Ruling 1531

Chapter 1531

Mark planted a kiss on her forehead. “What are you talking about? She doesn’t dislike you, silly. She even told me that you two visited the beauty salon together just earlier today! Frankly, I think you’re just not used to her yet. Give it some time; it will get better, you’ll see. She’s really an easy person to get along with.”

Arianne was hard-pressed to answer him. She was averse to going against Mark’s rosy-colored impression of his surviving relative, so she kept quiet and hoped that he was right about things getting better.

While her head was still in a knot, Mark’s had moved on to somewhere else. His lips fell onto hers.

She shut her eyes, savoring it gladly. The air became warmer and warmer—until a series of rapping on the door grated against the buildup.

Mark frowned. “Who is it?”

Shelly’s voice came through the door. “I-It’s me, Mark. It’s pouring outside, and there’s this dreadful thunder right now. It’s affecting my sleep. See, I have a bit of a nervous condition, dear, so it's really hard for me to fall asleep like this. Can you ask Arianne to be my bedfellow for the night?”

Before Arianne could bombard Mark with hints of her refusal, her pigheaded husband had already answered automatically. “No problem. I’ll have her go over right away.”

Arianne swatted his chest and glared at him. This man said yes to everything Shelly asked at the drop of a hat; he even saw no problem lending his wife away! Gee, why was his libido suddenly so quiet? Do something to keep her for himself already!

Mark laughed, drawing her hand to his lips for another kiss. “Come on, go keep Aunt Shelly company for the night. I noticed her sleeping quality to be a little subpar—she often wakes up the next morning looking like she hadn’t gotten enough sleep at all. Maybe she’s got some kinda age-related sleeping disorder of some sort.”

Left with no choice, Arianne went into Shelly’s room against her genuine wishes.

Sharing a bed with a stranger made Arianne queasy in just about every way imaginable. Even getting accustomed to sleeping with Mark had taken a lot more time than a single night, after all. In other words, she was going to lose tonight’s sleep for sure.

Arianne’s expectation was that Shelly would take a pretty long while to fall into sleep due to her nervous condition. However, the reality was that Shelly shut down completely before Arianne could even feel the faintest calling of her slumber!

Arianne did not sleep a wink for the entire night, and when morning broke, she earned a pair of smoky eyes for her effort. In contrast, Shelly, hearty and in high spirits, gave Mark a glowing review about how nice it was to have a sleeping companion and how much it made her feel safe.

Arianne could only suffer her gloom quietly. Shelly may have had the best night ever, but Arianne herself had not gotten even a single minute of reprieve!

The first thing Arianne did after reaching the company was to head right into Mark's office for her sleep-replenishing nap. Her action baffled Mark, who questioned, "Did the two of you enjoy your chat so much that it went that late into the night? You look like you haven't slept at all."

"Chat? She didn't even say a word to me before conking out!" she snapped. "Meanwhile, I couldn't get used to her bed, or the fact that the person sleeping next to me was not my usual companion. I couldn't sleep at all! Seriously, Mark, I'm begging you. No more making me her 'bedfellow' or something, okay? She had none of those sleep disorders or 'nervous conditions' at all—but I totally will if I have to continue sleeping with her. Of all people, you should know I require a long time getting used to the people I sleep with, right? Besides, she likes Smore a lot, doesn't she? Ask Smore to keep her company, then!"

Mark ruffled her hair in pity. "Alright, alright. I hear you. I won't ask you to do that anymore, alright? Here, help yourself in my office. I'll be quiet and light with my hands so that I don't wake you up. I know, let's have dinner outside tonight! You can pick whatever place and food you like. How's that sound?"

The first thing Arianne said upon hearing his invitation was, "Well, is your aunt gonna join us too?"

Chapter 1532

Mark's answer flowed out of him in a heartbeat. "Of course! She's our guest. We can't leave her at home while we have an enjoyable dinner outside, can we? Let's bring Smore with us later this evening, too! Oh, the joy of a family dinner!"

Arianne let out a drawn-out sigh and closed her eyes. Nope, she would not waste any more time talking if she could use it for sleeping. Mark could do whatever he fancied, for all she cared.

Arianne's nap lasted all the way to the late evening, only waking up when Aunt Shelly carried Smore—who, in turn, was brought to the company by Brian—to Mark's office, introducing quite the commotion in the room.

After briefly considering Arianne's state, Shelly remarked offhandedly, "Hey, I get that you're awfully tired, but you should take your nap home instead of sleeping in the office. It just doesn't bode well with the optics. To be clear, as 'the' Mrs. Tremont, you don't actually have a real reason to work, right? So, why keep up a public front of 'working' and overtax yourself by doing that? Doesn't seem worth it."

Fresh out of her nap, Arianne's head was still too foggy to understand Shelly's implications right there and then. Mark, however, stared at his aunt, slightly puzzled. "That's not true, Aunt Shelly. She's only tired today because she hadn't slept at all last night. Arianne finds it hard to sleep on a foreign bed."

Shelly broke out a smile. "Oh, I was just saying! No need to leap into your wife's defense immediately, kiddo. I didn't mean to accuse anyone of anything, honest. Now that you mentioned it—God, Mark, you should have told me she has trouble sleeping in new places! I wouldn't have asked her to accompany me if I knew!"

It took a while, but Shelly's previous comment began to click in Arianne's mind as her senses gradually returned. Instantly, the slighted woman spoke up. "For your information, my work isn't an act for anyone to see. I know I've put real effort into work and I'm paid for contributing substantially to the company. My conscience is free of guilt."

It seemed that Arianne might have been the type to wake up without an immediate grasp over her emotions. Her defense had sounded a little too gauche, and when combined with her dour, straight expression, the air in the room suddenly took a dive into consternation.

Mark could feel a headache coming. “Um, ladies? I think my work here is just about done. Shall we go and have our dinner right now?”

The group descended the tower. Once inside the car, Shelly suddenly flashed Arianne a warm smile. “Arianne, you’re not mad, are you? I didn’t mean any malice. It was just a throwaway remark.”

Still reeling from her nap, a groggy Arianne replied flatly, “No. It didn’t bother me.”

Mark looked at Arianne through the rearview mirror, his frown deepening. The last thing he wanted was for the two women to be enemies, especially since his mother had died a long time ago, and Aunt Shelly now filled the void she left by becoming Arianne’s mother-in-law in a way.

He wondered if conventional wisdom was right about mothers never getting along with their daughters-in-law. If that were true, then how did Tiffany and Summer manage to become so genial with one another?

Arianne’s usual temperament seemed to have gradually returned during dinner. She took care of Smore’s eating pleasantly enough, as though the incident in Mark’s office never happened. Neither did she look like she was hoping to join Shelly and Mark’s conversation, too, although that might have been because the woman found nothing to contribute.

Mark, though, thought differently. He wanted Arianne to be closer with Aunt Shelly, so he consciously drew the former into their topic several times. Nevertheless, Arianne’s response was all smiles and no words, which only succeeded in making the entire dinner a little bit too unsettling.

After the dinner, the group returned to the Tremont Estate. Mark followed Arianne into their bedroom before asking, “You’re mad, aren’t you?”

She began removing her makeup in front of the bathroom mirror. “No.”

He did not believe her. “Arianne, if you have anything in mind, talk to me, okay? I know it’s my fault for not discussing Aunt Shelly’s sudden arrival and stay at home. She just… came to me so suddenly that I hadn’t had the chance to talk to you about it. Still, I want you to know that I think it’s fine if you can’t adjust to an extra member in the house at the outset. She probably isn’t gonna stay here with us for that long in the first place, so I hope the two of you could coexist cordially as long as she stays with us, alright?”

Arianne fixed him a side-eyed glance brimming with resignation. “I told you, Mark. I’m not mad. Sure, she was sorta nasty back in the office, but I wasn’t chaffed by it. I admit I might have lacked some control over my tone and expression when I talked to her back there, but that was because, well, I just woke up when it happened and couldn’t control my temper right there and then. But honestly? I’m not angry. She doesn’t know how we live. She doesn’t know if my job is genuine or if it was an honorary position. She doesn’t know a lot of things—and I get it.

“But no matter how terrible I may be in managing familial relationships, I know better than to act against your biological aunt. She’s your maternal aunt, for crying out loud. I managed to be amicable with Helen, of all people—everyone else, including her, isn’t exactly difficult. I honestly don’t understand what’s distressing you,” she explained. “Also, this is your house. If your aunt wants to crash at your place, you can actually skip over my permission and give it the okay. You won’t hear any complaints from me. But… I gotta’ admit, I don’t want her to stay here forever. She’s your aunt, but she isn’t your mom or anything. She’s supposed to have her own life to attend to, and her presence here is going to cause ripple effects onto our lives.”

Chapter 1533

That's what she said, yet Mark could not help but suspect Arianne for being insincere.

Still, it was not like he knew any brilliant way to mediate between the two women, so he gave up with a sigh. “Alright, then. I hope you mean what you said. I guess the point I’m trying to make is that, well, we ought to communicate if we want to stop things from going awry, right? If you’ve got anything you’d like to talk about, just tell me in private. Most importantly, we, uh, should refrain from starting any sort of fights with Aunt Shelly as much as we could, got that? You’re my woman, Arianne, so it goes without saying that I’ll stand with you. But she’s my aunt, too, and someone I highly respect, at that.”

Arianne cocked her eyebrow. “Mm-hmm? You don’t say, Mark. I’m not obtuse, you know. Alright, you done being jittery and hinky now? Then go and chat away with your aunt, lest she starts hounding for you. I’m not good at socializing with people of older generations, so I’d appreciate it if you could save me from making the two of us talk. And yep, that includes the whole ‘being her bedfellow’ business, as that thing makes every fiber in my body tense as heck,” she admitted. “God, I think I understand how Sylvain feels about his current arrangement a little bit better now. Being all antsy and under high pressure when you’re at your mother-in-law’s place? Having no way of unsubscribing to that torment because, well, for Robin’s sake? And then adding in the arrival of a blight known as ‘Sylvain’s Mother’… Oh my God, I’m quaking.”

Mark promised her what she requested before quickly going downstairs.

Like most recent nights, a relentless storm had made landfall, punctuated by streaks of lightning and thunder. Despite the weather, Shelly had not come to fetch Arianne to sleep with her

The couple had much uninhibited fun tonight, with their frantic activity only winding down to an end when it was well into midnight. Mark fell asleep first while Arianne, feeling a little thirsty, went downstairs to get herself a glass of water. On her way back to their bedroom, she quickly glimpsed the sight of the half-opened door to Mark’s study.

Curiosity welled up in her. The door was typically shut close at all times. She tiptoed forward, ready to close it, when she caught a humanoid silhouette inside.

It looked like Aunt Shelly. But what was she doing here in the dead of night—without the lights on, at that?

Weak lights from the corridor illuminated Shelly standing before a bookshelf, her back to the door. She was holding something in her hand—a photo.

Was the woman suddenly struck by some longing for bygone times and was now sifting through old photos? After all, Arianne remembered that Mark stored some of his parent's pictures in the study.

Arianne was just about to buy her own reasoning when Shelly suddenly balled her hand into a fist, crumpling the photo in her grasp. Arianne's eyes might have been shielded from Shelly's face, but judging from how forceful her action was, it must have been a gesture out of hate—Arianne would even go so far as to think it was abject, absolute hatred!

The question was, who was in that photo? Arianne wondered if they were Mark's parents. If it were, then why?

She quietly crept back to their bedroom as though she had not just witnessed a bizarre incident.

The next morning, nothing about Shelly looked out of place. She looked and acted exactly as though nothing had happened last night. Seizing a chance when everyone was downstairs and having their breakfast, Arianne snuck into the study.

She examined all of the photos in the room until she identified the missing one as a wedding picture of Mark's parents. It was originally framed, too, but now, even the photo frame itself was gone. Neither it nor the picture could be found in the room's wastepaper bin, so Arianne surmised that Shelly must have taken them out.

Her actions baffled Arianne. That was her sister and brother-in-law's wedding photo in there! If Shelly hated Mark's parents so much, then why did she lavish their offspring with such excessive love?

Things just did not add up.

Her first instinct was to inform Mark about her discovery and ask him if Shelly ever had a feud with his parents. However, Arianne could not find a chance to ask—the woman was always flanking Mark, so Arianne found no opening for her query.

Finally, in the late evening, right after they returned home from work and while he was having his shower, Arianne finally got her chance.

"Hey, Mark, I want to ask you something," she began.

Chapter 1534

Mark was halfway out of his clothes when Arianne asked, so he adjusted himself before considering her. "What sort of business could possibly command such secrecy that you can't wait to tell me until after I finished my shower?"

Arianne leveled him a severe expression. “Mark, this is serious. Have you gone to your study as of today? Did you notice one of your photos missing? The one featuring your parents on their wedding day—it’s gone. Last night, I went downstairs for a glass of water, and I saw your aunt removing that photo from its frame before crumpling it into a ball of waste. And then today, when I went to check, both the picture and the frame were gone,” she explained. “To be clear, I’m not implicating something dark at work here. I’m just asking a question: did your aunt ever have, well, some unpleasant row with your parents before?”

Mark’s eyebrows furrowed. “That can’t be, can it? I know little about their affairs, but can’t we infer from the way she treats me that she probably doesn’t have any feud with them? Even if she does, could any grudge last this long?… Hmm, maybe I should ask her.”

Arianne glared at him. “Hold that thought. How do you plan to ‘ask,’ exactly? ‘Hi Aunt Shelly, Arianne said she saw you taking out your anger at a photo in the middle of the night. We wonder why!’ —Like that? Don’t be pig-headed and drag me into this,” she protested. “You should probably just ask a bit of this and that when you guys are alone. I mean, I’ve seen enough cases of friends undergoing a heel-face turning into foes—all cases related to you, by the way—that I’m scared your aunt is here for yet another nefarious purpose, too. I mean, why else would she dote on you like this despite having never seen you for so many years?

“You’re her sister’s son, not her own flesh and blood. And speaking of that, shouldn’t she have her own kids at this age? What kind of mother would toss her own kids aside to love someone else’s kid, huh? That’s just straight-up bizarre. And after seeing how she treated your parents’ photos, I’m terrified at the possibility of her coming back here and ingratiating on you for an unthinkable, ulterior motive,” Arianne explained. “I know, I sound like a tinfoil-wearing conspiracy theorist right now. But I can assure you, I’m projecting from the facts that I know. The affection she showered you is real, I can feel that—but it’s waaaaay too real. It doesn’t look a mite like the sort you get from long-lost relatives. No matter how close someone may be with another, going through so many years without even a single contact must, realistically, do a number to that feeling of intimacy, right?”

Mark had to admit that he was a little convinced by the merits in her argument. Sure, he held Aunt Shelly in very high regards, but that was because she looked like a carbon copy of his real mother. She

was his mother's sister and his biological aunt—Mark's regards for her sprang from that blood connection. However, when he discounted his feelings of respect, Mark did feel a little overwhelmed by Shelly's outpouring doting. She seemed to treat him a little too well…

Later that night, during dinner, Mark asked, "Aunt Shelly, I haven't heard about your family since you came here. Are my cousins not going to pay us a visit?"

Shelly's expression froze before she answered, "My only family is you, Mark."

Try all she might, Arianne could not help but think Shelly's answer was asinine. What did she mean that Mark was her "only family?" Arianne was his wife. Smore was his son. If Aunt Shelly was going to include Mark as her family, should that kinship not extend to both Arianne and Smore as well? Since when was Mark the only one who mattered?

With an answer like that, Arianne officially concluded that Shelly was, indeed, kicking her to the curb. Shelly had made that plain.

One look at Arianne's face summoned a wave of disconcerting into Mark's mien. "I was just, er, wondering," he explained.

The corner of Aunt Shelly's lips quivered briefly. "There's nothing for you to wonder about. I have no one, and I came back here all on my own. As for my life story, I prefer not to talk about it, and I don't think you're obliged to know."

“Um, that’s a bit hard to believe, with all due respect,” Arianne butted in. “You married someone overseas, right? A lot of years ago? Surely you have kids by now, Aunt Shelly… right? You can’t be alone!”

Shelly’s eyes were like two uncanny pools of still water, their surface dead and unanimated. “No. I’ve bore no children.”

Chapter 1535

No children?

Arianne was so embarrassed that she could bite off her own tongue. Any mother who bore no child by Aunt Shelly’s age likely suffered from some kind of conditions, and often, her infertility became a source of lifelong grief and emotional pain. Arianne had no business poking whatever wound Shelly might have like that.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she quickly retracted. “I didn’t know that, uh… Please forget that I asked.”

Shelly placidly returned to her meal. “It’s alright. It was a choice I made, actually. Not a fault of my body. Honestly, I’m quite happy not to be fettered by kids and whatnot at this age.”

Arianne breathed a sigh of relief. So, Shelly chose not to bear a child instead of being denied the chance out of unfortunate circumstances! Arianne would have accidentally detonated a bomb, otherwise…

When dinner was over, Aunt Shelly took Smore outside to play. She invited Mark to join them, but for some reason, the man—who had never said no to his aunt since her arrival—declined the offer.

Mark went straight into his study after the pair left, but today, it was not because he needed to handle urgent affairs pertaining to his company. Instead, he began an exhausting examination of every memorabilia and photo there.

Ultimately, Mark realized that Aunt Shelly had only thrown out that wedding photo, but it still upset him. After all, it had been one of the last few remaining pictures he had of his parents.

Arianne brewed him a pot of hot tea. “What’s wrong?… Oh. You look devastated. Can’t blame you, I guess. It was a photo not even you would treat lightly, wasn’t it? It kind of always sat there like an untouchable treasure. And then your aunt came along and just threw it away. Jarring that you haven’t even raised the issue to her now.”

Conflict danced on Mark’s mien. “What’s all this about? I only kept the photo because my mom was in it. It has got zero reason to do with my dad. That bastard doesn’t deserve my remembrance. And… look. Aunt Shelly didn’t want me to know about her history, but I went ahead and dug up little snippets of her past anyway. It seems that shortly before she returned to the States, her husband suddenly passed away due to some chronic illness, with no surviving children with her. Her husband appeared to have been somewhat affluent—he was a local fat cat, if you will. The odd thing was that right after he died, she came straight back to her home country and cut off every connection and social contact she had ever made in Germany. If we go by the timeline of her movement, I don’t think she had the time to inherit her husband’s assets before she left. Or maybe, more accurately, she just didn’t care about it at all. It was as if she had only one, singular goal: returning to the States.”

Arianne was perplexed. “What’s that supposed to mean? Is there anything or anyone back here that is so instrumental to her that she jettisoned everything else for it? B-But all she’s ever done since coming here was following you around! I haven’t seen her show interest in literally anything else yet! Unless… Wait. No, there’s no way she’s abandoning all aspects of her life abroad just for you—that’s preposterous! I mean, you’re just a nephew to her. It’s not like your relationship runs any deeper than that! It can’t be because of you, Mark. But if not you, then… what?

“Maybe it’s… out of some sort of clinging to something that happened in the past? Maybe she had an unflattering history with your mom from before? It’s serious enough that even after your parents had passed on, she couldn’t help but come back to check on things? Maybe… Maybe we shouldn’t be overthinking this,” Arianne finished.

Mark, on the other hand, seemed quite irritated by the mystery. It was as if there were multiple itches he could not scratch. “She wouldn’t reveal a thing even if I’d asked, so what choice do I have other than looking things up myself? And yet, this is the extent of her story abroad that I could dredge up; there was nothing else to discover. Even if she did have a row with my mom in the past—well, it’s not like that’s something I can just Google. As long as she keeps her mouth shut, I’ll never know.

“But… I remembered this incident that had happened during one of my school years,” Mark added. “She visited me at school. I remember her making me pinky-promise that I would never tell anyone about her visiting me and to say not a word to my mom. I didn't know why—and I still don’t know now. It’s such a bizarre promise to make.”

Arianne dared not entertain the more outlandish and absurd possibilities. “Well, maybe she had a pretty bad fight with your mom during that precise period? The sort that was so hostile that they couldn’t bear to see each other? But your aunt still cared about you, so she went to check on you under your mom’s nose instead. I mean, this is the best and most reasonable explanation we have yet,” she said. “But either way, I think that’s enough theorizing for a day. If you want to know the full extent of your aunt’s life, you could always pry it out of her bit by bit. We can’t really make her say anything if she doesn’t want to talk about it right now, can we?

“Well, I’m going to bathe,” Arianne declared, before admonishing, “You should probably set this case aside, too. At the end of the day, it’s just a photo. It shouldn’t sow a seed of enmity toward your aunt.”

Arianne took her shower and came downstairs just in time to bump into Aunt Shelly and Smore as they were returning. Watching the kid's glowing expression, she could tell that her son had a lot of fun outside.

Mary quickly approached them. "Welcome home! Master Aristotle should get a shower now, especially since it's getting late. Come on, time to bathe and prepare to sleep."

Smore looked at Mary and replied, "Granny, Granny! I want Mommy to give me a shower this time!"

Chapter 1536

Before Mary could react, storm clouds poured over Aunt Shelly's mien. "Ex-cu-se me? Who taught you to call your housekeeper 'Granny?' Seriously, a bystander might not have known any better and thought you really were her grandson!"

Mary shot Arianne a grimace of discomfort, who herself found Shelly's irreverent attitude and tone rubbing her off. Still, outwardly, Arianne mustered her patience and explained, "The Tremont family hasn't had an 'older gen' for so many years, and since Mary and Henry have been part of the family for so long, they're like seniors to us. In this vein, there's nothing wrong with having Smore call Mary granny, right? At the end of the day, it's just a form of address. It's far from the sort of thing up for debate. Come on, Smore. Mommy's taking you to the shower now."

Shelly was usually self-aware enough to stop before things escalated, but this seemed to be an exception. She simply refused to let go. "The Tremonts haven't had an actual elder until now, you mean. Now, though, Smore has one, and that's me. Therefore, I should be his only Granny—and no domestic worker is gonna take that away!"

Mary could see Arianne's frown deepening. Worried, she stepped forward and tried to mediate between them. "O-Okay, we got your point, and you're absolutely right about this. B-But Smore's gonna

need some time before he could change, right? So, please give him some time for that, please? No rushing?"

Arianne took Smore into her arms before regarding Shelly. "I mean, you're not wrong. You're technically Smore's Grandaunt, but that's all, right? 'Grandaunt;' not 'grandma' or something. Besides," she added jovially, "You look honest-to-God young to the eyes, Aunt Shelly. If he calls you Granny as you insist, it will make you seem way older than you look. That can't be right, can it? Ultimately, it's just an address. No need to fight over it."

Arianne had said the first half of her reply in seriousness, but the latter was delivered in such a jocular tone that it was obviously meant as a jest to help Shelly ease into backing down. Yet, countering Arianne's intention, Shelly shot the woman a frosty glare. "I'm the only elder left in the Tremont family, and I'm the only one Smore should call Granny! When it comes to family matters, an outsider should have no say in it!" she cried.

'An outsider should have no say in it'—outwardly, she sounded like she was accusing Mary as the outsider, but anyone who watched their exchange could tell that it was meant as an insinuation against Arianne.

Mary was starting to be genuinely exasperated by Aunt Shelly's overreaction. "What's wrong with calling you 'Grandaunt Shelly?' I don't see no problem with that. Smore's actual grandpa and grandma were gone a long time ago, anyway! Gee, I get it, it's my fault that this became an issue. I'll make sure Smore stops calling me Granny, okay?"

She turned to Arianne. "Go ahead and give Master Aristotle his shower, Madam. I'll prepare his clothes."

Arianne took Smore up the stairs without saying another word. Even if she had the patience of a saint, Aunt Shelly's outburst back there still made her seethe. She would not have hidden her anger and wrath if she had not cared about how Mark felt.

No one in this house could look down on or disparage Mary. No one.

Then, there was Shelly's word choice: "outsider." It irritated Arianne to the core. She—an outsider to the family?!

Smore usually took his bath in his parent's bedroom bathroom. Still broiling over the altercation from before, Arianne scowled as she inadvertently put a little too much force into her every action.

"Mommy?" Smore asked gingerly. "Are you mad?"

She caught herself and sighed before flashing him a forced smile. "Oh, no, sorry about that. Did Mommy scare you?… There's something important I would like Smore to know, okay? The only person who takes care of you the most, next to Mommy, is Granny Mary. Granny might be the Tremont's housekeeper, but she's been part of our family for so, so many years. She even took care of Mommy when Mommy was small! Her contribution to the family is waaaay more than what a normal housekeeper supposedly does. So, here's what Mommy wants you to learn: never forget who makes you, you. We don't care if she isn't our actual family; Mary's your granny, and nothing's gonna change that. It's a form of affection and gratitude for all that she's done, understand?"

Chapter 1537

Smore nodded like the confused boy he was. "Okay, Mommy... Um, I will listen to everything Mommy says, so please, no more being mad?"

Arianne ruffled Smore's hair. "Oh, Mommy isn't mad at you, silly. But! I would love it if you play with Granny and be nice to Granny more often from now on, okay? I know Grandaunt has been treating you very kindly, but it would hurt Granny a lot if you stop hanging out with Granny just because of what happened right before. Granny would feel so hurt and even cry in sadness, you know?"

While they were talking, Mark pushed open the door to their bedroom and greeted, "Hello! Giving Smore the washing, huh?"

Arianne, who was denied the freedom to blow up in Aunt Shelly's face, instantly decided that Mark was to be the proxy recipient of her fury. She shot him a nasty stink-eye without answering him.

The poor man was perplexed. "What the—? What did I do this time?"

She sneered. "Oh, you didn't do anything, alright. Your beloved aunt did it for you. I didn't throw a hissy fit in her face only because I respect her, but all this steam's gotta' go somewhere, doesn't it?"

"Hold on. What happened?" Mark asked, stepping forward.

Arianne gave the man a rundown on the incident downstairs. When it was over, Mark automatically assumed the role of a mediator and gave his commentary. "Ohhh. Gee, I'm not gonna lie; I honestly imagined things to be way worse than this. But I think Aunt Shelly just happens to be a little bit fuddy-duddy. All of her contentions stem from her old-fashioned belief that Smore shouldn't call a 'maid' something as intimate and familial as 'Granny,' but ultimately, I see this as a pretty small matter that should barely be an inconvenience. I'll definitely share our reasoning with her, Arianne. No worries," he said. "Mary and Henry had done so much for the Tremont family. The depths and lengths they go are beyond what I've paid them! They're so intrinsic to our home that we can't even draw a line to separate them from us. What I'm saying is that you're completely in the right here… So please, don't be mad

anymore? The weather's a bit cold tonight. You should get back to finishing our boy's shower before he catches a cold."

"Pfft. 'Fuddy-duddy'. Sure, 'cause that's the word we describe her with after seeing how stylish and young she looks," Arianne murmured. "Seriously, she doesn't even look like she's older than you all that much. I honestly cannot fathom why she thought that whole tirade was okay. She said those acerbic things in Mary's face, Mark! Do you know how much that hurts?"

Mark sighed helplessly. Unfortunately, that also did not sit well with Arianne, who glowered at him with daggers in her eyes. "Oho, is that a 'what a drag!' sigh I heard? News flash: this is the mundane, less-than-pleasant facet of family life. There are always all kinds of annoying dramas over the smallest trifles when people live together as a family—and you're not getting away from them, mister."

Mark was growing so weary of her lectures that he made up an excuse to escape downstairs. There, sulking on the living room couch, he found Aunt Shelly wearing a frosty scowl of her own.

"It's getting late, Aunt Shelly. Are you not going to hit the sack?" he asked.

Aunt Shelly raised her eyes slowly until they connected with Mark's. "So, Arianne threw a hissy fit at you, didn't she? All I'm saying is that Smore should never call a domestic worker 'Granny;' is that such a controversial opinion to have, huh? Not every older generation in the family has died, you know. It's not like it's gotten so bad that Smore needs some random outsider to fill in as his grandmother!" she ranted. "Arianne is young and immature, I concur. But you? You're supposed to be wiser than this! You're basically letting her run the show, Mark. Are you still the master of the Tremont household at all? God, you can't just let a woman dictate your every decision. You can't just… be a simp for her!"

Mark could feel the buzzing inside his skull as Shelly's diatribe went on. Hell, did he just escape Arianne's tirade only to be the victim of another?

“No, Aunt Shelly, there’s actually a perfectly reasonable reason for this,” he tried. “The context is a bit… atypical from most other families. I respect you a lot, as I do to Mary and Henry too, so to me, you are all my elders. In this sense, it’s not that odd that Smore would call Mary ‘Granny’ and called Henry ‘Grandpa,’ right? It’s just an affectionate way of addressing them. You really shouldn’t be mad over something like this, Aunt Shelly.”

Aunt Shelly suddenly broke out a chuckle. “Alright, consider me convinced. I haven’t come back here for so long that I really am missing out on a lot of contexts, huh? You should have told me earlier, dear. Is Arianne still pissed? I’ll go talk to her and explain myself. Wouldn’t want you two to suffer a schism over a trifle, right? Though… How shall I put it? Well, if Smore could call your butler and housekeeper ‘Grandpa’ and ‘Granny’, then it shouldn’t be a problem for Smore to address me as ‘Granny,’ too, right?”

“Of course, that’s no problem at all!” Mark replied eagerly. “A grandaunt is still, technically, a ‘granny.’ I’m behind whatever you fancy.”

Chapter 1538

With a smile, Aunt Shelly rose from her seat and climbed the stairs.

Arianne interpreted her approaching footsteps as Mark returning. She was about to call out to him to grab Smore’s towel from outside when she espied Shelly’s white fluffy indoor slippers falling into step before her.

Shelly noticed Smore nearing the end of his bath and grabbed the boy’s towel herself before personally wrapping him with it. “Who’s all cleaned up and fragrant, hmm?” she cooed. “Come, let Granny inspect you and see if you’re as squeaky-clean as you look! Sniff, sniff—oh, you smell downright wonderful, sweetie! Smore is the cutest, best-smelling-thing in the whoooole wiiide wooorld!”

Smore did not laugh or break a smile. Instead, he looked at his mother, watching her expression closely.

It honestly stunned Arianne a little. Who knew that a child this young could so early learn how to read other people's faces before acting?

After her little play with Smore, Shelly turned her attention back to Arianne, the perfectly curved and convivial grin on her lips never once faltering. "Arianne, dear, I hope you're not still mad at what happened earlier. I'll admit, I had little idea of how important Mary and Henry are in this household, but Mark filled me in about it just now," she said. "With that, I humbly apologize for speaking out of turn, and I'll extend this apology to Mary, too. All I hope is that you don't quarrel and fight with Mark because of me. Honestly, I pity him. He must have been very worn out by work already."

Had Shelly not ended her apology with the very last sentence, Arianne would have found no problem forgiving her; she would have gladly set their misgiving aside. But that single addition was too obvious an insinuation—it meant that the only reason why Shelly was backing down was for Mark's sake. She was "worried" that Arianne might turn what was between them into a fight involving her beloved nephew.

In other words, she was indirectly accusing Arianne of being immature and petulant, which left Shelly with no choice but to back down for Mark's peace.

Arianne flashed Shelly a slight smile and extended her hand toward her. "I know what I'm doing. Now, could you please hand Smore over to me? I have to tuck him to sleep."

Shelly sidestepped her outreached hand without breaking her agreeable act. "Oh, you shouldn't! I'll bring Smore to bed. He falls asleep so effortlessly, you know."

Just like that, Shelly rubbed Arianne the wrong way again. So, now the woman was trying to stop her from interacting with her own son?

Arianne's spleen, built over time since Shelly's arrival, reached its boiling point and threatened to erupt out of her. Shelly had robbed her of her husband since Day One, and now, she was actively taking Smore away, too. Not even a kid's actual grandmother would forcefully claim their grandson for herself—and Shelly was merely a grandaunt!

Arianne hated conceding to something as irresponsible as this, but after watching Shelly carry Smore away from her, she stopped herself from chasing after them and remained in place, telling herself that she could not brew yet another storm out of this. She could not give Mark reasons to believe that she was the immature one.

She waited until Shelly was a few distances away before shutting the bedroom door and bolting it shut. Later, when Mark returned and made a commotion, trying to get her to open, Arianne kept quiet and feigned deaf.

Let the man find a way around this himself. All of the pent-up frustration at Shelly's indignant bullying that was left in her found an outlet in Mark. She could not bear acting like a doormat to be walked over. Mark did not teach her to be a spineless, lily-livered woman. He taught her to be assertive and strong!

Unbeknownst to Arianne herself, she had declared war against Aunt Shelly. It was not her nature to be so bilious, but the specific ways Shelly had acted against her, especially her passive-aggressiveness, fanned her into pushing back. It is downright tiring to stop yourself from lashing out against those who walk all over you and please someone who craps all over you.

Realizing that he was not getting into the bedroom tonight, Mark relented and retreated to the guest room. Shortly after he laid down, Aunt Shelly knocked on his door and called out, “Mark? Mark? Are you in there?”

He sat up in resignation and opened the door. “Yes. What is it?”

Shelly’s fingers swiftly fastened one of the loose buttons around his chest as though it was not at all strange for her to do so. “You poor dear! Why are you crashing in the guest room? I heard you knocking on your bedroom door, you know. Arianne refused to open it for you, did she? Why is she so dang cross-grained? I’ve apologized!”

Mark was evidently unaccustomed to Shelly’s affection and took a step back from her out of reflex. “Everything’s fine, actually. Arianne sometimes has these bouts of tantrum, but I’m pretty used to it by now. I’m sure you weren’t the problem, as it’s almost always me. Either way, you should rest already, Aunt Shelly.”

Chapter 1539

Mark’s action had been slight, but Shelly noticed it. For a split-second, despondence flitted across her eyes—and then it was no more, gone before anyone could catch it.

All that was left instead was her voice turning as sharp as a knife when she bristled. “What did I tell you? I’ve told you, you cannot be the sort of simpleton who lets a woman lord all over him! What she’s doing right now is just beyond the pale! This house belongs to the Tremonts. And she? She’s just an orphan adopted and raised here thanks to your magnanimity. How dare she treat you like this? She can put on airs around me, but she has no right to do that to you. Honestly? I’ve been putting up with her for your sake all this time, but she thinks she can do whatever she likes because Mr. Tremont loves her soooo damn much, isn’t it? Well, enough’s enough! I’m gonna teach her a lesson—if someone has to sleep in the guest room tonight, it’s gotta be her and not you!”

Mark deadpanned. “Aunt Shelly, stop. This is how we live with one another. All you see is me doting on her, but you’re blind to the many other things she has done out of her consideration for me, too. People complement one another in a relationship; that leaves no room for external intervention. You forcing your hand in is only going to damage the equilibrium we’ve achieved. In my honest opinion, I don’t feel wronged for sleeping in a guest room. If anything, the fact that she was angry enough to lock me outside tells me that she felt more wronged than me.

“Look, I don’t know what transgressions forced you to put up with her, but I can tell you, this is just her nature. It’s not something that can be ‘fixed,’ and it doesn’t bother me, personally,” he continued. “Frankly, I don’t think you need to worry about it so much, considering the fact that your stay is only temporary. After you move out, she’ll be out of sight and out of mind to you, no?

“And one last thing. You’re right that she was an orphan I took in, but that was before. Now, she’s my wife, the love of my life, and the mother of my son. I think you should go back to bed, Aunt Shelly. She’s probably already fast asleep, too, so please don’t disturb her at this hour,” Mark finished.

Shelly’s mien gradually paled. She stood still, dumbfounded, until Mark closed the door on her face. And even then, she stayed rooted on the spot over a long period.

When Shelly started moving, she scurried not to her own room but Arianne’s.

Arianne recognized her voice outside the door and opened it. “What is it?”

“Can we talk inside?” she whispered, not wanting Mark to overhear her action.

Arianne obliged, letting the woman step inside. “What’s so urgent that we need to talk about it at this hour? I’m all ears.”

Shelly sat at the edge of Arianne and Mark’s bed. Strange shadows danced on her face, making her expression impossible to read when she started, “I don’t plan to ever move out of the Tremont Estate. I plan to live here… and die here.”

Arianne was baffled. Why was the woman telling her this at this time, completely unprovoked? She had to admit, however, that the news of Shelly’s “permanent residence” irked her quite a bit, but if Mark consented to it, then there really was nothing Arianne could say or do.

So, she replied, “That’s great and all, but this is kind of a matter between you and Mark. The two of you can settle on this privately, to be honest. No need to involve me. Just talk to him about it.”

Shelly lowered her gaze. “‘Mark’, ‘Mark.’ You only ever call him Mark, as if he’s just some colleague or stranger you just met. Seems to me like you don’t actually harbour much intimacy toward him after all this time. I’ll be very frank with you. I. Don’t. Like. You,” she stated placidly. “I never liked you from the start, and I don’t want you to be the person he’s bound to for the rest of his life. Don’t think you can stay by his side and enact your vengeance completely unseen. My advice? Give up. You’re not going to harm a single hair on his head because I won’t let you. You want to avenge your late daddy? You go find the real culprit yourself. I can tell you this: Mark isn't the perp.”

At that moment, it clicked. Arianne finally understood why Shelly was so hellbent on making her life miserable. It was deliberately done under the belief that Arianne secretly hated Mark and was only staying with him to look for that chance to enact her ultimate revenge.

Chapter 1540

Arianne could not even be angry. It was a misunderstanding, after all, and one that might require a lengthy explanation at that.

In resignation, she dragged a chair and sat. “With all due respect, Aunt Shelly, methinks you’re reaching,” she began. “You’re right. My dad was an innocent victim who didn’t need to die in that plane tragedy. But the burden and pain that incident brought weighed more on Mark than it ever did me, and it would be unreasonable of me to judge him as the sinner and take him out as my revenge. And also, I call him ‘Mark’ out of deadset habit! Doesn’t mean I don’t love him.

“Frankly, you shouldn’t be making these baseless, paranoid accusations. I’ve been with him for years, Aunt Shelly. Smore’s already past his second birthday. If my intention had always been to murder him, I have had many, many chances. For goodness’s sake, he sleeps with me every night. What’s keeping me from seizing the chance the first time it presents itself? A simple slit across his neck, and he’s done for good. Why would I need to stake the rest of my life with him to kill him? I’m a simple-minded woman. I don’t know any elaborative scheme to kill someone; all I know is this simple, direct, and Hollywood-slasher-style throat-slitting, and that’s it.”

Shelly sneered. “Please, no one thinks you’d be stupid enough to go for something so obvious. If you kill, you get punished by the law, so you choose to go after his heart and everything else he possesses. Tell me, what’s your mighty excuse for legally appropriating the all-powerful Tremont Enterprise under your name, huh? That’s right. I know all about that, too. I have to say, it sure takes a clever schemer to go from an orphan at the mercy of others to becoming the mistress of the Tremont empire. I applaud you for the artifice!”

Arianne was growing weary. “God, if you could spend just a bit more time learning beyond the surface, you wouldn’t even come to suspect me like this! The Tremont Enterprise was at its tether back then, Aunt Shelly. We were desperate. He almost died because someone else wanted to kill him! I exhausted every method and means I knew to protect Tremont Enterprise back then, and at that bleakest moment, that had to be done. When he came back, I told him that we should rectify this and make Tremont Enterprise his again, but he didn’t want to do it. You know why? ‘Cause he trusts me just as I trust him. He doesn’t even think it was necessary,” she rejoined. “Pardon my candor, but our lives had been pretty happy and peaceful before you came. I’m by no means banning you from joining our lives, and I don’t even mind you seeking to stay here permanently, too. But don’t inject yourself into our personal relationship. Don’t interfere with how we live.”

Then, soon after her ultimatum, Arianne reminded her, “You’re just his aunt and nothing more, you know.”

Suddenly, Shelly became severely agitated. “You vile—are you speaking to me as the matriarch of the house?!”

Arianne cocked an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting that I’m not? I’ve been the matriarch since the day I married Mark. You, on the other hand, are a guest. A relative.”

Shelly leaped to her feet with a “thud!” and looked down on Arianne. “Ha, what a joke! A random orphan who happened to be rescued by a magnanimous man thinks she could become the matriarch of the Tremonts! She thinks she has somehow earned the right to command and dictate what Mark should and should not do! Well, let me burst your bubble here: without him, there would be no you today! How dare you put on airs in front of me! On what grounds do you earn that entitlement of yours, huh?”

Now that their discussion had devolved to this level, Arianne decided she was at the end of her patience. There was no way she would let this woman think she was superior.

She leaped to her feet with just as much force as her opponent. “For your information, I’m the most aware of whether I’ve dictated Mark to do anything, not you. Yes, he rescued and raised me. But does that mean I should be submissive to him for the rest of my life? Hell no, because we’re all created equal. There is no reason why I must live like the dirt on his shoes for any reason whatsoever. Hell, I didn’t agree to be his wife out of some gushing gratitude to repay his magnanimity, either. And if we’re being petty and squabbling over technicalities, then there’s even less reason why I should be grateful to Mark, don’t you think? His mother bereft me of my only parent, so he filled my dad’s shoes and raised me. It’s entirely fair and reasonable!

“And saying I’m putting on airs? Ha! You’re confused. I haven’t been acting that way—that was you! It begs the question, what the hell is it that makes you entitled to acting so superior, huh? Because you’re his aunt? An aunt who hasn’t contacted him or seen him for more than a decade? Mark mentioned briefly meeting you while he was in elementary school, but man, that’s at least twenty years ago, isn’t it? After virtually never appearing in his life for so long, do you honestly think you’re poised to immediately interfere with our lives just because you’re back here now?”

Shelly was so apoplectic that she raised her hand high. Yet, the wallop never came.

Arianne did not duck nor jerk. She took one glance at Shelly’s hesitance and sneered flatly. “What’s stopping you, hmm? Was anything I said even wrong? You’ve been excluding me in any way you can imagine ever since you butted into our lives. You wouldn’t even let me mingle with Smore. At first, I thought you didn’t intend any of it, but now, well! It’s clear as day how deliberate you are. The thing is, you’re just Mark’s aunt. You have your own life and social circle while he now has his own family. At most, the two of you are people with individual lives that just happen to be related. How could some relative think she’s got the right to overstep lines, huh?

“I didn’t want to spell it out to you out of respect, but I guess I have to now. Whether you could stay in this house permanently or not depends on whether I, the mistress of the house, nod.”