Ruling 1611

Chapter 1611

Compared to her hysterical outburst, it was when she calmly recounted details of an upcoming divorce that twisted the knife in Mark's heart. Arianne only ever let loose of how she truly felt when it overwhelmed her control, and even then, these moments were sparse, far and between. It was the sort of sereneness she displayed right now that frightened him, not the least because the tone she used brought an air of matter-of-fact normalcy.

Mark would rather see her throw a fit than this, because at least the former implied a slim window of chance for reconciliation…

For the longest time, Mark had only silence. He could never let Shelly be incarcerated, especially since he knew Arianne was the type to put money where her mouth is. Of course, Mark did not want a divorce at all, but they had already come to an impasse beyond his control or saving.

At the very least, the fact that Arianne was not quitting her job in the Tremont Enterprise, for the time being, made it a lot easier to swallow and mull over. It meant that their separation was temporary, and that she would still be by his side at the end of the day. There were still opportunities for things to turn around. On the flipside, if he continued to rebuff her, it might pressure her into doing something drastic out of desperation.

"Fine, I concede," he croaked. "But I'll draft our divorce agreement. I'll hand it to you tomorrow."

Arianne was the one who brought the divorce option to the table, yet hearing him concede to it was like a stab through her heart for some reason. Perhaps she was hurt that all it took to make Mark cave was to threaten Shelly's wellbeing—it seemed that Mark saw that woman as his real lifeline, after all.

Arianne feared letting Mark see her cry, so swiftly, she switched off the lights and laid back down. If everything went exactly as she imagined, then tonight would be the last night they slept side-by-side.

Then, it was Mark's turn to lie down. Suddenly, he threw his arms around Arianne's waist from behind, squeezing her so tightly in his arms that it was as though he wanted to merge her flesh into his own.

Arianne did not deny him this time. She felt the warmth in his hug, and after realizing that it would soon no longer belong to her, bitter pangs seized her and she began to cry.

Every sob and sniffle reverberated clearly in Mark's ears. They were both in agony, both locked so closely with one another—and yet there was a schism between them so wide that nothing could bridge it.

They remained in this cuddled position for the entire night. Neither slept. The embrace never escalated to passion.

Arianne climbed up from the bed in the morning as per her usual routine. She dexterously masked the gauntness in her face, evident of a sleepless night, with makeup.

After some slight preparation, she was ready to go. Smore, however, acted differently from usual by running up to her suddenly before throwing his arms around her thigh. "Mommy, Mommy! Where are you going?"

The shrill yet tender voice of a child was always a shot to Arianne's heart, regardless of her apparent strong will. She crouched and held Smore's gaze, answering softly, "Mommy has to work today for a bit, okay, which is why I can't accompany you today. But Mommy will be back home early today. It's only for a while. Promise."

Mark could not bear to watch it. He quickly stepped out of the door.

The journey to the company was quotidian—except the fact that it was a Sunday, and Arianne and Mark were going to draft their divorce today.

They reached the company tower and found very few people who would willingly work on Sundays. They strode into an elevator, and while inside, Mark said, "I still have something else to attend to first, so you wait in the office. I'll draft the agreement for you. The civil affairs office isn't open today, so we'll have to get on with the process tomorrow."

Arianne hung her head and cast her eyes away from his. She answered him with a soft hum of understanding, which was the only response he was going to get.

It took Mark until afternoon before Davy finally summoned Arianne into Mark's office. It was a long enough wait that she had taken a long nap in the lounge.

She rose to her feet, stretching and flexing her stiffened body. She wondered if Mark was going to play legal tricks in the agreement. Could he really let her go so easily? Or was Shelly that one factor that deserved to have everything given up for her?

She walked into his office. Mark was staring at the laptop in front of him while handing her two different documents. “Read through them. If you have no objection, sign your name at the bottom. I won’t change a single word in these agreements after you’ve consented to it, but… whether you want to sign it or not is entirely your prerogative.”

Chapter 1612

From the outset, Mark’s eyes had never wandered away from his laptop to look at Arianne. It was so jarring, it felt as though he was not the one who had been desperately clinging to her for the entire night before.

Arianne did not mind his distance, though. After receiving the documents and browsing their content for a few seconds, she immediately found evidence of the “legal tricks” she had suspected Mark to pull off—he was not letting her off just because they divorced.

As she had requested, ownership of Tremont Enterprise would return to Mark and she’d gain a house under Smore’s name, receiving no further monetary compensation. Adding to that, however, was a ten-year-long contract between her and Tremont Enterprise, set to be automatically renewed at the end of term. It was also written such that the only side who could terminate the contract was Tremont Enterprise; Arianne would not have a say in it.

Last but not least, Arianne was banned from taking Smore outside of the Capital. Since she would gain Smore’s custody, Mark maintained his visitation rights, stating that she had no legal rights to stop him from seeing his son.

The other document accompanying the divorce agreement was apparently her work contract.

Arianne signed the contract readily, but she returned the divorce agreement to him. “Additions, please: Shelly-Ann Leigh shall not be allowed to be near Smore in physical proximity, and you’re forbidden from

bringing him to see her in secret. I can overlook your most egregious, overt terms in the agreement if you can honor my very simple ones."

Mark thought for a second or two before telling Davy to attach Arianne's two latest terms in the divorce agreement. He reasoned that, as long as Arianne agreed to everything else he set in the agreement, adding in a term or two that she wanted would be no problem at all.

Ariane's hand was shaking when she finally put down her signature on the divorce agreement. Her handwriting had come out a little too squiggly, but it was still recognizable, at least.

She raised her head and considered Mark. "Today will be the last day our family could be together. Seeing that it is also a Sunday, can you please come home early? Spend the last chance you know with Smore? You know we won't have chances like these in the future anymore, right?"

Mark fumbled a noncommittal hum as his answer before Arianne turned around and left. The door to his office clicked shut—and Mark immediately slapped his laptop into a close.

His affected aplomb vaporized.

Davy stood by the door. "U-Um, Mr. Tremont? Are… Are we done now? My mom insisted that I be back home for lunch with her today, and—"

Mark hurled one of his documents at the door. "Screw you for having a mother—and a goddamned nice one at that! Get out and go home, then! Ouuuttt!"

Davy bore the expression of someone who had just received a presidential pardon and fled the office—literally.

Meanwhile, Mark sat motionlessly behind his desk in the office for a while before rising to his feet and departing to Shelly's place.

Opening the door to see Mark standing behind it made Shelly's eyes shone with earnest, overflowing joy. "M-Mark, my dear! Why so sudden? You should have told me earlier about your arrival, silly boy, so I could have made something nice for you!"

Mark answered nothing. Instead, he marched straight into the unit and sat on the couch. He instantly lit up a cigarette.

"Why did you tell Arianne?" he asked.

Shelly stilled. Panic flitted across her eyes. "W-Whatever are you talking about, dear?"

Mark exhaled puffs of smoke in a drawn-out manner. "We've finalized our divorce agreement, and we'll be undergoing the legal process tomorrow. If today were not a Sunday, we would have been legally divorced by now. So, I'm asking you to kindly cease feigning ignorance and answer me this: why? I just want to know. Why did you come back at all? You said you came back for me—but was it? Because you took the one thing that mattered the most in my life from me!"

Shelly strutted toward him in her uneven, crippled gait before taking the seat right next to him. Mark could smell the perfume her body was oozing, and suddenly, he felt a wave of nausea washing over him. Instinctively, he jerked away from her by a few inches.

Chapter 1613

Shelly was a little hurt by her son's distance, however small it might be. "Mark, my dear, I only did what I know best! She's just no good for you, don't you understand? You can marry anyone else in the world—literally anyone! So, why this hyper-fixation on this woman alone?" she admonished. "I, for one, cannot buy into that idealistic notion that a woman who suffered would harbor nothing against you or the Tremonts. There is no way she holds no grudges or hate, son, and one day, mark my word, she will act on them and hurt you bad. Divorcing her is the wisest way, because now, you've opened yourself up for a better, more suitable spouse. Don't fret, boy. What you're experiencing is only temporary pain, and it'll be gone before you know it."

Mark's eyebrows were tightly knitted in the middle. "I see, is that how it's like to you? That pain is temporary and flitting? Just because you lack the capacity to let go of hate, doesn't mean everyone else is incapable of it, but more critically, whether she's a suitable spouse for me or not was never your call to make. But, of course, your wish has come true. She left me. She gave Tremont Enterprise back to me. And she took my son away from me. Are you laughing yet?"

"What—? She can leave however she wants, but she cannot take Smore away from us! How dare she?!" Shelly erupted instinctively. "If you wage a battle for custody, I'm sure she'll have zero chances of winning, Mark! Smore is a member of the Tremont family. We cannot let her take him away from where he belongs!"

Mark put out the cigarette prematurely in exasperation. "Would you just quit it? Have you got no self-restraint? She put her life on the line to bring our son to this world! On what f**king grounds do I have to rob him away from her?! Even if I engaged in a battle for custody, she already has a plan to win. She'll rat your crime out to the court and have you incarcerated, get it? Don't, for once, underestimate the woman who grew up alongside me," he snapped. "I'll be forthcoming with you. I just came here to warn you not to mess with her ever again. From the way I see it, you're having no trouble living on your own, after all. So, from now on, my personal assistant will be sending you an allowance every month without fail. You can use it to hire a caretaker if you please, or don't, since you've proven yourself more than

capable of solving petty hassles in life all on your own. Whatever you choose to do, though, I see that there's no need for your troubles to ever come to me. So, if there's nothing left that you want to talk to me about, then I'm leaving. You're on your own."

It took the slamming of her door to shake Shelly out of her shock. Mark had left her as abruptly as he had come. Now, the only proof she had of his presence was the smell of nicotine still wafting in the air.

Was that outburst Mark's attempt to cut his ties with her? Shelly would make sure that never played out for real, though truth be told, she was not the slightest bit worried. By now, Mark had waved the same rhetoric at her more than once, and yet, he never followed through with any of it.

The only thing that genuinely troubled Shelly was the fact that Arianne had taken Smore away from him. Through Smore, Arianne's tie with Mark would never be severed as cleanly as they should!

Quickly, Shelly fished out her phone and called Arianne. Instantly after the call connected, she went straight to the chase without a preamble. "I applaud the divorce, missy, but Smore must stay. Name a price in exchange."

"Whoa! Hold your horses, hag. I haven't even checked out of the house yet, and you're already assuming your role as the mistress of the family?" Arianne sneered. "You may hold power over your son's life, but keep your overreaching hand away from mine, thank you very much. For your information, he's completely out of your control. Besides, if money is what I wanted, I would have asked for it from Mark while we were discussing terms for the divorce agreement, smarta**. Do I look like I need your reminder?"

Shelly froze. So, Mark told her everything, after all.

She recovered her calmness very quickly. “Tell me, what do you want us to do so that Smore stays?”

Ariane sniggered. “Ha! Why waste time discussing the impossible?”

Shelly was enraged. “I know what you’re trying to do, b*tch! You’re trying to bind Mark to you through Smore, aren’t you? You take him away from him, and now he has to visit you if he hopes to see his son’s face after divorce… Ha! Don’t think I’m too stupid to see through your juvenile sleight, b*tch. I’ll have you know that I’ll make Mark marry another woman—someone who’s a genuine match—very soon and let her bear him a child. When that happens, Smore’s purpose will be obsolete. He will be unimportant! And with that, your entire plan will crumble!”

Arianne was so infuriated by Shelly’s accusation that she smacked her phone into ending the call. Shelly had been pretending to love Smore all this time because of this?! And now she was worried that Arianne was going to use Smore to have Mark bound to her forever?

Preposterous! Just frickin’ preposterous!

Mark returned to the Tremont Estate around 4 PM.

For some reason, Smore had been acting extra clingy to him since his return. Smore would follow him wherever he went. Even as Mark relieved himself in the bathroom, Smore would stand and wait outside the door.

Noticing the child’s aberrant behavior prompted Mark to ask, “Er, why are you following me around?”

Chapter 1614

Smore raised his little head and considered Mark. “Granny said Mommy’s taking me away from here, so I should look at you more often, because we won’t get to see each other anymore after this.”

Mark’s eyes quickly reddened before he pulled Smore into his embrace. “No, no. That’s not true. Daddy will always visit you as many times as possible. Daddy and Mommy are only temporarily separated, but it doesn’t change the fact that we both love you very much.”

Smore did not seem upset at all. “It’s okay. I don’t see Daddy that much at home anyway. You’re always so busy. It’s just me and Mommy living together, and she’s unhappy being here. So, I wanna go with her.”

Were these words something a toddler not even past age three say? For a moment, Mark was glad for his ability to keep his heart under wrap, or else he would have already succumbed to tears by now.

That night, during dinner, Arianne acted as though it was any other typical day in the Tremont household. Smore was exceptionally docile today; he finished all of the food in his plate and left not even a crisp behind. Arianne could not help but praise him. “Smore, you’re such a good boy today!”

The little man tore a piece of napkin and dabbed his mouth clean before replying, “It’s gonna be just me and Mom after this. I must listen to what Mommy says all the time, so she won’t feel tired out.”

Instinctively, Arianne’s eyes darted and lingered around Mark as bitter, forlorn pangs assaulted both their hearts.

Mark had eschewed retreating to his study after dinner that day and supplanted his usual habit with playtime with Smore. Arianne, too, joined the boy and his father in the former's game.

It was a rare moment in the Tremont Estate—all three of them playing together in blithe. The only folly of it was that it was not going to last into the future.

Suddenly, Smore took his mind out of his building blocks and looked up to his parents. "Why are the two of you sitting here and watching me today? Is it because we're gonna be separated soon?"

Arianne and Mark fell into silence. As some folks may attest, little girls are wonderful, sensitive creatures who speak agreeably, while little boys are challenging little buggers who love speaking frankly. The problem with Smore was that he did not just speak frankly—he also seemed to be lacking a filter of some kind. There was no beehive he would not kick, and some—like his parents' complication—got more than one kick…

Later that night, it was Arianne's turn to tuck the little boy to sleep. Then, she started tidying up Smore's and her belongings to pack them up. She trusted Mark to get her a new place to stay as soon as he could, but even before then, Arianne was sure she had to move out first.

To prevent the public from catching on, she had decided against telling Tiffany about it. She thought of staying in a hotel until the new accommodation for her and Smore was ready.

Mark took a seat on the chair before the French window and lit a cigarette as he watched her pack hurriedly. "You're in a rush," he gibed. "At least wait until your new house is finalized and ready for living."

“No need to wait for that. I’m gonna stay in a hotel for a few days, since I don’t want to be caught dead ‘dragging you around’,” she murmured. “Oh, and just for good measures, please hasten up the process of getting me a house.”

Mark paused for a second. “No, I won’t let you nor Smore live in a hotel. Your only two choices are either to stay here along with Smore, or leave him here and go to the hotel by yourself. Anyway, I should warn you that my aunt might come frequently. By then, she’ll definitely see Smore.”

Arianne fumed. “Are you threatening me? And stop referring to her as your aunt. Just call her your mom! This evening, she even had the audacity to call me and tell me to leave Smore behind for a price—a price, Mark Tremont! From the way I see it, someone just can’t wait to assume the mantle of the Tremont family mistress, even though, for crying out loud, I haven’t even left yet! I’ve told her that it’s impossible, of course, but maybe she begs for a refresher. How about you go and tell her it's not frickin’ happening?!”

Chapter 1615

After that outburst, Arianne took a step forward and pushed open the window. “Go, smoke as much as you like. We’re in a hurry to die anyway, aren’t we?!”

Mark stole a sidelong glance at her and stopped the half-burnt cigarette. Those were words of concern and care, yet she had to mask it with thorns and stings. They were not separated because they no longer loved each other; they still very much did and were actually forced to be separated for a while.

After she finished packing up her things, Arianne laid on the bed, ready to sleep. She knew that Mark would never allow her to have Smore live in a hotel, but she also could not possibly leave the child here while she stayed in one, either. In other words, she must stay in the Tremont Estate. But she could stop

sleeping with Mark in the same room after their divorce was officiated tomorrow by moving into the guest room.

The one thing that bothered Arianne the most was how likely it was for Mark to deliberately drag on the process of getting her a new home. It was exactly the sort of thing he would do, after all. He could literally delay what he promised with all sorts of excuses…

It was then that she felt her body cocooned by an embrace. She struggled against him for a while, demanding, “What are you doing?”

Mark buried his head into her neck. “This is our last time before… you know, our divorce. You sure you want to squander it by not commemorating it?”

Arianne’s heart beat wildly against her chest. “Nope, didn’t plan for that. On that note, you’re the only one who could think of sex at the cusp of a divorce. Tomorrow, I’m moving to the guest room,” she replied. “You better get this whole accommodation thing done pretty damn quick, because I’m not very patient about it. Also, while I still live in the Tremont Estate, don’t you dare lay a finger on me!”

Mark said nothing. Instead, he rolled over and locked her beneath his body. He lowered his head and forced a passionate kiss on her scarlet lips.

Arianne’s first instinct was to push him away, but his scent quickly engulfed her, draining her of all the strength to resist him. She looked away, dodging his kiss, and gruntled, “You stink of cigarettes…”

He tried kissing her again, as he would brook none of her resistance. There was even more force and dominance in it, as though he was pressing a burning brand on her and searing his mark on her.

Arianne frowned, but she closed her eyes instinctively. The truth was that she never really hated the smell of cigarettes on him because by and large, he just smelled like himself—all around her was the native, original scent of him. Before her thinking mind could catch herself, Arianne had begun responding to him passively.

It was all the fuel Mark needed. His hands worked into a frenzy as they pulled away and undressed her. It was only through moments like these that Mark could convince himself that she was not leaving him.

It was unbridled, maddening. His hunger and yearning shocked and even terrified Arianne a little, although he also made her chest thump and her heart blue. Rhythms washed over her in waves, and before she knew it, they conjoined with the chaotic, untangled, messy feelings that were in her head.

It drew her in and she lost her grip. Before she knew it, she was clutching onto his shoulders hard as he led her away and escaped into paradise.

Shrouded in the darkness of the room, two entwining bodies laid.

Softly, the male half of the pair breathed, “I’m sorry.”

Arianne leaned into his chest and said nothing. Too many things had happened, and an apology was not going to alleviate any of it. If anything, it only made the crushing melancholy even more unbearable.

The next morning, Arianne went downstairs for breakfast as usual without Mark following her. Mary came to her purposefully and asked, “Ari, when you finally move out of the house with Smore, can I go with you? I’ll take care of Smore while you work during the day so that you don’t have to worry about him while you work. I mean, if we hire someone else to care for him, it won’t make you feel safe, and I won’t feel safe for him, either. Oh, and when Smore goes to elementary school, I will bring him to school and bring him home, and I’ll cook all kinds of yummies for him, and… Lord Almighty, how could you, Arianne? Moving out with a little boy, going out there all alone! How do you expect me to be okay with this?”

Mary trailed off, wiping her tears.

Arianne swallowed the lump forming in her throat and flashed the old housekeeper a sunny grin. “It’ll be fine, Mary. I’m not leaving yet. When it is time, though, I’ll talk to Mark so I can bring you with me. You’re right about that, Mary—I won’t feel settled with anyone else taking care of Smore. On that note, can you please help me wake Smore up and let him have his breakfast? I’ll need to go to the civil affairs office today before going to work. I guess I’ll have to work twice as hard from now on, too, or else I wouldn’t be able to raise Smore all by myself.”

Mary was about to tell her something more when Mark suddenly descended the stairs, joining them. Immediately she stopped herself and walked away.

Arianne waited until Mark took his seat around the dining table before asking, “You got your documents ready? We should head to the office first before taking me to Tremont Tower. We both work in the same place, after all.”

Mark seemed to be in a sour mood. “You’re not my wife anymore after we officiate this divorce. Give me a good reason why I should drive you to work instead of leaving you stranding.”

Obviously, the upcoming divorce was what soured him.

Arianne rolled her eyes. “That wasn’t what you promised last night! Damn it, you change your mind like a girl changes clothes. Look, I might not be your wife anymore, but I’m still your employee. Will it kill you to just drive me along the same path we’re gonna go anyway?”

He nodded. “Yes, it’ll kill me,” he rejoined quietly, his tone sincere. “Just thinking about this beautiful woman sitting beside me as I drive to work not being mine anymore is a lethal stab through my heart.”

Chapter 1616

Was he flirting with her? Did not matter; Arianne’s cheeks were already burning even though it was supposed to be a somber event. It was hard to remain sad when Mark suddenly showed off how slick and buttery he could be.

Mark personally drove both himself and Arianne to the civil affairs office that day. In other words, he was trying to minimize the number of people who might catch the news of the pair’s divorce.

The car quickly arrived at their destination, yet both the driver and the passenger remained silently seated for a long while with their gazes linked. Finally, Arianne broke the spell by glancing at the time and noticing that they were about to be late to work.

“Can you just start checking if you’ve brought all of your necessary documents already?” she piped up.

“No need. I forgot to bring all of them,” Mark answered, unmoving.

“Stop joking around and take this seriously,” she chided helplessly. “Look, let’s just go. We don’t have that much time to waste. We still have to work after this, you know.”

Her finger slipped into the handle and yanked to open the door when Mark’s hand suddenly latched around her wrist and tugged.

“Just to be clear, you will wait for me till this stupid debacle blows over, right? If I found any male hanging around and breathing your air, I’ll murder him.”

“Mister, the only male who’s gonna be around me all the damn time is your son!” she snapped curtly. “A little too early to be trippin’ balls, aren’t you? You’ve been spouting ridiculous things since early morning! Ugh, let’s just go already.”

The documentation and legal procedure went on smoothly, with Arianne bearing a calm exterior while Mark wore a petulant, grinchy grimace. The contrast between the two was so jarring that the officer in charge had to stop and ask skeptically, “Are the two of you really sure about this whole thing? Do the two of you consent to this mutual agreement?”

Arianne nodded, but Mark grouched, “Not me. I was forced.”

The officer gawked at them.

“Mark Tremont! Are you frickin’ for real?! You know you effin’ consented to this when you decided to come all the way here! What’s with this childish tantrum all of a sudden, huh?”

Immediately after the officer certified their divorce agreement with the office's official stamp, Mark rose, spun on his heels, and quickly left. Arianne had to grab the divorce papers in one swoop and chase after him. "H-Hey, wait up!"

The two went back to Mark's car and he asked, "How much for Smore's alimony?"

Arianne stuffed Mark's copy of the divorce agreement into his glove compartment. "Whatever amount you think is suitable. I'm not asking for much, especially since if I ask, a certain someone's gonna mount it as evidence of me trying to milk you or something. Besides, I earn enough to raise him. If you feel bad about the whole alimony thing, then raise my pay. They are essentially the same thing."

Mark shot her a snide side-eye glance. "Lovely dream."

The pair reached Tremont Tower, and Arianne went to her desk. Soon after, Sylvain announced his presence with an invitation. "Yo! Would you and Mr. Tremont be free for dinner tonight? Robin says she'd be delighted to treat the two of you."

Arianne mused on it for a moment before replying, "I'll have to pass. Why the celebration when there's nothing to celebrate? If you insist on eating out, then just Mark will do. I need to go home first thing after work to care for my son."

Perceptive as always, Sylvain instantly caught the aberrant undertone in her answer. "Wow, you're making it sound like you and Mr. Tremont aren't actually living together as a family or something."

Arianne stuffed her hand into her bag and fished out her phone, dropping her divorce certification by accident. Without paying attention to the words on the paper, Sylvain quickly helped pick it up—and the words leaped into his sight.

He froze and then blurted out in abject shock, “You—what?! Mr. Tremont and you are divorced?!”

Arianne snatched the certificate away from him. “Shut your dang boombox! It’s just a small thing; what’s there to scream about? Anyway, chop-chop, go and make yourself useful already. Do what you’re supposed to do! Seriously, why are you so nosy?” she grumbled. “I’m warning you, do not spread a word about this in public. I don’t plan to publicize this, either.”

Chapter 1617

Arianne’s apparent laid-backness failed to infect Sylvain. He was still stunned, utterly bemused, with his face wrought with disbelief. At the very least, though, he did glance around furtively like a thief before whispering, “This can’t be legit, right? …Is this for real?”

Arianne tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Why would anyone lie about a thing like this? It’s no biggie; the only thing that is permanent is impermanence, and that extends to relationships. It’s a fact of life, amirite? The wise know better than to cling.”

A look of guilt and conflict crossed Sylvain’s pate. “It isn’t because of that time when I asked for advance payment, is it? You authorizing an advance didn’t leave this bad taste in Mr. Tremont’s mouth enough to hold it against you… right? Or did you actually approve my request without his permission?”

Arianne rolled her eyes. “Why do you even think that’s possible? Were he to disapprove it, I wouldn't have gone against his explicit order either! Jeez, aren’t you obtuse,” she quipped. “Either way, this thing

has nothing to do with you. It's a matter between us… and I think that's enough chit-chat for now. Go back to doing what you're supposed to do while I attend to mine, okay? A girl's still gotta eat even after a divorce, and that means I can't rest yet. Need to make as much money as I can to raise my son."

"You remained a Tremont Enterprise employee, huh?" he wondered aloud, quizzically.

"Of course! Where else could I go if not here?" she answered matter-of-factly. "Where else would I get a high pay or privileges? In fact, it's already stipulated in our divorce agreement—I'm basically bonded to this place for the rest of my life. Smore's custody may be in my hand, but Mark forbids me from bringing him out of this area. So, honestly, this is the only place I can be."

He breathed a long sigh of relief. "Well! If you're still in this neck of the woods, chances are that things aren't as close to the nadir as it might be. Looks like there's still hope, huh? If you had run away immediately after your divorce, then there's just nothing a man could salvage, is there?… Hey, if you consent, can a very good friend of yours wrap his head around how this whole thing came to be? I'm sorry, but I just can't… picture how in hell this sh*t could even happen. He practically adores you, man. How the hell can someone who loves you that f**king much suddenly divorce you?"

Arianne held Sylvain's gaze with a very solemn expression. "You're right; he loves me. He loves me so much that even as we're going through the process, we still love one another so much that it aches. But there is always bullcrap in life that is simultaneously more absurd than fiction and real. Some of those things even go on to become legitimately sickening, too. See, I've come to realize that I'm too powerless and feckless to solve a problem of that last nature, and so I resorted to be separated from him, however temporary," she said. "Sylvain, as someone who's unlucky enough to go through it all, let me give you some advice. If your mother genuinely, honest-to-God, frickin' hates Robin, then don't—under any circumstances—make them live together. Because if you do, one of them will inevitably leave you one day, and it can only be Robin. Because, screw it, no woman can beat a man's mother."

Sylvain immediately understood the veiled explanation behind Arianne's words and had decided, rather tastefully, to cease questioning her. "I got you, ma'am. Relax, I won't tell a soul about this," he said.

“Anyway, we probably should go back to work. Dinner’s still up after work, though—just gonna have to dump Mr. Tremont from the guest list. Honestly, eating with you is the more relaxing option.”

When work came to an end, Arianne called Mary to inform her that she would not be coming back for dinner, in addition to asking her to help care for Smore.

The group soon reached the restaurant. There, Arianne went against her habit and ordered a bottle of red wine. The sudden departure from her usual guardedness was enough to rouse Robin’s suspicion. “Um, Arianne? Why are you suddenly drinking?”

Sylvain shot Robin a loaded look, but the poor woman could not understand him. “I-Is there something wrong with what I said?”

Arianne flashed the couple a smile. “Oh, it’s nothing. I’m divorced,” she spoke candidly. “Since Sylvain already knew about it, I figured there’s no point trying to hide it from you, too. But, uh, you two are the exceptions, okay? I’d still prefer not telling anyone.”

Robin’s reaction was the same as Sylvain’s initial one. “W-W-What? Divorce?! Oh my God, Arianne! Have you lost your marbles?!”

Indeed, most people’s first reaction would be to question Arianne’s sensibilities. Men like Mark Tremont could not stay single forever, because once they do, people would trample over one another just to throw themselves at him and vye for his heart. Arianne was probably the only woman in the entire world who had the guts to divorce a golden boy like that.

She shrugged. “C’mon, it’s not a big deal. Still, can we talk about something else? Something more fun, like… Oh, I’ve been meaning to ask—now that the two of you are living together, have you ever considered babies? I mean, you’re both old enough to seriously consider it.”

Robin sighed. “Well… For now, we thought it’d be best to have kids one or two years from now, probably. It’s just not the time for ‘em yet… Hey, Arianne? If you’re feeling really down in the dumps and you wanna drink some of it away, just know that we’ll be happy to find a place for you to decompress after dinner, okay?”

Chapter 1618

Arianne shook her head. “C’mon, guys! I’m not down in the dumps or anything; you guys are just seeing things that aren’t there. Besides, I gotta go home after dinner. Smore only sleeps after seeing me home.”

Sylvain and Robin sent Arianne back to the Tremont Estate. By then, the time had come close to 10 PM.

Arianne patted her cheeks that were slightly burning from alcohol. She was not tipsy, but she still knew that she had drunk a little too much—at least two-third of the entire bottle was in her belly now.

She stepped through the estate’s gate and crossed the courtyard. It was then that she suddenly heard Mark’s voice ringing out of a dark, gloomy corner shrouded in shadows. “Where have you been?”

Arianne halted her footsteps. She followed the direction of the voice until she found Mark on a patio chair with his eyes trained onto her. Despite being outside, he was wearing his white indoor sweater; one had to wonder if he even felt cold sitting in this weather.

Liquid courage prompted Arianne to flash the man a grin. “Yo, we’re divorced, remember? You got no authority over where I go and stuff now. Besides, what’s with you not sleeping at this hour, huh? Hmm… Since you’re back here waaaay earlier than I am, you probably got Smore to sleep already, eh? Good! I’ll go grab my stuff and move to the guest room. Relax, I’ll be super light with my action so I don’t ruin your beauty sleep.”

She continued her path to the main door when Mark suddenly lurched and grabbed her by her wrist. “How can you inspire my faith in your ability to take care of Smore like this, hmm?” he chided disapprovingly. “After the two of you move out, should I reasonably expect you to not return home until it’s midnight more often?”

Arianne made a show of poking his chest playfully. “You reaaaaally should look at the time before you nag, mistah. How is 10 PM ‘midnight?’ Smore literally goes to sleep ‘round this time, so what’s wrong if I rush home at just the right time to tuck him to bed? Look, man, you might have been able to dictate what I can and cannot do in the past, but that’s not gonna fly now. So, I dunno, butt off with your papa attitude.”

Now that they were close, Mark could smell liquor from her, and his expression darkened even further. “Did you… Did you just drink?”

She shrugged his grip off. “Damn straight I did, so what? Dude, I’m gonna have to ask you to get off my back. You’re seriously irritating—not even my own mother tells me what to do. What excuses do you have, huh?”

Mark froze. Admittedly, Arianne was right. He had no actual reason nor right to control her. Even if she came home late at night, the only excuse he had to chew her off was to use Smore.

The pair returned to the bedroom together. Arianne swiftly rounded up everything she had packed up the night before and moved them to the guest room. As she already told Mary about her arrangement earlier, the housekeeper had dressed the bed with a fresh, new sheet.

She threw herself onto the bed, sprawling, and relaxed. Suddenly, she felt eyes on her and raised her head, just to meet Mark's face, now covered with a stormy expression.

Foolhardily, she waved at him dismissively. "Oh my God, go to sleep, man. Why are you looking at me? Oh, and also, close the door for me while you're on your way out, would ya? Thanks."

It seemed that she had finally worn Mark down to his last straw. He marched inside the room, and just when Arianne thought he was about to lash out at her, he spoke surprisingly gently, "You can't sleep in an unfamiliar bed, can you?"

Arianne buried her face under the sheet to hide the sadness from showing. "I know, but I'll get used to it… sooner or later, I think?"

Mark's lips thinned. "Neither can I sleep tonight. The bed just feels… different. Please, come to my room until you've properly moved out."

Arianne's instinct leaped at the offer because she knew the guest room would probably cause her insomnia for the night. But the more rational, deliberate part of her was against it; she worried that if she indulged in her yearning too much, she would soon cling to him even harder. The higher road was to cut off any attachment she had with him right now.

"No, it's fine. You go to sleep," she chose in the end.

Chapter 1619

Bitter yearning filled Mark's eyes before he suddenly lunged onto her, flipping her body so that she would face up toward him. He loomed over her, his hands pinning Arianne's struggling hands to her sides.

"If you don't go to my room, I'll… I'll undo you right here, right now," he hissed.

Arianne could not believe the words that came out of his mouth, and it showed in the way she widened her eyes in disbelief. It was only when Mark's hand slithered beneath her skirt that she reeled back from shock and cried, "Are you crazy?! Didn't we make it clear that you can't touch me after we're divorced?"

His handsomely-arched brow cocked up. "Hmm, curious. Whoever told you that? I'm afraid that this being the Tremont Estate—and not the Tremont Tower—means that I can do whatever I want here… unruled by the agreement."

Arianne attempted to struggle out of his hold, and he retaliated by burying his head into her neck. It was such an unexpected jolt that she had to admit defeat. "F-Fine, I yield! I'll go to your stupid room! But you honor your promise, you… Don't touch me!"

With his goal fulfilled, Mark removed himself from her instantly. "You should take a shower—you reek like a beer bottle. You complained before that alcohol stinks and I've never believed you, but now, I guess you're right," he said. "I'll give you only five minutes to appear in my bedroom. Otherwise… I'm sure you know what to expect."

Watching him leave with a beaming, triumphant grin on his face made Arianne wish she could punch him in his self-satisfied face. She sat on the bed, her mind drawing a blank while a small part of her kept time on the five-minutes-limit Mark had set for her.

The problem was that Arianne would not be able to sleep if she was in a new, foreign room, but she could not afford to lose her sleep because tomorrow was workday. Now that she was divorced with the boss of the company, she had lost her get-out-of-jail card—which meant that if she did poorly at work, she could not expect any form of pardon from Mark.

She went into Mark's bedroom and showered in the bathroom. When she was out, all lights were already off, leaving only darkness in their wake. Mark was already asleep.

Arianne felt her way to the bed and made sure to put ample berth between herself and him. In the end, the distance between them was large enough to put multiple Smores between them.

At first, her head remained a messy implosion of thoughts, but as time went on, sleep began to conquer her. She was about to sink deeply into slumber when a certain someone suddenly grabbed hold of her waist.

She felt her body sinking into the mattress for a second and was jolted awake. Before she could mutter a protest, however, Mark's scent overtook her again as he pulled her into a hug.

No sane person would reject a warm cuddle on a chilling winter night. It went on for fifteen minutes before Arianne suddenly grouched, "Damn it, you filthy liar!"

Mark's breath had become increasingly unsteady and shoddy. He was gripping her waist when he retorted, "Where's my lie? Or would you rather I do this to other women out there? Don't tell me you wouldn't bat an eyelash if I got on with other girls—you know we didn't split out of waning love. Now, let this be a lesson. The next time you drink all the way to late night and come home only then, be prepared to be denied the right to take Smore away when you leave!"

The next morning, Mark's wake-up motions woke Arianne up.

Her mind played back the things that had happened last night, and she immediately pulled away the sheet covering her legs.

Nope, last night was not a dream.

Arianne pulled out the divorce certificate and stared at it. Did this piece of paper even mean anything? Could it even protect her from a certain someone's libido? From the way her life had been, it did not seem like there was a change before and after divorce anyway!

She grabbed her clothes and put it over her in frustration before heading to the bathroom to wash herself. There, Mark was brushing his teeth when he greeted, "Good morning! Please be quick so that I can give you a ride to work."

Arianne rolled her eyes again. "Oh, how come you've never been so proactive before divorce, huh? You were basically always so somber and boring. Admit it, Mark. Ever since your aunt—oops, I mean your mom—returned, we haven't been going to work and coming home together for a very long time. Ever since she moved out, I hardly see you around anymore, let alone have sex."

Mark considered her from the mirror and avoided the topic of Shelly. “Well, that’s a lot of morning small talk. Now be quick with your preparation while I get changed.”

Chapter 1620

Arianne bristled. “If you’re gonna behave like a dang animal again tonight, you… you’re officially a horndog!”

Mark was about to leave the bathroom when he stopped, turned around, and shot her a smug smirk. “Woof.”

That jerk! Why was it that even when he was imitating a dog, that woof leaving his lips just… hit differently? The way he said it with his irritatingly mesmerizing, dulcet voice, coupled with that perfect face, it was just….!

After finishing her preparation for work, Arianne descended the stairs and immediately caught a fleeting but familiar silhouette in her line of vision. Her expression instinctively darkened.

It was Shelly-Ann Leigh.

“Mark, dear! I was buying some groceries around this neck of the woods earlier this morning and thought I should come by and say hi to little Smore. Good thing you haven’t left, too, ‘cause I got you some breakfast!” she greeted cheerily, filtering Arianne out completely as she approached Mark.

Mark shot Mary a look. The housekeeper understood him immediately and lifted Smore—who was still munching away on his breakfast—up from his seat before hurrying up the stairs.

Shelly was very peeved by that immediate reaction, and she let her displeasure be known loudly. “What do you think you’re doing, Mary? Taking Smore away from me the moment I stepped into this house? What’s the meaning of this?”

Arianne took a step forward and addressed her complaint, deadpanned. “See, you might not know this, but Mark and I have made it clear in the divorce agreement that you’re not to see or get close to Smore. Should he fail to do that, I’ll leave this country with Smore and go somewhere far, far away… and you people shall never see us again.”

Shelly’s face had turned into an ugly shade of red. All that was left for her to do was to lift her cane and strike the defiant woman before her. “On what grounds do you have to be making such despicable terms?! Smore is a scion of the Tremont family! Anything this family can give him, you can’t! Can you guarantee that by taking him away from here right now, he won’t hate you in the future for this? Who in the world wouldn’t want to live in such comfort and wealth of the likes of the Tremont Estate, huh?”

The corner of Arianne’s lips curled into a smirk. “But the Tremont legacy will always be his, anyway. Whether he leaves with me or not, Smore will always inherit the Tremont family. What substantial difference does growing up here make?”

“You’re really skilled at scheming, aren’t you, vixen? Even after the divorce, you still dream of possessing the Tremont family’s wealth and legacy. O-ho, you think you finally have an immutable grip on it now that you bore him a son, do you? You’re delusional. Mark will marry someone else in the future, have a new child, and then! None of this wealth will become Smore’s to take!”

Arianne leveled a meaningful glance at Mark, whose mien was darkening very quickly.

“Oh, is that so? You should probably ask Mark himself and see if that’s what he wants before you mouth off, though. See, here’s a fun fact: he’s undergone a vasectomy. Of course, it’s not irreversible in this day and age of modern medicines, but you’re gonna have to ask if he’s willing to undo that, don’t you think?’ she gibed. “You may put on airs when you’re talking to me, but that’s not gonna fly with Mark, because the man’s a mule who doesn’t submit to anyone easily. Now that we’re divorced, what other threats do you have left to scare him into submission, huh? Are you gonna continue your classic hits like crying hysterically, juvenile meltdowns, or even suicide threats? Put your tricks away, ma’am, because I’m not entertained enough to wanna play. And lastly? Excuse me for not wanting to continue this useless conversation. I’ve got an actual job to do.”

At that end, she shouted upward deliberately, “Mary! Keep an eye on my boy, please! I wouldn’t want any stranger getting close to my son!”

Before Shelly could offer a repartee, Mark stopped her. “Enough! If you have nothing to do here, then go already. Go home. I have work to do. Also, from now on, please leave Smore alone.”

Whenever Shelly was talking to Mark, she lost that sharp, acrid edge she always used with Arianne. “M-Mark! How could you say that? Smore is my grandson. Why am I being denied a chance to be with my grandson?! How could you accept such an unreasonable demand from her? God, can’t you see that Arianne’s using you like a pawn and scheming to take everything away from you, even after your divorce? For goodness’ sake, how can you be so stupid?!”

Mark frowned. “Even if she’s doing that, I don’t care. I don’t mind being owned if it’s her. Either way, you stay away from my business. Henry? Please escort her out of the house.”

Shelly’s knees almost gave away to shock. She could not believe that even after a divorce, Arianne was still living in Tremont Estate and was still allowed to use that unearned arrogance on her! Even Mark continued to stand on her side!