Ruling 1651

Chapter 1651

Mark left her home to work the first thing in the morning. Arianne, who was so exhausted by his carnal rampage last night, was unable to get up. In the end, she skipped work and slept all the way till afternoon.

When she finally woke, Mary served her a mysterious broth-like drink. “Come, dig into this special soup. Lunch’s up after this!”

Arianne sniffed it and caught a soft aroma not unlike that found in herbal alternative medicine. “What’s with this soup? It’s giving me this weird vibe…”

Mary snickered. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just a soup added with several herbs and spices that is traditionally meant to replenish your energy. No offense, but your body is pretty poo-poo, Ari! Though I think we should do the same thing for Mr. Tremont when he returns, too. It’s just good for the body,” she explained, before adding, “By the way, have you got plans later this evening? If you’re free, I’ll have to pass you the job of watching Smore in my place. I’ve got some business to do later, but I’ll be back just in time to make dinner for all of you.”

That was quite a novel turn of events. “Oh? I’ve never seen you gone out for personal reasons back in the Tremont Estate before. What’s so important that you need to go out for half a day?”

“Oh, just old man Henry inviting me out for a little walk—hiking, actually. Said he wants to train up his muscles a little or something, and I thought today’s weather is quite the right one. Besides, he finally got a half-day break today, which means he can split from seeing that old bum Mrs. Leigh and breathe a bit, you know?”

Arianne had always thought there was something between Henry and Mary, and this seemed like the right chance to tease the old housekeeper. “Took him long enough to ask you out on a ‘hiking trip’. Should have done this a long time ago, if you ask me!”

Mary slammed her hand on her shoulder a little too hard. “Bless you heart; you shouldn’t be joking about things like that! How can the two of us ever be an item? Urgh, kids these days—always looking for that gossip! I’ll bring out lunch right now. After that, though, I’m gonna have to go. Leave the dishes in the sink. I’ll handle them when I come back. You just have to look after Smore.”

Arianne nodded before taking a sip of her mysterious soup. It left an odd taste in her mouth, though she would not go so far as to say it was bad, per se—she might even call it rather tasty, if not unique.

Suddenly, a thought sprung into her mind. Did Mary make this soup precisely because she heard something through the walls?… Could the real use of this “herbal soup” actually be…?

By late afternoon, with Smore taking his nap, there was no one else in the house to interact with, so Arianne took the chance to watch her drama on the television from the comfort of her couch. Since the volume was soft, when someone knocked on her door, it sounded blunt and jarring.

Worried that it might wake Smore up, Arianne quickly dashed toward the door without putting her shoes on. She yanked the door open—and found herself staring, jaw-slacked, at the equally-startled guest.

Arianne had not expected to ever be visited by Saoirse, while Saoirse was simply startled by the way Arianne had presented herself. Arianne was bare-footed, her hair messy and unkempt; she looked like a textbook example of a dowdy woman.

Was this how Arianne presented herself in front of Mark, too?

The two of them took some time to compose themselves, but Saoirse was the first to break the spell. With a sweet smile, she greeted, “Hello, Miss Wynn! Sorry for my lapse in manners. I have something I would like to ask you about, so may I come in?”

Truthfully, Arianne was utterly against it. But even she had to admit curiosity about the depth of Saoirse’s relationship with Mark. What if he lied and downplayed it to her?

She released her grip on the door handle and stood aside. “Sure, come on in. My son’s napping, so we better keep this quiet.”

Saoirse looked around, examining her surroundings as though the furnishing interested her. “Aww, he’s napping? Bummer. I actually wanted to sneak a peek at Smore, you know, ‘cause Mrs. Leigh loves talking about him, and from the way she describes him, I bet he must be an adorable lil’ cinnamon bun,” she said. “Oh, before you take this the wrong way, let me say that I’m not here for any ulterior motive, Arianne. I simply want to know the truth… Specifically, the truth about you and Mr. Tremont, including why the two of you divorced. If it’s okay with you, can you enlighten me?”

Chapter 1652

Arianne was not a guileless fool, nor did she make a habit of willingly sharing her private matters with strangers. “Why ask? Are you so close with Mark that you’re supposed to know about his history already? If yes, then shouldn’t you cut the middleman and ask straight from the horse’s mouth?”

Sensing hostility, Saoirse went ahead and took a seat on the couch.

“I just can’t wrap my head around this whole thing. I want to learn why the two of you divorced in the first place, and why, even after that, his aunt’s adamant that you get booted from Tremont Enterprise. I can’t get behind why she doesn’t do anything herself and instead tried to talk me into it. I suspect that if it weren’t for the fact that Mr. Tremont was protecting you, she wouldn’t have resorted to asking an outsider like me to meddle, would she? The way I see it, it’s like she’s trying to carry out her wishes without fracturing her relationship with Mark,” she explained. “Here’s the thing, I don’t want to be an unwitting pawn. Yes, I like Mr. Tremont enough to wish we could be together, but I also look way past the intermediate. The last thing I want is a Pyrrhic victory where I got my wish granted, only to make a bitter enemy out of Mr. Tremont himself.”

Arianne frowned. “That Shelly-Ann Leigh’s looking to kick me out of the company, you say? And she tried to goad you into doing it for her?”

Seeing how Arianne addressed Shelly by her full name, more pieces to the puzzle clicked in Saoirse’s mind. “I take it that you don’t enjoy a pleasant relationship with Mr. Tremont’s aunt very much?”

Arianne snorted. “If it weren’t for her, Mark and I wouldn’t have been in such a dark place that divorce became the only option left! Look, this whole thing is a complicated mess and I’m not gonna touch on it, but I’ll tell you this one thing: don’t, ever, fall for her lies. If she herself doesn’t dare try ousting me, then how are you supposed to go about it? Truth be told, I wasn’t the one who wanted to be bound to Tremont Enterprise; that clause was Mark’s brainchild. He added it into our divorce agreement, as he would only accept the split if I don’t leave his sight.”

Right on cue, Saoirse spied a hickey on Arianne’s neck and immediately cast her eyes downward.

“I see now. Mr. Tremont… He stayed for the night recently, didn’t he? Just as I suspected—the divorce was an involuntary arrangement. It was coercion on his aunt’s part,” she concluded. “I’m glad I had the sensibility to ask you. I was so close to being duped into making an enemy out of you, and that

automatically means making an enemy out of Mr. Tremont. A divorce that was forced between a couple who still loves each other isn't a genuine separation, so I won't come in between you two and be used as a pawn."

Judging from what she had gathered, Arianne surmised that Saoirse and Mark had, indeed, nothing going on at all. It was a realization that softened Arianne's initial wariness. "But what exactly is between you and Mark?"

Saoirse sighed quietly. "What else? It's his aunt's doing. I met her during a tea party that one time and the next thing I knew, she was introducing me to Mr. Tremont. See, she's got a bit of a problem with her leg, so I helped her around during the party. That was probably why she remembered me in a favorable light, I guess. Nonetheless, I only went to the Tremont Estate that one time, and gosh, everything in Mr. Tremont's attitude—his word choices, his tone, his actions—was blatantly against my being there!

"You don't have to worry at all, Arianne. There's nothing between us, and it will stay that way," she promised. "God, imagine having an in-law like his aunt… I feel really sorry for you. Can't believe someone could be so giddy into forcing her nephew with another girl, despite knowing he still loves you."

Arianne pressed her lips into a thin line. How she wished Shelly were "just" Mark's aunt instead of his actual birth mother!

After Saoirse left, Arianne dialed Mark's number before ending the call on second thought. What good would she make by telling Mark his beloved mother was fomenting troubles behind his back? At most, it would just lead to another heated altercation. Nothing else substantial would have happened.

With Saoirse now out of the picture, who knows who else would come in to pick up where she left? Arianne was not at all optimistic that the next one would be half as shrewd and slick as Saoirse. In the

worst-case scenario, the next “contender” would be the lovestruck, obsessive type, and that was when the brunt of these schemes really hit.

As soon as Saoirse left the condominium, her phone rang. She glanced at the screen, saw it was from Shelly, and thought against picking it up instantly.

Shelly was the one who had provided her the address to Arianne’s house, and Saoirse bet that the woman had not expected Saoirse to have visited Arianne for purposes other than harming her.

A moment later, Saoirse finally picked up the phone unenthusiastically. “Hello? Yes, Mrs. Leigh. What is it?”

Anxiously waiting on the other side was Shelly, who decidedly phrased her question in a roundabout way. “So, any update on your progress? Have you gone to see Arianne?”

Chapter 1653

Saoirse examined her freshly-made manicure nonchalantly. When she spoke, her tone was markedly devoid of the respect she used to reserve for Shelly. “Yea, I’ve talked to her. So? Listen, Mrs. Leigh, don’t ever call me about this ever again. Mr. Tremont never wanted to divorce Mrs. Tremont, did he? Which is why even now, they live as though the divorce never happened. They’re always meeting each other whenever they can. So, why did you ask me to stir up something to get Mrs. Tremont kicked out of the company? Were you trying to get me into trouble? No one crosses Mr. Tremont. What’s a quicker way to incur his wrath than to hurt his lady?

“With all due respect, Mrs. Leigh, you’re completely on the wrong side of things here. You yourself knew better than to piss Mr. Tremont off, so you tried to sacrifice me instead. You only see me as a pawn, don’t you? And even if I manage to marry Mr. Tremont in the future, should I be expecting you to concoct some new schemes to kick me away if I don’t behave as you’d like? That’s right, I know you’re

the one who caused their divorce. In fact, I'm beginning to think that having an in-law like you is a pretty good testament to how hard a person's misfortune hits," she said, before finishing, "Anyway, I'm a busy young lady, so I'm gonna have to stop right here. Goodbye."

Shelly had not expected Saoirse to abandon ship so soon. When the same young woman cut off their call in her face, it caused her combined fury to erupt. She almost smashed her newly-bought phone into pieces as she shrieked, "That mousy, useless piece of sh*t!"

The day quickly turned into night. Mark had driven several laps in the Tremont Estate's area before finally conceding that he had to go back to the Estate in the end.

He could not remember a day when he needed not convince himself to go home. Seeing Shelly just put that much strain on his mind.

Mark was prepared for a face-whipping typhoon behind that door, but what awaited him—for reasons so mysterious, Mark wondered if he should count it as miraculous or sinister—was a very calm, decidedly-not-shouting Shelly. In fact, she even looked like she had had a good day.

"Welcome home, Mark dear. Why didn't you answer my call last night? You haven't even replied to any of my messages, either. That's a shame, isn't it? I only wanted to ask how Smore's doing and maybe talk to you a bit. Don't tell me you've made declining my calls a habit now," she said. "I know, I know. You think me annoying and you don't want me fussing about you. But it's only because I care for your wellbeing, you know. I get that Arianne won't let me see Smore, but does that mean I'll suddenly lose interest in him? No way; that's my grandson, alright? But… Enough about last night. I know you're tired, so go take a rest. I'm not going to go off at length about it anymore—wouldn't want you to feel any more annoyed."

Seeing Shelly in one of her less cantankerous moods made Mark lose his temper. Instinctively, he replied, "'kay. I'll be upstairs."

Shelly waited until he disappeared into the stairs before every scintilla of pleasantness in her mien dissipated as though they were never there. After living with him for a few days, Shelly had assembled a clear profile of Mark's temperament. She learned that the man always responded back in kind—act meek, and he reacts meekly; be aggressive, and he reacts with aggression.

That was the reason why many of their fights so far had ended in silent treatments. It was also why Shelly had to control her own temper with all her might, even if her spleen ran high at him seeing Arianne. She had to hold her fire, or risk their frail relationship cracking under constant conflicts.

Arianne was slightly late to work the next day. Smore had coughs, so she had to bring him to the hospital before work.

As she was walking toward her desk, she espied Shelly sitting on her spot, apparently having a very spirited chat with Sylvain. Knowing that any time Shelly wanted to talk to her portended troubles, Arianne approached her with a poker face. "What is it this time?"

Shelly turned to her before flashing a sweet, toothy grin and rose. She made a show of tidying Arianne's messy collar for her. "None whatsoever. It's just that this morning, I overheard from Mark's call with you that Smore's having coughs, and you needed to bring him to a doctor. I got worried, so I just thought of asking if the kid's fine. He is fine, right?"

Arianne's skin crawled. Shelly was, disgustingly, a virtuoso in acting.

She took two steps back quietly. “He’s fine. Even if he’s not, it’s got nothing to do with you. Don’t you have any work to do? Because I do, so please step aside.”

Sylvain watched their brief exchange with his mouth agape, though he did not interject. Catching his expression with her peripheral vision, Shelly immediately affected a wronged, wounded look. “Oh. I’m sorry. I just… I just wanted to know if Smore’s alright, that’s all. Look, I know I’ve done something that chagrined you but… Sigh. Never mind. Let’s just let that slide. Excuse me.”

Arianne said nothing in return, opting to let the screeching of her chair being pulled out fill the silence. Shelly had clearly messed with her papers, too, so she proceeded to tidy them in exasperation, her actions ungentle and forceful.

Sylvain waited until Shelly faded into a distance before asking quietly, “She doesn’t seem too bad on the surface, you know? At the very least, she’s way better than my mom. How did someone like that cause you and Mark’s divorce?”

Chapter 1654

Arianne immediately paused in mid-action.

“Are you for real? Do you only see with your eyes and avoid using your damn head?” she snapped. “Ever heard of two-faced fakers? Or are you doubting my character already? Or maybe you think I’m being overdramatic and raging over a nothingburger!”

“What? No, man! That was a genuine question; c’mon, don’t be pissed, please,” he replied quickly. “It’s just that… what I saw from my interaction with her and what you told me combined show a downright terrifying character. She acts like she’s chummy with you in public, but in the shadows? She schemes against you and plots your doom! You know, before you came, she struck a conversation with me, and there wasn’t a single line throughout when she mentioned anything bad about you. It had been heaps of

praises after praises, and at one point, she even lamented about the divorce between you and Mr. Tremont. She was acting so convincing that, I admit, I almost tipped over into believing her."

Arianne was close to erupting into scornful laughter. Was this Shelly's desperate grab at collecting supporters? What a two-faced, disingenuous, disgusting little b*tch!

Even as morning turned into afternoon, Shelly had yet to leave the company. She ostensibly wanted to invite the management higher-ups to lunch, and as the company's premier fashion designers, Sylvain and Arianne were also invited.

Arianne was a hundred percent against attending it. She had no idea what Shelly's latest stratagem was, so she was wary about attending what could very well be a trap.

However, when it was time for lunch, Sylvain still managed to drag her into it. He claimed that the prospect of attending the event alone made him queasy. As Arianne's best chum in the company, he was sure that Shelly would be mounting all sorts of ways to tear him down in Arianne's stead. To protect himself, he reasoned, he needed to bring Arianne with him to—as he called it—"draw aggro."

Arianne and Sylvain were the last to arrive at the chosen restaurant. By then, the private dining room was already brimming with people. Two of the seats next to Mark were already occupied—on his left was Shelly, while one of the managing directors sat on his right. Catching Arianne, the director got up from her seat a little, clearly deciding to pass the seat.

Shelly stopped her. "Oh, there's no need for that! You can definitely sit here. We're here for a fun, relaxed lunch, right? Just take whatever seat that makes you comfortable."

The director was a slick who quickly replied jokingly, “Oh, hell naw! Right now, the most comfortable seat for Madam is right beside our Mr. Tremont! We side characters just gotta retreat to our designated spots in the corner, haha!”

“Huh? You mean you people didn’t know? Mr. Tremont’s single now! He and Arianne divorced a few days ago,” Shelly exclaimed in feigned surprise. “Huh… I thought that, given how explosive this revelation is, it should have been commonplace knowledge by now in the office. Turns out it’s news to you guys, huh?”

In a split second, every pair of eyes in the room was trained on Mark and Arianne. All of their faces bore a variety of reactions, though they all shared the common shock of hearing a world-shattering news.

Mark’s expression darkened. Shelly did it on purpose—she did it on purpose!

In comparison, Arianne’s eyes narrowed on Shelly for a few seconds before looking away. She found an empty seat and sat, unfazed.

“She’s right. Mark and I are divorced. However, I saw this as nothing more than a private matter between two people, so there’s never been a consideration to announce it publicly. Aren’t we here in this company to work instead of, I dunno, gossip about other people’s personal baggage?” she said simply. “Honestly, how juvenile must a person be to not know she can’t mix private and public matters like this? How rude, too.”

Anyone who could read between the lines instantly knew this was a veiled clapback at Shelly. Suddenly, the general mood in the room turned a little strung.

Shelly's face slightly faltered. "Arianne Wynn! I only said it by accident, okay? That was an honest gaffe. You don't have to show me this nasty glower and sling a stinging retort like that at me, right? Regardless of what I did, I'm still your senior worthy of basic respect, correct?"

Chapter 1655

Arianne's tone was as cold as steel. "'Senior'? You mean the senior of the Tremont family, which by the way, I'm no longer a member of? What's that got to do with me?" she sneered. "I had respected you and bent over backward for you on so many, many occasions back then that, now, if you're trying to guilt-trip me on an imaginary inadequacy, you can call that off already. It's not gonna work. Besides, if we're tracking records, then you were the one who never cared for me at all, weren't you? But, of course, we're not in-laws anymore, so you should probably drop the whole 'respect your elder!' angle while we're in a professional setting. Remember, this is a company gathering—it isn't a private tea between you and me to air grievances. Let's have some class, shall we, Mrs. Leigh?"

Arianne was practically expelling breaths when she enunciated "Mrs. Leigh" for emphasis. Shelly had no interest in preserving Arianne's dignity and reputation, so Arianne had no obligation to hold back punches either. She would love to see if Shelly had the guts to announce herself as Mark's birth mother right there and then, since Mark's nature and temperament would definitely not brook a mortifying transgression like that.

In other words, if Shelly was too much of a milquetoast to announce it, then she better be prepared to remain as plain old "Mrs. Leigh" forever.

Mark slapped the surface of the table with just the right amount of force. "That's enough. Let's eat."

Sylvain let out a breath he had been holding and passed Arianne a piece of napkin. Her hand had barely grabbed hold of it when she heard an unambiguously tearful sniffle from Shelly's direction. Worse, it was so loud that everyone present in the room heard it.

God, what Oscar-winning act was she pulling off this time?

Seeing Shelly bursting into tears made everyone ogle Arianne with traces of disapproval in their eyes. The accusation was palpable—Arianne had made an older woman cry, and that was simply at odds with common decency.

With an unremovable grimace, Arianne ignored her and focused on her lunch. Someone out of the bunch would have come to the rescue sooner or later, she reasoned, which meant Arianne did not need to stick her hand into this muck at all.

Christ, she should not have come. It was a trap wearing a veneer of a lighthearted feast, and by attending it, Arianne had set herself up to be played by Shelly.

Frankly, it was not at all hard-to-understand what Shelly was aiming to achieve, since Saoirse had given Arianne enough tips as it was. Shelly was trying to eject Arianne from the company, and one of the most surefire ways to do it was to convince everyone in the company to see Arianne as deplorable and indecent. Combined with the reveal of their divorce, all Shelly needed was a little bit more spices and some time for things to ferment before—voila!—Arianne became the black sheep in the office.

This was just her first step.

Already, someone in the crowd offered Shelly some tissues and soft-spoken comfort. The situation had turned into a chance for motivated bystanders to suck up to Shelly, who was now the closest kin Mark had. Arianne had been excluded from the Tremont family, which was why nobody who was smart would stand at Arianne's side.

This unnerving atmosphere continued to hang above the dining room until lunch was over. The attendees gradually filed out of the room in droves, until only Mark, Shelly, Arianne, and Sylvain were left.

It was then that Mark finally let loose the broiling ire he had kept within him throughout lunch. “From now on, you are not to be near anyone in the company. You are not to invite Tremont Enterprise employees to any meal, either. Simply put, keep your hands off my company affairs!” he bristled. “Tremont Enterprise is a property of the Tremont family and you have not a mote of relation to it. Your only relationship to the family is through me and me alone. Even then, what we share is a shaky tie, because I maintain my stance: I regret being associated with you. I don’t care how great you are at dissembling to others. At the end of the day, the only thing I need you to understand is this: stop challenging my patience. The concessions I make are not checks for your temerity to cash.”

Now that Mark stated his piece, Sylvain could finally conclude in full confidence that Shelly did, just as Arianne accused, regard Arianne a nemesis to be taken out. Sylvain already knew about Arianne’s desire to keep her divorce a secret, so when Shelly seized the chance presented during this gathering to publicize it, her agenda had become too obvious to be ignored.

Shelly, however, was still trying to defend herself. “I really wasn’t trying to let slip the thing about your divorce, okay? Seriously, you can’t be lashing out on me on Arianne’s behalf just because I made an oopsie, right? Could it be that in your mind, I mean less than some Little Miss Extra who’s not even your family?!”

“‘Extra?! When the hell was she an ‘extra’?!” Mark fumed, leaping to his feet. “She’s my beloved! She’s the mother of my son! And who are you supposed to be? You’re the one who popped out of nowhere one day, who was apparently my—”

He left his sentence hanging rather than finish it. Sylvain was watching them, and Mark at least had the good grace to not strip off Shelly’s dignity in front of him.

Arianne heaved a mighty sigh. “God, just stop it. Been here, done this. There’s no need for this repetitive back-and-forth—it’s all spits and no substance. I’m going back to work.”

She clapped on Sylvain’s shoulder good-naturedly, signaling him to leave with her.

Before the two of them left the door, however, she stopped in her tracks and turned to look at Shelly over her shoulder. “By the way, if you’re looking to kick me out of Tremont Enterprise, you’ll have a better chance by doing it yourself rather than using other people as your pawns. See, Saoirse McKinsey isn’t a dumbass. She didn’t like to be ordered around and used as cannon fodder. I guess this is why you’re carrying out your scheme yourself now, huh? Unfortunately, you’re not as wily and shrewd as you fantasize yourself to be. And Mark? Well, he’s not as clueless as you’d hoped.”

…

After lunch, rumors and gossip about Arianne began to spread like wildfires in the office, each of them displaying slightly different blends to it.

Chapter 1656

Arianne could not care less about what others thought, especially since she hardly interacted with her colleagues at work. The only two people whom she ever forged a friendly rapport with were Sylvain and Robin.

Robin was the kind who could brook no bad talks made behind the subject’s back. Hearing unkind gossip about Arianne being made in her vicinity had spurred her into a few arguments with her coworkers in the department. Every time she recounted the content of the gossip in righteous indignation to Arianne,

the latter would always flash her a slight smile. “It’s fine, just let them talk till their mouths fall off. I don’t care,” she said. “You should stop arguing with them, too. We can’t control what others think, and I’m really fine.”

On a rainy weekend night, Arianne was awoken by the sound of her phone ringing incessantly. A casual glance at the screen revealed the caller as Mark, but she hesitated to answer.

Ever since the fiasco of a lunch, Arianne and Mark’s relationship seemed to have chilled. When they bumped into each other at work, they simply exchanged nods as their eyes linked for a second or two. They had nothing to say to each other.

For months, the two didn’t even meet each other outside of work. Arianne had no comments on how things had turned out for them, frankly, because she could bet that Shelly had something to do with it. Either way, if Mark was not going to see her of his own volition, she would not, either.

This was why it was surprising to receive his call suddenly. And to receive it in the middle of the night at that…

The ringing lasted for only a while before, to Arianne’s unexpected, mysterious dismay, it stopped. Suddenly, she lamented not taking up the call sooner.

Just when she was still debating about whether she should call him back, he called again. There was no hesitance in her picking up this time. “Hello? It’s late in the night. What’s wrong?”

Mark’s muffled voice reverberated from the other side. “Open… door…”

Arianne, shocked, forfeited answering him and leaped out of her bed to go to the living room. She yanked the door open, and a black silhouette fell onto her. Arms rounded her up into him, his familiar scent mixed with the stench of alcohol filling her in.

Arianne drew a quick, sharp breath and slipped her phone into her sleepgown's pocket. She helped him into her bedroom as she asked, "Why are you here all of a sudden? God, how much have you drunk? Who were you with? Jackson? God, Tiffie's really late in her pregnancy now, you know. You gotta stop asking Jackson to go out for a drink with you late at night. I know Tiffie isn't gonna explicitly go against it, but it's still not a good thing to do, agreed? Besides, alcohol is bad for health, isn't it? I've told you a million times, but you're so stubborn that you can give a mule a run for its money—"

Her lips were sealed by his own before she could finish her sentence.

His kiss was a force of nature, like a hurricane hellbent in taking everything into itself. It seized Arianne so forcefully and completely that she offered not a modicum of resistance.

She had no idea when the two of them were somehow on the bed. She had little else to do other than to let him take all there was in her.

Chills brought by the storm outside the window complemented with the rising temperature inside drew from each heated breath. It went on for an imperceptibly long time until they each finally calmed down.

Satisfied, Mark went into a deep slumber. Arianne, meanwhile, had yet to feel sleepy, so she laid next to him with her fingers gently tracing the arch of his eyebrows. Her beloved was physically right in front of her, and yet at the same time, he was so far away, he might as well as be on the other side of the world.

Chapter 1657

Arianne's thoughts were about to meander when suddenly, her phone beeped. A text.

Spam messages did not usually make rounds at midnight, so with a frown, she unlocked her phone and peeked at the message sent from an unknown number.

'I know Mark's with you again. He threw a big fit at me before running away. Oh, but don't get cocky, deary; he only thinks of you when he's in the dumps. That's literally all this is. FYI, a man can have multiple women in his life, but he only has one mother.'

Shelly-Ann Leigh. Arianne had blacklisted that woman's number last time, and now she had returned with a new one to torment her. Arianne was not in the mood to respond, so she simply blacklisted the new number again.

At the very least, Mark ended up on her bed. No matter how low in the dumps he was, he would never seek solace in the arms of any other woman.

That, alone, was enough of an assurance.

The next morning, Mark felt headaches assaulting him. In the midst of grogginess, he felt someone pinching his nose.

His eyes snapped open, and Smore's adorable, round face leaped into his sight. It was enough to stave off his annoyance, and quickly, Mark scooped the boy up into his arms. "Up already, you? Are you not gonna sleep a little more, little man?"

Smore rode Mark's back as babyish chuckles burbled out of him. "Mommy says only lazy bums wake up late! You're a lazy bum, Daddy! Mommy told me to wake you up for breakfast."

Mark shook his head. How did he end up here? The details were lost on him. All he remembered was that this was what he had been dreaming of for so long—of waking up to a beautiful morning like this.

The father and son fooled around on the bed for a while until Arianne went inside. "What are you two doing? Still not getting up?" she said. "Even if it isn't a workday today, you shouldn't be wasting your time on sleeping. Besides, I've promised Smore to bring him outside to play."

Arianne's appearance immediately arrested Mark's wandering eyes. Today, she donned a thin, high-collared sweater, its color as white as snow, on top of a pair of washed-out jeans. She looked like a girl-next-door brimming with clean, simplistic charm—just as she had looked a few years ago in the Tremont Estate.

"Ari, when a man starts reminiscing on the good o' days, does it mean he has truly grown old?"

His out-of-nowhere question mystified Arianne almost the instant it fell out of his mouth. "What are you sayin'? Are you trying to tell me that you're starting to miss the past, and that makes you old? Well, I happen to think you've been quite an old geezer for a long time now… Yep. You're a staid old geezer with a stiff upper-lip."

The corner of Mark's lips twitched. "Urgh. Thanks for ruining my morning vibe," he muttered. "Fine. Breakfast time. Smore! Get down from me!"

While the family was eating around the table, Arianne told Mark about the message she'd received from Shelly last night. "How dramatic was the whole tiff, huh? I can't help but be curious after seeing a text like that."

As he was wont to do every time someone mentioned Shelly, Mark's brow furrowed into a deep frown, as though someone had spat in his soup and he still had to drink it. She was someone he could not, for the life of him, become intimate with, and yet was just as impossible to remove from his life for good. He was helpless—choiceless.

"What else? I'm certain it's not something you can't imagine. She wants me to build a wall between the two of us so that we'll never see each other again, and I told her 'never in a million years'," he began. "Ari, I was thinking… Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps I should stop honoring her whims, you know? No matter what her demands are, I don't want to bend over backward in anguish for her anymore. I… I want to marry you again. Want you to come back to the Tremont Estate in the grandest, most official way possible. I want a wedding—the biggest, the best—and tell the whole world that you, Arianne Wynn, are my one and only wife.

"I've been thinking a lot on my own lately, and I've realized… Why try to hide something that can't be papered over? Not being able to hide a secret is not what's truly lamentable—it's losing the one person you love, back when she's right within your reach. My foster mother might have been heinous against my birth mother, but she has provided me with nothing short of motherly love. To me, my foster mother is my real mother," he continued. "What my foster mother owed my birth mother, I'll atone in her stead, but it shouldn't be in this way. I'm not adverse to supporting my birth mother until she shrugs off her mortal coil, but on the condition that you don't suffer a single wrong in the process."

Arianne was stunned into silence. Mark's proclamation shocked her profoundly primarily because she knew of the reason behind him enduring all of the trial thus far. Why else did he subject himself to such anguish, if not because his foster mother's reputation depended on it!

And Arianne would always, unconditionally, support him, even if at a little cost of her happiness. But now he spoke of giving everything up—for her sake.

Chapter 1658

She yearned for a beautiful wedding with him. And then an exciting, fulfilling future. Right now, in a flight of her imagination, she could already see him in her mind's eye, slipping their wedding ring through her finger in a church…

Despite that, she smiled and feigned casualness in her tone. "What are you saying? Your foster mom went ahead with an outrageous and earth-shattering plan just for you, Mark. I know my dad was a victim of it and I probably shouldn't even be saying these things, but… I don't think you did wrong. No, seriously, I don't. Don't ever think I'm suffering some sort of wrong or whatever because of what's happening right now, because frankly, I think you suffered way more than I did. As long as you're okay with this, I'm okay, got it? This whole remarriage-wedding thing… It's definitely not something you can just pull off. You know Shelly's not gonna let us remarry, let alone allow a grand wedding between the two of us—so don't. Don't be reckless."

The conviction in Mark's eyes was frighteningly resolute. "I've made up my mind, Ari. I'm going to do it."

"You'll regret this. You know you will," she rebutted, shaking her head. "If you stubbornly go ahead with it, well! I'm cutting ties with you, then. I'll… find some other guy and marry him, and I'll find a way to vanish from your sight and your life forever. You know I'll do it, because I always do what I say I would, so don't force my hand! Look… I can wait, alright? I don't mind waiting for things to get better. So please, don't do anything that is against what's true to your heart 'just because', okay? You know what they say: 'there's always a rainbow after a storm.' But our storm isn't over yet; are you telling me you can't take it anymore? No! We will wait until the sun is up and smiling at us again. We will wait for the rainbow...

“But first, enough talk! Have your breakfast already. After that, our family can go out and have some fun. Just look at Smore! He’s so happy and excited to see his Daddy!”

The more casual and noncommittal she sounded—the more reasonable she acted—the harder it wrung Mark’s heart. Why must Arianne always act so sensibly? Why could she not, for once, take a page out of Shelly’s playbook and throw hissy, sobbing tantrums and be irrational and self-obsessed?

If she could just act even a little bit like that, Mark would seize the chance immediately and take her side without hesitance. Unlike now, where he had to quietly give up on her once again because he was just too strapped for choices.

By this time of the year, bitter, nipping winter had left the continent, leaving spring to fill its void. Outside the city, the first verdant blanket of grass had sprouted, and the land was teeming with new life.

Mark and Arianne, together with Smore and Mary, had invited Jackson, Tiffany, and their son Lil’ P for an outdoor picnic.

Jackson’s culinary prowess was once again up for display in his grilling skill. All it took to lure the two little boys was the aroma from the food he was working on. It was so good, the kids had been watching the spit intently since Jackson began. They even resisted their nature’s call to romp around the field!

However, one member in the party outclassed the boys in gluttony. Tiffany, unfettered by her growing pregnancy, kept hovering about and pestering incessantly. “Is it done already? Me, me, me! Let me have a taste!”

Mary laughed. “Folks used to say that pregnant women are voracious gluttons, and I guess they weren’t lying at all. Look at you; you’re drooling more than two rowdy boys combined! Speaking of which, judging by the shape of your belly, I bet it’s a boy.”

That immediately bummed Tiffany out. “Excuse me? That’s not right! It’s definitely a girl. We went to check in the hospital, and the doctor said it’s totally a girl! And it’s gotta’ be a young lady, too, because she’s supposed to be Smore’s wife in the future,” she protested. “’Sides, I ain’t gonna be pumping out boys all the time, right? That’ll be the end of me.”

“I’m only laying it on you as it is,” Mary murmured. “The shape of your belly is the same as Ari’s when she had Smore…”

Tiffany immediately lost her appetite. “Jackson Weeeeeeest! You heard what the doctor said, didn’t you? It’s a girl, right?!”

Jackson nodded in his most disinterested, annoyed manner. “Yea, yea, whatever; it’s a girl, hip-hip-hooray. Can you stop nagging already? I think my brain is melting from the noise. Please just let me focus on my barbecue. As you can see, I’m the only one who’s grilling food for everyone here, so yea, a little sympathy will be most appreciated, thanks.”

With contempt etched in his scowl, Mark passed some raw food to Jackson. “As if you’re the only one working hard! What, am I not doing enough for you as your errand boy? Besides, you brought this job upon yourself by being a Gordon Ramsey over everyone else’s grilling skills, effectively setting yourself up as the only qualified chef,” he quipped, before adding, “I must admit, though… The air in these parts is refreshing. A mansion built here should be very profitable.”

Chapter 1659

Jackson had the same thought. “I’m thinking the same. I’ve been watching this space for a while now; just couldn’t plan anything with it because my company’s a bit short on funds lately. If you’re serious about this, though, may I propose a cooperation?”

Capitalists always see business in anywhere they go—even during an outdoor picnic. These two were, in particular, pretty far-gone in this regard.

Suddenly, on a decidedly bad timing, Mark’s phone rang.

Traumatized by Shelly’s relentless, obsessive pursuits these days, Mark had become very allergic to phone calls in general. He dithered for a bit before finally fishing the phone out. Seeing that it was from the office instead, his grimace eased a little. “Yes?”

No one could hear what was being said from the other side, but Mark’s face slowly crunched back into a slight scowl. He did not even say a word more before hanging it up, claiming, “I have an emergency at work requiring my immediate attention. You guys go ahead and enjoy yourself without me. I’ll come back as soon as I finish it.”

Tiffany took the chance to jab at him. “You finally got the time for Ari and Smore… and then you have to go, again. Unreliable much?”

Mark shot an unfathomable look at Arianne as though there were words ready behind his teeth, yet for some reason, he could not say them out loud.

She beat him to it. “It’s fine. Go, attend that urgent thing. Call me when you’re done.”

He nodded and hurried away.

Fortunately, Smore's attention had been completely focused on the upcoming delicious food, so he had not spared a shred of his mind on Mark leaving. If he saw his father leaving, though, he would probably wreak havoc via another toddler meltdown.

Mark could not make it back even as the picnic was over. In the end, the group had to return to the city after deciding they should meet at White Water Bay Café.

When Arianne asked him what happened, a strange, unnatural air shadowed Mark's mien. "Nothing, of course. Just, uh, a minor problem in one of our contracts."

After being with him for so long, Arianne could easily read through his attempt at mendacity. "Look, if you're only going to lie to me, then I'd prefer you to just keep quiet."

"Fine, fine!" he intoned helplessly. "It's about your last design. It's being, um, sued… for plagiarism. By a designer from another company."

Arianne's eyes widened. "Plagiarism? Who… Who did I plagiarize? Oh my God, Mark! You should have told me just now and brought me along to the office! Let me see which design it was exactly, you know?" she cried. "I almost always finalize my work on my desk, in the office. Sure, sometimes I'll look at other people's designs and products for inspiration, but most of my ideas come from discussions with Sylvain. I've never plagiarized."

Mark held her hand in comfort. “I know all of that… I know you. That is why I’ll get to the bottom of this. I won’t let anyone mount an unfair and untrue accusation against you. After all, this isn’t just about you now—it also pertains to Tremont Enterprise’s reputation. But I’m going to have to ask you to step aside from this, okay? Just let me handle it. I swear, I’ll clear your name.”

That was then when Arianne remembered something—and her heart skipped a beat in trepidation.

A few months ago, Shelly had gone to the office. She then sat on Arianne’s seat and had a lengthy talk with Sylvain. Yes, that was the same day that later went awry because of a certain lunch fiasco, which was why Arianne remembered that day vividly.

Shelly had messed around with Arianne’s papers that day, too—a pile that included her latest design. Could Shelly be so desperate to oust her from the Tremont Enterprise that she saw no problem going to this extreme? Could she really be so consumed by her personal grudge that not even the reputation of the entire Tremont Enterprise was worth preserving?

Arianne dared not make a case for that. The gravity of her accusation against Shelly would be momentous, and she knew very well the disparity between herself and that woman. Shelly had the leeway to bully and torment her as many times as the former liked, but she could not—not even once—wrongly charge Shelly of any wrongdoing. A single misunderstanding was all it would take to cause Mark’s inner balance to tip over to Shelly’s side.

Since Mark was the one heading the investigation, Arianne decided against starting off something on her own that could potentially harm his work rather than help him. When the truth was finally out, she would know for sure if Shelly was, indeed, the culprit.

After dinner, the group broke off and went their separate ways. Mark drove Arianne, Mary, and Smore back to the condominium. He was not going to spend the night at her place tonight, of course—if he kept avoiding the Tremont Estate, sooner or later Shelly was going to blow up again.

Chapter 1660

Arianne did not keep him. “Be careful while driving.”

“Huh? Oh, right. Yes, I will,” Mark fumbled in his reply, his mind still preoccupied with the plagiarism scandal. “You should head into the house now. Smore, say bye bye to Daddy.”

An entire day of hijinks had taken most of the young boy’s energy out of his system. Now, he languidly hung from Arianne’s shoulder and waved half-heartedly, not having even enough strength to say goodbye.

By the time Mark returned to the Tremont Estate, Shelly had already gone back to sleep. Curiously, she did not stay up to wait for him like she usually did.

It was such a novel behavior for Shelly, but Mark ultimately judged it as a good thing. At the very least, he was clear from yet another fight with her for the night.

The next day, as soon as Arianne stepped into the company, Robin pulled her into an empty corner in the building. “Trouble’s ahead, Arianne! Someone sued you for plagiarizing their work, and somehow this news has spread throughout the office like wildfire!” she reported. “They’re now saying that you only got your job through nepotism—‘cause you were married to the boss—and you’re only here to collect paychecks without actually working. And now that you’re divorced, they claim you’ve become so desperate that you’d resort to plagiarizing other people’s work just to stay! Supposedly because you’ve lost your only leg in staying here despite not working! Like… What the hell?! What a load of overblown bull… bull… Bullcrap! And I couldn’t even fight them all by myself!”

Arianne could feel a headache coming. “Just leave them be, Robin. I didn’t plagiarize from anyone, and I’m not afraid of what they say. Look, even if I were to copy a little too much from my source of inspiration, your husband’s the guy whose ideas I learn, okay? I’ve always discussed with Sylvain about our designs—since when have we ever needed external opinions from anyone else?” she replied. “Look, Mark’s investigating this as we speak, so you really don’t have to care about what they’re saying, alright? Good. I still have work to do, and so do you. Let’s just go get our work done.”

Robin was still fuming. “Damn it, Arianne, you’re too pacifistic! Regardless of what’s really happening, no one should forget that you’re still the person who shouldered the mantle of CEO back when Mr. Tremont was missing from the shipwreck accident! How could anyone who benefitted from this company even say anything against you after that?! You’re the reason why the Tremont Enterprise lives to see today. With qualifications like that, do you even need anyone to open a backdoor for you? And the most ironic thing here is that it isn’t your wish to remain in the company at all—it’s Mr. Tremont who insists on it! God, from the way they say it, it’s like you’re just soooo desperate to cling to Mr. Tremont and your job. What the hell?!—Urgh, I’m just! So damn mad!”

Arianne giggled good-naturedly and patted Robin on her shoulder. “There, there. You know, you and Sylvain standing on my side is all the assurance and support I need.”

Robin balled her hand into a fist and raised it in solidarity. “Well, I know you’ll weather it with no problem, Arianne! You can do it!”

Arianne mimicked Robin’s gesture. “Agreed—let’s weather this storm together! I can do it!”

Shortly after Arianne returned to her desk, she immediately espied a very surreptitious Sylvain beckoning Arianne to come closer. In return, she brushed him off with a discountenanced wave.

“Oh my God, is this even necessary? I already know what you’re about to tell me. And the answer is no, I didn’t plagiarize anyone’s work. Your Robin just filled me in about the whole thing,” she intoned.

“That’s… not what I’m trying to tell you at all, though?” he rebuffed. “I know for f**king sure you didn’t plagiarize, mate, but that’s not the point. The point is—I have a prime suspect!”

Now Arianne leaned closer to him in half-disbelief. “I’m listening.”

“Mrs. Leigh had sifted through the design drafts on your desk the last time she sat here,” he whispered. “Frankly, I didn’t think much about it back then; she only picked the draft up once and looked at it for a couple of seconds. But the design you were accused of stealing? It turned out to be the very same one she examined that day—this can’t be a coincidence. My money’s on her.”

Everything clicked in Arianne’s mind. Shelly had always been an incredibly talented and competent woman. It would not be outside her capability to take a glance at a given design, recreate a close semblance on her own by memory, and send it to an external agent.

Every sign Arianne had gathered so far was undoubtedly pointing toward Shelly as the culprit. While all she had prior to this was mere suspicion, now, with Sylvain’s testimony, she was near ninety-percent certain that Shelly’s handprints were all over this scandal.

Jesus. Once again, Shelly had proven that, next to fulfilling her obsessive goal to torment Arianne, her bottomline for low, dirty tactics was nonexistent. She just would not stop at all.

It was an exasperating realization. Arianne was so miffed by what she pieced out that she had retreated into staring into space blankly, her mood for work already dogged by distress.

Sylvain studied her for a bit before asking tentatively, “Would you like to bring this up to Mr. Tremont?”