Ruling 1601

Chapter 1601

Arianne clenched her teeth before unclenching them. “Giddy?! Would you have been giddy if it was your father?” she bristled coldly. “News flash, before his untimely death, the Wynns were no less of a family with high standing, too. What proof do you even have to claim that I was ever after the Tremonts’ wealth?!”

Hearing the lividity in Arianne’s voice, Shelly’s lips quivered into a pleased smirk. “Aww, you mad? And here I thought that after clinging to Mark for so long, his nature would have rubbed on you a little. You know, not wearing your heart on your sleeve like him? But who knew you’d break oh-so-easily?” she jeered. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but right now, there are only two people in this room—you and me. One of the murderers who killed your father is sitting right before you. So, what are you going to do? You know you can do whatever you please… There’s no one to stop you.”

At the height of her rage, Arianne turned around to face Shelly and smiled. “Oh, what’s this? Did you admit to going through the trouble of summoning me just to pettily spite me? Hope that you can piss me off enough to knock some teeth out of a woman recently out of the hospital? Well, now that I pay attention, yeah; this is a pretty tall floor. You’ll be splattered into a puddle of flesh and blood if you fall out of this window… But I’m not gonna do that. It doesn’t matter what the truth behind that stupid plane crash was; Mark did nothing wrong. At most, he was unwillingly privy to it. If I took out my anger on you, though… My circumstances would be different, because while he didn’t kill my father, I killed his aunt. No, I will not ruin my life nor Smore’s future.

“It’s exhilarating to know that our hate for each other is mutual. I don’t need to put up with you or pretend to be okey-dokey just because I care about Mark’s feelings. And then there’s the other thing: my father isn’t lonely in the afterlife. He’s got the Tremonts, including your beloved sister, as his companions! In that sense, there’s nothing I need to do for him anymore. But you… Oh, what a pity. Unlike my father, you’re alive but all alone. You’re so unwanted that the only relative you have left to cling to is your nephew! Tell me, isn’t this karma at work or what?”

Stormclouds began to pool into Shelly's face. But before she could cast her repartee, Arianne's one-two punch cut her off.

"And! That's not even all there is to it. Your married life in Germany was a catastrophe, wasn't it? Sad, so sad. Your body is completely battered! I bet you've been beaten up even more times than stray dogs on the streets. I mean, not even stray dogs get whacked that often. Honestly? Just the knowledge that you've suffered so much over the years is satisfying enough for me. God sees you and knows your sins, Shelly-Ann Leigh, and He deals you your retribution."

It was Shelly's turn to clench her jaw and ground her teeth. She shut her eyes tightly and sucked in a couple of sharp, deep breaths, just to force the blazing, cackling flames of rage in her mind down.

"You…! You're disgustingly good at pecking off scars, aren't you?!" she fumed.

Arianne raised her chin with a noncommittal curve on her lips. "Oh, you flatter me, Aunt Shelly. I was only showing off what I learnt a few seconds ago. I'm hardly an expert," she taunted. "Alright, is there any other drivel you want to waste my time on? If there's none left, then excuse me. By the way, don't think I haven't noticed you being glued to your seat since I've come in. I'm sure your daily life is going to be a challenge now with your leg being lame, right? Mark told me he wanted to hire a live-in caretaker for you, but you keep spurring him. Well, I've got bad news for you. Mark's life might start to become a little bit… busier than usual from today onward. He'll be so busy, he won't be able to answer your every beck and call anymore. Best be prepared for that."

Anything concerning Mark was a shortcut to Shelly's worst fury. "You b*tch! You really think you control Mark, do you? You think he'll stop caring for me just because a b*tch like you tells him to?!" she snapped. "You're delusional! He knows about the truth behind the plane tragedy, smarta**. So, why didn't he tell you before I did, huh? Why else do you think he's hiding the truth from you?"

For a second, pain flared behind Arianne's eyes. He knew, but he said nothing—because his aunt was the perpetrator. What happened if he told Arianne the truth?

In other words, Mark buried a secret just to protect Shelly.

Still, no matter how hurt Arianne was, she would never let it show to Shelly. Instead, she blinked innocently and said, "Oh God, Aunt Shelly, are you, like, mad? Even I haven't gotten mad, so why are you? Well, in the case of whether he listens to me or not… Why don't we find out? You think he will abandon his wife and son for a relative who hadn't talked to him for years and basically popped out of nowhere? Remember, the only family who's ever accompanied him all these years… is me. Smore and I are the two pillars that sustain his life! Don't believe me? Make it a bet, shall we? If I can't stop him from stepping through this door, then I lose!"

With that, Arianne spun on her heels and bolted out of the door, leaving an apoplectic Shelly fuming on her own.

Chapter 1602

It was Shelly who insisted on pushing Arianne's button over and over. Back then, Arianne would have sucked it all up and forgiven her no matter how much drama the woman caused. Because she was the aunt of the man Arianne loved.

But that had changed following this new light. Arianne might not act on vengeance, but it did not mean that she could continue to treat the murderer with the same amiability as before.

She returned to the office with all traces of her emotional upheaval tucked away and assumed an affectation of neutrality. The only thing different to her was that she now paid exacting attention to Mark's movement.

She had declared to Shelly that she would not let Mark step into the latter's place ever again, and she was damn sure she would deliver that promise.

The day wound down to the evening. Before work ended, Arianne strode into Mark's office. "It's almost time to go home, Mark. Let's go together," she said.

Mark hesitated. "Er, I have somewhere else to be after work. You'll have to go home without me."

"Don't tell me you're going to see your aunt again!" Arianne grumbled as she deliberately played up the rancor in her tone. "You said she refused your offer to hire a caretaker. But isn't she basically using you as one, by having you run to-and-fro and serve her goddamned unceasing demands? You're a married man, for Christ's sake. You have duties to your home, wife, and son. You can't just keep throwing yourself at her every call! This the same goddamned woman who sneak-attacked Alejandro even before her leg had recovered fully—remember that? What she underwent days earlier was a small operation; she could still relieve herself or shower or whatever on her own! What is there left for you to fuss about, huh?"

Unbeknownst to herself, Arianne had infused way more feelings into her words than she thought, and Mark caught it. "Um, are you alright? You sound… more aggressive than usual," he pointed out. "Look, I know what you're saying, but she's my… aunt, so I can't just cast her aside, can I? Anyway, she's only just called me to tell me that the water heater's busted, so I gotta come to her place with a repairman to fix it. After all, it's not easy living alone with a physical condition like hers."

Mark willingly helped Shelly bury many of her atrocities, Arianne remembered.

Her ire ballooned. “Yes, you’ve said so yourself, she’s only your aunt. What right does she have to demand a mere nephew to serve her to this extent?” she retorted in an icy tone. “Her marriage sucked; that’s on her. She lost her spouse early; nothing to do with you. And she’s infertile; not even your fault to begin with. Seriously, why the slavish devotion to her every whim? You’ve cared enough for her! And all of the toxic stress she’s put on me? I’ve had enough! If you can’t stop yourself from doting on her, then by all means, move into her place and serve her every day, why don’t you? It’s not like there aren’t many other ways to solve her annoying trifles—but you just have to choose the ones that demand you neglect me and Smore just to care for her personally. Have I ever been in your consideration when you make all these ridiculous decisions?!”

Mark was taken aback. “Ari, what happened to you? Why are you so riled up?”

Arianne drew in shallow breaths to reel herself back into control. “Nothing happened. I’m just finally speaking my mind. My resentment isn’t built in a day, Mark. I think the world of you; I regard you as an important factor in all of my considerations. All I’m asking is that you do the same for me too,” she replied. “You either hire a live-in nurse or whatever for her, or you let her continue sabotaging the peace in our lives. I’ll be very frank, Mark. If you continue this—if I continue missing your presence both in the day or night—so help me, I’m filing for a divorce!”

She turned around and stormed out of the office.

This was the first time she had ever brought up the prospect of divorce. Sure, it was fueled by rage, but Arianne regretted nothing.

Chapter 1603

Mark watched her figure vanish out of the door, frowning. That was not Arianne’s usual attitude; he knew her well enough to know that. That was an aberrant behavior.

Things would have been so simple if Shelly were just his aunt—if only. But she was more than that, unfortunately.

Arianne was not the type to throw tantrums however she liked, so Mark dared not take this lightly. After a brief calculation, Mark decided that Arianne was more important than the other party, so he gave Shelly a call. “Something else came up at home, so I can’t go to your place today,” he explained. “But I’ll send someone to fix your heater later. All you have to do is to open the door for them.”

Shelly was seething, but she had to belie it with faux understanding and consideration. “Oh, that’s totally understandable. The repairman will do! By the way, tomorrow is a Saturday, isn’t it? You’re free, aren’t you? Because I miss Smore. Can you bring him over to have lunch with me?”

Mark demurred for about two seconds before agreeing to her request. There was no harm in letting Shelly see Smore, was there? Grandparents love doting on their grandchildren even more than their own kids—take Summer for a quick example. Mark was rather familiar with that human quirk, so he could not help but soften his stance even though he told himself to never see Shelly again.

Throughout the road back home, Arianne had been repressed and passive. Mark had tried to dig up as many topics as he could to start a conversation, but all her reactions could be boiled down to very muted “oh” and “okay.”

The only time when a smile broke out of Arianne’s face was when they returned home, where she saw Smore. “Hello my little sunshine, Mommy’s home!”

Smore ran into her embrace excitedly. “Mommy, mommy! I wanna go out and play!”

Arianne carried him in her arms and rubbed her cheek against his. “Sure thing, little man. We’re going out to see your little buddy tomorrow, how’s that? Aunt Tiffie’s kiddo will be so happy to play with you, I bet!”

Mark grated against their good vibe with an interruption. “Er, how about the day after tomorrow? There’s somewhere he and I should go tomorrow.”

Parts of Arianne’s smile left her face. “Oh, wow, I wonder where that would be!… Your aunt again? Sorry, but the decision is final. My son’s going out to play tomorrow, and there’s no time for that other place. Besides… When was the last time you’ve gone out shopping with me, hmm? Tomorrow and the day after are the weekends. I can’t believe you’ve already made plans to waste them already!”

Mark regarded it as a continuation of her last lashing-out, so he let it slide. “Let’s talk about this again some other time. I’m heading for the showers.”

Arianne, meanwhile, brought Smore to the living room. “Smore, dear, do you wanna play with your little buddy, or do you wanna go to your grandaunt’s place with Dad?” she cooed.

Smore titled his head upward a little and considered his options with childlike seriousness. “Um, how about… my little buddy! I got a new toy. It’s very cool. I wanna show it to my little buddy.”

Arianne ruffled the boy’s hair, pleased. “Great idea! Mommy approves. Would you be so kind as to ask Daddy to join us tomorrow?”

Smore nodded and slid down from Arianne’s arms, scrambling to play with his toys.

Chapter 1604

Arianne caught Henry passing by and stopped him. “Henry, do you have some free time? There’s something I want to ask you about.”

Henry stepped forward. “Yes. What would you like to talk about?”

Arianne gestured toward a chair. Henry hesitated, then took the one next to her.

She shot wary glances at the stairs instinctively, worried that Mark would appear in any minute. “Henry, his aunt invited me to her place for a chat earlier today. She told me that she not only knew about the plane crash, but she was also the one who helped push the plan into motion,” Arianne said. “You’ve already seen what it's like between her and me; she’s got a lot of bones to pick with me. Now that I know about her participation, I don’t want Mark to care for her ever again. I also don’t want her to see Smore at all. Tell me, is my retaliation overt?”

The butler was an even-keeled man who never spoke before thinking. He mulled her words over for a while before giving his verdict. “No, not at all. She's merely an extension to this family; a relative. But you’re his wife. You’re his family. No matter what you do, it is within your jurisdiction. Furthermore, the rest of the retinue and I know how much you’ve tried to be cordial with Mrs. Leigh. We are very aware of your character and the way you treat others. However, there is a caveat: I must caution you against applying too much aggression when you’re dealing with Mr. Tremont. Be mindful of his temper and feelings. After all, she is his aunt.”

Henry’s words were just the boost of confidence Arianne needed. “Understood, Henry. Thanks. I’ll tread this issue as well as I can,” she replied. “I’ve told that woman that if Mark stepped through her damn door one more time, I’ll admit defeat. I never wanted things to come to this, believe me, but God, his aunt really forced my hand.”

Henry nodded slightly. “I see. In any case, if there’s nothing else, please excuse me.”

While the family was having dinner, Mark’s phone rang repetitively.

They were all notification tones. At first, he had not wanted to read them. But to his annoyance, they kept coming, and at one point, he finally read it.

Shelly—all of these messages were from Shelly. She asked about the name of the dishes he would like to have for tomorrow so she could prepare the materials. She told him she was going to make the meal personally. She pried for Smore’s favorite dishes. She wondered over and over if she had missed out anything else for tomorrow.

There were more than ten messages clogging up the notifications, all of them spotting similar content. Reading them all made Mark a little sick. Quickly, he replied to her by telling her not to overwork herself. Her leg was still in need of healing; how did the woman expect herself to cook?

Before he placed his phone down, Arianne, while wiping Smore’s mouth, intoned aloud, “Remember, Smore. We don’t do what Dad does. We all know that the dining table is for eating and not for other things—that’s a bad habit.”

Mark turned his phone off and set it aside. “Ari, let me bring Smore over there tomorrow, okay?”

She eschewed her most acrid or confrontational tone without neutering her staunch opposition. “I’ve told you, right? I’ve decided to bring Smore to Tiffie’s place tomorrow. Jackson will be there too, you know. Remember him? Your best friend? Sounds like a good chance for the two of you to catch up, am I right? Or what, are you suggesting that I change the entirety of my weekend plans for your aunt?”

Mark tried a compromise. “How about you let us meet Aunt Shelly for a bit before the three of us head to Jackson’s?”

Arianne held his gaze, deadpanned. Behind her eyes, as still as ice, were unreadable emotions. “If you can’t stop fussing about your aunt, then take her back into the house! Why go through the trouble of buying her a place to stay if you’re only going to keep running back to her? It’s fine if you don’t think that’s a nuisance somehow. But for God’s sake, don’t drag me and Smore into the drag!”

The flip in her attitude toward Shelly was too jarring, Mark realized. Previously, she had been rather tolerant and charitable of Shelly, but now, she was as stubborn as a mule. Something was amiss.

“Seriously, what came over you, Ari? You haven’t been acting like yourself since late afternoon. What ticked you off? Is it that time when I bought a place for Aunt Shelly before discussing it with you?” Mark asked. “But you didn’t flip out after you found out about it, so why the aggression over it right now? That’s quite a delayed response, honestly. Either way, I’m not a fan of guessing grievances, so just be upfront and tell me what’s wrong.”

Arianne set down her fork and knife and smiled mirthlessly. “Buying a place isn’t the problem. It’s your money, so I couldn’t care less about how you spend it. But you’re my man. I care about how much someone else is using my man,” she said. “I’m pissed by how you constantly neglect me and Smore ever since your aunt appeared, okay? If she were the sort of relative who’s wise, amiable, kindly, welcoming—I wouldn’t have problems mingling with her at all. But your aunt is as far away from those qualities as she possibly can be. What more do you expect me to do to foster peace between us, huh? I’ve had enough of her throwing psychotic fits at me while I nod and forgive her unconditionally like a moron. I’ve had enough of her dominating all of your free time to the point that I hardly see my husband

anymore! What, you like a submissive woman who never complains about her husband? Sorry, then. Your wife ain't it."

Chapter 1605

Surely, this could not be Shelly's doing, right? At least, it did not seem like it on the surface. But he had to admit, following a series of happenings, Mark had been passive and reactionary. But how could he act otherwise? Seeing Shelly living alone after a surgery uneased him. He could not stop fussing over her.

"I… I understand. I will try to bear this in mind and not do anything that may chaff you. I'll ask someone to do what I've done for Aunt Shelly in my stead, as long as that's possible. When her leg recovers, I'll stop letting her dominate my life."

On the surface, it sounded as though Mark was reassuring Arianne, but the truth was that he was hammering it into himself. Every time he saw Shelly, the truth behind his history would overwhelm him before it consolidated into an unreachable thorn embedded deep in his throat.

That night, Mark tossed and turned in his bed, tortured by his loss at telling Shelly he was not coming. He remembered how Shelly had excitedly rambled on and on about the dishes she would make tomorrow for them, making it impossible.

The next morning, Mark took Arianne and Smore to the West family residence. Summer, who already knew about their arrival prior, had prepared a sumptuous feast for lunch.

The first thing Smore did upon entering through the door was to play with his little buddy, Lil' P. Together, they were fascinated by Summer's poodle, Little Bean.

Unfortunately, the boys were currently at an age where they would play so rough that even the most playful dog would balk. Worried that the poodle's tiny frame would not be able to withstand two excitable humans, she told Smore early on, "Okay, you can play with doggie, but you can't lift it up, mmkay? You'll be hurting it, and that's no good. You also can't hit it; that's a no-no. Doggie is very cute and needs to be protected, right?"

Smore quickly assented to his mother's words, and along with Lil' P, they stared at Little Bean intently, their eyes unblinking. There were times when his little hands reached out, drawing closer and closer to the poodle, until he stopped himself and pulled them back in. It was clear that the kids really wanted to touch it.

Today, Summer had dolled Little Bean up like a little fair lady, complete with a lace dress. The outfit accentuated the poodle's charm so much that it was small wonder that Smore was having a hard time controlling his impulses. Even Arianne was tempted to nudge the dog a little.

Meanwhile, Mark was bantering with Jackson in the living room. Every once in a while, he would look at his phone, but other than reading messages, he did not call nor appear to reply to any of it.

Arianne caught his action multiple times already and knew what was on his mind, even if she feigned ignorance. Again, if Mark relented and went to see Shelly, it would be something she could never recover from.

After lunch, Tiffany suggested shopping for some products for her baby. Since Arianne had also been eyeing some cosmetics, the shopping trip was a done deal. They left their kids at home for Summer to babysit for a while.

The group broke into two pairs as they roamed through the mall, with Tiffany and Arianne walking ahead of the men. It became clear that the two pairs found different topics interesting, so they hardly

rejoined into a group throughout the trip. In fact, Jackson and Mark seemed to be useful only when it was time to pay.

Even when they were outside, Mark kept spying on his phone. The instances had become so frequent that even Tiffany—not known for being perceptive at all—noticed.

“Okay, hon, what’s with your man and his phone, huh? He’s got something super important going on or what? He’s been checking his goddamned phone without pause since we were in the West family residence… It’s like he was waiting for someone! Then every time you look at him, he slips his phone back into his pocket all smooth-like…. Suspicious. Very, very suspicious. I’m not trying to imply anything, but girl, I think you need to be wary…”

Arianne cocked her eyebrow. “Wary of what? His aunt? Pfft. My radar is already on her.”

Meanwhile, Shelly sat alone before a table filled with dishes she had prepared, still as a statue. It was close to two in the afternoon. The warmth of well-cooked, meticulously-prepared meals had long escaped the dishes, taking away the vibrant colors the food must have bore when they were fresh out of the stove.

She was so certain that Mark would bring Smore along to see her. But in the end, Arianne triumphed her.

If that woman had the guts to tell Shelly, upfront, that she would make sure Mark would never visit her again, then she must have already come up with conniving stratagems to deliver her promise. Under this circumstance, seeing Mark or Smore in the future would become an uphill battle.

Abject hate and malice sprung like fountains into a pool in her heart. Shelly had been denied residency in the Tremont Estate, causing her to live all alone out here, and yet Arianne still saw no problem to bereft Shelly companionship of her remaining kin.

When she had asked Arianne to meet her yesterday, Shelly's intention was pure and uncomplicated. She wanted to provoke her, hoping that in a fit of fury, that woman would lash out on her. Mark would see it, and finally, he would remove Arianne from his side forever.

Alternatively, even if Arianne did not succumb to her anger, the distrust Shelly sowed would still be poisonous enough to mar her relationship with Mark.

Shelly was a terrifyingly patient woman. Everything would bend and cave in due time. There was nothing in this world that could make her back down on any issues concerning Mark.

A while later, Mark received a call from Shelly. Upon seeing her name on his screen, the first thing he did was to walk away from the group.

Chapter 1606

Arianne knew exactly who was on the other side of that call.

She did not follow Mark as he retreated away, but her eyes trailed after him keenly. She wanted to see what sort of trick Shelly would pull off this time.

Frenzy befell Mark as soon as he received the call. He frantically approached Jackson, who was standing close-by, said something to him, and abruptly turned away from the group. He left just like that!

Before Arianne could even say anything to stop him, the man vanished into the elevator.

Jackson was utterly baffled. “Why the hell did that guy tell me if he’s got an emergency? And why am I supposed to relay that message to Arianne? I don’t get it—why didn’t he just cut the middleman and tell you yourself? You are here! With us!”

Arianne’s face, however, had turned ashen. She could see it clearly in her mind already—Shelly’s triumphant, beaming face declaring loudly, “You lose!”

Jackson could see the unsettling changes in her expression, and he instinctively spoke in a softer voice, “Um, what’s going on with the two of you…? Where is he going?”

Bitter cold began to seize every fiber in her hands and feet as it spread from the bottom of Arianne’s heart. She had never been more disappointed with Mark in her life.

“Nothing is happening between us. In fact, nothing’s ever gonna happen between us,” she said sharply. “It’s fine, Tiffie, come on. Let’s continue.”

Tiffany and Jackson exchanged glances. Whatever this was, it was definitely not “nothing.” Still, one look at the unsettling storm on Arianne’s face, and neither of them dared ask questions.

Meanwhile, Mark rushed straight toward Shelly's place after leaving the mall. Her voice had been weak and waning by the time she called him. She told him that she had a fall while she was cleaning away the dining table, hurting her leg and head.

Just the image of Shelly—helpless and all alone—spurred a lone thought in Mark's mind: he must race to Shelly's aid as fast as he could. Arianne would spurn him from seeing her, Mark was certain. That was why he dared not be forthcoming with her.

Soon, Mark reached Shelly's unit in the condominium and quickly fished out a backup key before using it to unlock the door. He felt small consolation in owning the back-up door; otherwise, he would not have been able to open it.

He raced straight into the dining hall. There, he found Shelly sprawled on the floor, apparently unconscious. There was what looked like blood somewhere below her body, but Mark could not discern the location of the wound.

His mind went blank. His attention drifted to the food, perfectly untouched, on the table and felt pangs of guilt stabbing him.

Mark took Shelly to the hospital. While waiting, he thought of calling Arianne and explaining the situation.

But when he thought of her most likely reaction to the news, he immediately decided against it. He did not want any conflict between them—not at this moment.

A while later, the operating doctor strode out of the emergency room. “Don’t worry, sir. She’s fine. Just a scratch. The wound on her leg wasn’t torn apart by her injury, too, so all we did was administer simple first-aid.”

Mark stilled. The doctor’s prognosis was too hard to believe. “But she fainted… and bled a lot… A-Are you sure she’s okay?”

Chapter 1607

The doctor was confident. “Yes, I’m sure of it. It’s not necessarily true that heavy bleeding connotes serious wounds. At worst, her fall might accidentally trigger an older leg injury, and since it’s connected to some of her leg ligaments, it elicited a sudden jolt of pain that could, understandably, cause her to faint in agony. Either way, when the IV drip finishes, she will be ready to go home. Right now, she’s already awake.”

Mark nodded and walked inside the emergency room. Shelly was lying on the bed, her complexion ashen. The usual cherry tint in her lips was now pale and bloodless. Fluid from an IV bag hanging above her head dripped slowly through the line and into her body; chilled by the nipping, wintry air, the fluid often left the patient’s arm feeling torturously numb.

Mark reached out and held the arm that was being fed the IV drip. Just as he thought, her arm was frigid to his touch.

“Why? I texted you. I told you I wasn’t coming.”

Shelly flashed him a pallid smile. “I’m sorry, dear. I’d been busying myself preparing food since the early morning that I missed your message. By the time I came around to reading it… lunch was already set. You only told me that you weren’t coming before noon, so I thought—I held out hope—that you’d change your mind, and I wouldn’t want you and Smore to come when there’s no food on the table. But

after waiting and waiting and my cooking turning cold, I knew you were not coming anymore. I began to clear the table, but I… I'm so clumsy and useless that I tripped and fell," she recounted. "When you answered my call… you were in a mall, weren't you? You and Arianne must have been shopping at that time. Oh, Mark, would she be mad that I've borrowed you at this time?"

Mark merely shook his head wordlessly.

They waited until the IV therapy was over before Mark drove Shelly home.

By then, the sky had gradually darkened. Thinking Shelly should not be left alone in her current condition, Mark stayed and watched her finish her dinner before finally leaving.

It was midnight by the time he returned to the Tremont Estate. The house was quiet and still, and Mark thought that meant Arianne was already asleep. He crept into their bedroom with featherlight footsteps, turning to close the door just as lightly when the woman's voice suddenly sounded from behind him. "So, what happened to her?"

Mark froze in mid-action. All of a sudden, he felt panic flooding him from nowhere.

He turned on the light. "Why haven't you gone to sleep yet?"

Arianne stared at him, deadpanned. "I asked, what happened to her?"

He drew a shoddy breath. “She fell and hurt herself. It’s not a big deal, of course—just a cut that drew some blood.”

The corner of Arianne’s lips quivered into a lopsided smirk. “No big deal, a cut, and some blood. And that’s all it took to keep you until midnight? She’s got some Oscar-level acting.”

Mark frowned. “What are you implying here? You think she made this up? I saw it with my own eyes. How fake could it be? Look, I know you hold some… misgivings about her, and yes, she has done a lot of questionable things before. But you can’t just downplay a person’s experience just because one or two instances of their actions in the past hurt you. Honestly, where is her fault this time?… You know what? I’m taxed. I’d appreciate it if you don’t kick up a fuss right now, okay? Let’s all rest early.”

He failed to notice Arianne’s shuddering frame. The fury inside of her flared, torching all over her mind until she was seeing red.

“Where is her fault? Let me enlighten you, then. Her fault is that she won! She won, I frickin lost, and now she’s pleased with herself and beaming about it, isn’t she?!” Arianne fumed. “Remember how we got married? You used some sort of trick and made me your wife despite my absence. This time, though, I’m not sitting out on my divorce—I will be there. I don’t care how busy you are, and I don’t care what depraved scheme she’ll cook up tomorrow; I just want you to spend about half a day drafting the document. It’s not gonna be a drag to do, nor will it take too much of your precious, sweet time.”

Chapter 1608

Every fiber in Mark’s face that formed his expression froze. “Are… Are you crazy? How could you bring up a divorce at the drop of a hat like that?”

Arianne laughed scornfully, but her eyes were red. “‘Drop of a hat?’ Oh, no. This isn’t something said for the hell of it. I’ve simply had enough! Everyone else thinks I’m an idiot, and I agree—I am an idiot! You

Tremonts… are just a cabal of bullies! Hell, you bastards dragged my innocent father into your stupid internal politics and killed him, for Christ's sake! You people are the reason why I'm an orphan! And yet after all those travesties, what did I do in response?—I fell in love with you. I gave my heart to you. I married you and bore you a child! I'm such a punchline, I wanna laugh at myself! Stupid me thinks that we'll be able to live together, happily, all the way till a ripe, old age. But all that you've done up till now has been a slap in the face, telling me that I'm the only one deluding myself. I'm a f**king idiot!

"You knew, goddamned it; you knew! You knew Shelly pushed your mother into causing that plane crash! You knew she's the one behind it! You f**king knew she's the one who killed my father! But you…! You hid what you knew from… from me. You kept quiet, said nothing—all for her sake. All so that I'd continue to forgive her abuses and tolerate her crazy ass unconditionally! Despite how terrible Shelly treated me, you still think she's worth your obsequious devotion as you completely sideline me and Smore. Do I mean anything to you, Mark Tremont?! And all of the debts I owed by being your charge? I've long cleared 'em, you bastard. In fact, I've never owed you—it is you Tremonts who owe me everything!"

Mark's pupils dilated. He raised his arm mechanically in an attempt to pull her into a hug, but whatever courage that had spurred him to try sapped halfway through. "Who… Who told you that?"

Possessed by rage, Arianne grabbed the nearest pillow from the bed and flung it as hard as she could at him. "Your beloved Shelly-Ann Leigh, who goddamned else?! She told me herself! What, still thinking you could continue to sweep the whole thing under the rug to save her skin? I'm starting to believe that none of you Tremonts ever turned out right! Why the hell did you adopt me back then, huh?! Because guilt makes you sick? Well, guess what? While you were alleviating your guilt, your action doomed my life into a bondage with yours forever!" she bristled. "All of the things you owe me, Mark… How in hell are you supposed to pay all that?!

"Do you know why she told me all of these things? It's because I'm your wife. As long as I stay as your wife, she will always be insecure. So, screw it, I'll let her dream come true, then! Let me be free, Mark Tremont, for God's sake! Just let me be free!"

Mark made no attempt to dodge Arianne's attack; he simply let her lash out in lividity. He knew that the day Arianne learned the truth, all hell would break loose and leave behind a chaotic mess too difficult to clear. But Mark had been mentally prepared for her hysterics and was very cognizant that anything he could say right now would sound feeble, weak, and hollow.

'Let me be free!'

She said that to him before. A long time ago, word for word. She had tried so hard to run away from him back then, but little did he know that he would hear those dreaded words again.

At the end of her outburst, Arianne sank into the bed and wept wordlessly. Why was it that Mark never seemed to stand on her side since the beginning? She put herself in his shoes and worried that any conflict with Shelly would agitate Mark, so she tried all of her might to treat Shelly as kindly as she could. No matter how much Shelly aggrieved her, she had always let her grievances go.

And what was Arianne's reward for that? Mark's lies.

Silence lingered for a while longer until Mark finally approached a sobbing Arianne. He intended to assuage her pains through his touch, but before he could, she snapped steelily, "Don't you touch me!"

He stopped dead in his tracks. "I… I'm sorry. I mean it. I shouldn't have hidden it from you. But what else could have happened…. had I told you? It'd be just like this; exactly like this," he croaked, as though talking had become the most difficult thing he had ever done. "I swear, it was never my intention to keep it a secret from you. I simply… didn't know what was the best way to tell you. I didn't know the surest way to talk about it without wounding you. But I've promised myself, you know, that once my aunt's leg has recovered, I'll cease visiting her forever. Just… p-please. Please, d-don't… don't do this to us."

It sounded almost like a plea…

Arianne raised her hand and wiped away tears from the corner of her eyes. She held his gaze.

“Do you know what’s on my mind now? Do you know how I feel? That day when Shelly told me the truth, I retorted that if… if you ever stepped through her door again, I’d consider myself defeated. Get it? She has been doing everything in her power to tear me away from you since the very beginning! Fine, then! Let me fulfill her dearest wish. Go and live happily with her, Mark. She’s your blood-related, maternal aunt, after all—the bond you enjoy with her is far deeper and heartfelt than some stupid tie you haphazardly made with an orphaned outsider. I personally detest the foolish emphasis on blood relation, but in the end, it was blood that completely decimated me. In the end, the only people who don’t believe blood relations matter that much are me and Helen. You and Shelly haven’t met for a long, long time, and yet the two of you act like a mother and her son. It made me realize how delusional I had been. I’ve bitten more than I could chew, and you… You make me feel like a worthless moron.”

Chapter 1609

Yes. She was a moron, because the Tremonts killed her father and made her an orphan, bereft of kindred and support, yet she fell in love with Mark, the scion of the family. She had thought that as long as he stood by her side, she would always be alright, and yet, it turned out that he had helped Shelly hide a terrible, critical secret.

It was a direct affront to her face. It was the clearest sign that she was, doubtlessly, the world’s biggest moron—

“She isn’t my aunt… She’s my mother!”

Arianne was stunned. His sudden confession had sent a seismic shock that locked her into a statue for a second.

Then, she cried, “W-what did you just say?!”

Mark told her everything Shelly had recounted to him that day. It was so difficult that he had to force himself to say it, the one history he never planned to tell anyone.

With this new light being shed, Arianne combed back every detail in Shelly’s behavior and action of the past few months. Suddenly, the fog that had plagued her mind for so long was lifted.

“No wonder… No wonder she dotes on you,” she muttered. “And no wonder she hates me so much that she wants me to be dead already.”

Mark’s tone was placid. “Despite knowing she’s my birth mother, acknowledging the truth about my birth was never an option to consider to me, which is why I didn’t want to tell you about it. Now, I’m holding out hope for the day when her leg finally heals. That would be the day when we can go back to living our own lives without ever crossing paths again. Arianne, I just want it to be over…”

If Shelly were nothing more than Mark’s aunt, Arianne would have hoped that there was a small, but enough, room for things to turn around. But this new light—that Shelly was actually Mark’s birth mother—had made the last of her conviction crumble. “No, you’re wrong. This isn’t gonna end. Ever. She’s never letting you leave her sight,” she rebuffed. “Don’t you see? The lengths she has gone just to come back here and plant herself firmly by your side? Tell me, do you really think a woman like that will let you escape her again?”

“I’m tired, Mark. Tired of it all. If she really were just your aunt, it would be possible for you to cut ties with her, then maybe… Maybe we would still have a chance at a shared future. But she’s your mother, Mark. How can I ever be happy again as long as she looms over me?” she pointed out. “I think… I think we should split, even if it’s for a short period. I need space to breathe.”

Just then, Mary’s frantic voice laced with Smore’s bawling blared from outside the door. “Madam! Mr. Tremont! Can both of you please check on Smore? He has been having his crying fit for a while now, and I just can’t make him stop. He hasn’t been acting up like this for such a long time!”

No matter how soured their conflict may be, her son’s welfare was the one thing that could make Arianne snap out of it. Not wanting others to know about the altercation between her and Mark, Arianne rubbed her eyes clear from all traces of tears before opening the door.

She quickly took Smore into her arms and placed her hand on his forehead. “That’s odd. He isn’t feverish,” she said, puzzled. “I thought he was sleeping pretty soundly just now, wasn’t he? What made him cry all of a sudden?”

Mary’s eyes were suspiciously red. “O-Only the Lord knows. I’m old, Madam. I no longer have the strength to handle this at this late hour, so I’m gonna leave Smore to you.”

It was at that moment that Arianne understood what truly happened. Mary had overheard their conversation about divorce, so in a frantic scramble to stop the fight, she picked Smore as the silver bullet. The poor kid was not sick at all—he was just angry and hissy because Mary basically yanked him out of his sweet dreams.

The tears Arianne had been pressing back behind her eyes were threatening to break out again. She felt so feckless, it was as though she had lost the strength to carry her own son.

Mark stepped forward and eased Smore away from her arms. “I bet he’s got a nightmare. Don’t worry. I’ll coax him back to sleep. You should rest as well, Mary.”

Mary gave no answer.

Arianne returned to her seat at the edge of her bed with her head now a complete mess. As Mark had explained, Shelly did not abandon him because she wanted to; she gave him up because she had no choice. She was even “imprisoned” in a foreign land for years, which was why it took her this long to come back.

This was a war where Arianne had long been designated the loser. The only way out of a bleak future was a divorce.

She had no other choice.

Chapter 1610

Arianne just wanted Smore to live happily and free from fear. Previously, she thought that having the entire family living together was the best environment to foster that, but her mind had changed. Divorce had become the better option because what was the alternative? Boxing herself into an endless strife with Shelly?

No way in hell could Arianne continue shoving humiliation after humiliation down her throat like it was nothing. Nor could Shelly ever brook Arianne’s presence around Mark.

Mary closed the door to Arianne's bedroom and started toward the nursery. By then, Mark had already successfully coaxed Smore back into sleep.

She sighed.

"Mr. Tremont, we… we've really done it this time, haven't we?" She said in an undertone. "We can't blame Madam for being upset and wanting a divorce. Before this, she thought Mrs. Leigh was just your aunt, but now? Turns out, she's your birth mother all along. How do you expect Madam to go from here on out? My heart aches for her, Mr. Tremont. Mrs. Leigh always treats her like garbage, but she hung tough, and went and took care of her for over a month while Mrs. Leigh was in the hospital. And you thanked her by keeping a big, terrible secret from her.

"But most importantly, Mrs. Leigh handed your most guarded secret away to Madam by herself. It's obvious, isn't it? She's trying to wreak havoc and drive you and Madam apart! I understand why you wanted to keep what she told you a secret forever, but doesn't it make you wonder about Mrs. Leigh's motives? While you were trying to keep this whole thing under wraps, she tore down your effort however she could!

"Mr. Tremont, I understand that there are some things that aren't my place to say, but I have to. Even as your birth mother, the kinds of things she has done are downright appalling. You know the lengths Madam would go for you, right? You know how much she sacrificed, and how much soul she pours to you," Mary continued. "We pity Mrs. Leigh, but that doesn't mean she doesn't have a horrible side to her. Either way, Madam shouldn't have to shoulder all of this baggage!… Sigh. I pray to God that you and Madam will be good together again, Mr. Tremont. Because if you two split… I can't imagine how sad and pitiful Smore would be…"

Mary trailed off as she choked back tears, too dejected to continue.

Mark cast his gaze down and considered Smore, now snuggled in his arms. No matter how much he dissembled an unperturbed exterior, deep down inside, his heart was torn apart. “I understand, Mary. I’ll do something about this.”

Mark returned to the bedroom and found Arianne already lying down on their bed. Without a word, he went straight into the bathroom for a shower.

Unsurprisingly, Arianne was wide awake. How could sleep come to her after all that had happened?

She listened to the whispers of flowing water escaping the bathroom. It drew her mind into a trip through memories—all of the things she had done with him and for him, all of the sweet and bitter adventures they had gone through together.

Arianne could not bear the thought of leaving him.

But what else could she do? Ugly disappointment and heartfelt despair that now overwhelmed her had already stained all of her feelings for Mark. She could no longer imagine how she could continue her journey with him.

Arianne waited for Mark to come out of the bathroom before sitting up. “My decision stands,” she proclaimed calmly. “We’ll go to the civil affairs office tomorrow.”

It was not a request for permission. It was a notice.

Mark's footsteps halted into a stop. His erstwhile wrenching heart was finally slashed open by her suggestion. "No. I won't allow this. I can fix this; I can. I can fix all of this."

Arianne would resort to threats if it could coerce him into compliance. "No, you can't. If you refuse, I'll take this up to the court. I'll publicize Shelly's crime of stabbing Alejandro. I'm certain that if I explain my position to him, he'll irrevocably stand with me, and Shelly will be incarcerated for sure. I've thought long and hard about this, Mark. I've come to the epiphany that as long as Shelly draws breath, there will never be a future for the two of us. She won't stop as long as I live," she said. "I do believe in your capabilities—you can solve every problem there is under the sun. But Shelly-Ann Leigh is your birth mother; you can't fix that. Besides, I lost the bet. Stop that useless denial and admit it, Mark: you can't leave her be, and you never will. I… I admit defeat."

Mark's penetrating gaze bore through hers. When he finally spoke, his voice was audibly trembling. "Is there really no other way? Must you do this—must you leave me?"

Arianne nodded firmly. "Yes. There's no other way. I'll return the legal ownership of the Tremont Estate to you. In fact, when I leave, I won't take away anything that rightfully belongs to you. However, I won't be quitting my job in Tremont Enterprise, because I'll be taking sole custody of Smore, and I can't guarantee his present and future without a good job. There's also one other thing. I'd like for you to buy me a new place to stay and put it under Smore's name. We can't have nowhere to stay… But that is all."