Ruling 1621

Chapter 1621

Henry stepped forward and told Shelly, “Mrs. Leigh, let me escort you out.”

Shelly snapped rancidly, “Mrs. Leigh?! Excuse you, it’s ‘Madam’ to you from now on!”

Henry feigned deafness. The difference between calling her Mrs. Leigh or Madam was so huge that it was not something a butler should take lightly.

The journey to the company was a silent one for both Arianne and Mark. Whatever good mood they had felt before on that day had now been completely whittled away by Shelly. Now, everyone felt terrible.

In silence, they reached the car park. Arianne glanced at the time and knew that she was almost late to work. Hurriedly, she got out of the car and started toward the elevator.

Mark’s footsteps, just as hasty as hers, clambered behind her. Then, when the distance was close enough, he grabbed her wrist. “Ari, I didn’t know she would come, okay? Please… don’t be mad at me.”

She gawked at him in bemusement. “Who told you I was mad? In fact, I was feeling pretty, well, allayed by your response. Thanks, you know, for not blindly supporting her during our tiff earlier. I’m not asking you to always stand by my side, but I do want you to never meddle into the affairs between us. Let’s be real; I’m never gonna be buddy-buddy with her for the rest of my life. It’s this utter inability to reconcile with her that makes our divorce inevitable, remember?”

Suddenly, Mark yanked her into him and lowered his head, planting a deep, forceful kiss on her cherry red lips.

Arianne's eyes widened. She jostled against him to resist him however futilely, because she remembered that the parking lot was shared and every employee who parked their cars within the company premise would see them. Someone was going to see them any minute now, she was sure, and if they saw them like this—it was not going to be good!

Thankfully, just as their breathings were starting to become unsteady, Mark let her go. "So, you're not mad at all?" he asked again.

Still panting, she gave a soft punch to his chest in displeasure. "Can't you tell I wasn't angry just by looking?! What are your eyes for? If you keep doing things like this in the future, I'm gonna… I'm gonna…!"

And the threat hung for a little too long, because apparently, Arianne could not come up with anything remotely menacing enough to finish it.

Luckily, the elevator came to the rescue. As soon as it opened, she strode into the lift, where Sylvain and Robin stood within.

It was an awkward ride. All four of them were even wearing jarringly different expressions, especially since Sylvain and Robin were baffled at seeing the newly-divorced still going to work together. Adding that to the fact that Arianne returned to the Tremont Estate after dinner last night, the Trudeaus wondered if this was a case of "divorced but not separated"…

Sylvain managed to keep his ballooning curiosity under wrap all the way to their office. Then, when they were both at their desks, he finally let loose. “Girl, what is the tea? Are you still living in the Tremont Estate or what? No matter how I look at it, the two of you don’t even act like your marriage is nulled… at all.”

Arianne was amused by his strange fascination. “Gee, since when have you become Nosy Nancy, huh? It’s his fault, by the way. The house he promised to buy me hasn’t come yet, which is why I haven’t moved out.”

Sylvain snickered devilishly. “Oho, methinks you can give up on that new house, ma’am. Wanna bet?”

Arianne thought differently. “If I say he will, then he will. No one knows him better than I do. He’ll definitely try to drag things out, but he’s not gonna be able to do that for too long.”

Some time around four in the evening, Jackson and Tiffany suddenly appeared in the office. Tiffany ran to where Arianne was excitedly with a delicate jewelry box in her hand, exclaiming, “Surprise! Look at this goooorgeous bracelet Jackson and I found while we were shopping just now! I bought one for me and one for you, so don’t you lose it, ‘cause this bracelet is now the testament of our friendship! Oh, by the way, let’s have dinner together tonight—just the four of us! Isn’t that fun?”

A pang of melancholy hit Arianne. “The four of them”—it used to be the four of them, but from now on, perhaps not anymore.

“Where are we going?”

Chapter 1622

Tiffany grinned. “Where else could we go other than White Water Bay Villa? Jackson’s the chef on duty, ‘cause he’s wary of the food that goes into my stomach now that I’m pregnant. Seriously, the only place out there with his seal of approval is White Water Bay Café—the place he frickin’ owns! I was like, ‘Aren’t these two just same difference?’ So, I decided to just throw the dinner party at home, since he’s so willing to break his back to cook for the four of us.”

Arianne clasped the bracelet around her wrist in front of Tiffany. “Alright. I’ll go there as soon as work is over.”

Tiffany yanked a chair from god-knows-whose desk and sat right in front of her. “Oh, I’m just gonna wait till your work’s over right here, then, since there’s only very little time left. Speaking of which… I just saw this gorgeous bridal gown collection somewhere online the other day and the style was just—chef’s kiss! You and Mark never had actual wedding photos, right? Are you sure you don’t wanna tick off that box and take a series of pictures of it? I just wanna see you in a bridal gown, sis—oooh, I want it so much, I can see it in mah dreams!”

Sylvain, overhearing their conversation, was so shocked at Tiffany’s brazen tactlessness that he accidentally dropped his pencil. “Oof! You kinda kicked the beehive there, man.”

His remark baffled Tiffany. “Me? What did I do? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?”

Arianne knew that the secret was not going to be hidden from Tiffany any much longer now, since Mark was going to tell Jackson sooner or later, anyway. She drew a sharp breath and explained, “Mark and I… are divorced.”

Her expression froze. “You—what?! W-Wait, what the hell?! Are you pranking me, Ari? There’s no frickin’ way that you and Mark would divorce before Jackson and I do. Like… that guy doesn’t ever let go of you! He loves you so f**king much he wishes he could eat you and make you part of his body… or

something. The point is, how can someone like that ever release you from him?—Unless! Of course, he must be dead now!"

Arianne buried her head into her hands and smiled mirthlessly. "He's very much alive, Tiffie, but we really are divorced. You know what? I don't even wanna talk about this. I'm only letting you know because you're my best friend, and you should just support me unconditionally through thick and thin. Don't launch an inquisition, Tiffie; I don't wanna talk about it.

Tiffany took some time to recover from her initial shock—and immediately rose to her feet and stormed off. Judging from her gait, Arianne knew that she moved with murderous intent!

Worried that in a fit of anger, Tiffany was going to trip and hurt her baby, Arianne leaped to her feet and followed her, shouting, "T-Tiffie! Tiffany Lane! Where are you going—don't run, please!"

Tiffany, however, bulldozed her way straight into Mark's office. When faced with a door, she shoved it open with a slam and careened straight at Jackson and Mark, who were previously having a pleasant conversation.

Whatever smile Jackson wore at that moment instantly froze, but he caught her with the help of his good reflexes. "T-Tiffie, what's gotten into you?!" he cried.

Tiffany pointed at Mark in fury. "This heartless piece of sh*t! He divorced Ari!" she shrieked. "Do you know how long Ari had been standing by his side, supporting him all the way, sacrificing almost all of her life for him?! And you think you can kick a woman like that away just f**king because?! That's it, I'm gonna tear you into pieces if that's the last thing I'll do!"

Jackson, too, was shocked. “You two are divorced?!”

Arianne, who was a few steps too late to arrive, watched the scene her best friend had caused and felt a headache coming. “Tiffie, please, at least let me explain…”

She waved dismissively. “You don’t have to explain and cover his a**, Ari. I bet this bastard worked together with his no-good aunt into bullying you, isn’t it?! What did he give you as compensation, huh? If not half of Tremont Enterprise’s ownership, I’ll tear his leg off!”

Mark was unperturbed. “First thing first, who told you I was the one who asked for a divorce? Do you really think I wanted to downgrade myself from her legitimate husband to a ‘maybe-yes-maybe-no’ back-up spouse? Honestly, I’ll implore you to use your head for a bit before threatening violence. If you can, however, persuade Ari into remarrying me again, perhaps I should give you half of Tremont’s ownership right now.”

Mark did not look like he was lying, so Tiffany, embarrassed and upset, turned to let off the rest of her steam on Arianne instead. “The hell were you thinking, then? There are a million women out there who wanna throw themselves on him, and now that you let him go, who’s gonna stop them?! Smore is just a child, Ari, and the two of you are already separating?! God, you two must be so bored, aren’t cha?”

Arianne licked her drying lips in resignation. “It’s… a long story. But first, you need to calm down, okay? Remember, you’re pregnant. To be honest, it’s not really that big of a deal. I’m still living in the Tremont Estate, so yea, I’m divorced, but not separated from him—which honestly makes pre- and post-divorce life not that different,” she explained. “Look, I think you should focus on taking care of yourself and the baby more than fussing over me, okay?”

Tiffany’s eyes reddened slightly. “Tell me, if I don’t fuss over you, who else in this effing world will? Your heartless mother who never cares for you? Will she fuss over you, huh? That woman is gone, Ari. She

took your sister to some far away land that I don't care about and frickin' disappeared from your life just like how she did the first f**king time around! Who else here will support you and care for you and 'fuss over' you if not your goddamned best friend?!" she raved. "Why didn't you tell me anything, Ari? Why wasn't I the first to know? I've never hidden secrets from you, so why do you do it to me?… Do you even see me as your best friend still?"

Chapter 1623

Arianne was subsequently subjected to a very harsh jeremiad, but she dared not offer any rebuttal. Tiffany was right; while her friend never kept secrets from her, Arianne could not say the same about its inverse.

After work, Arianne hitched Jackson's car for the ride with Tiffany to go to White Water Bay Villa. Mark could only glare at her with daggers in his eyes—a look she feigned not to see. They were divorced, so what could he do about this?

As soon as they arrived at White Water Bay Villa, Mark followed Jackson into the kitchen, the two immediately chatting about god-knows-what.

Meanwhile, Tiffany began her thorough, no-holds-barred inquisition. She unleashed a volley of questions regardless of how tactful they were until she pried every single piece of the puzzle from Arianne's mouth.

When the full knowledge was finally unveiled, Tiffany held her child as she seethed at the injustice her friend had suffered. "Frickin' Tremonts! They owe you so much, and yet they have the gall to make you look like the bad guy! On what rights do they have to treat you like that?! God! I know you asked for a divorce, but damn, I didn't think Mark would be foolhardy enough to agree to it… What was he thinking?... Sigh. So, what now? Gonna stay separated like this forever, or wait till it's a good time to remarry again?"

Arianne had not started considering this particular prospect yet, so she answered truthfully, “I don’t know yet. I guess I’m gonna cross a bridge when I see one. What else can I do? She’s his birth mother! Urgh, there’s no way in hell I am gonna act all submissive and greet her with a meek ‘hello, Mom.’ That is just straight-up impossible; just calling her ‘aunt’ is enough to make me puke.”

Tiffany snorted forcefully. “If that Shelly skank appears in front of me, I swear, she’s in for an epic tongue-lashing that’s gonna leave her in tears! Who gives a crap if she’s Mark’s birth mom? The things she did are f**king outrageous! Hmph. In the past, it was just you and Mark, with no parent breathing down your necks—life was all good, wasn’t it? But now, out of nowhere, some random buttinski just gotta appear and ruin everything, doesn’t she?”

Arianne, too, missed her past. But what could she do? She could not turn back time.

It was quickly time for dinner. The longer Tiffany glared at Mark, the more peeved and irritated she became, and yet she had no actual rights to throw a tantrum at him, either. As her ire built up, she lost her appetite.

“You’ve been putting Ari through suffering since before the two of you got divorced, man. If I catch wind that you continue to make her suffer even after this divorce, you better get your a** ready to be handed to me.”

There was a soft glint in Mark’s eyes. “I know.”

Jackson instantly grabbed a big spoonful of mashed potatoes and dumped it in her plate. “Okay, okay; don’t be mad, okay? Mark didn’t wanna divorce her either! You know… how about you focus your energy on the little thing living inside of you right now?” he chimed in. “C’mon, we don’t get to gather and eat like this all the time, you know. Let’s not sour the mood like this, okay?”

The dinner ended and the guests exited the villa. Outside, Mark opened his car door and looked at Arianne expectantly. “Want a ride?”

Arianne sniped him a snide glare and took her seat. “What else? What’s the alternative—making me walk back home on my own?”

A smile shadowed the corner of Mark’s lips. “Well, well, well. Weren’t you the one who decided to kick me to the curb just hours earlier?”

‘Bloody grudge holder,’ Arianne thought wordlessly. Tired, she closed her eyes and leaned back on her seat.

The pair quickly returned to the Tremont Estate, but before either of them stepped through the door, Mary rushed out with bad news. “Mrs. Leigh’s here… with all of her suitcases too. She said she’s coming back to stay here.”

Arianne and Mark’s expressions immediately turned stormy. He bought her a home to call her own already, and still this woman insisted on living here permanently? Worse, now that Shelly was here, it was impossible for Arianne to stay in the same house anymore.

Quietly, Arianne asked, “She hasn’t got the chance to be near Smore, has she?”

Chapter 1624

Mary shook her head. “Nope. With me watching, she’s got no chance. I’ve told Henry to let Smore play somewhere in the park, and till now, they haven’t returned yet. I’ll call Henry to come back now, but… the rest is up to the two of you now!”

Mark was the first to pace into the house and saw Shelly watching TV in the living room. Seeing him return, she smiled and greeted, “Good evening, Mark dear. You’re rather late to be home today! Were you having dinner outside?”

Mark furrowed his eyebrows. “You’re staying?”

Shelly eyed Arianne standing behind him and answered confidently, “That’s right. I never wanted to leave you, so it’s only right and fair that I return to your side. Unless, of course, you don’t want me to come over and stay with you. The unit you bought for me isn’t a very comfortable and nice place to stay, and it’s really not friendly to women living alone. Besides, you and Arianne are divorced now! Whether I stay here or not doesn’t cost you anything anymore! In fact… now that the place I used to stay is empty, well? You’re supposed to buy a house for her to move into, right? Just let her have mine! It’s not a cheap place to stay, and it’s in a good neighborhood and location. It’s perfect enough that you don’t even need to buy a new one for her anymore.”

Before Mark could say anything, Arianne had leaped into agreement. “Okay then, leave the keys to that unit to me—including the back-up ones. I’ll move in early tomorrow morning. Mr. Tremont? Grant me a half-day break for this, please. That’s all, I’m heading for the showers.”

With that, she ascended the stairs.

Mark tugged on his tie impatiently. “Why didn’t you tell me about your arrival or your plans, huh? I’ve told you, I’m taking my hands off your business, and I’ll continue to give you monthly allowance. So why

this drive to move here? Just tell me what it is that you really want afterward; for now, let me arrange someone to escort you back home."

"If I don't come and stay here, how long do you think Arianne's gonna stay here?" Shelly replied, her tone one of righteous concern. "You'll just delay the whole 'finding-a-new-house' thing for as long as you can, won't you? Then what's the difference between having a divorce or not having one? Not severing your ties as cleanly as you should have will only harm you one day, Mark, but you're just too magnanimous to her. What I'm doing right now is ultimately the best course of action for you, me, and her. You know that's true, so why cling to the opposite, hmm?

"Look, the most important thing right now is to let me live with you for a while since I'm already here to do that," she suggested. "If me staying with you doesn't pan out, then maybe I'll move out of the house by then."

Mark was so apoplectic that his face was the color of a storm. Time and again, he had relented several times for the sake of peace, only to have Shelly take full advantage of them before demanding more concessions. Because of her, he was forced to divorce Arianne, and now she upped the ante and demanded that Arianne be out of the house, too. He could not stand it—he could not stand her.

"This is my business you're interfering with here! Time and again, I've reminded you that none of my private affairs had anything to do with you!" he snapped. "Let me be unambiguously clear with you so that we're both at the same page: I recognize only one woman as my mother… and she's not you. I'm not letting Arianne move out of here, because the only one who's getting out of the house is you! Tonight! Don't force my hand!"

Shelly's voice was trembling when she shouted, "Who's forcing whose hand, though?! Do you expect me to watch you lose yourself as you travel farther and father into the path of destruction, huh? All is still not lost yet, Mark, you can still avert a grim fate if you just! Listen to me! Jesus, you're telling me that my sister—that despicable, depraved woman who had done every atrocious thing she could for herself—is the only one whom you think deserves your reverence and adoration as 'mother?' Truth is a sharper knife, Mark. If Arianne doesn't move out of the house per your orders, then I'll tell the whole

world about the sins your fake mother had committed all these years! And then I'll let everyone to know that you're my son all along!"

Mark kicked one of the closest chairs to him in fury, sending it careening to a side. Then he stomped up the stairs without any of his steam let out.

Shelly shut her eyes in pain. She had never wanted to threaten Mark the way she did, but this was the only way—this was the only way she had to force him into making that giant leap. Shelly had promised herself before she came here that she would not stop until Mark finally severed his ties with Arianne completely!

Mark went straight into their bedroom and pushed open the door to the bathroom. As the temperature outside of the bathroom was markedly more chilling than inside, Arianne instantly shuddered. "What are you doing?! Close the damn door, it's freezing out there!"

He obliged and closed the door, though he also made sure he was inside.

Arianne snatched her towel and wrapped it around her. "What's this about?"

Suddenly, Mark lurched and wrapped her into a tight embrace, ignoring his clothes as the flowing shower from above rapidly dampened it. "I don't… I don't want you to leave…"

For that single split second, Arianne blanked out.

“Do you really think you could get her out of the house this time? I can’t possibly live with her, Mark. You know that,” she pointed out. “Just let me leave, please. Let me live in peace. You don’t have to worry; I’ll always open the door for you to visit Smore. It’s not like you can’t see him anymore, you know? Please… don’t be sad…”

Chapter 1625

Mark knew she was right, but did that mean his heart would listen to reason right now? No, his heart continued to believe that he was losing Arianne forever, that she was never coming back, and his body answered his heart by hugging her even more tightly without showing signs of letting go.

Not knowing what to do, Arianne gave up and let him do whatever he wanted. A while later, however, they both heard a series of impatient rapping on the door to the bathroom and Smore’s voice exclaiming, “Mommy, Daddy! What are you two doing in there? Smore wants to bathe too!”

Arianne quickly shoved Mark away from her and opened the door, letting Smore in. “You’ll give him his bath later, alright? I’m close to finishing mine. Oh, and you’re completely wet, Mark. Take care not to catch a cold like this.”

Mark crouched to Smore’s height and looked at him carefully. “Smore, my little man, now that you’re gonna live with just Mommy… know that Daddy will continue to see you often,” he cooed gently. “Don’t ever think that Daddy… that Daddy has stopped loving you…”

Smore tilted his head sideway, his expression solemn. “Granny told me all about it. Grandaunt hates Mommy, so I hate Grandaunt. Don’t be sad, Daddy, ‘cause Mommy and I both like you very much.”

Seeing how perceptive and precocious Smore was gave small but significant comfort to Arianne. Did Shelly not insist that Smore call her ‘Granny?’ Too bad, because Smore clearly saw Mary as his true

grandmother. Just thinking about how livid Shelly was going to be for having her grandmother privilege revoked multiple times gave Arianne several jolts of glee.

In the silence of the night, Mark completely gave up on any form of restraint and lost himself over and over again in her. He would not stop until he had drained both himself and Arianne to their limits.

Arianne waited until Mark fell asleep before leaving to pack up any remaining belongings. She was going to move out tomorrow, after all—if she accidentally forgot to take any of her things from the estate, she would have to come back again.

There was no way Arianne was going to subject her eyes to Shelly's sickening face if she could help it.

As some of her things were left in Smore's nursery room, Arianne walked out of the bedroom.

She promptly found Shelly standing outside the bedroom, her ear to the wall.

How long had she been listening into their private activity?!

Bile rose into Arianne. "I had no idea you'd stoop to something this low, ma'am. Where'd your shame go, huh?"

Shelly sneered. "You're not shameful yourself, skank, so why should I? Hmph, looks like you're pretty slutty, too, aren't you? You're divorced, for Christ's sake. Sex outside of marriage? Shameless and

wanton," she jeered. "You better check all of your things and take them away. No use pretending to leave something behind just to have an excuse to come back—I see through your wiles, woman."

Arianne cocked an eyebrow. "What's wrong with two unmarried, consenting adults doing what we all do responsibly, hmm? Oh no, is it illegal?... Pfft, gimme a break. Also, you worry too much. I'm not gonna fabricate some excuses to come back here; I happen to think like you in this regard. My reasons? I simply don't wanna look at that fugly face of yours."

"Here's your keys; don't drop 'em—I've given you both the master and back-up keys." Shelly stuffed the keys to the condominium unit into Arianne's hand. "Remember this, Arianne: as long as I live and guard this house, you're not allowed to ever come back here," she proclaimed scornfully. "Don't be naïve and think that you have a leash on Mark through Smore. He's only acting like he can't leave you because he's been, unfortunately, stuck with you for so long that he hadn't really looked at other—better—women out there. Once the truth of his divorce finally hits him, I'm sure he'll gradually grow out of you and move on. When that happens, you'll cease to become even the slightest bit important. For you see, all men are sensual creatures that crave freshness, the new, and the unconquered. It's been so many years since he's bound himself to you—he should be sick of you by now."

Arianne frowned before walking past Shelly and entering the nursery room.

If Mark were, as Shelly had predicted, to move on with another woman, then she would no longer cling to him, either. If something was meant to be, fate will make it stay against all odds; but if it was not, then nothing could stop fate from taking it away.

The next morning, Mark helped load all of Arianne's suitcases and things into the car. From the looks of it, he might be planning to send Arianne and Smore to their new home personally.

Of course, that chafed Shelly. “Mark, my dear, you’ve got so many businesses going on in the office, right? You shouldn’t be wasting your time as their driver, should you? Just let one of your people do it for you.”

Mark ignored her completely. He carried Smore in his arms, got into the car, and drove away, leaving Shelly broiling and fuming on her own in his wake.

Mary glanced at the woman’s reddened face and sneered scornfully. “Would you look at that—a mistress wannabe really thinks she’s gonna control this household, huh? Bless your heart, but Mark’s been the sole master of the Tremont family for so long, he’s long past listening to the words of someone who doesn’t matter. You think you’ve won it all just because you won this one time, do you? Ha, you forget, you’re just a mortal. Let’s see if God will allow someone like you to live and boss other people well into a hundred years old!”

Chapter 1626

Shelly whipped her face to Mary’s direction and glowered at her. “And who the hell are you to talk? And who made you think you could talk to me at all, huh? I might not outlive Arianne, but I know for sure I can easily live longer than you. I won’t die before you do, so maybe you should pray for your own long life instead.”

Mary rolled her eyes. “I’ve lost no limbs, my legs are fine, and every year my body check-up shows that I’m normally healthy. We’ll see who gets to laugh last.”

…

Despite having moved every suitcases and box into her new home, Arianne decided not to go to the office with Mark today. “I’m gonna accompany Smore today,” she decided. “These things need to be

unpacked and arranged—looks like I've got my work cut out for today. You know, I've been meaning to bring Mary over with me, but I haven't gotten the time to discuss it with you. May I?"

Mark caressed her cheeks gently. "Why not? I'll have her come over by this afternoon, then, so that you have someone to tidy up the space with you. You won't get too exhausted by it all with a helping hand around," he said. "You should bring Smore around, you know, getting to know this place. Then, in the future, you can have Mary care for him while you work. She is a familiar, reliable face, after all. I know you feel safe to have her help.

"Ari, I suddenly have this feeling… Now that you're away, I don't wanna go back to the Tremont Estate anymore," he suddenly confessed.

Arianne's hand gently cupped around his before gripping it hard. "Don't think of your home like that, Mark. You're welcomed to visit us anytime you're free. I'll give you the backup key, alright? But! Don't come over too frequently if you can help it, 'cause I don't want people to start gossiping…"

His eyebrows furrowed. "Who in their right mind would gossip about us? Hell, even if someone did, I don't give a damn. What kind of gossip could anyone fabricate from a man visiting his wife and son?"

"Oh, please!" Arianne pouted coquettishly. "She's not your wife anymore, dum-dum."

He extended his arm around her waist. "That's not what you told me last night…"

Smore watched his parents in interest before declaring loudly, "Daddy! I wanna hug Mommy this way too when I grow up!"

Mark instinctively released his grip while the corner of his lips twitched. “Go and hug your own wife when you grow up, you little rascal.”

Arianne giggled in amusement. “Alright, you two. Mark, you should go to work now, yea? There are so many things in the office pending for you… I don’t think you have time to be idle at all, do you? Anyway, I should probably start cleaning up and sanitize wherever right now. Will probably unpack and arrange things when Mary comes around.”

When Mark left, Arianne sat on the couch with Smore in her lap and texted Tiffany, telling her that she had got a new home now.

Tiffany’s first response was to visit her right away despite Arianne’s attempt to dissuade her, which eventually made Arianne cave.

As it turned out, Shelly was quite a clean freak who might or might not cross into germaphobic territories. Despite her leg’s condition, she managed to leave the house in a rather pristine, spotless state. Arianne wondered if she had even hired a cleaner or two to help keep her place clean.

The first thing Tiffany did after moving in was to appraise the house. “Hmm, it’s not too shabby,” she muttered. “At the very least, this area is close to good schools, so it’s rather strategic in a sense. It’s also a luxury condominium, so that’s a plus, I guess… Though, for someone like Mark frickin’ Tremont, this is too below what he should have given you, hon. It shouldn’t be this so-so place—he should have given you a villa or something, duh!”

Arianne shrugged. “Nah, I think it’s just the perfect little place for me and Smore. It’s not a small unit, after all, and I rather adore the architecture and furnishing. The only bummer is… well, this used to be Shelly’s place. Mark bought it for her, but she moved into the Tremont Estate last night, and I took over her place in exchange. I mean, we all know Mark’s procrastinating about buying me a new house, after all, which previously made it impossible for me to move out of the estate. Either way… God, just thinking about seeing that Shelly’s face every day makes me gag.”

Chapter 1627

Tiffany blew up in an instant. “What the hell?! So, that’s why you’ve suddenly moved. It’s because of that godawful Karen, after all! Is Mark braindead or what? I can’t believe he’d let you move out of a place you should belong!”

Arianne smiled. “Will you believe me if I say Mark’s gonna come here every single night without fail? I think it’ll be way more bizarre if he keeps going back to the estate and stares at Shelly-Ann Leigh’s face all night long.”

Tiffany understood her immediately. “Aha! So it turns out nothing’s changed even after you moved out, after all. You three happy family are just changed into a new home, which is awesome, ‘cause we’re all leaving that old b*tch alone.”

Smore, who was standing before the French window and looking outside, suddenly cried out in excitement, “Mommy, look, a bird!”

This kid had never been to a building that was rather tall, so now, everything was so cool and exciting to him. Arianne hummed absent-mindedly at the child’s exclamation before returning to the topic at hand with Tiffany. “Since I’ve just moved in, there’s nothing here. Wanna go have some lunch outside together? Mary’s coming about late afternoon or so to help me unpack and tidy things up. Tomorrow, I’ll be able to go to work again.”

Tiffany caressed the bump in her belly. “I’m in! Quick, let’s seize this chance when Jackson isn’t around and let me have something with a bit more… oomph. Yes, more seasonings, more spices—and don’t you snitch on me about this, hon. I’m craving for food that doesn’t taste like your average normal water!”

By the time the group had returned from eating, Mary was already waiting right outside the door. The expression on her face seemed to exude eagerness to join Arianne.

She gave the key to Mary and told her, “This is the only key I got, apparently. You should make a copy of it when you’re free, Mary. I gave the back-up key to Mark already.”

“Okay. I’ll start unpacking and tidy things up right now. Yours and Smore’s clothes shouldn’t be cooped up in suitcases for too long, after all,” she replied. “Anyway, you can go and hang out with Tiffany. I can finish all of these by myself.”

“Say, Mary,” Arianne said playfully. “How much should I pay you every month? Disclaimer: I’m not half as rich as Mark… but I won’t be giving you any less than your worth, too.”

Mary feigned anger and glared at her. “How dare you bring up this money malarkey with me! Mr. Tremont is the one who’s gonna continue paying me; he told me this much. You’re not gonna need to pay out of your wallet, Ari. In fact, even if you insist, I’m gonna insist even harder to say no!”

Arianne mulled it over for a while before deciding, “Alright. I’ll just take him paying you as a roundabout way of him giving alimony, then. Not gonna ask for any other monetary compensation after this.”

The evening sky gradually set into dusk. Mary went out to buy some groceries for the preparation of dinner. At first, dinner included Tiffany's portion, too, but Jackson came and picked his princess up and away.

Immediately after she left, Mary received a call before she rhapsodically shouted at Arianne, "Mr. Tremont's coming for dinner!"

Arianne had a split-second debate with herself about the propriety of it all. It seemed inappropriate to still be so close with her ex-husband, after all. Of course, this internal debate lasted for only a millisecond because she immediately imagined the sight of Shelly foaming rabidly at Mark's defiance.

Suddenly, there was just no impetus whatsoever to stop him from coming, was there?

Besides, she had told him that she would never stop him from visiting Smore, which meant there was a perfectly legitimate front to accommodate Mark's frequent visits. Overall, there really was no reason to say no.

Soon after dinner was ready, Mark arrived just in time. Smore blithely threw himself into his arms. "Daddy! Daddy!"

Mark was wearing his most doting expression yet. "Hello, little man. Have you been listening to your mommy, hmm? Have you gotten used to staying here?"

Chapter 1628

Smore pointed at the window and exclaimed, “I like it here, there are so many little birds. They go cuckoo-cuckoo-cuckoo-cuckoo!”

Smore was talking about the pigeons that frequented a nearby plaza. The flock sometimes took off into the air simultaneously, resulting in a magnificent, eye-catching spectacle.

Mark spent his time after dinner watching TV with Smore on his lap. Arianne seized the chance to ask, “So, what time are you going back?”

He turned toward her, displeasure shadowing his frown. “You want me to go already? Well, I’m not going anywhere. In fact, I’ve asked Mary to pack some of my clothes and put them here. From now on, this is where I live.”

Arianne had long expected him to do that. “I’m being serious here, Mark. You gotta go back there from time to time, ya’ know. Wouldn’t want a certain someone to pick a fight with me over this.”

Mark might have said something to the effect of “yes”, but it was obvious he did not mean a single word of it. Knowing that he had retreated paying lip service at everything Arianne was going to say, the woman decided to stop asking him to go. After all, it was not like he would listen.

For several days from then, Mark had been spending his free time in Arianne’s place. He worked during the weekends while Arianne spent quality time with Smore at home. Sometimes, Tiffany would be there, too. Ever since coming to know that Arianne had divorced, the woman had been visiting her every few days whenever the whim struck her.

On one of these weekends, the day was interrupted by a sudden ringing in the bell. Mary, who was doing her daily cleaning nearby, went to open the door.

It was Shelly, whom Mary immediately blocked from entering. “What are you doing here? I’ve cleaned and checked every part of this house; ain’t got any of your stuff left anymore.”

Shelly shoved Mary aside. “Don’t boss me around.”

That riled Arianne up, and she grumbled, “Can you, for once, talk civilly? For Pete’s sake, she’s older than you. Show some respect.”

Shelly marched into the room, striking the floor with her cane loudly with every stomp. “Get off your high horse, I’m not here to spar about civility and morals. For the record, Mary is only a few years older than me, and she’s a bloody servant to the Tremont family. You want me to respect a subordinate? Laughable!” she bristled. “I’m here right now, Arianne Wynn, because I demand to know just what you do to Mark to make him waste away here? You used some sort of schemes, I know it. Otherwise, he wouldn’t keep running to you like a man possessed! You’re f**king shameless; you’re the sort of slut who doesn’t even care about dignity and her body!”

Arianne had been mentally prepared for the day Shelly stormed her house and wreaked havoc, and so Shelly’s appearance hardly ruffled her. “God, if you’re so unhappy about it, go teach your son a lesson or whatever, man. Since when are you the boss of me?” she retorted. “Besides, I’ve never forced him to spend his time with me whenever he can. He comes over here willingly.”

Watching them from the side, Tiffany’s rancor rapidly built up into a deluge that finally broke out of her control. She pulled her cuffs up to her elbows and fired off, “Seriously, who. The f**k. Are you?! Did you just come all the way here to act like anyone’s parent? Ari might have to call you Aunty Whatever when she was still married to Mark, but darling, get the memo: you ain’t nobody to her now! Seriously, b*tch

bullies the sh*t out of Arianne back then in the Tremont Estate, and now you're running and hopping across streets desperately trying to scream at her even after she moved out? You f**king cuckoo or what? I thought it's your leg that went busted, man, not your brain. Apparently, your leg injury is so severe that even your brain cells were damaged!"

Shelly was so enraged that her lips were visibly trembling. "B*tches of the same fur gang together, I see! I shouldn't even be surprised that this is the company you keep, Arianne."

Tiffany laughed scornfully. "Oh, you're not wrong at all. Birds of a feather, b*tches of the same fur—this is why you're so special, amirite? I mean, no f**king person in this goddamned world wants you in their group at all, not even your biological son! Ooh, that's gotta hurt ya. Seriously, when everyone starts avoiding you, shouldn't you at least have some self-awareness to wonder if you're the problem? For f**k's sake, have you ever tried this nifty adult skill called 'introspection?'" she jeered. "Look, you wanna glue your a** to the Tremont Estate, no problem. But now that Ari and her kid moved out, you bet your a** Mark ain't gonna wanna go back there now. Isn't it great, though? Living alone in that big a** mansion with no one to annoy you. What, you don't like it? What more can you complain about, Karen? Or should I call Mark and tell him his mom's on the loose, kicking up troubles again?"

Shelly espied the bump in Tiffany's stomach and reined in some of her fury. "Hmph, I'm gonna spare you just because you're pregnant, but don't get too cocky about it. Seeing you just begs the question: what in the world happened to Jackson West's judgement when he decided that you're, somehow, an eligible bride?! The West family is as much an upper-class in the Capital too! Ha, you and Arianne are both the same. You two used some underhanded, dirty tricks to bewitch these men, didn't you? You might be an unspectacular bimbo, but God, you're good at picking a target to charm."

Tiffany bared her teeth in fury. "Oh, you're not even wrong in this one! I'm a bimbo, yep, you got me. But I'm also the sort of uncivilized piece of sh*t who doesn't give a damn about not hurting an old lady, so believe me when I tell you, I ain't gonna pull punches when I start rearranging your face! Try me, man. Continue throwing insults out of your arse again, and I'm really gonna wipe the floor with ya'. What the hell, you're not even my relative or anything, so beating the crap outta' you is very easy, barely an inconvenience! Besides, everyone knows that a b*tch deserves to get her a** whooped if she trespasses someone's home!"

Chapter 1629

Shelly ignored Tiffany altogether and trained her attention on Arianne. She was not going to leave here empty-handed and without a shred of advantage earned.

“Arianne Wynn, let me be very clear to you. If Mark stays over at your place tonight, I’ll spread every atrocity his foster mother had done to the public as well as let the whole world know that he’s actually my son,” she declared. “You know damn well that this is the last thing he wants. If your motive is to see him suffer, then by all means, continue clinging to him. I don’t care what you people think of me. I’m clearly the villain to all of you already, and I’m not afraid to play the role to its logical extreme. Besides, I know he’ll one day wake up and feel grateful to me—one day, he’ll be grateful that I’ve taken the necessary step to make him leave you.

“If you truly care about him, then don’t let his worst nightmare come true,” she finished. “Don’t force my hand.”

Coercion was Shelly’s most adept gambit. All she needed was a single threat, and she would ensnare Mark and Arianne both.

Arianne did not forget the lengths Mark had gone to shoulder his foster mother’s sins as though they were his own. He was even willing to fool Arianne into thinking the plane crash was his fault alone. All of his deeds spoke of how much Mrs. Tremont meant to him.

And this was why Shelly’s threat was so effective—she was capitalizing on Mark’s love for Mrs. Tremont.

“Are you done? If that’s all you’ve got to say, then show yourself out. Goodbye,” Arianne replied flatly, dodging the question.

The noncommittal deadpan worried Shelly a little. Suddenly, she realized she was not as sure about what Arianne would do as she previously had thought. Would a threat like this work on her? It would if she loved Mark. But if she never did… it would not at all.

Shelly was only one foot out of the door when Tiffany slammed the door shut behind her with all her might, shoving Shelly's other foot outside in the process.

Rage flared within her once again. She had to take in several deep breaths just to force her flames down from spilling out into an uncontrollable tantrum.

Today was not as successful as she had envisaged, but perhaps she got some sort of leverage after all.

By evening, Mark had returned. Tiffany had long left.

Mary gave him a loaded look, and he turned to watch Arianne sitting on the couch, his mind immediately coming to an understanding. "My aunt came, didn't she?"

Arianne nodded without looking at him. "You should go back before the truth about your birth becomes the news of the century. There is no limit to Shelly's depravity. She said it's for your best and even thinks you'll one day be grateful for all the 'help' she gave you. I highly doubt you will, but more importantly, from her, I learned that nothing is scarier than a person with delusions of righteousness."

Mark's eyebrows began to knit together in the middle. "She threatened you too?"

The ‘too’ was the only cue Arianne needed to sneer. “I see we’re dealing with a master strategist, aren’t we? Can’t believe she threatened you, too. Jesus Christ, you have no idea how relieved I am that you weren’t raised by that sicko of a woman. The things she had experienced might affect her wildly, but there are always some traits and characters that come from nature rather than nurture—and those are immutable.

“I should stop. Better not keep you,” she added. “Go back, Mark. I’m sorry, but you’re not having dinner with us today.”

Mark stood still at his spot, unmoving. It was as though his mind had turned into an incubator for a blazing force of primal fury.

Mary had to gently tug her boss to the door as a silent suggestion to move. Arianne’s mood had turned just as stormy too, and if Shelly did as she had threatened, then no one in this room would be able to live the next day.

In the end, Mark gave a parting hug to Smore for a quick second before returning home.

Back in the Tremont Estate, Shelly had prepared the most sumptuous dinner that almost looked like an evening banquet. It was clearly a little too much for a meal shared between two people.

As soon as Mark saw the food, he stopped dead in his tracks, his face devoid of any emotions. “You knew I was coming home today?”

The smile on Shelly's lips froze uncannily for a second, but she quickly recovered from it. "What can I say? Mother and son often share some sort of telepathic connection, don't they? Or so I heard. I just knew you're coming home today, so I prepared a lot of these dishes myself. Come, let us dig in together!"

Chapter 1630

Mark strutted to the dining table and stared for a beat, not taking his seat.

Then, with one furious swing, he swept every single dish on the table to the floor. Amid the cacophonic clamor, he bellowed, "How could you?! I don't give a f**k if you threaten me, but why must you do the same to Arianne?!"

Shelly was so taken aback by his sudden outburst that she gave up looking for her cane, opting to rise as steadily as she could with the help of her chair. "M-Mark, my dear! W-What have you done?! I've poured my heart over that for the entire evening… I… It's Arianne, isn't it? She told you, didn't she? That little snitch!"

Mark whipped his face to Shelly's direction, his eyes as cutting and deadly as knives. "What in hell do you want from me? You bereft me of my wife and son, and now you're explicitly denying me whatever little chances I have left to see my family? She is the love of my life, and he the fruit of my loins! How could you? How could you be so inhumane? You've lived a crapsack life for decades, so now you've made it your mission to make sure no one else lives a tad happier than you did, isn't it?! Get a grip! Your pathetic, terrible life wasn't my doing, so stop taking it out on me! I've had it with you deluding yourself with this dramatic bullsh*t about how… sacrificial you've been to me. I wish I never knew my birth mother at all!"

Shelly pressed her hand against her chest, where a stab of agony had left. Her eyes were glinting with tears. "How… How could you say all of that? You would say these hurtful things to your own mother just for Arianne, wouldn' you? Are you really blaming me for all the suffering I endured over the first half of

my life, Mark? Do you understand my struggle, the tribulations I've fought with my tooth and nail? Do you know I've walked through hell just to return to you?… No, you don't. You don't understand it, do you?

"I can't—I swear to God—believe for one second that Arianne doesn't hate you deep in her heart. I don't believe that she has no hand in that gruesome shipwreck that almost robbed you away from this world! But most of all, I'm not stupid enough to believe that she wants a peaceful life with you, because why else would she torment you by taking Smore away? She's using the child to control you!"

No amount of reason will ever dissuade a woman who had dug her heels this deeply into her conspiracy theory. It was a realization that sapped Mark of every ounce of his strength to fight back, and so when he spoke again, his voice was evident of abject weariness. "Fine. You know what? I can't be bothered to talk to you. I'll be frank. At the beginning, I harbored genuine sympathy and respect for you, but now? The only thing your face inspires is revulsion. Is this what you wanted?"

"You've come back only to torment me, so stop using my welfare as an excuse to do whatever you please. I don't need anything from you… I just don't need you. I wish you never came back!"

"You mean you wish I was dead! Out there, all alone… That's what you wish!" Shelly shrieked hysterically. "All of you wish I could just die and stop obstructing your lives, don't you?! My sister did, and now even you do. What the f**k did I do? I'm the victim! And yet all of you keep gaslighting me as the one to be blamed for everything… Why? You're my flesh and blood, Mark. I will move mountains for you; I think the world of you. And yet, in return for the heart I gave you, you wish I were dead!"

True to his words, Mark kept silent. Instead, he stormed upstairs in fury.

Shelly took in the mess that was once food she had lovingly prepared and sank into her chair, sobbing quietly. It was unfair, life was being unfair to her. Why? She had hoped against hope that her life would

finally perk after she returned to her son, but now, she felt as though she had fallen into yet another level of hell.

It was Arianne's fault. Arianne's existence was the only reason why Mark was even capable of such cruelty against her!

The light in her eyes sharpened into a dangerous glint. Mark could marry anyone else in the world, but not Arianne Wynn!

One of the Tremont retinues—a young caregiver—gingerly crossed into the scene with a broom. She began cleaning up the place as quietly as she could.

Unfortunately, her movement alone was enough to trigger Shelly. She erupted, "What the f**k?! I'm still here, idiot girl! What are you trying to do, sweep me out of the house? Worthless piece of garbage—can't even use your eyes and appraise a situation before doing anything, can you?! Why the f**k is this family hiring someone as useless as you?!"

The hapless, wronged girl was nailed to the spot with tears in her eyes, utterly hard-pressed as to what to do.

Fortunately, Henry came to her rescue just in time. "It's alright, child. I'll handle this."

The young caregiver nodded in earnest gratitude before slipping away as swiftly as she could.

As Henry cleared up the aftermath, he remarked noncommittally, “It’s high time you try judging other people through the lens of the common folks. If you persist in acting the way you do now, your life here will bear no difference from your past life abroad.”

In stark contrast to her utter contempt for Mary, Shelly reserved sincere respect and acknowledgement for Henry, who had been working for the Tremonts for many years. To take up the mantle as the Tremont’s butler for so long earned the man a degree of status as well as hinting at his exceptional skills and competency.

She considered Henry. “Are you blaming me as well now? Don’t tell me you really bought Arianne’s ruse and think she genuinely loves him! If you do, well… Sorry to see that you’ve grown senile, Henry.”