Ruling 1701

Chapter 1701

The first thing that came to Arianne's mind was, "Why? You're planning a wedding between you and Robin?"

Sylvain smiled cryptically and danced around the answer. "Ask me no questions, mate. Just be my co-conspirator."

Arianne deliberately turned her eyes away from the magazine. "Nope, you can't make me unless you tell me what this is for. You can't afford to not get my opinion, right? We women know each other the best, pal, which means anything you pick for Robin might not hit her sweet spot. Am I right?"

"Alright, alright! Sheesh, it's true, okay?" Sylvain relented. "Remember how Robin asked for nothing when we married? Lately, I've been thinking about it, and I've come to the conclusion that you just gotta have an actual wedding, you know? It's the kind of thing that usually happens only once in a lifetime; quite a pity if a pretty lady never got to put on a gorgeous bridal gown at least once in her life, man. Sometimes, skipping the ceremonial trappings isn't always the right call."

His words reminded Arianne of herself and she wondered if it truly was a pity not to get dolled up in a bridal gown once in a woman's life. Her mind reeled to the moment when she witnessed Tiffany in her wedding gown, and—if she had to be frank with herself—felt a faint pang of jealousy. Her friend had looked so, so beautiful that day—

"Hello? Earth to Arianne?" Sylvain piped up, noticing she was blanking out and jostled her a little. "C'mon, help me choose. I've always thought that we share the same taste in aesthetics—wish I could say the same for Robin—so please, pick one for her."

Arianne took the magazine over and studied it carefully. It featured a series of bridal gowns designed by Tremont Enterprise, all of them uber popular in the market. Yet, for some reason, none of them caught her eyes.

“You know you’re a big-shot fashion designer yourself, right? Then why don’t you just create a gown from scratch, designed by you and only for her? A gown that’s been personally designed by you will be unique, priceless, and brimming with meaning. It will outclass any other bridal gowns in the world.”

Sylvain rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Hmm, you really think so?”

Arianne shoved the magazine back into his hand. “Yes, I know so. If I were Robin, wearing a bridal gown that I know you designed just for me is… It’d make me cry! Ooh, and don’t forget to outfit her with matching jewelry, too—now that is per-fec-tion! Unless… You’re gonna tell me right now that you’re only good with dresses and are actually a dum-dum when it comes to jewelry.”

Sylvain snapped his finger in agreement. “Okay! Your advice has been heard, loud and clear! Color me convinced; it does sound pretty good.”

That day, for lunch, Mark brought Arianne to a fine-diner.

She had suspected the location to be a front for some sort of ulterior motive, yet during the whole time they were together, it dawned on Arianne that he treated it as just a typical lunch. Mark picking a fine-dining restaurant—a pretty romantic place to most people—had really prodded Arianne into some fanciful daydreams.

Noticing her absentmindedness, Mark looked up and held her gaze. “What’s the matter? Is the steak not done to your liking, or is the red wine too insipid? You are welcomed to change them into something you prefer.”

She shook her head. “Oh, no, everything’s great. I was just thinking, well, maybe you brought me here because you’ve got some ‘fitting’ topics on your mind that you wanna discuss. Oh, uh, speaking of which—Sylvain and Robin are gonna have a wedding.”

Mark was markedly deaf to the subtext. “Yes, so I heard from the man himself. Why are we talking about them all of a sudden? Their wedding is a long time coming.”

Oh yea? If their wedding was a “long time coming”, then what about Arianne and Mark’s? Ever since Shelly left, the man had not mentioned their remarriage once. All he gave was a nebulous promise about receiving her and Smore back into the Tremont Estate soon…

Therein laid a problem: since Arianne was the one who declared disinterest in weddings and their ceremonial pomp in the first place, saying she now might desire them a little was akin to pulling an embarrassing switcheroo. Yes, in the past, Arianne was sincerely nonchalant; she did believe it was fine to never have a wedding. But now, after going through so much in life, her stance had changed.

Perhaps it was just in a woman’s nature to change their minds.

Arianne had fallen into such a conspicuous bout of silence that she was sure Mark would have picked up the cue. Unfortunately, the man was completely clueless and had even begun talking about work!

“Have I told you how our business is booming? I’m projecting a large margin of profit compared to last year.”

Arianne pursed her lips. “Urgh. No matter how much you earn, it’s yours. It’s got nothing to do with me.”

He chuckled. “Of course it’s got something to do with you. My wealth is for you and Smore to enjoy,” he replied. “I’ve mentioned us going on a trip, haven’t I? Regrettably, I haven’t gotten the slightest clue where to go, so I’ll have to defer to you again. Pick a destination; doesn’t matter if it’s within borders or overseas. You see, I expect myself to be a lot busier for the months to come, so if you miss this chance, you might never get it for a while. Your call.”

Chapter 1702

Arianne sneered quietly and turned her head away to look at the road outside. “Nowhere! I don’t wanna go anywhere at all.”

Mark finally caught on. “Hmm? Is there something on your mind? You’re a little bilious, aren’t you? Did I chaff you in any way?… I didn’t, right?”

Arianne might not be able to tell him what was on her mind outright, but the fact that he had to ask at all made her feel even glummer. “No, you didn’t. And I’m not ‘bilious’, okay? You think I’d dare be bilious around you? Let’s just go back to eating, shall we? I still have plenty of drafts I haven’t finished, and I need to get back there.”

To her frustration, Mark did exactly as she said! He went straight back into carving his steaks with (strangely) rapt attention!

Arianne was so exasperated that she almost let out a loud “urrghh!”. Was this not the same guy usually known for his acumen? Why could he not read her mind right now? Fine, then—let’s see if he could go through his life without ever mentioning restoring their marriage!

The two parted ways in the company after lunch, each tending to their respective agenda. When it was time to go home, Arianne exited the main door just in time to catch Mark’s car driving out from the parking basement.

He pulled over in front of her… to say hi. “I have some matters to attend to,” he explained, “so I can’t send you home today. Please be careful when hailing an uber, alright? See you tomorrow.”

Arianne cocked an eyebrow. “Whatever, man. You do your important business; I’ll be fine. It’s not like you have an unbroken streak of driving me home every day. Plus, I’m perfectly capable of not getting lost by myself.”

He waved and hit the road.

Arianne felt strange tingles over her mind, yet there had been nothing unnatural or out of sorts in the tone he used. He sounded cordial and devoid of edge.

What, then, gave her this weird feeling?

For the weekend, Arianne brought Smore to Tiffany's place. Her best friend's baby had gotten so big now that Jackson had forbidden her from leaving the house. Nowadays, Tiffany's space for movement was only as big as the entire villa.

"Why are you the only one coming with Smore? Mark isn't coming? Isn't he Jackson's homie or something?" Tiffany asked in curiosity.

Arianne sneered. "Urgh, don't mention him! I think he's hiding something."

Tiffany's ears seemed to perk up right on cue. "Ooohhhhh. Hiding something, you say? Like what?"

Arianne espied Jackson making tea in the kitchen and lowered her volume. "Back when the two of us were star-crossed lovers forced to live apart, he had been devising way after way to sleep over at my place with dogged determination. And that's on top of him driving me home and to work or whatever in the day. But these days? He leaves the instant work is over, and always with the same excuse of 'important matter to attend to'. He never even comes to my place to see Smore anymore!" she moaned. "Logically, one would think that with Shelly out of the picture, he would start talking about restoring our marriage… But he hasn't! I'm… I'm getting more and more insecure every day."

Tiffany narrowed her eyes, apparently mulling it over, before yelling in the direction of the kitchen, "Jackson Weeeeeeest!"

The man in question immediately popped his head out of the door. "Yes, ma'am?"

"What the hell has Mark been doing, eh?" Tiffany asked forcefully. "He never hides anything from you, hon, so don't you dare cover his arse for him! I want the truth and I want it noooow!"

Poor Jackson could only stare at them, flabbergasted. “Wait, what? Mark hasn’t been telling me jack. Isn’t he busy with his business lately? What else can that guy be up to? Honestly, he hasn’t told me anything, and even if he did… Come on, you didn’t have to bark at me like that, yea? I’m not covering his a**, babe. Calm down.”

Chapter 1703

Tiffany did not think Jackson looked like he was lying, so she dismissed him with a wave. “Okey-dokey, then. You can go back to making tea now. Oh, make one of them a little bit lighter on the taste, please? That will be for me. And also, don’t listen in on our conversation, hon—we’re discussing womanly secrets. It’s the kind of stuff y’all boys are forbidden to hear.”

Jackson laughed. “As if I’m interested to begin with! I wouldn’t want to listen to ‘em even if you wanted me to!”

Since she got no lead from Jackson, Tiffany was just as at a loss of explanation now. “I don’t know how to say this properly, but Ari… You know what men are like, right? They are animals, you catch my drift? You said he hadn’t been seeing you or Smore for a while, and he keeps saying he’s got something to mind every day after work… Like, what work, man? Is he really so damn busy that he can’t even send you home? He’s not even talking about restoring y’all’s marriage anymore, the hell does that mean?… An affair?”

An affair?!

Arianne furrowed her eyebrows. “Look, even if he’s got someone else out there, you can’t call it an affair, technically-speaking. We are divorced, ‘member? But, uh… Do you really think… Well, that he’s got someone else now? Um, I was the one who suggested we split back then so even if he has a new girl, I mean—I think?—I’ve got nothing to comment, really. But he still treats me differently from the way he

does with everyone else! He's stringent and austere with everyone in the office, but when he's with me, he smiles, and he has this softness in his voice—"

"Girl, he's still being nice to you because his son is with ya, okay? Because you're the mother of his fruit-of-his-loins!" Tiffany interjected with a bombshell counterargument. "Besides, he practically raised you since you were a kiddo. How badly can he treat you? And on the issue of that divorce. You weren't the one who wanted it; it's because his aunt forced it to happen, mmkay? You really think he's ignorant of that fact? But that's not the point, 'course. The point is if he really does have another woman in mind, he's gonna get a piece of me!"

Arianne sank her back onto the couch in annoyance. Her mistake was to think that Tiffany's not-very-superb brain could help her solve her conundrum, because the latter was obviously only going to make things even more confusing.

Suddenly, Smore ran to them and asked, "Aunt Tiffany, why isn't Lil' Pee-pee here?"

Tiffany burst out laughing. "It's Lil' P, kiddo! Not Lil' Pee-pee! Jesus Christ, how is it that you could speak like an orator at everything else but struggle with calling my son, hmm? Anyway, Lil' P is with his granny at the moment, sweetie. Aunt Tiffany's belly is a little too big to take care of him, that's why. If you wanna play with your buddy, though, you should tell me earlier. I'll bring him over for sure!"

Smore nodded, though he looked a little confused. "Awwkay. I'll tell you earlier next time."

Considering the toddler in front of her, a plan took shape in Tiffany's mind. "Do you miss your pops?"

Smore nodded without a moment of hesitation. “Yea. I miss Daddy. But he doesn’t come and see me or play with me anymore.”

Tiffany was feeling a little devilish today. Quickly, she swiped Jackson’s phone from the coffee table nearby and dialed Mark’s number. “Well, let Aunt Tiffany give your daddy a call, and then you tell him to come see you now.”

Smore looked at her excitedly, mirroring traces of anticipation on Arianne’s face. Unfortunately, the call went on for a long time with no one picking it up.

The young boy’s expression sagged. “Hmph, Daddy doesn’t even care about me anymore.”

Not one to be deterred, Tiffany called again. This time, Mark finally answered the phone, but his voice was muffled. “Hello…? Jackson? That you? What?”

She had planned to let Smore take the wheel from here, but after realizing that this was the voice of a sleeping man, Tiffany could not help but step in. “Your head, genius. This ain’t Jackson; this is Tiffany. Don’t tell me you were sleeping in the middle of the day, Mark Tremont! It’s almost noontime for God’s sake. The hell have you been up to last night, eh?”

A motionless silence answered her. Either Mark deliberately refused to say anything, or he fell back to sleep. Either way, multiple “hello?” from Tiffany later, there ceased to be any response from the other side. Stranger still, it seemed that the other side did not plan to hang up, either.

Arianne snatched the phone and hung it up. “Forget it, Tiffie. Doesn’t matter what he’s up to, I still have to work under him, and we’re still gonna see each other all the darn time,” she quipped. “I can’t raise Smore without him writing my paycheck.”

Chapter 1704

Tiffany was starting to get a bad feeling creeping up on her. “Are you suggesting… that he had a change of heart? But I’ve always thought—I mean, he’s always been pretty damn loyal, right?” she wondered aloud before adding, “Hey, look, even if there’s nothing between the two of you, and you can’t work in his company anymore, you still have your café, remember? You’re not exactly unemployed or in need of welfare assistance. You’ll definitely be capable of raising Smore. Besides, you’re uber-talented, Ari. There are gonna be lotsa companies who want you to be in their team, you can count on it! If I were you, I’d never worry. But ultimately, I think you should at least ask him and, well, see if he has really lost interest. If it’s true, you can start packing up and skedaddle outta’ there instead of wasting your precious youth with him, and get yourself a better man to marry.”

Jackson, with teas on a tray, walked in at the right moment and caught his wife’s last few words. “What are you girls on about? Who’s marrying?”

Tiffany was just about to launch into another epic tirade when Arianne stopped her with a look, before taking a sip of her tea. “Nothing. Just your typical small talks.”

Tiffany was never good at keeping her mouth shut, and the longer she had to keep it down in her throat, the more distressed she became. In the end, she resorted to the most roundabout way she could come up with asking Jackson. “Say, do you think Mark’s been acting a lil’ too bizarre lately? Ya know… If he’s got a new gal pal?”

Jackson glanced at Arianne for a second before answering, “I don’t think so? Well, he told me he had recently welcomed a bevy of new models, and… that’s about it. He hasn’t gotten close to any one of ‘em… Look, don’t overthink about these things, ok? A guy might find himself loving another woman one

day and I'll buy it, but bruh, I won't believe you if you told me Mark's that guy. He's only ever loved one woman all these years, and that's Ariane right there. I'm sure as hell you gals already know that."

Arianne murmured, "And Aery Kinsey?"

Jackson grimaced in embarrassment. "That was a show meant to make you jealous, though? Why are you counting that? And I thought he's explained the whole deal to you already."

It was still a very sore subject to Arianne, and she was very much against talking about it. Hence, she kept quiet.

By the evening, Arianne and Smore were ready to go home. It was then that Mark suddenly called her, and she dawdled for a second or two before finally answering him, "Hello?"

From the phone came Mark's trademark dulcet voice. "So, when Tiffany called me earlier with Jackson's number, you were sitting right beside her, weren't you?"

"Mm-hmm," she intoned candidly. She was waiting to see if he would explain himself—and how.

"Sorry, my bad. I was a little somnolent just now, so… I went back to sleep again after answering. Was there anything important? Next time, if you want to talk to me, just call me with your own phone," he said, a little too serenely.

Arianne felt a pang of peeves erupting within her. Did he really think she was not familiar with his nature to be fooled? Mark was the kind of guy who would wake up on time even if it were a weekend or a holiday. He could never be caught dead wasting half a minute snuggling on his bed after rising. How could someone like that have slept all the way to noontime, and still be too tired to remain awake in the middle of a phone call?

Hearing no response from her, Mark asked, “What’s wrong? Where are you? How about a dinner together tonight? Bring Smore.”

Arianne looked down at Smore, who was suckling on his lollipop, and answered flatly, “We’re fine; pass. You go be busy with your things. That’s all, goodbye.”

She hung up the phone and bent down, picking Smore up in her arms before hailing a cab.

Smore was nearing his third birthday and carrying him was starting to feel legitimately challenging. Soon, the boy would grow to the age when he no longer needed his mother to carry him around anymore.

Regardless, she was pleased by the fact that she had not missed a single day of his childhood, nor thrown away any chance at pulling him into her snuggly, cuddly embrace. Even if she had to live through her future with Smore alone, she knew she would live the best life she could ever have.

They reached the condominium, and upon exiting the elevator, Arianne saw Mark already standing by her door. It genuinely baffled her a little, though Smore was quick to spring toward him with an excited yelp, “Daddy!”

Chapter 1705

Mark had brought with him a plethora of toys, which delighted Smore so much that he hopped in joy. Pleased, the man picked the kid in his arms and played with him for a bit, before finally admitting, “I thought the two of you would be at home, but it turns out no one was. Unfortunately, I forgot to bring my key.”

Arianne stepped forward in an attempt to open the door. However, fishing around her handbag for minutes had not produced her key, either, which bummed her out. “So did I. Call Mary, then. She’s probably grocery-shopping or something.”

Mark did not look at all surprised. “Already did; she’s on her way back. She told me you left your key at home, too. Anyway, since you’re disinclined to eat out tonight, I figured I’d come over and have dinner at your place instead!… Hmm. You don’t seem very delighted, do you?”

Delighted? How was she supposed to be “delighted”?

Arianne leaned her back against the door and cast her eyes to the floor, avoiding his gaze. “There’s nothing for me to be undelighted about. Let’s just wait for Mary to come back.”

It was about fifteen minutes later that Mary finally dashed toward them in haste. “I began rushing back ever since I got your call, Mr. Tremont! I hope I didn’t make the three of you wait too long?”

Wordlessly, Arianne took the key from Mary’s hand, opened the door, and stepped inside.

Mary shot a glance at Mark, realizing that something was amiss. Despite that, she said nothing.

It was a little late to start making dinner, so Mary bolted straight into the kitchen to begin. Arianne, too, put on an apron and went inside. “Let me make the meal. You go and take care of Smore, Mary.”

The old woman lowered her voice before rebuffing, “Lord, what’s with the two of you now? Why are you avoiding him? And don’t think I didn’t notice—I’ve always been the one cooking and prepping food, so why are you suddenly here trying to steal my job? Plus, Mr. Tremont’s outside playing with Smore right this instant; why am I even needed there? You should be the one going, young lady. Mr. Tremont finally found the time to visit you, so why are you cooping yourself up in the kitchen?”

“Oh sure, he finally found the time to visit us, alright,” Arianne muttered under her breath. “At least in the past, it was because Shelly wouldn’t let him come here as often. But now, I don’t think he’s got anyone breathing down his neck, does he?”

Mary caught Arianne’s insinuation and laughed. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. What do you expect me to say? You’re bummed that he doesn’t come see you and Smore often, aren’t you? But aren’t the two of you always seeing each other in the office, anyway? For goodness’ sake, Ari, if you’re unhappy, you gotta lay it on him. You know what your man’s like—if you keep mum, he’ll play dumb. Isn’t that how conflicts happen? So, go out there and talk to him already! Then maybe he’ll stay for the night, yea?”

Arianne stubbornly held onto the vegetable in her hands. “I’m not going anywhere! If you wanna go see him so much, go then! I don’t care if he stays or not. It’s not like I’m begging him.”

Sensing that Arianne’s petulance was dead serious, Mary quickly chose to be silent.

Suddenly, Smore burst into the kitchen with two boxes of chocolate. “Mommy, Mommy! Look! Daddy bought you new choke-lucks!”

Arianne could not stop herself from stealing a furtive glance or two at the chocolates. It was the same packaging as she remembered. Mark had told her before that they were imported luxury confectionery, and honestly, Arianne did find their gilded jet-black packaging rather gorgeous. But why was he suddenly buying her chocolates when he never cared much for her at other times?

“Mommy doesn’t want it. Give it back to Daddy. Mommy’s got a toothache; I can’t eat them.”

Smore tilted his head in confusion. “Really? Does that mean I can eat them all?”

“No, I said give it back to Daddy. You can’t have it either,” Arianne emphasized. “If you eat them, you will have toothaches too, just like Mommy. And they will hurt a lot; they will hurt real bad! Mommy can buy you anything you want, Smore. We don’t need someone else’s things.”

Smore made a U-turn and ran back to Mark to dutifully pass Arianne’s message. “Daddy, Mommy said I need to give these choke-lucks back. We can’t have someone else’s things,” he reported.

It was Mark’s turn to be vexed. “Since when has Daddy demoted to ‘someone else’? We’re a family, Smore. Daddy’s things belong to the two of you, too. What is it with your mother, huh? Why does it seem like she is peeving because of me? Did you anger your mother?”

Smore looked positively wronged. “B-But I didn’t…”

Chapter 1706

Mark, growing suspicious, shouted in the direction of the kitchen, “Ari, get over here!”

Arianne pretended not to hear him, which prompted Mary to admonish, “Say something, dear. Before Mr. Tremont gets all miffed—”

Arianne tossed the vegetable in her hand into a pool of water that formed in the sink. “He can be pissed off all he wants; I’m not scared! In fact, I’m the one who should be pissed! If he wanna, he can scram the hell back to the Tremont Estate and throw his tantrum there and save me from his stupid show of dominance! You might be scared of him, but I’m definitely not!”

Her voice was so sonorous that Mary panicked at the thought of Mark hearing her. “Jesus H. Christ, turn down your boombox! What’s gotten into you? All I’ve been seeing is how normal Mr. Tremont has been acting—for Pete’s sake, he still buys you and Smore all these nifty knickknacks! How can something like that miff you at all? Gee, you’re crabbier and crabbier, aren’t you?”

Not about to subject herself to another one of Mary’s nagging, Arianne turned away and marched into the living room. “What do you want?”

Mark’s eyes searched her face for a moment. “What exactly is wrong with you? What is it in my conduct that pisses you off?”

He had been asking the same sort of questions with different phrasing, so she reacted to it by ignoring him completely. She took up Smore in her arms and went into the bathroom. “Wash your dirty hands before meals; we wouldn’t want you to swallow some icky germs in there, now would we? From now on, please remember to wash your hands after coming home from outside, okay?”

Smore's eyes had never left Arianne's, even as he replied with a babyish drag in his tone, "Mommy, you're not gonna be angry with me because you're angry with Daddy, right? I've been very good. I didn't make Granny angry…"

Although Mark had been bumping her mood down, Smore's innocent question did provoke an earnest chuckle from her. "What are you talking about? Do I look like that sort of person to you? I'll take out my steam on the person who infuriated me in the first place. I'd never take it out on innocent bystanders, would I? You've been so good, Mommy has no reason to scold you, does she? Come, wash your hands clean and then go back to playing."

It was then that Mark's coldly-unamused voice blared from behind her, "Take it out on who, exactly?"

Arianne jolted in shock before she hastily put on a calm front. "No one in particular!"

Mark stepped forward and wrestled Smore out of her arms. "Little man, Daddy needs to talk to Mommy for a bit in private. Please, go play with your toys."

With his mind still fixated on Mark's luxury chocolate, Smore chirped his okay cheerfully before sprinting away.

Arianne wanted to follow suit, but Mark blocked the door with his body, trapping her inside the bathroom unless she found a way to skirt him. "Out of the way."

He looked at her, questioning, “And if I don’t? Honestly, what’s happened to you?”

Arianne decided against engaging in his inquiry by getting physical, pulling and shoving and trying to jostle him away from her escape. However, Mark turned the table by snatching her hands and pinning them to the wall, his breaths looming inch-close to her nose.

“If you do not tell me what’s on your mind, you’re not leaving here,” he breathed. “I’m being serious. What’s… eating you?”

The last portion of his sentence ended in a long drawl woven with purposeful seduction. His voice, already dulcet and mesmerizing, was practically reverberating within her ears, sending in waves of shock into her gradually racing heart.

“D-Don’t you dare, Mark!” Arianne warned. “M-Mary and Smore are w-watching!”

Mark knew she was thin-skinned. He leaned even closer to her boldly so that their bodies were a hair away from touching one another. “We’ve done more intimate things than this for countless times, haven’t we? Really, what is this compared to our bolder plays? Now that you mention it, we haven’t been—”

Before he could finish, however, Arianne stomped on his foot so hard that his confidence waned and his grip loosened. She fled instantly.

Years of mastery over his behavior was sufficient in stopping him from yowling in pain, but it did not lessen the agony by any stretch. For Christ’s sake, she did not hold back!

Arianne sprung toward her bedroom with her heart still thumping against her chest while her mind cursed Mark in the same beat. That filthy fella! He had no shame—no shame at all!

Chapter 1707

When dinner was ready, Mark tactfully told Smore to get his mother. With Smore taking up this quest, he was not the slightest bit worried that Arianne might not want to come out.

Reality proved him right. Defenseless against Smore's surfeit of Cute Tactics—babyish singing, dancing, all things an adorable toddler does—Arianne subsequently opened the door and came out. When her eyes met the smugness and provocative beckoning in his, she retaliated by eye-rolling in his face before filtering him out of her sight.

Mary watched them wordlessly, adding no commentary about the whole situation except a tentative question, "Looks like you ain't going nowhere later, huh? It's pouring cats and dogs out there."

Mark nodded. "You're right; I'm bound. It's pouring."

Arianne was not going to believe that excuse in a million years, so she turned to the window and looked on skeptically—and realized that they were right! For some reason, a downpour had loomed over them since she-had-no-idea-when. But wasn't the weather just a few minutes before this all bright and peachy? What sort of coincidence was this?

"You drove all the way here, genius. It's not like you're gonna get wet," she said, deadpanned. "You'll only need to walk a few steps at most; use an umbrella, for God's sake. Aren't you the busiest man

alive? Wouldn't want us plebeians squandering a second more of your precious time—you're welcome to leave after dinner."

Mark pretended to misunderstand her insinuation. "Hmm? Oh, I'm not busy at all tonight. I'm in no rush to leave."

Arianne did not try to mince her words anymore. "You've got your spacious luxury estate waiting at home, don't you? A crappy shack like this is too below your impeccable high standards in comparison!" she mocked. "If you insist on not leaving, then have fun sleeping on the couch. It's all yours."

Mark turned to Smore. "Hey, little man, this house is yours, isn't it? Would you like your dad to stay?"

Smore nodded cheerfully. "Mmhmm! I love when Daddy stays! Don't go, Daddy!"

Mark beamed contentedly at Smore and awarded him a meatball. "I knew I could count on my son's magnanimity and compassion! This house isn't even legally under your mother's name; she really isn't the boss at all."

Seeing the father and son covering each other threw Arianne into bluster. "God, you ungrateful little pipsqueak! After all that I've done for you!"

With his mouth filled with that meatball, Smore asked in a muffled voice, "Wyat's ungreshful pipsqiush?"

Mary was so close to guffawing out loud, though Arianne was so miffed, she lost all of her appetite and tossed her utensils aside before storming toward the television.

Nothing playing on the screen entered her mind at all, because her mind was completely overtaken by Mark's voice—it just made her skin crawl. Everything was out of place, yet he still had the gall to pretend as though nothing was happening! Just what the hell was he hiding behind her back?

If something felt weird, then it must really be weird! Arianne was sure of it. He must have done something behind her back!

After dinner's clean-up, Mary took Smore with her and went to sleep, leaving just Mark and Arianne in the room. That was when Mark finally dropped his erstwhile flippant act and leaned closer to her. "Hey, what has really got into you? You cannot possibly be enraged without rhyme or reason."

Arianne was quiet for a second before she decided. "Why were you asleep when Tiffie called you? What were you up to last night? I know you well enough to know that you don't do catnaps. These days, you leave the office immediately after work with this excuse of being super-busy—like, what's keeping you busy, huh? Are you really so busy that you don't have time for Smore anymore? At least it used to be because someone was stopping you from coming. But there's no excuse now, is there? This is just you, not caring at all. Look, I'm not at all obsessed with resuming our marriage, okay? I just think Smore can't grow up without love from his father, so you should, at the very least, keep him company more often."

Mark finally understood her. "…That's why? This is the reason? God, you're overthinking. I might have gone out of the company after work, but I've always stayed at home. I haven't gone out anywhere at all. I'll admit, there has been something occupying my time lately, but I did make an effort to visit you and Smore, didn't I? As for the naps… I haven't been sleeping very well these nights, so I guess I've been compensating for that through oversleeping. But how on Earth did you come to those conclusions? You weren't thinking about something salacious, were you? Well, if you find it hard to believe, you're welcome to check security footage from Henry's side. See if I've been spending my time outside."

Chapter 1708

Arianne was quick to deny. “I was not! It’s just you acting all… weird and bizarre and everything! You keep saying you’re busy, but like… what is it that you’re busy with? If it’s not anything suspicious then there’s no problem telling me what it is, right?”

Mark’s eyes looked away as he chuckled lightly. “Oh, it shouldn’t warrant any suspicions, all right. But… it’s nothing I should tell you right now. Oh, look at the time! I should bathe. Let’s retire to sleep early! I’m beaten.”

She watched him rise and head to the bathroom, and stole a glance at the clock hanging on the wall. It was only nine… And he was “beaten” already? He slept for long hours in the day and still could not keep himself awake—how was this even normal? Nope, this was absolutely abnormal!

After his bath, Mark went straight into Arianne’s room and—proving himself clear of mendacity—plopped straight onto the bed and dozed off.

Arianne was furious, yes, but at this point, all she could do was to ball her anger up for another day. As she studied him, she could not help but notice how sound asleep he was—and suddenly, just like that, her mood quietened.

What if he was genuinely tired? All these years that they had been together, he had never wronged her with the affairs of women except that one time he was with Aery, who continued to be a thorn in Arianne’s flesh.

So, what did she have to lose if she just believed what he said?

Arianne's eyes fluttered open, basking in the morning light. Still in a spell of grogginess, she saw Mark standing right in front of her French window where the gentle, wispy morning sun blurred his silhouette around the edges like an unreal mirage.

She rolled to her side, and Mark immediately turned around to look at her. "Up already? Mary told me to wake you up for breakfast, but you were still sleeping and I didn't want to disturb you."

Arianne brought her hand to her eyes. Even the gentlest rays were a bit too hard for her eyes at the moment. "Wanna… lie down a little longer…"

The space beside her on the bed suddenly sank a bit, prompting Arianne to turn her head. She was met with Mark's face being only a few inches apart from her eyes and pulled away instinctively. "What are you doing?"

He pulled the sheet off her body to wrap his arm around her small frame. "Keeping your company while you lie down a little longer, of course. Spectacular weather today, isn't it? Want to go somewhere?"

Arianne wriggled and jostled herself into a comfortable position in his embrace. "How about a hike? I haven't been working out for a long time, I think my joints have turned rigid. Oh, but can your old, rickety bones carry you up a hill, hmm?"

Old? The light in Mark's eyes dimmed ever so slightly. This was not the first time she had called him old. Although she had always said it in jest, when she mentioned it multiple times, he started wondering if there was a kernel of truth after all. Was this her sincere opinion? He was, after all, ten years older than her. Had she always minded the wide berth between their age this whole time?

He lurched and nibbled her earlobe. “You really think I’m old?”

She shuddered. “B-But it’s true that you’re older than me! You’re ten years older than I am! Don’t tell me that you haven’t noticed!”

Will Sivan’s image drifted into Mark’s mind. Will… was younger than him, no question about it. Was that why she fell for him? The more he dwelled on this issue, the more miffed he became. “Do you really care that much about age? Have I really turned so much older after ten years? Be frank with me!”

Arianne instantly changed tact—frankly, she just wanted him to be quiet so that she could sleep a little bit longer. “What? N-No! Not at all, okay? You still look as young as back then. You haven’t aged; you’ve matured. In fact, you’ve matured into a kind of dependable, reliable man. I like you this way, and I don’t care about age. Seriously. Totally. Er, literally? Anyway, if I was lying, then may God smite me down!”

Unfortunately, her answer only sounded even more like lip service to Mark. Now, a very unsatisfied Mark rolled to his belly so he could pin her under him.

“You can think age has caught up to me, but I’ll still be able to sate your hunger no problem,” he declared. “You must have gotten all knotted up because I haven’t come to see you these past few days, isn’t it? Well then, we can start right now… And it will only end when you scream satisfaction!”

Chapter 1709

To hear a stoic, monkish man suddenly breathing words like that while they were on the bed immediately brought hot flushes to Arianne’s cheeks.

The two of them were about to indulge themselves when Smore suddenly burst through the door. “Rise and shine, lazy bums! Mommy’s a lazy bum!’

Arianne’s instincts took over and she shoved the man above her aside before bolting up straight to make a show of managing her messy nightwear. “Oh please, Mommy’s already awake. Up from her bed right this instant!”

Smore studied the two of them with curiosity. “Mommy, Daddy, are you playing? I wanna play together!”

Mark coughed to mask his embarrassment. “Well, Son, I’m afraid this is adult-only. You need to be much older to be… eligible. Regardless, let’s finish our breakfast quickly and get changed. Daddy will be bringing you for a hike.”

Smore’s spirit soared the instant he heard his father promise some playtime. He skipped and hopped excitedly to Mary next—the child had forged a habit of pulling his “Granny” into everything, from a good feast to a fun activity. Even at a young age, Smore was big on sharing happiness.

Arianne, meanwhile, ignored a certain man’s begrudging look and nonchalantly got to her feet, ready to wash. “You promised you'd go with me, right? You know Smore’s only gonna ask for someone to carry him after a few steps up, and that’s the sort of labor you’re meant to do. So! Better eat more of your breakfast right now! Wouldn’t want you to be all wimpy and tired later. Go on, chop-chop.

For their excursion, Mark had changed into his white sportswear. Compared to him in his suit-and-tie—somewhat his usual dress code—seeing him in casual wear brought out a whole new air to him. He looked a lot more relaxed and welcoming, and Arianne had to admit that she was a fan of a casually-dressed Mark.

Their car reached the base of the hill soon enough. Mark gazed ahead and frowned at the height in mild dismay. He was never the type to enjoy activities like this, and he had not gone on hikes for quite some time now. The fact that he might have to carry Smore in his arms later, he could almost imagine Arianne laughing at him later.

It did not take a lot of steps before the toddler gave up. “Daddy—upppp!”

Mark submitted to his fate and raised the kid, placing him on his shoulders. “Don’t make any weird movement.”

Smore had never been raised to a height as tall as Mark’s. Now, sitting on his father’s shoulders, the little boy was both scared and excited. “Tall! T-T-tall! So tall!”

Smore was rarely this jubilant, so seeing him like that made Arianne’s lips curve. “We’re just getting started, Smore. We’re gonna take this slow, and then up there, on the peak… I heard there’s a gorgeous lake.”

The peak? Mark breathed out a long, drawn-out sigh. “You can’t seriously aim to reach the peak, do you? Why can’t we just do a bit of a free-form hike and stop whenever? It’s not like your constitution’s apt for strenuous physical exercise like this, is it? You don’t even do much hiking normally, do you?”

Arianne cocked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? How about we try it out first? Maybe your knees will give out first.”

Arianne had brought her camera for this particular excursion, and as they hiked, she made sure to take pictures of the beautiful sceneries their trip had to offer. She also took a lot of pictures of Mark and Smore, and his progress showed: at first, he looked imperturbable and steady, but when sweat started to break out of his forehead, his eyebrows had stayed furrowed.

They finally reached the halfway point where a resting shack was available. Placing Smore down, he reclined at a bench beside the hike track. “You just want me to admit that I’m old, don’t you?”

Arianne snapped a picture of him before revealing her half-smile. “Oh, no way. You’re not old at all! Totally not at all!”

Mary, in comparison, seemed to be in a way better shape than Mark was. “Too true. You’re not even that old yet, Mr. Tremont! I’m the real senior citizen here. Heck, when I was your age, I could do whatever without losing my gusto! I can run all the way to this peak without rest back then, wouldn’t you believe! But now, shucks. Just this height’s enough to make me huff and puff,” she chimed in. “But I do get some workout every day from walking to the supermarket for groceries and stuff, at least. While you, Mr. Tremont—you sit behind that desk in your company all day. Gotta come out for walks and runs sometimes, you know? They are good for your health.”

Smore, who had the luxury of riding on his father’s back, still had a lot of energy to spend. “Daddy, look! The houses over there are so tiny! But weren’t they tall before…?”

Chapter 1710

Mark followed Smore’s line of sight until the city view leaped into his eyes. Skyscrapers, always seeming so impressive back in the city, were now no more than tiny, unremarkable blocks.

“Stand at the top, and you’re at the vantage for viewing the furthest stretch of the world. Stand at somewhere flat, and everything looks tall and out of reach. If you want to see far into the world, then always strive for the top—always. You understand me?”

Of course Smore did not. The deeper meaning behind his words was completely lost on the kid, whose reply was, “Ohhh, so we’re gonna climb all the way up to the peak? Because the peak is the top!”

The corner of Mark’s lips twitched. Why the heck did he try to pass something only an adult would understand on to a kid who was not even three?

Arianne’s laugh escaped her. “Alright, Smore, Daddy’s worn-out now. Let him take a breather, okay? You know Daddy’s tired because he had to carry you all the way up here, right? It’s very tiring.”

Smore grabbed a water bottle out of Mary’s backpack and handed it to his father. “Daddy, have some water then.”

Mark took it from the boy’s hand and patted his little head. “Aww, look at Smore, all grown-up and matured now.”

Smore broke into a grin so wide he bared all of his baby teeth. “Then after finishing this water, Daddy can give me a piggyback up the peak again!”

Mark’s hand froze in mid-action. This little rascal—he was only worried that Mark was too tired to carry him up to the top, was he not?

This was when the phone he had placed in Arianne's backpack rang. Hearing it, Arianne immediately fished it out and gave it to him, though not without spying on the name on the screen. "It's Jackson."

Mark grabbed his phone, and he immediately walked away from the group as his habit kicked in. "Hello?"

Jackson seemed to be telling Mark a lot of things from the other side while Mark kept stealing glances at Arianne as the conversation went on with scarce answers. Soon, the call ended.

Arianne's suspicions rose again. "Why was he looking for you? And you kept looking at me because you were afraid of me listening in, weren't you?"

Earnest relief crossed Mark's gaze. "What is there for me to hide? What can I possibly be afraid of? Ha! It's only some affairs concerning the company, and Jackson was only telling me to go there right now. Either way, I'll have to abandon this hiking trip for now, I'm afraid. Or… maybe we should all go home together? I can drive us home first before I depart for my company."

Mary was a little hesitant. "The entrance ticket wasn't exactly cheap, though. Should we really give up before reaching the peak? Sounds like an awful waste. Ari, are you gonna continue the hike? Maybe we should just let Mr. Tremont go do his business on his own while we continue what we set out to do with Smore. How about that?"

Arianne trained her eyes on Mark for a good few seconds, but nothing about him clued her in. "Fine, fine. You go wherever you gotta be on your own. Mary and I will be continuing our hike with Smore. I can't possibly want to give up now that I'm outside, right? I just hope you didn't find an excuse to flee from hiking 'cause it was your idea to take me out for a hike, after all."

Mark shrugged. “Hey, you saw what happened. My phone has been in your safe keeping this whole time; Jackson was the one who summoned me away. It’s definitely not because I’m looking for ways to flee, now is it? If I manage to finish this early, I’ll come back for you. Either way, do take some breaks before hiking again. See you around.”

Smore immediately grabbed a fistful of his pants. “No, no, no! Daddy please don’t go! If you go… when are you gonna come back to play with me?”

Mark crouched and rubbed Smore’s cheeks before looking up to Arianne for a second. “There, there, little man. Daddy’s got a really big thing he needs to pull off right now. But when that’s over, I’ll play with you every single day. For now, Daddy’s gotta go.”

Arianne watched his silhouette vanish into the path that led down the hill as she mulled over his words.

A “big thing”? Just what kind of “thing” would Mark Tremont consider “big?”