Ruling 1751

Chapter 1751

Nikolai spat at the ground. “Get out of our way, or don’t blame me for extending my courtesy to you, Dad! Don’t squawk about disrespect by then!”

Mr. Lark’s eyes widened in lividity. “You dare lay your hands on your old man?! I'm still your goddamn Pa! You may have your harpy of a mother cheering you on for being a paragon of jacka**es, but don’t mistake that as authority to do anything you like, you insolent brat! Christ, you’re a carbon copy of your mother! I shouldn’t be surprised though; a child takes after the parent who raises them, after all, and right now, you’re an embarrassment and I wish you were never born!”

Nikolai clenched his teeth, his hateful eyes zeroing in on Melanie. In his mind, he had already equated every fault as her doing. One look at Nikolai’s face was enough to tell anyone that he wanted to tear her into pieces with his bare hands.

Finally, Melanie’s second eldest brother, Miklan, yanked his big brother by his shoulder. “Nikolai, snap out of it. This is your sister you’re looking at, man. Don’t scowl at her with that hideous demonic impression as if she’s your blood enemy. I mean, can we even blame her? Our real foes are the Wests and the Smiths, guys.”

Nikolai’s fury found a new target in Miklan, and he swung his brother’s hand away. “What the f**k? Trying to take on the nice guy act, seriously?! You’ve always been like this, Miklan, acting docile like a good puppy in front of dad! Lo and behold, you get your share of the family wealth, too, but look at where we are now—our f**king wealth is no more! Who are you trying to fool with that stupid act?!”

Unthinkably, Miklan did not share a mote of Nikolai’s pugnacity. Despite his brother’s attitude, the former merely replied in dismay, “Whatever floats your boat, man. It’s fine to demand justice and everything, but no one should have gotten physical; that crosses the line. We’re all Larks here, right?

We're family. An in-fighting like this is just pointless. If you people really wanted substantive changes, shouldn't you be demanding your 'justice' from, I dunno, Jackson West or Alejandro? Instead of taking it out on a woman while Alejandro isn't at home—you guys are just a bunch of pussies!"

Mrs. Lark responded by decking Miklan on the face. "Are you even my own flesh and blood? Why are you standing up for that disgraceful b*tch?! Whatever she's experiencing right now is incomparable to the bulk of our losses, stupid!"

Never hit a person on their face—especially a man's. Unsurprisingly, her action drew Miklan's genuine ire. "Goddamn it, how about you stop acting like a rabid cur, Mom?" he bristled. "She may not be your daughter, but she's still my sister… We share the same father, for Christ's sake! Do you really think I'm gonna just stand here and watch you people lynch her? Use your head for once, people—what benefit can you even reap from lynching her?! Will it make Jackson and Alejandro stop their assault? Jesus Christ, is any one of you ever going to be reasonable?!"

Someone among the crowd had grown impatient. "Screw you, brat! We're here to demand justice; who the hell gives a damn about your family's internal drama?! Get that fixed behind closed doors, pal! We just wanna take good care of Melanie—because ain't no Larks ever tolerated traitors and snitches!"

Miklan removed his blazer and cast it to the ground, pulling his cuffs up to his elbows. "Oh yeah? Come and get some, tough guy. Try me, see if you people are man enough to beat the living daylight out of me! Why do you people think I came along with your lot? I just wanted to make sure that none of you louts start burning things down, man; I never wanted to 'demand justice'. I might have agreed to removing Tiffany as a threat, but when things went south, I never once agreed to scapegoat Melanie! How is it fair to blame her for the sh*t we did?!"

Since Nikolai was the culprit who pushed Tiffany, he bore the most responsibility, and Miklan's words spurred him into hurling a sucker-punch right on the man's face, no holds barred.

“If it weren’t for her trying to ruin my plan, we wouldn’t have come to where we are now, you buffoon!” It was Nikolai’s turn to fume. “The hell are you trying to pretend this has got nothing to do with her?! If Tiffany died that day, just as she should, then who the f**k would have known who’s behind it?! It was for the Larks as much as it was for her, but she was stupid, spineless, and a failure of a woman who can’t even rope her own damn husband!”

Miklan’s full ire was finally aroused. In a flash, a melee erupted between the brothers.

The foofaraw quickly escalated into genuine snafu. Mrs. Lark was forced to become a desperate mediator while the rest of the mob set their attention back to Melanie. Insults, philippics, and beatings directed at her soon returned.

The nanny, despite her order to take care of Melissa in a room upstairs, was losing her composure the longer she listened to the pandemonium outside. The young girl herself had not the slightest inkling of what had transpired, so she asked the nanny in confusion, “Many people downstairs, no? They are noisy…”

The nanny was close to panicked tears. “Uh, it’s nothing, Little Miss! I’ll just call your daddy again while you hang tight and don’t go anywhere, alright?”

Bored, Melissa intoned, “Ohhh-kay….”

The nanny dialed Alejandro’s number and called him. “M-M-Mr. Smith! Please come back home, ASAP! Madam… It sounds like she’s being beaten up! She ordered us not to interfere, saying we can only do something after you’re back!”

Chapter 1752

On the other end of the phone, Alejandro was rushing home as he yelled, “Don’t listen to her; tell the guards to do their thing! I’m rushing home already!”

Alejandro’s words were the shot of confidence the nanny needed. She immediately pushed open the window and yelled, “Protect Madam! Retaliate against whoever hit her—this is our boss’s order! He is coming home as we speak!”

The guards acted instantly. They swarmed toward the mob-surrounded Melanie and liberated her, who was already covered by battered marks and bruises. Mr. Lark, who had thrown himself forward to protect her, looked no better.

On a distant end, neither Nikolai nor Miklan had emerged victorious in their fight. Mrs. Lark just could not break them up.

The Larks and the guards resigned into a shouting Mexican standoff for about fifteen minutes before the shrieks of tires on brakes scraped against the atmosphere. Alejandro’s car had screeched into a stop right outside the gate. There was a very evident dent on its bumper—God knows how many red lights he had sped through on his rush back home that he got himself into a non-fatal accident at some point.

A man with fresh blood streaming down his forehead descended from the car. It trickled down his cheek and dripped onto his shirt, staining its whiteness with blinding red. The steel in Alejandro’s eyes and the gale of dogged ruthlessness his presence ushered immediately arrested everyone on the spot. No one dared break a sound, let alone throw a punch. Even the Lark brothers’ mano a mano had halted.

His eyes seized on Melanie’s damaged state, and he raised his finger to point at the Larks. “F**k ‘em up, so long as they don’t die from it.”

Before Melanie could understand him, the guards were mobilized. She could only watch on as a new brawl unfurled, eyes widened and mouth hanging agape. Instincts spurred her into yanking Miklan and her father away, the latter of who knew that things had gone way out of hand. “Mel, please tell him to stop. Those are your uncles and relatives there. This is inappropriate!” he told Melanie in an undertone.

Melanie wanted to make Alejandro stop, but fresh memories of being humiliated and beaten up came to mind, so she chose silence. Alejandro knew his limits, she was sure; no one would die from this.

The chaos continued for a long, long while until everyone was beaten into submission.

Alejandro sat on the lounge chair in his yard and looked over a dozen of Larks kneeling before him. “What’s with this kneeling? You all are several years my seniors, aren’t you? Inappropriate, I bet. Get up.”

Mrs. Lark was the first to rise. She had lost her previous boorish brazenness, especially since the straps of her luxury handbag—a limited edition Chanel—had broken in the melee and rendered into a dirty, undignified sack. Honestly, none of them had expected Alejandro to stand up for Melanie to the extent of punishing them.

The rest of the mob gradually did the same, though meekly.

Alejandro lit up a cigarette before passing one each to Miklan and Mr. Lark. They might share the same surname as the rest of the mob, but Alejandro was not blind to who was right or wrong.

He exhaled a puff of smoke nonchalantly before finally asking, “So, I trust that this sh*t’s even, right? Now, who’s the head of the Larks? Want to talk about selling your company off?”

“I… I hold the most shares,” Mr. Lark answered weakly. “I agree to pass it…”

Mrs. Lark opened her mouth into an obvious shape of yet another tirade, but her words stopped as soon as Alejandro scowled at her.

“Well? And the rest of you?” he raised his volume. “Come on, at least acknowledge that I’m being very civil here. I’ll give you all five minutes to think this through—even though I’ve wasted quite a lot of time dancing with you people about this issue already, if I do say so myself. But… It looks to me that everyone hasn't achieved a united opinion yet, so here’s five minutes for your discussion.”

Chapter 1753

Melanie’s uncles, after going through the worst of the guards’ retaliatory fisticuffs, were quick to succumb. Slowly but surely, only Mrs. Lark and Nikolai remained silent.

Alejandro chuckled. “Oho, looks like we’ve got ourselves some tough cookies! Tough, and a sore to virtually everyone around them… You, Nikolai Lark! You’re the jacka** who pushed Tiffany down the stairs and made Melanie bear your blame, aren’t you? Meanwhile, your mommy supports everything her precious little baby does. Well, let me tell you, I consider everyone else involved in this fight today to be even—except the two of you. The rest of you may go after signing your names on the contract. But you two? You two get an extended stay… We have much to discuss.”

Mrs. Lark was frightful at her core, but she was not about to admit that. “W-What are you gonna do to us, huh?! You think you’re above the law, huh, hotshot? I’m calling 911!”

Alejandro remained unperturbed as he fiddled with the lighter in his hand. “911, huh? Are you gonna tell the cops that you trespassed on a normal civilian’s residence and then thrashed a hapless woman in the first place? Gee, I wonder if that’ll work! Sure, you people look like sh*t now, but this is definitely a case of self-defense. Have some sense for once.”

Spleen erupted within Mrs. Lark’s body like a volcano. Not knowing how to express that sudden burst of rage, her eyes rolled backward and she swooned, though no one could tell if she had genuinely fainted or if it was just an act.

Nikolai helped his mother to her feet before bristling. “What the hell do you want, Alejandro Smith?! It’s you who’s the jacka**—despite your marriage, you still care only for Tiffany Lane! What the hell is Melanie to you?!”

The woman in question averted her gaze, fully expecting answers that would do nothing to preserve her dignity.

Alejandro pressed his lips into a slight pout. “Which genius told you that Tiffany is all I care about? I’m only trying to repay her for the kindness she showed me for three long years. Is that a cardinal sin? You asked what Melanie means to me, but haven’t I already spelled out the f**king answer for you all? She’s my wife, and she’s untouchable to the likes of you, period! Will you guys only learn after some good old fashioned spanking?”

Contempt shadowed Nikolai’s features. “Really? Please. If you ever treated her as anything remotely resembling a wife, you would have tried having a son again with her as soon as her daughter was born. You’re the only heir to the entire Smith legacy; there’s no f**king way posterity and passing on family lines never crossed your mind,” he retorted. “It’s just so obvious—you’re looking for an excuse to nullify your marriage! Pfft. Had this happened anywhere else but here, I bet you wouldn’t have even given enough damn to intervene!”

“Jesus Christ, only animals will obsess over fathering offspring for the sake of ‘family lines.’ Seriously, after all that your teachers had taught you about evolution, the only thing you remember is humping and pumping babies? My man, please stop. Your IQ is giving me secondhand embarrassment,” Alejandro jeered. “Besides, all this grand talk about family line and all that clusterf**k is moot. If we had to follow your definition of heirs and inheritance, the Smiths would have been considered extinct…”

No one understood what he meant at the end of his tirade, but Melanie did. The real Alejandro Smith had perished a long time ago, dragging the Smiths’ legitimate bloodline along with him.

Nikolai was, by all accounts, a competent orator when it came to the domains of business. Unfortunately, he was woefully wanting when it came to verbal sparring, especially when his opponent was Alejandro, whom he could not possibly win. All his life, Nikolai spent most of his time with well-mannered upper-crusts, so his repertoire of profanities was limited. In contrast, Alejandro was a veteran who cut his path out of an array of diverse social experiences.

Nikolai found himself tongue-tied. “You—!”

Alejandro had no patience for their exchange, so he ordered his men to bring up the agreement.

Nikolai remained uncooperative. It spurred Mr. Lark to admonish him. “Just sign it, Son. You kicked the beehive, you pay the price. Besides, it’s not like we lose everything from this… There’s always a chance to rise back up again. Please, read the situation and act accordingly.”

Nikolai’s pigheadedness was roused again. “What’s he going to do if I refuse anyway, huh? As long as I say no, none of these signatures will have any real effect! I’m one of the shareholders and I have the

right to vote against this! You know what? I don't believe one bit that I'm going to die here today, anyway. Like, who the hell does he think he is, huh?"

Alejandro studied him with interest. "Oh, really? Tell me, have you ever wondered where all of my copious number of brothers and cousins went? Hmmm? And still, you have the balls to act like a baboon on my turf. Someone clearly has a death wish, don't you agree?"

A slight but evident change overcame Nikolai's mien, but he still refused to budge.

Chapter 1754

Mrs. Lark gradually opened her eyes. "Nik… Just let it be this time. Our luck ran out this time. Sign it and bail; I don't ever want to see their faces again…" she breathed wispily. "Don't ever show your faces again, Melanie, Alejandro!"

Seeing his mother change her mind uneased Nikolai. "Mom, are you really going to let everything the Lark family has built up and worked on be handed to… that knave? We'll be setting ourselves up as clowns for everyone to laugh at and mock… I can't live like that!"

Alejandro's patience had run dry. In a fit, he walloped the contract on Nikolai's face. "Boo-hoo-hoo, cry me a river! Find some way to cope with it, smartass, since you people brought this on yourselves. Anyway, time's up; my time is too precious for you people to waste!"

Bodyguards that had stood by immediately fanned out from behind Alejandro and surrounded Nikolai, who tripped and fell onto his bottom in terror. "What the hell are you people trying to do?! I-I-I'm warning you, d-don't you dare do anything stupid! Alejandro Smith, if you dare… I'll remember this and make you pay!"

Mrs. Lark was scared enough that she dared not go on another fainting spell so that she could shield her son. “How dare you! Alejandro Smith, we will not be bullied!”

Miklan could not stomach their antics anymore. He picked up the contract from the floor and handed it to Nikolai. “God, Nik, just sign it already, man. What else can we do at this point, huh? We’re never leaving this place if you continue to run that mouth of yours. Besides, coming here was you and Mom’s idea, was it not?”

Nikolai leveled his brother with a glare, scowled at Alejandro, and finally, reserved his worst glower for Melanie. “You… Just you wait!” he hissed.

He could throw a million nasty threats, but he still had to sign it. When he was done, Alejandro finally nodded in satisfaction. “Great! You all may leave. Don’t you worry, tough guy; Melanie will definitely be waiting for your comeback, as will I. I eagerly await your return, Chad. I can’t wait to see whatever tricks you have to make me pay!”

Instantly after that, he turned to Melanie and handed the contract to her right in front of the Larks. “From now on, the Larks’ company is all yours to manage.”

Melanie could feel pairs of hateful eyes burning through her skin; the contract began to look heavier and heavier. She had to shake herself out of a daze to finally receive the paper as its weight sank her heart into her stomach.

The Larks fired a few more insults out of indignance as they left the estate, but Alejandro ignored them now that his main goal had been achieved.

Peace gradually returned, and Melanie turned to Alejandro. “You’re wounded. How did you hurt yourself like this? Go change into something new, and I’ll tend to it with a simple fix before we get you to the hospital….”

As she spoke, her fingers reached out to his coat in an attempt to take it off him, but Alejandro dodged her. “It’s all blood inside; there’s no need to dirty your hands. Besides, it’s not a big deal. Just a little bump on my way here, nothing to it. I’m gonna take a shower and get changed, then probably slap some simple fix on it and call it a day,” he said. “You need to get tidied up, though, before I take you to the hospital. Christ, those jackasses did not pull their punches with you…”

Melanie’s raised hand froze in midair for a few beats before she retracted it. “I’m fine. Just some scratches.”

She returned to the room and met Melissa, who still had no idea what had happened. “Mommy! Can Millie go downstairs and play now?”

Melanie fingered her unkempt hair into place. “Mmh. You may. Go, but be careful. And don’t go outside the gate.”

Melissa noticed the bruises on her face and stood on her tippy-toes as she beckoned her to crouch. Melanie obliged with a smile. “Yes?”

Melissa kissed her mother’s bruises. “Kiss your boo-boo, no more pain! Right? Mommy tell me that. You slipped and fell, right, Mommy? How can you be not-careful? You always tell Millie to be careful…”

Chapter 1755

Melanie felt tears swarming to her nose. “Y-You’re right. Mommy has been careless… But I’ll be more careful next time,” she replied. “Millie kissed Mommy’s boo-boo, though, so I don’t feel pain anymore… Just a little tired. Can you sleep on your own later?”

Melissa nodded docilely. “Okay! Millie is a big girl now! Don’t need bedtime stories. I will sleep, sure!”

Melanie waited for the nanny to take Melissa away before she sank onto the rug-covered floor with her back against the bed, her eyes studying the contract. Fresh memories of the event just moments ago replayed in her mind.

She exhaled a long breath. Her father and Miklan had stood up for her at the right time and came to her aid. It made her feel a little bit better. At the very least, not everyone in her family saw her as a contemptible enemy.

At least, she still felt a small warmth of familial bonds from them…

By the time Alejandro finished his shower, Melanie was still sitting on the floor.

“Hey, hey. I told you to tidy yourself up and get changed, didn’t I? I’m taking you to the hospital,” he said as he got dressed. “How hard did they hit you? Why did you stop our men from helping you? That was just stupid. I mean, are we hiring these people for charity?”

Melanie willed her thoughts to gather and stay in line before rising to her feet and flashing him a slight smile. “I’m fine. They are my family—they were only here because they were mad, see, but how hard

can they hurt someone who comes from their family? You, though… How did you even do this to yourself? Stay here and wait; I'm gonna grab our first-aid kit. Just look at it—it's still bleeding! If we can't stop it, we'll really have to get you to the hospital."

Alejandro doubted Melanie's account, so he snatched her arm, pulled her cuff, and inspected the skin beneath. There were no obvious wounds; the worst was on Melanie's face, which had been marred with patches of red. It was the kind of injury that would evolve into large swathes of blue-black bruises after a night's sleep, and Alejandro was sure that any bystander would take one look at them and instantly mistake him as a domestic abuser.

He clicked his tongue. "Those motherf**kers did not wear any kid gloves, did they?""

Melanie pulled her arm away from him in discomfort. "They are my seniors, Alejandro. It's inappropriate to call them that, wouldn't you agree? Either way, I'm sorry for the trouble. Because of me, you had to rush home and got into an accident that left you like this. Sit tight, I'll get the kit."

Alejandro watched Melanie's curvaceous silhouette weave in and out of the room's furnishings as she searched for the first-aid kit. He let his mind drift away.

She was always so… rigidly courteous with him, he realized. Too distant, as if there was a wall between them. He had wished he could regain those same feelings he felt back when he was dating Tiffany, yet he could not find any of them in his union with her. It was not like Alejandro did not know what to look for—he had been in a relationship before and knew what sort of feelings it was supposed to give him. He thought it should be the same for marriage, too.

So, what went wrong?

Soon, Melanie found the very thing she was looking for and began to tend to the wound on his head. After determining his injury to be merely skin-deep, she breathed a sigh of relief. “Phew, thank God it’s not the serious kind. I was worried that it might be the type that hurt your brain, you know, something akin to cerebral concussion. Still, I think you really ought to take an X-ray on it,” she remarked. “This kit is hardly used in normal times, but I’m glad that the essentials are all inside. Uh, looking for it has been pretty hard…”

Her slender waist rocked before his eyes. Her chest was the titillating subject of his viewing angle from his spot on the bed. When she bent closer to him, strands of her hair grazed the tip of his nose, drawing a faint zephyr of fragrance. Alejandro could not help himself from slinging his arm around her waist, pulling her closer to him so he could bury his head into her soft, supple skin.

“From now on, don’t ever try to take on every single pain yourself,” he said. “If someone wrongs you, you can always tell me. Nobody—and I mean nobody—can ever walk over you.”

Melanie’s motion halted; his intimacy had come so abruptly that it baffled her. All these years, she had always felt like they were just partners appointed to live together under the same roof.

When he said these words… Had he ever thought that the one person who wronged her the most was, perhaps, Alejandro himself?

A moment later, she shrugged out of his embrace quietly. “All right, I’m gonna apply some meds. First the antiseptic, then we wrap it with bandages. It’s still early, so we can still take you to the hospital for a check-up. Unfortunately, I’ll have to sit out of this trip, but I can assure you, I didn’t suffer anything that might require medical attention. Besides, Millie needs someone to help her with her bath.”

Chapter 1756

Alejandro remembered his car and called Jett, telling him to bring it to the repairmen. However, even after he hung his call, the image of that crumpled mess in his mind's eye made him frown.

"Bah. Should just get a new car. I got sick of that one, anyway. Hey, got any car you like in mind? Let's go take a look tomorrow," he said. "Also, I've decided that this is just a scratch and I'm skipping the hospital."

A new car? Well, was this not the first time the man had ever voiced any genuine inclination to buy Melanie anything? "No, no need. I'm not going anywhere," she said, shaking her head. "Besides, don't we have other cars at home? Any of them is good enough. Why bother buying a new one for me?"

The linchpin to her refusal, of course, was that Melanie's mind was already set on sincerely proposing a divorce in two days' time. Him suddenly breaking out an ostensible act of bonhomie like this would only give her pressure.

Normally, Alejandro did not care much about these things—any rejection would deal an instant end to the conversation. But today, he was out of character. "Look, the thing about driving is that you gotta drive a car you genuinely love for the whole thing to really hit the heart, okay? Okay, we rest our conclusion. You're coming with me tomorrow to pick out a new car," he insisted. "When Millie's of age, she's gotta' start going to school, and you'll be having your little 'Moms' Club', right? A car's essential to that sort of socializing, and I ain't letting you drive those junk-metals in the garage. Seriously, those cars are only gonna embarrass me, got it?"

Junk-metals?! Melanie was speechless. Every single car owned by the Smith family was a luxury car; leave it to Alejandro to make such a bold brag.

She cast her sight downward in silence and began packing up the first-aid kit. That was when Alejandro suddenly snatched her wrist.

Words were unnecessary. She could see glimmers of libido in his eyes.

Without any hesitation, Melanie willed her arm to jerk out of his grip, but it only made him tightened it. Her nerves strung tightly, her eyes desperately averting his in trepidation. She dared not give herself into the sensual waves he was capable of bringing her, because she feared that all of those would only solidify into attachments, introducing doubts into what should have been a resolute decision. She had been weak and faltering for far too long.

Just this once…

Just this once, she wanted to take charge of something in her own life!

…

The next day, while recuperating in the West family residence, Tiffany's eyes widened before she cried out, "What the fu—?! The Lark family assembled a mob and caused a hoo-ha in the Smith Estate? And it turned into a frickin' brawl?! …Wait, how do you know?"

Jackson could feel his poor eardrums struggling to hold themselves together from bursting, "Can you just…! For Christ's sake, lower that boombox of yours! God, your shouting ability is on par with an opera singer that I seriously doubt you've just given birth," he moaned. "Look, I'll know things whenever I feel like knowing them, end of story. Besides, it's not like this is some top-secret news. I should also tell you that Melanie's fine, which is a given, of course. At the end of the day, they are still a family. Ain't no one gonna beat her to death, man."

Tiffany was still very cross. “B*tch, it’s Alejandro who acquired the Larks’ family company—what’s that gotta do with Melanie?! On what damn grounds did they have to beat people up in their front lawn? Goddamn, they’re a pack of rabid, frothing animals!”

Chapter 1757

Jackson brought a bowl of hot soup to Tiffany’s lip. “Alright, alright. Drink this while it’s still warm quickly, please; I gotta get to my office today. Anyway, Alejandro managed to return just in time to give those Larks a piece of his mind, so everything’s even. ‘Sides, he even capitalized on them showing up at his front door to make them sign the contract right there and then, so hey, not exactly a fruitless fiasco, is it?”

Tiffany looked at the soup and felt her stomach churning in retaliation. “I. Don’t. Want. It,” she declared. “I’ve been drinking the same damn soup every day! I wasn’t even this chubby-lumpy when I was pregnant, but since this confinement happened, I’ve been adding thirty pounds to myself! Thanks to this soup, I need to trim all of this fat now. So, nope! Take this away, please. Oh, oh—and don’t let your mom see you do that, thanks. I just really don’t wanna drink it anymore—the taste just makes me siiiiick!”

Jackson started on, helpless. “Bae, you know my mom means well, especially since the circumstances of your childbirth is… well, less than ideal. Your body needs to recover, and we gotta make sure we don’t leave any malaise or nasty side-effect behind, okay? C’mon, honey, you can always get toned and lean in the future, but damaged heath? That’s irreparable,” he admonished. “Just go through with it. It’s just a bowl—slurp it and gulp it down and before you know it, you’re seeing the bottom of the bowl!”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “What do you think this is, the lousiest booze you can just gulp down? I’m tellin’ you, hon, this soup is waaaaay too strong! Hell, it gets stuck on your tongue and I ain’t drinking it! Take it away!”

Skeptical, Jackson took a sip. It was a little bitter, as medicinal herbs were wont to taste, but it did little to tarnish the overall tang. Either way, Jackson had no habit of forcing Tiffany to drink something she did not like, so he said, “Fine! I’ll drink it, okay? Better than letting my mom see this and getting her nerves all knotted up. You know she’ll be screaming about you not eating enough, and then there’ll be nothing to sate your voracious appetite that results from it.”

He had only taken two sips of the soup when Summer suddenly burst through the door. “What’s the big idea?! This soup isn’t for you, Jack! If you want it so much, then get your butt to the kitchen and pour yourself a bowl!”

Jackson was positively crossed. “B-B-But it’s not that I want to drink it! It’s that she doesn’t wanna—”

He did not have the chance to finish his sentence before Tiffany snuck a clandestine punch on his thigh. “What are you sayin’, silly? I didn’t say that!”

Honestly, he could never understand why women had to be so darn complicated. He gritted through the pang and forced a smile. “Eh heh, enjoy yourself then, sweetie…”

Tiffany stared at him.

Summer read the air between them and caught the hint bubbling beneath. “You’re sick of the same soup, aren’t you, Tiffie? Gosh, silly girl, you could have just told your Mom! No need to be coy and bashful about it—we’re family after all. What, you’re afraid of offending my sensibilities? A woman’s at her weakest after childbirth, which is why she’s gotta eat good to be better! If you think this soup is a displeasure to have, then you’ll feel terrible too. Lord, you should have just told me upfront.”

Tiffany steeled herself for a confession. “Okay, maybe I am… a bit sick of it, just a little itty-bitty bit? I’ve been drinking the same soup every day since returning from the hospital, three times a day! It’s enough to make me full. I know it takes you a lot of time to prepare this soup, Mom, but I just can’t take it anymore…”

Summer sighed. “Oh, you silly summer child. I can’t believe that, after all this time, you’re still acting as though we aren’t close enough! Don’t worry, I’ll switch up the flavors every now and then; you can bet that you’re never gonna be sick of the soups again. Honestly, I would have done that earlier if you’d just told me—it’s precisely because you’ve been keeping quiet about it that led me to think you love this flavor, okay?” she said, before suddenly barking, “Oi, Jackson! What the hell is keeping you from going to your office already, huh?! You have two kids now, boy; get your arse to earning more benjamins for the household! It's not like you’re the one who’s just given birth, right?”

At that moment, Jackson felt the sting of being abandoned by his own mother. “Holy cow, Mom. Ouch? I’m leaving, all right? Wouldn’t wanna bomb y’all’s quality mother-daughter bonding, after all. I’m just an extra NPC anyway…”

“Oh, oh! Don’t you forget to visit our precious girl in the hospital! Take a picture of her for me! And then ask the doctor when our girl will be discharged!” Tiffany reminded him.

Something locked behind Jackson’s eyes dimmed. “Right…”

He left the residence and stood at a crossroad, lighting his cigarette. Once Tiffany’s confinement was over, there would be virtually no way of hiding the grim truth. She had always imagined their daughter to be healthy, rationalizing the child’s extended stay in the hospital to her being a prenatal baby.

It could not be further from the truth—the baby was in a very, very dire situation. She was weak from being prematurely birthed and she suffered from birth asphyxia, which heralded a slew of short-term

and long-term effects that made the baby's likelihood of survival up in the air. Jackson dared not even hope for the girl to be hale and hearty the way other babies were.

When his cigarette died, Jackson got into his car and drove to Tremont Enterprise. There was a contract to be discussed, but more importantly, there was something Jackson would like to confer with Mark.

His arrival was met with the peculiar sight of Arianne being chastised by Mark in his office. Apparently, she committed a folly in her design draft, which was entirely her own fault. Hence, she bore the brunt of Mark's criticism, who did not bother to mince his words. "Seriously, a rookie mistake from a veteran like yourself? Have you not learned anything from Sylvain?" he chided. "What could possibly dominate your head while you're physically in the office, huh? Rubbish, garbage, trash of all kinds?"

Arianne espied Jackson's arrival and flashed him a smile, grateful for the opening to escape. "Oh, let me make the two of you some drinks while you big boys have a chat. Oh, I'll correct my draft too!"

Mark raised his hand as though he was about to knock on her head. Anticipating—and dreading—the pang, she immediately slipped away.

Jackson laughed. "Didn't know you have the heart to scold her at all. Or are you only the king in the office but scrapping your knees cleaning floors at home?"

"Don't confuse yourself with me. I don't do that sort of thing," Mark reparteed, snorting. "All I did was lecture her with words that hardly count as severe. She's an adult; it's expected of her to use her brain, and I'm telling her to do just that. But that's neither here nor there. What's brought you here?"

Jackson produced the contract for him. “Take a look. No problem? Put your autograph on it. You know the drill; we haven’t needed to harp on details since ages ago, right? Perks of being best friends, I guess.”

Mark skipped reading the contract completely and signed his name on the paper. “So, how’s your daughter doing? Any news from the doctors?”

His inquiry cut straight to the heart—Jackson’s heart, specifically. The man’s mien immediately became an exhibit of doom and gloom. He sank into Mark’s couch before replying, “Christ, how do you expect me to answer this? It’s already a miracle for the baby to have survived and been birthed under that gruesome condition, but now… I’m wondering if I should just… you know, give up. She’s so young, so feeble, so fragile. Must we subject her to the horrors and pains of her form of existence? She had only just come to this world, and already she’s got a taste of all the worst sh*t our godforsaken life has to offer. God… It just pains me.”

The color of Mark’s eyes seemed to have dimmed. “If persistence is a legitimate course of action, why would you bring up the thought of giving up to me? To mention it as though it’s a justifiable option is to imply gravity… So, how bad is it?”

Jackson buried his face into his palm before letting his hand slide in defeat. A boy who was once reputed as ‘The Casanova of The West,’ the tribulations in life had now gnawed him into a maudlin man fettered by worldly sensibilities. “The doctor said the kid’s too damn frail for being prematurely birthed, man; her future is not going to be a relieving sight. Then there’s the fact that she suffered a severe case of birth asphyxia; the doctor warned that even if she manages to survive this critical period, her cognitive abilities might already be dealt a big hit. What’s most unnerving right now, really, is this pesky uncertainty of whether a kid as young as she is could even survive this ordeal, you know? I’ve visited her once and I already can’t bear to see her a second time. She’s so small, Mark; this itty-bitty size… And yet all sorts of tubes were prodding into her as she lay in the incubator. No signs of life. None.

“If… If she can’t hold on much longer, then I wonder why I shouldn’t just give up right now? Cut out all that extra suffering that awaits her, you know? God… You know what kind of person I am, right, Mark?

I'm not the type to give up so easily, but seriously, if there's no miracle—if this is how dire it's become, should I…? Lord knows how long this thought has been circling in my mind for days on end. But Tiffie might not be able to accept this, so I just… What would you do, Mark? If you were in my shoes, what would you do?"

Mark placed his hand on his chin, the cogs in his mind turning. Before he could answer, however, Arianne walked into the room with teas on a tray, interjecting, "If I were you, I'd be more optimistic. I'd cheer myself and the baby on, telling her to hang on. Worst-case scenario, the baby doesn't make it, but at the very least, we tried our best and did what we could do. The more likely scenario is that she might be a little bit dumb growing up, but that's not that big of a deal, is it? Maybe she's not viable for marriage, but her parents could still care for her for the rest of her life. She'll still live like a princess at home!

"We're talking about a life—and a part of Tiffie's life. I understand what you're feeling, Jackson, and I don't think you're wrong necessarily, but I still think you shouldn't give up. Give her more time… What if time is all you need for a miracle to happen? Don't doubt the tenacity of life, Jackson; life isn't as weak as you'd imagine. If you really think she can't make it, then wait until Tiffie's confinement is over, and the two of you have a discussion over it. The worst thing you could do in this situation is to make this choice on your own. Knowing Tiffie, doing that would instantly make her hate you forever."

Jackson leaned onto the couch and stared ahead of himself, his hollow eyes unseeing. "But I… I can't bear seeing her suffer like this any longer. The agony she must be going through… I don't even have the heart to see her in that terrible state for a second time…"

Mark shot Arianne a loaded glance. "Excuse me, but are you fresh out of agendas? Put the tea down, thanks, and get back to fixing your draft!"

Arianne pouted and placed a glass in front of Jackson. "I'm going to work on my stuff. But remember, Jackson, don't be rash."

Jackson nodded stiffly. Mark, meanwhile, waited until Arianne left before giving his verdict. “If I were you, my decision would be based on the doctors’ opinion. If they opine that there’s no reason to let her go on, then her chance of survival must be very slim. It will be a mercy to let her go earlier by then, but this is truly an excruciating choice… Have the experts come to that conclusion yet?”

Jackson released a long sigh. “Well, he mentioned something similar to that. Didn’t outright tell us to begin considering giving up, natch, but he beat about the bush and told me that the kid’s chance of survival is not high. Even if she survived, her cognitive abilities are most likely impaired, so he asked if the baby’s family would consider giving up on treating the baby…” he explained. “One of the biggest determining factors is money, but there’s also the question of faith. When hope is low, people don’t typically place faith in holding on, because they worry that they’ll lose their wealth while their faith crumbles. As for me, money ain’t the Devil here—my concern is my daughter’s happiness. I don’t want her to suffer so many pains only to depart from this world without ever enjoying a scintilla of the beautiful things in life…”

Mark took one look at the indecisiveness Jackson displayed and decided to make his decision for him. “Well, since the doctor did not directly suggest giving up, you’re not poised to overthink in that sort of direction at this moment. Just be patient and wait—maybe, someday from now, the hospital might call you and tell you that things have taken a turn for the better, yes?” he said. “Jackson, look at how disconcerted and rattled you are while you are out here… And yet you put on this blithe, devil-may-care front for Tiffany’s benefit when you’re home. I earnestly pity you.”

That was hardly the biggest problem at hand right now. Tiffany wanted a picture of her daughter, while Jackson was too harrowed by the baby’s state to visit her. It did not take the man a long time to turn to Mark for help. “Hey, Mark? We’re bros, right?”

That was a red flag as bright as any. “We’re bros when everything’s a smooth sail, ‘bro.’ At other times? Nope,” Mark answered defensively. “You should tell me what’s on your mind first before I decide—don’t just cast that question out as an opener. I don’t want to be used by you…”

“What can I even use you for, bruh? I just want to ask you to help, uh, visit my daughter in the hospital and take a few pictures for Tiffany to see. She insists, you know. I’ve been cramming all sorts of excuses to delay it, but if I keep straddling at her limit, she’s gonna erupt in anxiety. I’ll be real with ya’: I just don’t have the courage to go look at her again, so please… Just help me out on this one. Visit my daughter and take a few photos of her with your phone.”

Chapter 1758

Mark relaxed his guard. “Oh, that’s all? Not a problem. My hands are tied at the moment, so I’ll have Arianne go. It’s her best friend’s daughter, after all; she would be pleased to help. Besides, women have this magical way of making things look better in photos than they really are, so she might be able to take just the right picture to mollify Tiffany.”

He made a lot of sense, Jackson thought as he rose from his seat and straightened his collar. “’Kay then. I’ll get Arianne’s help. Heads-up: I won’t be coming back here,” he said. “Also… I really don’t think any magic’s gonna be able to touch up the painful truth, man. I dunno, with the state my girl’s in, it’s… not gonna work.”

Arianne left Tremont Tower in the late afternoon and headed to the hospital to visit the Wests’ ill-fated child on Jackson’s behalf. It was, personally, a breather; without it, she would have to remain cooped up in the office with her back hunched over her drafts, and that was not counting the possibility of being summoned to Mark’s office for lectures.

Now that Arianne Wynn was the undisputed, definitive “Mrs. Tremont”, it effectively silenced the office’s gossip mills from talking about her publicly. However, it did little to curb scrutinizing eyes from watching Arianne’s moves quietly. If she had gotten her job through the backdoor Mark opened for her, she dared not imagine the sort of things these people might say behind her back!

Arianne stood outside the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, peered through the clear window into where Tiffany and Jackson’s daughter was—and instantly held a sharp inhale of breath. The baby now looked slightly larger than when she was delivered, but her growth was so minuscule that she was still far, far

too small compared to other healthy, normal infants delivered at the same time. The West family was one of means, and it showed in the infant's treatment. She enjoyed the best the hospital could offer, along with a few hired hands to care for her every need and inspection.

Yet, her condition did not inspire optimism.

It took Arianne a moment to shake herself off from her daze before fishing out her phone to take photos. She did her best to capture any wisp of vivacity that could pass as hopeful signs, but the photos only succeeded in wringing any onlooker's heart.

When she was done, she turned to the doctor-in-charge. "Can she really survive this? Please, tell me the truth. Should we still keep her in there?"

"Based on what we've observed, though we are not a hundred-percent confident, Little Girl's odds of survival aren't zero. As long as her family decides against giving up, she can continue to be closely monitored and cared for," the doctor replied matter-of-factly. "The light at the end of the tunnel is almost always attained only by those who finish the long walk, after all. More importantly, Little Girl's doing pretty well today—I was just about to call Mr. West and tell him about it. Now that you're here, please help pass my message."

Arianne quietly released the breath she had been holding. "All right. Thank you."

She came out of the hospital with her mood slightly perked. The doctors themselves were positive that the baby still had a chance, which gave her fuel to persuade Jackson to hold on.

She had just reached the side of the road when an eye-catching red Ferrari—limited edition, Arianne realized—suddenly pulled over in front of her. Before she could wonder whom the driver could be, the window rolled down, and Melanie's head peeked out. "Hey, what are you doing here? Never mind that; where would you like to go? I'll give you a lift."

Arianne did not reject her offer and climbed in right away. "I've never seen you taking this out for a spin before, Melanie. Didn't see any license plate… Is this new?"

Melanie made a helpless expression. "$300,000 sank for this car Alejandro insisted on buying for me. Honestly, he gave me a terrible shock more than surprise," she replied. "I thought he brought me along today to pick a car, but it turned out he had chosen this one already. The whole point of me being there was to drive it right away, it seemed…"

"Aww, he's not too bad, huh?" Arianne exclaimed, a little green. "He's generous with his money and surprisingly thoughtful. So… what's with the grimace, then? Anyone else in your shoes would be beaming and flexing already. But you don't look too ecstatic, do you?"

Melanie's lips thinned. "Arianne, I've made up my mind. I'm going for a divorce. I would rather he treat me the same way he did all these years—where I'm sometimes invisible, sometimes 'there', and always inconsequential and trifling. Honestly, I hate how he's suddenly going this extra mile trying to please me right now. It confuses me; it makes me falter. Of course, not that I expect you to understand how this feels…"

Arianne felt her brain humming in bafflement. "B-But didn't you used to hope that he would love you back? You know, back then? Now that it's finally happened, why are you suddenly….? Hey, I told you to hold your horse back then when you first mentioned this, right? The advice still stands. I just don't think the two of you necessarily need to come to this, okay? Come on, have you really thought this through?"

Melanie seemed reluctant to continue the conversation—how could she, when sitting in this newly-bought sportscar he ostensibly bought for her only distressed her even more? “Never mind. Let’s drop this topic. Where are you heading? I’ll drive you there.”

Arianne obliged and dropped the thread. “Tremont Tower. I came here to visit Tiffany’s daughter; what about you?”

“Don’t air your dirty linens in public, they say. I agree, but only because this is too embarrassing for me to even talk about it.” Melanie flashed her a sad, mirthless smile. “The Lark family showed up at our doorstep yesterday, looking to fight. They beat me up. Alejandro got into an accident while rushing home and injured his head, but he decided not to visit the hospital while forcing me to do the exact opposite.”

It was only then that Arianne was primed to notice faint signs of blue-black patches on her face. Melanie had plastered make-up over them, causing the bruises to evade Arianne’s notice for so long. “Oh my God! Are you alright? The doctor didn’t see anything serious during their inspection, right? What the heck, Melanie! Your family’s crazy... Why even release their pent-up steam on you?”

The other woman’s lips quivered into a brisk smile. “It’s fine; it’s over now. Speaking of which—Arianne? I was thinking… When Alejandro and I discuss our divorce, I hope you and Mr. Tremont can be there. See, he’s very thin-skinned, so I bet if the two of you were there, he would agree right away than to lose his pride and face pleading for me to stay. My mind has been made; I won’t dance around this issue with him any longer. It’s pointless. Meaningless.”

Arianne’s first instinct was to balk. “Um, hey, it’s not that I don’t wanna help, Melanie. It’s just that… Mark and I probably should not intervene? Besides, what are you afraid of? Is it really because you’re scared of him skirting this issue or… is it because you worry he might do something nasty to you? God, he isn’t a wife-beater, is he? Is he a domestic abuser?”

Melanie shook her head hurriedly. “No! No, he isn’t… And I can’t make up things he didn’t do, right?” Her answer sprung at the tail of Arianne’s question, before she added in a resigned tone, “But, I just… Huh. Never mind that. I’ll drive you to Tremont Tower. But if it’s remotely possible, I really wish… you and Mr. Tremont would lend me a hand, please. I… I only need help on this one request…”

Arianne was at a loss for a response, so she chose silence. Alejandro and Mark might be brothers by blood, but their relationship was hardly better than two random strangers’. If she and Mark intervened, they would automatically be seen as standing on Melanie’s side, and Alejandro would go ballistic, guaranteed.

Few things in life were as messy as everyone’s internal family drama. And that was not counting how difficult Mark and Arianne’s—who were only Alejandro’s family in technicality—position was in this entire thing!

After sending Jackson the pictures once she was inside the building, Arianne went straight into Mark’s office and recounted Melanie’s decision for a divorce.

Mark’s first response was the same as Arianne’s. “No can do.”

Dismayed, Arianne’s furrowed eyebrows scrunched together harder. “I don’t want to stick my hand into this, either, but Melanie doesn’t even have her own family for moral support right now, Mark. All she has is me! She really, seriously, not-at-all-kiddingly wants a divorce. We can’t just… not help her, right? That would make us, you know, a bit….?”

Chapter 1759

Mark narrowed his eyes into two scrutinizing spotlights that grazed her face. “Has Alejandro committed any act of infidelity? Has he committed domestic abuse? Or has he wronged her or committed any grave injustice toward her?”

Arianne shook her head slowly. “No, I think? The only thing he’s done wrong is not having loved her back then…? That’s all; I don’t recall any notable conflict. Alejandro even bought her a limited edition sports car, you know—$300,000 and all! I think she finally sparked Alejandro’s affection. I mean, if animals could forge genuine, heartfelt bonds with other creatures they spend time with, then what more could we say about us humans? Melanie’s patience has carried her to this day when he finally loves her, only for her faith to crumble and give up. She’s put her foot down and made up her mind; she wouldn’t listen to me!”

Mark stayed his ground. “Same suggestion: stay out of it. Alejandro is the type of wretch who remembers scores. He remembers every. Single. Bloody. Thing.”

Arianne shuddered. “All right, all right; point taken! I’ll just… try to talk Melanie into changing her mind the next time we meet.”

Night fell. Jackson returned to the West family residence early after work. Since Tiffany’s confinement period began, he had been spending his nights here.

Just as he expected, the first question Tiffany cast as soon as he stepped through the door concerned their daughter’s picture. He was prepared to face the storm to come.

She practically lunged at him as soon as he was inside. With her face beaming with earnest excitement, she cried, “Pics! Pics! Picsss!”

He hesitantly passed his phone to her. “There, in the gallery. Take a gander yourself; I’m heading to the shower.”

Tiffany could see the overcast in his mien, and it uneased her. “Hold up. I-Is our sweetie… not doing well? Don’t… Don’t you hide things from me, hon.”

He cracked a forced smile. “Oh, naw. The doctor even told me that the baby’s doing exceptionally well today! Please don’t overthink.”

Tiffany pulled up his gallery app skeptically and started looking for the pictures.

Her eyes misted the very instant her baby’s image leaped into her sight. “No… No, no! She’s suffering, Jackson! How long must she suffer like this? I haven’t even… had the chance to feel her in my embrace since she was borned…”

Jackson started panicking a little. “B-Bae, don’t cry, please! Christ, if I knew you were going to sob like this, I wouldn’t have let you see anything at all! If you keep this up, I… I ain’t taking no pictures for you anymore! …C’mon, honey, please don’t cry… You’re trying to recover from childbirth, remember? This isn’t good for you, okay?”

Tiffany fought back rolling tears. “I… I… I just can’t stop my heart from breaking after seeing our baby like this… B-But you’re right. I’ll stop now.”

Jackson wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “There, there. Take a rest, mmkay? Don’t roam around in the yard; you might catch a cold,” he said gently. “You should spend more time with Lil’ P every time you’re free, yea? Seeing our wonderful son’s antics will do wonders to your mood, no matter how bad it might have been.”

He was right; they still had an adorable son. They were lucky to be blessed with a son and a daughter—and right now, the only thing they desired was that their daughter turning out healthy and safe.

…

Time flew. Soon, it was Sylvain and Robin's wedding day.

Mark's surprisingly humane side made an appearance when he allowed the happy couple a month's long matrimony leave. Unfortunately, as the man himself was caught in a business trip, he had to sit their wedding out, leaving only Arianne to attend it alone.

Since the mire of his unsavory past still hung over him, Sylvain had forgone inviting long-time acquaintances to his wedding. Instead, most of the guests were his current coworkers mixed with some bigshots in the fashion-designing scene who sincerely appreciated and extolled Sylvain's talents.

The wedding was held in a picturesque church located in suburbia. Right now, every corner and walkway was teeming with an artistic aureole. It complemented the day's especially brilliant, golden sun. Everything was serene. Tranquil.

Arianne met the bride while she was resting in the lounge. She was already all dolled up in a bridal gown that was unique, elegant, and regal—all Sylvain's signature design flairs. Most crowning of all beauty, though, was Robin's happy, blossoming smile.

"A-Arianne!" she cried. "I'm a bit n-n-nervous."

She held Robin's hand for comfort. "C'mon, girl. There's nothing to be nervous about! My wedding with Mark was waaaay more nerve-wracking. It was only when he bent his knee that I finally understood that I was the star of the show that day!" she exclaimed. "Sylvain designed this just for you, didn't he? I can tell right away. Lemme tell you, sis, this gown you're wearing? There's no other in this world! Hee hee, are you touched?"

Robin lowered her head bashfully and giggled. "Just one teensy-tiny problem: I already knew about this, so mm… Not too surprised, unfortunately! See, after his design was finalized, Syl took measurements of my sizes and everything, and that's how I knew," she said. "Hmph, can't believe it hasn't been part of his knowledge yet, despite the two of us already being married for quite some time..."

Arianne tried, but her laughter still escaped her. "Gawd, really? Oh, don't worry. Knowing him, I bet he's got your measurements all committed to the deepest part of his memory by now. Oh, by the way, I saw your parents on my way in, and I know they started out with nothing nice to say about Sylvain, but today? They are just beaming with pride!"

Her remark seemed to have reminded Robin, who asked, "Say, what about Sylvain's mom? Have you seen her?"

Chapter 1760

Since she did not, Arianne shook her head. "No, haven't come across her anywhere. She should make an appearance before the wedding starts, right? Both families have gotta show up by then, no?"

Robin said, haltingly, "I… don't think she's coming."

That took Arianne by surprise. “Why is that?”

Robin’s fingers closed around the fabric of her dress tightly. “Because she’s made it blatant and clear that she doesn’t like me—no, she hates me. When Syl told her about our wedding, she said, ‘Y’all already registered yourselves as married anyway; what’s the big fat point?’ She thinks our wedding is unnecessary. She thinks my family pressured Sylvain into planning one, because we somehow want stupid material things like a house or a car or whatever fancy-schmancy things only she can cook up,” she fumed. “She told Syl all of this on the phone. He thought I was already asleep, but I heard everything. The wedding has always been Syl’s idea—not my family’s.

“To be frank, Arianne, I loathe his mother to the core. I hate her because she hates me. She can belittle me all she wants, but she can’t do that to my parents. My family means jack in her eyes; we’re that worthless to her. So, you know what? The fact that she isn’t here might be the best blessing the Lord could give today. If she comes and disses my parents, well! Let’s just say no one is gonna come out of this without dirt in their eyes.”

Grave determination etched on Robin’s otherwise gentle features. Seeing flashes of steel behind a girl who was usually as soft as silk was quite scary; but then again, if the meekest robin might attack when it was cornered and desperate, then what more could one expect from people?

Arianne patted the back of her hand for comfort. “Relax, nothing’s gonna happen. It’s a fine, beautiful, happy day today. Even his mom would think twice about being an unreasonable—uh-hem—arsehole at an event like this. If she did disparage everyone here, then my advice is that you don’t hold back and give her hell. Everyone has a line other people absolutely cannot cross, right? If she crosses it, then don’t suck it in and pretend it’s nothing. Sylvain knows what kind of person you are, Robin, and that’s all that matters. As long as we know our conscience is clear.”

The tolling of church bells filled the air after the guests filled up the pews. With her father’s hand guiding hers, Robin began the trademark walk down the aisle to the altar where the lucky groom was already waiting.

Arianne suddenly realized how similar some facets of Sylvain was to the late Eric Nathaniel. They both commanded themselves with a svelte, roguish air laced with a glib composure that stemmed from their natural confidence, yet when they put their heart in it, the weight of their affection made them impossible to miss.

Arianne had taken the first row of the pews. Her heart swelled as she wished the best and happiest of life for the couple.

It was then that a silhouette crossed through the door.

“Ex-cuuuu-se me? So, y’all are starting this show despite my absence? Like, do you people know who I am?”

The audience’s curiosity launched their attention to the source as Sylvain’s expression subtly cracked. Ursula had not shown herself right down before the wedding started, so the groom had concluded that she was not coming after all. But here she was, announcing her presence right when the wedding had just begun, with a move no one could misconstrue as benign.

She was here to crash the show.

Robin’s face paled, and if one looked closely, they could see her slightly shaking. She was bottling up her spleen.

Mr. Cox asked his daughter in a displeased undertone, “Who’s that?”

“Sylvain’s mother.”

His scowl deepened. “You’re kidding. You and Sylvain had been officially recognized as husband and wife for so long, yet I’ve never even seen this woman before. So, why is she showing up now? What’s this supposed to mean?”

Robin kept quiet. The answer was plain enough without words.