Ruling 1821

Chapter 1821

Mark said, “She wants to borrow some money. There’s a chance that Aery’s going to recover, but it’s going to cost a fortune for her follow-up treatment, and it’s going to be a very long process. There seems to be some issues with her company at the moment and she’s having some trouble with her cash flow, so she has no choice but to ask me for it.”

‘Borrow money, you say?’ Arianne felt a little embittered. ‘Helen would actually rather look for Mark instead of her own daughter?’

Arianne bit her lip. “You’re the one she’s asking for, not me. So, do as you please. You don’t have to tell me.”

Mark walked to Arianne’s side and sat down before reaching out his hand to grab onto her shoulder. “Why would she look for me? Wouldn’t it be because of our relationship? It’s all the same, whether she looks for me or you, so is there a need to differentiate so clearly? I’m telling you to ask for your opinion; the person who’s asking for a loan is your mom after all. I know you don’t like Aery, so if you don’t wish to help her, I won’t lend them so much as a single cent.”

‘Could I actually bear to say no in this situation? No matter how much I hate her, I wouldn’t be so cruel. It’s a human life after all.

‘If Helen were to have to take care of Aery in her vegetative state until she dies, would she carry on hating me? Would she hate me for not helping when I could? Hate me for being so heartless…?’

At that thought, Arianne took a breath before she said, “Go ahead and lend them if you want to; there’s no need to ask me. However, remember to write down a loan chit. You have to be clear with money even if it were your own brother. I don’t owe her anything, you more so.”

Tiffany had no intention of listening to the mention of Aery at all, so she silently got up and headed to the patio.

Arianne frowned and reminded Mark with a whisper, “You really shouldn’t mention Aery in front of Tiffany next time.”

Mark was slightly aggrieved. “You were the one who said there were no outsiders here and asked me to be straightforward, but you’re blaming me now? You women really can’t do anything well except for pushing the blame on others. I’ll go reply to your mom’s email then.”

Arianne did not say anything and followed Tiffany to the patio. “Tiffany, isn’t it hot outside? What would you like to drink? I’ll ask the kitchen to prepare it.”

Tiffany forced a wry smile. “Why are you being so courteous with me? If I want to drink anything, I’ll do it myself; I don’t see myself as an outsider. Are you finished talking? I only thought that it was getting a little boring inside, so I came out to get some fresh air…”

Arianne lowered her eyes. “I’m sorry, I hate Aery as much as you do, but… I can’t sit aside and watch…”

Tiffany smiled and tapped Arianne’s shoulder. “What are you talking about? On one hand, there’s your mom, and on the other, your sister, so you should care about them. I’m fine, don’t you know what kind of person I am by now? No matter how unhappy I am, I’ll be able to get better very soon without

overthinking things. I'm living quite well now. I have Jackson and a son and daughter as well, so what's there to complain about? That matter really doesn't have that big of an impact on me…"

'How could it possibly not? For such a thing to happen to a woman, it would definitely be a lifetime trauma.' Arianne knew very clearly what was going on, but she did not expose Tiffany's bravado. Hence, she could only continue to pretend like nothing had happened and put on a magnanimous facade.

That night, just after they had dinner, Jackson arrived to pick up Tiffany.

Tiffany was like an innocent child as she joyfully rushed into his arms. "You're here right on time. I was just done with dinner. Have you eaten?"

Jackson lovingly pinched Tiffany's cheeks. "How could I possibly dare to eat before picking you up? Dinner is already prepared at home, so I'll eat when I get back. We'll be leaving now, Arianne, Mark."

Mark waved his hand. "Drive safe."

When they got into the car, Tiffany stared at Jackson, seeming to size him up from head to toe.

Jackson felt a shiver run down his spine from Tiffany's staring. "What's the matter? Has something gone wrong? Are you not satisfied enough by watching me everyday?"

Chapter 1822

Tiffany adjusted her posture so she could look at him, face to face, and display the full glory of her love-smitten grin.

“Will I ever get enough of looking at you, hon? Nope! I will never! Ever! Be bored of your handsome face, puddin’! See, you’re that one precious starburst I’ve gone through loads of bullsh*t in life just to finally find and make mine; do you really think I’m gonna deny myself from staring at my husband, looking damn fine every single day, hmm? Ha! People say that marriage is how you break the spell of love, but not for me, man, not for me. Because every day I spend with you just makes me fall even more maddeningly in love! I love ya so hard! Purrrrrrrrr…”

Jackson could see his skin crawling in real-time as she rambled on. “What the hell…just happened? You were never this… cringey back then, r-right? The hell knocked you on the head and changed you, babe?”

Scarily, Tiffany did not seem at all offended by his reaction. Even scarier, she simply continued leveling him with an unrelenting stare…

Jackson broke down into pleading, “B-Babe, can you please blink? Or better yet—just turn your eyes away from me and stare at that tree or something instead! Lord Almighty, no offense, but I’m getting this feral-predator-meeting-prey vibe from you right now and I don’t think that’s conducive for driving… Okay, stop! I’m seriously, seriously, freaking out! Get those eyes away from me before I pee myself!”

Tiffany sneered as loudly as her displeasure could allow and righted her posture. “Urgh, frickin’ dumba** who knows diddly-squat! Fine, I guess I’ll just have to feast my eyes on the abundance of hot, sexy guys near me on the streets, then! By the way, you’re not working overtime tonight, are you?”

Jackson sensed a shiver up his spine immediately. “Oh Lady Tiffany of Lane, please have mercy on my body! You know I’m dead tired from work, right? Now that I gotta feed not one but two brats, I need to work even harder every day. I’m so busy, I don’t even have the luxury to think about sex!”

He then drew a sharp breath. “Oh, but you’re welcome to wave and see if anyone out there wants to fill my place, only I’ll strangle them dead in order. Anyway, can we just leave this topic for tonight, babe? At this time in the middle of a drive, seducing me is like trying to flirt with a cow. Oh, that reminds me. My mom told me to buy some baby milk on the way home. Numbah Two is running out of hers.”

Tiffany shot him a sideway leer. “Mister, can you stop calling her ‘Numbah Two’ already? FYI, she’s a proper young lady who has an actual name, okay? It’s ‘Cynthia West’.”

Jackson hung his head in shame. “Oh, I didn’t mean to—Look, old habits die hard, okay? Would it kill you to be a bit more forgiving of me falling back to using a placeholder nickname?”

The pair returned to the West Family residence, where Jackson promptly went to have his dinner with the rest of his family.

Her daughter, Cynthia, was hungry. Since Tiffany had her dinner back in the Tremont Estate already, she took over the job of feeding the girl from Summer so the latter could have her dinner along with the rest of them.

Lil’ P wolfed down his dinner haphazardly, then ran to where his mother was to watch his sister being fed. He took note of every single drop of milk drained from the bottle and pouted in derision. “Hmph! She eats like a whale! One day she’ll eat us poor with that fat appetite.”

If Tiffany had an extra hand, she would punch the little prick in the nose. “What are you complaining about, huh? She’s literally just drinking her own frickin’ milk! What kinda sorry older brother are you, man? You not liking your little sister is bad enough; must you also diss her like that? Seriously, are you

really my son or some changeling? God!" she reprimanded. "You know what? When your old man and I moved back to White Water Bay villa, you bet you're gonna be left here with your Granny and Grandpa. I'll take your sister with me, too, thank you very much!"

Lil P, however, simply reacted with unfazed contempt. "Okay, good idea. I don't wanna stay with a scary-mean-mother like you anyway! And I especially don't wanna live with that ugly cootie-monster! If I stay with her, I will catch her ugly germ too!"

Chapter 1823

Summer, listening in from all the way back in the dining room, guffawed so hard she choked on her food. "Ha—uh, uh hem! Cough, cough, ptooey! Hahahahaha! Jesus Christ, Lil' P! How old are you again? That little boombox of yours can really say the most outrageous things! If you were a few years older, your mom would have whacked you right now! C'mon, you rascal, your sister's only gonna be ugly for now—when she grows older, she's only gonna get better, you can bet on that! The tables might turn by then and she would be the one who doesn't want to play with you anymore!"

Tiffany thought of her daughter's challenge in cognitive abilities and lowered her head as a sharp pang stabbed her chest. Every time Lil' P started running his mouth and throwing all sorts of disparaging remarks at his sister, the anger that he fanned within Tiffany was genuine and real. Had Cynthia not suffered enough? Why must she still be treated with contempt?

Tiffany knew Lil' P was, at his core, just a little kid with equal maturity to boot. But it did not stop how much her heart would ache, did it?

People outside her family could belittle her daughter as much as they wanted, but she would not brook hearing it from her own people. Cynthia was not just any girl—she was the daughter she almost traded her life for. Intelligent or not, Tiffany did not care; her life's purpose was to protect Cynthia and be by her side forever.

Tiffany's silence was deafening; it was so stark that Summer thought she had crossed the line. "Oh, Tiffie, I… I'm sorry, I didn't mean to… I was just joking, Tiffie. I would never think Cindy's ugly—in fact, I think she's quite a cutie too, a-and she will only grow up to become even more beautiful, I know it. She's my granddaughter, so there's no way I won't love her. So, don't take my ribbing to heart, all right, sweetie?"

"No, it's okay, Mom. I wasn't mad at you. But…" Tiffany inhaled sharply. "Plato West, you little brat, listen to me closely. If you dare call your sister an ugly monster or anything like that again, I am not. Letting. You. Get Away with this. You know your sister's born with some disabilities; you know s-she's… imperfect… But her own older brother kicking her to the curb like that? Plato West, how… How d-do you expect her to l-live?!"

It ended in a choked sob.

Seeing her reddened eyes, Lil' P took a few fearful steps back, spun on his heels, and sprinted back into the dining hall where he could dive into Atticus's hands for protection. Going for his grandfather as his asylum was the boy's go-to strategy for any impending spanking, which really showed how much Atticus doted on his grandson.

Summer loved her granddaughter, but she loved her grandson too. Right now, all she could do was to rub Lil' P's little head comfortingly without a word.

Seeing Tiffany tear up took away Jackson's appetite, so he placed his utensils down. "Tiffie, maybe all you need is a good rest upstairs. I'll feed Cindy in your stead. Either way, Lil' P is just a little boy who knows nothing—he probably doesn't even know what 'ugly' really means, babe. It's pointless to debate this with someone who's fundamentally incapable of understanding, right? Cindy is our daughter; we'll do all of the loving and doting and pampering."

Tiffany forced the earnest pain flaring in her heart from showing on her face and passed Cynthia to Jackson before vanishing upstairs.

Summer let out a breath she had been holding. “Oh, God ease Tiffany’s poor heart. She may put on that devil-may-care front, but these remarks can crop up in her heart, too, and it will hurt. We should really pay attention to what we say, I think. Better not say the wrong words from now on.”

As soon as she finished her dinner, Summer took Cynthia away from Jackson’s hands, freeing him to look for Tiffany upstairs.

The first thing that greeted him after stepping through the door was a blank-faced Tiffany laying sprawled on the bed. While she appeared lost in thoughts, her pillow was visibly wetted by warm, relentless tears rolling down her cheeks. Jackson had to get close enough to her to pick locks of matted hair away from her face.

“Hey, babe. You all right?” he whispered gently. “You were really pissed just now, weren’t you? What’s eating you, Tiffie? If there’s pain in there, you must tell me, okay? Don’t bottle it up and suffer it alone. I know it’s more than Lil’ P being a brat treating his sister with contempt.”

Tiffany sniffled. “I… I don’t know what’s eating me either. I just feel… like I can’t hold it in anymore. Every time Lil’ P does this... when he disparages Cindy like that, it just twists the knife that’s been lodged in my heart. Cindy’s misfortune is torment enough, Jackson, so why? Why won’t her brother let up?! I know what y’all think. ‘He’s just a kid! He ain’t mature enough to understand what he’s doing!’ But I don’t want this… thing to be a recurring shadow that haunts Cindy since her childhood, okay? I don’t! J-Just l-l-look at her when I was feeding her; she looked like a goddamned normal kid, no different from anyone else! E-Even I still can’t believe… that I’m looking at a cognitively-challenged child…”

Everything that hurt Tiffany hurt Jackson too—he was just better at concealing what he really felt.

He lifted his hand and patted Tiffany in a featherlight manner. “Hey, hey. It’s all right, babe. That no-good twerp’s gonna get a taste of his Pop’s medicine for sure. But you, though! How can a fierce mom like yourself be bullied into crying by her own son, hmm? That’s kinda embarrassing, ain’t it? Hee hee…”

Chapter 1824

Tiffany suddenly sat right up on her butt with her outstretched, slender fingers closing around Jackson’s collar. Her eyes were still wet with tears, but the glimmer had somehow been imbued with a new tinge of seduction. “You’re not going anyway tonight…”

Jackson’s eyes darkened slightly. “Damn it. Took your bait.”

Tiffany pursed. “As if I could ever create any scheme as good as yours! Really, are you not gonna take the lead?”

Jackson’s heart was fluttering. The way she pitched her voice, the tone she used, and the look on her face… That woman’s seduction game was truly the pinnacle of all!

…

The next day in the Tremont Estate, Arianne and Mark’s return was greeted by Henry personally coming out of the door. “Welcome home, Mr. Tremont; Madam. You have a guest at home.”

They halted in their steps. Neither of them expected company that day, though Mark nodded. “Mm, understood.”

They strode into the living room, where Arianne instantly spied a familiar figure sitting on the couch; a presence that stopped her dead in her tracks.

Helen? What was she doing back in her home country while leaving Aery alone?

Mark was not surprised, however. He had figured as much the moment Henry told him they were to expect a guest. He took a seat and asked straight away, “You’re here? What would compel you to return in the flesh? If it’s about money… haven’t I transferred a sum?”

Helen considered Arianne with a feeble smile hanging on her lips. “I thought you wanted an IOU for this, yes? I figured it’s better for me to appear in person to help with such an invaluable form, especially when the amount I’m asking for is this huge. Now, I’ll create the IOU for you to sign; I’ve brought my own paper and pen.”

Arianne stepped forward. “It wasn’t him who wanted it, it was me,” she replied flatly. “Since you see nothing wrong with such a request, then please proceed.”

Mark furrowed his eyebrows a little. Had the mother and daughter both been so thoroughly estranged that this was the only way their reunion could go?

Helen took out a piece of paper and pen and started drafting the IOU. “Arianne, you misunderstand me. I don’t at all think writing an IOU is unnecessary. It could be your idea or Mark’s, it doesn’t matter—it makes sense to create one, and I don’t object to it. Really, you don’t have to put so much emphasis on it. I’m only here out of respect. Do I make myself clear?”

Arianne sneered. “Respect? Have you ever respected me throughout my life? Pfft. Now, I’m not gonna talk about all those things that had happened in the past, but that’s only because by this point, there isn’t anything to talk about between us. Of course, I do pray that Aery could wake up from her coma and everything, since to you, she has always been your only daughter, right? With her up, you won’t have to waste time remembering someone as unimportant and irrelevant as me anymore.”

Helen’s writing hand was visibly shuddering as she listened to Arianne’s tirade, but she forced herself to complete the IOU before passing it to Mark. “I’ve signed my name on it. Take a look; if there’s no error of note, please sign yours as well. In any case, Arianne? I… I know I’ve done a lot of wrong against you. I expected our reunion to be like this, too. I’ve sunk so low into the nadir that I have no other choice but to ask for money from the two of you, see. Not a shred of my dignity has remained. And so… it doesn’t matter what you think of me, or what you paint me as anymore.”

“‘It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter’—it never mattered! This is the only sentiment you ever have when it concerns me—it never frickin’ matters!” Arianne retorted hotly. “Aren’t you supposed to disappear from my life forever after taking Aery away, huh? You know, the same way you did when you abandoned me without even a modicum of regret or concern? You should have lived since then, so why aren’t you? What’s all this stupid, pathetic, ‘woe is me’ state meant to invoke, huh? Aren’t you the one who always gloats about her capabilities and talents?!”

Chapter 1825

Mark could not stand to watch their exchange anymore. He stood and tugged Arianne’s arm, suggesting, “All right, that’s enough. I recall Smore having some assignments from school today, and maybe you can check and see if he’s doing them. Let me handle this.”

Arianne responded with a wordless, sullen sulk before turning her back from them and walking away.

Her bravado took her as far as a corner, where no one else was present, before it crumbled and revealed her reddened eyes. The fact that Helen was borrowing a hefty sum from her was never what dismayed her—it was the revelation that after abandoning Arianne, Helen's life did not improve at all. Seeing her going around, essentially begging for charity, was a sting to her heart, and she hated how that distress felt.

Downstairs, Mark tried his best to comfort Helen. "It's all right, I can assure you. I sincerely believe she doesn't mean abuse when she said what she said. She concurred when I told her you needed monetary help. The most likely impetus to this, my guess, is the… complication between the two of you that she still cannot forgive. Please don't take it to heart."

Helene flashed a pained smile. "I know, I know. To stoop to such lows… I can only accept everything she accuses me of, and it's okay. I owed her this much… and more, wouldn't you say? More than I can ever atone in my lifetime. Mark, in my absence, please take care of her, okay?"

Mark drew a deep breath. "Understood. I will care for her with all my heart. How long… will you be staying?"

Helen shook her head. "Not at all. Bought the night plane; just can't leave Aery in that state for long. I've only gotten someone to watch over her temporarily while I'm away for this trip," she replied. "I should be going. Please, help me tell Arianne and Smore that I said goodbye."

That was all. She rose to her feet and vanished outside the door. She did not seem to have taken any moment of reprieve between flying back to her home country and back abroad—it was an overseas trip made ostensibly for a single sheet of IOU…

And Arianne.

Even though her daughter clearly did not welcome her appearance.

A while later, Arianne descended the stairs and noticed Helen was gone. In a knee-jerk fashion, she asked, “Where is she?”

Mark shrugged. “Gone. Told me to bid you farewell.”

Desolation sparked in her eyes for a millisecond. “Hmph! So she can’t wait to leave either. Can’t let go of Aery, can she? Fine by me; I like her gone. I don’t wanna see her face at all.”

Mark kept himself from exposing her shoddy affectation. In truth, Arianne had wanted to see Helen—she just could not bear to admit it from her lips.

A simple meeting like that would only become even rarer from here on out; why must people taint each of them with hostility? The future is already locked in a race with misfortune, both vying to claim hapless men before the other. Who knew if a mundane meeting today would be the last one could ever have? After all, the countdown to death begins the moment one is born—every second in one’s life is a relentless push to our dusty death.

Helen’s appearance turned out to influence Arianne’s mood more than one would expect. Even by dinnertime, she remained absentminded and even a little hagridden.

Smore showed her his homework after he finished, but she only made a passing glance around the pages before returning them back to him with nary a review. It was a far cry from her usual nagging self.

It was jarring enough to spur Smore into asking his dad secretively, “Dad, is Mom upset because Granny came? I should be a bit more good-boy today, right? Don’t wanna get spanked.”

“Glad to see you getting it,” Mark remarked in resignation. “When your mom’s upset, don’t attract her anger. Granted, this is as much advice to you as it is to me—looks like we’ll have to be on our best behavior for a few days. Fools rush in where angels refuse to tread.”

“Angels? Really, where?” Smore echoed in confusion.

“…It’s just an idiom, little man. Means only fools would dare to be reckless when even the wisest would balk. Anyway, you’ll have to play alone today. Then take a bath and go to sleep; don’t give your mom reason to be even more upset than she already is. You’re old enough to take a shower on your own, aren’t you?”

Smore was quite confident of his ability to do that, at the very least. “Please, I know how to shower. I’m not gonna upset anyone with that!”

The dark of the night had always been fertile grounds for unbridled trains of thoughts, but tonight, Arianne’s rotten mood made Mark hesitate in sharing his musing—or even doing much anything else. In the end, he could only toss and turn from his side of the bed as sleep continued to elude him.

Chapter 1826

At the last of his relentless rolls, Arianne finally spoke up. “Too full to fall asleep? Get up and move around, then.”

For some reasons, he felt fretful. He tried to pull her into him as an antidote. “Could say the same about you. You know what’s on my mind, don’t you? I’ll be honest with you—if you ever want to see your mother, you can. Always, anytime you want. You needn’t affect nonchalance after you see her every time; I know you wanted to see her a great deal.”

Hearing him mention Helen lit up her fuse, causing her to shove him away from her in frustration. “Don’t mention her! She doesn’t even wanna lay her eyes on me, so why the heck should I plead with her to look at me like some sad, pathetic thing, huh? I’m not without my dignity and pride, you know; there’s no way I would still come with puppy-dog-eyes begging for her to take me in after she abandoned me over and over again! No!”

Her outburst stole Mark’s response away, leaving him speechless. Combined with the fact that his mind was also split on some other “matter”, he found himself hard-pressed on how to organize his riposte. In the end, he chose to give up talking entirely.

Arianne stomped her foot on his thigh. “Speak, mister! Why aren’t you talking?”

He quickly seized onto her delicate foot and sighed. “What am I supposed to say? I don’t even know what to make of this thing between the two of you. Every time we raise this topic, you turn into a woman-shaped nuke, and I don’t enjoy masochism. You want me to shut up about her, don’t you?”

It was Arianne’s turn to be tongue-tied. She might shout about wanting the world to shut up about Helen, yet another deeper, subconscious part of her yearned for her—every news, every information,

everything about a mother who never was. Their blood tie had become an invisible, unbreakable thread; it bound her, tortured her.

Now that she had fallen into silence, Mark panicked. “W-What? What did I say this time?”

She shook her head before curling herself into his chest like a placated cat. “Nothing. How much did she ask for? Is she really living in… well, abject despair?”

Mark grazed her smooth, disheveled long hair with a featherlight touch. “Oh, no, just a bit of a bump, I’ll wager. Nothing to worry about. I’ve told her already, if she is ever strapped for cash, all she has to do is ask from me. She’s got a good head for business on top of her shoulders; I believe she will turn this around very soon. That’s just what one should expect from a capable talent—you could throw them in any environment, and they will still make quick work out of their adversities and thrive. The only thing that’s wearing her down is Aery’s condition, but as long as she finds the means to weather it, she will be fine.”

“I… I’ll pay… her debt, I mean, b-but you’re not telling her about this! I don’t owe her anything… not at all, I haven’t owed her anything for a long time…” came the muffled reply.

Mark lowered his head and kissed her forehead. “Ari, when it comes to us, there’s no talk of ‘debt’, okay? What’s mine is also yours. In fact, I never planned to make her repay a single cent because she’s family, and I want to help her as much as I can, too. Problem is, she’s adamant about not ‘troubling’ me, so she refused to tell me how her current situation exactly is. …Not that I would worry, granted. She’s no hapless fool—if she knows she can’t make it, she’ll know to ask for help,” he replied. “You, though… You just had to lambast her with that harangue today when the two of you met. Asking for help would likely become much more… difficult for her from now on.”

Honestly, Arianne rued her outburst too, and now that he reminded her of it, her ire rose sharply enough to dispel any lingering sleep she still had. Angry, she gave a barrage of punches to his chest. “You and your irritating mouth! If you fail that hard at comforting people, then try not talking!”

Mark finally succumbed to his desire and gripped her wrist. “Oh, I’m terrible at comforting people in this particular way, all right. You understand what I’m getting at, yes…?”

Sensing his breath on her skin made her heart skip a beat. Frustrated, Arianne turned away and mumbled, “Ugh! I’m so irritated right now—not in the mood! I! Hate! You! Hmph!”

Chapter 1827

At six in the morning, a string of frenzied ringing startled Arianne out of her sleep. This was not her usual time to wake up, and she did not intend to start now.

She jostled Mark, signaling him to help her get it. The man groggily obeyed and stood up from his bed, grabbing her phone and taking a glance on the caller’s name before passing it to Arianne. “Your phone; it’s Melanie. You pick it up.”

Arianne placed the phone by her ear blearily. “Mmm, helloww? Melanie? Why the early call?”

All the way from the other side of the phone, Melanie’s voice was dangerously light and evidently shaking, “A-Arianne… T-Teo… He… He’s been abducted… The m-media’s already on it… D-Don’t you know yet?”

The fog of sleep around Arianne was immediately dispelled. “What did you just say?! W-What happened?!?!”

Mark was so shocked, his plan to return to his slumber was instantly thwarted, and in response, he rolled on his back to express protest.

Arianne willed herself to recover her composure before descending from their bed as lightly as she could and went into the bathroom. She asked only after shutting the door, “Melanie, what exactly happened? Wasn’t he just fine yesterday or something? How did he suddenly get abducted like that?”

Melanie could not come up with an explanation either, as her knowledge was all gleaned from the news report. “I d-don’t know… L-Last night, the midnight news… T-The headline w-w-was s-s-something along the line of ‘Heir to Rodriguez family, Mateo Rodriguez, kidnapped; kidnappers demand astronomical sum of ransom, threatens death otherwise’. I asked around, you know. The best information I got recountedTeo’s abduction as s-something that happened in broad daylight yesterday, b-but the news wasn’t expected to s-spread so soon… A-And now, because of media attention, and the police’s involvement, I… I’m s-so worried that Teo’s gonna get hurt!

“Those kidnappers… they must not have wanted the police to get involved, right? I’ve asked his family, and his parents said… They said they didn’t tell anyone about this, yet somehow, word of his abduction and the police’s aid have gotten out, a-and there’s no way of s-silencing this thing anymore! The Rodriguez… The Rodriguezes are going mad with panic!”

Arianne might have the fortune to not be subjected to it, but she had observed and heard others’ harrowing experiences enough to know that a cocktail of media sensationalism and breakout news about the Rodriguez family seeking law enforcement’s help bode badly for Mateo’s survival.

Arianne had thought that Melanie's intention was to seek her comfort, especially since Mateo was Melanie's childhood friend, so she quickly launched into comfort mode. "H-Hey Melanie, don't worry, okay? The kidnappers' goal is money, right? If they took him out, then they would gain nothing anymore, right? It's just a few hours since Mateo was abducted, so there should be a possibility of things turning around! If you need any help, Melanie—any help at all—all you need to do is ask."

"Arianne, don't you think something's very fishy about this? Why else do you think I called you?" Melanie said suddenly, as though the conversation had pivoted to somewhere else. "Teo isn't a kid anymore. How could an adult be abducted by anyone in broad daylight? E-Especially when this happened after Mark discovered that meeting between the two of you—"

"What are you saying, Melanie…?" Arianne interjected, her body frozen. "Are you suggesting… that the man behind this… might be Mark?"

Melanie inhaled a sharp breath from the other end of the line. "Arianne, I don't want to, I really don't! But I can't completely suspend my suspicion either! It's just possible, isn't it? This abduction… reeks of personal enmity. It's riddled with suspicions. Why didn't the kidnappers target easier prey like kids, who would throw up the least resistance? Why a grown-up like Teo, when the risk runs high? There's only one reason: there is a vested vendetta against Teo!

"I've suspected Alejandro, too, but it's become known fact that there is nothing going on between Teo and I. The misunderstanding from before has long been resolved, which bereft Alejandro from any reason to do this. E-Either way, Arianne, I urge you to be more attentive than usual. If my conjecture is right, then you know what's right… Teo, God save him—he was supposed to return overseas today, but now…."

Chapter 1828

Arianne's mind was upheaved into a terrible confusion.

She hung the call soon and stood in the bathroom alone, desperately combing through her memory of Mark's recent behavior to find any abnormality.

Arianne would not have ever suspected Mark before Melanie stated her case. But once the woman raised her points, Arianne just could not help but follow the way the conjecture went. Yes, Arianne very much wanted to believe Mark was in the clear, but even she had to admit that he had always been capable of analogous cruelties.

He had been downright apoplectic the night he found her with Mateo. And yet with the exception of beating that man on the spot as an outlet for his anger, Mark came out of the experience almost unaffected. There was no follow-up to the event; there was not even a mention on the days after. The way he had been acting was simply a far cry from his character.

The Mark that Arianne knew was a man who never gave anyone or anything a pass. Anything he perceived as a threat or an affront would be uprooted from his path completely with extreme prejudice. It was just not like him to turn the other cheek—he would not sincerely pardon someone just because Arianne apologized. On the contrary, he would hold a grudge against it.

When one really took all of his traits into account, it made her wonder—was it possible that Mark had a hand in Mateo's abduction?

Arianne could not bring herself to continue that train of thought. She returned to their bed like a haunted woman and stared at the man deep in his slumber. She had no inkling at all on how to question him about it.

If it really was his doing… He would have deduced what Melanie was about to say from the unusual timing of her call, right? The fact that he could still pass Arianne's phone to her without a lick of panic—he was so overtly calm that it bordered on chilling.

When it was the time when he usually woke up, Mark roused gradually from his sleep. He was immediately treated to the sight of Arianne sitting on their bed with a pale, haunted complexion.

He sat up and asked, "What happened? Why did Melanie call you at such an ungodly hour?"

Arianne peered into his eyes and found only remnants of bleariness in them, and she could not bring herself to ask him outright. "She… Uh, she told me about an incident," she replied, taking the indirect route. "It's even there in the news. Haven't you read it?"

Mark rubbed his temples as though he still had not completely woken up. "Well, what is this 'incident,' hmm? I'll have you know that I have zero attention to gossip or other trifling entertainment 'stories'. The only news I care about pertains to business."

Arianne levied an unyielding stare at him before enunciating her answer carefully, "Mateo Rodriguez has been abducted. Some unknown informant leaked this to the media, and now the news has published everything, including the fact that the Rodriguez family had sought help from the police. In a climate like that, the kidnappers might not dare to take the ransom they demanded. Will they be so exasperated at how things turned out that they'll kill him in frustration? …Either way, I'm scared that Mateo's fate might be a very grim one."

Mark's body froze a little before he whipped his face to her, eyes staring as though he was trying to read her thoughts. "I know nothing of this, but an incident with such gravity would have likely reached me sooner or later even if you hadn't told me… The fact that it hasn't implies that this happened recently," he said. "Mateo is Melanie's childhood friend, yes? She must be very anxious right now. It's a small

wonder why she would choose to tell you all of this. Anyway, I better get up and wash myself. There's a meeting scheduled today; I need to get to the office early."

With that, he came down the bed and went straight into the bathroom.

Arianne let out a drawn-out breath. He had met her eyes head-on when he talked; she found no sign of elusion in them. This should be enough to clear her suspicion, right?

Not quite, because Mark was also renowned for his mastery over outward expressions. Masking a lie, to him, was akin to stealing candy from a baby. Should Arianne believe a man like that, then?

The journey to Tremont Tower was fraught with silence; nobody talked. It was obvious that Mark had realized Arianne's suspicion of him—both of them simply refrained from prodding the topic.

The car steered into the parking basement, and Arianne—like always—followed Mark up into the elevator.

It made a stop at the ground floor. Almost immediately after the door opened, a loud ruckus—seemingly sourced from somewhere near the entrance to the tower—blared and entered the elevator. Someone was shrieking about wanting to see Mark, and when his presence was found inside, that person began to spring toward the elevator before being halted by security.

Chapter 1829

Mark heard the pandemonium from outside and frowned slightly, but he showed no inclination to care. Arianne, however, caught Mateo's name among the hubbub and sprang out of the elevator unthinkingly before heading to the entrance. "What's going on?! Who's responsible for this hoo-ha?!"

Seeing her leaving the elevator, Mark hesitated for a beat before trailing behind.

By the time the two of them got closer, the troublemaker—an upper-class woman whose dress reflected her standing—dropped to her knees and let out a bloodcurdling keen. "Mr. Tremont, please! Teo knows he's messed up, please! Please, he's my only son! Please, please, please have mercy, please let him go!"

Arianne felt her heart shudder. Was this Mateo's family? But… who told them that Mark might be connected to his abduction? How else could they be so quick to show up here, in his turf?!

A storm had clouded Mark's darkening expression. "What's that supposed to mean? What does Mateo Rodriguez's welfare have anything to do with me? You've looked for the wrong person. Security! Escort them away; I don't want any ruckus in my company."

The security was just about to do it when Mateo's mother suddenly cried out in a sort of desperate determination, "He's the only son I have! The only heir of the Rodriguez family! Let me die in his stead!"

It was rush hour by now, and a spectacle like this had attracted bystanders—many of them murmuring to one another as they collectively speculated the possible connection between Mateo's abduction and Mark Tremont.

Trepidation on the event escalation built up in Arianne. She leaned closely by Mark's ear and breathed, "Maybe we should bring this to your office for a talk, yea? Having it kicked up here is definitely not helpful for the optics…"

Mark balled his hands into fists before barking steelily, "Bring them to my office!"

There were two who begged for Mark's audience that day. One was Mateo's mother, and with her, his father; the couple had discarded all attention to the dignity and pride they usually maintained just for a shot at saving their son's life. Even after they appeared in his office, the couple remained on their knees and refused to rise.

Arianne tried persuading them as she stood at the sideline but to no avail. Several failed attempts later, she gave up and went straight to questioning, "Who told you that Mateo's abduction had anything to do with Mark? Do you have any idea that the optics of the two of you kicking up a scene like that out there is gonna mar Tremont Enterprise's impression? Seriously, shouting and screaming and creating this ugly spectacle out there despite knowing nothing concrete is just plain stupid."

Mateo's mother's eyes scanned Arianne from head to toe before muttering under her breath, "Someone told me… that you and our Teo were caught in an affair by Mr. Tremont himself… And our Teo, he… he suffered a severe beating over it…"

Her voice, though soft and weak, was not without malice directed at Arianne.

The first possible identity of this informant that Arianne could think of was Melanie. Could Melanie have told the Rodriguez about that unsavory incident? At the cusp of the moment, mentioning something like that was akin to pushing Mark into a minefield. Worse, there was still no concrete evidence on whether Mark did or did not have a hand in this…

The knot had just become even more entangled.

“Hey, I wasn’t having an ‘affair’ with Mateo that night, okay? It was a meeting between two old pals who met back in their university,” she corrected helplessly. “Seriously, it was just a misunderstanding. I’ve explained it to my husband about it, too. Look, shouldn’t you people be more worried about how to bring Mateo home safe in one piece than to kick up this god-awful commotion here, huh? The more time you waste, the more risk you put his life under. Haven’t you two figured this out yet?!”

Mateo’s parents said nothing. They were desperate—they were grasping at straws as long as it meant the possibility of being right. It did not matter if Mark was truly the man behind it; believing he was the culprit was all there was left for them. Maybe if they begged hard enough, Mark would show mercy and let Mateo go, alive.

Suddenly, Mark broke his own silence. “You are looking at the wrong person. I confess to beating him up, but abducting him? That is utterly unrelated to me. If you have the time to cry and beg on my feet in my office, you probably also have the time to think about how to save your son. Most cases I know that are cognate to yours rarely see abductees returning home alive, so please, if you have nothing else to speak of, leave.”

Chapter 1830

The only thing Mark’s speech was able to do was to make the couple exchange glances.

Who in their right mind would ever confess to a crime like this?

Arianne watched the tempest in Mark’s mien slowly pooling into a hurricane. Before he lost control and erupted, Arianne shot a meaningful look at Davy, who called in security to escort Mateo’s parents away.

Unfortunately, the influence of the kerfuffle to the office's mood had taken effect. Suddenly, all the office could talk about was this strange riot; Arianne could not tune it out even if she wanted to.

When it was finally lunch break, she called Melanie. "Hey, Melanie? Did you tell Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez about the thing that happened that night?"

Melanie sounded completely flabbergasted. "I haven't mentioned a thing, though? …Arianne, what happened over there? What made you ask? I admit I suspect Mark's involvement, but before there is concrete, indisputable evidence proving it, telling people about that night is like begging for everyone to suspect him, right? Especially Teo's parents! God, they cannot know this. If they do, they will scream bloody culprit at him! That's why I would never mention something like that."

Her tone did not indicate mendacity, but it did serve to plunge Arianne into complete loss. "So it wasn't you…? But who the heck else would it be? The only people who know about that incident are the few of us! I don't think Mateo is the type to tell his parents about it, either! But just this morning, his parents came to Mark and created a really huge scene. From the looks of it, they've already judged that Mark was the man behind it! And now everyone in the office is talking about this…"

Melanie could not, for the life of her, figure out any possible explanation. "Seriously, I did not tell Teo's parents about it, Arianne; you gotta believe me! The only person I've talked to about my suspicion is you, Arianne. I'm panicking over Teo's abduction, but I haven't lost my mind to the frenzy. This isn't something to be taken lightly—it will be really, really bad if Mark got falsely accused."

Arianne ended the call and sank into a fruitless analysis. She booted up her computer and dug up news of Mateo's abduction and examined the details closely.

There were still new developments, and all of them pointed to the worst. Right now, the kidnappers had expressed disinclination to work out the ransom amount with the Rodriguez family, while Mateo's status was a complete mystery.

When work was over and it was time to go home, Arianne noticed the bodyguards flanking Mark. Even as they were driving home, there were two other cars tailing them.

It was not wrong to err on the side of caution, but to see measures this drastic did introduce anxiety and apprehension. Had things really escalated to such danger level? Apparently, Mateo was not the only who was in danger—Mark and Arianne, too, were not safe.

Most laughably, perhaps, was how Mateo's parents leaked information about Arianne and Mateo's secret meeting, which ended with Mark's discovery, to the media. Although the pair had not made explicit that Mark was the suspected culprit, everyone who was not a halfwit could read the implication.

Naturally, since it was all speculation and rumors, there was no concrete evidence that could indict Mark squarely as a suspect. The police, too, had no reason to question him.

Finally back at home, Arianne looked at Smore and suddenly felt a deep sense of dread. "Henry, from now on, Smore's schooling will be suspended for a while," she instructed. "It's chaos out there. We should all be on our guards."

Henry was never the inquisitive type, so his assent was curt and prompt.

Mark, however, was now in his irascible mode, where his fuse had been cut so short any kindling could blow him up. "Why are you afraid? Just dispatch some bodyguards to watch over Smore while he goes

to school! I, for one, don't at all think the Rodriguez family would dare use my son as a threat against me for their unfounded vengeance!" he bristled. "If they really have any truth on their side, they would have produced actual evidence to prove that I've abducted their son. Otherwise, what's all these baseless accusations going to do to us, huh?!"

Arianne felt a throbbing in her head. "I get it, I get it. But we can never be too careful, right? You know what desperation can do to a person. What if something completely outside sense did happen? I'm not gonna take up a risk like that, Mark. He's my only son—I can't and I won't put him under any risk, so no, no school for now. Just listen to me this time, okay? I know you're distressed and agitated over those rumors and slanders, but please don't pay any mind to them."