to say to Jackson, so after a while, she decided to excuse herself into the bathroom while waiting for food to be served.

She milked as much time as possible while being in the bathroom, clearly bidding for the moment when food was finally served. The loo was practically the best alibi she could exploit to avoid listening to a bunch of people debating.

Suddenly, Amy walked into the bathroom and said expectantly, “Ha! Knew you were hiding in here.”

Tiffany smiled in embarrassment. “Oh, yeah. You caught me red-handed, Amy. You know me, I hate hearing people nag about things that I don’t get at all. I’m new here, you know, and the things you guys say? Makes me feel like I’m living among Martians…. C’mon, just let me have this teensy quiet moment, please?”

Contrary to her usual demeanor, Amy smiled. “Seriously, Tiffany, aren’t you supposed to use this chance to learn something instead of evading work again? Ha, you really are only here through connections. Be frank, you and Mr. West… must go quite far back, don’t you? I can tell, you know.”

Chapter 943

Tiffany was stunned. “Wait, but how did you—?”

Amy turned to the mirror and tidied the locks of her hair. “Mr. West reacted to you falling off the chair with this superhuman-like reflex, man. The sort people only reserve for those that matter in their hearts. No one would have been so ready to save a damsel at the drop of a hat like that! That was including the fact that his back was facing you! Also, you’re the only person in this entire company who dares talk back at him this way.’

Bitter melancholy rose to Tiffany’s chest. “What we have is all in the past, though. And to be frank, I honestly never wanted to get here through this ‘connection’. God, it’s so embarrassing. Anyway, I think I hid here long enough. I can’t stay here forever; it’s quite nauseating.”

Amy patted her shoulder like an encouraging elder sister. “All in the past, huh? Then let it—not you—stay in the past. Now, you’re the assistant director of the branch company in South Park, and he’s your superior, your boss. Do you understand me?”

No, Tiffany did not understand her. Was Amy implying that her manners and deference to rules were too subpar? Implying that Tiffany had not regarded Jackson as her boss enough during work?

Amy’s reminder was a wake-up call. Suddenly, Tiffany realized that she had not been acting right and had been stubbornly clinging to the past. “Okay, I got it. I’ll treat him as my superior.”

Once they returned to the private chamber, Amy made out some space next to Jackson for Tiffany to sit, who then poured a cup of wine for her boss before bringing his favorite food to him.

Her drastic change in attitude stunned Jackson so much, he halted his utensils in midair and asked, “What are you doing?”

She looked up to his face. “Is it wrong to pour you some wine? You’re my boss, Mr. West. In fact, I promise you that I’ve learned my lesson, and I aspire to never be late to work again. I’ll work harder from now on!”

Jackson noticed the seriousness in her eyes, and his expression darkened. Did she really only treat him as her boss? It was a thought that chased away all of his appetite. “We don’t drink at work. That is the rule.”

Tiffany switched out his drink without any sign of being chaffed. “Oh, pardon me for forgetting.”

It was supposed to be a meeting-in-disguise, yet no one talked shops around the table. In fact, no one talked at all, period. Jackson, in particular, wore a stormy expression throughout the meal. He did not even touch much of the food, and around the halfway point, he told Amy to foot the bill in his stead before leaving the restaurant alone.

His behavior did not bother Tiffany one bit. Half a day at work had sucked her stomach dry, so she did not care if Jackson was not enjoying the food. Her goal was to eat as much free food as she could, especially when the company was paying for it.

Back in the building, right after Tiffany stepped through the entrance, she heard Jackson’s apoplectic voice boom from inside, “Why don’t these accounts tally, huh? Where the hell did the money go? What do I have as my finance department, a bunch of braindead goons? You people thought you’re safe from my scrutiny just because I’m far back in the headquarters, huh?”

His outburst terrified Tiffany and Amy both. They might not be members of the finance department, but they were unfortunately close to the eye of the storm at the moment, and the intensity in the air was freaking them out a little.

“Hey, Tiffany. You’re close to Mr. West, right?” Amy murmured carefully. “So, are we supposed to skedaddle at this moment or what?”

Tiffany, however, shook her head in a confused daze. “The problem is, he never ever had outbursts like these when he was with me before, Amy. So, how am I supposed to know what to do in this situation? Hell, I remember him as someone with a really, really good temper! Did someone crap in his popcorn today?”

Chapter 944

The two of them looked at each other and shook their heads. Obviously worried, neither dared walk into the office right then and there.

It was only after the financial department was done being screamed at and had all come out of the room with defeated, pale faces that the two fearfully entered the office. They pretended to have heard nothing prior to their entry and focused on their work, pointedly ignoring Jackson out of fear.

Unfortunately, sometimes a mine just did not need anything to detonate it. Even without prompt, Jackson took out the rest of his anger on Amy.

“I’m under the impression that you’ve been working under us for many, many years, haven’t you, Miss Velasquez? Hmm? Do you know that, before our compartmentalization, this place used to be our company's headquarter, governed by my mother before she passed the baton to me? In other words, this is like our second HQ! So tell me, why the heck was my ‘second HQ’ bombing so hard last year, huh? And now, based on the performance recorded so far for this current half of the year, I can already see you people tanking even harder than last year’s abysmal result! Just what kind of director would let something like this happen, huh? I didn’t even plan to shriek my lungs out at you people when I decided to visit this branch, but goddamn it, you all have been acting like y’all are on vacation while I’m not here!”

Amy listened to him grouch with her body straight and her head hanging low. “Yes, you’re right,” she answered. “I should have done better. I’ll do my absolute best to reach higher standards on all accounts in the next half-a-year.”

Jackson’s eyes quickly switched to Tiffany, the only bystander around, after he was done lashing out at Amy. That sudden attention caused the woman’s heart to sink low as she gulped. ‘Holy sh*t, he’s not gonna kill me, too, isn’t he? I haven’t done anything here!’

Contrary to her expectation, Jackson merely massaged his forehead before muttering, “Urgh, I don’t even have the mood to shout at you. I’m going back to the hotel. I will be back tonight… That’s right, everyone in this office is working overtime tonight! No buts!”

When the man finally left the building, both Tiffany and Amy let out drawn-out sighs. As a veteran, Amy had too many experiences to be easily daunted and disconcerted by a harsh scolding from her boss.

“Bruh, why are you sighing? It’s not like he screamed at you! Hell, you probably should be thanking God that I, the director, am around for you to pass the buck, or you’d be the one being drenched in angry spittle! Oh, and what did they say about ‘the most dangerous man is also the most charming?’ That would probably fit Mr. West’s description, ha! He’s already hot, and now he gotta look photogenic even when he’s shouting at people!” she quipped. “He hardly came to our company in the past, you know It’s always been his mother, Mrs. West, which is why I haven’t learned enough about his temperament yet. But you bet I’ll learn a fudge-ton, though, if he shouts at me a few more times.”

That made Tiffany laugh. “Oh my God, Amy! Who knew you’d have such a sense of humor? You always wear that deadpanned expression and look so serious that I thought you’re just some uptight, humorless boss-lady! Damn, if you’d acted like this since the start, I wouldn’t have been so on edge all the damn time!”

“Please, darling, that was me trying to draw boundaries and lines for a newbie, mmkay? If I don’t scare you into behaving yourself, you probably wouldn’t for the rest of your tenure!” Amy countered, though it was evident that she had given up on her uptight affectation. “But we’ve been colleagues for a while now, and I gotta’ say, you don’t seem the kind to put on airs and not know where the lines are drawn. You’re more like my little sister, who’s the same age as you, so I’m kinda relaxed around you.

“Anyway, chit-chat’s over. Our finance department just got bombarded hard, and we gotta work out what went wrong with those accounts before the worst of Mr. West arrives. So yea, gotta get our arses

to work. We got overtime tonight," she reminded. "Better not chat anymore, too, lest Mr. West make a surprise U-turn back here and see us bantering then chew us to pieces."

Tiffany shot an apprehensive glance at the entrance, only relaxing when she was sure Jackson had not returned to the office. Then, she sorted his documents into various piles—the ones he had finished were stacked together while the others were tucked someplace safe so that he would not miss any of them when he came back.

Her schedule turned tight as the evening progressed into night, and Tiffany skipped her dinner and remained in the office. To get herself up to speed with the nitty-gritty in her current branch company, she saved a load of documents and materials on her computer for reading. However, reading for the whole day made the words appear blurry to her weary eyes.

Jackson came to the office sometime around eight. Since the standard time to leave during an overtime spree was nine o'clock, Tiffany was confident that he was only here to patrol them. Quickly, her mind muttered a mantra of pleading that the man ignore her as she pretended to train her attention onto the screen. Amy had gone to the bathroom and left her alone with him right now, and his presence was causing her growing anxieties…

Unfortunately, Tiffany's fear seemed to serve as an attraction force that pulled Jackson to her. In his formal tone, he asked, "Are you free after work?"

She perceived his question as a preamble to business. "I'm free right now, Mr. West. If there's anything you would like me to do right now, I'll do it to the best of my ability."

Jackson was speechless. Was she really so obtuse as to not hear him mentioning "after work"?

Before he could clarify himself, however, Amy returned to the office, hollering, “Yo, Miss Lane, you skipped dinner, right? Up for some late-night snacks with m—oh, Mr. West. You’ve come…”

Chapter 945

Jackson returned to his seat behind his desk and hummed, “Mm.”

Amy drew in a shaky breath and strolled back to her seat feebly. It was then that Jackson suddenly asked, “So, where are you two going for snacks? I think there’s catering in this building, no? Why skip dinner?”

He seemed to be talking to Amy, but it was quite apparent that Tiffany was the real subject of the question.

Amy mulled over her words for a bit before answering, “Well, Miss Lane had been working real hard lately, so she hadn’t gotten the time. As for snacks, there’s a nearby street filled with seafood vendors that just started their business, and I heard praises from our coworkers who’d been there. I was hoping to try ‘em out. Are you interested too, Mr. West?”

Tiffany swore that Amy’s brain must have stopped working to think this was a good idea. They had waited for the entire day to leave the office behind and reward themselves with a relaxing session of good food, yet, here she was, inviting the source of their stress. How on Earth was anyone going to relax then? And why was Amy so calm? Was she not afraid at all?

Tiffany hoped against hope that Jackson would decline the offer. Surely his royal, high-class taste buds could not stomach something as plebeian as street food, right?

As though intercepting some sort of message from Tiffany's expression, Jackson knowingly accepted Amy's invitation. "Alright. I haven't had some street food for a pretty long while. It's pretty nice to enjoy those from time to time."

Tiffany's head fell in a defeated swing. Fine, then! Looks like she could only rely on food to dispel the frustration in her mind now. After all, it was not like she dared talk back at him.

In the Tremont Estate, Arianne—with Smore in her arms—enjoyed the cool evening breeze in their yard with Mark.

Staying in an air-conditioned environment all the time could sometimes freeze their body so much that their bones felt brittle, so having the heat being dissipated by nature's gusts was an enjoyable change.

It was one of those rare evenings when Mark returned from work early, so the baby reacted by becoming too excited to sleep. Mark, too, allowed Smore to wriggle and roll around in his embrace while he leaned on his chair.

Arianne stared at him for a while before beginning hesitatingly. "Um, Mark? There's something I'd like to discuss with you."

She had never acted so solemnly before. Confused, Mark looked up and considered her. "What's the matter?"

Arianne steeled herself before explaining, "So… I went to the old Wynn Mansion the other day. No one lives there, and it's virtually abandoned into ruins. It's just… It's my dad's childhood home that my granny left for me. I can't just let it die like that, right? So, I was wondering, could we get someone to,

er, make some touch ups before hiring someone to watch over the house? I know, I know. It's gonna cost a fortune, and although I got some money on my own, I'm sure it's not enough. So, uh, can you, well, help me for the rest of the amount?"

They might have been husband and wife for years, but Arianne had never asked him for money before. In the past, Mark's money was basically forced into her account, so now, making the demand on her own accord made her feel uneasy.

Mark did not answer her either way. Instead, he pivoted, "Oh, so you went and checked it out? Is it truly that battered? Besides, the weather's been arid these days. What time did you and our son go outside?"

Arianne was acutely aware that he had circumvented the topic of money, which further sapped whatever courage she had mustered. "W-We went out before noon, cause', uh, it wasn't scorching at that time. The house is in a pretty horrid state, to be frank. It's overgrown with tall grasses and stuff. It just looked… dead."

Mark pondered on her words for a few seconds.

"If repairing it is what you want, then I'll instruct Henry to begin hiring people for it right away. He'll manage everything," he said. "Don't you worry about the money problem. Heh, you hardly ask me for anything, so how could I say no? Besides, of course I know how much that house means to you. Your worries are misplaced."

He agreed to her request! Arianne breathed a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'll help, too. I'll pour in all of my savings into this. I'll pay for the people we hire to watch the house! Thank you, Mark.'

Mark extended his arm and pulled her into him. “Hey, keep your savings for yourself, alright? I’m always behind your decision, so please, don’t ever thank me like that. I should be the one to thank you, in fact. You gave me the chance to atone for my sins when you chose to stay with me.”

Chapter 946

His greatest saving grace? This was her first time seeing him display such immense guilt over all of his mistakes in the past. She felt compelled to hold him.

She gazed at Aristotle, who was still full of energy, and suggested, “Maybe… We can try handing Aristotle over to Mary? He’s not sleepy yet, so he probably won’t fuss.”

It took Mark a while before he understood what Arianne meant. Usually, he would have to force that little third wheel away. Today, it was a rare sight for her to take the initiative. Of course, he was happy. “Okay. Take him. I’ll wait for you in the bedroom.”

Arianne blushed as she carried Aristotle away. She found Mary and tried her best to look as normal as possibly. She tried her best to regulate her breathing. “Mary, could you take care of Smore for now? I’ll take him to bed later.”

Mary happily accepted Aristotle into her arms. “Sure. It’s fine. Come over for him later. He’s not sleepy yet, so I’ll take him for a walk around the garden. He’ll get sick too easily if he’s always cooped up at home.”

Arianne nodded, turned around, and headed upstairs. She guiltily locked the door when she entered the room. Mark saw this and chuckled. “Who are you so afraid of? No one will come in when I’m home. Don’t worry.”

She stared coyly at Mark, who was on the bed. “It just doesn’t feel right to leave Smore like that…”

He knew that she would feel conflicted. “He sleeps with us every night anyway. Why are you worried? We need time to ourselves too, don’t we? We’ve gone through so much in the past that we haven’t had any proper time to ourselves, and we haven’t been able to spend any time together after he was born. Half of our lives are squandered. Come here.”

Arianne took a deep breath and relaxed. She walked to him and sat on his lap, just like how she used to when she was a child. He looked the same as ever. The only difference was, she wasn’t small enough to curl into his chest like she used to.

She reached out and wrapped her arms around his neck then laid a chaste kiss on his lips. She tried to deepen it, like how he usually did with her, but to no avail. She wasn’t skilled enough or bold enough.

Mark allowed her to take the reins at first but lost his patience after all of her dawdling. He smoothly circled his arm around her waist then toppled her over and trapped her underneath his body. “Let me teach you.”

His hot, passionate kiss ignited fireworks, bursting from within their beings. Arianne awkwardly helped him remove his clothes. Her heart trembled as she stared at his firm, naked body.

They looked into each other’s eyes, and her vision went blurry, her cheeks flushed.

“You look so beautiful, right now…” He surrendered completely.

She looked away awkwardly. He rarely talked in bed; she couldn't take this…

Just as things were beginning to heat up, Mark's phone rang. The sudden noise was loud and sharp, killing the mood between them. "You should probably answer that," Arianne said shyly. "For someone to call you at a time like this, it's probably important."

Mark got up irritably, snatched up his phone and walked towards the French windows. "Hello?"

Arianne didn't know who called or what they said. She simply saw the expression on Mark's face turn from impatient to stern, then ashen… She realized that something huge had happened. She pulled on her clothes and waited for him to explain.

Mark fell silent for a long time before ending the call. "I need to go out for a while. Stay home and watch Aristotle."

Chapter 947

"What happened?" she asked.

He tightened his grip around his phone. "Something has happened to Eric. I've always known that his stomach problems would end up in a disaster… I've got to go.

Arianne's mind buzzed. She immediately remembered the first time she met Eric. He had an amiable temperament. He was always smiling and very easy-going, and he still seemed so dazzling next to Mark and Jackson. Despite severing ties with his own family and building his own business, he still shone like a star and worked hard to shine on his own…

Based on the look on Mark's face, Eric might be…

"I'm going with you! Eric isn't just your friend but mine too," she insisted determinedly.

This time, Mark did not object. Instead, he asked, "What if Smore cries? Who knows what time we'll come home. It might be morning by the time we're done."

Arianne quickly changed her clothes, afraid that he might change his mind. "Should it matter? Eric left his family long ago. We're his only friends. If Smore wants to cry, let him bawl the night away. It's fine. I'll come back early if it gets too much. Let's go. No more delays."

Meanwhile, Jackson, who was having supper at a roadside seafood shack with Amy and Tiffany, received the call as well. His expression was just like Mark's, but he couldn't rush home right now. It would be a few hours' drive, so he had to leave it all to Mark.

Tiffany noticed that something was amiss when he ended the call. "What's wrong?" she asked.

Jackson took a deep breath. "Something has happened to Eric. You ladies should feel happy—I'm going home tonight. No one's going to watch you now. Enjoy your food, I have to go."

Tiffany put down the large prawn in her hand. "Ca-can… I come with you? You're the boss anyway. You get to make the decisions. Give me two days off…"

Jackson hesitated for two seconds. “Are you sure?”

Tiffany nodded. “Mm, Eric is my friend too. If something has happened to him, I can’t possibly ignore him. Since you’re driving, I can carpool with you. I don’t have to drive. Will that be okay?”

“Let’s go then,” Jackson agreed. “Amy, I’ll leave the company in your hands. We’ll discuss the financial department’s issue when I get back.”

Amy was still in shock. “Oh… Oh! Sure! You guys go ahead then.”

Jackson had to go back to the hotel to pack first. Tiffany didn’t have much to pack, so she followed him back to the hotel. She paused in the doorway and did not go inside, secretly relieved that she did not go for supper with Alejandro tonight. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been able to come along.

Based on the look on Jackson’s face, she was too afraid to ask him about Eric.

They got into the car after moving all of his things downstairs. “You can take a nap in the back seat. I’ll wake you when we get there.”

Tiffany insisted on sitting in the front. “No need. I’m not tired. I’m worried about you driving in the dead of the night. I can, at least, chat with you while I’m next to you to keep you awake.”

Unbeknownst to them, the suddenly harmonious pair had connected over something far more important.

Chapter 948

The hospital.

By the time Mark and Arianne arrived, Eric was in the middle of surgery. No one was waiting outside the operating theatre before they arrived. It was heart-breaking.

Arianne sat on a long bench in the hallway. “Who called you? Why is no one here?”

“Tanya.” Mark looked at her from his side profile.

Arianne frowned. “Why her? I guess it makes sense… She left after making that call, probably because she didn’t want to run into us.”

“The condo she lives in is right across Eric’s office. She probably happened to see that something had happened to him, so she sent him to the hospital and called us.” He guessed. “Jackson is on his way back too.”

Arianne had nothing to say about that. At least, Tanya wasn’t completely evil and hadn’t forgotten Eric’s kindness toward her.

The surgery took more than five hours. Once the operating theatre's indication lights went out, Mark rushed forward and waited for the door to open.

The head surgeon's forehead was drenched in sweat when he emerged. "Are you the patient's family members?"

Mark nodded heavily. "How is he?"

The doctor shook his head with restraint. "He has late stage gastric cancer. He's young and should have had treatment sooner. He was only sent here after he began coughing blood. He's been stabilized for the time being through emergency surgery, but… You should know, under these circumstances, he won't be able to hold on for much longer. A month, at most. He can choose to stay in the hospital, but he will have a hard time, or… Take some time off and do whatever he wants to do while he still can. I suggest a discharge from the hospital once he's healed from surgery. No treatment can be done at this point."

Mark's breath caught in his throat. His eyes welled with tears as he stayed completely silent for a very long time.

Arianne wasn't as strong. She was reduced to a puddle of tears long ago.

When the nurses wheeled Eric back into his ward, they stayed next to him and didn't leave his side. Jackson and Tiffany soon arrived. Tiffany was initially under the impression that everything was fine, despite seeing Eric hooked onto an oxygen tank, peacefully asleep. However, when she strode over to take a closer look, she noticed hints of dried bloodstains on the corners of his lips!

She was shocked. Tears formed in her eyes, but they wouldn't fall. "What happened? How did this happen? He was fine, what happened?"

Arianne shook her head and pulled Tiffany outside. "Eric is dying. Late stage gastric cancer. We had no idea. We watched him start a new relationship, but I never thought that his life would end so soon. He usually poured all of his energy into his work. He was working so hard, why is god so unfair? He coughed up blood all of a sudden, and probably ran into Tanya. She sent him to the hospital and called us. She left before we arrived."

Tiffany held her chest in agony. "Where's Vicky? She can't possibly be asleep at a time like this, right? Eric's been out for so long, and she's closest to him, yet Tanya was the one who sent him to the hospital? I've never liked that woman. Aren't they supposed to be living together? Her boyfriend hasn't been home all night, so why hasn't she reacted at all?"

Arianne had nothing to say in Vicky's defense. Perhaps there was no explanation needed. Tanya had used Eric's phone to call Mark and Jackson, so she had probably called Vicky too. Who knows why Vicky wasn't here.

They kept vigil in the hospital for the entire night. Eric finally woke up the next day. He was as pale as a ghost and his eyes… held no trace of sorrow at all, as if he knew that this was his end and had already accepted it. "What are you all doing here?"

Jackson managed a bitter smile. "What else would you expect? You're really something else. You've kept this from us all, even till this point. Were you afraid of troubling us? Some best friend you are. Are Mark and I nothing more than drinking buddies to you?"

Chapter 949

Eric was still feeling very weak. It took him a while before he finally answered. “What are you saying? I just… don’t feel like living anymore. By the time I realized, it was already in the late stage anyway. There’s no need for treatment.”

Jackson’s voice grew hoarse. “What do you mean, ‘don’t feel like living anymore’? If you really didn’t, why’d you get a girlfriend then? You obviously wanted to live…”

Eric shut his eyes and shook his head. “Everything felt perfect before we got together, and I began looking forward to the future. But she’s not marriage material. She’s only good at having fun and is only concerned about enjoying herself. She’s not ready to settle down yet. We’re from completely different worlds. I’ve had enough fun, and now, I want stability. But she has only just started having fun. Our paths were different from the beginning. If I’m correct, she must have gone out drinking last night and isn’t home yet. It’s fine. We’re going to break up anyway. By the way, when I’m dead, turn everything I own to cash donations. I want to do some good for the world, just like Mark used to. Consider it my way of gathering good karma. Hopefully, I’ll receive a more peaceful life in my next life…”

Mark lifted his hand and rubbed the corner of his eye, as if to conceal an uncontrollable tear. “Do you… want to tell your family about this?”

Eric refused. “What for? So that they can find out where I’m buried and jeer at me for dying before them? No way. You’re all here. That’s good enough. I’m really satisfied with my life now. I’ve enjoyed everything imaginable.”

Suddenly, the room door burst open. Vicky rushed in, carrying the stench of vestiges from a hangover into the room. She threw herself against the bed and burst into tears. “Ricky! What happened to you, Ricky? What happened to you? Are you alright?”

No one spoke. Everyone wanted to ignore her. The fact that they hadn't thrown her out of the room was a result of their final straw of courtesy.

Eric stared at Vicky calmly. "I forgot to tell you… Let's break it off. I won't be alive for very much longer. I don't need to drag you down."

Vicky was in shock. "What are you saying? Why are you saying these things? What will happen to me when you're gone? I came all the way back to the country for you. I'm all alone. I put everything on the line for you, and you're breaking it off, just like that? What am I going to do, I'm all alone!"

Eric took a deep breath, probably because he was still hurting. "Stop giving me that crap about you giving everything up. Your academic qualifications and studies abroad were all a lie. I knew this since long ago. Your family is completely different from your description. I never exposed you because I didn't see the need. It didn't matter to me anyway, understand? I'd like to live my life freely, with whatever time I have left. I used to plan for our future, but now… I can't… My final plans do not include you…"

Vicky felt like a joke at this point, standing in the middle of the group as a form of mockery. She got up with tears in her eyes, probably stemming from guilt. "I don't care. I refuse to break up with you at this point. I'm still your girlfriend. I will personally send you away from this world. They're just your friends while I'm the closest thing to you. I won't leave."

Eric frowned. "Where were you last night when I nearly died? You were the first person I called… But you rejected my call. I was coughing up blood and collapsed on the side of the road. Tanya was the one who brought me to the hospital. You're not the last person I saw during my final seconds of consciousness. What more is there to say? I didn't want to mention this in front of everyone, but you said all those things to get a legal share of my inheritance, didn't you? I've already told Mark to donate all of my possessions, so stop acting. I don't want to see it. You're only my girlfriend, not my wife. You don't have the right to any inheritance."

Chapter 950

Arianne and Tiffany couldn't stand it any longer. They had no idea that Vicky's number was the first one Eric had dialed. Vicky had actually rejected his call while he was dying, all for the sake of having fun. Now, she had the audacity to claim that she was the closest thing to Eric!

The biggest irony of all was that it was Tanya, whom Vicky hated the most, that managed to save Eric's life for the time being.

Vicky was losing control of the smile on her face, but she persisted. "What are you saying? Are you feeling confused? This is all in your head. I'm not doing this for any inheritance! I wasn't even aware that you'd called me last night. I went to the washroom and my friend rejected the call out of mischief. She didn't tell me about it either. I realized that I couldn't call you this morning and that you were in the hospital when I checked your location. I asked a nurse downstairs when I arrived… and found your ward. I really didn't mean to do it. Please don't think of me that way. I'll stay with you for the remainder of your days. Please… Let me stay with you…"

Tiffany could tell that Eric did not have the energy to deal with Vicky, so she spoke up in a muffled voice, "Vicky, are you still drunk? Eric has already made it clear. His final plans don't include you. Are you still confused? A love based on lies can never last. I could tell from your attitude that you've only ever seen Eric as an ATM machine, a form a refuge. He's dying, and you're still plotting to take his possessions from him? He has only left his family, he's not an orphan, so you don't have the right to inheritance, regardless! I can't watch you act any longer. He has made it very clear that all of his possessions will be liquidated to donations. Do you understand? None of us here will receive a single cent from him, aside from those who really need it. Have I made myself clear?"

Vicky angrily reached out and pushed Tiffany. "I'm speaking to my boyfriend. How dare you interfere? Why are you getting so emotional?"

Jackson grabbed Vicky's wrist. His voice was ice-cold, his eyes thunderous. "I will only say this once, please get out."

Vicky was frightened by the grim look on Eric's face. She struggled to release her wrist from his grip. "Look at what they're doing to me, Eric! Let's put everything aside and consider this. I've been dating you for such a long time, so they shouldn't be treating me like this!"

Eric turned his face to the side. "Got it. I'll give you a small portion of the inheritance as compensation. However, you will only receive this sum of money after my death. Please do not disturb me during this time. The money will be yours if you can accomplish this. Fail, and you won't receive a single cent."

Despite his past feelings, he refused to see her in the end, before his death. She, who had once been by his side. Was it because he was thoroughly disappointed in her? If one factored unwillingness for his loved ones to watch him suffer, that wasn't the case with Eric. He simply wanted to live in peace for the remainder of his days.

When Vicky hesitated, words still hanging on her lips, Arianne pushed her out just in time. "He's already promised you compensation. Stop asking questions. Can't you see the look on their faces? Stay any longer and you'll get beaten up. You'd deserve it too."

Vicky was under the impression that Arianne was on her side, so she whispered, "Then… Give me an estimate. How much do you think Eric will give me? Half of the inheritance, maybe?"