Ruling 1591

Chapter 1591

The office was quiet enough for Arianne to overhear Ursula from the other end. “Oh, I know you’re working, silly! Did you see the desserts and coffee I bought you? Bon appetite! I bought an extra set for Mrs. Tremont too. I sure hope she enjoys them!”

So, these were from Sylvain’s mother—and by her own admission, she had not bought anything for poor Robin.

It was a loaded gift to accept. Arianne felt like she finally understood the discomfort Robin felt whenever she was with Sylvain’s mother.

Sylvain set the desserts and coffee aside with a quick shove as soon as he hung up. “Goddamn it. It’s like she can’t just let peace be,” he murmured. “God knows why she decided to trespass here early in the morning. What, life’s not troublesome enough for her?”

Arianne thought for a moment. “I’m not used to having confectionery and coffee this early in the day, but Robin would probably appreciate them. I’m gonna give her mine,” she said. “Besides, we girls planned to have dinner and shopping together this late evening, and I want to invite her to join us, so you don’t have to wait for her after work. Melanie and Tiffany are going to be there, too. It’s time for sisters to gather.”

“Give her mine, ‘cause I ain’t touching it,” Sylvain said.

Arianne had no choice but to carry both sets of food all the way to the Strategy Department. As expected, the sweet-toothed Robin’s eyes practically sparkled when she saw them. “Gosh, Arianne,

you're the best! I woke up late today and skipped breakfast, you know. Sylvain stayed over at my place last night, so I was kinda-a-bit-maybe dreading to see my mom's stormy glower the first thing in the morning, so… yeah. You know what my mom's like, right?"

A smile broke out on Arianne's face. "Forget that; Sylvain slept over at your place last night? Hmm. No wonder he didn't know his mom showed up in the office this morning. She brought these desserts and coffee here, and then called Sylvain to tell him to pass them to you."

Robin was pleasantly shocked. "W-Wait, really? She said that?"

Arianne nodded. "Of course! You're her daughter-in-law. At the end of the day, she can't possibly have the heart to treat her daughter-in-law too unkindly. People of older generations are like that—they like to sound meaner than they really are, all tough-love and everything. We newer gens just gotta' be as less of a snowflake as we can, right? Anyway, me and the girls are gonna have dinner together later this evening; just you, me, and our two other friends. So, remember to wait for me after work later, okay?… That's all. Enjoy your breakfast. I gotta get back to work."

As naïve and guileless as ever, it never once occurred to Robin that Arianne might have dissembled the truth. As a matter of fact, Robin was already quietly overjoyed over the thought that Ursula had never hated her as much as she thought.

When work was over, Arianne and Robin hailed an uber to the chosen restaurant. No sooner had the two of them arrived at the entrance than they noticed two cars tearing through the asphalt from opposite directions before they both pulled over by the sidewalk. Tiffany and Melanie emerged from each of the cars before turning to face the respective drivers, presumably to bid them farewell.

'These two had personal drivers!' Arianne and Robin thought in unison, feeling a little bummed that they had to uber instead.

Jackson espied Alejandro's car at a distance and snorted in contempt. "Call me whenever you're done, Tiffie. I'll pick you up."

The woman in question straightened her several-months-old pregnant belly and intoned, "Yeah, yeah, whatever. You can go plunging back to work now, hon. I ain't holding you back."

Now reunited, the women sauntered into the establishment where Arianne asked Melanie, "Isn't Alejandro currently recuperating? Why did he drive?"

A sweet, beaming smile shadowed Melanie's lips. "Well! At the eleventh hour, he said he's got business he needs to attend to and so he's gonna give me a lift 'in the meantime.' I told him, mind you, that he didn't need to, but he went and ranted about how hailing uber is a waste of money. Welp, guess I lost that debate."

Chapter 1592

Tiffany leaped straight into her commentary. "Puh-lease. I didn't even know he's that big of a cheapskate since way back. I mean, seriously? Bruh's mad over uber prices?"

The corner of Arianne's lips twitched. Sure, pregnancy could dull a woman's wits for at least up to two years after childbirth, but in Tiffany's case? She was probably slated to be this dense for at least six years. How did Tiffany miss Melanie's obvious act of flaunting her relationship? How the heck did the girl listen to that and think Melanie was genuinely complaining about Alejandro being "miserly?"

Melanie, however, was very amused. "Well, maybe he's always been a big, fat cheapskate this whole time! Tee hee," she joked. "Anyway, we should probably start placing orders. Remember to tailor our

dishes according to Lady Tiffany's preferences, girls. Among a bevy of women, the pregnant one is queen."

Arianne could not stop herself from sharing about her woes with Shelly while the women dined. "So, girls, why do you think Mark's so… against telling me things? His aunt just went through this minor medical operation and he's forbidding me from visiting her. It's like… It's like he doesn't want me to meet his aunt for good, you know?"

Tiffany waved dismissively. "Girl, banning you from meeting her is a blessing, okay? You worked your bum off caring for that broad back when she was in the hospital for an entire month, but guess what happened? That's right. She didn't give a flying crap about how nice you were. So why so desperate to curry her favor, huh? Just see this as a way to keep your positive vibes with you, hon; it's not like that shrew's got no one taking care of her in your stead. And also, who cares if those two got secrets they don't want you to know about? As long as those secrets aren't causing your troubles, why bother? That's just so extra. Remember, ignorance is bliss. Mark likes to keep his little secrets from you? Sure, whatevs.

"Girl, you gotta start learning to be zen about these things. Watching you being a worrywart tires me out, for God's sake," she finished.

Arianne sighed. "But… That's not what I meant, though? What I was trying to say is that… Sigh, I just can't stand the idea of him hiding secrets from me like this. It's like, he thinks we aren't actually that close enough to know everything about one another. I feel left out…"

It was Melanie who addressed her this time. "Frankly, from what I observed, Mark is quite the aloof character, but he treats you as an exception. If he doesn't wanna talk to you about something, I'm sure he has his reasons. Tiffany's right, Arianne. Be more zen and worry less. When the time's right, he'll tell you of his own accord," she admonished. "It's similar to Alejandro and me. I don't like asking him about himself, but if he feels like telling me, I'd be happy to listen. If it's otherwise, that's fine for me too. I get that complete transparency and intimacy between husband and wife is great, but I can certainly see the merits in keeping a respectful berth between spouses, too."

Unfortunately, Arianne found her mind even more embroiled in anxiety despite their advice. She turned her attention to Robin, who had taken to retreating into her daydreams, sitting next to her and asked, “What about you? What do you think?”

Robin snapped out of her reveries with a blank, confused expression. “Huh? Me? Oh, er, I think, um… they both make sense!”

Dinner and a shopping spree later, Arianne went home with her hands full of bags by ten o’clock. Thinking that Smore was waiting for her, she had rushed home, her speed powered by a tinge of guilt.

What she did not expect was to find Smore already sleeping soundly in his room thanks to Mark, who returned home early that day. The father was no less adept at soothing his son into sleep by himself, after all.

Mark was reading in the living room when she came home. Arianne decided against asking about his day and ignored him altogether, carrying all of her bags upstairs.

Mark furrowed his eyebrows. He put down the book in his hand and followed her. “What’s wrong?”

She stood before their bed and began to unpack and sort her spoils. “Nothing. You will frown upon me asking you too many questions, won’t you? So, I’m not gonna. Talk about them or don’t; that’s your call. From now on, I won’t pester you by asking about your business. I won’t even ask what time you’ll come home,” she intoned. “If there’s anything you think I should be concerned about, tell me. Otherwise, keep it a secret for all I care. I’m happy to have less worries on my plate. Perfect bliss.”

No matter how he chose to interpret her, Mark could feel a hidden thorny jab aimed at him. He grabbed hold of her wrist and said, “Don’t, please. I came home early today. Are you still going to throw a tantrum despite that?”

She shrugged off his grip softly. “Don’t overthink this; it isn’t a tantrum. Can’t you tell that I’m trying to sort my stuff? Go and do whatever it is you’re supposed to do already. Buzz off.”

Chapter 1593

Instead of heeding her, Mark froze into place like a statue.

Arianne ignored him and turned her attention back to her stuff before taking a shower. She re-emerged after she was done to the sight of him sitting by the edge of their bed, his head hung and his mind lost in thoughts.

Emotions as nebulous as the fog shrouded his visage. It was hard to make out what could be on his mind.

She climbed into their bed and laid down. “Switch off the light, please. I’m going to sleep.”

He reached out to the bedside lamp and clicked it off. Amid the ensuing darkness, he said morosely, “I’m sorry. I don’t intend to keep secrets from you, but it’s just… I don’t know how to even say it. Many things have happened recently and I… I’m just so tired.”

Arianne closed her eyes, but sleep was leaving her. “I know you are, and I want to empathize with your anguish. But you’re not giving me the chance to do that at all, Mark. The only thing I can do is to listen. I want to help. I want to take up some of the burden on your shoulders, but God, when those things involve you and your aunt, I’m relegated to the role of an outsider! Do you know? She isn’t the only one ostracizing me—you’re doing the same thing, too. So now, I gave up on caring; I don’t even want to ask. But now you’re suddenly pulling off this weird… thing with me. You don’t happen to suspect I’m mad at you, right? ‘Cause don’t worry, I really am not. Again, I’m not the nosy type who wants to take up everyone’s problem and fix it. So, how about we agree to just focus on our separate domains and do our own thing, hmm?”

For the longest time, Mark offered only silence. Then, without breaking it, he rose and went out of their room—and straight out of the house.

Arianne listened to the sound of his car fading with distance, her sleep now utterly sapped. Where could he be going at this late of a time? Seeing Shelly again?

Mark sat on the bench outside Shelly’s ward in the hospital. After a while, he finally rose to his feet and strode in.

Shelly had troubles sleeping, so she was still awake when she saw him. She had a pretty good gut feeling as to why Mark appeared in her room despite the hour. “Bickered with Arianne again? And she chased you out of the house in the middle of the night?” she stated. “That ought to hurt.”

Mark sank into a chair placed right next to her bed. “No, she didn’t chase me out; I went out myself. I didn’t know how to face her any longer,” he said. “The doctor told me that you are to be discharged two days from now, whereby you recuperate at home. When that happens, I… I won’t get myself involved with your affairs anymore.

“I’ll hire a caretaker for you, of course. You brought me into this world, so I have an obligation to care for you, and I’ll do so by providing monthly allowance. But that’s the extent of overlapping in our lives,” he finished.

Shelly eyes reddened, but she forced herself to crack a smile. “I understand. You don’t have to give me allowance, boy. I’ve never spared a penny raising you. When my leg’s finally recovered, I’ll resume work,” she replied. “Truth be told, I knew you would take the truth very poorly. I’ve been expecting your reaction for a long time. But promise me, Mark dear, that you don’t ever vanish out of my sight. I want to see you, somewhere close, as frequently as can be. You don’t have to worry about me letting slip a single word about our secret with Arianne. I know—this is a secret only you and I share.”

Mark took a deep breath and rose to his feet. “Excuse me.”

Shelly nodded. Then she looked down and said nothing.

Back in his car, Mark shut his eyes in anguish. Shelly was not at fault, he told himself, she was the victim. And yet, Mark could not stop saying things that would sting her. After that, he would reprimand himself in guilt.

He just could not accept the revelation that his aunt had been his biological mother this whole time. It tormented him. But he could not go home because that would be where he would face Arianne and her icy, unsympathetic attitude. He could not stay in the hospital either, because it agitated him.

Mark had nowhere to go.

He ruminated on his thoughts for a long while before calling Jackson’s number. “You up?”

Jackson replied in an undertone, “Holy sh*t, you haven’t called me at a time like this for ages, man. What happened? Wait, never mind—gimme an address and I’ll head there pronto. We can talk when we see each other.”

Chapter 1594

Mark wanted nothing more than a partner to drink his woes away. Even when he was drunk, he was tightlipped and aired nothing about his real birth circumstances.

If he could not even bring himself to tell Jackson, his best friend, then how could he ever tell Arianne?

Jackson had to lumber a very wasted, clambering Mark out of the bar while the nipping gale slapped his entire body. “The hell, Mark Tremont? Anyone seeing your sorry a** right now would suspect you’re at the verge of divorce, man!” he grumbled. “Who would drink like a man possessed if there’s nothing eating them inside? Or did you just lure me outta my house just to make me as miserable as you? I mean, it’s the best goddamned explanation I have now, man, since you ain’t saying anything other than forcing me to get as wasted as you are.”

No sooner had he finished his commentary than he espied Arianne standing next to Mark’s car. By the looks of it, she must have been waiting for a while, too. Her hair was a disheveled mess from being blown by the wind.

Arianne approached them and helped Mark up. “Did he tell you anything, Jackson?”

“Nada. Not a word,” the man admitted. “He made me sit there and watch him get seriously sh*tfaced. Seriously, what the hell happened between the two of you? He hasn’t invited me to drink in the middle

of the night for ages. And while we're on topic, how did you know we were here? He didn't call you throughout the session."

Arianne waved her phone. "Tiffie called. She said she overheard your conversation with Mark and guessed you guys were going for a drink again. She wanted me to catch you in the act."

Jackson suddenly felt chills climbing his spine. He thought the woman was already too deeply asleep to be alert. "Look, ma'am, we were just drinking, man. We didn't do anything else! Mark was obviously feeling down in the dumps, which you can tell, natch. Me? I'm only his chaperone; it ain't got nothing to do with me. So… could you kindly put a good word for me to Tiffie so she doesn't, ya know, chew my ears off? I don't think I can survive otherwise…"

Arianne smiled. "It's fine. Tiffie knows you're clean—she wouldn't have let you out otherwise. Sorry for the troubles, Jackson. Would you like me to ask for a valet? You can't drive in this state either."

He waved dismissively. "Naaaah. I'll be fine. I can handle myself. You and Mark gotta get home as soon as you can, though. It's freezing out here. You shouldn't stay outside for too long."

Upon returning to the Tremont Estate, Arianne had to muster all of her strength to haul Mark into the room before tossing him onto the bed.

She sat aside, panting, as the relief of jettisoning a load overcame her. After recovering her breaths, she prepared a piece of warm towel and scrubbed Mark's face. Then she threw herself onto the bed, sank into the mattress, and immediately lost the will to move.

However, before she fell asleep, she remembered to tuck Mark in with their sheet.

He was reluctant to confide even in Jackson. Just what kind of earth-shattering secret could he be hiding?

The next day, Mark's hangover caught up to him even before the day broke. A head-splitting headache roused him.

He expected Jackson to dump him in a hotel room for the night, but he found familiarity in the furniture around him—and the woman sleeping next to him. He stilled for a while, then climbed down from the bed and headed to the bathroom.

By the time he finished washing up, Arianne was still asleep. Mark wondered if he had exhausted Arianne completely last night.

He watched her curled into a fetal position with her cheeks slightly pink. She was adorable.

He drank in the details of her long, thick eyelashes fluttering every now and then. She was just beyond adorable.

Had she never grown up under his care, would Arianne have retained a sense of childlike wonder and a rosy-colored outlook in life? The Tremonts owed her so much. Mark thought he could never clear that debt even if he exhausted all that he had to their limits.

She might have sensed someone watching her, because Arianne groggily opened her eyes. Seeing Mark sitting by the bedside, she turned to face him and slurred, “Up already? Good, take a shower. You reek of booze…”

Chapter 1595

A smile shadowed Mark’s lips. He reached out and ruffled her hair. “Don’t worry, I’ve washed. Sorry for the troubles and for forcing you to put up with my stench the entire night,” he said. “I’m going to the Tower now, and you go back to sleep, okay? You can sleep until you’re all freshened up for work. I’ll discount it from being tardy.”

Seeing his gentle smile dispelled the sleepy haze in Arianne’s head. How long had it been since he last smiled like this? A thick smog of gloom had been shrouding his mien for days that now, seeing him talking to her this early in the morning felt like a miracle.

Arianne watched Mark going into their changing room before sitting up on her bed. She shook her still groggy head, suspecting herself to be dreaming.

Mark came out of the room, changed, and saw Arianne sitting on the bed. “Oh no, did I wake you up?” he said gently. “You can go back to sleep. I’ll be going right away.”

She shook her head again and spread her arms wide.

For a moment, Mark gawked at her motionlessly. Then he dashed forward and pulled her into his embrace. “What’s the matter?”

She tightened her arms around his firm, tough torso and let an overwhelming sense of security settle inside her. “Nothing. I just suddenly feel like hugging you. I haven’t hugged you like this for a long, long time...”

Was it that long? Mark was a little lost. He had not noticed how long he’d neglected her.

After a period of silence, he asked tentatively, “Why don’t we have a go before I…?”

‘Have a go?’ Arianne landed a slap on his chest. “The only thing that’s going is you—to the office. Jesus, what do you have in that filthy brain of yours, huh? When I said I wanna hug, I meant it literally. What did you think?”

Mark was a little miffed, though. What other activity did they have that could adequately pull two hearts closer together once more?

Arianne went to the office unhurriedly by the time it struck ten in the morning. Since Mark left early enough to skip breakfast, she had swiped a meal for him… even if it could not technically be counted as “breakfast” by now.

He was not in the office. Neither was Davy, so she could not ask him about her husband’s whereabouts even if she wanted to.

She waited, and moments later, Davy appeared. “Morning, Madam! Here for Mr. Tremont, I presume? He was having a meeting just now, but it adjourned just minutes ago. He should be here soon.”

‘A meeting, huh?’ She breathed a sigh of relief. “Sure. I can wait,” she replied. If Mark were to be outside instead, this set of breakfast would have gone to waste.

Davy spied the lunchbox on Mark’s desk and mumbled under his breath, “Odd. Someone sent him breakfast too. Wasn’t that you as well…?”

Her eyebrows creased. “Oh, so it wasn’t needed because he had his breakfast already? Gee, couldn’t you have mentioned it earlier? I’ll have to eat it myself now.”

“N-No! Oh, it was a gaffe!” Davy sprung to his own rescue. “M-Maybe he’s still hungry? Oh my God, please don’t tell him I said anything!”

Just when the two of them were talking, Mark finally returned. “What are you two on about?”

Davy shut his mouth and retreated to his desk. Meanwhile, Arianne asked drily, “Who sent you breakfast this morning?”

Mark’s eyes dodged her. “Er, honestly… who else could it be other than Aunt Shelly? Granted, I had not the slightest inkling that she’d do such a thing.”

She sneered. “And here I worried that you might be hungry. Looks like my concern was unwarranted after all.”

Chapter 1596

Mark could feel his head throbbing as he crossed to his desk and opened his lunchbox. “Look, it wasn’t satisfying, okay? She got me something I didn’t really like. But this one—the one you brought me? Mm, just what I like. You’ve had your breakfast, right?” he said. “Anyway, you should go back to work. I need to head out after this breakfast.”

Arianne sighed. “If she weren’t your aunt, I would have thought I’m battling a new love rival or something,” she remarked. “She knows you like the back of her hand. Heck, she’s even more attentive to your every microscopic need that I am.”

Mark grimaced. “That’s just ridiculous, no?”

Arianne let out the mother of all snorts before turning on her heels and starting toward the door.

Mark waited. When he was sure she had gone far outside his office, he called out to Davy instantly. “You told her, didn’t you? Damn it, are you dimwitted or what?” he grumbled. “I can’t believe that even after all this time of being my personal assistant, you still haven’t internalized the age-old adage of ‘loose lips sink ships?’ Do you even have any inkling of the line between what could be said and what couldn’t?”

Davy slouched in defeat. “I-I-In my defense, Mr. Tremont, I thought she was the one who sent you breakfast earlier today, so I, you know, wondered under my breath. You gotta’ admit that it was an honest gaffe, right…?”

Mark wondered if he could open up Davy’s skull and check its content. “Shouldn’t you know by now? Arianne only ever sends me breakfast if her mood strikes just right! The next time you’re unsure of something, hold your tongue. Got it?”

Curiosity bubbled into Davy's face. "Oh, but I honestly think Madam is being really nice to you, you know? Don't you think so?… Why?"

Mark rubbed his temples in resignation. "When have I ever said she isn't anything but nice to me? On the contrary, I think I'm the one who's lacking… You know what? Can you stop interrogating like a five-year-old and their endless questions? Have you got no work to do?"

That late evening, Arianne received a text from Mark. She was to have dinner with him tonight, and so she should wait for him after work.

Arianne had thought this was a date night in disguise, but upon arriving at White Water Bay, she met Alejandro and Melanie, who were already waiting for them. It was an apology dinner, after all.

Melanie had brought Millie along. She was now about a year old, the age where babies were at their cutest. Even Mark couldn't help but ogle her for a little too long.

Once the dishes were laid out on the table, Alejandro's irreverent attitude reared its head. "Well, well, well. The two of you sure make an interesting pair. One apology gift after another—I'm so flattered that I'm beginning to feel embarrassed."

Mark shot Arianne a side-eye that seemingly asked her when she had gone to see him. Honestly, she had not expected her husband to apologize on his own accord, so she set out to do it for him already. Who would have predicted that Mark would come to do it too?

Not that it was wrong of Arianne to apologize, with or without it being on Mark's behalf. Alejandro was a victim of Shelly's crazed attack, and he had not expressed his misgivings about being a target until now.

Knowing that Mark would not respond to him, Alejandro continued. "Now, I may not be troubled by this at all—seeing that I probably have nine lives—but Arianne's in a more precarious situation, don't you think? I've distanced myself from Mark as much as I can, but nope! She still saw me as a target. Imagine what she could do to someone as close to you as your wife, Mark. I'd be careful if I were you, Arianne."

"That's an impossibility," Mark rebuffed confidently.

Alejandro's inner Devil's Advocate argued, "Nothing's impossible, mate. Especially something like this."

Worried that a war might break out, Melanie shoved Millie into Alejandro's arms. "Your turn to carry her. My hands are a little sore from carrying her for this long.

A very baffled Alejandro received the baby. "For Christ's sake, she's only as heavy as a plush toy! Apparently, that's enough to tire your arms?"

Then, he turned to Millie, now comfy in his embrace, and suddenly assumed the look of a loving father. "Look at you, little cutie. Why don't you ever grow a little bit larger despite eating that much? You're as light as a feather, honey. This must be from your mom; she must have been just as frail as you are when she was small. This explains her abysmal strength even after she's become an adult."

The corner of Melanie's lips twitched. Millie's growth had been nothing short of typical, and yet Alejandro had been harping on how small and skinny she was. Did he not know that baby girls just grow at different speeds and into different sizes than their male counterparts?

God, some people loved mouthing off without trying to understand the logic behind it.

Watching, Arianne could not stop herself from giggling. "Alejandro, that's just how baby girls grow. Most boys are much faster and larger in comparison. Millie's growth is really healthy by all accounts."

Mark may have refrained from joining in on the fun, but his gaze kept stopping around Millie. The more he considered her, the more it struck him that having a daughter was miles better than a son.

Too bad Mark was stuck with a rascal forever.

Chapter 1597

After dinner, Arianne and Mark watched Alejandro and Melanie leave. She entwined her arms with his before commenting, "You know, Alejandro's pretty forgiving, isn't he? If he's really the sort to hold grudges, it wouldn't have been remotely as easy to put this case behind us."

Mark, however, still could not bring himself to say anything nice about Alejandro. "Hmph. His misfortune is none of my fault. Unlike Jackson's case with Seaton, his is several leagues more embarrassing. For the record, he lost to my aunt, who doesn't even know any martial arts," he sneered.

A rather harsh remark to make, but Arianne had to admit that it was not wrong. Alejandro had gibed and mocked Jackson despite his plight back then, only to have his bum served by a woman a few months later. Could there be any stronger proof that karma exists?

While the two were in the car, Arianne asked half-jokingly, “You like daughters better, don’t you?”

“No. Sons are good,” Mark denied.

Arianne was not buying it. “Then why did you keep staring at Millie throughout dinner? You prefer daughters and it’s obvious! No use denying it,” she said. “Now, I know I can’t bear you another child, so we’ll have to hope that Tiffany’s baby is a girl. Then I can appropriate her as my own.”

“Tiffany? Pssh. Her daughter will probably take after her mom. Plenty of brawns but no brain to boot,” he sneered, a little scornfully. “That child’s gonna need to find herself a man with brains like Jackson, or she’s not going to survive.”

Nobody liked hearing their best friend being insulted. Arianne, upset, immediately leaped to Tiffany’s defense. “Excuuuse me, mister. You can’t talk about Tiffany like that! You just don’t know how to appreciate the depth of her character. Look at her, living the life of the blissfully ignorant… You’ll never be able to live like that, Mark. This is why you speak the ugly words of a jealous man! I’ve seen through you, Mark Tremont!”

Mark was amused. “Oh ho? You’ve seen through me?”

She pinched his earlobe playfully. “Saw through your flawless skin and found an ugly green-eyed monster underneath! But then again… I guess I have a big soft spot for jerks with a heart of gold like you, too...”

Street after street bathed in relentless, nipping nightly gales flitted across the car window. No one would notice a clandestine corner at the end of the sidewalk.

Shelly-Ann Leigh watched Mark’s car fading into the end of the road from that corner, lost in thought. The cardigan she wore did not hug her as tightly as it should, exposing the patient’s uniform worn underneath. Despite the support of her cane, throes of pain pulsated through the leg that had just gone through minor operation.

Still, no pangs could relieve the ballooning anxiety in Shelly’s mind.

Why were Mark, Arianne, and Alejandro here? By Mark’s nature, ignoring that Tremont bastard son’s existence would have been his greatest act of compassion. So, why did the same man invite the bastard son to dinner and banters? That was dangerous!

Shelly knew for certain that no amount of blood relations could dilute the hatred taken root in one’s heart. To have things come to this—Arianne must have had a hand in it. If it were not for Arianne Wynn, Mark would have never, ever deigned to do something so reckless! How could Mark even think about mingling with that bastard son so amicably, despite their complicated birth circumstances?

The knowledge of Arianne giving some of Tremont Enterprise’s shares to Alejandro made it impossible for Shelly to not suspect that something was afoul. This was a conspiracy, it must be. A secret stratagem against Mark between Arianne and Alejandro.

Meanwhile, before the couple reached the Tremont Estate, Mark suddenly received a call from the hospital, telling him that his aunt had disappeared.

He instantly slammed his foot onto the brake.

Arianne jolted. Had it not been for the safety belt, she would have flown out of the car through the dashboard. “Mark?”

He was still in silence. Two seconds or so later, he recovered his usual calmness and proclaimed, “Nothing. Hey, Ari? I’ll get you home first. I gotta go to the hospital for a while.”

‘The hospital? Is it about Shelly again?’

Arianne did not ask her question out loud. Instead, she answered, “No, you don’t have to send me home. We aren’t very far away from the estate at this part of the road, so I can uber home from here. You go, ASAP. She’s only undergone a surgery; I imagine she has no one else with her at the moment.”

Chapter 1598

Mark’s hesitation amounted to a total count of one second before he took up Arianne’s suggestion and left her beside the road.

Honestly, that bummed Arianne. Not that she had another choice. She was more worried about whatever it was Shelly must have started yet again.

Mark practically rushed into the hospital, but he only found Shelly sitting up on her bed, having her dinner, a slapdash takeout that was neither sumptuous nor nutritious.

He breathed a long sigh of relief. “Where did you run to?”

Shelly looked at him innocently. “Nowhere. What’s wrong? You came here without a notice. By the way, the doctor said I’ll be discharged tomorrow, but I wouldn’t be able to complete those dreadful discharge documents with my leg like this. Sorry, Mark dear, but I might need you to come over tomorrow and help me one last time. After that, I’ll never inconvenience you again.”

Mark could not care less if she was lying, or where she could have gone. All there was in his mind was a remark on how much of a nuisance this was.

“Can you please not run around however you please in the future? Your leg might run into new problems otherwise, and then we would have to get it operated on again. Also, what is that? Haven’t I told you that even if you were to order takeout, you should only order from the more famous restaurants? How do you expect to gain any nutrients from that, hmm? God, I ought to hire a live-in nurse for you.”

Shelly cast her eyes down and about. “No, there’s no need for that. I told you I don’t need you to support me like that,” she murmured under her breath. “You don’t have to worry about me, and you shouldn’t. If Arianne catches this, she will get pissed off. And then if she snoops around and digs out information, you’ll certainly be trapped in a tight spot.

“When I’m discharged tomorrow, you don’t need to hire help. The cost of hiring a live-in nurse can be very costly. I, on the other hand, have zero problems cooking and performing normal chores by myself just fine. No matter how bad my current life could be, it can’t possibly come close to the horrors of my past.”

Just like that, Shelly touched Mark’s heart and roused his sympathy. He thought of the battered scars and healed wounds marring her body and found his chest increasingly tightening until he felt like he could not breathe.

He could not imagine the tribulations she had gone through all these years. When he first saw her emerging from a posh luxury car, clad in fine clothing, he had thought that she must have lived a good, happy life…

He took hold of the haphazard dinner Shelly had yet to finish and threw it away. Then, he ordered a more sumptuous replacement from White Water Bay café with a call.

“Listen. After you’re back home, I’ll appoint someone to bring meals to your doorstep every day. Any trash you’ve collected can be passed to this person, and they will throw it away for you. All you have to do is stay at home and let your leg recover, okay? Don’t cause a scene by running to wherever you fancy, because I really have no time to solve your every business,” Mark stated. “If you ever find the need to hire a live-in caretaker, tell me. I’ll be frank; I really don’t think you should even live on your own.”

Shelly lit her lower lip, saying nothing. On a surface-level, it seemed that Mark was managing every detail in her life and forming a comprehensive arrangement for her sake. But his ulterior motive was too obvious—he wanted to cut his ties with Shelly down as much as he could, and he wanted to do it in a way where it would not haunt his conscience.

However, this also proved that deep down inside, Mark still thought the world of her; he could not bear to abandon her. Otherwise, he would have done precisely that in a heartbeat, her livelihood be damned. He would not try to arrange everything this meticulously, would he?

She raised her head and looked up at him, smiling. “I get it. Thank you. You should go home. I’ll be fine.”

He did not. He sat on a chair and watched her finish her meal. He cleaned up the trash.

Only after that did he leave. By the time Mark finally reached home, he felt like his entire being—his mind and body—had been completely sapped dry. Every meeting with Shelly left him drained, more drained than he had ever been in his life.

Arianne, seeing him like this, quickly offered to help take off his coat. “So, what happened this time? You were so frenetic just now. Nothing big happened, right?”

“No,” Mark affirmed, shaking his head. “But I still need to go to the hospital tomorrow to get on with the documents for her discharge. Once she’s back home, though, I don’t have to exhaust myself over her anymore… God, I ought to hire a live-in caretaker for her, but she’s against it. How does she expect herself to live alone with a condition like this?”

“Well, of course she’s against it.” A jab sprung from Arianne’s tongue before her brain could stop it. “A caretaker’s existence will remove any legitimate excuses she has to cling to you. She can only call you all day, every day, when no one’s with her.”

Chapter 1599

Mark furrowed his eyebrows so slightly that it was nigh undetectable. “I'm going to shower.”

By the time he had gone into the bathroom, Arianne finally realized the gaffe she made; there had been an element of insinuation. But of course, aside from Mark, Shelly had no relatives to care for her. Besides, it might even be a bad look for Mark if he cared too little about the only surviving relative he had.

Even if he “cared” a little too much that it chaffed Arianne, her disgruntlement would only distress Mark. In truth, she had no other choice but to silently bear their current arrangement.

The very next day, Mark left for the hospital early in the morning. Arianne had to hail an uber to work.

Sylvain, ostensibly due to an urgent matter, was searching frantically for Mark. When he found him absent in his office, he turned to Arianne and asked, “Hey, where’s Mr. Tremont? It’s a bit too early for the Big Boss to not be here, isn’t it? Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him around that much these days.”

With her hand propped against her chin, a rather indolent Arianne doodled circle after circle on her paper. “Why look for him? He’s currently fixing his aunt’s problems again—God knows when he’s coming back,” she intoned. “If it’s urgent, though, you could always tell me. It’s the same as telling him in person.”

Sylvain demurred for a good few seconds before proclaiming, “I… er, I need to request for a salary advance.”

Arianne's hand froze in mid-action. She glanced up at him skeptically. "You're not exactly the type without surplus of cash, Sylvain. Very few things could compel you to require a salary advance, no? Which means… you're gonna ask for a very hefty amount, aren't you? Why do you need it? I suspect you wouldn't ask if you weren't hoping to get, say, $100,000 at least."

Sylvain sighed. "Robin's parents finally relented, okay? And I would love to finally bring her home. But that can't happen with my mom around—those two are like cat and dog, man. I shudder to think how life's gonna be when you force them to live under the same roof. So, I need to purchase a place to accommodate my mom.

"Told my mom, mom said cool, great right? No. She brought up some 'conditions.' First, she wants a residence that's no smaller than 100 square-meter. Secondly, she wants her new home to be in one of those golden, strategic areas or whatever. Problem is, the price of housing in any part of this damn city is expensive enough, let alone a residence in her preferred locations. Even a 100 square-meter unit is enough to cost me a kidney, man. Honestly, I don't have that much cash with me at the moment."

Sylvain must have burned a sizable portion of his savings trying to survive life after the catastrophe concerning his reputation. Now, just when he thought he could finally catch his breath, he was suddenly thrusted into the business of buying an expensive house as soon as possible.

No matter how Arianne looked at it, she could not shake off the feeling that it was unwise. "You've just gotten yourself out of a financial pickle, right? So there! You have a legitimate reason to not heed your mom's ridiculous whims, don't you? Even if you can't buy a place in full, you can always start with down payments. You've got the cash for that, don't you? After that, you just need to pay a bit of your debt every month. That's clearly the more affordable way to go about it," she suggested. "Seriously, though. Why is a woman who is living alone demanding a 100 square-meter space, huh? I must be trippin'. Can't she settle down with a modest room and a common hall? All these incessant needs for glamor—what a pain in the neck!"

Sylvain grimaced. "Of course, I've considered that! But my mom hates it! She wants her new abode to be paid in full, one-shot, and then put the house under her name alone. I thought this was going too far,

so I discussed it with Robin the other day. In the end, we agreed that fulfilling her vain demands is ultimately the best road. As long as she stops pestering us after that, God, every obstacle in this world is trivial!" he said. "I've been waiting for this day to come with bated breath—the day when I can finally start a new, happy family life. Please, ma'am, you gotta help me out!"

Since the amount Sylvain was asking would place a rather hefty toll on the company, Arianne could not take it lightly. She called Mark.

An affair concerning the company begged professionalism, so immediately after the call connected, Arianne went straight to the chase. "Mark, Sylvain needs some cash to buy a new house, and he's requesting a salary advance. What says you?"

Mark had just finished tackling the documents needed for Shelly's discharge, and right now, he simply could not afford this distraction.

"I'll leave it up to you to make the call," he answered. "I know you've got a good grip on how much money goes in, out, and stays in the company's account, so you're apt to decide the amount he should get. I'm busy over here, so I have to go."

Chapter 1600

As soon as Mark ended the call, Shelly asked casually, "Was that Arianne? What's the matter?"

He helped her into the car. "It was nothing. Listen, I'm going to send you home, and then I have to leave for somewhere else. I have things to attend to."

Shelly's lips thinned in silence. She had heard him carefully enough—it had something to do with the company's finances. More importantly, Mark displayed a dangerous amount of faith in Arianne, effectively making her the Treasury Secretary of the company.

It broke open a spring of ire. The way Shelly saw it, Arianne was just a random orphan girl who was lucky enough to be raised by Mark. The only trait of worth this girl had was a degree of physical attractiveness enough to bewitch poor, hapless Mark… and nothing else! How could so much power over Tremont Enterprise even fall into the hands of a vixen like that?

They reached Shelly's condominium, and almost instantly after Mark left, Shelly sat on the couch and called Arianne.

"Hello, Arianne. Got time? There's something I would love to speak to you about. Is that fine?" she began.

Arianne did not spring into any agreement right away. Shelly calling her out of her own accord ticked off so many alarms in her mind that she had to consider whatever the woman said very carefully. Instead of agreeing, she asked gingerly, "Is Mark with you there? He's left, hasn't he?"

Shelly was forthcoming in her answer. "Oh yes, he's gone, alright. I wouldn't have called you otherwise, would I? Because, you see, I want to meet you… alone. I know, you are itching to know what happened after Mark found me. I didn't want to divulge in the past, but now, I am ready to chat a bit. Mark doesn't want to talk about it at all, does he? And yet you hunger for the reveal. If I continue to keep it a secret from you, I'm afraid the mystery might drive you crazy, won't it?"

Shelly cast a very, very seductive bait. Yes, Arianne hungered to know what in the world happened after Mark found Shelly. Most crucially, she wanted to understand why Mark started to behave so erratically since then.

Her hesitancy lasted for only a moment or two after the call ended before she departed to see Shelly. Since Mark forbade the two women from meeting each other, Shelly must have known that he was not going to the company now as to catch Arianne's absence before giving Arianne this invitation.

Finding Shelly's condominium did not take long. It was just as easy as locating the floor she lived on, since Arianne had already been there before.

As soon as she stepped through the door, Shelly regarded her with an expression bursting with aplomb. "Sorry, darling, but my leg's in a bit of a rough spot. If you want a drink, you might have to pour it yourself."

Arianne stood before the French window, tall and firm. "No, thanks. Let's just cut to the chase; don't be shy. Tell me whatever it is that you want to say. There are many things in the company still pending for my attention. I don't have a lot of free time to spare."

Shelly stared straight at Arianne for a while. "The day before the plane crash… my sister called me," she began.

"She was sobbing in despair, frightful that when she passed, that other slut and her bastard son would succeed her position as wife in the Tremont family. Mark's role as the heir would be jeopardized. She asked me: what should I do? And then I told her… I told her that if she was going to die either way, then she should take every threat in life to the grave with her. 'Make them your funerary companions,' I said. That's right, the plane crash was my idea. My sister and I planned it together. I pushed her, or she wouldn't have dared to see through it otherwise."

For a split second, Arianne felt her breath bated from her. She spun on her heels stiffly, her back now facing Shelly. “So? You’re telling me this… why? What’s your point?”

The light in Shelly’s eyes flickered. She had not expected Arianne’s reaction to be so muted.

“Hmm, why, aren’t you mad about this? Your beloved father died an agonizing death and left nothing behind—except, of course, a seed of resentment planted in your heart. You were only a feckless eight-year-old. As an orphan, you needed someone to care for you… and then Mark came along and saved you. Raised you. You must be proud and giddy to have married into a prestigious family of eminent social standing through that, I bet.”