

A Ruling Passion – Chapter 1

“Wow, he’s back. He immediately made huge donations to the prominent art schools in the capital too. It’s great being rich, isn’t it!”

“I’ve heard that he’s our alumni, having graduated from the Southline University. That explains his generous donations. Plus, he’s the richest man in the city after all. More importantly, he’s so charming, practically the whole nation’s ideal man rich, handsome, and down to earth. There’s no one else like him in this world!”

The entirety of Southline University Art Institute was engrossed with news regarding Mark Tremont’s return, except for Arianne Wynn who stood out like a sore thumb.

Seated at the stairway, she was munching on a stale bun which had long lost its warmth. Downing the otherwise hard to swallow baked good with just plain water felt equally as cold as the winter season.

Mark Tremont. He’s back again after three years...

“Ari, why are you eating buns again? Come on, I’ll buy you a good meal!”

Tiffany Lane plopped herself down carelessly beside Arianne.

The latter shook her head before she stuffed the rest of the bun into her mouth, picking up her bag and swinging it over her shoulder. Her action emphasized her frail frame.

“No time. I’ve got to go back.”

Tiffany sighed. “Alright. Don’t bring any more buns tomorrow. I’ll bring you breakfast.”

Tiffany’s voice slowly drifted afar as Arianne paddled her bicycle, finally disappearing as it flew away with the wintry breeze.

Returning ‘home’, Arianne carefully parked her battered bicycle to the corner and slipped in through the back door. She put down her bag swiftly, returning to the small clammy storeroom.

Just when she was about to change, Mary came in a hurry. “Ari, don’t help me out today. Sir’s looking for you... ah, and be careful. Don’t speak if you can lest he is upset, otherwise you’ll be at the receiving end again.”

Arianne Wynn nodded and went upstairs cautiously. She patted down the washed out jacket she wore, remembering that he disliked sloppiness.

She subconsciously held her breath whilst knocking on the door, her fingertips were trembling. She had grown a lot over the last three years, so she wondered how much would he have changed?

“Come in.”

A mellow voice soft like the winter sunlight spoke from within the room. If one did not pay attention, they perhaps may not realize the icy tone mixed in.

Arianne’s heart sank a little. Pushing the door open and entering, she left it ajar on purpose.

The man was seated facing the French window with a magazine in his hands. The expensive tailor-made suit hugged his build perfectly, adding an exquisite wash of gray to the snow white winter day.

Even while seated, his long legs were evident. Occasionally, his fingers with distinct joints flipped the pages gracefully. His features, flawless as if they were painstakingly sculpted, seemed dreamy under the cast of light.

Mark Tremont, he was back after all.

“You are turning eighteen in another half of a month?”

His nonchalant tone bored a deep pit in Arianne’s heart. Not receiving her response, Mark Tremont tossed the magazine onto the coffee table beside him and turned to look at her, his deep eyes were nothing but cold.

Arianne stepped back instinctively, convinced that she was truly the only outlier of his compassion!

“Yes...”

Frightened, like a deer caught in the headlights, her face was pale without a tint of blood.

Mark Tremont walked up to her, each approaching step of his caused her to move back in fear.

As both approached the door, Arianne almost tripped from the half closed door. Mark was quick to step forward, closing the door with his arm as it brushed past Arianne’s ear, trapping her in between.

“Are you afraid of me?” His tone was taunting, seething with hate.

Arianne Wynn dared not meet his eyes. He was much taller than her, so their close proximity could only allow her to stare straight at Mark's chest while his aura engulfed her.

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Arianne was too scared to resist. This had happened countless times in the past.

“Sir, it's meal time.”

Butler Henry's voice rang from outside the room, sounding like a savior that had just come from the heavens to rescue Arianne.

Butler Henry had served the Tremonts for decades and had watched Mark Tremont grow up, thus Butler Henry carried some significance to the latter.

“I see,” Mark Tremont replied casually.

Arianne Wynn opened the door immediately, fleeing for her life. Mark's words still echoing in her mind.

“You're turning eighteen in another half of a month?”

His question shattered the peace within her. She was well aware of what turning eighteen meant.

Mark Tremont left the house after the meal, giving Arianne a sense of relief as she drifted to sleep on the small bed in the storeroom. She had lived here in the storeroom for ten years. To a certain extent, the Tremont Estate was her second 'home'.

Her slumber tonight was not in repose. She asked her father repeatedly in her dream, "What actually happened? Is what they told the truth?" The only response she received was her father's smile, followed by the sight of his back before he boarded the plane.

The crash killed all seventeen passengers aboard the Tremonts' private jet, including Mark Tremont's parents.

The media extensively reported that the accident was due to the pilot's mistake, however, rumor has it that the pilot was drunk before flying the aircraft.

Arianne Wynn's father, Zachary Wynn, was the Tremonts' private pilot. He was labeled the public enemy, even long after his death in the aviation crash. Toward the end of Arianne's dream, she saw Mark Tremont taking her home. No one understood why he would take care of the sinner's daughter.

Eight year old Arianne was brought into the Tremont Estate while holding onto Mark Tremont's hand. Back then, Arianne had naively thought as both of them were orphans,

perhaps this was his sincere kindness. However, once the doors shut, her hand was flung away as Mark Tremont stared down at her icily.

“Your father is dead. You shall repay for his sins.”

The hatred that enveloped eighteen year old Mark Tremont nearly devoured Arianne. From that moment onward, she understood perfectly that he was not here to help her.

When Arianne woke up from her dream, the sun had already risen. Holding onto her feverish forehead, she watched the falling snowflakes outside through the tiny window in the storeroom. “It’s snowing huh...” She said with a faint smile.

“Ari, bundle up. It’s going to be cold today since it’s snowing. Don’t you catch a cold with that petite body of yours.”

Mary was concerned for her just as she had always been. Over these ten years, no matter the season, Mary would always shower her with a few fond reminders once she woke up.

Arianne bummed her acknowledgment and put on her only coat to fight the cold weather. When Mary saw Arianne as she was going out the door, she felt a twitch in her nose.

“Ari... ask for some money from sir and buy some new clothes. You’ve had this for years. Girls like you should be spending at this age. Look at you...”

With a stubborn shake of her head, Arianne rode her beaten bicycle against the frosty weather.

Mark Tremont banned everyone from providing her with anything, money included. Any charity was to come from him and only him.

Ever since the age of eight, Arianne would try her best to please him for anything that she wanted. He disallowed her to call him brother, so she had always called him Mark Tremont, the name stayed deeply rooted in her mind.

The honk of a car beeped from behind Arianne, prompting her to cycle as close to the curb as possible.

When a black Rolls Royce drove past her, she met eyes with Mark Tremont through the half opened car window. The exchange was brief, the car zooming past afterward.

All of a sudden, the vehicle stopped in front of her. Subconsciously, Arianne stopped as well, supporting herself with one leg on the road while both of her hands rested on the bicycle handlebar. She waited quietly.

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Two minutes later, Mark Tremont's car drove away. Arianne released a breath that she was unaware of holding, wondering what he was doing when the car was stationary.

“Sir... It's snowing. Are you really not letting miss in the car? Should we wait a bit more? Or shall I call her?”

The driver, Brian Pearce, was rather worried.

“Busybody...” Mark Tremont looked at the delicate silhouette from the rearview mirror, feeling inexplicably annoyed. He waited for two minutes and had given her the chance.

When Arianne arrived at school, Tiffany Lane was baffled by her soaked state.

“What do you think you're doing? Did you cycle here in the snow? Are you crazy? Come on, breakfast is still warm. Eat up quickly!”

Arianne accepted the milk and bun that Tiffany passed her with a smile, a dash of red appeared from her cracked lips.

Tiffany sucked in a deep breath. “Do your parents not care about you? They don’t worry about your meals or clothes and aren’t concerned about you attending art school. Did they pick you up from the streets?”

“My... mother remarried when I was very young and my father passed away ten years ago. It’s not their fault ...” Arianne replied as she took off her soaked coat and sipped the warm milk. The indifferent tone in her voice, along with her actions was a pang to one’s heart.

Tiffany then fondly rubbed Arianne’s wet hair.

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier? We’ve known each other since high school and yet, you never told me anything before you finally spoke up today. It’s absurd how your mother could bear abandoning a pretty little girl like you... Who are you living with now then?”

‘Who are you living with?’

Arianne did not answer immediately as she thought about how she should refer to Mark Tremont. Her elder brother?

“My elder brother.” That was all she could say.

Tiffany Lane was quite perplexed.

“Your elder brother? Your biological brother? Even if he’s only your cousin, he shouldn’t let you live so pitifully. Have you bought the paint the tutor asked us to buy?”

Arianne shook her head. “I won’t be able to buy it for the time being but I’ll think of something.”

Three years ago, she was guileless but not gullible. That was her first time rejecting Mark Tremont.

His icy tone spread from his lips.

‘One day, you’ll beg me.’ ‘

After that, he left the country without a warning and she had never asked him for another favor or another meal in the Tremont Estate, surviving only by working part-time jobs.

She was unable to fulfill his request nor please him, but there was no need to anymore.

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Looking at Arianne's frowning face, Tiffany's heart ached for her. When she was about to say something, a warm masculine voice interrupted.

"Tiffany, what's up with your cutie pie today? Why does she look so listless?"

It was Will Sivan who spoke, the other person whom Arianne knew on campus.

There were only so many of the rich and powerful in the capital. Both Tiffany Lane and Will Siyan were among them, though not Arianne Wynn.

"It's the paint..."

"Tiffany!"

Arianne cut her off and discreetly shook her head. For some reason, she did not want Will to know about her plight.

Out of the blue, Will Sivan's hand touched her forehead. "You have a fever."

“If you fall sick, our Tiffany here is going to nag all day long again.”

It sounded like he was complaining, but Will’s hands were already working to take off his scarf to wrap around Arianne’s neck.

She looked up at him, her heart beating a little faster. His smile felt like the sunlight that spilled from a blanket of clouds, gentle and natural. Loose hair fell from his forehead, draping down to his starry eyes which looked like they contained all the stars of the universe.

Will Sivan was one of the best looking people Arianne had ever met, only second to Mark Tremont.

When they had met ten years ago, Mark Tremont had taken her breath away too.

“Who’s that?” Mark Tremont’s gaze was locked on Arianne Wynn and Will Sivan, who were beside her from the corridor outside of the art studio.

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The dean beside him grinned. “Mr. Tremont, are you referring to... Will Sivan? You’ve probably heard of him, one of the three young masters of the Sivan family. He’s in his junior year now. The three of them are usually together.”

“Next time, I don’t want to see him again at Southline University. No, in the whole capital,” Mark Tremont said emotionlessly as he turned to leave.

A few steps later, he halted. “And I’ll fully sponsor Arianne Wynn, anonymously.”

The dean bowed his head quickly.

“Of course, of course. Have a good day.”

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After classes, Arianne Wynn dragged her lethargic self as she pushed her bicycle to the campus gate, standing to wait for Will Sivan to return his scarf.

“Ari, are you waiting for Will? He went home at noon, he said he has some family matters.”

Tiffany Lane walked to her and took out a small bag from her purse.

“Here you go, cold medicine, he asked me to give you this. Medication for fevers is also inside. Remember to take it.”

Arianne looked at the bag of medicine but did not accept it.

“I don’t need them. Return the scarf for me. I’ll head home now.”

Now that Mark Tremont was back, she had to be home on time every day.

Tiffany thrust the small bag towards Arianne. “What are you being stubborn about? Even I know that he likes you, you wouldn’t have noticed, would you?”

A blush crept onto Arianne’s pale cheeks. “Stop with your nonsense! Bye!”

Having taken less than two steps ahead, Mark Tremont's car sped over suddenly, skidding to a stop less than a meter away from Arianne.

Tiffany was about to lash out, but Arianne's hand flew to cover her mouth. "It's okay, it's okay. You can go back first!"

Arianne could already see the brooding face of Mark Tremont who was seated behind the car's windshield.

Mark had no patience for her. A honk was all it took for Arianne to hastily park her bicycle to the side, hopped into the car and pulled the door shut.

Tiffany Lane was dumbfounded. She wanted to say something but the car had driven off.

Sitting in the car, Arianne's head hung low not daring to speak. This was the first time Mark Tremont had picked her up from school, yet she felt no element of surprise, she was only flooded in fright.

"Gotten yourself a boyfriend?" Mark Tremont casually questioned.

Arianne thought of Will Sivan and shook her head nervously.

“No.”

At the same time, she tightened her grip on the bag of cold medicine in her hands.

“Will Sivan won’t be making an appearance anymore.”

Mark Tremont looked at her with a smirk in his eyes.

Arianne looked up, shocked when she met his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

Her response upset the man.

“Other than redeeming your sin, there’s nothing else you have to do in this lifetime of yours, including falling in love, marriage, or giving birth. Understand?”

The chilling tone sent Arianne into a freezing abyss. She suddenly felt a slight hatred for the man before her. Why must he take everything that she liked away?

Soon enough the car returned to the Tremont Estate. Upon exiting the vehicle, Mark Tremont's eyes darkened when he saw the bag Arianne was clutching in her hands.

"Stand right there."

Arianne froze. The bag of medicine in her grasp was snatched away in the next second and thrown on the road. Her shoulders slumped as she quietly made her way to the back door. No one remembers when it was since Mark Tremont had disallowed her from entering through the front door. He forbade her because she would bump into him and stated that she could make an appearance only when he wanted to see her.

"Come to my room tonight."

Mark Tremont ordered and walked briskly through the front door. The scowl on his face even intimidated the group of bodyguards. Regardless, Mary and Butler Henry still approached him.

"You're back, sir."

Mark gave a light hum of acknowledgment. He stopped again when he was at the staircase.

“Arianne Wynn is to have her meals at home morning and night from now on.”

‘Was he implying that he had been torturing her with how feeble she currently looked?’

Housekeeper Mary smiled. “Yes, sir. I’ll make sure that miss eats well.”

While Arianne Wynn cleaned the kitchen with Mary at night, Mary held her cold hands sympathetically.

“That’s enough. Rest early. Stop helping me, look at your cracked hands. Ari, sir is actually quite nice to you. Stop resisting him. Don’t you understand him still? Obey him and everything will be fine. I’ve watched him grow up. He’s not a bad person.”

Arianne did not say anything, merely continuing what she was doing, mopping the floor repeatedly. Her entirety refused to see Mark Tremont. The Tremont Estate was huge, though Mary did not have a lot of work. Her tasks were bound to be completed with time.

The clock ticked past eleven when Arianne built up the courage to go upstairs and knocked carefully on the door. There was no sound or movement from the other side and she wanted to turn and leave. Upon a moment of hesitation, she opened the door and entered, fully aware of the consequence if she did not listen.

She made her way softly into the pitch black room.

“Are... you asleep?”

The man’s voice came from behind her the next second.

“Did I ask you to come at midnight?”

Jumping with a shudder, Arianne felt around for the light switch but something had caused her to trip. With a cry, she fell face first to the floor.

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A pair of arms surrounded her suddenly and pulled her back. Arianne could almost feel the dampness from his fresh shower and smelt the fragrance of body wash. Her hands supported herself on his chest, unknowingly they were shaking. The arms that were wrapped around her waist let go abruptly.

“Get lost.”

For some reason, his voice was a little raspy. Arianne had no idea how she had upset him again so she scurried off at once.

It was when she returned to the storeroom that she had regrets. She had forgotten to ask him about Will Sivan. Recalling what happened just now, however, the courage to seek him again slipped away from her.

When morning came the next day, Mary came into the storeroom with a glass of water.

“C’mon, Ari. Here’s some cold medicine.”

Arianne Wynn was puzzled. Mary did not know she caught a cold. Furthermore, how would Mary dare give her medication without Mark Tremont’s permission? As if dismissing Arianne’s doubt, Mary sat down on the edge of her bed with a smile.

“Sir has gone on a business trip and will only be back in about a month. This was his instructions before he left. Here you go.”

Arianne could not point a finger to the feeling in her heart, but she felt inexplicably lighter hearing that he would temporarily not be around. After taking the medication, Arianne briskly made her bed and went to school.

When she entered the studio, the dean personally came to pass her all the materials she had lacked.

“Miss Wynn, check if there’s anything else you’re missing.”

Arianne was taken aback. “No... nothing is missing. This is...?”

The dean did not explain, merely saying, “That’s good then.”

As the dean left, Arianne was lost in her thoughts, staring at the items she had received. Mark Tremont was surely not the source, since he would not have the time nor the effort to be concerned about her situation at school.

“Ari, I’ve heard that someone’s sponsored you anonymously. I didn’t expect the administration to work so quickly. Your paints are all better than mine!”

Tiffany Lane rummaged through the materials that the dean had sent over once she was here.

Arianne kept quiet as she arranged her new belongings.

“Hey, who was the one that picked you up yesterday? Crazy driving, almost killed you there.”

Tiffany was a chatterbox, always spouting new topics whether Arianne replied to her or not.

“That’s my brother,” Arianne answered.

There was a slight pause from Tiffany.

“What sort of brother is he? He’s so rich yet here you are being groomed into a slum girl. Let me meet him next time.”

Arianne smiled. “Don’t criticize him. He’s actually very nice. He’s not my biological brother, so it isn’t his obligation to take care of me. He’s done more than his part.”

That was what she told herself too. She was a sinner, but Mark Tremont had given her shelter and taken care of her for ten years.

Tiffany pouted before beginning to guess the mystery sponsor in excitement.

“Who do you think is funding you? Will Sivan’s dad has kicked him out of the country and he won’t be coming back until a few years. Do you think it’s him? Someone has sponsored you right after his departure. Otherwise, it just doesn’t make sense.”

Stunned, Arianne found it more convincing that the sponsor was Will than Mark Tremont.

Thinking about the man who was like a gentle ray of sunshine, she felt her heart clench. Will Sivan’s departure was her fault...

During Mark Tremont’s absence, Arianne Wynn was a lot more relaxed. Tiffany had dragged her for a fun day out on her birthday, which was on the weekend. The former knew that she disliked crowds, thus she did not invite anyone else.

Before they went home, like a magic trick Tiffany produced two small gift boxes.

“These are presents from Will and I.”

Arianne did not accept them, she could not afford to return them anything of similar value. A look at the gift boxes was evident that the presents were costly. She was poor, that said she had seen enough during her years in the Tremont Estate to know.

“Thank you for spending the day with me. There’s no need for presents.”

Arianne breathed in deeply, it was the scent of the chilling breeze and snow.

Tiffany pushed the boxes into her hands.

“When I am nice to you I don’t expect anything in return, but Will is the opposite case... Stand up straight. I’m gonna complete what he’s asked me to do.”

Unable to figure out what she was about to do, Arianne straightened up obediently.

Tiffany looked at Arianne in all seriousness.

“Ari, I’m Will Sivan. I like you. Wait for my return. You’ve got to wait for me.”