Ruling 951

Chapter 951

Arianne's expression hardened. She lifted her hand and delivered a hard slap. Her upbringing prevented her from spewing foul language, so this slap was an amalgamation of how upset she was. "Leave."

Vicky gritted her teeth but was too afraid to do anything to Arianne, so she left in a huff.

Arianne had put a lot of force into that slap because she was truly infuriated. Her hand was still sore and numb when she returned to the ward. Mark pulled her aside. "We can take care of Eric from here. You should go home. Smore won't be able to endure your absence."

Arianne could see how tired Tiffany was as well, so she dragged her along. "Come on, you can come home with me. We'll come over when we wake up. I have to go home and check on the baby."

Tiffany knew that Jackson and Mark wouldn't leave, and there were people watching over him. She said nothing, ordering take out for them before following Arianne back to the Tremont Estate.

It was a bright, sunny day when they left the hospital, and when they woke up from their naps, the sun was still up. This day felt longer than usual, yet they hoped that it would never end, that things would stay just like this. That way, Eric would always be with them.

After waking up, Tiffany choked with sobs during their meal. "I never thought that Eric would collapse… He has always had such an unfortunate life. Is god so determined to torment him?"

Arianne held Aristotle in silence. No one could give a clear explanation in times like this. Death was like a large web, covering the whole world. People were dying in every corner, and sadness was everywhere. One would only understand when that sadness hit them. No one would be able to escape this net in the end, but some people would only land in it much later than others.

Tiffany had lost her appetite. She took two sips of soup before putting down her spoon. “I’m going to check on things at the hospital. I don’t have anything to do here anyway. You have to take care of the baby, so it’d be inconvenient for you. Let Mark handle it.”

Arianne nodded. “I’d really love to help, but I can’t, so I’ll have to leave it to you. I’ll visit when he’s asleep. Tell Mark and Jackson to get some rest and not to push themselves too hard. I’m worried that they haven't slept at all.”

After Tiffany left, Mary strode forward with a somber look on her face. “Has something happened to Eric? He looked fine when we saw him last, which was during Aristotle’s one month celebration.”

Arianne felt weak. “Who can tell which comes sooner — the future or an accident? Isn’t this how life works? No one can tell when they die. At any rate, did the baby behave while we were away last night? He must have tired you out.”

Mary sighed. “I was just about to say… With such an emergency on hand, Aristotle was such a good boy. He didn’t cry or fuss. He didn’t even cry when he woke up and got hungry. He sucked on his thumb instead. I set an alarm clock and fed him milk when I woke up and saw him. Do you think he sensed something?”

Of course, Arianne did not believe in psychic theories. She was just glad that Aristotle had behaved himself. Mary was just saying that Vicky and Eric wouldn’t last when she met her at the one month

celebration. Her prediction actually came true. However, no one thought that they'd break it off just as Eric was dying.

The condo.

Tanya didn't have a good night's sleep either. She happened to witness something amiss with Eric, just as she had gone out to buy something. Eric collapsed before she could ask him anything. She rushed forward and found that he had been coughing up blood. He was barely conscious and still clutching his phone, with the call records still on the screen.

Chapter 952

Her feelings for Eric couldn't be explained. She thought that it was love, at first. Later, she realized that it was completely different from what she had felt for Jackson. Now, she believed that Eric felt more like a brother to her, like family. She wanted to stay at the hospital but was afraid of running into Arianne and the rest. She still felt very concerned.

Just as she was growing fidgety, she heard the sound of a key turning in the doorknob. Only Jett had the keys to her place.

Jett had mentioned that he had to take a trip to South Park with Alejandro and that he would probably be staying for a week. She was surprised by his early return and got up. "Have you eaten?" she asked. "I… I didn't know that you'd be back so soon. I haven't had time to cook."

"Don't worry about me," Jett calmly replied. "Are you going out?"

Only then did Tanya realize that she had been holding her phone and keys, looking as if she was ready to head out. She paused and decided to be honest. “I’m going to the hospital. Eric’s been admitted. I found him unconscious on the ground yesterday after coughing up blood. I sent him to the hospital.”

Jett was taken aback then realized why Alejandro had suddenly insisted on coming back. Something had happened to Eric, which explained why Alejandro had suddenly insisted on coming home. Tiffany and Jackson were probably back too. “Go… If you want. Just a reminder to keep your mouth shut. Also… Alejandro won’t be happy if he finds out about this. Come back as soon as you can.”

Tanya sighed with relief and felt moved at the same time. He knew that her trip could potentially cause problems for him, but he let her go anyway. “Okay. I’ll be back soon.”

She asked about Eric’s condition upon her arrival at the hospital, too afraid to go in straight away. Instead, she stayed in the corridor, looking around and trying to see if anyone was around. Someone was certainly watching over Eric. Despite her decision to come, she wasn’t prepared to face Tiffany and Jackson and the rest. Especially Arianne, who really terrified her.

Suddenly, Eric’s room door opened and Tiffany stepped out. Her first instinct was to hide, but she had nowhere to go, aside from the other patients’ wards. During her two-second long bout of hesitation, Tiffany spotted her.

The pair fell silent as they locked eyes. Tiffany’s face was shrouded with an icy chill, as if she were at a loss. After a while she spoke up. “You can go inside if you want. Eric would probably be dead on the street by now if it weren’t for you.”

Tanya lowered her head. “I… Maybe that’s not such a good idea. Eric was coughing up blood yesterday. Is he alright? What happened? Is it stomach problems again?”

The tip of Tiffany's nose looked red. "Late stage gastric cancer. He doesn't have long. That's why I've asked you to go in and see him. This is between you and Eric. It has nothing to do with me. I don't want to see you, so don't ask for my forgiveness. Mark and Jackson are both inside. You're here anyway. Are you too afraid to go inside?"

It's true, Tanya was too afraid to go in. She wasn't prepared to face Jackson. "Yes, I'm too afraid to go in. Send my regards to Eric. I'm leaving." She turned around and quickly rushed towards the elevator at the corridor entrance.

Tiffany was rendered speechless. She had already mentioned that Eric was dying, and Tanya still didn't have the guts to go inside. Why'd she do that if she knew that this would happen? Now she was too embarrassed to see anyone.

Tanya rushed out of the hospital, supported herself against a tree on the side of the road, and retched. Nothing came, but she felt dizzy and lost the strength in her legs.

Chapter 953

Tiffany's words echoed in her mind. Eric was dying…

She stared at the white walls outside the hospital. She didn't want to leave like this, but she couldn't come up with a reason to go back inside. In the midst of her hesitation, she noticed a black BYD on the side of the road. The car window winded down, revealing Jett wearing a pair of glasses and gesturing at her with his chin.

She looked around, ensured that no one who knew her was around, then got into the car. “What are you doing here?”

Jett started the engine with an emotionless look on his face. “I’m worried. I have to go back to Alejandro’s, but I’ll drop you home first.”

Tanya bit her lip and said, “I’m sorry. I didn’t go into the ward at all. I ran into Tiffany at the hospital. Don’t worry. I didn’t say anything.”

Jett did not answer. He tossed a plastic bag from the hospital at her, with two small medicine bottles inside. She took out the bottles and found that it was folic acid. “These are… for me?”

Jett nodded. He did not say anything comforting, but it comforted Tanya nonetheless. Their relationship as husband and wife was fake, but the baby in her womb was real. Jett was concerned for the baby, or he wouldn’t have gotten folic acid for her.

Meanwhile, Tiffany made her way to the gynaecology department. Jackson and Mark did not realize that she had gone all the way here. She realized that she hadn’t had her period lately and wondered why. She had decided to get a check-up, worried that something might be wrong. She felt extra worried after Eric’s sudden collapse.

When it was her turn for ultrasound, she lay down and nervously said to the doctor, “Just tell me if there’s anything wrong. I can take it. No need to tell my family.”

The doctor saw her rosy cheeks and that she was in the pink of health. She didn’t look sick, so he didn’t take her words seriously. “Okay, don’t worry.”

Suddenly, the doctor came alive with rapt attention, then moved the apparatus around on Tiffany's belly. She went pale with fright. "Is… something wrong? I've only missed my period for two months. Is it cancer or anything like that?"

The doctor turned to the side and looked at her. "What are you saying? You're pregnant. For more than two months."

Tiffany was shocked. Pregnant? This word was once so distant to her… She and Jackson had been trying so many times previously but couldn't conceive at all. How did this happen? Whose baby was it?

She recollected her scattered thoughts and calculated the time frame. It was probably the day before Jackson and Tanya's scandal. Was her time of conception the same as Tanya's? The only possible father was Jackson. She hadn't had sex with any other man.

She was gripped by confusion over her emotions. She wasn't completely overjoyed. Could she happily burst into the ward and tell Jackson that she was pregnant, during Eric's critical moments? It seemed inappropriate to give this news in front of a dying man, and Jackson really didn't have the energy to manage anything else at this point.

After some thought, she decided to keep it a secret for now then come clean once Eric was settled. Besides… She wasn't sure of how to deal with this baby. She and Jackson were currently broken up.

She carefully slipped the medical report into her bag. She was still feeling quite energetic and did not feel any discomfort from her pregnancy, so she could easily pretend that everything was normal and carry on with life. It wasn't good to be overly anxious anyway.

By night time, Mark and Jackson couldn't hold on any longer. They had Henry send someone to take care of Eric then went home to get some rest.

Tiffany wanted to go home and see Lillian. The road home happened to be on the same route back to Jackson's home, so she decided to carpool with him.

Jackson seemed to be in a bad state in the car. He focused entirely on driving and did not speak. Tiffany knew that he hadn't slept for an entire day and night, so she didn't dare talk to him either, afraid of causing an accident. However, she would glance at him from time to time and wonder who the baby in her belly would look like...

Chapter 954

Life was funny that way. You hope and hope for something to come, but it never does. Then, when you least expect it, it arrives like an accident.

Jackson noticed her staring at him and turned his face to the side to look at her. "Why are you staring at me? Is there something on my face?"

She hurriedly turned away. "No, I was looking at the scenery. Don't be so vain."

Jackson wasn't in the mood to joke around with her. He dropped her off at the ground floor of her condo. "Here."

She opened the door and got down from the car then suddenly stopped. “If I told you that I was the one who got pregnant and not Tanya, would you take responsibility?”

Jackson stared at her as if lost in thought, then said, “If you really could get pregnant, I’d love to see it. Even a chicken would have laid an egg by now after taking care of it for so long.”

The corners of Tiffany’s lips twitched. “I really… can’t be bothered with you. Fine, fine. Go home and get some rest. Be careful on the way home.”

She smiled as she watched his car disappear into the streets, then happily pranced into her condo. Life was full of ups and downs.

Lillian saw her humming away when she entered the house and was surprised. “What are you doing back here all of a sudden? And you’re so happy too. Did something good happen?”

Tiffany did not tell Lillian about the baby, worried that she wouldn’t be able to keep her mouth close. “I’m on a break, so I’m here to see you. I’m tired. I’m going to sleep for a while. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

Lillian looked disgusted. “You should at least take a shower before going to bed. I’ve washed your sheets and duvet. They’re all clean. Don’t you dare sleep on them for one night then leave me with dirtied sheets the next day.”

Tiffany wasn’t angry at all. She happily hugged Lillian and kissed her. “I understand, mom. What mother would snub her own daughter? I’ll shower and get fresh and clean before going to bed.”

The Tremont Estate.

Mark immediately took a shower and went straight to bed after arriving home. He was simply exhausted. Arianne had had a nap in the daytime, so she was still feeling fine. Afraid of disturbing his rest, she made Aristotle sleep in the baby room. She stayed with him, afraid that the baby would make a fuss.

When she woke up the next day, she discovered that Mark was nowhere to be found. It was highly likely that he had gone to the hospital. His best friend of many years, Eric, was sick. Anyone would be anxious.

She, too, felt unsettled as she stayed at home. She took Aristotle to the hospital. Places like the hospital posed a risk to small children, and they were advised against going. Unfortunately, she had no choice, as she couldn't abandon her baby. As expected, from the moment she set foot into the ward, Mark said, "Why did you bring the baby here? Go home."

She frowned. "What's wrong? I just wanted to drop by. Jackson and Tiffie aren't here yet?"

Mark sat in a chair with a sullen look on his face. "Mm. They're probably coming by later."

Eric was awake and didn't seem to be in much pain. He could still bring himself to play with the baby. "He's so big now. He looks much sturdier than when I last saw him and much better looking too. More importantly, his complexion is fairer now."

Arianne wanted to laugh but couldn't bring herself to do it. "Yes… He was placed under blu ray in an incubator for so long after his birth; of course, he would get a tan. He's fairer now. Smore, this is your Uncle Eric. You must… remember him, okay?"

Chapter 955

Aristotle stared at Eric as he sucked on his fingers and drooled. His tiny face was a picture of innocence and naivety, completely unaffected by the suffocating air of illness in the ward.

Eric smiled at Aristotle. "So cute… Unfortunately, I'll never have children, and I'll never get to watch him grow up."

Arianne took a deep breath as she felt her eyes sting with tears. "Don't talk like that. What if a miracle happens? You look fine to me. You'll be fine. You have to stay optimistic. Everything will get better."

Eric took off his oxygen mask and paused. "Do I look like a pessimist? You're all sadder about it than I am. There's no need, really. I think it's fine. Putting this thing on makes breathing feel weird. I won't die. Why should I keep it on?"

Mark forced the oxygen mask back on him. "Are you nuts? If the doctor tells you to put it on, you put it on. Why are you taking it off?"

Eric rolled his eyes helplessly at him. "Fine, I'll keep it on, okay? I think I can leave the hospital the day after tomorrow. My wound doesn't hurt so much anymore. I don't want to lie in this hospital all day and waste my time. I already don't have very much of it."

The room door pushed open as he spoke. Tiffany and Jackson entered together. The pair happened to bump into each other at the hospital entrance. When she saw how much better Eric looked, Tiffany strode forward and drew the curtains wide open. “A brighter room feels more uplifting. How are you feeling today? Does it hurt anywhere?”

Eric turned around and gazed at the scene outside, looking very calm. “No, nothing hurts. I’m quite alright. You don’t have to watch over me all the time like this you know. Don’t you have work to do? Get back to your usual schedules. I’m not dying that soon. Are you just waiting to see me for the last time?”

“I’m happy to do it,” Jackson chimed in. “What’s it to you? Honestly, I’m not that busy. The company will do just fine, even if I’m away for a few days. As for your company… I’ve sold it off. I didn’t think it’d be a good idea to just close down and dismiss the staff. Keep it open. As you’ve said, all leftover assets will be turned into donations… after this.”

“Okay, that’s good,” Eric replied calmly. “I’ll leave it in your hands.”

Jackson didn’t mention that Mark had bought Eric’s company over. They had made a silent agreement to hold on to every last thing related to Eric…

At this point, Arianne decided to add on, “How much do you plan on giving Vicky?”

Eric turned to her. “Are you asking, or did she ask you to ask me?”

“I’m asking,” Arianne replied with a deadpan look. “I’m not close to her. She never mentioned this to me. I just want you to make things clear, so that we can deal with it properly. After all… You have the final say on the total amount.”

Eric thought for a moment. “$30,000. That should be enough.”

Arianne nodded. “I’ll leave you to it then. I have to go. The baby will fuss soon, and he might disturb your rest.”

Seeing this, Tiffany said, “I’ll walk with Arianne. I’m coming back later, so don’t get annoyed by the sight of me.”

“Go ahead,” Eric said with a smile.

Once they had left the room, Tiffany couldn’t contain herself any longer. She had to spill her little secret. “Smore’s going to have a girlfriend soon.”

Chapter 956

Arianne flashed Tiffany a weirded-out expression. “Okay, what are you talking about, Tiffie? Did you skip sleep last night and are now trippin’?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “What I’m talking about is the truth, hon! If we count the dates, I actually got pregnant waaay before Tanya! Ha! Okay, okay—so, yesterday, I was like, hey, I haven’t gotten any visit from Aunt Flo. And so I went to do a body checkup and bingo! I hit the jackpot—I hit the goddamned

jackpot! Holy hell, I was praying left and right, every day, so that I could finally bear a child, but nothing worked. And now, I have my child after Jackson and I are over… Like, am I supposed to be pleasantly surprised, or should I be like, a bit more mortified?"

Arianne became quiet. "On one hand, news of Eric's suffering has just broken to us. On the other, you're eagerly telling me one of the best news ever. It's making my head spin. I don't know if I should feel sad or happy… So, what do you plan to do? Get back together with Jackson? He doesn't know about this yet, does he?"

Tiffany was herself conflicted with her next plan. "I… kinda don't know what to do yet? I mean, I'll probably talk to him about this after Eric's sad news comes to pass, and then I'll gauge how he feels about this. Either way, we should probably keep this secret to ourselves right now. Yeah, that includes you, man. Don't accidentally let it slip!" she said before adding, "Oh, by the way, imma go out for lunch with a friend, so I'm not going to the Tremont Estate with you later, ok? Take care of yourself."

"Alejandro?" Arianne followed up instantly.

"Yeah." Tiffany nodded candidly. "But he's just a friend, alright? Don't you go thinking he means more than that! Anyway, I'm now working in South Park, so I can't stay here all the time. I gotta go back there around these two days. If anything happens to Eric, anything at all, you tell me right away. I'll fast-and-furious back here, pronto."

Arianne thought back on how she felt about Alejandro and, after mincing her words a little, suggested, "Okay. But, uh, Tiffie? Now that you're pregnant, I'm pretty sure you're gonna get back together with Jackson very soon. So it's probably more prudent to lessen your interactions with anyone from the opposite sex, okay?"

Tiffany was already ahead of her on this conclusion. "Yep, I got that already. Well, see you around."

Soon, Tiffany arrived at the Chinese restaurant Alejandro had chosen for their lunch hangout. It was an excellent opportunity to break the news of her pregnancy. If he genuinely harbored some feelings for her, the fact that she was pregnant with another man's child should serve as a stark cue for him to abandon his advances.

The first thing Tiffany did after entering the reservation chamber in the restaurant, where Alejandro was already waiting, was to greet him as usual. "Yoooo! Aye, Jett too! C'mon, join the table with us! It's always so weird seeing you standing like that while everyone else's seated."

Jett made no move until Alejandro beckoned him to the chair.

Their orders soon filled up the table. Alejandro personally poured Tiffany a glass of red wine before joking, "This is fantastic stuff right here. I should know, since I've just 'tested' it to see if it's poisoned, heh."

Tiffany pushed the glass away gently. "Thanks, but I'm good. I can't be drinking now that I know I'm pregnant. I should probably start learning how to be a good mother, too."

Alejandro's muscles tensed against his control. "Pregnant? You mean, with Jackson's child?"

"Duh. Who else would it be?" she replied, nodding. "I'm not into casual sex, you know. So yeah, I can't keep going out with you for meals and stuff now that I'm an expecting mother. As compensation, allow me to pay for both of us later! No, don't you take that bill away from me."

The implication in her words was impossible to ignore. Alejandro could not, for the life of him, have expected all of his carefully laid-out schemes to crumble the instance she mentioned her pregnancy. He had always been masterful at beguiling his real emotions, but this was quickly turning into a challenge he could not win.

He could not stay around her and banter as though he felt nothing. If he remained, Alejandro feared he would lose control over the tides of emotion within him.

“I have some emergency errand I need to attend to. I have to go,” Alejandro declared suddenly.

Jett immediately rose to his feet and held onto his wheelchair.

Tiffany was a little taken aback at how fast he was to excuse himself the moment he knew she was pregnant. Did this mean that he really had been approaching her because he had feelings for her? If yes, well—this was probably one of the most poorly-hidden reactions she had ever seen. But at least it was what Tiffany had been hoping to achieve.

She flashed him a relieved smile. “Okey-dokey. Godspeed with your errands.”

Alejandro passed by the counter and had Jett pay out of his pocket. Then, they left the establishment altogether.

The full magnitude of Alejandro’s fury was only uncovered once the duo entered the car as he fumed. “She’s pregnant—pregnant?! F**k you, Jackson West!”

Chapter 957

Jett's grip on the steering wheel unconsciously tightened. "What do you plan to do?"

Bone-chilling blizzards seemed to howl within Alejandro's eyes. "I will not let that child come to this world, never. If she loses it, she loses the only reason she has to return to Jackson… Yes, I won't stand seeing her being taken away from me ever again!"

Jett was stunned. Was Alejandro's ultimate game plan not to have Tiffany in his arms? Had his boss never truly loved Tiffany and done everything just to possess her like an object? After all, how could anyone who genuinely loved someone be able to mercilessly scheme a miscarriage?

Finding it deeply troubling, Jett spoke up, "Mr. Smith, I honestly believe this to be a terrible idea. What happens when she finds out that you're the one who caused her to miscarry? Would she even want to spend the rest of her life with you after that? Doing something like this is to plant a bomb that would one day blow up, sir."

Alejandro had obviously lost much of his rationality. "Then what the f**k else am I supposed to do, hmm?!" he snapped. "Am I supposed to watch her birth that thing and go back into Jackson's arms?!"

That shut Jett up. Although Alejandro's plan was incredibly ill-advised, Jett must admit that he could come up with no better alternatives, either. Besides, judging from how his boss acted, Alejandro was probably genuinely incapable of loving a woman in a pure, benevolent way.

In the end, he could only answer, “I don’t know.”

Alejandro said nothing. He shut his eyes and leaned backward in his seat wordlessly, as though all of his mental energy had been directed at putting out the fire within him.

…

The hospital discharged Eric Nathaniel after a few days. Outwardly, he seemed no different from any other person if not for his bouts of agonizing stomach aches.

Perhaps he deemed that his life before his stay in the hospital was too hectic and work-oriented, for Eric had decided to spend what was likely the last of his time on Earth by being as free as he could be. He let himself do whatever his whims directed him without much self-restraint.

Regardless of how liberated and diverse his whims were, none of them pertained to returning to the Nathaniel family home.

That family meant nothing to Eric, even at this point. It had always been utterly devoid of love and warmth, so the last thing he wanted was to subject himself to more heartache and bitterness at his last few moments.

Tiffany had returned to South Park to resume her work. So, too, did Jackson, who tagged along because he was needed to handle the problems concerning the branch company’s finance department. Meanwhile, Mark returned to his hectic life in his company.

On the surface, it looked as though the ripples had calmed and everything had gone back to normal. But everyone knew that this was merely the calm before the storm.

Eric's death was imminent. It was only a matter of time.

Jackson had not known much about the South Park branch, but now that he was actively looking out for problems, he quickly dug up the hidden issue in the company's finances. Apparently, $60,000 had vanished into thin air, and though that was not necessarily an earth-shattering sum of money, it was large enough to begin an inquisition.

On the day he returned to the branch company, Jackson—whose mood was significantly impacted by the somber news of Eric's malady—was in one of his most tempestuous moods yet. Already he delivered a scathing harangue to the finance department in the morning, but that only served to lift the rug away from an even bigger scandal: a young accountant, no older than thirty-years-old, had embezzled the company's funds!

Jackson immediately decided to file a case against the criminal, causing the guilty accountant to break down into tears. "I didn't mean to! I thought I would be able to return what I'd borrowed within three months. I-I didn't know I couldn't! Mr. West, please, please, please! Don't take me to the cops, I beg you! My future will be ruined if that happens! I shouldn't have given in to my vanity and used that money, and I swear I'll make up to it! I swear, I promise! P-Please!"

Jackson's expression was tenebrious and stormy. "Vanity? So you, an adult, didn't even know you should only spend according to the actual-goddamned-size of your bank account? Do you even know that what you've done is against the law? And you thought you could return that sum within three months—haha! Hilarious, you don't know just how much you've stolen from your company, do you? Quit begging me with your tears and snot, 'cause I ain't no saint. I'll resolve this travesty exactly the way it should be handled. Now, that is an actual promise!"

Crowds from other unrelated departments had begun to gather and watch as the altercation went on. Still, all of them were mindful enough to leave a wide berth between themselves and the eye of the storm. No one wanted to get dragged into that hot mess.

Chapter 958

The accountant threw his arms around Jackson's leg just as he started toward the door, crying, "No, no, Mr. West, please! I'm begging you! My parents… They are in ill health, Mr. West! My mom needs meds to survive! If they heard of this, I don't think they would be able to stomach it at all! Please, please… I can return that money, I swear, I swear—"

The accountant wept, but no amount of tears could soften Jackson's heart. Everyone had that little line in their mind that, when crossed, would compel one to deny others mercy. Jackson's happened to align with the law.

Shrugging the accountant off of him, he returned to the office without sparing the teary accountant so much as a glance.

Tiffany and Amy, whose ears were perked up to listen in on everything, sat up straight and solemnly when he walked in.

Jackson's steam did not seem to have petered out, though, which was evident in the way he furiously flipped through the documents in his desk as though he could not find the exact paper he was looking for. Gingerly, Tiffany asked, "What are you, um, looking for? May I help?"

He leaned into the back of his chair slightly and massaged his forehead. “No, I’m fine. You can go back to work.”

Furtively, Amy signaled Tiffany to stop talking. Approaching Jackson right now was obviously a suicidal decision. Tiffany responded with a purse of her lips before wordlessly turning her head back to her computer and pretending to stare at it.

She remembered hearing folks claiming that computer radiation could harm a fetus. Hence, she took the cactus plant from the desk Jackson occupied with the conviction of someone who knew the cactus had always belonged to her and placed it nearby.

Suddenly, Jackson asked, “Why did you take that cactus? What, afraid of radiation? Please, your face is already peppered with blemishes.”

Tiffany pulled out her smartphone and stared at her selfie-camera, suspicious. “Uh! Liar! What blemishes? All I see is my skin being pearly and glowing! And by the way, can you like, not pick me as your venting target? This cactus belongs to me. What’s wrong with me moving my thing over to my place? And, p.s? I’m not afraid of radiation-induced spots or anything silly like that!”

‘I’m just worried about our baby,’ she finished quietly in her head.

“God, I’m not using you to blow off steam,” Jackson refuted, his voice noticeably quieter. “I just… suddenly feel the desire to talk to someone. I don’t even mind quarreling a bit.”

Tiffany was a little shocked by his admission. “Sorry, but I don’t have the time or energy to quarrel with you, ’cause you see, I have loads of things to do. I’m a very busy woman if you can’t tell. My goal is not to work overtime because it frickin’ wears me out.”

At the end of her words, Jackson abruptly rose to his feet and declared coldly, “Fine, then. Stick your nose into it. You’re going to work overtime tonight either way.”

With that, he immediately stormed out of the office.

Amy was stunned out of her wits. “What the—? What’s going on in Mr. West’s head, huh?” she exclaimed. “Is he always so damn cranky? And you, too! He doesn’t look like he’s in the right headspace, so why are you being so difficult, Tiffany? Why can’t you chat a little with him? Honestly, despite him obviously having a sh*tty mood, you still went and pushed his buttons! Well, excellent! Now we have to work overtime—again.”

Tiffany was a lot more blasé. “Nah, what he needs right now is personal space to cool himself down. Honestly, he’s not the only one who’s cranky right now. We all are, including me. One of his best bros has been diagnosed with stomach cancer, and he doesn’t have a lot more days to live. This is why he’s so prickly. We’ve all distraught, so yeah, you probably need to get used to his new temper.”

A thoughtful look shadowed Amy’s face. “Seriously, what’s… the relationship between you and Jackson? You’re suddenly here as the assistant director, and when his best bro’s sick, you’re just as cranky—and both of you were simultaneously absent for a few days. Did the two of you visit that sick friend together?”

Tiffany became quiet for a minute before answering, “If you must know… Fine, I’m his ex-fiancé. I know, I know. That’s a shocker, isn’t it? Frankly, I’m just as shocked that this had ever happened between us before, too. But anyway, you done being nosy? Let’s get back to work then. I honestly hate overtime…”

That sentiment was further vindicated by the fact that an expecting mother required long hours of quality sleep, too. But every time Tiffany returned from overtime work, all that bathing and washing up would cost her time to watch an episode or two of her favorite drama. If she insisted on getting her entertainment fix despite that, it would push her sleeping hour to midnight!

What a stressful way to live.

Jackson had not made an appearance in the company after he stormed off, though the finance department's affairs were more or less settled. Throughout the evening, everyone in the office was gossiping about that poor accountant's fate, who would likely be jailed for a few years.

Chapter 959

When it was near the original time to get off work, Tiffany felt mild aches flaring up all over her waist, shoulders, and back. She leaned onto her chair, feeling a little burned out.

Desperate, she sent a text to Jackson: 'Are you sure we're supposed to work overtime tonight? Can I say no? Like, I think I'm about to fall apart. Can I request for leave? If you don't reply to me, I'll assume the answer is yes.'

Tiffany had expected the man to be too busy with whatever was occupying his time to spare her any attention, yet his reply was lightning-fast. 'No overtime? Only if you join me at the hotel. It's this, or stay in the company. Choose.'

The term “hotel” cued Tiffany to jump into more risqué imaginations; however, when part of her mind reminded her of her pregnancy, her eagerness dissipated. She replied to him a little guiltily, ‘Why do you want me at the hotel, hmm? I’ll be upfront; I’m not into casual sex. And also, we broke up.’

To her shock, Jackson’s next reply came from calling her immediately. “Are you a dimwit or what? Or are you implying that I’m that kind of person? Look, whether you accept my bargain or not is up to you!”

Before Tiffany could answer him, the call ended. One had to wonder if he called her simply because he found written text replies too bothersome.

Tiffany thought for a second and decided to grab her bag. “Hey, Amy? New order from Mr. West—no overtime today. I repeat, no overtime!”

It was a victory she won by exchanging her beauty and body. Surely the only way Jackson could honor this tremendous sacrifice Tiffany had made was to pardon everyone in the office from working overtime!

Amy was a little skeptical at first. “Now, wait a minute. Is this fake news? If you’re sure that’s what he wishes, then I’m telling the whole office!”

Tiffany patted her chest, self-assured. “Pfft, do I look like I’m lying? I’m the assistant director, sis. Of course this is real! Anyway, I gotta jet. Go home soon too, you. See ya’.”

Tiffany knew the hotel Jackson was staying. Despite never once entering its lobby, she knew the directions—and she was aware that it was someplace she could reach by foot and without calling for an Uber. Still, Tiffany managed to milk about half an hour time from what should have been a short walk.

The biggest reason why she took so much time was that there were two voices at war with one another in her mind. One of them argued that Jackson's yearning for comforting emotional support meant Tiffany had a duty to provide him with that. Even if he ended up having a hard-on, she should oblige for once and use herself as a healing outlet of some kind.

On the other side, however, a different, stern voice rebuked the first one by emphasizing on the fact that both Tiffany and Jackson had split. They should not engage in physical intimacy because the act could complicate their relationships. 'The safest thing to do while in the hotel is to be a decent conversation partner,' this voice claimed. 'And don't forget, a pregnant woman shouldn't be having sex…'

Just when Tiffany thought these two warring voices were going to tear her apart, she found herself standing right outside Jackson's room already.

She calmed herself and knocked. The door quickly opened, revealing Jackson, who just had a bath, in a bathrobe wiping his matted hair with a towel. To her chagrin, he looked a little too seductive for his own good.

Tiffany sharply averted her eyes away from him. "I'll be upfront again. I'm only here to chat!"

Jackson looked at her like she was the village idiot. "Don't tell me you thought I'd asked you to come because I wanted your body. Frankly, I have zero mood for that. Give me some time to change. We're going out to eat."

His candidness made Tiffany's cheeks burn. "W-Well, you're the one who invited me to a hotel room!" she protested, a little embarrassed. "And I know you! You're far from some goodie-two-shoes boy—uh, you know what? W-Whatever. Just be quick, would you? I'm not coming into your room, so change into whatever you wanna wear while I wait outside."

Jackson responded to her by instantly shutting the door in her face.

Five minutes later, he came out, his clothes ready. "Let's go."

With that, he paced straight toward the elevator without shooting Tiffany a glance.

Suddenly, Tiffany found her chest sinking into a faint sense of melancholy. In the past, all the man would ever look at was her body. Since when had he lost interest in her? Just thinking that this cold, cold man striding in front of her right now was no longer hers made Tiffany bilious, as though untamed flames had been sparked. Why the hell was she so adamant that their relationship must end back then? Especially since she, Tiffany herself realized, still hungered for his magic?

She wondered if she only knew she still loved him because she pigheadedly let him go.

Chapter 960

Jackson went into the elevator first, followed by a very dawdling Tiffany. To accommodate her, he courtly reached out to the side of the elevator doors to stop them from shutting.

It was a little gesture, but it was enough to add a few more regrets into Tiffany's mind. She was really beginning to wonder if she had been jinxed by some kind of vodou when she wanted to break up with him.

Jackson had said nothing the whole time they were inside the elevator. He stared ahead while wearing a stoic, uncaring expression as he casually tucked his hands into both pockets of his jeans. He had rolled up his sleeves to about his elbows, hence exposing a small section of his ivory-fair skin. Clasped on his left wrist was an expensive luxury watch that betrayed his social status.

If one were to describe the aura Jackson exuded, it would be that he was seventy-percent gallantry blended with thirty-percent knavishness.

During their descent, several other guests in the hotel boarded the same elevator. It did not matter if the newcomer was a man or a woman—the first thing they did immediately upon entering was to stare at Jackson for a good few seconds. Slowly, Tiffany was pushed into a pitiful corner, her view reduced to the back of his head.

When the elevator finally reached the lobby, Tiffany was the last to get off. Jackson already stood by the door, teasing her. "Can't you go any faster? Or is this the problem with short people?"

Tiffany was wearing a pair of half-size larger shoes with about one and a half inch heels, and her legs were wrapped in slippery satin pantyhose. If she walked too quickly, her feet would slide into the shoes deeper, causing her to lose balance and fall. Worse, her heels were already chafed by the coarse surface at the back of the shoes, too.

These shoes were new, but Tiffany already felt like kicking them off her feet before slamming them into the trash.

“Okay then, chalk it up to me being short!” she grumbled under her breath. “Get ahead of me then, Mr. Lanky Legs. You’ll have to wait for me anyway in the end.”

Being a bona fide ladies’ man, Jackson was able to deduce what exactly was going on with Tiffany after a brief scan. Her shoes did not fit her. On top of that, he could catch blots of blood oozing out of her heels through her pantyhose.

His expression darkened. “Why stubbornly cling to a pair of shoes that don’t even fit you?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Well, how the hell would I know if it fit or nah without wearing them, dumba**? I bought them because I eyeballed them and thought they looked about my size, okay? Who knew this was gonna happen when I put them on? God, I spent about $300 on this pair of shoes. I don’t want to throw them away… So, just let me wear these for one last time today, okay?”

When she finally inched closer to him, Jackson suddenly snatched her hand and held it firmly. “You’ll walk easier like this. We should get you a pair of functional shoes before we eat.”

A lump grew in Tiffany’s throat. Everything about this was so evocatively familiar that for a heart-aching moment, she almost believed the two of them had never been separated before—

She yanked her hand away from his quietly. “No, I think it’s fine. Besides, it’s not like I’m gonna stay after we have our meals. Then once I get home, I’ll take these shoes off and never wear ‘em again.”

Jackson's eyebrows furrowed before he changed tact and grabbed her wrist, forcefully lugging her toward his car parked just outside. His grip was a little bit tighter than before, and Tiffany found her struggles futile. She could not understand what triggered the man. It was only when they were both inside the car and she was massaging her aching wrist that Tiffany finally grouched, "What the hell was that?"

He paused for a moment before replying, "Nothing." Then, he added, "Seatbelts."

Tiffany grumpily buckled up and put him out of her mind as much as she could.

The air in the car was still and heavy, with each of them dealing with their own thoughts.

She told him that she would not buy any new shoes, but Jackson stubbornly brought her to the mall anyway. To get things over as soon as she could, Tiffany haphazardly picked one of them that looked tolerable to her style before informing the sales assistant the size of her feet.

She approached the cashier, card ready for payment. The cashier lady took Tiffany's card from her hand when Jackson suddenly butted in, his hand extended. "No, it's on me."

The girl smiled shyly. It was not uncommon to see men paying for their women's shoes in their shop, so naturally, she took Jackson's card in lieu of Tiffany's.

After changing into the new pair and leaving the mall, Tiffany asked, "How much did it cost? I'll transfer the money to you."