Ruling 1581

Chapter 1581

Water quickly filled Shelly's eyes. Before the first tear broke, however, Mark groaned exasperatedly. "No, you stop that! Stop your tears! Now! It's not going to inspire mercy from me—hell, the longer I look, the more you disgust me. Don't bother wasting your acting chops on me! It was you who harmed Alejandro, wasn't it? What the hell are you going to do next, huh? Murder Arianne, isn't it, you psycho?! You don't belong anywhere other than a goddamned asylum, where you can get your lunacy mended!"

Shelly forced the rolling tears back into her eyes. "Y-Y-You're disappointed to see me here, aren't you?" she said, her voice trembling. "But I can assure you, it's not what you think! Not once has my body been defiled. I simply have nowhere to go, Mark. I have no money. This is only temporary, a quick fix. Do you…? Do you really think so little of me…?"

Mark's mind was so utterly ablaze that it fueled the curtness in his answer. "How about 'bloody yes?!' I wish you'd never tainted my life with your presence. I wish I never had an aunt like you! You want to continue keeping your secrets to yourself? Sure! I will happily let you go. In fact, from now on, consider yourself expelled from being my family, and don't fret with the hassle of talking to me ever again. And should I find you hurting a single hair on Arianne's head, so help me, you'll be a dead woman in no time. My life is mine to live—so you keep the f**k out of it!"

The pupils in Shelly's eyes dilated. Mark's words stung.

Tears marred the makeup around her eyes, making her look positively pathetic.

Then, suddenly, she chortled.

“You’re right. You’re utterly right. Who am I to meddle in the affairs of your life? I haven’t raised you all your life, have I? But I never wanted to abandon you. No, you don’t know a fraction of my bedeviled life, Mark,” she said. “Yes, I staged the accident that happened at the show venue. I pretended to be disabled by the incident because I wanted to stay… with you. I have no leg to stand on as your unimportant maternal aunt, so the only way you would willingly let me stay is if you felt indebted to me. Only through guilt would you feel obliged to care of me.

“I didn’t have the courage to divulge the secrets bottled inside me because… Because I worry that you will break at the end of it. All I care about is you, Mark. I don’t want the truth to take that away from you. Your wellbeing is the lone reason I need to swallow all of the pains in my life quietly. I don’t care if I’ll be tortured by ’em for ten years or twenty years or even the entirety of my life. But I can’t endure these without you, Mark… I need you. Desperately. Only when I’m by your side will I ever feel a glimpse of life in this corpse I’ve come to inhabit. I’ve waited for this day for so long… So, so long…”

Mark could see it—the harbingering shape of a world-upending secret, now at the cusp of unravelling. He wanted to turn away, and yet the most morbid of his curiosity compelled him.

In the end, he let Shelly continue, knowing full well that the hideous truth was upon him. “There’s only the two of us here. If you want to say something, then say it now. It’s long past the time to overthink,” he replied.

Shelly looked out of the car window. It had blocked all of New City’s white-hot revelry from seeping into the car’s interior—and her gelid heart.

“My sister was infertile,” she began. “She knew she was losing your father, so in a desperate act to beleaguer her position, she returned to live with us, her original family, for a long time. It happened before your birth. That was when she convinced me… She convinced me to act as a surrogate mother to her child. And that child? It was you.”

Mark stilled. He was no different from Alejandro, then. He was not a legitimate scion of the Tremonts, was he?

Shelly took in his reaction and quickly clarified. “No, you have genuine Tremont blood in your veins. You’re not a son of some random stranger and me. You see, my oh-so-considerate sister had meticulously planned it such that at the end of the day, I was the one laying on her husband’s bed. But I didn’t care for the Tremonts’ wealth or your father’s love; I wanted no part in it. But your mother… She begged and begged me like a woman possessed, and when pleas did not work, she resorted to castigating me, calling me self-centered and heartless to forfeit my help when she needed it the most, raving about how she could not live without your father’s love. Your grandmother was alive back then and was in cahoots; they could not bear the idea of the Tremonts’ wealth slipping through their fingers. Neither could my mother bear to see my sister living like a walking corpse eking by the days, especially since she had sacrificed too much for that man. So, they forced me. They made me take part in that unbelievable, outlandish scheme.

“Everything worked just as my sister had planned. She drugged your father, who knew not a lick about this. He thought he had had sex with a B-girl by accident. Of course, some stranger seized that confusion and dissembled herself as this ‘unfortunate B-girl’, and ironically? It worked to that hag’s favor because they soon had a son afterward, who grew up to become that bastard who survived to this day. My sister had exhausted all of her wits to her most deplorable end, and yet she still couldn’t win the heart of a genuine piece of sh*t.

“After I was pregnant with you, my sister stayed at home, watching my every move, frightful that any regret I bore would turn me to abort you. She had rejected your father’s repeated attempts to visit her because she was supposed to feign nurturing her non-existent baby. All that happened while I was just a young, unwed girl who could not possibly appear in public after getting myself knocked up, so they caged me at home all the way until you were born.

“That moment when you arrived, my water broke in the middle of the night. Afraid to have anyone seen me like this, they refused to get me to the hospital,” she said. “Every now and then when my mind revisits that fateful night, it still terrorizes me. I was so close, Mark. I was a hair away from death.”

Chapter 1582

Shelly seemed to have reached a point where she balked at recounting her past. Her voice, thick and strained, had broken into a series of unintelligible croaks complementing the anguish in her face.

Mark curled his fingers into fists and gritted his teeth. “Go on.”

Shelly waited, letting the brunt of her emotional turmoil pass, before continuing.

After the labor was over, she took a glance at her baby boy.

In a snap, all the repulsion and the feeling of defilement left her completely. Women may experience a profound change of heart the moment they claim motherhood, and Shelly emerged from her experience a mother who could not bear to part with her son.

Suddenly, she refused to let her sister take her child away.

To stem unwanted developments from this incident, Shelly’s sister took the baby back home the next day. The baby was then christened as Mark Tremont.

Never had Shelly ever imagined that her sister would one day be so utterly possessed by a man that she saw her own little sister as nothing more than a baby-pumping machine. She forbade Shelly from seeing the child and even gave her a sum of money, calling it her compensation.

That was when the seeds of unassailable malice were planted within her. The world was cruel—monstrous.

She had snuck onto the Tremont Estate several times, however, and so, out of fear of the whole thing being exposed, her sister orchestrated Shelly's arranged marriage to a lad abroad. She was to never come back, never to see her son ever again.

She, a young girl who had never traveled beyond the city of her origin, was then dumped smack-dab in a country so alien to her that she spoke not their language. Every day she faced a stranger whom she knew nothing next to being her husband. Naturally, she came down with a long case of depression and was sent for treatment.

In the beginning, her husband had been big-hearted. He was a rich, gentle, kind, and handsome German, who magnanimously accompanied Shelly through her depression and helped ease her into her new life.

But hearts are easily broken than mended regardless of efforts. Shelly could not forget the child that had been with her for a single night. When she slept and dreamt, they were of returning home and reclaiming her son.

She could not love her husband, let alone nurture a life out of this union.

Perhaps it was more accurate and truer to say that Shelly never did recover from her fragmented psyche. Years passed, and she drove herself deeper and deeper into lunacy enabled by obsessions—and she dragged her husband into madness along with her. Seven times she was pregnant, and the number of abortions she made were equal in number.

None of it beat the last, most gruesome one. Her husband, desperate to have the child nurtured, imprisoned Shelly at home. In response, she defied his wish forever with a flick of a knife and a critical slash through her abdomen.

She lost the child—along with all the other ones she could have had in the future.

Chapter 1583

Years of care and dedication had not awarded the man any reciprocation. It was only a matter of time before her husband wore out his senses and devolved into the same unstable mess that Shelly was. He started drinking hard and physically abusing her when prompted by liquid courage.

Shelly thought that receiving his abuses was the only way to get even with what she owed him. She forgave him every time.

When the alcohol passed, the man's sobriety would be marked with tears of guilt as he gawked at the bruises all over Shelly's body. He would always throw in an equal-part apology and equal-part relentless inquisition. He could not stop asking why Shelly refused to love him, and why she balked at bearing him a progeny.

And Shelly would always reply, "Because you remind me of my sister. I'm only your wife because she arranged my life that way; you're a cage she's prepared for me. I want to go home—my home, where my son is! I hate them… I hate them all. I want them all dead!"

For the past thirty-odd years in her life, Shelly lived like a prisoner exiled to a foreign soil, bereft of a chance to go home. Her life's purpose was to be used as a prop for her sister. But her husband had tacitly allowed Shelly to return to America once or twice to see Mark, hence those few short visits he remembered during his elementary school years.

Shelly had tried hard to slip under her sister's radar, but ultimately, Mrs. Tremont found out about it. In retaliation, Mrs. Tremont threatened her husband somewhat, forcing him to take her away and forbade her from returning to the country.

By then, the feelings her hapless husband had harbored toward Shelly also began to mutate. Her role as the center of his universe began to wane, and he stopped tormenting her the way she tormented him. He started spending his time and devotion completely on alcohol and other hedonistic indulgences, and yet he could not let Shelly leave, either.

In the end, the only thing left between them was mutual hatred… and a dash of Shelly's regret for subjecting her husband through hell.

Still, not even regret could stop Shelly from murdering her husband—the man whose reward for cherishing her was to be tortured into insanity. As the days passed, Shelly's obsession with returning home redoubled. She disregarded everything but her singular goal and began to lace her husband's food with slow-building poison.

Day by day, she watched his body wither, and when life finally escaped him, Shelly immediately flew to America and back to Mark's side.

To sever her ties with everything in the past and completely escape the shadow that had loomed over her, Shelly forfeited her husband's handsome inheritance. Seeing whatever he had left for her would only serve to remind Shelly of all that had happened.

As her account drew to an end, Mark rolled down the window and lit up a smoke. His hand was shaking so much that holding the cigarette became a challenge.

He had been his “aunt’s” son all along. The mother for whom he had stubbornly reserved an unsullied impression in his heart had committed such an inhumane, culpable act! She had imprisoned her own sister for so long!

If the truth was as Shelly recounted, then everything finally made sense. It was hardly a surprise that a woman who had worked so obsessively hard to return to his side would perform so many extreme, erratic acts. It was a tough pill to swallow, yet Mark could not hate Shelly for all that she had done.

Perhaps Shelly-Ann Leigh was the most deserving of sympathy out of everyone else…

For a long time, Mark said nothing; he was hard-pressed to say anything. The truth had sapped him of his strength. But no matter how hard he wished whatever Shelly said was untrue, wishes could never bend reality.

The silence lingered for a very long time until Shelly broke the spell with a delirious smile. “To be honest, my vengeance had been exacted a long time ago. What’s left in me was pure obsession to return to you,” she admitted. “Since we’ve opened this can of worms, then there’s no reason to fear letting you know even more, yes? You remember that plane tragedy? I was the one who convinced my sister to go through with it.

“She had gotten afflicted with an incurable disease by then, and amid her despair, she suddenly thought of reconnecting with me, of all people! It turned out that she had no one else to pour her heart out to, you know; what a poor, pathetic thing. She had bawled over the phone, and all her angst concerned you—she spoke as though you were her actual, biological son. Couldn’t calm herself from the fear of that bastard son stealing away what she thought belonged to you alone.

“So? I gave her an idea. She couldn’t stomach the thought of another woman taking over her role after she died, could she? Couldn’t stand the thought of that slut marshaling her lil’ bastard into contesting for that Tremont inheritance, could she? I told her that if she lost her man’s heart to some slut out there while she was alive, then she should take his heart with her to the afterlife. Oh, who knew she would really buy it?” Shelly continued. “When I first heard of her death, I was surprised to find a lick of sorrow in me. But oh, it couldn’t compare to the giddy thrill of revenge at all! She tormented me for years, and in the end, she didn’t earn a single happy ending herself.”

It did not matter if Shelly was talking about the real circumstances of Mark’s birth or anything else. Every revelation he heard these few hours had been a blow to his head.

Chapter 1584

It was too much for his mind to digest.

Time crawled into the wee hours. Mark drove Shelly to a hotel owned by Tremont Enterprise for her accommodation.

“This is where you’ll stay for today. Tomorrow, I’ll have Brian move your things to you,” he said before he left. “I’ll arrange lodging for you in the hopes that… you never meddle into my life ever again. The truth is, I never wanted you to appear.”

Shelly opened her mouth, but whatever she wanted to say never came. All there was left to her answer were the tears that refused to stop streaming down her cheeks.

Mark returned to the Tremont Estate. Instead of entering his bedroom, however, he retreated straight into his study.

The house was in still silence, and none of Mark's movements broke it. He forfeited turning on the lights but sank into his chair, spreading his long, lean legs wide while dropping his arms tiredly at either side. Right now, this laidback posture was the only means he had to keep his cool and sense afloat.

He kept asking himself if there was anything that made him different from Ethan Connor. After spending his life frowning at his brother's illegitimacy, it turned out that he was a bastard himself all along!

Mark had a nagging feeling that his father might have already known the lengths his mother had gone to in the shadows. Father might have chosen not to expose her, but he was still disappointed, and that was why he continued his relationship with Ethan's mother. A few years later, that relationship bore Ethan.

The sudden croak of a door pushing open grated jarringly against the silence of the night.

Arianne stood by the doorframe. Weak lights from the corridor outside launched her elongated shadow into the unlit study. She was not sure if Mark had returned home or not, but she did catch some murmurs of movements a few moments earlier. Arianne would not go to sleep before Mark was home.

Searching eyes found Mark's silhouette shrouded in the darkness, and she quickly hurried forward. "Why aren't you heading straight to bed after coming back, huh? Did you manage to locate Aunt Shelly? Or was there no lead at all?" she asked.

Mark pressed his lips into a thin line, unsure of what to say. Every muscle in his body revolted against the idea of breaking the truth to Arianne because he just could not fathom letting anyone know—

When Arianne finally saw how utterly despondent Mark was, she was shocked into thinking that something terrible must have befallen Shelly. Gingerly, she crouched close to him, resting her upper body on his lap.

“Mark, dear, did… Did something happen to Aunt Shelly? Please don’t bottle things up to yourself, okay? Talk to me.”

Mark ruffled her hair mechanically. “It’s nothing. Just… having a bad mood, that’s all. I would like to be left alone for the moment, please. Don’t fret about me; go to sleep.”

Even the most intimate couple may need to grant their partner some personal space every now and then. Despite her anxieties, Arianne obliged to his request and left the man alone.

The next morning, Arianne woke up to find Mark already gone.

Mary informed her that he left with Brian early that day, but Arianne noticed the marked hesitancy in the housekeeper’s manner. She found it strange and pursued it, but Mary refused to be forthcoming, citing an order from Mark that banned her from explaining outright.

Chapter 1585

The more Mary acted this way, the more uncanny everything felt. Then, Arianne examined the entire house and found that every single one of Shelly’s belongings—her suitcase and other things—were gone. Someone even drove her car out of the garage.

There were only two possible explanations for this. Maybe Shelly was found and Mark sent her somewhere else to stay, so all of her things were transferred away. Alternatively, Shelly was dead, and a grieving Mark could not bear to look at the things she left.

Arianne was more inclined to believe the former than the latter. Shelly might be a little loco in the head, but she was not delirious. In fact, she had proven herself to be quite clever and lucid. A woman like that just didn't seem the type to accidentally kill herself just because she'd ventured into the world on her own for a few days. But if that were the case, then why would Mark hide that information from Arianne? Why would he refuse to say anything?

Arianne decided to feign ignorance. Since she had sold off much of the real estate owned by the company after the shipwreck tragedy, she was sure that Shelly had no place ready for her right away. In other words, if Mark wanted to provide his aunt with lodging, then he would need to make a hefty purchase. Then, Arianne could seize on the "abnormal amount of spending" as a chance to ask him where the money was going.

Throughout the next few days, Mark always left the house at daybreak and returned home late at night. He also ceased mentioning Shelly completely and began to feign a veneer of normalcy in his daily life.

It did not work, of course, because everyone could tell that something was off.

Arianne didn't get the chance to interrogate him, especially since he always returned after she had fallen asleep and left the house before she rose. He never appeared in his office, either—his daily whereabouts simply became a mystery.

His absence had become so obvious that one day, even Smore piped up, "What's Daddy up to?"

Arianne had no answer, so she defaulted to haphazard fibs, assuring the little boy that his father was merely working extra hard to prepare for Smore's birthday present.

A week passed, and Arianne finally found a new spike in expenses while reviewing the company's account. When asked, the finance department explained that the expenses were for Mark's personal reasons, with none of it being related to company affairs.

More accurately, the money was used to purchase a unit in a luxury condominium famous for its spectacular location and environment. Every unit there was outfitted with high-class amenities, hence they were regarded as luxury homes one could immediately live in after purchase.

Arianne had wanted to ask Mark directly about it, but the man kept avoiding her. After some musing, she decided to go straight to the den herself—but not without dragging Robin along as her companion, of course. Truthfully, Arianne was too disconcerted by the mystery to go there alone.

Why did Mark not let Shelly continue her much-needed psychological treatment, or let her stay in the Tremont Estate? Why give her a place to stay outside? What exactly happened that caused Mark to be so… weird?

The duo quickly reached the foot of the condominium, where Robin voiced her apprehension out loud. "Um, Arianne, you don't think we can get in without being a resident here, right? This is, like, some high-class area for high-class people, right? Their security is bound to be super tight…"

Arianne's lips thinned as she tried to recall the floor of the purchased unit before replying, "It'll be fine. All I have to tell them is that I'm the owner of one of the units here. Mark bought it, didn't he? And I'm his wife. That makes it my property too… technically."

Still, their entry was not easy. The guards were acutely aware that Arianne and Robin were strangers, so their interrogation had been a long, meticulous one. Finally, after matching their information, the guards let them in.

Immediately upon arriving at the targeted floor, Arianne pressed the bell. A minute or so passed before the door finally opened.

Just as Arianne imagined, it was Shelly-Ann Leigh.

Her bemusement at Arianne's presence paled in comparison to Arianne's, who was downright bamboozled by how… well and normal Shelly's leg was. Shelly was practically the very opposite of being crippled, just as Arianne had sneakily suspected.

Chapter 1586

Robin, too, was utterly flummoxed. Shelly's heroic tale of rescuing Mark at the cost of her leg was well-known in the office. But here Robin was, staring at Shelly's decidedly not-lame leg and feeling really lost.

Shelly recovered quickly. "Come in," she said with a placid flair, as though nothing earth-shattering had happened at all.

Arianne had to give props to the unit Mark had bought for Shelly. A wide, roomy corridor led from the entrance to a living room furnished and designed to invoke the feeling of wholesomeness and the hearth. The open-concept kitchen seemed European-inspired. The large French windows in the living room allowed one to overlook the bustling city streets outside.

Shelly poured two cups of water for them. “And here I thought Mark would rather keep all of this from you.”

“Oh, he tried,” Arianne replied flatly, taking the cup. “For that, he even started avoiding me these past few days. I managed to find out about him purchasing a unit in this condominium by myself, though, and I guessed it was for you, so I came here today to see for myself. He came home very late that fateful night, you know. Looked completely out of sorts. I bet that was the day when he finally found you, wasn’t it? So, are you gonna tell me what the heck is going on? And why is your leg…?”

Hearing how Mark had shielded the truth from Arianne invoked a flitting sense of disappointment in Shelly’s eyes. Mark had decided that the true circumstances of his birth were too shameful to be shared with the world, she realized, and so he spurned at mentioning it to anyone, even his beloved wife.

“What you see right now is what it is. My leg is fine,” she said. “I lied… But of course, you already knew that. Just like how you know that the runway disaster was self-orchestrated. Weren’t you playing detective?”

Arianne felt not a lick of guilt. “Damn straight I did. How else would we have known you’re behind all of it, hmm? But that’s not all there is to it—you’re Alejandro’s assailant too, aren’t you? What the hell are you trying to achieve? Just what on Earth happened after Mark found you?”

Shelly had no intention of recounting all that she had told Mark to Arianne. “Everything that needs to be said has been said to Mark, sweetie. If you’re itching to know, then ask him,” she rejoined. “I’ll let you in

on this much, though. I don't just dream of Alejandro Smith's extermination—I also dream of yours. Sadly, I can't make it happen, can I? Not when you're too disproportionately important in dear Mark's heart, and I can't bring myself to see him upset. I've finally put down the heavy baggage hanging on my neck for years, Arianne. Now, I feel liberated.

"I don't intend to kick up any more storms from now on, so you can relax those tense shoulders of yours. But in this same confident breath, I can tell you that I'm never, ever leaving Mark, too. I'll plant myself in this city like a tree and forever watch over him. And anyone who thinks of hurting him… Well, my wrath cannot be relieved so easily."

It was a palpable warning waged at Arianne, who knew that Shelly still saw her and Alejandro as threats to Mark's wellbeing. Again, Arianne needed to clarify herself.

"That warning's uncalled for. Alejandro will never scheme to harm Mark or claim Tremont Enterprise for himself, and I have even less reason to do that. Honestly, what intrigues me the most is whatever event that has stripped you off the basic ability to trust anyone. Seriously, are grudges really that important in your worldview? I mean, sure, you have the choice to spend your life wallowing about your woes and your hatred, or… You could just live, carefree and happy. So, why do you insist on the tormented way of living?"

It was brief, but Shelly's eyes turned glassy. "No one knows better than I do about how impossible it is for anyone to let go of their bitter resentment," she murmured. "Love could be fickle, ephemeral. But hate definitely outlasts love. No love can stand the trial of time and not wither, but hate is steadfast. Unceasing. Dies only with the beholder's death. Yes, only then…"

Arianne texted Mark once they were outside the condominium. 'I met your aunt.'

“Um, Arianne? Are we going back to the office now?” Robin asked gingerly. “Er, just to assure you… I won’t say a thing about the, um, your family affairs to anyone.”

Chapter 1587

Arianne gave Robin a sweet smile. “I trust you. You know what they say, ‘don’t air your dirty laundry in public’, so let’s not air mine out, alright? Anyway, come on. We gotta get back to the office now. We’re technically playing hooky by being here at work hours.”

Soon after the two returned to Tremont Tower while Arianne crossed into her workstation, Sylvain halted her with news. “Mr. Tremont came back a while ago; dude’s been looking for you. Since you weren’t around, he asked me to tell you to meet him in his office when you’re back,” he said. “Er, heads-up? He looks kinda pissed. You guys… aren’t fighting again, are you?”

Arianne pouted. “We weren’t, but God knows if that’s going to last for long. Anyway, I’ll go now.”

What if Mark was reluctant to have Arianne visit Shelly? Maybe this would become the fuse that started a new fight between them.

Before she entered Mark’s office, she knocked politely, pushing the door open only after hearing Mark’s vocal invitation from inside. Seeing how much she followed the rules stunned Davy into a still, as though he was watching pigs fly.

Arianne stood erect before Mark’s desk and asked aloud, “You were looking for me, Mr. Tremont?”

Mark raised his eyes to meet hers, perplexed. “Did you bonk your head against a wall this morning? You sent me a message, remember? Was it not a request to get me to see you?”

She smiled. “No, no head injury whatsoever. You must be upset that I’ve visited your aunt, right? But really, what about it needs hiding, hmm? Maybe you’re the one who should explain why you’ve kept avoiding me these past few days. We live in the same house, but I hardly see you around anymore. Come on, fess up. Being candid helps more than it hurts.”

Mark’s eyes bore through her for a while before he tentatively asked, “Did Aunt Shelly, well, say anything to you?”

Arianne knew he was trying to gauge how much she knew, but she was disinclined to turn Mark’s attempt on its head and lure him into exposing his story. She did not want to force him to say anything against his will.

“Honestly, I tried to get her to tell me anything, but she told me to ask you instead. She said she told you everything that needed to be said already. So, what the hell happened between the two of you? Is she really… well, sane enough to forfeit treatments? She actually looked and acted kind of normal just before.”

Mark sighed a breath of relief. “No, nothing happened between us. She doesn’t need to get treatment in a hospital, either, because the root of her erratic action’s gone. She’s… She’s only acting the way she did because she bottled up too much turmoil inside of her,” he explained. “I’d appreciate it if you stop pursuing this question. Also, you misconstrued my busy schedule as me avoiding you, Ari. Either way, you should get back to work. I’ll be home very late today, so don’t wait for me when work is over.”

He was strangely adamant about keeping his secret, Arianne observed helplessly. He did not even think Shelly faking her disability was something he should explain, did he? Though his reluctance to dwell on that could also be excused by being an issue that was too personally distressing to Mark, she reasoned.

The man in question had returned to burying himself into his documents with a straight face, which crossed Arianne a little. He used to throw himself at her any moment he could in the past! And now, Arianne was the one who had to search high and low for an audience with him.

That evening, after work, Arianne procured some medicinal supplements and visited the Smith manor.

Since Shelly was the culprit who assaulted Alejandro that day, Mark ought to take responsibility for it and express some sort of regret—he could, after all, be incarcerated if Alejandro ended up choosing to bring it to the law. But Arianne knew Mark could not let go of his ego to apologize to his half-brother, so she would have to do it in his stead.

Not that she worried that Alejandro would be petty enough to report Mark, of course.

She stepped into the yard and found only Melanie and her daughter. Alejandro was absent.

Melanie stared at the heavy, packed bags she carried with her, puzzled. “Arianne? What are you doing? That’s a lot of things for someone who just came to say hi.”

Arianne placed everything down in one heave before swinging her sore, tired hands. “Heck, I was actually scared that I didn’t buy enough! I’m here to apologize for the trouble Alejandro had gone through on behalf of a certain guy who can’t lower his pride enough to do it himself. Say, where’s Alejandro? He isn’t home?”

Chapter 1588

Melanie mused on her words and instantly came to an understanding. “Um, he’s upstairs. Still recuperating, I’m afraid, so he’s technically a homebody these days. Come, I’ll show you the way.”

She brought Arianne to Alejandro’s room upstairs to see him. Immediately, Arianne put on her most guilt-ridden exterior and muttered, “Hi, Alejandro. You’re not critically wounded, are you? I’m really, really, reeeeally sorry about what happened.”

From his chair, Alejandro briefly considered her before looking back down at his phone. “Please stop. You’re weirding me out. Look at your expression and tone—it’s like one of those solemn Japanese pleas for forgiveness,” he replied. “You weren’t the one who stabbed me, anyway, so if I’m demanding apologies, pretty sure I want to hear them from Mark or his sweet, beloved aunt. The hell’s that got to do with you?”

Arianne laughed awkwardly. “As you already know… that isn’t going to happen anytime soon. Look at me. I’m the only one who ended up here… alone. Mark is so frickin’ thin-skinned, he can’t bear to apologize even if he knows he’s in the wrong; you know what he’s like! Though, to be fair, his aunt didn’t exactly ask him about the pros and cons of stabbing you before she did it—”

“As if his aunt would have done anything if it wasn’t ‘for Mark’s sake.’” Alejandro considered Arianne after turning his phone to sleep, unfazed. “Bah, whatever. I don’t plan to do anything about it anyway. It’s a small, skin-deep wound already on its way to healing. And also, you being a tryhard at apologizing is just creeping me out on so many levels. You suck at it. Sincerely, stop.”

Alejandro’s answer was very reassuring to Arianne. She decided to have her dinner with the Smiths that evening.

Although Melanie grew up as Little Miss Lark who never needed to dabble in house chores, she proved herself exceptionally competent in homemaking since her union with Alejandro. The Smith manor used to be wanting the cozy air of hearth, but now, even the pillows on the couch had Melanie's preferential touch to it.

Millie had been unruly throughout dinner by shouting about wanting to come down from her baby chair. Immediately after her feet hit the ground, though, she charged toward Alejandro with full speed.

"Goddam—Millie!" Alejandro paled, extending his hand forward to keep the girl away from him. "Don't come any closer you lil'…! Remember the last time your shenanigans ripped your old man's wound open? You're planning a patricide or what? Shoo! Go run to your mom instead!"

Unfortunately, the more he resisted, the more mulish Millie was in tackling him.

Initially, Melanie let it play out without intervention since she enjoyed watching Millie bonding with her father. Eventually, her worries about Alejandro's wound reopening caught on, so she began to chide her. "Millie, you come to me right now, young lady! If you insist on being naughty, Mommy's gonna keep your favorite toys from you!"

Millie stared at Melanie, lips pursed, tears at the ready as though she was going to bawl any minute now. She looked positively upset.

Alejandro's eyebrows furrowed a second before he scooped the girl up into his embrace. "Okay, okay! There, there, no crying. Jesus, I don't have a choice, do I?… Well, what would you like to eat? Pops can grab 'em for you."

Melanie rolled her eyes. One minute he was complaining about her daughter clinging onto him, and in the next, he pulled her into him anyway. It was like he was deliberately making Melanie the nasty parent here.

A grin crept onto Arianne's lips as she watched. Ever since he let go of an impossibility like Tiffany, Alejandro's marital life with Melanie had been nothing but rewarding and happy. It proved that there was always a special someone for anyone under the sun, and that sometimes, giving up—instead of clinging—bettered one's life rather than making it worse.

Melanie spied Arianne smiling and asked, "What, Arianne?"

She shook her head. "Oh, nothing. Was just delighted at how great everything's turning out for you guys. I mean, look at Millie! She's adorable! She's inherited the best of her parents' genes. I bet she'll grow up to be a gorgeous young lady!"

Chapter 1589

Complimenting someone's child for their good looks was a surefire way to delight their parents. Beaming, Melanie regarded her daughter for a good long while before remarking, "Millie's a lil' cinnamon roll, alright, but only her lips seem to have come from me. Other features came from someone else… I wonder, are those from Alex's old look?"

Instinctively, Arianne stole a spying glance at Alejandro. He was feeding Millie with his head lowered close to the girl, having appeared to miss the women's conversation. Of course, that was an affectation. Anyone huddling around the dinner table definitely heard them.

Melanie was aware that it was a sensitive topic to tread, but her curiosity over Alejandro's past look—when he was Ethan—overtook her. Hence, she followed up with the question. "Alex, do you have your old photos with you? I, um, would love to see them—"

"No," he rebuffed flatly.

Arianne furtively tugged on Melanie's sleeve and shot her a meaningful glance.

After the dinner, Arianne and Melanie were left alone in a room upstairs. Arianne managed to dig up one of Ethan's old photos. It was captured a few years ago, some time around their graduation.

Ethan had carried an air of a young man still wet around his ears, but his natural handsomeness still managed to shine, with some of his features even echoing Mark's. One could tell that Little Millie's look had borrowed much from Ethan's original appearance, but since her father had altered his face to resemble Alejandro, Mark ended up the person whom Millie seemed to take the most after.

Melanie's eyes were nailed to the photo. "So, Millie does take after him, huh? Honestly, he looked a lot hotter as himself than as Alejandro," she commented, before asking, "Arianne, can you send this to me? I'd like to keep a copy."

Arianne nodded and obliged. It was then that the observant woman noticed a curious detail and piped up, "Hold on. Was there a woman wrapping her arm around his shoulder?"

Arianne turned a little bashful. Truthfully, this photo was cropped from an original picture featuring Ethan and Tiffany; though she remembered to cut away Tiffie in entirety, she had forgotten about the arm that remained.

“Well! It’s, uh, probably one of our old classmates. But this is a really old photo, so I kind of don’t remember who the other person is…? B-But if you don’t like seeing this disembodied arm around, I could always rummage through my albums and see if there are some other ones,” Arianne quickly replied. “We graduated from the same institution, so there should be plenty more to choose from.”

Melanie, perspicacious as always, instantly caught on. “Nah, I love it,” she said reassuringly. “I mean, he looks downright dreamy here. You don’t have to find new ones, Arianne. This one’s perfect.”

Arianne let out a shoddy breath. “T-That’s great!… Oh, would you look at the time! I gotta’ go.”

“I’ll drive,” her friend offered hurriedly. “It’s not like I have anything else to do at the moment. Alex is recuperating, but he isn’t exactly bedridden, either. He can take care of Millie for me. Oh, just imagine—we’ll be able to chat along the way! Jeez, d’you know how bored I am at home? Trying to carry a conversation with you-know-who is like having tea with a brick wall.”

The way back to Tremont Estate was fraught with Melanie bombarding Arianne with relentless questions about Ethan. Arianne was keen to sate Melanie’s curiosity, but she also had to constantly filter her answers, thus making the entire conversation a slog. It was so taxing to be alert and mindful of every word she said all the time during a casual chat with her friend. Plain restrictive, too.

Finally, they reached the Tremont Estate. Arianne could not help but breathe a sigh of relief as soon as she got out of the car.

“Thanks for the ride, Melanie. Be careful while on the road,” she said. “We should hang out again sometime, like a meal or something. How’s that sound?”

Melanie agreed immediately. “Count me in! Let’s get Tiffany onboard too, alright? I heard how tight Jackson’s watching her these days. I can only imagine how bored out of her wits she must be.”

Arianne affirmed her suggestion with a chuckle. She watched Melanie’s car vanish into the distance before finally turning back into the house.

She could not help but admire Melanie’s forgiving nature. She might not even be able to befriend Mark’s ex the way Melanie did if Arianne were in her shoes.

That night, Mark came home as late as he had said. By the time he was back, it was already the wee hours of the morning.

Chapter 1590

Thirst roused Arianne from her sleep. She went downstairs to grab some water and chanced upon Mark walking through the main door.

“What kept you till this late at night, hmm?” she asked from her spot by the stairs with the cup in her hand. “Look at the time, Mark. Even club-goers would have been home by now, I’m sure.”

Abject exhaustion shadowed his mien. “As it turned out, the wound on her leg hadn’t fully recovered yet when she decided to run away and kicked up a world of troubles,” he explained. “A minor surgery had to be performed today in the hospital to prevent sequelae. But, of course, that’s neither here nor there. Are you up because you haven’t slept yet, or did you just wake up?”

By “she” and “her, Mark obviously meant Shelly. It made Arianne wonder why he could not just refer to her as “Aunt Shelly” like he used to, though it was an inquiry she decided not to voice. The last thing she wanted was for Mark to think she was spoiling for a fight.

“Of course, I woke up from sleep. What, you think I put on my beauty sleep just to wait for your return? Not happening,” she quipped. “Anyway, have you hired anyone to look after Aunt Shelly? I’d imagine that after the surgery, she’s gonna be very much inconvenienced in her daily life.”

Mark seemed to balk at mentioning anything about Shelly. “Look, that’s already within my consideration, okay? Just go back to sleep, Ari. I’m heading for a shower,” he said. “Oh, and one other thing. You don’t need to look after her or visit her from now on, alright? Just pretend… Just pretend that she doesn’t exist.”

That stunned Arianne. “What… what’s that supposed to mean? How—uh, why are we pretending that? She’s your aunt! Unless… you think if I see her enough, she’s gonna tell me something big—something you don’t want me to know?”

Mark offered no rebuttals, only silence. It was the kind that implied consent.

What Arianne described was exactly what he feared the most right now. He could not bear the idea of a single soul knowing anything about his truth...

Arianne pressed her lips into a thin, quiet line and watched Mark stride past her. She had to will herself to press back the furor his silence had spurred in her mind.

She was dangerously tempted to ask him why whatever-this-news-was had to be forbidden to her, and yet the other part of her worried that she would accidentally push his button if she hounded him, causing a war to break out.

After that, neither spoke a thing to the other for the rest of the night.

The next morning, Arianne woke up to find that, again, Mark had left. At least this time, he left Brian back home to take her to work.

“He’s gone awfully early today. Is he heading to the hospital?” she asked Brian in the car.

“I dunno,” the man replied noncommittally. “He definitely doesn’t tell me where he’s going. I’m just a humble driver, you know.”

Arianne knew Brian was just keeping his boss’s secrets. Mark must have warned him not to let slip of his whereabouts, which meant that no further questioning would yield answers.

The first thing she saw after reaching her desk in the office was a box of exquisitely-made desserts and a cup of coffee. She was not the only one with the mysterious gift, though, because a similar set was sitting atop Sylvain’s desk too.

At first, Arianne thought these were Robin’s gifts. Then, she examined the packaging and realized that the desserts and coffee were both branded and rather expensive. It begged the question of why the normally scrimping Robin would buy something outside her usual purchasing power.

She was still in the midst of speculations when Sylvain strode toward her as though he, too, had just arrived at the office. He looked at the gift on his desk, and a skeptical look crossed onto his face. “Yo, Arianne. You’re exceptionally chipper this fine morning, You’re even buying your employee something nice for breakfast; that’s… weird. You wanna tell me what’s the good news?”

Arianne stared at him, her mind plunging back into a mist of questions. “Wait, you mean it wasn’t Robin?”

The confusion on Sylvain’s face deepened. “But she and I arrived together. It can’t be her.”

Two pairs of mystified eyes stayed linked for a long beat until Sylvain’s phone broke the spell.

His grimace made it clear that he was reluctant to answer it, but he did it anyway. “Hello? Yes, I’m here… Mom,” he began. “What? Please, I’m working, man.”