Ruling 1551

Chapter 1551

After a while, Shelly regained her composure. Mark carried her downstairs on his back, and they had dinner as though nothing had happened.

Mary intentionally avoided Shelly and did not dine with them on the table. She also secretly complained to Arianne and told her that Shelly was definitely insane. Arianne felt helpless and had no idea how she could resolve the situation.

During dinner, Shelly answered a phone call but did not leave the table due to her leg. When she picked up the phone, the expression on her face immediately changed and both Arianne and Mark could clearly see the changes. The couple looked at each other and took a deep breath—they had just gone through an argument; anyone in their right mind would break down if another argument ensued.

It was unknown as to who had called Shelly or what had been discussed. All that was known was that Shelly had hung up the phone in a hurry without saying a word.

Very soon, that person called again, but Shelly immediately switched off her phone.

Mark and Arianne both feigned ignorance and did not dare ask. There were still countless moments where they had to tread very carefully.

Shelly had completely lost her appetite after receiving that phone call. She asked Mark to carry her back to her room when he was done eating. Since Shelly's accident, Mark was the one to personally take care of her, since she would not accept anyone else to take up that role. For instance, Mary had received the brunt of Shelly's rage despite the former's age.

That night, the moment Arianne laid in bed after coaxing Smore to sleep, Shelly sent her a text message and said that she needed to use the bathroom.

Arianne shrugged her shoulders and reluctantly crawled out of bed. Mark asked, “Did Aunt Shelly call for you?”

She looked at him in contempt. “Who else could it be? I have no idea who it was that called her during dinner earlier. I’m really scared that she’ll torture me later. I’m absolutely terrified of her.”

Mark said, “Based on the first few digits, I noticed that the number seemed to be from some company. Stop thinking too much for now. You should hurry and tend to her, since she already called you. Don’t ask her anything afterward; I doubt she’s the kind of person who would lash out at you for no good reason.”

For Mark to even use the word “lash out” to describe Shelly, it would seem that he was also on the verge of losing his patience.

Arianne resigned to her fate and headed for Shelly’s room. Shelly’s face was rather dark because of how long it took for Arianne to arrive, the latter of whom’s conversation with Mark had spanned a few minutes. Arianne pretended not to notice and helped bring Shelly to the bathroom. She could not help but yawn a few times as she stood beside Shelly.

It was precisely because of her yawn that Shelly coldly said, “If you can’t bear it, you could ask Mark to come instead. There’s no reason for him to ignore his aunt.”

Arianne's lips twitched and she smiled apologetically. "I wasn't being impatient. I'm just quite tired, that's why I yawned… I don't think it's illegal, is it? Of course, I should be the one who takes care of you in terms of going to the bathroom. Mark's a fully grown man, after all. It wouldn't be appropriate for him to be doing this…"

Shelly lightly snorted and did not reply.

Chapter 1552

At that moment, Arianne had a serious thought as to what would happen in the future. In the past, when Shelly was still healthy, it was very likely for her to move out and live elsewhere. However, now that she'd lost her mobility and was most likely going to be a cripple forever, without any hope of recovery, it was very likely that she would have to live in Tremon Estate forever.

Arianne was in no position to object. Shelly was in that situation because she had saved Mark. She had just joined Tremont Enterprises not too long ago but was already in such a situation. It would be impossible for her to continue working there when she was unable to move with one leg. Mark owed it to her, so he should naturally take care of her.

At midnight, Arianne set her alarm to wake up later in the night to check and see if Shelly needed any assistance.

As she walked to Shelly's room in a daze later, right before she was about to knock on the door, she suddenly heard Shelly's voice from inside the room. Her voice sounded as though she was suppressing her emotions and she let out a low growl, even speaking in her own language. "I told you I don't want it. Whoever wants to inherit it can do as they please. If no one wants to claim it, you're free to donate it. I don't want even a single cent of it! Do you not understand?!"

Inherit? Arianne thought for a moment before she came up with an answer. Shelly was probably referring to her dead husband's inheritance, wasn't she? She really didn't want a single cent? Was she out of her mind? Wouldn't this be too strange? She could have claimed an inheritance, but why did she have to react so vigorously as though someone was forcefully feeding her a cup of poison?

Arianne did not dare to go in immediately. She waited until there was no more noise coming from inside the room before she pretended as though nothing had happened and knocked on the door. "Aunt Shelly, are you awake? Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

After a moment, the door opened and Shelly stood by the door, standing on one leg. She had trouble even standing properly due to the injury on her leg. Arianne quickly went up and held onto her. "You shouldn't move around like that; you wouldn't want to fall down. I'll help you move around and exercise whenever I've got some spare time, so you really shouldn't walk around when you're alone."

Shelly's gaze was fixated on Arianne, her eyes filled with complicated emotions. "We should always follow our hearts, should we not? Just like how it's a fact that I dislike you, I'm neither hiding my emotions from you, nor am I pretending not to. Likewise, you're free to ignore me if you want to. There's no need for you to wake up in the middle of the night just for me. You can see for yourself—I can walk by myself just fine and move around on my own too. If I fall down, so be it. I'll learn how to walk on my own eventually. Practice makes perfect, doesn't it? If I feel that falling down is painful, I'll eventually find a way to avoid falling down myself."

Arianne was slightly surprised. Shelly seemed to have some hidden meaning in her words, but she could not understand what it was. It was as though the words were meant for her, yet it also seemed to be meant for herself. "Well… I don't intend to leave you alone, but you're quite right though. You could indeed try to find a way to stop yourself from falling down again after you've had a taste of the pain. However, it isn't appropriate for you to do so, as you might fall and end up having to be hospitalized. Hence, it's better that I take care of you…"

Shelly suddenly seemed like a deflated balloon. She rested her back against the wall and slowly slid down onto the floor. "I feel like having a drink. Why don't you have some with me?"

Having a drink at 3 AM?

Arianne was in a daze. She went downstairs and took out a bottle of alcohol and two very small glasses. She was afraid that Shelly might drink too much.

However, the truth was that it did not matter how small the glass was. If the person truly wanted to drown their sorrows in alcohol, they could carry on drinking continuously no matter what and finish off the bottle easily.

As Shelly got more and more intoxicated, she began to rant. “I feel like I’m about to go insane from everything that’s happening to me. I feel as if there’s a wild beast tearing my heart apart and I’m trying my best to shut its mouth, yet all my efforts seem to be in vain. I really want to let it loose and let myself be free from all my problems for once, but I can’t… Why… do people have to live in such agony for their entire lives?”

Arianne was not sure if Shelly was actually drunk, so she did not dare to ask anything, despite how curious she was and how desperately she wanted to find out what secrets Shelly had.

Finally, when she realized Shelly was ranting nonsensically, Arianne mustered up her courage and tentatively asked, “Aunt Shelly, why aren’t you willing to inherit your late husband’s wealth? Why do you treat Mark as though he is your own son?”

Chapter 1553

Shelly muttered something very softly and Arianne could not make out what she was saying. Just when she wanted to ask in more detail, Shelly had already passed out on the floor and was completely drunk.

Arianne had to put in a lot of effort to try and put her to bed. When she returned to her bedroom, she had a very hard time keeping her eyes open and dozed off to sleep very quickly.

The next day, when Arianne woke up, Mark was already gone. She looked at the time and realized that it was past 10 AM. Arianne thought that she might as well lay down for a while longer and procrastinate since she was late for work anyway. Arianne had not been able to get to work on time since Shelly's incident.

When she walked downstairs, she saw that Shelly had a children's storybook in her hands and was reading to Smore. Shelly seemed much kinder whenever she was with either Mark or Smore. Smore seemed to like her company as well, since he could sit quietly beside her and listen to her story intently. Children tend to be able to feel if someone is treating them well or not, so from the way Smore treated Shelly, it would seem that she was treating him quite well.

If Mark's mom was around, would it be the same scene?

Suddenly, Shelly raised her head and looked at Arianne, who was standing by the stairs. She asked with a smile, "You're awake? Did I trouble you too much last night? I'm sorry, I tend to go on a rampage whenever I'm drunk. I must've said some strange things last night, didn't I?"

Arianne shivered when she saw how Shelly was smiling at her, as she did not know when Shelly would have another mood swing. "No, you didn't. You immediately went off to sleep the moment you were drunk and were no trouble at all. I'll be heading to the kitchen to get something to eat. You guys carry on."

Mary was not around that day, and Arianne did not know where she went. As she casually rummaged through the kitchen to find something to eat, she heard some irregular footsteps walking towards her, which obviously belonged to Shelly. Her hand trembled and she accidentally put in too many noodles in the pot. “Aunt Shelly?”

Shelly was able to move around better with the help of a customised crutch but was not able to travel too far. She stood by the kitchen door and looked at Arianne before she half-jokingly said, “What’s the matter? Did I startle you?”

Arianne quickly shook her head. “No, I was just a little deep in thought when you came in. Would you like something to eat?”

Shelly looked at the ball of noodles that would inevitably clump up together and pouted her lips. “No thanks, it doesn’t look appetising. About last night… I lost control of my emotions. Did I really not say anything strange when I was drunk?”

Arianne calmly answered, “You really didn’t. You only said you had a lot of pent up frustration but did not wish to say what it was. Aunt Shelly, it isn’t healthy to keep everything inside. You might fall sick from it.”

Shelly lowered her eyes and gave a wry smile. “Is that right? The thing is, I can’t find someone to confess my problems to. It’s been so long that I’ve kept all the good and bad times to myself, only letting myself loose and allowing myself to cry in secret when I can’t withstand it. No one is willing to listen to me. In fact, no one is even willing to know about it, so I have never dared tell a soul.”

Chapter 1554

What could she possibly not dare to say? Arianne casually said, “You can tell me if you want to. I’m listening. There couldn’t be anything that you wouldn’t dare to say. I’m sure it’s nothing terrible, is it? I

truly hope that you'd feel better with a peace of mind once you've gotten rid of everything from your chest. Frankly, you've got a really strange personality—you're truly kind and sweet when you're in a good mood, but anyone would have to be very careful around you when you're in a bad mood."

Shelly shook her head. "Alright, enough of this. Mark brought me to the hospital for my checkup and to get an X-ray scan this morning. He should be retrieving the report this afternoon. I really hope that my leg will heal, or otherwise, I can only rely on Mark to carry me around for the rest of my life. I don't want to become a burden to him.

Mark returned home with Shelly's report in his hands after 1 PM. He headed straight to his bedroom with a dark expression and asked Arianne to follow him as well.

Arianne thought that it was strange but followed him anyway. When she closed the door, Mark threw Shelly's X-ray results on the floor. "Aunt Shelly has fractured her body in the past. Furthermore, it's not just one fracture; she has several fractures that had been inflicted at different times. Although neither of her injuries were enough to cripple her, she has damaged her bones. Do you know how painful that would be? I suspect that she was tormented most of the time during her marriage. Due to her last accident, I asked the doctor to conduct a complete body checkup on her. The result shows that other than a few fractures on her bones, she is almost deaf in her left ear. The doctor suspects that she has been beaten up badly in the past. However, she's been pretending like nothing's wrong with her all this time. Moreover… her uterus has been badly injured. That means it's not that she doesn't want to have a child, but that she can't. I only just found out how badly injured she is; it's inhumane… especially the knife wound on her abdomen. It seems like that stab had directly injured her uterus."

Arianne picked up the test report from the floor and studied it in detail. Mark was right; it was an X-ray of her skeleton, and all the details were in there. When Arianne had helped to wipe down Shelly at the hospital previously, she had not removed Shelly's garments to wipe off the rest of the area. However, Arianne would occasionally see a few scars, once in a while, though she would heed no attention to them. This was because Shelly had very fair skin and her injuries were so old that they were mostly faded, which would not attract attention.

If that were true, why did Shelly wait until her husband had passed away before returning to the country? It was no longer the old era where women were expected to stay with their spouses until the day they died. Based on Shelly's character, she would most definitely ask for a divorce if she had been domestically abused. She hadn't bore a child and had nothing to tie her down, especially money, since she had even refused to receive her rightful inheritance.

These were all probably the reasons why Shelly was mentally ill, and it was a very serious matter. At that point, she was the only person who knew what had happened, and getting her to tell her story was the biggest issue. Arianne knew that she could not force the truth out of Shelly just to satisfy their curiosity and rip open the latter's scars.

The couple discussed for a moment and came to the conclusion that they would ask Shelly about the truth. They figured that the best way to recover from a mental illness was to make the patient face their fears, and since the death of the latter's husband had not helped get rid of her nightmares, she was most definitely mentally ill and needed to be treated.

Mark was enraged after he found out about the matter and could not calm himself down for a long time. However, Arianne walked downstairs with him after she put in a lot of effort to calm him down. The couple brought Shelly to the patio to sunbathe.

The weather that day was quite fair, the wind gently blew, and the heat from the sun was just the right temperature. Shelly was in a good mood. She sat on a chair and asked with a smile, "Are you not going back to the office today, Mark? However, it's good to get some rest once in a while. Otherwise, you'd be exhausted from spending all your time and energy at the office."

Mark was unable to pull a straight face. Moreover, Arianne kept silently pulling his sleeve to gesture how he should begin asking since it was a matter that only he could broach.

Shelly noticed Arianne's movements and her eyes twitched. "Is there something you would like to tell me? Has it got to do with my leg? If it can't heal, then so be it. I do feel slight regret that I won't be able to be completely healthy from now on, but I suppose I'll be able to accept and adapt to the situation quickly. Furthermore, I did it for Mark and not someone else, so that's fine."

Chapter 1555

Mark walked towards Shelly and stopped in front of her before kneeling down. He took her hand and said, "Aunt Shelly, how much have you suffered in the past? Did that man lay a finger on you? Why didn't you leave him?"

Shelly's face instantly turned pale as though she had flashbacks of the past. A hint of horror flashed through her eyes. "What are you talking about…?"

Mark's grip on Shelly's hand slightly tightened. "Aunt Shelly, we're your family, so there's nothing that you can't tell me. I just want to understand your past and know why you're mentally ill when you should be living a normal and happy life instead."

Shelly panicked and struggled to remove his hand. "I don't know what you're talking about! Stop asking! I'm fine now… really… please stop asking…"

Mark paused for a moment. Arianne, knowing that he was being soft-hearted, gritted her teeth before she said, "Aunt Shelly, what are you hiding from us? It's only us here, so you can talk to us. You'll feel much better if you do. We can't bear to see you live like this. We hope that you're able to get a good night's sleep instead of being constantly haunted by nightmares. We're just concerned for your wellbeing." Anyhow, it was both for Shelly's wellbeing and theirs, since the former's abnormality had been very inconvenient for the latter.

Shelly's eyes fixated on Mark's face, her eyes seeming to glimmer faintly. "There are some things that shouldn't be told for the good of all of us. Mark, everything I did, I did it willingly. I would give up everything for your sake. I've survived that hell and have finally arrived in heaven, so of course, I'd be able to live well from now on. The past isn't important now. I don't wish to bring it up, and you shouldn't dwell on it either. My life's wish has been granted already, so if I have to die, I will die with no regrets."

Perhaps the emotions in Shelly's eyes were so intense that Mark got a shock, for he got up and took a few steps back. "Aunt Shelly, I don't understand what you've said. I know that the accident to your leg is because of me, but are you saying that your marriage… has got something to do with me as well?" Why… Why was she treating him so well when he was only her nephew? She had been treating him so well that it was as though she was… his real mom!

Mark's heart trembled when he came to that conclusion.

Shelly could see right through Mark's terror. She quickly changed her tone to a gentle one and said, "I was referring to my leg, and you shouldn't feel sorry for me. It's fine. It doesn't matter how terrible my marriage was, it's all in the past now. I don't wish to talk about this anymore, so let's change the subject. Smore's so big now, he's almost three years old already. Are you planning to have another one, Arianne? I'm a cripple now and can't go out to work anymore; plus, it wouldn't look good for me to limp around in the office. Therefore, I could help take care of your child if you have another one.

Arianne's lips twitched, not expecting to become the next topic. "Well… I can't get pregnant anymore. Regardless, Smore alone is enough for me. I injured myself when I gave birth to him previously."

Arianne could only say that much rather than going into too much detail.

However, Shelly suddenly spat out something unexpected. "Could it be caused by that illegitimate son of the Tremonts?"

Arianne and Mark looked at each other and did not know what to say. Ethan Connor was now Alejandro Smith and could be said to have mended his ways, so there was no need for them to linger in the past. Additionally, they managed to have Smore, so they had no regrets. The most important thing was that Shelly had been living overseas for so long without ever coming into contact with anyone within the country, yet she not only knew that Mark's father had cheated on his wife, but she also knew about his illegitimate son. Obviously, Shelly had been paying attention to the happenings of the Tremonts.

Shelly noticed their reaction and murmured, "I was just asking casually. It seems like he hasn't caused you any trouble, so that's good. If he did, I would never forgive him."

Arianne took a deep breath. "No, he didn't. Although we aren't on good terms with each other, it's not too bad either. Further, he hasn't been monitoring our movements recently, so we're free to move around now, which feels good."

Chapter 1556

Shelly was dumbstruck. "What, that bastard's made some impressive name for himself already? Why else wouldn't he be seduced by the sheer wealth and power of Tremont Enterprise, huh?" she questioned. "Do the two of you talk to each other sometimes? Maybe you should invite him to dinner and let me check him out."

Arianne was at a loss of what to say, but Mark saved her from answering altogether. "It's fine. We aren't exactly good buddies."

How would Shelly react after knowing Mr. Tremont's supposititious son went on to become Alejandro Smith, who now also possessed shares in Tremont Enterprise? One thing was for sure—she would be very, very miffed. The entire event would still be too convoluted to expatriate even if Arianne or Mark tried.

Thankfully, Shelly did not insist on her idea. “Fine, then. I hate the bastard just for existing, anyway, so maybe it’s better if I don’t see his face. He’s a living reminder of that disgusting affair between your father and some wild, uninhibited woman outside. Remembering that sh*t always makes me sick.”

Meanwhile, way back at the Smith Estate, Alejandro let out two rapid-fire sneezes. It felt like someone was badmouthing him behind his back…

He had not gone to work today, instead choosing to spend his day playing with Millie in the estate’s garden. Melanie, who watched them from the side, gibed, “The weather’s turning chilly, Alex. Can you at least protect yourself from catching a cold? If you get sick while giving Millie these big, sloppy kisses, you’re going to spread your virus to her.”

Alejandro did not seem to mind at all. “Who says it was a cold? I think it’s just someone trash-talking me behind my back.”

Melanie laughed, amused. “Interesting. You actually believe that sort of tale told by old wives, huh? Well, then, who do you think is the one trash-talking you right now? If I may be frank… You keep such an impressive record of making enemies that if you sneeze every time someone badmouths you, you should be firing snot like a machine gun, twenty-four-seven. Either way, I don’t intend to turn this into a debate. All I’m asking is the very reasonable request of putting on more clothes when the weather’s getting too cold for you, ‘kay? I don’t care if it’s tacky or ruins your impeccable swagger. Health over fashion, Alex!”

Alejandro shot her a side-eyed glance. “Why do you sound like my mom? Mom always said that when I was a kid.”

Almost immediately, the twinkle in his eyes fainted. The thought of his late mother still depressed him.

Melanie, who was adept at reading faces, swiftly rose to her feet and opened the window blind. Golden sunlight sprayed into the house, and she remarked, “Oh, what a beautiful day today is shaping up to be! We should honor it with an excursion, agree?”

Alejandro looked out of the window and broke out a slight smile. “Agreed, though I’ve admittedly grown a little too lazy to leave the house. Maybe next time. Oh, and by the way, you asked who’s trash-talking me behind my back, right? If I have to guess, I’ll stake my bet on Mark Tremont’s aunt. I mean, who else other than that woman?”

Melanie mulled it over for a moment. “I heard that his aunt had an accident a while ago. Arianne had been taking care of her ever since, sacrificing her work for the time,” she began. “I wonder… Why did the light in the runway fall without showing any signs of faults or stuff like that? And the fact that Mark was almost the one at the receiving end! Either something suspicious is happening, or his luck really ran out that day.”

A slight glint flitted through Alejandro’s eyes. “Hmm… Gotta admit, when you put it that way, it really does seem suspicious. Tremont Enterprise’s choice of show venues never changed, and it always demands its logistics to be the best in the industry. Under those circumstances, the probability of one of its lights suddenly falling off its spot is about as high as getting struck by lightning on a clear, sunny day—practically impossible. So what the hell?… Not that I care, of course. I mean, it’s the Tremonts’ little drama; I cannot overstate how disinterested I am about it. Besides, Mark’s smart enough to order an investigation behind it already, right?”

Chapter 1557

Melanie might have brought up points of curiosity in passing without considering the possibility of chicanery, but Alejandro brought that under focus. If the lighting accident was manufactured, then who could have been behind it? What could their goal be?

Was it… to kill Mark Tremont?

Melanie drew in a sharp breath. “Alex, listen to me. You can bicker with him all you want, but he’s still your brother. You better not just stand there and not help.”

Alejandro furrowed his eyebrows. “And I’ve started seeing him as my brother since when, exactly? If the man himself isn’t worried, then why the hell should I be? I’m not in a hurry to brownnose him. Besides, the one who got hurt is his aunt, so he’s probably already onto the whole thing already, right? Hell, I bet they’ve concluded it as nothing more than an accident. And what if it really was just some freak accident, huh? It’s a thing that happened like what, a while ago or whatever. Who’s into reopening a case?… If you’re so worried about it, then call Arianne and caution her or something.”

Melanie immediately pulled out her phone and began her call. She did not launch straight into her concern—opting to preface it with small talks—before feigning a casual tone when asking, “So, how’s Mark’s aunt doing so far?”

Arianne hid in an empty corner before answering, “Her right leg’s busted. Doctor said it might be permanent, too, but at least nothing else was harmed.”

Melanie spied Alejandro in the periphery and continued, “Why do you think the light fell off the ceiling? Tremont Enterprise always picks the same few venues for its shows, right? And people usually don’t change the lights in a runway frequently, too, which means it should be very secured in its place. You… don’t think this might be a mite too suspicious? Did Mark investigate it? Was it an accident?”

The incident had happened for quite a while by now, but Arianne had never considered it in any particular direction before. “Yeah, I think that’s the conclusion. What else could it be? Sabotage?”

As soon as the words left her lips, the cogs in Arianne's head began to turn and suspicion rose. Granted, she had never handled show logistics before, so she had no experience to draw knowledge from. But now that Melanie reminded her that Tremont Enterprise always chose the same few venues, and that furnishings such as lights were seldom changed, her newfound doubts started becoming a little too pressing.

An untouched light should not have fallen off its perch for no reason.

Melanie worried that she was creating ghosts out of shadows, too, so she quickly clarified, "Well, I just think it's all a bit concerning so, yea… I was just asking. Wanna make sure that it's not some malicious sabotage. Ultimately, I'm glad that no harm befell Mark—all thanks to his aunt's heroic rescue, too, but it's regretful that she sacrificed her leg for it. Anyway! You must be busy with something, aren't you? I only called to talk about this so… this is goodbye for now. Let's hang out again some other time."

The conversation ended, but Arianne's mind continued to whirr for several minutes longer.

She sent a sneaky text to Mark, telling him to leave Shelly alone for a while. Ever since her aunt-in-law went through that accident, she had been busy caring for her recovery and post-mortem questions about the event slipped her mind.

Perhaps it was time she asked.

As soon as Mark returned to their bedroom, Arianne pulled him aside. "Hey, uh, what happened after Aunt Shelly's accident?"

Mentioning the incident was a surefire way to lock Mark's furrowed eyebrows into place. "Why ask? Of course, it was an accident. What other verdicts could there be? The venue is owned by Tremont Enterprise, which means the guy in charge is me. Get it? Had it belonged to a third party, this whole thing would have ended with an exorbitant amount of medical fees on top of compensation for that accident. Since the person injured was Aunt Shelly, though, things were resolved in a pretty straightforward manner—free from annoying squabbles and such, at least."

Arianne cast her question in the hopes that he caught on, "And have you tried, well, checking if it really was an innocent accident? From what I heard, stuff like lights don't fall off their spots all of a sudden. Since the venue belongs to you, there's even less reason for you to cut cost in furnishing and maintenance, right? Everything's gotta be the best—be it the quality of the lights or the outfitting for the shows. So why was it faulty? Look at the lights in our home. It's been years since we've touched them, but none of them have shown signs of falling off or anything. You don't find this whole thing a bit strange at all?"

Chapter 1558

Mark could hear the undertone in Arianne's question and held her gaze. "If there's something you'd like to suggest, then say it out front, please," he stated candidly. "Ever since Aunt Shelly's accident, I've been bogged down by not just work but also her recovery. I could spare no more energy to postulate if that incident were a ploy or an accident or God-knows-what-else. The way I see it, the whole thing has the hallmarks of a typical freak accident, and isn't that what these things are wont to do? Misfortune is a lottery sometimes. We can't start suspecting that everything in the world is out to get us just because something like that happened once or twice before. Being overtly allergic like that can't be good."

Arianne sighed quietly. "It's Melanie. She called me moments earlier, and I think she wanted to bring this to attention. So, I brought it up to you; that's all there is to it. If you really lack the time, then you don't have to investigate this, okay? We'll let bygones be bygones. The only reason why I thought it might be worth scrutiny is because it involved you and Aunt Shelly, who even became lame because of it. If someone was out to harm you, we can't let them escape. We need to make sure it doesn't happen again, agree?"

At that moment, Shelly suddenly appeared, approaching the two with the help of her cane. “What are you two whispering about, hmm?” she exclaimed mirthfully. “What’s so secretive that you two are discussing it behind me back?”

Mark quickly helped her to the living room before easing her onto the couch. “No, no secret. What is there to hide from you?” he answered. “We were just… discussing what to have for dinner later! What would you like to eat, Aunt Shelly? Tell me, and I shall have the kitchen crew work on it.”

Shelly thought for a second. “How about… steaks? I haven’t had one for ages now! You wouldn’t mind having steak for dinner, would you, Arianne?”

Arianne was a little baffled at being dragged into the conversation. She had always been rather unfussy when it came to food—she never bothered asking what meals were being made in the kitchen on any given day. Besides, being thrusted with a question like this meant that even if Arianne hated having steak for dinner, she could not be frank about her aversion. “I’m fine with anything, honestly. Anyway, you two go ahead. I’m gonna take a nap with Smore.”

Arianne disappeared upstairs, and Shelly suddenly broke out a heavy sigh.

Concerned, Mark asked, “What’s wrong, Aunt Shelly?”

She held his gaze with her own marked with sorrow. “Oh, Mark, I’m so sorry for being such a pathetic burden since I’ve come back to you! I created so many troubles, and Arianne even had to care for me in the hospital for so long, and… I bet she’s utterly exhausted. That’s my fault too, I know. Most people would not be able to handle me at all! Arianne must have ranted about me behind my back, right?”

Shelly's words amplified the guilt that had been residing in Mark's mind since the accident. "What are you talking about? Burden? You're no burden. You were hurt because you were trying to save me! I cannot hold anything but gratitude for a sacrifice like that, and it's only fair that we devote ourselves into caring for you," he said. "Arianne had not a word of indignation, and she has never complained about anything, so don't fret about it. Let's focus on your wellness, shall we?"

"Hmm? She didn't say a word at all? —Oh, I get it; you're burying it under the rug, isn't it? Aww, I appreciate the sentiments, but I'm perfectly okay with people being irritated and mouthing off behind my back. I'm your beloved aunt, Mark. You can practically tell me anything without censoring yourself. I didn't give her the treatment of the best aunt ever, after all, so it's normal if she rants. She's an outsider, after all. She isn't compelled by the sort of innate kinship found in blood relations like ours. Honestly, I've never asked much from her because of this reason, too!"

Throughout her counterargument, Shelly was all grins, the caustic edges in her words locked behind a pearly-white smile. She had said it with a droll and jovial twang, so even if the content of her words hurt, a typical listener would still find it impossible to be enraged.

However, Shelly's tone did nothing to save Mark from the pangs of realization that his aunt had yet ceased belittling Arianne even now. He was aware that reforming the woman's disparaging opinion of his wife would take more than a few explanations from him, because he had tried that and still saw no improvement.

By this point, Mark was discouraged from defending and clarifying his wife's character and personality every time Shelly mounted another muted attack. Instead, he always did his best to steer their conversation away from it altogether. "No, she's never ranted about anything like that. Anyway, I still have some business in the office to attend to, so I'll have to go for a while. I'll be back home as soon as I can. Should you need anything, you could call out to one of my many retinues."

Chapter 1559

Shelly, gleaming the subdued aggravation in Mark's eyes, decided to stop. "Alright, alright. Go ahead. Brian's gone home, hasn't he? Be careful while driving, okay?"

She looked out of the window and watched Mark's car vanish into the distance, the softness in her mien gradually receding. Finally, she summoned Mary to her.

The housekeeper balked at any interaction with her, so she made no attempt at hiding her irritation. "What is it, Mrs. Leigh? I'm in the middle of cleaning duty."

Shelly sized Mary up before exposing her guise with a deadpan expression. "Please, you're just looking for a way out of talking to me, aren't you? All you do all day is take care of Smore for a while; you're not even required to do much actual housekeeping. But of course, that is neither here nor there. I just wanna ask you something, so why don't you take a seat?"

Mary reacted by straightening her back and standing tall. "No, I'm not gonna," she declared in a steely tone. "I'm just a lowly worker who has no right to sit next to her mistress. Now, if you have anything to say, Mrs. Leigh, make it quick."

Shelly did not care much for Mary's attitude. "Fine by me. Gotta' admit, Arianne is plenty amazing at charming people, isn't she? All these years living off the Tremonts gave her ample opportunities to ingratiate on everyone here, huh? She's pretty successful, too, judging from how willing you and that butler are to leap to her side. She must have showered you two a lot of favors, I presume? How else would a mere orphan, living at the mercy of someone else, managed to command so much of your reverence, huh?" she sneered. "But back to the question. What's the tie between Alejandro and the illegitimate son of the previous Tremont patriarch, hmm? You must know, don't you?"

One of the things that always ruffled Mary's feathers was hearing other people bad-mouthing Arianne. Right on cue, her spleen flared and rose into her pate. "Can you stop mouthing off nasty malarkey about

Madam already? Everything was all sunshine and blue sky until you came along kicking up all kinda hoo-ha!" she snapped. "Ingratiation? Giving favors? Poppycock! What humble folks like me know is treating each other kindly just as you want others to treat you, and that good people don't build genuine connection outta' prices! And why are you asking about the Tremonts' bastard son, huh? What in the name of the Lord does it have anything to do with you? You're Mr. Tremont's aunt from his mother's side, for Pete's sake; you're not even a member of the Tremonts!"

Shelly turned a deaf ear to everything that did not match what she was looking for and asked again, "Just answer the damn question, Mary. Is Alejandro Smith the Tremont bastard or not? And before you run off your mouth, you'll do well to remember that my sister died because of that bastard and his shameless, homewrecking mother. You think I, as her surviving family, have no right to know about him?"

Mary had had enough of Shelly for a long time. Seeing how the latter was obsessing over Alejandro, Mary remembered that the man himself was no saint, and the thought of using one poison to fight another rose into her.

"Fine! Alejandro's the Tremont bastard that you're looking for," she told the truth. "What'cha gonna do about it, huh?"

Shelly clenched her jaws, the cogs in her head already beginning to turn. She stayed quiet.

Mary took the chance to turn away and left. There was no way she was going to give this Karen any more of her time.

A few moments passed. Shelly made her way up the stairs and slowly back into her room before booting up her laptop. She pulled out all the information she had hitherto collected.

It was the news article pertaining to Mark's tragic shipwreck. The libelous report Seaton had released back then, too, appeared, having been discovered by Shelly.

Every rumor hid a kernel of truth; this article named Alejandro as the Tremont family's bastard. Although Mark later dispelled its veracity in public, Mary had admitted to Shelly that the Alejandro rumor was true all along. It meant that at least a part of the news was true—and a large part, at that.

An illegitimate son, and an orphan whose father was killed by the family. Alejandro and Arianne both had motivations, did they not? But Shelly would not let danger lurk around Mark, even if Arianne had become Mark's wife while Ethan had become Alejandro Smith. And then there was the fact that Smith Enterprise possessed some of the shares to Tremont Enterprise, too. Everything was hurling toward the worst possible outcome—

After a quick revision on what she had collected so far, Shelly snapped her laptop shut and put her hand on her aching temple. Lately, every spike in her emotion always seemed to escalate into a head-splitting migraine.

Arianne must have bewitched Mark into silencing all the exposed knowledge after the shipwrecking incident, Shelly surmised, because she wanted everything to return to the guise of normalcy. But some of the Tremont Enterprise shares later went to Alejandro Smith. Every sign and element clicked, painting a picture—Arianne and Alejandro were working together to eliminate Mark!

Chapter 1560

By evening, Mark returned home to Shelly waiting by the door with her cane. She smoothly tucked Mark's hair—blown astray by the breeze—into place. "You're gonna wanna take a bath, right? Go quickly, dinner's waiting."

Mark was still unaccustomed to Shelly's affectionate gesture. In reply, he hummed uneasily and hurried upstairs.

Arianne watched their interaction, unperturbed. The only thing she was thinking about was how excessively Shelly doted on him. Honestly, Arianne was a little jealous of Mark having an aunt who loved him this much.

It was time for dinner. Everyone was having medium-rare steaks, Arianne noticed to her dismay, except Smore, who had tender, well-done steak.

She was not a fan of steaks with any pink in their middle. The longer she looked at her pinkish slab, the more her appetite waned. Arianne found steaks any less than well-done to be too gross to eat, but another part of her insisted that she should not waste food by throwing it away. In the end, she decided to have salad as makeshift dinner and pushed her steak onto Mark's plate.

Shelly observed Arianne from her spot and immediately launched an inquisition with a straight face. "What? You don't like it? I thought I'd asked you earlier today, Arianne. You told me anything will do."

Arianne eyed Mark for a second before answering, "I'm not feeling my appetite today, so I'll just make-do with a bowl of salad."

Shelly stabbed her fork into Arianne's steak and flung it onto the table. "If you disliked it that much, then throw it away to a proper place. Mark isn't your garbage disposal, for Pete's sake. Just because you don't like to eat something doesn't mean you're entitled to throw it to someone else however you like. That's, frankly, a very rude and uncultured thing to do!"

Arianne placed her fork and knife down onto the table and looked at Mark, deadpanned. She was waiting for his reaction—if Mark made no response, then Arianne would fight back at what was obviously a thinly-veiled jab.

Mark frowned. “That’s a bit too much, don’t you think? Ari didn’t take a single bite out of her steak before giving it to me. In fact, I wouldn’t mind eating her leftover food, either. She’s my woman; it’s not a big deal for us to finish each other’s leftovers. Also? I was the one who raised her. To say she’s uncultured is to accuse me of being terrible at parenting. Is that what you’re saying?”

Shelly leered at Arianne frigidly. “No, what I’m saying is simply what I observed to be the truth. Your relationship status with her shouldn’t matter—a rude behavior should always be frowned upon. And there’s another thing. You were still incredibly young when you started raising her. You had studies and the company to simultaneously attend to back then. When would you get the time to impart important values and rules of decorum to her? But it’s okay. We can always educate her now; nothing’s ever too late. Sorry, but I just can’t stand people acting like troglodytes in my face.”

Arianne crossed her arms and stared at Shelly as though she was watching a performance. After going through that woman’s particular brand of torment for a while, she had built enough callus against the former’s tirade that it would take a lot more to anger Arianne. As long as Mark was on her side, Arianne knew she could endure Shelly’s tantrums.

Mark put his eating utensils down, having lost his own appetite as well. Wiping the corner of his lips with a paper towel, he remarked, “Aunt Shelly, might I remind you that we’re only eating at home among family? There’s no need to be so…schoolmarmish, you understand? I’m not one to impose a lot of house rules, you know. The last thing I want is for everyone to feel uptight.”

Arianne was snickering in her mind. Mark was always the fuddy-duddy one all this time! It only took this moment for him to finally relax his stance on house rules.

Shelly, at the very least, knew when to give up. “Fine, fine. Let’s get back to eating. But really, Arianne, listen to me. From now on, you are to be mindful of your behavior, okay? I don’t want Smore to pick up nasty, uncouth habits growing up.”

Arianne cocked her eyebrow and leveled Shelly with a coy smile. “Hmm? What sort of ‘nasty, uncouth habits’ could you possibly be talking about? If it were me, I wouldn’t sound the alarm just because Smore’s little girlfriend pushed what she didn’t like into his plate. I mean, if Smore’s happy to finish it for her, then there’s really no room for Mommy to interject, right? Heck, it’s not just leftover steaks either. I won’t mind if Smore’s being handed parts like, say, lettuce left from a finished cheeseburger, a slice of pizza left with only its crust, God-knows-what. It doesn’t matter to me at all!”