Ruling 1741

Chapter 1741

Melanie suddenly laughed. “It’s fine, I understand what you meant. We… haven’t gotten a divorce. The divorce papers have been signed, but he ended up tearing them apart afterward. He seemed to have changed his mind when he found out that it wasn’t me who pushed you. I have no idea what’s going on in his mind. I even thought… that he wouldn’t let me off the hook even if he found out that it was my brother who’d done it.”

Tiffany patted her chest as she heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s impossible! I think you should’ve told him the truth long ago. Alejandro isn’t that kind of person; he definitely wouldn’t have vented his anger on you if you weren’t a part of it. Furthermore, whatever that’s happened between me and him is long but buried in the past, so there’s no way he would seek revenge on my behalf! Although he’s now become Alejandro Smith, I still vaguely understand his temper from when he was still Ethan Connor. Since the both of you aren’t divorced, then you should live together happily. I think the two of you are quite compatible with each other. He’s someone who’s extremely bad while you’re the complete opposite of him—isn’t there something to describe both of you? Oh! The both of you mutually reinforce each other!”

Melanie quietly pondered about what Tiffany had just said. ‘We are reinforcing each other mutually? This seems to be quite deep to be used to describe me and Alejandro. However, now that I think about it… I haven’t completely cast aside the idea of getting a divorce.’ Melanie recalled how happy and how glorious she felt when she first got married to Alejandro, then she recalled how sad and devastated she felt currently. ‘All of this that’s happened, aside from Alejandro not loving me, is all caused by the Larks.

‘If things really go as Alejandro has planned, the Larks are probably going to hate me forever after he’s taken over their business and passed all of it over to me to manage. I can’t bear to have my family members scorning and insulting me everyday, but I also can’t bear to have Alejandro stay by my side as a constant reminder that our marriage is purely business, no love involved.’

Melanie was well aware that their marriage had been established for business reasons, but it was a fact that she had fallen for him as well. She thought that Alejandro would be able to develop feelings for her

as time passed, but she had not expected for it to end up becoming a habit for her to exist in his life. 'Alejandro probably meant that he can't get used to not having me in his life if I were to leave, didn't he? He's probably used to the lifestyle where he focuses on his work outside while I take care of the family at home, used to how I don't interfere in his matters while I help him take care of our daughter. However, all of this isn't the kind of love that I want.

'There is a saying that love at first sight is a very rare sight to see since there are so many people in the world. However, I clearly remember that my heart skipped a beat when I first saw him. Is that why… I feel so depressed now?'

Tiffany curiously kept on saying "hello" when she did not hear a word from Melanie, who finally regained her senses and replied, "All right then, take good care of yourself. I'll come and visit you when I'm available. Are you staying at the West family residence at the moment? If there's nothing else, I'll hang up now. Millie's pestering me to take her out to play."

After hanging up the phone, Melanie walked towards the window in her bedroom to look downstairs. 'The guards at Alejandro's manor have not retreated, so he must still have his guard up around me. So, I can neither get him to agree to a divorce, nor can I just walk off on my own.

'When I first rushed towards him in the beginning, I never expected that I would one day think of how I could leave him. It's actually laughable how both of us have actually ended up in this situation in the end.'

That afternoon, Melanie brought Millie along and suggested that she wanted to go out for a walk. The guards allowed her to leave after asking for Alejandro's permission. However, they still drove Melanie instead of allowing her to travel on her own.

Melanie requested for the guards to drive her to Tremont Estate. When she entered, the guards, unexpectedly, did not follow her.

Chapter 1742

It was considered to be Millie's first visit there, so she was a little shy. She felt curious and wanted to play when she saw the various items in the patio that seemed fun to play with, yet she was afraid to do so at the same time. It was not until Arianne had come out to welcome them and gotten Smore to bring Millie to play along that the latter became a little more courageous.

From the moment Melanie entered Tremont Estate, Arianne could tell that she had visited her for a reason, so she asked Mary to brew some tea. Then, both she and Melanie sat by the tea table in the patio as they casually talked. "What's the matter? I know that the situation within the Larks doesn't look too good, so you must be feeling bad as well."

Melanie lowered her eyes. "Honestly… There's nothing much for me to feel bad about. I am troubled by the amount of pressure my family is putting on me, but I can't be bothered with how the Larks end up. Arianne, I still want to get a divorce."

Arianne's eyes trembled a little. "I heard from Tiffany that Alejandro isn't willing to divorce at the moment. Logically speaking… You shouldn't have any reason to insist on getting a divorce, so is it because Alejandro wrongly accused you? You were the one who silently approved of bearing the sole responsibility at that time though…"

Melanie shook her head. "It's not because of that. Although I was a little saddened when he suspected me previously, but… I don't blame him. The reason why I want to have a divorce is because I can't continue to live like this. I can't continue to live with him when all there's left for me is torture. He's promised to take over the company the Larks have and pass it on for me to manage, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do. I… am an illegitimate daughter that my father had with another woman. What a joke, right? I'd just recently found out because my mother had been treating me the same as my two

brothers since I was a child, so I wasn't able to tell at all. My real mother has long since passed away, and I was brought into the Larks when I was a month old…"

Arianne was slightly shocked. "How's that possible? Are you sure it's not… something your mother said in the heat of the moment while she was arguing with you?"

Melanie gave off a wry smile as she said, "No, it's definitely true. From the moment I was married, my mother had almost never given me a call. She rarely took the initiative to call me, aside from when she needed Alejandro's help with something on the business side. Moreover, the moment the incident where my brother pushed Tiffany occurred, the Larks all expected me to bear the sole responsibility of it. Am I not the person who's the most innocent? Everything the Larks have belongs to both my brothers; I don't have any share of it at all. Everything changed the moment I got married. In the past, before I'd gotten married, they'd never made me feel that something was amiss. I think it's probably because they wanted to raise me well enough so that they could receive an even greater benefit later on. I'm very grateful that they never told me the truth for the past 20 years, as I didn't think little of myself. At least I was able to live happily for all those years."

Arianne remained silent for a moment before she finally said, "I think I understand the gist of it now. You must've felt devastated when Alejandro suggested getting a divorce. You'd learned the truth about your identity and your family even treated you like this, yet your husband still wanted to divorce you. Are you feeling like you have no one to depend on at the moment? Are you feeling helpless? You want to get a divorce in the hopes of escaping all of this, which I can understand… But what about Millie? She's the only "thing" that belongs to you now."

Melanie turned to look at Smore and Millie, who were playing together, and tears began to well up in her eyes. "I don't know… I can't bear to part with my daughter as well, but I really want to leave that place. Whenever I think of how she won't be in my life anymore, I end up crying so much that I lose my voice. I feel extremely disheartened, but I won't be able to leave if I don't leave her with Alejandro; he'll never allow me to take her with me. Moreover, I'm afraid that I won't be able to raise her properly by myself. In the past, I'd always lived like a princess at the Larks', where everything would be laid out for me on a silver spoon, so I never thought about how I could live independently. Moreover, I've gotten married so early and even given birth to a child, so I have no idea how I could possibly survive on my own when I'm suddenly being forced into this situation…"

Chapter 1743

Arianne was well aware of an old saying where you should not interfere with someone else's lives. However, since she was also a woman, she was also well aware about how painful it would be to live with a man who did not love his other half forever. 'Does Alejandro love Melanie? The answer is very obvious: most likely not. How lucky would Melanie have to be to receive a happy ending in a relationship that has been built up on benefits?'

In the end, Arianne painstakingly advised, "Melanie, I'm sure you know Alejandro's personality by now. If he really refuses to let you leave, you won't be able to leave regardless. He'll make sure that you wouldn't even be able to step foot out of the Capital. Why don't you do this: have a proper discussion with him after the matter with the Larks has ended, all right? Also… He isn't going after the Larks because of Tiffany. She has both me and Jackson supporting her, so there's no need for him to be involved with her. Therefore, he should be doing it… for you. It's a fact that Tiffany was in peril because of your brother, but you've also been put up on the chopping block by the Larks yourself. Tiffany isn't his woman—you are. Forget everything else, Alejandro is actually quite macho for being so protective of you."

At that moment, Melanie recalled what Alejandro had said to her in his office the other day. She was a little moved as she thought about it, but it was soon replaced by a determined decision. "I'll take your advice and wait until all of this is over before I talk to him about the divorce again. It's likely he's just feeling sorry for wrongly blaming me previously and thinking that I was asking for a divorce because I was throwing a tantrum. So, I'll talk to him about it again after all of this has ended and we've both calmed ourselves. Animals have been proven to be able to have feelings for each other over time, let alone humans. No matter how little he loves me, I'm still his wife by law. Therefore, I'm very clear with what I've seen, and have considered very thoroughly. This is all unrelated to love."

'I won't hope for anything else anymore.'

Suddenly, Millie was crying, causing Melanie to rush over towards her reflexively. "What's wrong?!"

Millie was lying on the grass as she cried until her face had turned completely red while Smore stood to the side, seeming slightly helpless. “She… fell from the slide.”

‘The patio is completely filled with grass that is very soft, so a fall like that shouldn’t be very serious. Millie should most likely be frightened, that’s all.’ Then, Arianne approached them and asked in a gentle voice, “Smore, how did she suddenly fall?”

Smore pointed towards the upper half of the slide, probably too nervous to even utter a word. Based on his actions, they could judge that Millie had accidentally fallen on her own. Arianne knew her son very well—he wouldn’t be so naughty towards the little girl.

Melanie thoroughly checked Millie and heaved a sigh of relief when she realized that Millie was not injured. “You should be more careful. It’s all right now, there’s no need to cry. You’ve got to be stronger. Look how badly you’ve frightened Smore with your crying.”

Millie looked at Smore and held his hands of her own accord. “No cry… Play again…”

Both Arianne and Melanie burst out laughing. The little girl had just cried from falling down, yet she was able to climb back up and continue playing. ‘I suppose that’s how kids are, filled with innocence. The adults’ world is much more complicated than theirs.’

That night, Melanie figured that Alejandro probably wasn’t going home for dinner, so she stayed at Tremont Estate to have dinner with Millie.

Just as they were having their dinner, Alejandro suddenly called. “Are you still at Tremont Enterprise?”

Melanie answered, “Yes, what’s the matter? Are you back home already?”

Alejandro observed his empty manor and felt slightly uneasy. “Yes, I deliberately came home earlier today, only to find that there’s no one at home. I don’t even have a warm meal to eat…”

Melanie naturally felt uneasy when she heard that. “I’ll head home now then. I thought you wouldn’t be home for dinner tonight, so… Wait for a while, I’ll come home now.”

After Melanie hung up the phone, Arianne asked with a smile, “Was that Alejandro? Is he not even able to have his dinner without you there? Finish up your dinner before you leave, forget about him. It’s basic propriety for him to inform you if he’ll be coming home for dinner. I can’t stand this kind of awful behaviour.”

Mark, who was sitting to the side, silently shot Arianne a glance, making her smile even wider.

Chapter 1744

Melanie gave her full understanding to Alejandro. “It’s fine, this is how he’s been living all this time. He’s never called to tell me if he was going to be home for dinner since I’m normally always at home. Sorry for bothering you today. I’ll be leaving with Millie now, Mark, Arianne.”

Mark slightly nodded his head in acknowledgement. Arianne got up and sent Melanie out. “Remember what I told you. You should calm down and have a long, hard thought about it these next few days. Divorce isn’t a simple matter. You wouldn’t want to regret it later on.”

Melanie nodded her head and got into her car with Millie.

Arianne returned to the dining table after seeing that Melanie’s car had gone off into the distance. Just as she was about to eat, Mark grumbled as he said, “I seem to recall that I would always call if I wasn’t going to be home for dinner, right?

Arianne raised an eyebrow as she said, “That’s right, I wasn’t even referring to you just now. What made you think I was?”

Mark couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss, but he couldn’t put his finger as to what it was…

On the other hand, when Melanie and Millie returned to Alejandro’s manor, the kitchen was still quiet. When Melanie saw that Alejandro was sitting on the sofa in the living room reading a magazine, she went up and casually asked, “Aren’t you hungry? Why didn’t you ask someone in the kitchen to make you something to eat when you knew that it would be late by the time I arrived home…”

Alejandro put down the magazine he was reading and waved towards Millie. “Millie, come here and let Daddy hug you.”

Millie jumped into his arms and hurriedly complained about how aggrieved she felt. It took Alejandro a long time before he finally got around to what had happened. “Oh… Did you fall down? Where did you fall on? Does it hurt?”

Millie touched her little face. She had actually fallen down from the slide face-first at the time. Alejandro gently blew on the little girl’s face. “Alright, alright, it won’t hurt after I blow on it…”

Melanie rolled her eyes as she saw the scene before her. ‘He didn’t even want to look at Millie when she was born, let alone hug her, yet now he loves her to no end. It seems like my presence is not required at the moment. He doesn’t want to bother the cook to make dinner, so he’s torturing me instead?’ At that thought, Melanie rolled up her sleeves and went inside the kitchen to put on her apron. Alejandro walked over to the kitchen with Millie in his arms. “You don’t have to cook anything complicated, just whip up something simple.”

Melanie grumbled as she said, “In that case, don’t you know how to cook up something simple yourself? We have a cook at home, so did you have to wait for me to come back to do so? You wouldn’t have died from starvation. I should’ve listened to Arianne and finished my dinner before coming home.”

While playing with his daughter, Alejandro jokingly said, “Then you should’ve finished your dinner first before coming home. I can handle my hunger. We do have a cook at home, but aren’t you the one who usually cooks? Well, you’re the one who likes to come up with what kind of dishes you cook, aren’t you? I’ve gotten used to your food, so I don’t like eating other people’s food. In fact, we could fire our cook at home.”

Melanie was instantly startled. ‘It seems like my efforts have not gone in vain all this time. However… It all doesn’t have any meaning anymore, not when we’re about to get a divorce.’ After a moment, she said, “You aren’t giving me any allowances, yet you expect me to take care of our child and cook for you. I’m not your mother. In the future, I should ask the cook to prepare our meals. I don’t want to spend that much effort anymore. I’m tired…”

Alejandro's eyes turned slightly darker. "Are you trying to hint at something?"

Melanie outright denied the fact. "No, you're overthinking things. I just don't want to… allow myself to feel so tired anymore. You go out with Millie and wait for me while I whip up something simple so that it won't take long. Millie and I haven't eaten much either, so we might as well all eat together."

Chapter 1745

After that, Alejandro carried Millie outside without saying another word.

While they ate, Melanie casually asked, "How are things with the Larks?"

Alejandro answered back just as casually, "We're currently in the midst of discussing their acquisition. They aren't letting up at the moment, but I think they won't be able to continue holding on much longer."

Then, Melanie remained silent. Alejandro suddenly asked, "That's it? I thought you would've said something else."

Melanie snickered. "What else can I say? It's their own fault that things have developed up to this stage. Even if you hadn't stepped in, Jackson probably wouldn't have gone easy on them either. I'm not that saintly; I can't even say what's going to happen to me, let alone worry about them. Moreover… Even if I begged you, you wouldn't help the Larks anyway, so what's there for me to say when I already know the outcome? Even if you help me defend the Larks, they're still in the wrong, so if you go up against the Wests as well, how am I supposed to look them in the eye again? It wouldn't be beneficial for you either."

Alejandro suddenly said, “If you really want to defend the Larks, I will help you.”

Melanie was suddenly startled. “Why…?”

Alejandro picked up a piece of tissue to wipe his mouth. “Because you’re my woman, so anything’s fine as long as you’re happy. I’m only going up against the Larks because they bullied you, so if you want to forgive them and want me to protect them, I will do so. So long as you tell me, I can even go against Jackson. It wouldn’t matter to me if Mark ends up being offended as well since I’ve never been on good terms with them in the first place. However, the problem is… Are you able to forgive everything that the Larks have done? Can you let bygones be bygones?”

Melanie could feel Alejandro’s gaze towards her, so she lowered her head in panic. “I can’t, that’s why… I won’t ask you to protect them. They have to own up to their own mistakes and bear the consequences themselves. That’s what they taught me when I was young, so it wouldn’t be wrong for me to use that same concept on them. Do as you please, I won’t bother with whatever happens with the Larks anymore. I’m full now and Millie isn’t eating anymore either, so carry on eating by yourself. I’ll clean up after you're done.”

Alejandro, noticing that Melanie was avoiding him, was slightly unhappy as he said, “Are there no maids in the house? Why do you have to clean it up? I only said I like to eat your food, I never actually treated you like a nanny.”

Melanie did not say anything. She merely carried Millie upstairs.

After Melanie closed the door behind her, she let out a long sigh. ‘Why did my heart still race when he said those things to me? I can’t even bring myself to look him in the eyes…

‘As long as I say it, he’ll actually protect the Larks? He wouldn’t even care if he had to go up against Jackson and Mark? Even if the Larks are wrong in the first place, he’ll turn a blind eye and help me no matter what? Why was he always so cold to me when I was so infatuated and passionately in love with him? And now when I’ve given up, he’s actually…’

By the time Melanie had coaxed Millie to sleep, Alejandro took the initiative to carry his daughter into her cot. When he returned, he directly turned off the lights.

Chapter 1746

When Melanie saw Alejandro approaching her, she instinctively avoided him just as she felt his breath on her lips. “I’m tired, I would like to get some sleep. You’ve probably got a lot to do in the office tomorrow as well, don’t you? Get some rest.”

Alejandro lowered his raised hand. “Fine…”

He had never liked to fulfill his urges by force.

When Arianne arrived at her office on Monday, she received Sylvain’s invitation. He and Robin were going to be married soon. Just as Arianne received the invitation, Sylvain emphasized as he said, “I was already planning to do this, not trying to rush behind you and Mr. Tremont. Whatever happened at your wedding was purely an accident… Don’t take it to heart.”

Arianne glared at Sylvain. “Do I seem like the kind who would overthink things? I think my wedding with Mark was rather perfect; there’s nothing for me to regret about since he put in his all. As for Tiffany's accident, it doesn’t matter to me in the slightest. Relax, I’ll definitely be there for your wedding, but I

can’t say the same for Mark. It would depend on his schedule. Also, a friendly reminder, however your mom thinks and treats Robin, do make sure that she doesn’t cause a scene during the wedding. It will really be a lifetime trauma if a wedding is destroyed.”

Sylvain looked to his surroundings before he whispered, “I know, that’s why I wasn’t intending on letting my mom participate in our wedding. However, that wouldn’t work after I thought about it again. If my mom finds out about it, she’ll definitely make a huge scene. Therefore, I’ve been trying everything I can to pull them closer together recently, just so that she can quietly attend our wedding. I’ve been buying her whatever she wants, all so that she wouldn’t do anything to shame Robin during the wedding on my behalf.”

Arianne could not help but laugh. “Are you trying to… cover up your family’s skeletons? Why are you speaking so softly? You sound like a thief. That’s your mom—what good would it do for her to ruin your wedding? Wouldn’t she be humiliating herself as well? I doubt she would cause any trouble under normal circumstances, so you don’t have to be so nervous. You’re going to be a groom soon, so stop fooling around so much.”

Sylvain seemed to be irritated as he said, “Of course, you would be able to say that. It doesn’t affect you, after all. But it’s different for me. How could I not be worried? Based on my mom’s character, what’ll happen is really unpredictable. What if she suddenly hates Robin even more when she sees her getting married to me? Also, Robin’s parents are both educated people, so although they might be a little conservative, they could still be considered to be mannerful. Hence, I’m afraid that my mom might get into a ruckus with them after talking to them for a while. My mom has been used to living like a rich woman, so she’s still got her arrogance about her. By the way, what reason could a woman have to refuse to have children?”

The sudden question startled Arianne. Although she was a mother herself, she had always been very casual about giving birth and had never thought of whether she wanted to have a child or not. Therefore, how would she possibly know why a woman would not want to have children? After thinking for a moment, Arianne guessed that it was Robin who refused to have children, so she asked, “Is this why you haven’t had a child yet? Because Robin refuses to have one?”

Sylvain aggrievedly nodded his head. “What other reason could there be? Before we were together, she seemed to agree when I said I wanted a child, which is why I was looking forward to having our child soon after we began living together. However, when that actually happened, she suddenly changed her mind. Moreover, she wouldn’t tell me the reason when I asked her why, only saying that she wants to work hard on her own for a few more years instead of relying on me. She said that she wants to follow your footsteps and be independent! I think she’s just dodging me. I’m not young anymore, so shouldn’t a child be our priority at this moment?”

Arianne pondered for a long time but still could not come up with a reasonable explanation. “I have no idea either. I’ll ask on your behalf later.”

Sylvain’s eyes began to glisten. “Why don’t we get it done today? Ask her out for lunch this afternoon and help me ask her. In return, I’ll pay you back for your lunch. How about it? You can pick your lunch venue to be wherever you want.”

Arianne ended up feeling embarrassed when Sylvain had so “kindly” offered her. “Do I seem like the kind of person who’s very short of lunch money? Actually… Shouldn’t the two of you be discussing these kinds of matters on your own? By asking me to be involved, you actually make me seem as if I love interfering with others’ lives.”

Sylvain was just shy of cajoling like a woman by wiggling his shoulders. “Come on, could you please help me out here? Would I be asking you for help if I could actually ask her myself? You really aren’t short of any lunch money, but aren’t you trying to help me though? So, it would only be logical for me to pay for your lunch. It’s settled then; help me out this once and I’ll forever remember your kindness. I’ll be at your beck and call in the future! You’re the only person she calls her best friend in this company, so you’re be the best candidate to take up this task!”

Chapter 1747

Helpless, Arianne relented and accepted her mission.

It was time for lunch. She declined Mark's invitation and dragged Robin to a cozy little Chinese restaurant for the break.

After taking their seats and making their orders, Arianne feigned her tone to be non-committal as she asked, "So… How come you and Sylvain haven't tried adding members to the family yet? He's more than old enough to be a father while you're just the right age. You know what it's like: better have children early while the body's at its prime than to wait until you're thirty-odd years old and life's fraught with uncertainties. By then, your body's state might not be as optimum for childbearing, too."

Robin was a little skeptical of her intention. "Hey… Wait a minute. This isn't because Sylvain's asking, is it?"

Arianne's mind scrambled in slight panic, but outwardly, she doubled down on her pretense of casualness. "Wha-wha-what? Oh, nooooo. Why would he make me ask you something like that? Noooo way. I was just curious myself! But if you don't wanna talk about it, it's fine. I wouldn't want you to think I'm acting as his spy trying to lure you into spilling some secrets or something."

Robin sighed. "Nah, that wasn't what I meant. It's just… At first, I wanted to have a child as soon as possible, too. But, well… After knowing about what his mom thinks, I don't think I should have kids right now. Instead, I want to be strong and independent. Only a woman like that has the confidence and resolve to stand up for herself," she explained. "On the other hand, if I were to be impregnated and had to stay at home, I'd be losing my job and my source of income, and his mother's contempt of me would only multiply. I don't want that; I want to prove myself to her. I want to show her that I don't need Sylvain to keep my life afloat, and I didn't marry Sylvain for his means."

The root of the problem seemed to still be Ursula. Arianne paused for a moment before admonishing, "Well, judging from one of his oft-mentioned topics, Sylvain seems to really want a kid. Aren't you worried that you might never win his mother's nigh-impossible respect while your efforts wear away at your relationship with your beloved? See… At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what other people

think of you; Sylvain will always be your strongest tether. You're not marrying his mother now, are you? This is life between the two of you, and what's more… Sylvain has always chosen you since the get-go. He'd rather have his mom live on her own than lose you. Seriously, you don't have to pay that shrew any mind."

Robin hung her head in evident dismay. "Even now, my parents have never shared a meal with his mother—not even once. They're still strangers to one another," she said. "Shouldn't in-laws act as a family after marriage? But whenever his mother talks about me or my family, she never stops using that… scornful tone or changes that look of despise. Do you know how it feels to be dehumanized as unworthy and to be completely nothing, Arianne?"

Of course, Arianne understood it a little too profoundly. "Yes, I do. Sylvain's mom really seared a terrible shadow on your mind, huh? I'm worried that this desire-for-kids-thing might turn into a sore spot for the two of you, though. Hey, tell you what: you two should have a heart-to-heart talk about this someday, okay? Don't start keeping things to yourself, because a bad communication skill… well, kills. Too many misunderstandings are a recipe for broken relationships, you know."

Shades of morosity and drear seeped into Robin's eyes. "I get it, Arianne. Believe me, I wanted to talk to him about this; it's suffocating to bottle things inside. But… how? How can I break it to him? If I tell him what I think, wouldn't it seem like I'm an incendiary trying to incite antagonism between Sylvain and his mom? If he fights with her because of how I feel, it will make me the bad guy. I would have lost the high ground to say anything… No. Let's not bring this up. Talking about it just stresses me out. It's a long road ahead before the light at the end of the tunnel; all that's left for me is to suffer through it."

Arianne fell into silence. Such was the world of adults—always stressed out, always shouldering all sorts of burdens. It did not matter how materialistically fulfilled everyone was; at the end of the day, no one gets to live without trials and worries.

The question was, when would a person's life start to cross into suffering?

Shortly after Arianne returned to the office, Sylvain was quick to tug her aside. “So, how did it go, comrade?”

Honestly, Arianne wanted to keep quiet just to avoid upsetting him. “Look, it’s a sensitive, personal issue between the two of you, and I just don’t know how to go about it, okay? Besides, according to Robin, it’s not even something I should be telling you! God, it’s like I’m your spy or something…”

Sylvain fished out his phone and transferred cash into her bank account—twice her lunch bill. “…And there you go, my sincerest sincerity in a form everyone can understand,” he quipped. “Look, it’s fine; you can lay everything she told you on me. I won’t tell her it’s from you.”

Arianne accepted her “payment” and glared—though very meekly—at him. “Hmph, you think you can just bribe me with money? You underestimate me,” she muttered. “Anyway, I asked, and she said it’s because she thinks her entire family is being dissed by your mother. She wants to prove herself to your mom through a score of achievements, which is why she doesn’t dare halt her career to bear a kid. It takes at least two years for a woman to go through the beginning of pregnancy to the kid’s arrival, you know? And then when the child’s here, you two will have to decide if you want to raise them yourselves or hire a nanny. Seriously, Robin would have to miss work for two years just for this—and that’s why she doesn’t want to.

“My take? I think your mom really left some lasting trauma in her, Sylvain. But you probably shouldn’t take this to your mom, though, because that’s only gonna complicate things for Robin. She seems to have decided on a strategy for this already, and that is to weather her trials through,” she finished. “I guess that’s life, I’m afraid. Just a long slog of suffering.”

Chapter 1748

Sylvain sank into silence. He had thought that giving Ursula a separate place to stay, away from his family, would help circumvent many of these problems, but now, it seemed that his hope to escape was premature. He knew the exact opinions and thoughts Ursula harbored toward the Coxes. This was why,

in the past, Sylvain had been adamant that a relationship, an affair between two persons, would ultimately need to subsist on the blessings of those around the couple. To marry without other people's blessings was to unite against all odds—especially the most difficult ones.

Sylvain made his choice long ago. And come hell or high water, he was not going to bend his knee.

Arianne patted his shoulder good-naturedly, hoping to give him comfort and a morale boost. Unfortunately, before her hand left him, Mark—who just stepped inside the office at that moment—caught her.

One could almost see lightning flashing on his stormy expression. "Arianne Wynn. My office, now!"

Sylvain was pulled back into reality—and immediately decided to pull out of the conversation. "Yo, this ain't got nothin' to do with me!"

Arianne rolled her eyes. "As if I thought it's your business in the first place! Go bury your nose in your stuff. I'll be back in a jiffy."

She went into his office with impatience written all over her face. "Is there a problem, Mistah Tremont?"

Mark's chiseled index finger was trained at her so closely that his fingertip was almost touching her forehead. "Putting your hand around other people's shoulders and back in the office, aren't you? Have I become invisible in your eyes that nothing enjoins you from getting 'touchy-feely' with other guys, hmm?"

“Excuse me, mister? That’s quite a stretch on the technicality of patting someone on their shoulders, dude. Don’t tell me your brain is weaving some incredible plot about what happened already,” she riposted, baffled. “Besides, glad to hear that you at least remember we’re in the office right now, and we should be talking shops here. So why are you impinging on my private matters?”

Her comeback choked Mark red in embarrassment. With a gnashing of teeth, he retorted, “Oh yeah? Then let’s talk shop. Your work bonus for the month is nullified. That is for abusing your working time on frivolities! Now, you may go.”

Hearing how she was losing every single penny she had made this month instantly pushed her button. “What the—? Since when have I done that?! For crying out loud, it’s normal for people to talk to each other during work, dum-dum. The salary I get from you is already low enough, and now you’re gonna deduct it even more? Can’t you feel your conscience aching from this injustice?”

Mark loved seeing her enraged like this. “On the contrary, my conscience is skipping around, singing a happy tune. Is there a problem?”

Oh, she could not argue about this, all right. He was the boss; he could deduct anyone’s salary however he liked. Arianne shot him her most menacing stink-eye before stomping out of his office with a bang. She was going to scrap every single dime he had deducted from her if that was the last thing she would do!

Arianne deliberately did not stay to wait for Mark after work. Instead, she hailed an uber and left on her own.

Anticipating—and mostly, preventing—his “Ceaseless Chain of Calls”, Arianne turned her phone off completely so he could have fun screaming at her in the office like a madman!

Truthfully, these days, Arianne was preoccupied with scouting for the perfect school for Smore, and the search was surprisingly taxing. Either way, she was too tired to engage with Mark's battle of the wits.

Chapter 1749

A certain someone stepped inside with a bouquet of flaming red roses. He placed them on the table in front of her and announced, "Someone gave this to me. Frankly, I have no love for it, so it's yours now."

Arianne spied the bouquet with a side-eye. The flowers' freshness was so overwhelming and evident that there was no way he did not buy it for her. Yet, the same man wanted to pretend otherwise just to save his thin skin!

"Urgh, I don't like it. Throw it away."

Mark turned exasperated. "Why you—don't step out of line!"

She scowled at him. "Hey, hey, hey! You said 'someone' gave you this bouquet, and you only gave it to me because you yourself don't want it. And now I'm telling you I don't want it either—how's that 'stepping out of line', huh? If anything, you're stepping out of your line by giving away a beautiful gift someone clearly took pains to give you! Though I have to wonder… Which young lady dares present you such bright red roses, hmm? They're so fiery red, I can see the flames of her passion and infatuation toward you!"

Mark was so furiously stumped by her that his tongue gave up on a repartee. Instead, he hissed something about letting Arianne do whatever she pleased with it before storming upstairs.

Arianne picked the bouquet up after he left and breathed in its rich fragrance—premium roses, fresh with beads of water adorning their petals, as lovely as they were demure. She admitted that rather than seeing a no-gooder throwing tantrums, she would very much rather feast her eyes upon a bouquet of beautiful flowers!

During dinner, Mary whispered into Arianne's ears, "Um, what's with Mr. Tremont? I told him to come downstairs for dinner, but that fella just mumbled something like 'I'm already full… of steam!'. Whatever in the world is that supposed to mean?"

Arianne sputtered into a chortle. "Oh, leave him to me, Mary. I'll drag him here."

"God Almighty! A long time ago, you wouldn't have the moxie to challenge him like that!" Mary exclaimed after a sigh. "But now? Look at how the tides have turned!"

She was not wrong. Arianne herself had never foreseen a day when she could reign supreme over an alpha, and it was just… So! Exhilarating!

A chuckling Arianne went up the stairs to coax Mark into having his dinner. There, her target had taken root on his chair at the usual spot before the French window, as unmoving as a life-sized statue. No matter how hard she called him, he would not let loose a single note of response.

Hence, Arianne snuck up from behind him before snaking her arms around his neck. "Mm, I hate to admit it, but that bouquet's gorgeous," she breathed. "Are you sure you're skipping dinner? Smore's already wolfing food down as we speak."

Mark tugged her wrist and bit the back of her hand lightly, imprinting a set of faint teeth marks. “If I ever see you touch another man’s shoulder again, I’ll lop off your hands,” he murmured.

Arianne giddily flashed her hands to him. “Oh yeah, wha’chu waiting for? Here are my tasty hands! Lop them off, go on—a little kitty bite like this can’t possibly be all you got, is it?”

He rose to his feet and rapped gently on her head. “One of these days your annoying self is going to be the end of me! Go, dinner awaits!”

Arianne tugged on the edge of his untucked shirt and let him lug her along. “I heard the Larks aren’t holding up very well, Mark. The punishment’s a bit cruel to Melanie like that, huh.”

Solemness dawned on Mark’s features. “No crueler than the way the Larks had treated her, though. Alejandro’s retaliating on Melanie’s behalf, after all. Otherwise, West Industries alone would not deal enough brunt to speed up the Larks’ downfall. I’m waiting for Alejandro to annex the Larks’ company before discussing the terms on releasing their hold on Tremont Enterprise’s shares.”

Arianne was a little taken aback. “Oh? Why’s that? Afraid that Alejandro might hold too much of Tremont Enterprise’s stocks?”

He answered her with assenting silence. Regardless of their current circumstances, Alejandro Smith was still Ethan Connor underneath that skin and identity; he was still the same bastard son of the Tremonts. It would be unwise to let him hold that much power over Tremont Enterprise—better safe than sorry, always.

Chapter 1750

Back in the Smith Estate, Melanie was feeding her daughter dinner. Alejandro would not be having his dinner at home today, which was hardly surprising.

Him calling Melanie in advance about it, though, was incredibly abnormal.

Truthfully, Melanie was cognizant of the aberration underpinning their interactions lately, and—to her dismay—it was rendering her closer to vacillating about the divorce she had so wanted to see through.

It was at this moment that the nanny suddenly hurriedly came to her. “Madam? Your family is outside the gate. They say they are here to see you, but… should we let them in?”

Melanie could see more than an air of urgency from the nanny. There was fear thrown into it. She rose, shot a quick glance out of the window, and found herself staring at not only her mother, but also the rest of the family: her father, her two older brothers, and other relatives who were shareholders of the Larks’ company. There were at least a dozen people in the mob.

Melanie held no delusions that they were here for a friendly tête-à-tête, but hiding was not an option, either. “Quick, bring Little Miss upstairs and stay in a room. No matter what happens, do not let her come downstairs,” she ordered. “Also, inform all of our guards to not intervene into my family’s affair while I handle it. Oh, and please… call Alejandro, tell him to come back. Remember, no matter what happens, not one of you should step in before he is home!”

The Larks were here looking for an ax to grind, and Alejandro’s absence exacerbated her trepidation. But if any of the guards got physical with the Lark while the master of the house was gone, then it would seem like it was from Melanie raising her hands against people who were her seniors. After all, other than her brothers, everyone else in the mob was her older relatives.

With everything in proper order, Melanie finally let the guards open the gate. The Larks sallied through the opening and spread out into a perimeter around her.

Nikolai was the first to bark. “Melanie Lark, you ungrateful little filth! You spit on all of the sacrifices and kindness we’ve made all your life! I especially tried to remove one of your biggest hobbles, but what did you do? You ruined it, and then as if that’s not enough, you’re actively wrecking the Larks! You are a curse, a baleful curse!”

“And now the Larks are crashing into a ditch. Does that please your blackened heart, huh?” Mrs. Lark chimed in. “Damn me and my soft heart! I shouldn’t have agreed to bring a misbegotten excuse of a child back home. Twenty-odd years of raising you—wasted! I can’t believe this is how you decided to repay us! Because of you, our family is crashing and burning and left with nothing, and that includes your uncles and aunts! You deserve to die!”

Their words lit the fuse, and in a snap, everyone else began to throw in their own acrid jeremiads. Spit and saliva were like a flood threatening to drown Melanie out; she could not hear any individual voice but only a torrent of angry buzzing. Sometime amid the ensuing snafu, someone shoved her and caused her to stumble. Before she could right herself, there were more hateful jostles and deliberate thrusts until Melanie lost her footing altogether and crashed onto the cold, hard ground.

Someone among them began throwing kicks at her.

All through the ordeal, Melanie’s eyes were trained on one person. Among everyone here, her father was the only one who was close to her, be it in blood or relations or other aspects—

“Enough!”

Mr. Lark could not bear to watch anymore. He dove toward her, shielding his daughter with himself. “You said you’re only gonna protest justice! How the hell does that mutate into beating the crap out of a woman, huh? We’re in the Smith territory, for God’s sake! Are you people begging for trouble?!”

Melanie’s heart, long submitted to plaintiveness, warmed up a little. “It’s o-okay, Dad… I… I’m the one… in the wrong… I didn’t manage to shoulder the blame alone. But whatever happened, h-happened… There’s nothing I can do anymore. If you’re here to express dissatisfaction, this should be enough… Please, you have to go before Alejandro comes home. Because when he’s here, none of you… will be able to go anywhere…”

“Oh yeah? We’ve moved on to beating the snot out of you, but have any of Smith’s guards come to your rescue? Why is that, huh? If Alejandro ever saw you as anything more than a subhuman, then why do his people just stand there and gawk at you being humiliated, huh?” Mrs. Lark, already descending into her worst, had discarded all reservations for caustic low-hanging fruits. “Do you really think beating you up is enough? No, the loss we suffered because of your stupidity can’t be satisfied with this alone! Hell, I wish you’d die already!”

Melanie took in Mrs. Lark’s increasingly unhinged, twisted grimace until the latter’s features started to blur. She had not wanted to cry, but her tears broke out like a waterfall from a broken dam.

Her mother… She used to be so sweet, so kind to her. And now the same mother was beating her up. Wishing she would die.

Melanie knew that all of Mrs. Lark’s hatred was more than their most recent unfortunate ordeal. It was an eruption of past grudges and bitterness; it was fury and loathing directed at Melanie’s deceased birth mother as much as at Melanie herself.

Seeing Mr. Lark continue to shield Melanie made Mrs. Lark's blood boil so much that her body shuddered. "Get out of my way, you old geezer, or you'll get your share of punches! Don't you see? It's this b*tch of a daughter who doomed your sons! If it weren't for her, we Larks would still be in a good place—none of this bullsh*t of starting everything all over again!"