Ruling 1341

Chapter 1341

Alejandro drew a quick, shallow breath before proclaiming, “You’re overthinking. It doesn’t matter if I did it as Alejandro Smith or Ethan Connor; I am me. I am the one who married you, and I’m the one who fathered our daughter. In similar veins, our marriage is true.”

It was the first time Melanie ever felt assured. If he was not going to abandon her, then perhaps all she needed was time to win the rest of him.

…

Despite planning for a week-long break, Arianne departed home on the fifth day.

She initially thought of resolving as much café-related work as she could within this week, but she missed Smore more and more terribly as time passed. In the end, she decided to hand the job to Naya since she was free enough to watch the café’s renovation during the day.

Arianne had already finalized the café’s renovation plan and addressed all of its finer details, so all Naya had to do was stick to it.

It was already the wee hours by the time Arianne reached the Tremont Estate. Mark and Smore were already fast asleep. With featherlight footwork, she placed her suitcases down, hurriedly bathed, and burrowed under the sheets.

All illusion that she was stealthy enough not to wake them up shattered when Mark suddenly wrapped his arms around her from behind. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home today? And why in the middle of the night—alone? You could give me a fright with this! You could have flown during the day. Why didn’t you?” he protested.

“Midnight flights are the cheapest, Mark,” she replied softly. “All I cared about was coming home by today, be it in the day or night. Aren’t you happy that I saved some of your money?”

“S-urgh-s-save my money?!” The bitterness in Mark’s voice turned up a notch. “Who told you to save squat? Jesus, would you ever do something about that miserly characteristic of yours? Are you that strapped for cash?”

The last thing Arianne, already exhausted from the long journey, wanted to do right now was to engage in a quarrel with this one. Swiftly, she cupped her hand over his unrelenting mouth. “Okay, nightie-night, will talk to you tomorrow. Can’t even open my eyes now, good night!”

Arianne fell into a deep sleep within minutes, but Mark was not so lucky. First, her movements woke him up from his slumber, and now, while he was filled with a burst of desire, she closed shop before they could get anything started.

For the rest of the long, unexciting night, Mark had no choice but to gawk at her, his hunger unsated.

The next day was a weekend, which allowed the two to wake up in the late eleven-o’clock morning. By then, Smore was already playing with Mary in the estate yard for the entire morning.

While the couple was washing up, Mark stood behind Arianne and pulled her into his chest. He nibbled on her earlobe and breathed, “I woke up late today—all thanks to you. For the record, I haven’t overslept for so many years.”

Arianne, tickled, shrunk back. “Wow, it’s impressive how dull and rigid your life is. What’s the harm in sleeping a little bit more during the weekends? Aren’t you ever bored by your unexciting routine?… Oh, stop tickling me now! Look, it’s almost noon. Time to go downstairs for lunch! I’m starving.”

Mark was miffed by Arianne’s response. In retaliation, he traced invisible circles all around her waist with his slender, nimble fingers. “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘distance makes the heart grow fonder,’ hmm? On second thought, what’s with your oh-so-many excuses? You told me you were too exhausted last night, and now you’re too hungry. Did it occur to you that I’m also absolutely ravishing? Why don’t you sate my appetite right here, right now, why don’t you?”

Arianne felt her body turning into jelly. But before she could answer him, she spied Smore’s curious face peeking out from the door.

The eyes he leveled at his parents were so inquisitive that they burned Arianne’s cheeks, and she shoved Mark away from her before scooping the boy up into her arms. “S-Smore! Did you, uh, climbed the stairs yourself? Or did Granny bring you up here?”

Smore ignored what his mother said. Instead, he lurched and bit his mother’s earlobe, shocking her.

She shot an accusatory glare at Mark. “Who told you to act like a horndog in front of our kid? Look what he’s learned from you!”

Mark looked helpless. “The kid’s learned it by watching us in secret, Ari. I didn’t even know he was there! C’mon, kids this age are good at copying what they see, right? He probably thinks this is just, uh, a fun thing to do?”

Smore glanced at his mother, then at his father, before suddenly copying Arianne’s tone and “chiding” Mark. He was babbling gibberish, of course, but the mimicry of his mother’s vitriol was a tad bit too uncanny—

Arianne’s jaw slackened. It was apparent that the two of them needed to be more mindful of their actions from now on, lest Smore begin to pick up every single thing his parents did. Their little baby had grown up enough to be conscious of and receptive of the world around him, after all.

Maybe it was high time to reconsider Mark’s suggestion and let Smore sleep in a separate room…

Chapter 1342

As they were enjoying their lunch, Mark suddenly received a call from his company. From the way things sounded, Arianne was sure he would have to leave soon after.

Immediately after his call ended, Arianne asked, “So, your office needs you, huh? What kind of emergency could steal you from a weekend?”

Mark sneered. “Well, it’s no thanks to our old partner in transportation and freight, who went through a crisis the other day. It convinced me to seek other companies deserving of a long-term partnership. By a stroke of bad luck, I guess, this drew Alejandro’s attention, and he set his sight on me. I signed a contract with him under the pretense of an agreement, thinking I would be able to find others to work with, but that snake managed to threaten all other transportation companies enough so that no one dares answer our calling. God, he made them worried for their skin. So now I have no choice but to treat that agreement as genuine and… meet up with Alejandro. Brrr.”

Arianne was confused. “But why sign a contract with him in the first place? None of this would have happened if you didn’t.”

Mark shot her a resentful glance, but he ultimately refrained from explaining. “None of your business. I’ll handle it myself.”

That mystified Arianne. The Mark she knew would never have agreed so readily to a partnership with Alejandro! Still, despite her curiosity, she recognized his disinclination and decided to bail.

Before he went out, Mark informed her that there was going to be a party later this evening, and she was encouraged to prepare for it as early as necessary.

Arianne was over the moon. She was eager to be his companion for the event—lest he had to hire a female companion like the last time. Frankly, even now, any reminder of Janice Bell made her fume.

It was also the perfect opportunity to train Smore into sleeping away from his parents, and Arianne thought this would be the night to start.

A little while later, she received a call from Mark telling her that he was on his way back home. That was the cue for Arianne to doll herself up and change into her gown of choice—a draping, milky white dress. As for her hair, she pulled it into an elegant, graceful bun.

Right after she finished, Tiffany called. “Yo, am I gonna see you at this party or not? Jackson said Mark’s gonna go, and I thought, ‘well, Ari’s probably gonna be there too!’ so I said, yea, I’m going with ya. Anyway, we’re on the way to the party already. What about you?”

“I’ve just finished preparing for the event,” she replied. “Of course I’m going, Tiffie. If Jackson’s bringing you, then Mark wouldn’t have dared bring any other girl with him, amirite? Anyhow, wait for me. See you at the party.”

Soon, Mark arrived and waited in his car downstairs. Arianne told Mary to distract Smore by playing with him in another room before she herself crept out of the house. If the boy saw his mother leave, he would most certainly cause a ruckus.

She breathed a sigh of relief in her seat at the success of her “escape.” “God. I feel bad for leaving Smore behind. Ow, when he finds out that his Mommy’s gone, he’s gonna hulk out!”

In contrast, Mark was not at all concerned. “Bah, the kid needs to grow up and leave his mother one day. Plus, I, Mark Tremont, shall not have a mama’s boy as my son!”

He considered Arianne briefly and added, “You look awfully gorgeous today.”

Arianne shot an embarrassed glance at Brian on the driver’s seat, her cheeks slightly hot. “And what do you expect in return for that compliment? Me swooning over how hot you are?”

Mark cocked his eyebrow. “Please, I don’t need you to remind me of something I already know.”

What a braggart. But then again, he sure had the right to brag.

Their destination, Arianne realized, was a large private estate with a size rivaling that of the Tremonts'. Everywhere she looked, her eyes were greeted with notable socialites and upper-class figures. Though few appeared to be invited, all of the participants were faces familiar enough that Arianne had no trouble recalling their names.

Chapter 1343

After meeting up with Jackson and Tiffany, the four of them chatted for a bit before splitting up into groups of their own. It was a given that the men would begin talking about business and money, while the dullness would inevitably bore the women.

It was said that the owner of this luxurious estate was a powerful magnate who had built a sprawling business empire within the country and outside of it. As a result, many would trip over themselves to flatter him and get into his good graces. The reason why Mark and Jackson were here, however, was simply because they were old friends with this magnate, whom they had partnered with several times in many different ventures.

Tiffany, standing in the estate's courtyard, where a large swimming pool sprawled before her eyes, exclaimed, "Holy Mother Mary, this guy's as rich as Scrooge McDuck! He built this grand, pompous place despite not staying here too often! I mean, the fees for these renovations must have been as much as the cost of the estate itself! It's a bit too high rolling for me, man. Even this swimming pool is a little too large in my opinion!"

Arianne chuckled, "Welcome to the world of the rich, I guess. It depends on the way you want to live. You could live just as extravagantly too if you wished."

Just then, a group of three middle-aged women approached Arianne and Tiffany, wine glasses in hand.

“Ah! The two of you must be Mrs. Tremont and Mrs. West, right? So pleased to meet both of you.”

Arianne smiled, raising her glass and taking a sip. “The pleasure’s all mine.”

The appearance of strangers disquieted Tiffany, but she went through it by copying what Arianne did. Once the three women left, she asked, “Do you know them, Ari?”

The woman in question shrugged. “No, I’ve never even seen them before, but aren't these things ubiquitous in events like these? People will come flocking to you and try to get to your good side if they judge you to be useful to them and worthy enough. You just have to get used to it… Hey, wait a minute! Weren’t you Little Miss Lane in the past, hmm? These events should be bread and butter to a high-class girl like you. How come you’re asking me?”

Tiffany pouted, “I hated attending events like these, Ari. I was only ever there because Dad dragged me kicking and screaming. Besides, I was just a child. There’s no reward in befriending a child! So anyone who said hi to me was really just doing it to get into my dad’s good graces.”

A few moments later, a pouring autumn rain crashed the party and forced everyone to retreat into the estate. There, among the crowd, Tiffany noticed Jackson and Mark chatting lively with two foreign-looking strangers.

She sauntered towards them to join Jackson while nabbing a glass of red wine from Jackson’s hand. Her husband reacted with a coddler’s smile, not at all chaffed, and took a new glass for himself.

The older foreigner quipped in fluent English, “My, my! You sure dote on your lady, Mr. West! Is this a shared trait among you local gentlemen?”

Jackson admitted to his behavior without hesitance, “Sounds about right! Or at least, that is the case for Mark and me.”

Mark beckoned Arianne to come forward, and the latter obliged before giving the two foreigners a sweet smile. Mark placed his hand on Arianne’s shoulder and introduced her.

“These are my old friends, Seaton S. Bart and Beau L. Scheidt.”

The foreigners managed to create rather believable English names for themselves, but to see a large, burly hunk calling himself “Beau” was still a bit dissonant. Despite this, Arianne’s courteous smile remained on her lips as she greeted them, “Mr. Bart, Mr. Schedit. A pleasure to meet you.”

Tiffany only joined the conversation afterward, so she didn’t know that the foreigners’ English was better than hers. She remarked under her breath to Jackson, “Is that Beau guy really serious with his name? I mean, it sounds like a lady’s name more than anything.”

The four friends guffawed at Tiffany’s remark rather than feel embarrassed. Beau raised his glass in Tiffany’s direction and explained, “Ah, you’re far from the first to think that! I love your refreshing candidness.”

The man's proficiency in English embarrassed Tiffany. "Uh-oh… Um, I'm sorry."

Jackson rubbed her head in consolation. "Aww, no. We go way back! Back then, I was the one who liked to tease him for his name."

Suddenly, Alejandro's voice rang out, "Mr. Bart. I'm pleased to see you so well."

Hearing his name, Seaton turned towards his direction. "Ah, Mr. Smith. Long time no see. I heard about Mr. Don Smith's recent passing. My most heartfelt condolences to you and your family."

Chapter 1344

Alejandro and Melanie's presence brought a biting charge to the air. Thankfully, Seaton and Beau had no inkling of the antagonism between Alejandro and their two friends. Hence, they were saved from the creeping disquietude.

Still, both Mark and Jackson's expressions darkened slightly.

Alejandro scanned the faces before him and stopped for a few seconds at Tiffany, his possessiveness glinting from the deepest reaches within his eyes. Quickly, however, nonchalance rushed to supplant his true emotions as he replied, "Sooner or later, everyone has to meet the Reaper. It's fine."

Melanie, on the other hand, waved at Tiffany. They exchanged smiles when their eyes met.

After learning that Mark was Alejandro's (or more accurately, Ethan's) older brother, Melanie felt pressured to greet her apparent brother-in-law somehow. In a spur of the moment, she blurted weakly, "Good evening, bro—I mean, Mark. And Ari."

Just like that, Melanie's slip-of-tongue aggravated the already uneasy atmosphere. Mark's face was practically covered in frost, and Alejandro's was not the slightest bit better.

Arianne braved through the uneasiness and smiled at Melanie. "Well, ladies, let us chat among ourselves somewhere else. All men ever talk about is business; if we listen to them prattle any longer, we'll get bored. Come on."

Melanie nodded in agreement and hooked her arm with Tiffany's.

When the three of them reached a quiet, far-end corner, Tiffany drew out a long breath. "God—damn—it, Melanie Lark! That's waaaaay too foolhardy of you, hon, calling Mark 'brother' or whatever it is that you wanted to say right in front of Alejandro's face! I've never even heard the man genuinely calling Mark his brother before! Look, maybe I've spared you some details, but surely you sense the bad blood between those two, right? Hell, they hate each other so much that they tried to kill one another!"

Melanie looked positively mystified. "I mean, I could sniff out something strange, but… you can't pretend blood relation doesn't exist just because they aren't on friendly terms. I thought I should at least acknowledge him as my brother-in-law, especially since there's no enmity between the two of us, specifically. God, I just thought it would be very impolite of me not to greet him back there. You know, at least once."

"Well, what's done is done. Alejandro's not gonna kill you over it, anyway," Arianne said in resignation. "Besides, we gotta admit, things should have gone this way—everyone living in harmony with zero in-fighting."

Tiffany pouted. “In harmony, my arse. There’s no way that could ever happen; you’re pretty ballsy just to think it’s remotely possible.”

Across the room where the men were, a confused Seaton asked, “Huh. I never knew you and Mr. Tremont were this close—you two practically regard each other as homies. How come Mark never brought it up?”

Alejandro shot Mark a sidelong glance and answered without missing a beat, “We’re currently long-term partners, and so to show solidarity, we may sometimes call each other ‘bro’ in more leisurely settings like this one. It is merely honorific.”

Mark sneered, but it was soft enough that it eluded his conversationalists. Combining that with him offering no denial, it was clear that he tacitly approved Alejandro’s made-up excuse.

Seaton had the expression of a puzzled man coming to an answer. “Ohhh, I see, I see. Yet another admirable value of your already rich and marvelous culture; quite a way to characterize social relationships, too. I strive to adopt it.”

A few moments later, another foreigner with a shaggy mop of hair donning a slightly crumpled suit swaggered downstairs. The way he moved was too jarring against the backdrop of the posh party, so he instantly attracted eyes everywhere.

Tiffany was quick to crack wise, “Oh boy, who’s that party-crasher right there? Some kinda junkie? Not at all worried that he might get kicked outta here?”

Arianne shushed her. Someone might hear what she said and create a ruckus out of it.

Upon seeing the new man, Seaton's good-natured temperament was immediately swapped into that of a brewing storm. With a tumultuous expression, he marched toward the uninvited guest, grappled his shoulder, and hissed under his breath, "What the f**k are you doing here?! Didn't I tell you not to sh*t on this important party today? And you can't even behave for a day?"

The man stared into Seaton's furious eyes with his own glassy, unfocused ones before breaking into a toothy grin. He replied in their native language, "Oh, but it's so terribly boring up there. I'm only looking for simple, delightful thrills; you don't need to worry about me at all! Nope, no trouble-making here, you can go back to whatever business you were dabbling in."

With that, he suddenly threw his head upward and yelled at the room upstairs. "Oy, get your a** down here, b*tch! What'chu doing hiding inside? You're my wife now!"

Chapter 1345

The party's attention had turned to the stairs. A feminine silhouette crossed into their line of sight, her hair disheveled and blocking half of her face.

But Arianne knew who she was. It was Janice Bell—again.

The first thing that came to Arianne's mind was her annoyance at meeting that woman yet again. But when she noticed the blue-black spot at the corner of Janice's lips, a new understanding—that things might not be as simple as they were last time—dawned on her.

Janice's injuries, barefaced as they were, prompted Seaton to drag the strange man upstairs by the collar, his well-maintained image abandoned in the midst of his fury.

No one knew what happened next up there, as Seaton had not emerged since then. Quickly, whispers began to fill the hall.

Janice remained still on the stairs. Even when the guests murmured among themselves, stealing glances and pointing fingers, she stood as wooden as a marionette, her unblinking eyes trained on Mark, as though they were never going to move away from him.

Thanks to the unknown party-pooper, the evening was over sooner than planned.

En route to the Tremont Estate, Arianne noticed that Mark was still wearing his frosty glare from the party. Gingerly, she tried to soothe him.

"Hey now, don't be mad with Melanie, okay? She only said it out of goodwill and decorum. It was nothing malicious—certainly not enough to enrage you for real, right…?"

"No, it hasn't reached that level yet," Mark replied flatly. "I just hate seeing Alejandro's stupid face."

Arianne closed her hands around his. "Hate the man, but don't hate his poor wife, okay? Melanie's a very decent woman—she isn't Alejandro. She doesn't deserve your ire. And hey! It was supposed to be a fun gathering between old friends, wasn't it? Look alive, Mark!"

Arianne's double-whammy mollification tactic—using both reason and emotional appeal—softened Mark enough to crack out a forced smile. "I'm smiling now, okay? Happy?"

His softened attitude emboldened Arianne enough to ask, "Why was Janice there in his house? What happened to her? And what's Seaton's relationship with that weirdo?"

Mark paused for a beat before answering, "He's Seaton's cousin—a ne'er-do-well with no scruples would be the most accurate way to describe him. A classic example of a family embarrassment. He even possesses all of the worst kinds of addictions and habits under the sun. Honestly, I didn't expect Janice to end up with him… And to marry him, too, making her his fifth wife. Seriously, the only reason why he has so many exes is that none of those women could endure his physical abuses for long.

"By the way, can we not talk about Janice anymore? She chose this path herself; she is her own undoing," Mark added. "No one forced her to marry a piece of scum like that. But more importantly, her life is no business of mine."

Arianne added nothing more to the conversation but hearing about Janice's incident made her pensive. Her "marriage" must have happened just a short while ago, right? To think that Janice would marry someone so easily—and to a virtueless man like that!

Still, that was not all that puzzled Arianne. Mark's friendship with Seaton meant that the latter was someone with no faults in his conduct and character. So why would he house and tolerate his no-good cousin?

Smore was already fast asleep by the time they reached home. According to Mary, the boy had thrown a seismic fit before finally surrendering to sleep.

Arianne snuck into the nursery to look at him before creeping out of the room.

While she was changing in their bedroom, Arianne acutely sensed burning eyes on her, causing the woman to bashfully turn around and reprove, “God, why are you staring at me like that? Go take a shower right now, you know how long my bath takes. Besides, I haven’t even removed my make-up.”

Mark came up to her from behind and wrapped his arms around her curvaceous waist. “The problem is, I don’t want to cool down…”

Arianne could feel her body suddenly weakening. “C-Could you at least wait until I shower? Let me change into a fresh set of clothing. It’s not very comfortable to do it in an evening dress—”

He scooped her up into his arm anyway.

“No, I can’t wait any longer! That little rascal finally isn’t here anymore! I can go wild and play harder now, can’t I? Heh, this evening dress is perfect for you. So perfect, in fact, watching you in it feels…”

The gale of yet another autumn storm bellowed outside the window. Heavy raindrops fell onto the windowpanes, eliciting a sonorous symphony of pitter-patters in sync with the creaking bed on the other side of the window.

A while later, the storm stopped, and Mark went into the shower. Arianne, worried that the thunder might have jolted Smore from sleep, went into the nursery several times, her heart only relieved when she saw that her son appeared to be fine.

Chapter 1346

Smith Manor was located a little further away so by the time Alejandro and Melanie arrived home, it was already very late.

The pair remained silent during their journey home.

Melanie was worried that Alejandro would be upset at her using the word, ‘Bro’, to Mark earlier so she was too scared to speak up. She ran straight to the bedroom as soon as they arrived home to remove her makeup.

Surprisingly, Alejandro followed her into the bedroom as well, but he ignored her. He only took his clothes off before he took a shower.

Feeling uneasy, she tried to dispel the awkwardness by saying, “Are you angry?”

Alejandro glanced at her. “Why would I be angry?”

“Because I accidentally called Mark Tremont ‘Bro’ in front of everyone,” she said, almost whispering.

“No, I’m not,” Alejandro calmly replied, “Come here.”

She got up and walked toward him. However, when she realized his intention, she paused in her steps. “I… I have to check on the baby!”

He pulled her toward him before she could turn around and leave, then, lowered his head and caught her lips.

Melanie bit his tongue… hard. She pushed him away as he winced in pain. “We can’t do it now! Calm down, I’m going to check on the baby!”

The storm in Alejandro’s gaze remained as he watched her leave in a panic. However, he did not try to force her again. That was just a moment of impulse. He had noticed how earnestly close she and Tiffany were at the party and began feeling apprehensive. Did this woman really not have a scheme up her sleeve? Could she really accept him having someone else on his mind? Was she still the bossy and spoiled Lark heiress he once knew? It was as if the only bold act she dared to do was bite his tongue a moment ago. It hurt, but he was not annoyed. It felt… different.

By the time he finished showering, Melanie was still nowhere to be found in the room. He never really paid her any attention so he did not care where she went and went to bed.

After some time, the room door was gently pushed open. Melanie quietly walked toward the bed. She looked at the sleeping man and hesitantly reached her hand under the covers. After feeling around, Alejandro suddenly spoke up, “You ran away in a panic when I wanted sex, and now, you’re teasing me after I fell asleep. What are you playing at?”

Melanie pulled her hand out, panicking. “It’s not that… I can’t find my ring. I remember putting it by your pillow. Have you seen it?” It was their wedding ring. She had searched every corner of the house for it. After some thought, she realized the bed was the only place she did not search. She would not be able to sleep if she did not find it.

“I haven’t seen it,” Alejandro replied in a tone that was a mixture of impatience and exhaustion, “Can’t you look for it tomorrow? Go to bed. Stop fooling around.”

She felt disappointed. Did it really not matter to him?

Sensing her still-moving but quiet figure, Alejandro got up impatiently and turned on the lights in the room. “Fine, fine, we’ll look for it. Hurry up.”

Chapter 1347

She did not reply. Instead, she bent down and carefully searched the bed. Alas, she still could not find the ring.

Alejandro’s patience was at its limit. “If you can’t find it, forget it. Just get a new one tomorrow.”

She bit her lips. “If you can get a new ring after losing it, does it mean you can do the same to people? I’ll find it. You go to bed.” She turned around and left after that.

Alejandro was bemused. He believed that her irrational tendencies were acting up again. However, when he lay down again, he found himself unable to fall back asleep. After tossing and turning for a long time, he got up, strode to the window, and lit a cigarette. He swept his gaze across every corner of the

room. Then, he noticed a faintly glittering object in a corner under the bed. He walked toward it, leaned forward, and found Melanie's wedding ring. The glimmer of light was from the sparkle of the diamond.

He picked the ring up, placed it against his lips, and blew on it to get rid of the dust. Then, he slipped it on his pinky. He certainly did not want to face an emotionally unstable woman at that moment. Who knew if they would end up fighting?

The next morning, he went straight to the office. He had forgotten all about the ring.

When he finished work and arrived home, he found Melanie still searching for the ring in the manor. It was only then that he remembered the ring. The sight of her seriously looking for the ring amused him. The urge to tease her suddenly overcame him. He strode forward and asked, "Still looking for the ring?"

Melanie was upset with him due to his attitude from last night so she deliberately showed him a sulky expression. "Yes."

He sat down on the couch. "Stop looking. I bought you a new one." Then, he pulled the ring off his pinky and placed it on the coffee table.

Melanie refused to even look at him when she heard that it was a new ring. "I don't want a new one. I will find it. It's definitely somewhere in this house."

He did not say anything else and only watched as she continued searching. Finally, when his amusement waned, he said, "Alright, stop looking. How can I possibly find time to buy you a new ring? I found it under the bed. Have a look."

Melanie was taken aback. She marched to the coffee table, picked up the ring, and examined it before putting it on her finger. Only then she was certain he was not lying. “When did you find it?”

“Last night,” he replied indifferently.

She glared at him. “Why didn’t you say something? I’ve been looking for it all day!”

He could tell that she was slightly annoyed. “You didn’t ask, and I forgot. I just remembered. Is this tiny thing really that important? Isn’t it just a piece of jewelry to you women? If it’s lost, it’s lost. Just get a new one. What would you do if you really couldn’t find it?”

Melanie could not be bothered to argue with him. She picked the baby up and returned to the room to feed her. Explaining sentiment and feelings to a cold-blooded animal like him was, to put it bluntly, like preaching to a deaf man.

Alejandro sat for a while before he made his way to the study. He noticed that the slightly-wilted plant that had not been taken care of in days was showing signs of revival. He was surprised. The housekeeper would never touch any of his things without his permission. This plant had been moved and placed in a corner with sunlight. No one else but Melanie would dare to do such a thing. She knew that he had brought this plant back after meeting Tiffany. Why was she taking care of it? He really could not figure that woman out.

Chapter 1348

Just as he fell deep into thoughts, he suddenly heard Melissa’s cries. Her adorable little face entered his mind unbidden, and he felt compelled to hold her so he turned around and walked out. He found

Melanie anxiously trying to soothe the bawling baby, looking completely helpless. “I’ll take her downstairs,” he said, “Fresh air will be good for her. Maybe she’ll stop crying.”

Melanie thought she was having auditory hallucinations. This was his first time patiently offering to help with the baby. She stared at him apprehensively for a few seconds before she handed the baby over to him. “She’s been crying a lot lately, I’m so tired. If you can take care of her for a while, I’ll take a nap. Just an hour will do, even half an hour is fine too.”

He took the baby and cradled her gently in his arms. “It’s not like we don’t have maids. One of them should know how to take care of a baby. Leave her with them if you really can’t do it.”

Melanie shook her head. “I can’t do that. I’ll do it myself. It’s fine if I’m a little exhausted. Things will get better when she’s older. She’ll be more attached to me if I take care of her. She’s the only one I can count on now. Otherwise, am I supposed to count on you?”

Alejandro raised an eyebrow and said, “If I were you, I wouldn’t count on a one-month-old baby. I’m your man. Are you hoping for her to take care of you once she grows up and gets married? Stupid.”

‘I’m your man’. Those words caused a thousand ripples in Melanie’s heart. That was his first time explicitly acknowledging their relationship…

Seeing the dazed expression on her face, he carried Melissa toward the staircase. “Hurry up and take your nap. I can’t handle her when she wants her milk.”

The fog in her heart had lifted. “Okay!” Melanie cheerfully replied.

…

At night. In the Tremont Estate.

Mark kept his eye on the phone throughout dinner as though there was something urgent.

Arianne knew that he paid a great deal of attention to etiquette during meals and would never be distracted from his meal under normal circumstances. She asked, “What are you doing? Haven’t you been drilling good table manners into my bones since childhood? No smacking lips during meals and paying attention to your food.”

He looked at her. “There’s an urgent matter in the company. Eat your food. Stop bickering. You had terrible table manners when you were a kid. Was I wrong in teaching you? You had other bad habits at the dinner table, apart from smacking your lips. Who’d want to marry you?”

“I seem to recall that I’m not the one who’s in a hurry to marry you?” she retorted, unable to help herself, “Who forced me into this marriage? Even if I have a ton of bad habits, it doesn’t seem like you’re very picky.”

He could not argue with that. Instead, he simply shot her a threatening glare.

Aristotle had gained a fondness for playing with his food lately. Soon, the table in front of him was a mess of mashed peas, cereal, and applesauce.

Arianne had already tried her best to clean up, but she was no match for him. In the end, she waited until he was done before she began to clean up.

Mark glanced at Aristotle, an arrogant frown could be seen on his face. “Sloppy. Can’t your son be a little cleaner? If he can’t eat properly, feed him. Look at this, it’s everywhere. Filthy.”

Aristotle’s tiny ears were very sharp. He was upset when he heard this and threw some of the food in his bowl at Mark with his spoon. The back of Mark’s hand was stained with mashed peas in just a blink of an eye, he did not even have time to avoid it. The corner of his eye twitched in anger. “I’d teach you a lesson on respecting your elders right now if your mother weren’t here. The nerve of you, rebelling against me at such a young age. What’s going to happen when you’re much older? Don’t you think that you’ve been a naughty boy? Hmm?”

Chapter 1349

Aristotle scoffed. He turned his head to the side sulkily. It seemed like he was really fearless.

Arianne giggled. “I love watching you two quarrel. The little one is so fearless, and the big one is all bark and no bite. It seems like your son is the only one who has you twisted around his little fingers. If I made such a mess when I was young, you would’ve flayed me alive. That’s the difference.”

Mark suddenly remembered that she had once mentioned being very scared of him when she was a kid. It seemed like she had a traumatic childhood because of him. He stroked his chin and wondered if he was really that scary? Why was Aristotle unafraid of him? Was it because Arianne used to think that she had wronged him? Unbeknownst to her, he was the one in the wrong. He had let her live submissively in the Tremont household for years. Now, it was time for her to hold her head up high. At that moment, his phone began to ring. He rose to his feet and stepped aside to answer it. “Hello? Are the stocks alright?”

“Yes,” the person on the other end answered, “We’ve unloaded. No hiccups from Smith Enterprises.”

Mark sighed in relief. Those goods were very important. He had no choice but to ask Alejandro’s company for transportation. He could not stop worrying even before the cargo was discharged. After all, no one could say for sure Alejandro was not scheming. It was best to remain vigilant. Things might have gone smoothly this time, but it might not be the same next time.

He had to admit that Ethan played the part of Alejandro Smith flawlessly. His style suited the Smiths’ very well. The Smiths not only dominated Ayashe, and ever since Alejandro’s arrival in the capital, no one had been able to touch the ventures that interested him. As a result, it would be difficult for Mark to consider choosing other transportation companies.

Initially, Mark did not put much thought into it. Competitors would, naturally, arise since there was money involved. However, he did not know what Alejandro had done, but no transportation company in the capital dared to challenge him. They refused to take the jobs no matter how much money was offered. At that time, Alejandro had managed to trample on his confidence. That was a huge problem for him. It meant that Alejandro had managed to grasp a pinch of his weakness. Who knew what would happen if Alejandro was upset? He could not seem to find a solution for that matter.

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The next day, in the office, Mark asked Davy to set up a meeting over lunch with Alejandro, after some consideration. The best outcome would be to end the contract or to get a grasp of Alejandro’s intention. That opportunistic ba*tard was getting increasingly difficult to deal with.

Alejandro arrived at the restaurant at noon, as agreed. Mark and Alejandro were the only ones in the large, private room. It was best to discuss business in a quiet environment. Conversely, it was also an appropriate place for a quarrel.

Mark did not beat around the bush. “What do you want? What are you planning? Let’s be frank, I’m not interested in beating around the bush nor am I interested in playing games with you.”

Alejandro stared at him with a half-smile on his face. “Did you get up on the wrong side of the bed today? I’m not plotting anything, and I don’t intend on playing games with you. I really didn’t expect an ordinary partnership would make the almighty Mark Tremont so anxious.”

Chapter 1350

“Why are you stopping me from engaging with other transportation companies?” Mark asked coldly, “Don’t think that I’m unaware of what you’ve been doing behind my back. I didn’t sign an exclusive contract with you.”

Alejandro curled his lips. “That’s right, it’s not an exclusive contract, but I don’t like competition. I’m entirely capable of handling your company’s transports. You don’t need other transportation companies. You don’t need to be so vigilant with me. Take it easy, okay? Aren’t you tired of being on your toes all the time?”

Mark would, naturally, never let his guard down in front of Alejandro. “You know that’s not possible. I can’t trust you. We have two options; either we end this contract or you let me find another transportation company. That way, we’ll both have a way out. Don’t try your dirty tricks with me, and don’t test me. Understand?”

Alejandro sighed. His expression suddenly turned solemn. “Why won’t you trust me? Am I not the closest person to you in the world, apart from your son? Shared DNA is a connection that we can never

destroy. I confess that I once hated you and that I've done a lot of bad things, but didn't you try to kill me too? I was lucky that I survived. I think we're even, no? I don't want to fight with you. I just want to discuss business with you. I wanted the Tremont fortune in the past because I had nothing. Now, I have everything. I don't need anything from the Tremonts."

Alejandro's reaction surprised Mark. He was momentarily unable to differentiate truth from lie. At the very least, Alejandro looked sincere. Nevertheless, it was still absurd. Alejandro was once hell-bent on destroying the entire Tremont family. Now, he wanted to shake hands and call it a truce? Preposterous! No one would believe Alejandro's words so easily. Finally, he decided to compromise. "Since you put it that way, I can try and trust you, but you'll have to give me some assurance. Don't stand in the way of my search for other transportation companies. I will only hire one other company, and you can both have equal distribution. When I determined that you don't have any schemes up your sleeve, we'll sign an exclusive contract. If you refuse, it just means you have ulterior motives and you're scheming. Otherwise, it won't hurt for you to accept this."

Alejandro thought it over and replied, "Sure. I'll agree to this. You can sign any transportation company you want. Once you're less uncertain, draw up an exclusive contract with me. That way, you won't have to walk on eggshells anymore. The Smith family has more right to a partnership with you than anyone else. From now on, please prioritize me. I will surpass you. You're not the only one who's capable. I might not have been born into glory, but it doesn't mean I can live a life of glory."

Mark found Alejandro's words slightly strange. Was Alejandro competing with him? He wanted to beat him in everything, not in an antagonistic way but on even ground. If that was the case, then, it would be for the best.

After lunch, Mark contacted a large, reliable transportation company in the capital at once after returning to the office. The contract was signed smoothly, and he felt more at ease. If Alejandro really did not have any ulterior motive, they would sign an exclusive contract later. It was not impossible. He had always drawn a clear line between his professional and private lives. If possible, he would not let his personal life interfere with his professional life. It would not benefit him in any way.

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That afternoon, after work, Tiffany and Jackson drove to the West Residence as usual. Ever since the birth of their son, they had only three priorities; home, the company, and the West Residence.

Initially, Tiffany grieved over being unable to personally raise her son. However, after a while, she realized there were a lot of benefits that came with it.

There were women in the office who had no one to take care of their babies after their delivery and were forced to leave their jobs and become full-time housewives. It was not ideal to abandon one's career and to make one's baby and husband the center of one's life after all. Sleep alone would be a luxury, and not many could continue living refined lives under those circumstances.