Ruling 1671

Chapter 1671

Mark slowly said as he stroked Arianne's hair, "I'm not thinking about anything. I don't want to since it's tiresome to think too much. All I want is to hug you like this now. You smell really nice…"

Arianne pursed her lips and smiled. Mark no longer had the scent of roses on him and had returned to how he used to smell in the past. It would seem that Mark had changed all the bathing products that Shelly changed for him previously. He even changed back to the type that Arianne liked to use previously. Women have always been easily moved by little details. Although Mark was not a person who paid attention to details, he had already done his best for Arianne.

Suddenly, when they heard Smore coughing from the room next door, Arianne reflexively sat upright in shock. "I'll go over and take a look at him. He's been coughing for the past few days and doesn't seem to be recovering."

After covering Smore with a blanket and observing for a moment, Arianne returned to her bedroom again. "He'll be fine. He hasn't got a fever, just a few coughs, so it shouldn't be a big problem. It's getting late, let's go to sleep. We still have to go to the office tomorrow."

Mark pondered for a moment before he suddenly said, "About the plagiarism, you don't have to ask about it anymore. You don't have to know how I've resolved it. All you have to know is that neither you nor Tremont Enterprise will be affected by this."

Arianne reached out her hand and punched him in the chest. "What are you doing talking about this in the middle of the night? Aren't you afraid of ending up having too much to think about and then getting struck with insomnia? Wouldn't it be better to just have a peaceful sleep? You really are trying to cause me more worries on purpose. I'm the one who's mainly involved in this case, aren't I? Why are you asking me not to ask about this? I have the right to know about it."

Mark did not say anything and Arianne did not intend to continue asking either. Some things were better left unsaid.

The next morning, Arianne was awoken by Mark's phone's ringtone. She woke up in a daze and could tell that Mark had gone into the bathroom to answer his phone. However, she was unable to clearly hear what he was saying. All she knew was that Mark had tidied up his things and left when he got out of the bathroom.

Arianne snoozed again before it was 7:30 AM, which was the usual time that she would wake up. It was at that moment that she became curious as to why Mark had left early in the morning after receiving a call. Did he have some urgent matters to attend to?

When she arrived at the office, Arianne still did not see Mark anywhere. After inquiring from Davy, she found out that Mark had not arrived at the office yet.

She sent Mark a text message to ask where he was, but there was no reply. Hence, Arianne thought that Shelly was playing some kind of trick back at home again and did not want to bother with the matter.

Meanwhile, Mark was sitting in his car at an underground garage in some clubhouse, fiddling with an exquisite looking mini-lighter in his hand. James was kneeling down in front of Mark's car door, which was slightly ajar, and he was in a drunken state, listening intently. Furthermore, James was exuding a rotten smell that would only be on people that had had a wild night.

At that moment, the clubhouse was almost empty and there weren't many cars around. As James acknowledged the situation that he was in, the fear in his eyes gradually became more intense. "Mr. T…

Tremont? Didn't we already come to a settlement? Why are you still looking for me? I've already done everything that you've asked."

Brian, who stood behind James, kicked him in the ass. "What are you talking about? Of course there's a reason we would come looking for you. Otherwise, did you think we would just give you money for free? You seemed to be bragging quite happily with your bunch of friends last night, saying that we were begging for you to eat with us and even giving you $150,000 for free. You're quite the bold one, aren't you?"

James wiped his face and grovelled on the ground in horror as he begged. "I've never said anything like that. I don't remember any of it. I must've had too much to drink last night. Please don't take it seriously. I just like to brag…!"

Chapter 1672

Scorn was dripping from Mark's smirk. "It doesn't matter. I don't care about your trifling, boasting cockalorum to your friends. All I want to know is this: who gave you that bloody design draft? I know you didn't pen it—it's my wife's creation. You stole it, you sued her for plagiarism, and you extorted one-hundred-fifty grand from me. Seems to me we've got a long score to settle."

James was shaking like a leaf. "N-No! T-T-That's untrue! I didn't steal anything from nobody. I swear it's my creation! I didn't steal! Please, Mr. Tremont, just let me off, okay? I don't even want the rest of the money anymore, alright? Let's just call it a truce, yea? I've told the press that the whole plagiarism thing was a misunderstanding! We're alright now! That's a good reason to let me go, right?"

Mark's patience was rapidly thinning. With a frown, he hissed, "You talk too much. Is this your way of pleading to get your tongue removed?"

James immediately shut up, not a single word escaping him.

Mark shot a look at Brian, and the man responded by unleashing a barrage of kicks and punches at James until blood was oozing out from the latter's nostril and the corner of his lips.

Brian stopped. "We're gonna ask you one more time, jack. Who gave you the goddamned design? We gave you a peaceful way out of this, and we warned you to never tell anyone about your meeting with Mr. Tremont. But no, you took it as a f**king license to blow your horn, didn't you? You told your posse of fashion-designing friends when they joined your little self-patting party, didn't you? You and your uncontrolled piehole… You brought this upon yourself, and now, if you're not gonna take the easy way and spill, trust me, I'll make sure you can never be a f**king designer again. Your brain or your hand—pick one. I'll remove the other from you."

James was terrified for his skin, yet he refused to yield. In fact, he double downed on the claim that he did not plagiarize, and that it was his original creation.

Brian was getting a little hard-pressed to continue, so he looked to Mark for his next order.

Shades of stonehearted apathy flitted through Mark's eyes. He waved and closed his car door.

Brian understood his boss. He took off his blazer and immediately threw all of his strength into an indiscriminate beatdown that lasted for fifteen agonizing minutes. James broke bit by bit with each attack until he finally gave up and cried, "I'll talk! Lord help me, I'll talk! Stop!"

Brian gave a few more stomps for a good measure before barking, "Spit it out!"

By now, not a single patch on James' face bore any semblance of normalcy—it was all blue, black, and purple all over. He was never quite the looker even before Brian's violent makeover, but now, stained by a mixture of blood and tears, he looked like the stuff of nightmares. It was a face that Brian would not want to look at twice.

James took some time to gather his breath before confessing between pants, "It's… It's from someone I don't know, okay? An email… sent to me. The design… It was attached to it. The sender… was anonymous… and they told me that no matter what, I must… I must claim the design as mine. My ideas reservoir has been running dry for a while now, okay? My company… was about to fire me. That design saved my life!

"A few days after I submitted it to my company, Tremont Enterprise presented something that looked so analogous that I got greedy, okay? I sued your company and Mrs. Tremont because I thought I could earn just a little bit extra from my windfall. I thought you guys would try to use money to settle this outside court… but I'm f**king sorry now, okay? I was f**king wrong, and I won't do it again. It's all… It's all that anonymous sender's fault! My mistake is to lose out to human temptations; it happens. I never wanted to steal anyone's work—f**k it, I didn't even know it was Mrs. Tremont's!"

It was then that Mark's hand suddenly came out from his rolled-down window, the lighter he had been previously fidgeting with in his grip. It turned out to be a mini voice recorder that had been recording everything James said.

Hearing a playback of his own testimony knocked James into a daze as he laid sprawling on the floor, too beaten to move a single muscle. It dawned on him that all his avarice brought was wrath from someone he should not have crossed, and now he could not walk back on his mistake anymore. Perhaps he should feel grateful for having his life with him after all of this.

Mark tucked the recorder back into his pocket and concluded, "We got what we wanted, Brian. Let's go."

Chapter 1673

Brian scowled at James—who was still lying on the floor, pathetic as ever—before getting into the car. “Mr. Tremont, shouldn’t we get our money back from him? We owed this schmuck nothing. There’s no reason he should hold onto our money, especially when seventy-five grand isn’t just any sum,” he spoke.

“Oh. He’ll return the money to us of his own volition, mark my words,” Mark replied calmly. “He’s a milquetoast. Even the most dull-witted milquetoast knows that salvaging a chance to live another day is leagues better than dying.”

Just as he predicted, the money Mark had given to James was returned to him in full later that day. At the very least, the man still had enough sensibilities; choosing any other action would have invited more than a savage beatdown.

James had previously told the press that the plagiarism accusation was a “misunderstanding”, but soon, the man had come to the press with something more to add into the narrative. In another statement released—this time prodded by Mark—James McGinnis admitted that the design was never his original creation, and that he got it from an unknown but illicit source. Details of how it fell into his hand, however, were purposefully glazed over.

The first thing Arianne did, after catching wind of the latest development, was to go straight to Mark. “McGinnis said he didn’t create that design… which means I’m innocent. But he also claimed that the source that gave him my work was unidentified…? I don’t understand. How can it be unidentified? Who passed him my draft, Mark?” she interrogated. “This whole scandal is over now, isn’t it? You can go ahead and tell me who’s behind this already, right? Don’t tell me you have no idea, I won’t buy it—not when you’re the leader behind the investigation.”

Truthfully, Arianne was confident that it was most likely connected to Shelly, which was why she demanded closure. Her gut feelings kept nagging that the only reason why Mark refused to let her participate in the investigation was because he wanted to protect Shelly from her.

It was a daunting thought. She was no longer a tenant in the Tremont Estate, and she was divorced; there was nothing left among the remains of their relationship that could make her feel safe and cared for. Arianne might not mind Mark covering Shelly's crimes from virtually anyone in the world, but she absolutely could not brook him hiding it from her. By this point, Arianne was even open to the suggestion of letting Shelly off scot-free—all she was asking from Mark was that he did not keep her in the dark just to protect Shelly.

Instead of answering her, Mark took out the recorder and played James' confession for her.

Not once in the man's desperate self-incrimination had he mentioned the identity of his mysterious source. It occurred to Arianne that James genuinely had no inkling of who that person might be. So, by the end of the recording, she frowned. "Shouldn't be hard to identify the source of that email, right?" she asked tentatively. "I trust that you will… You know, investigate that?"

Mark nodded firmly. "Yes, I will. But there's solid evidence that you and Tremont Enterprise are innocent now, so there really is no need for you to focus on this anymore. Let's find relief in that and get back to whatever you're working on, Ari. In the meantime, when I finally find the snake who sent your draft to McGinnis, I will expose them with no hesitation."

'The culprit behind this could not be any more obvious, though,' Arianne thought. With Sylvain out of the picture, the only one left was Shelly. All this investigation needed was that one irrefutable, incriminating evidence…

Mark returned to the Tremont Estate by late evening. As usual, Shelly told him to bathe as quickly as he could before coming downstairs for dinner.

He was just about to take the first up the flight of stairs when she suddenly blurted, “So, how did the plagiarism investigation go?”

He immediately halted his step. “Why are you interested?”

She leveled Mark with a piercing, unflinching gaze. “You suspected me as the one behind it, didn’t you? So I asked how it’s going. Because, dear, I would appreciate it if you could clear me of that accusation you made about me once you’ve gotten to the bottom of this. Is that so wrong?”

Mark held her gaze for a long beat, finding her attitude a little too unreadable. If she were, indeed, the one behind this, then how was she acting so… guilt-free? There was not a scintilla of avoidance in that unbroken stare she was giving him, and the longer it went on, the more Mark felt like a fool.

Chapter 1674

After a brief internal musing, Mark spilled, “That designer—James McGinnis—had admitted that the design was given to him by an anonymous sender through email. It was never his original creation from the outset; he stole Arianne’s idea. As for the identity of that sender, they may benefit from anonymity now, but it’s not at all hard to find out who they may be. Soon, the truth will come out… and we’ll see.”

Mark had paid his most exacting attention to Shelly’s expression while he spoke, but nothing in her mien was out of place. In fact, she sighed a breath of relief. “Oh, that’s good news, isn’t it? Go get that little snake, you. Everyone will be able to breathe easy if that perp is finally apprehended. Anyway, go and take your shower while I set up the table.”

After dinner, Mark summoned Henry to his study. “I want the identity behind that email sent to McGinnis uncovered as soon as possible,” he ordered. “No matter who it is, do not let anyone catch hold of it. It is for my ears only, understood?”

Henry answered right away, “Understood, Mr. Tremont.”

The next midday, while in his office, Mark received a call from Henry. “Mr. Tremont? The lead is in. The email was sent from one Robin Cox, an employee from the Strategy Department of the Tremont Enterprise. We’ve double-checked the email account and the IP address, and they matched seamlessly. She appeared to have accessed her account via a work computer in the office.”

It was completely outside anyone’s wildest expectation. Even Mark was stunned into a seconds-long daze before crying, “R-Robin Cox?! B-But why would she do something like that at all?!”

It was Henry’s turn to be taken aback. “Pardon me but… is this also something I should have found out, Mr. Tremont? Either way, you’re in the Tower now. I’d imagine it’s easier for you to ask about it than me from here.”

That woke Mark up from his shock to realize how dumb his outburst sounded. Henry’s job was to investigate, not interrogate.

He hung up the call and told Davy to bring Sylvain into his office.

The man, who appeared to be in rather high spirits today, seemed to have come in expecting good news. “Yo—I mean, good afternoon, Mr. Tremont. Anything I can help you with?”

In contrast, Mark was wearing a grave expression. “As it turned out, Robin Cox was the one who sent Arianne’s design draft to James McGinnis via an email. McGinnis had no idea whose design it belonged to, so he appropriated it as his own before upping the ante and claiming we stole his idea. The truth about the plagiarism scandal, writ large, is uncovered, but this one right here… I haven’t talked to Robin pertaining to this, but I’m interested in asking for your opinion in this matter.”

Sylvain’s face was teeming with a plethora of emotions. Regardless of how he looked, his rejection of the possibility was imminent. “No way in a million years! I would have made a more convincing suspect than she ever could! You know how well Robin gets along with Arianne, don’t you? The two have never had any spats or bad blood between them at all. In addition to that, I’m familiar with Robin’s character enough to know that this is an impossibility. How could it be her?”

Mark himself was skeptical of Robin’s participation. “Relax, Sylvain. This is only what had just been uncovered. Can you shed some light by recalling details about that day again? Arianne was late to work due to a personal matter, so she told you to take out her draft from her drawer and have a look at it. Who saw it after you took it out, beside yourself and my aunt? Did Robin see it?”

Sylvain’s memories jogged back to that day as he tried to remember the details. “I took out Arianne’s design draft from her drawer after receiving her call,” he began. “Robin… Yea, she looked for me at my desk that morning, but it was for a very brief exchange. She did notice the draft enough to compliment Arianne’s work in passing, but then she left. After that, I went to the bathroom. The trip to-and-fro should have taken only two minutes or so, tops. No sooner after I came back, your aunt arrived… With all due respect, no matter how I look at it, I can’t bring myself to believe it could be Robin’s doing. I rather believe that someone else might have looked at the draft within that short two minutes while I was gone.”

These details were new to Mark. “Why didn’t you tell us about these earlier? Arianne told me that only you and Shelly had seen the draft, you know.”

Sylvain seemed quite chagrined by the turn of events. “I hadn’t expected the gravity of the situation to ever reach this point, honestly. These things slipped my mind when Arianne asked me the other day, especially since I didn’t even think Robin would ever be a factor, so I told her that Shelly and I were the only two. But now that Robin’s dragged into this mess, I can’t possibly fib and cover her now, can I? — God, and we’ve lost the security footage for that day by now, haven’t we? There’s no way to check if anyone else had come across that draft within those two minutes…” he said. “Tell me, please. If we can’t find someone else to be a reasonable suspect, Robin will be forced to take up the blame as it is, won’t she?”

It was slight, but Mark nodded. “I’m sure you understand the graveness of this incident.”

Chapter 1675

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Sylvain turned silent for a moment before speaking again. “Mr. Tremont, can you please give me some time to check with Robin? I’ll give you her answers.”

Mark approved his request. He preferred tackling this current knot with a more humanistic approach since the great, overarching issue had already been resolved. Next to that, this was more of a small, loose strand.

Besides, judging from Arianne’s nature, she would still refuse to take any action even if Robin were the real culprit.

After exiting Mark's office, Sylvain dashed straight to the Strategy Department. There his wife was, completely engrossed in her agenda-of-the-day until he whisked her away so suddenly; she was too shocked to question him.

It was only when the two of them were in an empty, remote corner of the office that Robin finally inquired, "What are you doing, Syl? Oh God, you look ghastly… Is there something wrong? I'm a bit busy right now, and I don't want my superior to see us, 'cause this superior is super-fierce and she's gonna explode all over us if we're caught—"

Sylvain gripped either side of her shoulders and gazed into her eyes. "Look me in the eyes, Robin, and be honest with me, please. Were you the one who sent Arianne's draft to a competitor named James McGinnis through an anonymous email?"

Robin froze. "W-What are you saying, Syl? Wait… Oh, oh no. No, don't tell me… You can't be referring to that plagiarism scandal, right? Y-You think I was conspiring against Arianne—are you crazy?! How can I even bring myself to do that? What on Earth could even suggest this to you?"

Sylvain drew a sharp, deep breath. "It wasn't me; it's Mr. Tremont. Right now, it's very likely that you're going to be blamed for the whole thing, Robin… So please, tell me you didn't do it… right?"

She was close to anxious tears. "No way, Syl! Don't tell me you don't trust me too! But why? Why would I do that at all? Arianne has been nothing but kind to me—what petty reason do I even have to plot against someone like her? I was beyond myself panicking when this stupid c-c-crap happened. H-How could I be the culprit behind it?"

He released the breath he had been holding. "Thank God. Knowing that it isn't you is all I need, Robin. Now listen to me very carefully: do not, under any circumstances, accidentally claim being the hand behind the incident to anyone. I'm going to talk to Mr. Tremont again while you get back to whatever it

is you were doing before I unjustly interrupted you. Act natural, but keep your eyes peeled. Has anyone touched your computer in your absence these days?"

Robin's mind drew a blank. "Jesus Christ, I don't know! Sylvain, please, you gotta tell Mr. Tremont that I didn't do it! If I'm not innocent, um… May God strike me down!"

Sylvain stayed with her for a while to comfort and allay her anxieties before returning to Mark's office. After hearing his report, Mark did little else than send him back to work.

Something was definitely fishy about this.

Later that afternoon, Mark invited Arianne for lunch as a chance to update her on his latest findings.

Just like Sylvain, Arianne's response was one of utter disbelief. In fact, she seemed to react even more strongly against the possibility. "Nope, hell naw, no way! It could be literally anyone else before Robin should even be considered. She's the most straight-laced, guileless girl I've ever met, Mark. She's utterly incapable of not wearing her heart on her sleeve or belying her behaviors. And! She has zero impetus to hurt me in any way. Honestly? The only plausible workaround I can believe is if someone is deliberately framing Robin—seriously, she cannot be the culprit, or I'm not Arianne Wynn. I've never misjudged a character."

The way things spiraled into even more of a convoluted mess was beginning to exasperate Mark. Any further investigation, to him, was akin to trying to find a way out of a forest enveloped by a thick, perforating fog. Besides, the fact that Tremont Enterprise and Arianne had their names cleared—combined with James paying so dearly for his crimes that his career's future basically went dark—had sapped much of his motivation to continue digging into a quandary that was no longer important to him.

“You know what? Let’s just call an end to this debacle. If we continue our investigation, it’ll most likely cement Robin as the one to take up the blame, justified or not. This entire incident has taken place a while ago enough that all security footage of that crucial day is gone by now. We’re virtually denied any conceivable way to clear people of suspicions,” he said, putting his verdict forward. “Robin’s like a little sister to you, isn’t she? You wouldn’t want to see her kicked out of Tremont Enterprise, I wager. Sylvain won’t stay in the company if that happens too, will he?”

Arianne, however, was determined not to let the dust settle on this one so soon. If someone did, indeed, framed Robin by hijacking her computer to send that incriminating email, then Arianne would very much want justice by exposing that bastard from their hidey-hole. Still, she was also not blind to the fact that, at least for now, things were not shaping up to Robin’s favor. In the end, Arianne had to make a choice.

“Fine, then. Put a brake onto that investigation—there isn’t any more lead to follow, anyway,” she replied. “You must feel pretty relieved that this ended without any proof painting your aunt as the mastermind, don’t you? I mean, if it were otherwise, the two of you would probably face the most catastrophic falling-out ever, yea?”

Mark said nothing as his silence alone was the answer. He had, indeed, released a long, drawn-out sigh of relief when he found out Shelly was not involved.

Shortly after he returned to his office after lunch, Mark met Robin, who was standing outside, waiting for him.

Chapter 1676

Mark took his seat behind the desk. “What’s the matter?”

Robin promptly handed him a resignation letter. “Mr. Tremont, I know that things are looking bad for me now, which is why I… I have no problem resigning my position as long as Sylvain is safe from negative splashes. I swear, though, I’ve got nothing to do with any of this. I’m innocent! But Sylvain told me that it’s too difficult to clear my name by now, and it’s likely that the investigation has no other leads to go forward. I… I guess that means there’s no other way out, so I’ll willingly resign. I’m sorry.”

Mark stared at the resignation letter in her hand and thought for a while. “Take this back. Frankly, I’ve never even considered firing you,” he replied. “I’ve talked to Arianne just now, and we both agreed to close the chapter on this case. Neither of us are interested in continuing this investigation, and no one will mention it ever again, let alone allow it to affect Sylvain negatively. Both Arianne and Sylvain are adamant that you’re innocent, while I admit I’m quite skeptical of the finding, as well. I’m more inclined to trust your character above all else. Please, go back to work.”

Robin could not hold back her tears any longer and allowed them to trickle down her cheeks. “T-Thank you… Thank you all for believing in me. I just… I feel so wronged and angry. I’ve come to see Arianne as the sister I never had, so how can I find it in me to harm her? I don’t know who’s trying to frame me… But when they were flinging all these nasty, horrible gossips about Arianne, I fought back and lashed out at a lot of them. I know I probably made some enemies with that, and now they wanna hurt Arianne and me at the same time. Oh, it’s my fault for recklessly speaking out… Arianne told me to just let them talk, but I didn’t listen. I just… I just can’t stand it! I can’t stand seeing people hurling all this debasing and caustic crap at Arianne behind her back!” she fumed. “Do you know, Mr. Tremont? Ever since the office caught wind of your divorce, they have begun openly debasing her—d-d-defaming her! It’s ridiculous! It’s just unbelievable!”

Mark’s eyebrows furrowed. “Hmph. Sure, Arianne and I may be divorced, but to me, she’s forever the woman of my heart and the only mistress of the Tremont Enterprise. The trifling inputs and commentaries of these kinds have no place here. I’ll handle this myself, Robin. You may go.”

Robin nodded tearfully before turning to leave Mark’s office.

As soon as she was gone, he subsequently called Davy in and bristled. “Next time, if I ever hear anyone gossip about me and Arianne’s divorce or any other related but equally useless drivels, I’ll fire every single one who said a word right where they stand! Have I made myself clear?! I may have divorced Arianne, but she’s still my woman and the boss of all of you in the Tremont Enterprise. Anyone who speaks ill of her is akin to speaking ill of me!”

Davy had not seen him being this furious for a long time, so he was practically scrambling for an immediate response. “Okay, okay, got it, boss! I will spread the words and tell ‘em to stop all that Nosy Nancy stuff, alright? Please calm down, Mr. Tremont… W-Want a cup of hot tea?”

Mark dismissed him—and his tea invitation—with a wave, and Davy immediately sprung out of the office in his mousiest manner.

Robin was still crying by the time she returned to her desk in the Strategy Department, which elicited a horde of side-glances and ogles from her colleagues. Despite this, no one came forward to comfort her.

It was then that suddenly, Robin’s direct superior, Libby Sheppard, approached her and offered some napkins. “Dry your tears, hon. What’s this about?”

Robin shook her head in silence.

Libby leaned against a table nearby and patted her on the shoulder. “I get it. I’m a fearsome tigress to all of you, I know. But it’s really for your own good, hon. I’m actually pretty chill. If you have anything eating you inside, you can always just talk to me. I see you as my little sister, sweetie, so let it out. Feels tons better than cooping it up in your chest.”

Robin remembered Sylvain's advice not to tell anyone about the email. "I'm fine, ma'am, thank you. I'm okay now, I'll get back to work," she replied, dancing around the topic.

Seeing that she would not talk, Libby said nothing more before turning away and leaving.

Chapter 1677

That same night, Melanie invited Arianne to have dinner at the Smith Estate.

She accepted the invitation and attended alone. It had been a while since the friends chatted with one another, so their ensuing conversation quickly turned into a pleasant, lively one. Revisiting the topic about the plagiarism scandal around the dining table, Arianne once again reaffirmed her disbelief that Robin was the one behind it.

Melanie agreed. "I don't think it's her, either. I've talked to that girl before; I've got nothing other than good things to say about her. Someone must have hijacked her computer at work and used her account. Poor girl; she's still shouldering blame that was never hers to begin with without knowing what has really happened! Good thing you're a force of reason, Arianne. Otherwise, there really isn't any other way but to have her kicked out, and that will definitely impact Sylvain, too."

Alejandro, who had been reticent to comment throughout the women's exchange, suddenly sniggered. "Hmph. It still reeks of Mark's beloved aunt."

Arianne was immediately galvanized. "Oh? Why'd you say that?"

Melanie nudged him gently. “Hush, don’t go around fanning flames of conspiracies, you. You already know how testy the relationship between your brother and his aunt is, don’t you? If you get this wrong, well! What do you suppose might happen? ‘Leave unsaid the wrong thing at the tempting moment’, so said Ben Franklin. Isn’t where they are good enough? The case is over. Arianne and the Tremont Enterprise are both unharmed.”

Alejandro shrugged, clearly abandoning his piece. However, Arianne’s curiosity had been so effectively hooked that she felt compelled to pry it out of him. What if Alejandro’s two-cent was the exact breakthrough she needed?

“Why did you think so in the first place, though?” she asked again, before adding, “It’s alright, Melanie, there’s no one else here but us. I don’t see any problem letting his state his piece for giggles. We’re basically just chattering around whatever we like right now. As long as everyone knows not to take things too seriously, yea?”

Seeing encouragement in Arianne’s words, Melanie no longer stopped her husband when Alejandro began insouciantly, “Remember, Shelly used to work in the Strategic Department. Can we really eliminate the possibility of her planting some loyalists there, especially since we know for sh*t she’s still panicked and antsy about you remaining as a Tremont employee? You best believe she appointed some henchmen to watch your every move in the office while she’s away, sweetheart. In fact, I bet she ordered her henchmen, whoever they are, to carry out the bulk of her scheme under everyone’s nose. Makes a lotta sense, doesn’t it?

“Lemme reiterate for you. If she planned this as the masterstroke to oust you, then you can be damn sure that she’s cooked up an exit strategy for the instance where things go awry. Hence, she instructed her loyalist to use Robin’s computer and account at work to send that email. Since Robin is the wife of Sylvain—who’s, in turn, super- chummy with you—it’s not that hard to seize on one of the many chances Robin might have in coming across your drafts as the incriminating proof. Of course, she’s the designated scapegoat—because it will make coherent sense,” he continued. “Since Robin’s your little sidekick, you will definitely choose to abandon the investigation the moment her ‘involvement’ is discovered, too, innit?

“Before Robin’s role is found, though, the scandal would have already introduced a crisis to both you and Tremont Enterprise. It’s technically a small fry to Mark, to be honest; he will solve it no problem. But the crisis of trust in your integrity? Now that’s a whole different sh*t. If your crime as a plagiarist were confirmed, well! Tremont Enterprise’s gotta kick you out, right? Fits her ulterior motive like a glove, doesn’t it?” he continued. “This way, Shelly had thought of both the scheme to oust you and an exit strategy if things go south. Now look at what happened. Her plot was a failure, but she’s still safe and sound. At the very least, her relationship with her sunny boy Mark is safe from being on the rocks. You dig what I’m saying?”

With every word, Arianne’s heart sank lower and lower into abject horror. Alejandro’s analysis had no holes, and she found herself buying his narrative more and more. What other explanations were there? Robin genuinely wanting to plot against her? Impossible!

Melanie, acutely catching the slight changes in Arianne’s mien, quickly moved in to stop Alejandro from continuing. “Alright, that’s enough. Arianne, hey? Calm down. It’s all just conjectures—his personal conjecture, to be exact. You don’t need to take it seriously, okay? Just pretend it’s just a random guy’s commentary.”

It was too late. Arianne’s mind was already experiencing a cataclysmic shock as Alejandro’s explanation sank in.

“I don’t give a damn how Shelly plots against me, but to use the people around me as her fall guy? Goddamn it, that’s just low and wretched!” she remarked hotly. “I buy Alejandro’s explanation, that’s for sure. But don’t you worry, Melanie. I won’t act recklessly. Instead, I’ll slowly trick whoever that scumbag is into exposing themself. After that, all we have to do is to pry information right from the horse’s mouth. Frankly, I don’t see why I’d be wrong to do that. She brought this upon herself.”

Consternation shadowed Melanie’s face. “Arianne, with all due respect, I urge you to reconsider. She’s Mark’s aunt, isn’t she? If you wage this full-blown, all-out war against her, any victory will only be a Pyrrhic one where both sides suffer heavy tolls, isn’t it? I agree that she has really crossed the line by forcing you and Mark to split, but I’m also worried that Mark will end up letting things slide simply

because she's family to him… you know, again. You'll be utterly crushed, right? There will be an unscalable wedge between the two of you because of it, too, and well… It's just not worth it. If I may suggest… How about you turn the other cheek for this one?"

Chapter 1678

Before Arianne could mount a reply, Alejandro had stepped into the opening with a repartee. "And this is why no one seriously considers a woman's opinion on things. Turning the other cheeks doesn't bring peace—instead, it only makes you seethe and suffer your indignance on your own. An eye for an eye is the real way of living! We're all equal as humans, so why the f**k should we have to tolerate certain subsets of people, despite them being no more special than we are, huh? What's the point of living a life of servitude and submission?"

Melanie was so exasperated that she launched into a series of eyerolls. "Oh, please miss me with that high-minded bunkum. You just want to watch the world burn with a box of popcorn in hand, Nero. Sure, your conjecture sounds reasonable, but it doesn't automatically exclude the possibility of you being dead wrong! What if you were wrong? You goading Arianne into pursuing this investigation is basically just you trying to manufacture more drama!"

Alejandro, however, was very confident in his analysis. "Here's where you're wrong—I never make half-assed conjectures. I guarantee you, my guess is at least eighty- to ninety-percent close to reality. If you don't believe me, go ahead and verify it on your own. Hell, what's wrong with letting Arianne investigate my claim clandestinely? And also? I don't make a habit out of watching other people's dramas, so why would I even want to cause the world to burn? If this were anyone else's problem, I wouldn't even bother to say a thing."

Arianne had to reel back from the sudden skirmish before stepping in. "Guys, guys! It's okay. No matter what the result is, I'll never pin the blame on Alejandro. Seriously, Melanie, don't you worry. Everything said here stays here. I'm not gonna mention a single word of it to Mark."

Melanie sighed. “Alright, I concede. You’re a shrewd, intelligent woman. I’m confident that you’ll know what to do and how to do it right; I won’t stop you. To be very frank, I actually despise his aunt’s character. If I were you, I don’t even know how long I’d last. It’s just that… I know how much you love Mark, Arianne, and if things are exactly as Alex said, then… God! The fallout between the three of you is going to be gutting. But then again, maybe it’s more of my problem. I’m more… eager to please, so to speak. I always appeal for harmony, so I have the propensity to concede on everything even at the cost of myself…”

That ticked Alejandro off. “Oho, as if anyone has been making you suffer for the sake of ‘harmony’ lately! On the contrary, the only thing you’re missing is an actual crown, woman. You’re so close to being the absolute monarch in this house, who the hell even dares make you suffer the slightest bit of grievances, huh? Hell, ever since Mel popped out of your belly, your temper has been growing every day. Sooner or later, I’ll probably have to bow before talking to you!”

Melanie was speechless. She never knew Alejandro could be so adept at turning the truth upside down before spinning stories out of it. Since when had she ever acted remotely as ruthless as he described? In fact, in this house, he was always the one with the last word!

Arianne quickly returned home after dinner, but a fitful sleep awaited her that night. She could not stop thinking back on what Alejandro had said, and the more she ruminated, the more sense it made. His analysis checked every single thing that had happened so well that all it was missing was the “this is definitely what happened” seal all over it.

The next day, immediately after she reached the office, Arianne sprung toward the Strategy Department. She wasted no time pointing at Robin and shouting, “You skank! I can’t believe I saw you as a sister—blindest thing I’ve ever done in my life!”

Robin was just as snippy and angry as Arianne was. “See? This is why I can’t stand you! So what?! If you don’t even wanna try to be nice, then leave me alone! I’ve always hated your cocky face and that disgusting putting-on-airs attitude. I never understood why you’d put in so much effort to act more

superior than you really are! Seriously, don't tell me, in your mind, you still fancy yourself as 'Mrs. Tremont'!"

It was then that Arianne swung her hand, landing a loud slap on Robin's cheek. It was neither hard nor soft in force, but it did elicit a loud crack.

She spun on her heels and stormed off. Sitting, Robin caressed her lashed cheek before sobbing to herself with her head on her desk.

Around her, pairs of eyes watched with interest and schadenfreude. The poor girl had been making enemies left and right for the past few days by staunchly defending Arianne, but now, the only reward she got was public humiliation.

Chapter 1679

Soon, someone among them finally stopped gawking and feigned care. "Aww, don't cry a river over this now! The sooner you get used to it, the better. Gee, a while ago, you defended her to the point of getting into heated disagreements with us. Now you know, huh? Being 'Mrs. Tremont' for a while had really gotten into her head, I'll give you that. B*tch always thinks she's several levels above us. And then she got dumped hard, but she still thinks she's 'The Madam' and the boss of us. Ludicrous, right? Oh, wait… We gotta watch our backs—the boss has mandated us to never talk sh*t about Arianne, so we better zip it now, I guess. Come on, Robin, don't be too upset, ok? At least you get to keep your job in Tremont Enterprise. It's not like Arianne has the power to fire you or anything."

It was then that the supervisor approached them, chastising, "Oy, what do you think you people are doing here? This isn't time for talking—shut your piehole and go back to work! Miss Cox, you're with me."

Libby brought Robin to a remote stairway, and after a quick survey, making sure that no one else was within earshot, she suddenly dropped her voice into a hushed tone. “Okay. Why did Arianne suddenly hit you, dear? How did the two of you come to that?”

Robin sniffled. Her voice was thick with tears. “C-Can… Can you keep it a s-s-secret if I tell you?”

Libby seemed oddly excited. “You can count on me to keep a secret, sweetie. I’m all ears.”

“S-She said that the higher-ups have f-found me as the one who made t-that scandal happen—m-me!” Robin leaned into her ear and whispered. “She claimed I was the one who gave her draft to this g-guy named James McGinnis or s-someone. She said I was conspiring against her, but I swear to God, I didn’t! We fought pretty bad about this… and I guess we’re friends no more. What am I gonna do, Mrs. Sheppard? I know my time in Tremont Enterprise is doomed… Help me, please! I don’t care if I get fired, I just… I don’t want Sylvain to get caught in this.”

Curiously, there was not a single trace of surprise on Libby’s face. In fact, she looked almost as though she had been expecting this news for a while and was visibly sighing in relief. “Oh, hon, I’d love to help with this but… this is beyond my power,” she comforted with a half-smile. “If they thought it was you, then there really isn’t any other way left now, is there? I think it’s best you adjust your mindset and bite the bullet. Gosh, I actually thought Arianne would be merciful to someone like you. Turns out, she’s cold-blooded through and through…”

Robin’s eyebrows bunched into the middle. “W-What was that?”

“Nothing! Nothing at all,” Libby corrected herself hurriedly. “What I meant was—well, seeing how close she was with you all this time, I really thought she would be lenient to a friend.”

“Well, apparently not. She told me that not publicizing my crime to the entire company is already the limit of her mercy,” Robin murmured, dejected. “Mrs. Sheppard? Please don’t tell anyone about this, okay? You’re the only one who knows now… And please, believe me, I didn’t do it! I really didn’t…”

“Right, right. I got you, hon. It’s okay, don’t cry anymore,” Libby answered noncommittally. “Hey, you know, with Sylvain’s capabilities, what’s wrong with you retiring as a housewife? Honestly, you don’t even need to rub elbow grease in the Strategy Department at all, right? If I were you, I’d just treat this as a blessing in disguise. Oh, and also, I don’t think Sylvain’s gonna be, like, too severely impacted by this. He’s got more than enough genuine talent and competence to stay afloat, so chill, ‘kay?”

“You know… At first, I thought Mr. Tremont’s aunt was the nasty one. I believed she was so nasty to Arianne that she became the driving force behind their divorce,” Robin remarked casually. She had abruptly but seamlessly pivoted from their previous topic. “But now, I realized I’ve only been fed a one-sided narrative from Arianne’s perspective. I mean, Mrs. Leigh had been so kindly to all of us back when she was still around… It really doesn’t seem like she’s capable of that kind of heinous thing at all, right? I bet the real problem was in Arianne herself all along.”

Mentioning Shelly seemed to have stirred Libby a lot. “Bless your heart, sweet child; took you long enough to get here! Of course Mrs. Leigh’s the best. She’s also Mr. Tremont’s aunt, you know—actual kin and everything? Like, who does Arianne think she is compared to real family, amirite? Honestly, I think it serves her right to be kicked out of the Tremont family—just sweet, sweet comeuppance right there. Though I gotta say, it’s a bummer Mrs. Leigh can’t be joining us because of her leg problem. I miss the times when she was around…”

Robin looked at her in envy. “But I heard that Mrs. Leigh’s leg is recovering, isn’t it? She’s gonna return to work very soon, I bet. Gosh, Mrs. Sheppard—are you close with Mrs. Leigh? I can’t help but feel that you’re… well, really good at making powerful friends.”

The young woman's earnest praise was quite the dopamine for the supervisor. "Hon, I'm not trying to rub it on anyone, but… Well, duh! Ever since the first day Mrs. Leigh came to the office, I've become the closest colleague she has. We are such good friends that she even gives me the nicest little gifts privately," she replied, beaming. "Even now, she and I are still in frequent contact with one another. You can say we're really friends more than colleagues! …Oh, anyway, how did we even get so off-topic? I think we should stop here. C'mon, hon, time to go back to work. You're still a Tremont Employee, you know; still got duties to attend to. Do your best as if this is the last day of work, will ya'?"

Evening came. It was almost time for work to be over. Robin had gone to see Libby again, but this time, she wanted to invite her for dinner.

"Hey, Mrs. Sheppard? I think my days in Tremont Enterprise are numbered. Even if Arianne kept her mouth shut about this, I still don't think the higher-ups want me around. The company's probably gonna kick me out anytime now, so I think… I'm not coming to work anymore tomorrow. I want to preserve my dignity by choosing to leave rather than being dumped, you know? But before that, I was thinking… Will you come and have this farewell dinner with me? I wanna show my gratitude and appreciation for all the care and help you've given me all this time."

Chapter 1680

By this point, even the look Libby shot was evident of pity. It was as though Robin's predicament had drawn much of her sympathy. "Oh, hon, I can't accept this now! I don't recall actually giving you any special treatment, you know, because I believe in treating everyone fairly and impartially. Chin up, dear. Your husband's the renowned designer, Sylvain Trudeau! Leaving Tremont Estate isn't gonna hurt you too much, trust me. People like you won't ever fret about the cost of living, yea?"

"But I insist, Mrs. Sheppard!" Robin exclaimed, her eyes wide with sincerity. "Sylvain's too busy tonight to join, but he approved of me inviting you for dinner, so… Well, c'mon! Let me treat you just this once—you can go anywhere you like. Or, if you don't know where to pick… How about White Water Bay Café? It's a pretty top-notch place. But what do you think?"

Hearing White Water Bay Café as a possible venue perked some of Libby's interest. "Damn, that's an expensive place right there though, ain't it? I've only been there once… and then I looked at my wallet in pain for a month."

"Oh, I'll admit it's a bit demanding on the price," Robin replied undauntedly, "But I think it's the best way to express my most sincere gratitude, you know? So please? Join me?"

Libby dithered for a second before agreeing. "Okay, okay. I'll go; you happy? But wait for me as I pack up."

Robin nodded, smiling brightly. She stood aside and waited.

As soon as they reached the café, Robin sauntered straight into a private dining chamber she had reserved for the occasion, surprising Libby. Despite that, the supervisor hid her glee and affected neutrality from the outside. "Bless you heart, Robin! You're burning a hole through your wallet with this. I didn't even expect a private chamber!"

Robin waved. "Aww, shucks. It's quieter here. Makes it easier to talk later, you know."

"Gee, you rich folks sure think on a different wavelength than the rest of us plebs, huh? Sylvain must earn a lot in a year, I bet. Enough for you to live your life like a queen at home without ever needing to work," Libby said without skipping a beat.

As soon as she took her seat, the excited supervisor abandoned her affectation of reservation completely. She took the menu from the waitress' hand and began ordering dish after dish without any semblance of self-control. At one point, she looked up and furtively studied Robin's expression before

asking tentatively, “Oh, I wonder if I’ve gone overboard a little…? You gotta pardon me, Robin. It’s a bad habit that I can’t seem to shrug. I mean, it’s just so hard to control myself when I’m ordering meals, you know? Like, if it’s food that I like, I just can’t help but order it…”

Robin was not at all bothered. “Oh, I don’t mind! It’s my treat, remember? You’re welcome to pick whatever you like.”

After Libby’s orders, Robin asked for a bottle of red wine—a gesture that instantly made a bright, euphoric smile blossom on Libby’s face. Genuinely pleased, she took out her phone and started taking selfies. After all, people like her did not always get the chance to eat in a high-end fine diner; it would be a tremendous waste not to take some pictures of herself to flaunt on social media.

Robin, meanwhile, kept glancing at the time. When it was almost the moment she had been waiting for, she piped up, “Mrs. Sheppard, there’s another friend of mine who’ll be joining us tonight. It’s almost time for her to appear, too. You wouldn’t mind, right?”

Libby was so preoccupied with capturing her best profile that she had no attention to spare for Robin. “Yea, sure, fine with whatever,” she replied perfunctorily.

Not too soon after that, the door to the private chamber was pushed open. In unison, Robin and Libby looked up at the same time.

It was Arianne.

Shocked and quite flabbergasted, Libby immediately whipped her face to Robin, her head filled with questions.