Ruling 1191

Chapter 1191

Jessica flexed her feminine assets with a sweet smile. “Aww, pity. I wonder, what would you do to solve a naughty little knot like myself, hmm? The straightforward way is to sleep with me, of course. All of this would instantly cease to be a problem. And yet, you men are wired to complicate even the simplest of things. The minds of the opposite sex are so unfathomable.”

Mark had enough of her uncouth teasing. He leaped to his feet with an icy scowl and announced, “If we cannot come to a mutual agreement, then there’s no reason to continue this discussion. As for how I’d solve a knot like you… Well, a mite of patience will soon reward you with an answer.”

With that, he spun on his heels and left.

Jessica’s fervid eyes traced his retreating silhouette until he disappeared into the distance. Then, when her attention returned to her surroundings, she espied Sylvain beside her appearing to be deep in thought.

“Curious, curious. I’m literally offering myself to another man right in front of you,” she teased, “And yet, you don’t seem jealous.”

Sylvain’s lips curled briefly. “Please. The number of beaus surrounding you makes the act of being jealous a legitimate chore, wouldn’t you agree? Besides, I’m but one member of your harem. It’s quite unnecessary to be jealous of my fellow members,” he replied. “But here’s a friendly piece of advice from a long-time partner: do more research on Mark Tremont’s background. You’re not from these parts, so you don’t know who he is. Aren’t you at least worried that you might be messing with the wrong person?”

Jessica was unfazed. “C’mon, I’ve researched him enough. He’s an entrepreneur genius who was orphaned at eighteen. He has been leading the Tremont Enterprise for many years despite his youth… So what? At his core, he’s still just a businessman. And no matter how brainy he is, he’s only a man—and all men have the potential to cheat. No matter how much he loves Arianne, sooner or later, the seven-year itch will make its debut, and he will find himself craving for something new, something fresh,” she remarked. “I have chosen him as my prey, which means he’s not escaping my sight. I’ll make sure that one day, I’ll savor him until I’m satisfied.”

A wave of disgust flitted through Sylvain’s eyes, but it was so fast that no observer would have caught it.

“Alright, whatever floats your merry little boat. Oh, by the way, returning to my home country has been surprisingly pleasant. I want to stay there for awhile,” he said. “Shouldn’t be a problem, considering how I’ve been on hiatus close to half a year. No thunderbolt of creative spirit has struck me, either. Now, I’m not keen on the idea of being called a ‘has-been past his prime’ or something like that, so would you kindly let me have this vacation?”

Jessica pressed the glowing butt of her cigarette dead before tossing it into the ashtray.

“Oh, is it really for a vacation doubling as a quest for inspiration, or is it just a farce because you miss the little woman you’ve slept with, huh? You think I haven’t caught wind of your ‘exciting adventures’ since you’ve gone back home, do you?” she questioned, deadpanned. “Aww, Sylvain. You’ve always been different from everyone else in my life. You know I could never let you go, yes? You couldn’t have flown high without my help, dear. I broke your little wings a long time ago. You will always be within my palm. Remember, I can make you greater than your peers… Just as I can take that away and watch you plunge.”

She said it in an unimpressive cadence, yet every single word was a barbed threat like the thorn of a rose.

Sylvain went quiet for a few seconds. When he spoke again, he sounded lonesome. “I know, I know. I don’t plan to leave you, alright? It’s a break—that’s all it is. And that Robin Cox? She’s just some girl I’ve slept with a few times. She’s so ridiculously vanilla, how the hell is she gonna make me feel anything? But anyway, barring any sudden problem, I’ll be heading off around these two days. I’ll be in touch. That’s all. See ya.”

The first place Sylvain went after exiting Jessica’s office was the bathroom on a floor below, dousing his face with ice-cold water. When he looked up, his true feelings surfaced and took over his visage.

Sylvain was cognizant of the Tremont family’s old dirty secrets as well as Mark’s penchant for baleful, underhanded means. But none of the nitty-gritty about Mark’s real dangers, which Sylvain had gathered since returning to his native country, had ever been passed to Jessica.

He, too, was once a young naïve boy harboring rosy-colored ideas of love. Back then, he drew closer to Jessica, not to elevate his standing and prestige, but out of a bona fide desire to be with her. Of course, it did not take Sylvain a long time to realize that Jessica just wanted a pet that kept on giving. She drained his everything—his body, his energy, and even his talent. It was legitimately impressive of her to exploit every single strength he had so thoroughly.

Slowly, he came to realize that he was her boiling frog. The only ending down the road was bleak and destructive, yet Sylvain was utterly caged.

Chapter 1192

He had bound himself to the fame and expectations of a “renowned fashion designer,” and he knew that Jessica could easily ruin him through that. Either Jessica falls alone, or he dies along with her—it was high time that Sylvain made a decision.

He might still wear the glorious façade of prestige in public, but he knew better. His current life had ceased to provide him with even a shadow of design inspiration, and he had not produced any exceptional work for at least half a year. He had become nothing more than a useless parasite leeching off a woman.

Jessica was right to suspect his ulterior motive for returning. Yes, it was because of Robin Cox—the girl with a name most befitting of her character. She was a happy, chirping robin in a bright, sunny day. Whenever Sylvain was with her, he also felt his personhood acknowledged. He felt as though he was slowly reanimating, and his creativity—stifled for half a year—began to see signs of life.

The one thing Sylvain wanted the most was to prove that, even without Jessica, he was still the top-level fashion designer the world had known him as. Even without her, he would still be able to create awe-inspiring designs.

He wanted to prove to himself that it was his own talent and skills that made him. None of it was ever because of Jessica.

That night, someone knocked on Mark's hotel door.

Mark signaled his bodyguard, who was never one step too far from him unless Mark needed to rest, to answer the door for him.

Right outside stood one of the hotel receptionists, who passed a document folder someone had instructed him to give.

The bodyguard delivered it to Mark, whose first impression was that it was rather thick for something so nondescript. Intrigued, he opened the folder and began examining its content.

To his surprise, the folder was filled with intimate photos between Jessica and men of all kinds, with a considerable number of them being rather risqué and uninhibited. Mark continued a cursory examination and noted that he could not find a single photo depicting Sylvain and Jessica together.

It was almost a given who the mysterious sender was.

It was true that preparation for Mark's scheme was underway, and the man knew that few things in life could decimate a person in public as devastatingly as a reputation-hurting scandal. Still, none of the information he had gathered thus far could rival the comprehensive wealth of intel in this unassuming folder, so he had to admit that it was a godsend. Thanks to it, many of the most toilsome parts of his scheme were completed.

He tucked the document folder to safety and instructed the bodyguard, "Get a hold of Sylvain Trudeau's schedule."

If Mark's prediction was correct, Sylvain should be aiming to flee right now before the storm ravaged. It would not surprise him one bit if Sylvain had left the city by the time this folder reached Mark's hands.

Ten minutes or so passed, and the bodyguard returned with news. "Trudeau booked a flight back home tonight."

Well, well, well. It turned out that Sylvain had betrayed Jessica and fled. Offering a treasure trove of Jessica's most intimate secrets was a tacit negotiation on his part, too—he wanted to protect himself, so he gifted Mark information in exchange for mercy.

Since Arianne had told him not to harm Sylvain, Mark never planned to hurt the man with his scheme. Nevertheless, Sylvain's contribution was a boon to his side, as it inadvertently bumped his progress forward.

Just then, the hotel phone inside his room rang. As it was within an arm's length, Mark instinctively answered it.

Before he could say anything, though, he heard Jessica's voice from the other side, taunting, "Good evening, Mark Tremont. I was wondering if you'd like to have a drink with me? I know you're digging up my information right now. Typical move when you wanna knock someone down their throne, mm-hmm? Now, now. Wouldn't it be more straight-to-the-point if we meet up? I'll be happy to chat with you about absolutely anything. Just ask, and you shall be answered. I wouldn't just tell you how many men I have hooked up with, Mark, but I'd even tell you the juicy, uncanny details between us too, tee hee. You see, there are some things about me that you could never get wind of unless I let you in on them. Surely, you remember that this turf you're in right now isn't your little Capital."

Chapter 1193

Instead of turning red in frustration and slamming down the phone, Mark simply placed his hand on top of the folder and replied calmly, "Oh, is that so? You're that confident that I won't ever dig up your secrets, huh?"

Jessica was sure that her secrets were secured. "Do I sound like I have doubts? So, are we gonna meet up?"

Mark’s lips twisted into a smirk. “No, I don’t think I will. In fact, if you’ve got nothing to say now, I’ll hang up right away.”

After that, he hung up. To Mark, the victor in this battle had already emerged.

The next day started with multiple major international media websites breaking all kinds of intimate photos between Jessica and many different men. Eyeball-popping as they were, they instantly became viral both within and outside the country.

The bombshell news then escalated into such drastic levels that many prominent media sites had censored much of the details even before Jessica could personally conduct damage control. Unfortunately, the censors were no match for the news' rapid spread, so now every netizen had caught on to the scandals.

Adding insult to injury, Jessica’s private residential address was released to the public, causing her house to be surrounded by a swarm of journalists. Jessica could not even leave her house, let alone look for Mark in person.

Tearing down a business magnate required one to be relentless in their attacks, so Mark also released incriminating records pertaining to Jessica’s company itself, including her years-long tax evasion. The details revealed such egregious misconduct that the only possible end to this legal storm was for Jessica to clear all of her tax debts, be subjected to hefty fines, and do time in prison.

After everything was said and done, Mark purchased a plane ticket home instantly. He was disinterested in staying back and watching every moment of Jessica’s downfall—it was unnecessary, even as a form of entertainment.

Jessica, meanwhile, was essentially forced to quarantine at home for almost a full day. Her luxury house, which was once her pride, had now become her gilded cage.

She thought she had all of her weaknesses covered and that Mark would never be able to pry a single detail of it. However, it turned out that her adversary had not only managed to find the skeletons in her closet, but also orchestrated a no-holds-barred exposé on them!

Her company was under investigation. If evidence of tax evasion cropped up and these allegations were confirmed, her life would be over.

Jessica could not fathom how Mark managed to get his hands on her secrets as well as the evidence that backed them. As she sank into a fitful search for answers, she suddenly remembered Sylvain's warning, and a connection was made.

With shaky hands, she dialed Sylvain's number and waited. The call could not connect.

Jessica was grasping at whatever she had to remain in control. She took out a cigarette and only managed to light it after multiple attempts because her hands were quaking so much.

She took a deep breath and curled herself into a ball on the couch, her face as ashen as a vengeful ghost. The usual lights had left her increasingly glassy eyes. "Sylvain f**king Trudeau, you double-crossing snake—"

In her trance, the cigarette burned to its end. Pain flared up in her fingers, finally jolting her back into reality as she dropped the still-glowing cigarette butt onto her expensive carpet. It burned a hole through.

Jessica scrolled through her call history and hesitated for a beat before hitting “call” on Mark’s number.

Immediately after the call connected, Jessica shrieked into the phone hysterically, “How the f*** did you get your grimy hands on those things?!”

Mark, who was at the boarding gate, received her call with such aplomb that bystanders would think he was talking to an old friend. “Do you mean the photos or evidence of tax evasions?”

Jessica was silent, but her body shook like a leaf.

Mark gave a soft chuckle. “If I want something, I’ll find a way to get it… Don’t you know that? I guess this further proves that you don’t know me that well, after all. You should have done more research on who I am before making your little plans,” he taunted. “The truth is, Jessica, you’re nothing to me. Perhaps you should remember this.”

The call ended. For a moment, there was only Jessica’s hoarse, livid howl and the cacophony of a phone smashing into pieces.

Chapter 1194

Jessica’s raging fit eventually died, but in its wake, pure spite and malice lingered in her eyes.

Quickly, she booted up her laptop and disseminated the story between her and Sylvain out into the public. If her world was going to crumble, then she might as well drag someone down with her.

A few days later, the most recent development in Jessica's scandals made headlines back home. The strength of the gathered evidence, along with her affront to legality and common decency, effectively cemented Jessica as guilty. She was sentenced to three years of imprisonment.

The case's ripple effect then passed onto famous male fashion designers who had worked closely with her. Since many of their illicit relationships with Jessica were also publicly outed, their future was more or less doomed.

Arianne was one of the last persons to have heard about the entire debacle. In fact, she only caught wind of it because her co-workers were engrossed in the discussion the scandal had sparked. Sure, Mark returned home a few days ago, but he had decidedly skirted around the details and oversimplified the conclusion as "it's over now, relax."

When Sylvain abruptly left the company, Mr. Yaleman had been downright heartbroken, calling it "the company losing its golden goose." But after knowing about the troubles the very same Sylvain was now embroiled in, Mr. Yaleman's mood skyrocketed enough that he broke his usual miserly streak today and bought coffee for everyone in the office. It was quite a magnificent example of schadenfreude.

Arianne brought a cup to Robin's desk. "Here you go."

Robin appeared distracted. "Oh, it's just you, Arianne…. Um, I don't do coffee, so you drink it."

Arianne patted her on the back. “You heard about what happened to Sylvain, haven’t you? I bet it’s because Jessica wanted someone to suffer along with her. Honestly, all these years of working so hard for her, yet none of his efforts attracted an ounce of mercy in the end.”

Robin forced a smile. “I can’t wrap my head around it. Jessica is bad, through and through—I mean, she’s not at all good news, right? For someone to be so closely associated with her, do you think the old adage about how birds of a feather fly together applies here? Does this mean Sylvain is as much of a jerk as she is?”

Arianne was hard-pressed to answer a question like that. “Hey, we should probably not harp on this too much. How about we have a barbecue or something tonight? Smore is weaning off my milk, so gone are the days when I have to be overly guarded about what goes into my mouth.”

Unfortunately, Robin’s spirits were too down in the dump. “Maybe next time, okay? I’m feeling really sleepy today for some reason. It’s like I can’t keep my eyes open for long. I’ll definitely host a BBQ party for you next time, though.”

Arianne gave no reply other than a soft sigh before returning to her desk.

A few moments later, Mr. Yaleman, whistling happily, approached her. “Oh, morning, Arianne! All of those things about Sylvain are true, huh? Who would have thought! I thank the Lord that he hadn’t stayed with us, or our company woulda suffered some really nasty brand damage! Oof!” he remarked. “And let’s not forget that Jessica! Jesus Christ, I’ve never seen a woman like that in my life before! Tsk, tsk. She doesn’t hold a candle to you at all, Arianne.”

It seemed that Mr. Yaleman had forgotten just how much he bootlicked Sylvain before the latter's departure, and this jarring change in attitude was not earning Mr. Yaleman any favor in Arianne's mind. "I don't know, Mr. Yaleman. I'm in the middle of something here. You're distracting me," she intoned.

Mr. Yaleman broke out a forced, coy chuckle. "Oops! Sorry. I'll be going."

The day quickly wound down to an end. As usual, Mark personally drove Arianne home from her company. En route, she remarked, "Sylvain probably didn't expect Jessica, who was the one who brought him to his zenith, to also be the one to drag him all the way to his nadir, huh? All those juicy secrets between Jessica and Sylvain were only revealed a while after that woman's travesties had gone public, so I know it wasn't you. The best explanation I could come up with is that Jessica just wanted to drag someone to hell with her."

"Nah, he predicted all of this," Mark replied flatly. "I would have needed more time to gather her dirty secrets, but Sylvain removed that toilsome job from me by providing me with the precise information I needed. He wanted to protect himself, that Sylvain, which means he expected Jessica's skeletons to be exposed to the public sooner or later. He knew what he was signing up for when he presented me with all of those incriminating pieces of evidence, yet still… he did it anyway. I have a nagging feeling that this is his payback for living under that woman's iron grasp for too long.

"In fact, none of the guys, who erstwhile had no problem being intimate with Jessica, wanted to speak for her after this blew up. They're only focused on defending themselves," Mark pointed out. "It's obvious. Theirs is a risky for-profit relationship. It was never anything beyond that."

Chapter 1195

Arianne was stunned for a second before relief overwashed her. "Ah. So Sylvain still has a conscience after all. I know his betrayal was more of a self-preserving gambit than anything, but hey… he made a good choice."

‘And, at least, Robin didn’t fall in love with the wrong person,’ she added in her head.

“Sylvain sent you home once, didn’t he?” Mark suddenly took a sharp turn in their discussion. “You don’t happen to think I knew nothing about it, do you? And also, what’s with this relief in your voice, huh? What, happy that some other guy isn’t a complete douchebag?”

Arianne pursed her lips. “Oh, so someone’s installed security cameras on the entrance gate and spied on me, huh? ‘Cause I know for a fact that Mary wouldn’t have told you that. But to get to your question: yes, he did send me home once. That was before I knew him well enough!—Scrap that; I still don't know him well enough even now. And didn’t he get close to me out of an ulterior motive? I was the one who received him with nothing less than pure intent! And then there’s the fact that he’s Robin’s man. They held hands for two days, okay? So yeah, can you please not imagine things that haven’t happened?” she rebuked. “More importantly, I like your type more than any other kind of guys anyway!”

Mark’s lips quivered. “Now, that’s my woman of culture and taste. By the way, I’m not working overtime tonight. I probably won’t have to for a good while, as a matter of fact. Finally, I can spend more time with you at home.”

Arianne stared out of her window as the scenery from outside flitted past her line of vision. “Oh,” she hummed absent-mindedly.

“Hold on, what does ‘oh’ mean? You don’t sound thrilled having me around, do you? Or am I overthinking this?” he mumbled.

Arianne quickly turned to glare at him. “Please. I was just thinking about how you’d managed to discover Jessica’s tax evasion crime so soon. I expected you to be gone for a few days, but you somehow got it done in a snap.”

Mark sneered. “Does it honestly surprise you that she’d avoid paying her taxes? It was easy. All I did was go after her finance department, who helped her fake the accounts, and persuaded them with a little cash and benefits. Ratting out someone's tax frauds could yield quite the monetary benefit, you know. Why would they continue to hide her records when presented with that sort of reward? You know how fickle loyalty can be. Sometimes, all it takes is a little nudge, and the ball rolls on its own. Plus, her way of securing loyalty is entirely off-base—you can’t expect benefits and intimidation to work all the time. I’m not at all surprised that all of her lackeys ended up abandoning and betraying her without second thoughts.”

Frankly, Arianne was inclined to approve of Mark’s method in this specific case. At the very least, his methods had been apt and markedly less extreme.

The two soon returned to the Tremont Estate. When they passed by the entrance gate, Arianne made it a point to scan the surroundings and found the hidden cameras. She had never noticed them before…

Mark followed her eyes and understood what she was looking at, so he feigned an attempt to knock on her head. Arianne quickly ducked, covering her head with her arms before busting through the front door. “Hey, no hitting my head! I was just checking if you’d planted these security cameras around, okay? And you did! You had them all along!”

Mark did not even try to deny it. “Of course, I always have cameras all over the gate! What? You think I installed them just to watch you in secret? I could be doing this for legitimate security purposes too, you know!”

Seeing them fooling around delighted Mary to no end, whose lips stretched into a wide, bright grin. Mark had never been so playful before—not even when he was just a kid. “Back already, the two of you? Well, wash up and get ready for dinner. Smore is starving!”

Seeing Smore made Arianne stop and regain her more mature composure. He reminded her that she was, first and foremost, a mother, so she should not be acting like a kid.

She pulled the child to her and pecked him on the cheek. “Did you miss your Mommy while she was away?”

Smore seemed a little stunned by her kisses. Then, he reached out his tiny hands and clasped them around her neck before rubbing his little face against hers affectionately.

It was so sweet that Arianne swore her heart was about to melt. “Oh my gosh, you smell so good, Sweetie! You got lotion all rub-rubbed over you, didn’t ‘cha?”

“Oh, I rub lotion on our little man every day, alright—keeps the face hydrated, you know,” Mary chimed in. “But Lord, look at his skin! It’s practically flawless, just like you and Mr. Tremont’s! And as smoothly fair, too.”

Mark flashed Mary a smile before climbing up the stairs and heading to their room. It was his habit to bathe immediately after returning home.

Arianne, however, only took her bath after getting Smore to sleep. She came out of the bathroom with a face mask plastered on her, which attracted Mark’s sidelong glances.

“What?” she asked. “Is there something wrong with me?”

He retracted his attention. “Nothing. I just don’t get why women like face masks so much.”

Arianne knew that, as a man, Mark had no inkling of the power of facial masks. “If you’re looking for that one logical reason, there isn’t any. We just like them. Wanna give it a try though?”

Chapter 1196

Of course, Mark denied the request. “Don’t even think about it. My face is not your torture device. I will not look like a sissy.”

The more he protested, the more Arianne wanted to do it. She pulled out a facial mask and forced him down on the bed. “Don’t move. It’ll be over soon. You’ll love it. Your face will be all soft and fragrant by the time I’m done. Isn’t that wonderful? Come on, let’s try.”

Mark vehemently objected. He twisted his head around. “No!”

He began to give up when he noticed droplets of water from the facial mask on his body. He was now too afraid to make any more big movements. “Take it away. I don’t need it!”

Realizing that his struggling had lessened, Arianne swiftly pasted the facial mask on his face. “See, isn't it better to listen to me? You just had to struggle, didn’t you?”

Suddenly, Arianne’s phone rang. She already had her way, so she got down from bed to answer the call. She reminded him, “Take care of that yourself. Don’t leave it all scrunched up or it won’t be evenly distributed. I’m going to answer this call.”

The call was from Robin. They had a short discussion on work, nothing too urgent. When she turned around after the call, she found Mark meticulously smoothing out the mask on his face. She thought that he would tear it off at once… Was he being a hypocrite?

She burst into laughter. “Hey, tell me, you don’t spend a lot of time on your face, so how did you get such a nice complexion? You’re already past thirty, yet you don’t have a single wrinkle on your face.”

Mark gave her a sidelong glance and didn’t answer, as if he were displeased at her for mentioning his age.

After that, Mark suddenly hugged her. “Actually… My reason for fixing that surveillance camera on the door has to do with you.”

She paused for two seconds. “Uh… And?”

He stumbled. “Back when I went overseas for three years, I wanted to see if you came home on time, nothing else. I haven’t checked that surveillance camera in a while. I heard about Sylvain dropping you off from a conversation between Mary and Henry.”

Arianne didn't answer. So, Mark had used that surveillance camera to watch her during his three year stint away from the country. She couldn't describe how she felt. She thought that they never interfered in each other's affairs.

Her silence made Mark hold her even tighter. "You're not angry, are you?"

Arianne shook her head. "No, I never believed you when you said that you installed that surveillance as an anti-theft device. The Tremont Estate's bodyguards stand guard 24/7. What thief would dare break in here? I'm tired. I'm going to sleep."

Mark fell silent for a few seconds from behind. He released her and turned away, with his back facing her.

Arianne came to a sudden realization. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," he mumbled. "Aren't you tired? Go to sleep."

The tone in his voice clearly displayed that something was wrong. He would continue sulking at her if she did not coax him. Arianne knew his habits, so she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her face against his back. "I am sleepy. The weather is so cold too. Cuddling makes it warmer."

Chapter 1197

Once she sensed his slightly stiffened body relax, Arianne went to sleep in peace.

…

The weather was getting warmer in spring. Warm winter wear was shirked off and Aristotle was now crawling even faster than before. Not even Arianne could keep up with him, let alone Mary. She usually ended up drenched in sweat from chasing him around. Furthermore, Aristotle had begun showing signs of learning to walk and would prop himself against a wall to take two steps, then stumble and fall on his bum. Even so, he didn't cry. He was a strong baby.

Tiffany was getting ready for the birth and would call Arianne every day lately, asking her questions on what the baby would need and what to prepare. She would ask the same question countless times, over and over again. She was getting overly worried.

Jackson had completely let go of work too. He stayed with Tiffany every day, refusing to leave her at all.

Tiffany checked into the hospital during the estimated time of her birth. She had initially decided on natural birth but changed her mind in the end and insisted on a Cesarean.

During her visit at the hospital, Arianne advised, "I still think that a natural birth would be better. You have a healthy body. It's such a pity for you to opt against it. The recovery rate will be too slow if you go for a surgery. It's going to be painful anyway. Why did you suddenly change your mind?"

Tiffany had been so anxious lately that she hadn't been able to have a good night's sleep. Her pallor had waned. She now lost the chubbiness that she had gained over the past few months and seemed to be losing weight. "I'm just scared of 'that'."

"What?" Arianne asked, confused.

Tiffany secretively leaned into her ear and whispered her explanation. She immediately felt embarrassed. "You really are… If you're so worried about that, know that there are so many natural births going around, so wouldn't they have already… affected conjugal relations?"

Tiffany disagreed. "You had a Cesarean. Of course, you have nothing to worry about. I don't want to lose interest in sex with my husband at a young age. You know what Jackson is like. He has high requirements in that area. Do I really want to struggle over this, if I don't recover properly? I'd much rather endure the surgery for his sake and mine. It scares me to think of that thing popping out from inside of me like that…"

The corners of Arianne's lips twitched. "Fine. Pretend I never advised you. All is well as long as you're happy and as long as you don't suffer from the intense pain later. You saw how it was like for me when I gave birth to Smore. I was in pain for a good few days after the surgery. You won't die from the pain! Furthermore, that's your son in your belly; it's not a 'thing'. You're going to be a mother soon, so start acting like one."

"Daughter!" Tiffany sniffed with displeasure. "Who said it was a son?"

Just as she had spoken, Summer and Jackson entered the ward with a thermal lunchbox. Summer smiled contentedly as she said, "My grandson must be hungry. Come, Tiffie, time to eat. Arianne is here too. You can chat with Tiffie now. She's getting antsy now that the baby is coming."

Tiffany wouldn't dare dispute the baby's gender with Summer. Arianne stepped aside in amusement. "You enjoy your food. I'm going home. Don't worry, I'll be right outside the operating theater when the baby arrives. We'll all be there. Stay calm and don't worry…"

"I'll walk you out," Jackson offered.

Arianne waved her hand. "No need, no need. Just stay with Tiffie. It's only a short distance, and it's not like we're strangers. I can manage."

Jackson did not insist. He had been suffering the most during this time. It was clear by the sight of his sunken cheeks; his cheekbones were more prominent than ever.

After leaving the ward, Arianne casually strolled to the elevator and waited. She sensed someone walking toward her, so she shifted aside, thinking that they wanted to take the elevator too. She only realized who it was when that person spoke up.

Chapter 1198

"Tiffany's about to pop too, isn't she?"

Arianne turned to the side to look and found Jett holding a lunch box. Looks like Tanya had checked in at the hospital to wait for her birth too. After all, she conceived around the same time as Tiffany. She nodded. "That's right. Tanya's almost due too, isn't she?"

“Mm,” Jett replied. The elevator door opened then. He stayed in his spot and let Arianne go in first. Then, he followed.

Now, it seemed that everything Tanya had gone through was for nothing. Jett was the father of her baby, and a meticulous and chivalrous man. Tanya would have a good life with him.

Arianne and Jett weren’t close, so they simply exchanged a few conversational words.

However, bumping into Jett served as a reminder for Arianne that there was a ticking time bomb in the form of Alejandro, lying in wait. Who knew when he would decide to explode?

Smith Manor.

At the dinner table, Don Smith took meticulous care of Melanie. The table was filled with an array of nutritious meals, tailored specifically for pregnant women. He wouldn’t even let her take her own food. However, she knew that despite everything good that came with her union with the Smith family, Alejandro did not love her…

The nicer Don Smith was to her, the more obvious Alejandro’s distance felt.

Don Smith had always disliked Alejandro’s aloof attitude toward Melanie. “Ale, Melanie’s belly is growing. Try to spend more time with her while your legs are still recuperating. Stop daydreaming all the time. What are you thinking about?”

Alejandro continued eating his dinner with indifference and did not respond.

Melanie was forced to act cheerful in order to lift the mood. “It’s alright, grandfather. Alex is just in a bad mood because his legs haven’t healed after a long time. I can understand. I may need to watch my feelings during my pregnancy, but he’s just the same. Don’t nag him, okay? He’s been staying home every day now, hasn’t he? I can see him whenever I want. That’s considered spending time with me already.”

The more sensible Melanie was, the more resentful Don Smith felt towards Alejandro.

Alejandro was not in the mood to deal with such a heavy atmosphere. He picked up his walking stick and left the dinner table. His legs have been recuperating quite well over the past few months, and he no longer needed the wheelchair. Instead, he could walk on his own with a custom-made walking stick. However, Don Smith still refused to transfer the Smiths’ business authority over to him. On the surface, it was done out of concern. In reality, he was simply trying to use this as an opportunity to restrain him.

Melanie hurried after him when she saw him leave without eating his food. She returned to their room and asked in a soft voice, “What’s wrong with you? Grandfather was just grumbling. You shouldn’t mind him too much. It’s not a good idea to live in constant hostility. We’re a family, after all. He’s your grandfather.”

“The Larks may be sentimental about these things, but the Smiths are different. He’s only nice to you because you’re an outsider. You’re a Lark,” Alejandro indifferently explained.

The word “outsider” sounded piercing. Melanie felt disappointed. “So, I’m an outsider to you?”

Alejandro didn't answer. The space between his brows showed hints of impatience. Not only did he have to face a battle of wits with Don Smith, but he also had to take extra care of Melanie's feelings. Honestly, he didn't have that much patience. The best way was to stay silent.

Melanie laughed in a self-derisive manner and did not argue. "I heard that Tanya will be giving birth soon. She has checked into the hospital. Tiffany has done the same in the same hospital."

Chapter 1199

Alejandro frowned at the mention of Tiffany's name. "Stop fixating on other people's business and take care of yourself."

"You're worried that I'm paying Tiffany too much attention, aren't you?" she asked. "Don't worry, I won't do anything to her. That's not who I am. I'm just giving you an update on her condition. You'd be keeping an eye on her too, even if I kept my mouth shut, wouldn't you?"

Alejandro didn't deny it. It's true, he had been paying close attention to everything about Tiffany, including her checking into the hospital to wait for her delivery. He knew all about it.

At that moment, Melanie truly felt exhausted. It was an exhaustion that stemmed from her mental state. Alejandro was like a rock, a rock that would never warm up. No matter how much she tried, she would only ever have a cold reception from him. His occasional display of warmth was simply to put on a show for outsiders.

She didn't want to live the next half of her pregnancy in depression. After a long pause, she said, "I think I'll go back to Ayashe tomorrow and spend the rest of my pregnancy there. I'm not used to this place."

At least, she felt more relaxed at the Larks' home and didn't need to constantly walk on eggshells, paying close attention to other people's opinions and moods.

"Whatever!" Alejandro irritably snapped. "Are all women this troublesome? Whining and threatening to leave whenever something doesn't go their way? Do you really think that will work on me?"

Melanie tried her best to control her emotions. "You're overthinking things. I just feel unhappy staying here, and I'm not used to this place anyway. It's bad for the baby if I hold in my emotions all the time. I'm not throwing a tantrum at you, and I'm not hoping for you to go through the trouble of putting on a show, just to please me. That's all…" Then, she turned around and walked out, making her way back to the dinner table to continue her meal.

Don Smith could see the tears in her eyes and asked, "Did he piss you off again?"

Melanie hurriedly shook her head. "No! I'm just sleepy. My back's been aching lately too. The doctor says that this is quite common during pregnancy. Grandfather, I'm starting to miss my home. I'd like to go back home for the rest of my pregnancy. Is that okay? It has got nothing to do with anyone; I just feel like going home. Perhaps my mental state is more fragile due to my pregnancy…"

Of course, Don Smith did not believe her. "Melanie, I have experience. You can't fool me. It's quite normal for couples to fight. If there's a problem, you can always discuss it behind closed doors. There's no need to go home to your mother. It wouldn't do you any good if everyone found out about this, would it? You're not children anymore. Don't solve your problems impulsively."

It may have sounded like advice, but in reality, it seemed more like a scolding.

Melanie was suddenly reminded of Alejandro's words. Don Smith was only nice to her because she was an outsider. She was a Lark… She was nothing more than a tool for benefit in his eyes. Her feelings and opinions, none of them mattered, did they? She simply wanted to go back to her home, a place most familiar to her, while she was in this fragile state. Why wasn't she allowed to do that?

She was close to breaking down. "Grandfather, do I look like I'm throwing a tantrum to you? I just want to spend the rest of my pregnancy in my own home. Why can't I do that? Yes, it's true. Alejandro and I have our conflicts. But I've never mentioned our quarrels to anyone in my family. I've been swallowing it all on my own! I've been putting myself in everyone else's shoes and putting both our families into consideration. You shouldn't think of me in that way. I'm not being impulsive. I just want to go home. That would be good for me and the baby."

Chapter 1200

Seeing her rise in emotions, Don Smith had no choice but to soften his tone. "Melanie, you've misunderstood me. That's not what I mean. I'm not asking you to shield Ale in front of your family members. I'm well aware of how he's been treating you, and it's his fault. I'm just worried that separating from this conflict would only estrange both of you further, instead of solving the problem. If you really want to go, have Ale take you there. You have to smooth things over before you leave, understand?"

Melanie didn't want to waste her energy on guessing what Don Smith was thinking. It didn't matter if everything wasn't what it seemed. Having to deal with conjectures all the time was too tiresome. She didn't feel like caring anymore, and did not want to try reading his mind. All she wanted to do was to deliver this baby, safe and sound. "I understand."

Upon returning to her room after dinner, she realized that Don Smith had an ulterior motive in asking Alejandro to take her back to Ayashe. Alejandro probably wouldn't care, which meant that the real meaning behind Don Smith's words was—if she wanted to go, she needed Alejandro's approval first. If Alejandro refused to take her, she could forget about leaving. Don Smith knew Alejandro very well. Therefore, Don Smith never intended on letting her go in the first place.

Alejandro's words served as a reminder for her; she was nothing more than an outsider in the Smith household. She needn't take the old man's kindness towards her seriously. Kindness with an ulterior motive was worthless.

Despite having all of that in mind, she confronted Alejandro. "Grandfather has asked you to take me back to Ayashe. I just want to stay there for the rest of my pregnancy. I'll come back when the baby is born. I just can't seem to adapt to this place. I could do it before I got pregnant, and I was able to tolerate it all. But now that I'm pregnant, I'm feeling even more uncomfortable than ever. I can't eat or sleep. Please, try to consider my needs."

To her surprise, Alejandro agreed this time. "Sure, when do we leave?"

His agreement seemed too easy, a stark contrast from his previous attitude. As a result, she lost her senses for a moment. "Uh… Will tomorrow be okay? You don't think that I'm throwing a tantrum anymore?"

Alejandro shot her an indifferent glance. "I'll have more peace and quiet when you leave. Besides, you have a point. You weren't raised in the capital, so it's quite understandable that you'd have difficulty adapting here. Your pregnancy is a special case. If you want to go home, go. Even if you are throwing a tantrum, it doesn't matter to me. I'll play along with whatever you want. That way, everyone's happier."

His answer was both pertinent and aloof. Melanie smiled. Her smile carried hints of bitterness. "Hehe… Fine. You want peace and quiet, and so do I. Everyone's happy. That's not so bad."

…

The next morning, Arianne received a call from Tiffany in the midst of her busy work day. She blinked furiously when the phone rang and felt slightly rattled. She put down her work, stepped aside, and answered the call—it was Jackson. “Tiffie’s stomach suddenly began hurting today. She’s in surgery now. She asked me to call you and say that she wants you to be here. She’ll tear me to pieces if she doesn’t see you here when she’s out. Can you come over?”

Arianne panicked. “I’m at the office. I’ll come over immediately. I’ll be there before she’s done with surgery. That’s it for now. I have to do my handovers!”

After ending the call, she quickly called Robin over. “Fix up this sample for me; I’m already halfway done. There’s been an emergency, and I have to take the day off. Thank you!”