Ruling 1631

Chapter 1631

Henry sighed in resignation. “Whatever floats your boat, I suppose. In all honesty, I watched Madam’s growth from a little girl to who she is today, just as Mr. Tremont had. She has always been under his constant scrutiny all these years. Who are you to judge her character and nature? Overt willfulness can only be your own undoing,” he said. “Compare now to the Tremont Estate before your return. Everything was serene and happy. But now, the house is enveloped by a bedeviling miasma. If you keep this up, this household will implode. Is that what you want to see?”

Shelly cracked a bitter smile. “Please, the only thing this household has lost is Arianne Wynn. So what? She’s just another one of the dime-a-dozen women. Mark will move on someday; his so-called devotion will someday change target too. There is no such thing as a devoted, eternal love.”

She had all the examples she needed: Mark’s father came to love someone else other than his wife, to the point of siring a bastard son. Her own husband even started out maniacally enamored by her, but in the end, no amount of initial passion had stopped him from descending into debaucheries. It did not matter if Shelly’s conditions forced him into it, or if he always had the hidden propensity for such a thing—all Shelly knew was that she had never seen eternal love in real life. How was she supposed to believe it even exists?

The way she saw it, Mark was just a typical, young man. After his separation from Arianne, it was only a matter of time before he started falling in love with another woman and moved on.

…

Shelly-Ann Leigh had succeeded. She stopped Mark from seeing Arianne, as well as forcing him to physically remain with her in the same house every day. But there was a catch: Mark now completely ignored her.

It did not matter if she played her role of a doting mother and prepared the three most important meals in a day. It did not matter if she personally delivered the lunch she made to Mark in his office every day. Mark never displayed any signs of appreciation, nor did he speak a word to her since the altercation that day. He also never touched the food she made for him.

The days were drawing nearer to the end of the year, and company activities and work had reached a frenzy. Working overtime had become compulsory to every member of the company except one Arianne Wynn, who had the privilege to go home as usual. No matter how busy the office was, Mark made it mandatory for her to go home and care for Smore.

Every day, Arianne had to thread through a sea of eyes brimming with jealousy and envy. They made her feel a little guilty.

The year-end break finally came. It was just the free time Arianne needed to primp her new home with a festive makeover, as well as purchasing loads of food for Christmas.

Even if her family had downsized to just her, Smore, and Mary, it was no excuse to pass up one of the most important festivals of the year. She could not remember enjoying a Christmas resembling the ones she had before she was eight, and she was determined not to let Smore relive such a loss.

The night before Christmas, Arianne and Mary baked cookies in the kitchen while Smore danced along with the performers on his TV. Mark and Ariane might have divorced, but Smore did not seem to have registered the true weight of the split. The naïve mind of a toddler had simply shielded him from understanding it all.

Despite having her hands full, Arianne's attention always drifted to her phone, which she had set aside. It was Christmas Eve; surely Mark would call her to give her a season's greeting? And yet, even by the time the batter was set in the oven, there was no call nor text from him.

Was Shelly watching him so closely that he was not only forbidden to visit her, but also banned from calling her?

Mary could tell what was on Arianne's mind, so she pointedly avoided mentioning Mark. Festivals like Christmas were supposed to be a day where families reunite and gather, after all.

It was then that they heard the doorbell. Reflexively, Arianne dashed toward it, but it was not Mark standing outside but a food delivery guy with a very large package that seemed to be filled with fresh, raw food.

Even after she took on the package, Arianne could not help but stay rooted by the door for a while as she glanced around several times. Finally, she closed the door in dismay. "Mary, please help open this up and see what's inside."

Mary took out a little knife and unboxed a cornucopia of seafood. "Aha! Mr. Tremont must have ordered it for us. Seafood is your favorite, isn't it? He may be banned from coming, but he clearly still has the two of you in his heart."

The gift somewhat mollified Arianne, though it did not stave off her dearest wish to have Mark be here, personally, just for a single meal…

Mary mentioning Mark made Smore turn toward them in interest. “Is Daddy coming? The TV says today is Christmas Eve, and that families have a ‘ree-you-nee-un’… Does ‘ree-you-nee-un’ mean families get together? Then why isn’t Daddy coming?”

Arianne forced a smile and carried Smore to the dining table. “Daddy’s too busy. He might not be able to visit us today. Here, have some fresh cookies. Mommy just baked them for the occasion.”

Chapter 1632

Smore placed a few of his cookies into an empty plate. “I’m leaving some of these for Daddy. He hasn’t eaten what Mommy made yet.”

Was Smore insensitive and inconsiderate? If he were, he would not have cared if his father had gotten to taste his mother’s cookies. Was Smore sensitive and sweet, then? Well, he did just twist the knife in his mother’s heart, right where it hurt…

Mary, at the very least, was amused by the little boy’s antic. “Aww, isn’t our Smore just the most precious, sweetest thing?” she praised. “Your daddy puts on an icy exterior all the time, too, but boy, he’s always the nicest gentleman to his lady. The apple doesn’t fall too far from its tree; I know for sure that you’ll grow up to be just as much of a loving man.”

Meanwhile in the Tremont Estate, sitting across from each at the dining table, were Mark and Shelly gawking at one another in tense silence.

The clamor of fireworks outside was all the presence Christmas’s Eve amounted to within the walls of the Tremont Estate. Without it, anyone within the house might miss the fact that tonight was the night before one of the merriest festivals of the year, as the house was grim and doleful and its interior was utterly devoid of any celebratory decoration.

Every delicacy on the table tasted like wax to Mark. He might physically be here, but his soul had long left the building.

Unsurprisingly, Shelly knew exactly what was on his mind. She would not have cared at any other time, but tonight was Christmas Eve—she knew he was very likely to bail on her regardless.

She took a napkin and wiped the corner of her lips. “Oh, spare me that long, gloomy face, will you? Finish this meal with me, and you’ll be free to go to… wherever you want to be. I won’t stop you. Of course, it’s only for tonight. It’s a special occasion, so I’ll turn a blind eye to it,” she said noncommittally. “Still, you can’t spend your night outside; you must come back home. That’s all I’m asking.”

Shelly had hoped that Mark would react to her sudden mercy with gushing gratitude and joy as though she had bestowed him a benediction. Reality, however, was contrary to her expectation—Mark merely held her gaze with an emotionless poker-face.

“Spare me your pretense. I’m right here eating with you, aren’t I? What, you want me to crack you a wide, happy grin? Sorry, I’m physically unable to smile right now—logical, I guess, since no man cracks a smile when they’re being held hostage,” he replied flatly. “Honestly, you can only afford to be so brazen and unbridled now because of that leverage you have over me. But what happens if I finally come to terms with the truth of my birth and am no longer beholden to your threat one day? What else do you even have up your sleeves?”

Shelly was cocksure of herself. “Oh, I don’t think so. You’re never going to ‘come to terms’ with your past. I know how much you loathe me—which is why you can’t ever stomach the idea of the whole world knowing you’re my son, can you?” she rebutted. “My sister committed countless crimes against me, but she still means a lot to you. After all, to ensure that you remained the sole heir of the Tremont family, she was willing to orchestrate a plane crash that took every other Tremont off the face of the

Earth before her illness could kill her. You think she was a martyr who died for you, don't you? And so, in that ensuing guilt, you won't allow her name be tarnished by my exposé, will you?"

Mark's grips tightened around his fork and knife, his face cackling with storm clouds. "If you value your dinner, you'll shut your mouth."

Shelly knew when enough was enough. "All right, I'll shut up. Let us pretend that I didn't say the last couple of sentences, shall we? By the way, since you distrust my mercy, how about a quid pro quo? I'll let you visit Arianne and Smore tonight if you agree to meet a special someone the day after tomorrow."

Mark was very wary of Shelly's motives. "Who?"

"You'll know when you get there," she replied cryptically.

Mark waited until Shelly finished her meal and set down her utensils before dashing for his coat and bolting out of the door. Then, without missing a beat, he got into his car and began to drive to Arianne's place.

Chapter 1633

Frankly, Mark had not expected himself to be free tonight. Based on what he learned about Shelly, the more meaningful and important a given day was, the harsher his house arrest would become.

His patience toward Shelly and her threats was thinning. Sometimes, an impulse to just give up and let her do whatever she wanted would seduce him. For a chance at freedom from her control, Mark was

tempted to allow Shelly free reign in anything—until he thought about the potential ramifications, and suddenly that thought would become baleful again.

Most importantly, the man knew that the cost of seeing Arianne and Smore tonight was far heftier than the promise she had coerced him into making. There were more schemes in Shelly's sleeves waiting for him, he was sure, but right now, he cast his worries to the farthest reach in his mind. He just wanted to meet the people he missed so much.

By the time he reached the condominium, it was already nine at night. He had forgotten to bring the back-up key with him, a fact that only occurred to him after he searched through his pocket.

Mark lifted his hand for a knock, his slightly quaking fist showing a sliver of the roaring emotions swirling within him.

He had not seen Arianne since the company took its long Christmas break, because every time he left the house, Shelly would tail him. She would brandish that same, tried-and-true threat all the time, leaving Mark both furious and feckless.

Hearing knocks on her door, hope within Arianne's heart rekindled. Fearful of the chance that it was yet another false hope, though, she stayed rooted to her seat and had Mary open the door instead while forcing herself not to look.

It was then that Smore struggled against her arms and cried, "Daddy!"

She turned around and found herself facing an approaching Mark head on. A wet lump formed in her throat, and she stammered, "H-Have you had anything yet? Mary and I… We, uh, we baked some

Christmas cookies, and some of mine are deformed and out of shape, b-but I think they taste pretty good nonetheless, a-a-and you're late to the party and we had our Christmas dinner already. But… would you like to take a bite? I'll brew coffee to go with it."

As far as preambles go, it was rather unremarkable. But its essence laid in the heart behind the words.

Mark nodded. "I would love to."

Arianne placed Smore onto the couch and rose to her feet before heading toward the kitchen. She knew Mark's preferences like the back of her hand; she knew how to make the perfect coffee for him. Soon, the thick, rich aroma of coffee beans began to fill the room.

Smore, meanwhile, had begun talking his old man's ears off. His vocabulary was still fairly limited, and the longer he talked, the more he began to slur, resulting in a garbled, semi-intelligible mess that was lost on Mark. Of course, the father pretended to understand him anyway, which only encouraged the boy's motor-mouthing even more.

The coffee was ready. Arianne brought the steaming pot and a plate of cookies to the dining table and announced, "It's done. Chow time."

Smore, who excitedly joined in on the fun, shouted, despite already having had his fill, "I want some too!"

In resignation, Arianne obliged by taking out some of Mark's cookies for Smore. It suddenly reminded her of the child's earlier antics, and so, with a beaming smile, she recounted the incident to Mark.

He fell silent.

Confused, she asked, “You okay?”

It came out almost as a whisper. “I’m sorry.”

A wave of desolation suddenly washed over Arianne. “Why are you telling me you’re sorry? I don’t like hearing these words. It seems to be more than just an apology—it means helplessness. Resignation. Are you telling me that you…no, that Shelly has arranged for you to see some other woman? Is this what you’re sorry about? Well, I… I really don’t mind. We’re divorced. If you want to take up another woman’s hand, I have no right to stop you.”

He looked up and held her gaze. “What are you talking about? No way in hell am I ever attending some stupid matchmaking even if she’s arranged it. I was apologizing, because I wasn’t able to visit you earlier, and that I have to go home rather than stay here for the night.”

Arianne breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, God, that’s all, is it? It’s fine. Stay here for a little while until you absolutely must go. But make it after Smore sleeps; I don’t want him to throw a crying fit over you leaving.”

Chapter 1634

Right now, the one thing that Arianne feared the most was Shelly’s prediction of Mark falling in love with another woman coming true. With someone like Shelly devoting her effort and relentless persuasion into making it happen, who knows if Mark might cave in one day?

As though knowing Mark was going to leave, Smore—who should have gone to bed by ten o'clock—had stubbornly stayed up way past bedtime. Even after the clock ticked past eleven and he kept making jaw-breaking yawns, the little boy was adamant about accompanying Mark.

Mary had already gone to sleep. She had decided early on to give Arianne and Mark their much-needed alone time, thus leaving Arianne to accompany the man in watching late-night Christmas programs.

Unsurprisingly, neither of them was focused on the TV. Their minds were too preoccupied with a plethora of things they had dreamed of telling each other that now, despite the chance presenting itself, neither knew where to start.

When it was almost twelve, Mark's phone started to ring. He did not need to spare the screen a glance to know that the only person who would call him at this time would be Shelly.

The persistent ringing was beginning to sound like a cursed melody coming after his life.

Arianne broke the spell. "Mark, it's gonna be alright. Go back, she's urging you already. You know I'm not looking forward to being verbally abused on the day of Christmas itself."

Smore, who was close to falling asleep, suddenly sprung awake. He grabbed a fistful of Mark's shirt in panicked apprehension. "Are you leaving, Daddy?"

Mark forced a smile. “Yea, Daddy has to go. You listen to your Mommy’s words and go to sleep, okay, little man?”

Smore began to pout, a sign that he was going to cry. “I don’t want you to go! Daddy doesn’t want us anymore, don’t you? Why haven’t you come see us for so long?”

Arianne could hardly choke back her tears. Smore might act carefree and blissfully ignorant, but that belied the fact that he had always known.

The little boy’s words were the last straw on the camel’s back. In a split second, Mark lost control of himself and hurled his wailing phone to the floor hard, shouting, “I’ve had it! F**k her! I don’t give a damn and I’m not leaving!”

A very shocked Arianne sprung to her feet and dove toward his phone. Fortunately, the only damage it suffered were some cracks on the screen.

“What are you doing, Mark?” she chided gently. “I know it hurts; I feel the same. But think about it—if you don’t go back now, what will Shelly do to you? Please, calm down. Go back for the night and wait until tomorrow. Smore, Mary, and I are gonna visit Henry in the Tremont Estate… which means we’ll see each other again. It’s Christmas, for Christ’s sake; it’s the best, irrefutable excuse I’ll ever get. She won’t have any reason to turn me out—and even if she does, I’m not afraid. She can do whatever she likes.”

Mark pulled Arianne into his embrace. “I’m nearing my limit, Ari. I don’t think I can endure it anymore,” he confessed. “I want to just say f**k it and let it go to hell, for all I care…”

She patted his back softly. “No, no. You’re fine, you have to be. This is all a temporary trial, Mark; you gotta weather it. You’ve already put up with her for so, so long—isn’t it motivated by guilt? You’ve been Shelly’s sole tether to life all these years, and she did, after all, start out as a victim. Look, your foster mother had sinned for your sake, so if it helps you feel better, think of this as a redemption. You’re doing time in your mother’s stead, and when all of the debts she incurred are cleared, that’s when you’ll finally be free.”

There was truth to her words. He had been suffering for his mother’s sins this whole time.

Arianne carried Smore in her arms and stood before the French window, the two of them watching Mark’s car vanishing under the night sky. It was then that Smore suddenly asked very quietly, “Was Daddy mad at me just now? Is it because I said something I shouldn’t have said?”

Arianne shook her head. “No, silly boy. How could Daddy ever be mad at you? He was mad at Grandaunt. Come, time for bed. We’re seeing Grandpa Henry tomorrow.”

It was the longest night yet. Mark had rolled down his car window and let the bitter winter gale chip away the cigarette between his fingers. With every replay of Smore’s disappointed, pitiful face in his mind, his heart sank a little lower.

When had the act of living itself become so weary? He wondered. Why had it even become so exhausting in the first place?

He returned to the Tremont Estate and found Shelly still awake and waiting for him.

Mark was not in the mood to acknowledge her at all, so he proceeded to the stairs. He was just about to reach the stairway when Shelly broke out a bellow, “Why didn’t you answer my call? Did Arianne stop you?”

Chapter 1635

Mark’s furious backlash was instantaneous. “Are you done manufacturing outrage over nothing?! Because of you, I only got to be with my son for a few measly hours on a Christmas Eve. Is that not enough control for you?! I’ll have you know that Arianne will be bringing Smore to visit Henry tomorrow. Let me put this out there: I’m not afraid of flipping out if you dare make her feel the slightest discomfort. Of course, you’re welcome to test my resolve if you don’t believe me.”

“That’s the most ridiculous crap I’ve ever heard this week! Bringing your child to this house on Christmas Day just to see the butler working for the family?” Shelly mocked scornfully. “Or is there yet another hidden agenda, huh? You know what they say—you can never trust a snake!”

Mark balled his hands into fists. “It’s not like there’s anyone else worthy of her visit, is there? What, you can’t really be suggesting yourself, can you? Are you even worth the trouble?… No, don’t answer that question; I’m already fatigued enough as it is. I’m going to try to get some rest, so don’t disturb me.”

Shelly watched Mark storm upstairs before grabbing the nearest cushion on the couch as the victim of her violent rage. At one point, she took out her phone and was close to dishing it out to Arianne, but her rationality returned at the right time to stop her. It was not worth dooming her already frail relationship with Mark just because she wanted to vent, Shelly reasoned. It might be more strategic for her to lose this round, this time.

The next day, Mark woke up and went downstairs just in time to catch Shelly busying herself in the living room. Lined up on the coffee table were snacks and confectionery popular among kids these days.

Seeing him by the stairway, Shelly smiled warmly. “Good morning! Smore’s coming over today, isn’t he? Oh, I’ve prepared all kinds of stuff he likes, including the materials for lunch later!”

Mark had grown accustomed to her flip-flopping personality. “I’m going to pick them up,” he said flatly.

Shelly cast her eyes on the floor. “Oh! Well, okay then.”

He soon reached Arianne’s condominium. He then called to inform her of his arrival before waiting patiently in the parking lot.

About five minutes later, Arianne, Mary, and Smore appeared. As soon as she got into the car, Arianne asked quizzically, “How did you convince her to let you drive us there? I actually expected you to be completely banned from coming to see us, you know. We were almost gonna hail an uber.”

“Please, you already know how… capricious she can be. Her temperament flip-flops without rhyme or reason,” Mark replied dryly. “At one moment she’s almost pleasant, and then the next second she’s something else entirely.”

Arianne thinned her lips in silence. Naturally, she was a little too familiar with Shelly’s particular “quirk.”

The car crossed into the Tremont Estate’s yard. Before going inside, Arianne instructed Smore, “You must be a good boy and say hi to Grandaunt, okay? No throwing tantrums around—we want to be civil. Mommy isn’t saying that you gotta like her, but you can’t be nasty to someone even if you don’t like them.”

The reason why Arianne still referred to Shelly as “grandaunt” rather than “granny” was because Mark never formally recognized the woman as his birth mother. True, the relationship between those two was a touchy mess, but there was an actual reason to stick to the former address. Whether Shelly should be referred to as “Granny” or not was, even now, a very delicate subject.

Smore answered his mom affirmatively, and the family walked inside the house.

Immediately, Shelly approached the little boy with her cane in one hand and a plate of cookies in the other. She unsurprisingly ignored Arianne altogether and acknowledged Smore directly. “Hello, deary! Come give your Granny a hug! I’ve got some delicious snacks for my little sweetie.”

Smore was so taken aback that he immediately forgot his mother’s instruction. Instead of doing what he was told, he dove into Arianne’s arms and titled his cheek as far away from Shelly as he could before mumbling under his breath, “You’re not Granny! I hate you, Grandaunt…”

Chapter 1636

Arianne herself was just as reluctant to let Shelly be near Smore, so she intuitively backed away as well.

Seeing her reaction coupled with Smore’s words was enough to trigger Shelly’s temper. “Gosh, I just love how you brainwashed your child. Taught the boy to address some random, non-blood-related woman as Granny while despising his true biological grandmother, didn’t you? Are you going to teach your son not to recognize Mark as his father next? Just as I thought, allowing you his custody was a grave mistake!”

Arianne was not in the mood to clarify, so she replied simply, “We’re here to see Henry.”

Shelly turned to Mark and bristled. “You saw what happened with your own eyes, didn’t you? She brought her son back here for a mere butler on Christmas! Isn’t this the most preposterous, asinine bull ever? Just look at how she indoctrinated her son… Tell me, how could you still think she’s beyond reproach, huh?”

Mark wrapped his arm around Arianne’s shoulders and led her away to the living room. “I’m very well aware of how she raised Smore, thank you. Besides, I told you they were coming to see Henry yesterday, didn’t I? How did you miss the memo? Never mind that; where’s Henry?”

Shelly set the plate of neglected cookies down on the coffee table with a loud clang. “How should I know? He’s been outside since the early morning. Can’t say I know when he is coming back.”

‘Outside since the early morning?’ Arianne frowned. She did not think Henry would be so urgently needed on Christmas Day. She suspected Shelly to have made up some sort of excuse-quest for Henry to attend to, therefore keeping him away by the time they visited the estate.

Still, Arianne did not plan to expose Shelly, so she just replied, “I’ll call Henry and tell him to come back now.”

Shelly stared at Arianne with daggers in her eyes. “The hell’s that for? He’s the goddamned butler of the Tremont family! What’s wrong with him carrying out what’s well within his duty, even if it means he has to be a bit busy on a holiday?” she rebuffed. “He’ll come back when he has to, okay? Unless… You think I somehow made up an excuse to send him away. Despicable accusation—how cynical can you be, woman?”

Arianne pressed her lips into a thin, firm line as she willed herself to not be provoked. She had to do it for Mark.

Mark himself was sensing a migraine coming. “Enough, enough! No one’s forcing you to chat with anyone you don’t like,” he snapped. “If you can’t stand us, then retreat to your room upstairs and keep yourself company.”

Afraid that Mark was going to flip out on her if she kept it up, Shelly dropped her confrontational attitude instantly and softened her tone. “Look, I’m very much against tainting the merriest day of the year with petty squabbles, but Arianne taught Smore to despise me on top of banning me from getting near my grandson. Frankly, I’m not even mad—but I expect you, of all people, to at least be clear-headed about who’s right and who’s wrong! Arianne may not know how to behave, sure, but you’re of a different upbringing, aren’t you? She hasn’t been properly taught by her parents since a very young age, but you’re different, are you not? I’m not bringing this up because of our personal history. I’m just saying, her unfavorable kinks won’t just be intolerable to the Tremont family, but she will also be just as lambasted if she were to be married off to any other family out there.”

Shelly had been confident that being the senior in the house gave her the authority to critique a junior’s unflattering conduct. Unfortunately, criticizing Arianne’s upbringing was a shortcut to vexing Mark, and right on cue, his expression turned stormy.

“If you think she ‘doesn’t know’ how to behave, then the fault is squarely mine. Because, apparently, the person who raised her was me. Most importantly, the only man she’s ever going to be wedded to is me. There will be no one else,” he replied darkly. “Smore’s her son; she has every right to limit whom her son could interact with however she fancies. Besides, if you loathe her so much, then how are we supposed to believe that you’ll like her son any better? Isn’t it therefore reasonable to not let you near Smore, then? Here’s some advice: you either shut up right now, or you go to your room upstairs. Choose.”

The air seemed to have gelled by that point. Arianne quickly tugged on the corner of Mark’s shirt to covertly tell him to stop.

It would not matter who started the fire, Shelly would always blame it on Arianne. Changing that woman's demonic caricature of Arianne in her mind was impossible, so the next best thing Arianne could try to achieve was to not make a fire happen at all. She was only here to see Henry—and Mark, of course—not looking for trouble.

A moment of disquieting silence later, Shelly glowered at Arianne for a split second before regaining an affectation of serenity. She walked away from the group and proclaimed, "I'll call the butler and tell him to come back as soon as possible."

Arianne breathed a sigh of relief as she thought back on that lethal glare Shelly shot her a minute ago. It had unnerved her, making her feel like a prey that was moments away from being torn into pieces by a wolf. Shelly made her skin crawl.

It was hardly a challenge to deduce why Shelly was becoming more and more brazen with her antagonism, though. Arianne and Mark were divorced, so the mistress of the Tremont family had become Shelly. Now, Arianne was merely an outsider.

However, the way Mark had come rushing to her defense in front of everyone was at least reassuring. If it was not for the divorce certificate's existence, Arianne could be fooled into thinking that the divorce had never happened. Her relationship with Mark did not seem to have changed at all, and that was despite their ugly confrontation on the night before the divorce.

If anything, today's event had been an enlightening window into Mark's true thoughts about her. As a result, Arianne could no longer find it in her to be livid at him for covering up Shelly's role in the plane crash anymore.

Chapter 1637

Henry returned home shortly after.

Mary took out the items that had been bought for Henry. “Henry, Ari has bought these for you. That overcoat is especially nice; I helped pick it myself. You should try it on later.”

Arianne felt slightly troubled since Mary was the one who bought it instead of her. Arianne would be placed in a difficult spot if she did not bring any present for Shelly. However, even if she did, Shelly might complain and even criticize the present that had been given. Hence, Arianne thought she might as well not get her anything since she did not need to gain Shelly’s favouritism. Mary only did that to spite Shelly, but she neglected the fact that it would make it difficult for Arianne to escape the inevitable later on.

Henry shot a glance at Arianne and noticed that her face had paled. He knew that he should reject the gifts if he did not want Arianne to offend Shelly. However, instead of rejecting it, he smiled happily and said, “In that case, thank you very much, Ari. I realized that you look much better ever since you moved out of the Tremont Estate.”

Henry was indirectly saying that Arianne did not need to give Shelly any gifts since she and Mark were already divorced and she had already moved out. In a way, Arianne and Shelly could not be considered to be completely unrelated since they both still had a grudge against each other.

Arianne calmed her nerves and went headstrong as she said, “What’s there to thank? You’ve been taking care of me so much for so long that I think of you as part of my family… By the way, why have you gone out so early in the morning? Did Mark not tell you that I was coming to visit you today?”

Henry glanced at Shelly and said, “Mrs. Leigh instructed me to buy her some desserts this morning from a particular patisserie in the city. The roads were quite jammed this morning, but I turned back when I received the phone call, even though I hadn’t even arrived at the shop yet.”

Would Henry be asked to buy desserts if it was not done deliberately? Everyone knew what was actually going on, even Mark's face was extremely dark and frustrated.

Shelly was not flustered when her actions had been exposed. Instead, she was furious because she felt that everyone was going against her and siding with Arianne instead.

In that situation, Shelly would only be placed in a much worse position if she were to come off strong, but she might be able to gain some sympathy if she portrayed herself as a weak person instead. Therefore, she suppressed the anger in her eyes and said with a low voice, "You guys carry on chatting. I'm not feeling well, so I'll be heading upstairs now. There's no need to call me down for lunch later."

Nobody spoke as they all quietly watched Shelly walk upstairs, the atmosphere instantly turning vibrant the moment she left. Even Mary told the truth about the presents and said, "Ari felt bad that Mrs. Leigh might be unhappy if she only bought you a present, Henry. Even if she did buy something for her, Mrs. Leigh might complain and criticize Ari, which would make Ari feel uncomfortable as well. Therefore, I was the one who bought you the present, Henry. I wanted to annoy Mrs. Leigh for not treating Ari with the respect every human should receive."

Mark was rather unhappy at how the situation developed—Shelly was his own mother after all. It did not matter to him how he treated Shelly, but he would be slightly offended if it were someone else who did it to her. Putting Shelly's recent actions aside, she was still quite pitiful for whatever happened to her 20 to 30 years ago. Furthermore, it was a fact that Shelly truly cared for Mark. However, it was also because of how much she cared for him that she would use some extreme methods to commit mistake after mistake.

Arianne happened upon Mark's frown and almost immediately realized what he was thinking. It would seem that Shelly's previous plan to gain sympathy had worked. Arianne, afraid that Mark would be offended by Mary, immediately said, "Mary, why don't you go on and help Henry try on his overcoat?

You've got such a good eye to have picked such a nice overcoat for him. Christmas is just around the corner, so why are you still wearing such formal clothes, Henry? Hurry along and try on the overcoat Mary picked for you."

Henry nodded his head and grabbed Mary along with him. It was at that moment that Mary realized that she had gone a little too far when she looked at Mark.

When everyone was gone, Arianne turned around and looked at Mark before she asked, "Are you offended when others pick on her? In that case, what if it was me who picked on her instead?"

Chapter 1638

Mark answered reluctantly, "What are you talking about? Can't we talk about something else?"

Arianne breathed lightly and walked to the patio with Smore in her arms. "Let's go outside and sit for a while since the weather's so nice today. It's a little boring to be sitting inside at the moment."

Mark followed Arianne to the patio, which had previously been decorated according to his preferred taste. However, everything changed shortly after Arianne had left; even the roses that she loved had been replaced by another type of vegetation. Undoubtedly, the interior of the house would very soon be renovated according to Shelly's style. Arianne suddenly felt that she would not be able to return to Tremont Estate after her recent departure. Even if she did, she would have to return as a guest such as today. The man beside her was no longer related to her legally and everything would be different once he had another woman by his side.

The two of them sat opposite each other and suddenly ran out of topics to talk about. Only Smore was still running around excitedly without a care in the world.

In the end, Arianne still struck up a conversation and said, “I think the patio looks quite nice with its new decorations. Her sense of beauty seems to be better than yours.”

Mark lowered his eyes. “It doesn’t matter what she does, so long as she doesn’t annoy me.”

Arianne raised her head and looked at the blue sky. “Have you ever thought of what excuse we would need to come up with for us to meet again next time… How much effort would it take for us to do that? Do you think… things will slowly die down between us and that would be the end of it? If that’s true, I will probably regret how I ended up having such a huge argument with you before we divorced. Frankly, I’m not too bothered by whether you deliberately hid the fact about the airplane incident because of your mom or me, as I’m very well aware of your character. However, I’m afraid that I might end up with too many regrets unknowingly and end up not being able to fill up the gap I have.”

Mark was startled for a moment. “What nonsense are you spewing? We won’t be leaving any regrets behind. If we hadn’t divorced, I’m afraid that you would have suffered. Therefore, I think your suggestion to divorce was the right idea. Plus, you wouldn’t be happy if I were to force you to stay by my side in that kind of situation. Wait for me; I will find a way for you to come back.”

Arianne merely smiled in reply. She knew that there was no place for her there so long as Shelly still lived. Therefore, she did not take Mark’s promise seriously since the chances of it being realized were not great.

When it was time for lunch, Shelly did not join in as she had said earlier. Mark tried to invite her to join them but that failed, so he did not bother himself with her again.

However, while everyone was eating, Shelly suddenly walked downstairs and looked haggard, with no makeup on. She walked towards the living room and turned on the television as though nothing had

happened. However, it seemed like a bunch of healthy people eating together whilst they neglected a cripple who was sitting to the side.

Arianne knew very well that Shelly was deliberately making everyone lose their appetites, yet she could not say anything except for losing her own appetite as she felt disgusted.

When she saw that Smore and Mary were almost done eating, Arianne got up and said, “We’ll be off now, Mark. See you again next time.”

Mark stopped eating and said, “I’ll send you off.”

Arianne rejected his offer. “It’s fine. I don’t want the two of you to argue again, so you should stay behind and clear up this mess. I really hadn’t wanted to come here today, but were it not for meeting you and Henry.”

Chapter 1639

Mark glanced towards the living room and helplessly asked Henry to send off Arianne and the others.

He stood where he was, going into deep thought for a long while before he walked towards the living room. “What are you trying to play at? I’ve already told you before not to make things difficult for Arianne. What would you have me do?! Did you come back just to control me? Do you think that you could make me obey your every wishes just because you have some leverage on me? I’ve had enough!”

Shelly was in tears when she raised her head and looked at Mark. “Just how bad do you think I am? You think that I’m a bother, that’s fine; I’ll just walk away and not interrupt the two of you. However, here

you are, still blaming me when she's left after she was done eating. Have I done anything? Furthermore, I didn't stop you from sending her off. She was the one who didn't want you to do it anyway, correct? Why are you putting that on me? Since you're already divorced, you shouldn't be in contact with each other anymore. If you're missing Smore, you could just ask Henry to pick him up and let him stay over for two days."

Mark took a deep breath before turning around and heading upstairs. There was a very loud bang when he closed his bedroom door, which obviously indicated that he had completely vented his anger on the door.

Mark remained in his bedroom until the next morning.

Suddenly, someone was knocking on his bedroom door. Mark thought that it was Shelly and said with a cold voice, "Stop bothering me!"

Unexpectedly, a voice of an unfamiliar young woman came from the other end. "Excuse me… Mr. Tremont, have I offended you in any way?"

Feeling curious, Mark opened up the door to see who it was. He realized that standing before him was a completely unfamiliar woman who was dressed gracefully like she came from a humble family, with long jet black hair that made her seem like a gentle and demure girl. She even had just the right amount of light makeup on. Although the woman could not be considered to be extremely pretty, she seemed innocent and attractive, which would make anyone feel comfortable to have her around. All in all, the woman seemed to be of the same type as Arianne, yet they had nothing in common.

Mark suddenly remembered that Shelly had said that she wanted him to meet someone, but he had no intention of going out. Could Shelly have invited the woman over to his house because of that? It was

obvious what Shelly was planning to do, so Mark coldly said, “How could you have offended me when we don’t even know each other? You better run off and look for the person who invited you over.”

The woman was slightly startled for a moment and even felt awkward. However, Shelly arrived in the nick of time. “Saoirse, let’s go downstairs. Mark will be down shortly. I’ve already told you that he’s got a very bad temper, but you wouldn’t believe me.”

The woman nodded her head and turned around to walk downstairs after glancing at Mark again.

Mark intended to close the door again but was stopped by Shelly. “You promised me that you would at least be nice when she’s still here, so stop making things hard for her. You’ll find out if you like her or not after you’ve communicated with her. I refuse to believe that Arianne’s the only girl who suits your taste in this world. Saoirse McKinsey is a lady who comes from a well-off family. She’s compatible with you regardless of her family background or her character and much more suitable than Arianne. With that being said, you should quickly freshen up and come down to have a chat with her.”

Not only had she found another woman, but she had even found a woman whose surname contained Kinsey. It was obvious who Shelly was trying to refer to.

Mark had zero intention of being close to another woman, let alone interact with one. He was not willing to even lay his eyes on another woman. “You’re the one who invited her over, so deal with her yourself. I haven’t got the energy to do it for you.”

Shelly’s eyes trembled a little. “Just once, could you do it for me and have a chat with Saoirse? If you truly dislike her after that, I won’t force you into it anymore. I won’t even look for another woman for you. Otherwise, there will definitely be another woman after Saoirse leaves. Do as you wish.”

Mark frowned and hesitated for a moment before he asked, “Are you sure? Are you sure that there won’t be a next time as long as I help you entertain this woman today?”

Shelly gladly nodded her head. “Yes, I swear on it.”

Mark pondered for a moment and forcefully agreed to do it since it would be better to resolve the issue rather than letting it develop into a bigger problem later on. Furthermore, when Shelly mentioned that Saoirse was the daughter of a well-off family, Mark suddenly recalled that he had a long term collaboration with someone whose surname was McKinsey as well. Therefore, it was obvious that Shelly had come up with an intricate plan for him—Mark knew that he could not directly chase Saoirse away from his house for the sake of his company!

Chapter 1640

In order to not leave a good impression of himself on Saoirse, Mark deliberately wore something casual and refused to tidy himself up. It would be best if she did not have a good impression of him.

When Mark went downstairs, he casually walked towards the sofa and sat down. Then, he deliberately sized up Saoirse for a moment frivolously, which made him look like a debauchee. “Did you come alone?”

Saoirse blushed after being scanned by Mark with his frivolous eyes. She was too nervous to even meet his gaze, which made it obvious that her heart was fluttering. “Y-yes... I was invited over by Mrs. Leigh to visit your house after we met up over a cup of tea a few times previously. That’s why…”

Not beating around the bush, Mark said, “How could she be inviting you just to visit our house when she’s clearly asking you to come here for a matchmaking session? I’ve been married once and have a son

who's over two years old, so I have no plans on having another child. Are you happy with that?" What Mark was trying to say was that the Tremonts would only have Smore as Mark's one and only son.

Saoirse nervously raised her hand and pulled back the hair by her ears, her actions being all too similar to Arianne's. "I'm aware of everything that you've just said. Mrs. Leigh has already told me about it. I-I… don't really mind it… However, what I do mind is whether you would still be in close contact with your ex-wife. I believe you should have some recollection of my father since the two of you have been in collaboration with each other for many years now. We've never met before, but I've always been curious about the kind of person you are. Now that I've met you today, you're really different from how I imagined."

Mark lit up a cigarette, as based on his knowledge, women normally dislike the smell of tobacco. "What's different?"

Saoirse secretly shot a glance at him. "I used to think that you would be how others have described you, which is a cold person. However, after meeting you today, I know that what they said isn't true. Although you've got a bad temper, you're… sincere. I-I… really love that…"

Love?

Mark could not remain calm any longer. "Are you right in the head?"

Shelly, who was hiding by the stairs to "take a peep" at their conversation, almost fell. 'How could Mark say such a thing to a woman? Asking whether she is right in the head… If it were any other woman with a bad temper, she would probably have exploded instantly.'

Saoirse had already steeled herself after the prior incident when she knocked on Mark's bedroom door, so not only was she not angry, but she even smiled and said, "I'm perfectly normal. I don't believe there is a woman who wouldn't love you, would there? Maybe I don't stand out when compared with other women, but I'm very confident that I'll be able to make you have a different opinion of me."

Mark mocked her without hesitation. "You're overconfident in your capabilities."

Shelly could no longer listen any further. She swiftly took a photo of the pair and immediately tucked her phone away before walking up to them. "Saoirse, I've asked someone to make you some tea. It's the one you recommended to me previously. I've gone to such great lengths to acquire it."

Saoirse politely smiled as she said, "Thank you, Mrs. Leigh. Tremont Estate is truly beautiful, especially the pasture out by the patio. Am I correct to assume that they're all plants that you like?"

Shelly truly liked Saoirse from the bottom of her heart. "Is that so? I was the one who decorated it. I just had it revamped a few days ago. It seems like we've got very similar tastes. What a coincidence."

Saoirse knew how to impress her elders. With a gentle and timid voice, she said, "Mrs. Leigh, many people would be envious of Mark for having such a wonderful aunt."

Naturally, Shelly would not reveal the truth about how she was Mark's real mother, since it was a shameful incident for the Tremonts that should not be made known to the public, no matter how much Shelly dreamt of letting the entire world know that Mark was her son. In the end, Shelly changed the subject without being fazed in the slightest. "Saoirse, you carry on talking to Mark while I check up on the condition of the pot of flower I just bought yesterday. I'm worried that it may not be able to survive."