Ruling 1771

Chapter 1771

Tiffany looked at Arianne and felt embittered. “If my daughter hadn’t had any problems, I would’ve really just given her to you. However, it’s a pity… that things didn’t turn out as expected. I’ll take care of her myself.”

When she saw Tiffany’s reddened eyes, Arianne shot a glance at Jackson and knew in her heart that Tiffany knew about everything. “Tiffany, don’t say things like that. If they’re fated to be together, I don’t have any complaints, so why don’t we see how the kids develop? Mark and I still want to have a daughter as well, but it’s a pity that we won’t be able to do so in this life.”

Smore was slightly disappointed. “Why? Why can’t Mommy give birth to a sister for me?”

Arianne had no idea how she should explain it to him. “You go along and play with Plato and stop asking so many questions. Little kids shouldn’t interfere in adult matters.”

Smore took Plato’s hand and headed outside to find Little Bean to play with after leaving with a “hmph”.

When Tiffany looked at her daughter, she looked extremely calm and caring as though she was going to take care of her daughter for as long as she lived. ‘She’s still my baby girl. I’m going to love her even if she isn’t smart, as long as she lives happily.’

Later that evening, Jackson invited Mark over to his place as well. After all, his beloved daughter was finally home; he needed to celebrate the occasion no matter what.

While they were chatting leisurely, Jackson asked Mark about the matter where he requested the shares that the Larks had in Tremont Enterprise from Alejandro. Mark casually replied, “He gave it to me the moment I asked for it and effortlessly sold it according to the price of the share at the time. We’re all smart men, so there’s no need to go through so much trouble when he knows the reason you were doing that.”

Jackson laughed as he said, “That’s true, at least he understands the situation. If he’d refused to hand it over, you would have had to put in a lot of effort.”

Mark paused for a moment. “It’s also possible that he’s too busy to put in any effort to argue against it. He’s still in the midst of getting a divorce after all.”

Tiffany, who was listening to the side, interrupted their conversation, saying, “They’re still getting a divorce?”

Arianne’s ears perked up as well. She had not been in contact with Melanie for the past few days, so she did not know what was going on.

Both Mark and Jackson became speechless when they saw their women’s gossipy behaviour. Mark helplessly said, “Why are the two of you so interested when mentioning this matter? Is divorce a very sensitive issue? Do women love that topic so much?”

Arianne rolled her eyes at him. “Melanie is considered our friend, so can’t we be concerned for her? I’m sure she’s the one who’s pressuring Alejandro into doing it, not the other way around. She’s been wanting to divorce him for a long time now, so I’m guessing Alejandro is still refusing to do it, which is why they’re still at a stalemate. Weren’t you unhappy when she asked us to be there? She’s going to have to mention it sooner or later.”

Mark still maintained his prior attitude. “I’m definitely not going to meddle in their business, so if you want to interfere, go ahead. Just don’t involve me. Alejandro and I aren’t familiar with each other.”

“Aren’t familiar?” Arianne reached out a finger to poke at Mark’s chest. “Unfamiliar, you say? The two of you both have the Tremonts’ blood flowing in you, yet you’re telling me you aren’t familiar with him? I see you’re as hard as a dead duck’s beak.”

Mark curled his lips into a snicker. “Who’re you calling a duck? Could you be better with your choice of words?”

Chapter 1772

Jackson could not control himself and laughed hysterically, causing everyone to shoot glances at him. Hence, he forcefully stifled his laughter. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hold it in for a moment there. Please ignore me and continue…”

That night, at Alejandro’s manor.

Melanie paced around in her bedroom. She was waiting for Alejandro to return home. She kept on calling and texting him, but Alejandro replied to neither. It had been a few days since Melanie had seriously told him she wanted to have a divorce, yet he had no intention of showing up at all. She no longer wanted to delay the matter; she had steeled her heart for it.

However, when she finally received a call, Melanie did not expected it to be from Mrs. Lark. ‘I suppose the only reason they’re calling me now is because they want money. They’ve been used to living extravagantly in the past, so now that the Larks have no more capital, they’re bound to fall short of

money sooner or later. Therefore, they've now thrown everything onto me. Both she and Nikolai will come asking for more money every few days.' However, despite not wanting to give them any money, including the fact that Melanie's dad had specifically asked her not to give them any, she still could not handle being pestered by Mrs. Lark and ended up giving her money once. From there, the situation merely worsened…

Melanie was extremely frustrated at that moment, so she rejected her call. However, Mrs. Lark soon called back again, and she had no choice but to answer since she was frustrated that Mrs. Lark might prevent Alejandro from calling her due to her constant calls. "Hello?"

On the other end of the phone, Mrs. Lark spoke to her with an upright attitude. "I'm out of money, send me more."

Melanie took a deep breath. "Why should I? I merely gave you money previously as repayment for you raising me, which was also my way of cutting off all ties between us. If we're talking about repayment, my dad was the one who earned the money to raise me and my nanny was the one who took care of my daily necessities, so when did you ever have to worry about that? The only remnant feelings I had for you was how equally you treated me compared to both my brothers, that's all. Could you stop using the only thing that's making me feel some sense of gratefulness toward you? The Larks' company has already been bought over, so you've obviously still got a whole lot of money left, yet how fast have you actually squandered it all to have to come to me to ask for more? Couldn't you go out and conduct some mini business?"

Mrs. Lark coldly scoffed. "Most of the money is with your dad. What am I supposed to do if he refuses to give it to me? The money I received from selling off that miniscule amount of shares isn't even enough for me to floss my teeth and has been long but gone. Why don't you just tell me if you're going to give me the money or not? If it weren't for you, would the Larks have ended up in such a situation? Is there a problem with you giving me some money when the Smiths are so rich? Indeed, you didn't spend my money in the past and the person who took care of you was your nanny, but you said it yourself, I treated you and your brothers equally all the same. Although I wasn't the one who gave birth to you, I did raise you, so could you really not give me any money? So long as I haven't got enough money to spend, don't even think of having a peaceful day."

Melanie lost her patience and coldly said, “I have no time to argue with you, nor do I want to be bothered with you. If you call me again, I’m going to change my phone number. Come up to my doorstep if you can!”

After saying that, Melanie immediately hung up the phone call.

Two minutes later, Nikolai called instead. In a rage, Melanie directly switched off her phone. ‘That’s better, I finally have peace.’

Then, Melanie headed downstairs to use the house’s landline to give Alejandro a call. This time, Alejandro actually answered the phone call, probably because he thought that it was one of the servants who was calling him. When Alejandro heard Melanie’s voice, he went silent for a moment. “I’m busy at the moment. I’m hanging up now.”

Melanie quickly said, “Wait! Don’t hang up! Could you come back so that we can have a proper discussion? I’ve waited for you for a few days already…”

Although the phone call was not disconnected, there was no sound coming from the other end of the phone. Just as Melanie had lost all hope and thought that Alejandro was no longer listening, he suddenly said, “Are you that eager to divorce me? You were that eager when you first got married to me as well… I don’t think there’s anything for us to discuss because I won’t agree to a divorce. Moreover, there wouldn’t be any use if you went to court since there aren’t any signs of our relationship having any cracks.”

Melanie bit her lip. “There’s no more love between us, isn’t that good enough? There aren’t any feelings between us, so just let me go.”

After a short moment of silence, the phone sent out the sound of the other end hanging up.

Melanie was gloomy as she put down the phone and sat at the sofa for a moment. Out of nowhere, Millie suddenly walked up towards her and asked, “What’s wrong, Mommy? Why are you unhappy?”

Chapter 1773

As her eyes grazed her daughter’s profile, beads of tears fell from Melanie’s eyes. “Millie, my sweet girl… Will you blame your Mommy for leaving you and your Dad one day? Mommy’s sorry, but she just doesn’t think she will find happiness in her life here. I want to try another way, a different life. But know that your Mommy won’t go far from you, and all of my love is always for you. When Mommy finally finds her footing while she lives alone, when she finally has surplus money, I’ll come and try talking your Dad into releasing you into my care, okay? Mommy really wants to bring you with her; it’s just that there’s too many uncertainties…”

Melissa’s little hand reached out to her mother’s cheek before wiping the tears away. “Mommy, what’s ‘happiness’?” she asked innocently. “Is it very big and important?”

Melanie found herself grasping at air for an answer. Is happiness ever “big and important”? She did not know; heck, she did not even know what it meant to be happy—it was cryptic, almost enigmatic, and difficult to be expatriated through words and descriptions.

The only thing Melanie knew she could explain, though, was that the life she was in right now was… depressing. Every early morning, Alejandro rose, went to work, and left Melanie alone at home to care for the kid. She was never a Capital native and she did not know anyone here; she spent most of her life in Ayashe before her marriage, and the only friends she had made here were Arianne and Tiffany. She watched her life waste away, day by day, in this claustrophobic little cage.

If he loved her—if he truly loved her, then all this… she could endure. Love was often a panacea to the malaise of mundanities, but Melanie could not even get that from him. Because of him, she left the city she grew up in and confined herself at home to be the perfect, textbook-good wife—it was being wrapped tightly in a thick, black shroud so fitting that it left not a slit for air to come in. It blindfolded her from the vibrant colors outside. It gave her no taste of his warmth or affection. It almost asphyxiated her.

Melanie had gone through many nights to understand the extent of her tragedy. And yet, she could not figure out why he refuses to let her go.

Her heart was against her squandering the remainder of her wasted life here; she wanted to be free from her chains, and she wanted that freedom to be extended to him. The only thing that could have made her abandon everything she had thought of in a heartbeat was if he tells her that he did, indeed, love her.

That hope dashed on that fateful day when Tiffany's incident happened. His every act and reaction on that day was a painful wake-up call. She was forced to reckon with the cold, hard fact that claiming a person's heart—especially one that had long been possessed by another woman—was a moiling task.

With Melissa slumbering in her arms, Melanie sat on the living room couch downstairs until it was one in the morning when she finally heard Alejandro's car steering into the front yard.

It was the middle of a quiet night. The sound of car tires against the pavement was jarring and sharp, which immediately perked Melanie up. When she saw Jett helping a drunken Alejandro into the door, her habit kicked in, causing her to put Millie down to better help care for him.

A millisecond later, she stopped herself. This was what Melanie liked to do, was it not? She was always attentive to his every detail, taking great pains over his every need; it had become her habit. But what about him? He never did the same for her. To him, Melanie was a baby-pumping machine, a nonliving object that never required maintenance such as love and compassion.

“Madam! Why aren’t you asleep yet?”

It was from Jett, who was shocked at seeing her.

“I… I have been waiting for him to come home. Something to discuss,” Melanie replied simply as she adjusted her position. Carrying Millie in her arms for so long had caused some sore muscles.

Jett, of course, knew what that “something” was. “With all due respect, I’m afraid Mr. Smith’s a bit… drunk out of his skull. No matter what’s on your mind, I think it’s probably best left to the next day? I’ll take him to his room; you rest early, too.”

He was right. Alejandro was so drunk he was effectively knocked out. He could not even perform basic tasks; Jett had to practically half-lug him around just to take him to places.

Melanie hummed in agreement and followed the two up the stairs. Then, suddenly, her eyes caught a single bright red lip mark on his white collar.

She was stunned. Every single one of his shirts was hand-washed by Melanie herself, and she prided in cleaning them thoroughly. But now, there it was, a bright red stain in the shape of a woman’s lips!

She forced herself to avert her eyes. ‘Don’t feel hurt; no need to feel hurt,’ she told herself. They were at the cusp of divorce. After that, there would be no ties between them. She would not need to ask him where he had gone for fun.

Jett helped Alejandro ease into his bed and finally caught the stain of lipstick on his collar.

He furtively glanced at Melanie tailing him. “Er, how about I help Mr. Smith change into a fresh set of clothes, Madam? I just realized; that would make sleep a lot comfier.”

Melanie put Melissa down and approached Alejandro before unbuttoning his shirt, filtering the single lipstick stain out of her view. “It’s alright; lemme handle it. It’s late—you should rest, too.”

Chapter 1774

Jett furrowed his eyebrows. His voice was marked with hesitance when he said, “Uh, Mr. Smith, he didn’t—”

She cut into his sentence before he could finish. “No, it’s all right. Doesn’t matter anymore.”

Jett held back any words he might have wanted to say, turned around, and left.

It was surprisingly toilsome work to remove Alejandro’s shirt from his sleeping body. Her eyes were glued to the lipstick stain on its collar, her body slumped into a defeated seat by his bedside. She gravely wanted to discuss their divorce, and for that, she braved through long, drawn-out hours waiting for him to come home. He, on the other hand, had a woman in his arm while drinking himself stupid out there.

Even a somber moment like this did not dull his mood, did it…?

Another imperceptibly long period of inertia later, Melanie washed the shirt by hand, making sure it was spotless before airing it outside. It was wet and a little warm—and not at all enough to thaw her icy heart and her determination to end this once and for all.

Melanie knew Alejandro like the back of her hand. Any drunken night would result in a very early rise in the morning due to a headache spurred by hangovers. So, she decided to sit by his bedside until the day broke. She would wait for him to get up.

Just as Melanie expected, before the clock struck seven, Alejandro's headache woke him up. After a bleary trip to the bathroom, he finally noticed Melanie sitting by his bedside.

He halted for a second, and then asked, "Did Jett send me home?"

She nodded. "Can we talk about our divorce now? I'm being serious."

He took a set of pajamas from the closet and went straight into the bathroom. "What's there to even talk about? We've been here before, man—I said bloody hell to it. Look, I'm really busy lately, so please spare me these irrational quarrels, okay? I ain't got time to dance with you."

Following that last word, he shut the bathroom door tight.

Melanie's fingers clawed around the edge of her shirt. Barge in! She wanted to just barge inside of that darn room and force this issue to come to a head. He was always like this—treating this issue with infuriating tepidness, drawing up a plethora of excuses to feed her, and then run away and leave her wallowing in abject loneliness… She had it!

She waited until he was done with his shower and was about to leave the bathroom before blocking his exit with her body. "So long as we don't resolve this, you're not leaving this place today! I'm not gonna waste my finite days on you—I hate a life like this, and I've had enough of it!"

Alejandro trained his eyes on her for two quiet seconds. There was nothing beneath those clear, unrippled pools. "Move."

Melanie bit her lips silently, but she did not budge.

He gritted his teeth as though he was near his limit. Then, he spun on his heels, grabbed his blazer, and hurled it onto the bed hard. "What the hell do you want?! For God's sake, can that brain of yours hold anything other than bloody divorce?! Christ, you wanna talk about it? Then wait till I come home at night, okay? We will talk; we will f**king talk! I'll be home earlier than usual, all right?! But now, for the love of God, I need to go to work—so don't be a nuisance and stop blocking my way!"

Melanie was worried that this would be another one of his mendacities. "Really? You promise you'll come home earlier?" she asked, her voice unsteady.

His expression was sullen and dour, but he did not refute her, so Melanie took it as a tacit admission. “All right, then. You may go. I’ll be making dinner for you tonight. Just… don’t be late again. Don’t make me wait all the way till late at night.”

Alejandro said nothing. He grabbed his blazer and started toward the door without giving her a single passing glance.

After a full night without respite, Melanie was finally exhausted. There was still some time before Melissa woke, so she decided to seize the gap for a nap. Otherwise, she would have lost the chance to sleep completely when her daughter woke; Melissa would want her mommy to play with her all the time.

Chapter 1775

As the car was heading to the company, Alejandro closed his eyes and tried to salvage any reprieve this way, but his headache persisted while his mood remained incredibly sour.

Jett, from the driver’s seat, watched him through the rearview mirror and remarked carefully, “Mr. Smith? Madam caught that red lipstick stain on your collar last night.”

The man’s body froze. His eyes snapped open. “When was there a lipstick stain?”

Jett steeled himself. “Uh-hem. You drank too much last night, and then you met someone you used to know, and then you two went upstairs. Uh, she had her arms around you, and then she kissed you. You pushed her away… That was when I quickly hauled you out of there.”

A quiet but broiling flame flared within Alejandro. “Melanie… She saw… What was her reaction?”

Jett shrugged. “She was just… neutral. I wanted to help you change your clothes, but she insisted in the end. I wanted to explain the stain but she wouldn’t let me…”

Neutral?

Alejandro cast his eyes down and let his gaze wander outside the window. All of a sudden, he felt like the worst crap in the world.

He had lost yet another girl who once thought the world of him.

In the past, if Melanie saw a woman’s lipstick stain on him, she would have dragged him out of his drunkenness and shouted at him about who it was. But now, she responded with neutrality—and it was his doing.

He wanted to kick himself. Why did he have to destroy everything? He felt helpless, at a loss, having no idea how to even sustain this marred, broken, and jagged marriage.

His mind wandered to that moment, over the phone, when she told him she did not love him anymore with that tone—he felt as though someone had closed their claws around his heart and squeezed it tight. Pain made him breath hard, but he had no way of escaping that pain…

“Tremont Enterprise,” he said.

Jett changed direction per his order.

Once Alejandro was in the Tremont Tower, he sauntered straight into Mark’s office. Since he was Tremont Enterprise’s shareholder, no matter how stacked the security was at the door, they might as well just be décor for him.

Mark’s face was covered in a veneer of ice as soon as he saw him. “Spit it out, and then get the hell outta my sight.”

Alejandro was not offended at all. Instead, he threw himself at the couch, wiggling and adjusting to assume the most comfortable position. “Ain’t here to talk shop, man. I’m here to talk about private affairs. So I’m gonna have to ask you to put your work aside because I need you to teach me something.”

Teach him something? “Gee, you actually think I could be a pedagogue to you in any particular subject? Pardon my skepticism, but you have done all sorts of great and sh*tty things under the sun. I’m afraid I’ve got nothing more to impart,” Mark mocked.

Alejandro’s face suddenly turned serious. “How the f**k do you make a woman who’s desperate to leave you… stay?”

Chapter 1776

Mark cocked his brow. “Melanie Lark? Hmph, who’s surprised that she’s finally had enough of you and wants to part with you? You mistreat her. And of course, the whole trial of being bound to a man who doesn’t love you—must be hell. Maybe you should learn how to love someone first before thinking you’re viable for marriage, punk, so don’t keep her and waste her away. I mean, haven’t we been here before? You messed Tiffany up, and now you mess Melanie up. Seriously, can you ever act like a decent human being?”

He did not upset Alejandro—in fact, the latter had made enough mental preparations for the sort of mockeries Mark would definitely cast at him, so Alejandro could take them. “Yo, I’m here to ask you for solutions; I’m not here to be ‘educated’. I mean, pop’s gone, so maybe your big brother instincts compel you to be the fill-in, but eh, hard pass on the lectures. You claim I didn’t treat Melanie good enough, but what’s good, then? I bought her a limited edition sports car, gave her the most expensive jewelries—I’m giving her nothing but the best! But all she ever wants to do is to stay in the damn house caring for the kid. She doesn’t wanna go anywhere! And now, she keeps harping on a divorce.”

Mark let out a shrill snicker. “Women may be materialistic, but not all the time. They might be delighted by a car, or jewelries, or designer bags, but their delight is predicated on a foundation of relationship and bonding. If all they need is material, then that isn’t love to begin with. Besides… You might be able to charm naïve ingenues who've never seen the world before with all these flashy materials; those women will eagerly climb into your bed with their legs spread wide before they even think of leaving you! But Melanie isn’t an ingenue who’s never seen what material is like. For Christ’s sake, she grew up in the Lark family; she’s seen it all!

“Not every woman acts as how you’d imagine they do. It could be any material, but it’s gotta be built atop of actual, genuine relationship to mean anything. Otherwise, it’s no different from a transactional relationship. Lemme guess, you didn’t usually gift Melanie things in the beginning, did you? All these gratifications—you’re only trying to repair your bond after noticing the red flag, which is why they are working so bloody well now,” he continued. “Simple question: do you love her?”

Alejandro pondered on it for a while. “I don’t know. No one’s ever taught me how to love. But… I… I just don’t want a divorce.”

Mark sipped on his red tea. “Why not?” he asked offhandedly. “Because your girl still needs her? Or is the needy one you? Do you have only needs for her, or is it because you can’t let her go? Either way, spare me the diddle. I don’t have the time to chat idly with you. Let the question sit on your head for a longer time before answering me.”

His words silenced Alejandro into a full five-minutes rumination. “I think… I think I’m the one who can’t leave her. I’m used to her standing beside me, used to her cooking, and every time she mentions that damn divorce, I’ll become too frightened to go back…”

“Jesus Christ, Alejandro, just tell her you love her! You won’t die out of a heart attack from saying that, and you won’t lose your precious face or dignity either,” Mark snapped curtly. “It isn’t hard to just tell your significant other that you love her. Not at all… If that’s all there is, you may leave. I still have a lot of agenda on my plate, so here’s the door; show yourself out before you bug me more.”

Alejandro rose to his feet and tidied his collar. “Fine, then. If I can’t bug you, then I’ll bug Arianne instead. Honestly, I’m honored that you’ve said so much to me today. I’m gonna repay you with a hearty meal, man. You better not flip off my genuine intention on this.”

Mark waved dismissively as though he was too impatient to tell him anything more.

Alejandro left Mark’s office and went to the open-space area, strutting to Arianne’s desk. He produced a beautiful jewelry box for her. “Here. A gift. Need a favor.”

Arianne was deeply engrossed in formulating new designs, so his sudden move gave her a fright. “Yeeoow—wha? You need a favor from me, which is…? Wait, hold on a sec. You, Alejandro Smith, would need someone to lend you a hand too someday? And to compensate that with a gift? Well, you better tell me what you need and I’ll try to see if I can help. I can’t claim anything before I make sure.”

Alejandro loomed over the desk, a devilish smile playing on his lips. “Oh, I assure you, it’s just a small favor. Just need a little gift of the gab to make it work, though. Anyway, I didn’t give Mark any present just now. You sure you don’t wanna agree to my request?”

Arianne thought for a few seconds. “Okay, go on. I’ll do my best.”

Alejandro sighed. “Please talk to Melanie for me. Tell her how sad our daughter will be if she doesn’t have a mom. Just talk and talk until she doesn’t want a divorce anymore. Look, I trust your persuasive and oratory skill—I know you’re just the perfect woman for the job.”

The realization hit Arianne, who immediately broke into a grin. “Well, well, well! Who the heck knew that you’d have a day like this too, huh? You’re pleading with me over this? Tell you what—I actually don’t mind helping even if you don’t gift me anything. See, this thing ultimately depends on you; it can’t be sustained by outside help. Honestly, you might have no idea about this, but Melanie used to love you a goddamned lot. The only reason why she’d want a divorce is because you pushed her to this. You really gotta think hard and long about yourself, man. If it doesn’t work, then… Just treat her the same way she used to treat you. Because that is what she believes is the best expression of love.”

Alejandro raised his eyebrow. “God, a single speech from you triumphs Mark’s bullsh*t by a mile! All right, I’m thanking you in advance. I promised her that we’ll talk about this tonight after I go home, so you better talk to her before I go home, you know? So maybe… a half-day break around the evening?”

Chapter 1777

Now, who would say no to a vacation? Arianne immediately waved her phone before chirping, “Well, then! Lemme ask for a half-day break from my Fearless Leader. Relax, I’ll have it settled in one late afternoon. Anything that’s gotta sway things to your favor, I’ll say ‘em. Remember to treat me to a good hearty meal for this!”

After her lunch with Mark, Arianne headed straight to the Smith Estate.

Melanie was tidying Alejandro's clothes in the bedroom. Every shirt and suit she had touched was spotless and mint as though it were bought yesterday, stacked in the most orderly row one could imagine. Each of them had a scent, too; a faint, but distinct fragrance resembling Melanie herself—refined, prim, fetching, and a little bit mulish deep inside.

"All this is your handiwork?" Arianne exclaimed in shock. Ever since things were official between Mark and her, Arianne had never deigned herself to any of these chores. With her mind always trained toward developing her career, domestic chores just never crossed her mind. Who would have thought that a young woman of standing raised in a privileged family would get her hands dirty on menial chores—and to do them to such sterling degree made it obvious that Melanie had ample chances to hone her skill.

Melanie looked up at her and flashed a smile. "Yea. He really hates it if any of his shirts spots a single wrinkle. Seriously, any furrow in his shirt is a furrow in his eyebrows, and then he'll nag the ears of the nanny for a bit. In the end, I decided to just come in and do it myself," she explained. "He told me he was going to properly discuss our divorce tonight, so here I am, tidying and sorting his clothes before he pulls his hair trying to find the shirt he wants but can't. You're free enough to pay me a visit, Arianne? Aren't you supposed to be busy in the office?"

Arianne did not plan to hide her intention. She simply dragged a chair over and sat, hoisting Melissa into her arms to play with her. "It's Alejandro. He drove to the company to look for me, so here I am, putting a good word for him."

Stupefaction flickered in Melanie's eyes. Her plan had always been to talk Mark and Arianne into helping her case, so she never expected Arianne to become Alejandro's spokesperson. A prideful, haughty, arrogant man… stooping to requesting help from someone else? And for something like this?

Words failed Melanie all of a sudden.

Arianne sighed. “Alejandro doesn’t want this divorce to happen, plain and simple. What I think is… I got him wrong, Melanie. He does have feelings for you. He didn’t just ask me for help over it, he even talked to Mark about it. Seriously, the fact that he went to seek counsel from Mark is quite a bombshell for me! I mean, you know how much he hates anyone with Tremont as their last name… But I’m not gonna dwell on this. You should look at Millie. She’s still so young and she was raised by you. Do you really have the heart to abandon her and leave?

“Men are not exactly renowned for their patience. Maybe Millie would even get a horrible spank if she keeps crying for her mom, you know? Can you really live with that? I don’t think Alejandro’s beyond salvation, frankly, so maybe you should give him a chance—in a sense, it’s like giving yourself a chance, too. He’s already trying to mend this, trying to right his wrongs. It was obvious to me the moment he bought that car for you. Didn’t you notice that too?”

Melanie felt bubbles of ire rising within her. Melissa was an innocent, naïve little angel whose adorable smiles could thaw ice; just the thought of leaving her baby like this was like having a razor pressed into her heart.

As though Arianne’s argument never crossed her mind! In fact, Melanie had already decided that she would wait until her life alone was stable enough before discussing with Alejandro to take the daughter back for herself. She had wavered between decisions for so long, straddling along the line between two sides until she chose divorce. Was she cold? Maybe. But the coldest was not her—it was Alejandro, was it not? A man who would never seem to be warmed by anything she did. Doubling down on that dogged, deluded clinging to warm his stone-cold heart would only bite Melanie with its frost until she herself became just as frozen, just as stiff, just as numb.

Chapter 1778

Melanie drew a deep breath. “Well, then, Arianne. Do you actually believe that all a man needs to do to make a woman stay is to gift her a car, some fancy jewellery, some chic designer bags, what-have-you? Is that all what love amounts to? Oh, no… No. Men do that so that you’d wanna stay with them. Once you’ve gotten all pleased and charmed by their bait, he’ll revert to how he’s always been. Why? Because you’re just an objective, and he’s achieved it. Why even waste energy coddling you now? …Don’t you see? There’s not a scintilla of genuine affection in it.

“I can tell, you know, if he loves me or not. I’m not seduced by all these materialistic trappings. I only ever wanted him, as a human being—be it Alejandro or Ethan. And yet, it doesn’t matter who he is; he simply isn’t mine. You don’t know the half of all those days and nights I’ve spent since I was bound to him by marriage, do you? I have had suitors—throngs of them, and I’ve never needed to lower myself to such submission, never needed to walk on tiptoes around any man. I’ve done so much for him. So, so much… So why is it that, at the end of the day, I’m still not in his heart?

“He just wants me to stay for the sake of his daughter. This is why the last ember of my hope has long died, Arianne. So, spare me all the platitudes of a spokesperson; you shouldn’t have.”

Even if Arianne were a master debater, Melanie’s reply had effectively hamstrung her arguments. At the end of the day, Arianne was never Melanie Lark; she had never lived a day with Alejandro, and she held no profound understanding about him.

“Are you absolutely, seriously—like, without a doubt—sure he’s never told you he likes you? Does he really hold nothing that could make you miss him when he’s gone?” Arianne asked finally.

Melanie was quiet for a beat. “Maybe he had, maybe he hadn’t. God knows I don’t remember a single instance of it…. Ha. Why is ‘I love you’ a metric, when a good few numbers of men are so adept at paying that lip service whenever their mood kicks in? A funny little whim—and he tells you he loves you. Do you trust your gut instincts, or the lips of men and their whims?” she reparteed. “I’m already an abandoned soul without a home or a family. A person like that—like me—yearns for their marriage to be exceptionally happy and warming. But I can’t even make that happen! She that lives on hope shall die fasting, and so I rather smolder my hope.

“…I think that’s all there is to this conversation, Arianne. You don’t have anything more to add to it. I know, you’re doing this because you think this is what’s best for me, but I’ve gone through way more painstaking ruminations. The desire to divorce has stuck and echoed in my mind for such infinite times that I just… I know this is the last time it’s going to stay in my head. I’m sure of it.”

Arianne felt defeated as she nodded stiffly. “Seems like I’ve underestimated your determination, Melanie. Just pretend I never came here, then; have a good, long talk tonight, you two. I wish you’ll find the chance to reconcile, for real,” she said. “You’re not gonna listen to what I say now, I get it. I don’t like putting in good words for someone, anyway. I just believe that… he’s not completely unsalvageable. If there is a possibility—any at all—you should still give both yourself and him a chance. Either way, I should go. Let’s continue talking some other time, shall we? Divorce or not, we’re still friends.”

Water crept into Melanie’s nose. She rose to her feet, her eyes reddened. “Let me send you home. You’ve come all the way here just for this, after all. You’re right; this divorce doesn’t impact our relationship at all. Don’t worry.”

Arianne smiled helplessly. “It’s okay. No need to send me. It’ll inconvenient you if you have to bring your kid along,” she declined. “I’ll just hail a cab or an uber. You, meanwhile, should seize on these last few moments to enjoy your time with Millie.”

Arianne texted Alejandro the moment she stepped out of the Smith Estate.

‘We underestimated her determination to divorce you, man. Sorry, but I can’t help you anymore… This one’s on you alone. She said… She doesn’t care if you were Alejandro or Ethan, she had always just wanted you. But you made her feel like you’re not hers at all. So yeah… It’s up to you on how to take this, I guess.’

Reading this, Alejandro sent an office chair careening to the floor with a kick.

Tried as he might, he could not understand any of it. Had he ever owed her anything? Starved her before? Deprived her of necessities in life? He was generous—bountiful, even—with his money; she had always been able to spend it however she liked. And he had never done anything that scorned her or wronged her, had he?

So why was she so f**king hellbent in nulling their marriage?!

Every train of rationale Alejandro could come up with pointed at the misunderstandings he made during Tiffany's incident, but that could not be all there was to it, right? There's always a process before the breaking point. That incident alone could not be the totality of that process, could it?

Or… had it acted as the fuse that exposed some things about him? Things that had finally chilled her heart?

Chapter 1779

Alejandro stared at the ticking clock hands on the wall, his exasperation growing. By dinnertime, he would have to go home and have that dreadful conversation with Melanie, and he hated it. He hated needing to go home.

Still, he could not stall this any longer. Both of their patience was thinning.

He fought against what was to come until the last minute before giving up and reluctantly driving home.

The confrontation was just a matter of time.

Like always, Melanie had finished preparing dinner. When she heard the sound of Alejandro's car steering into the estate, her heart sank, slowly but surely, into her stomach. He was not late today.

Melissa leaped from her baby chair and sprung toward the door, shouting excitedly for her father.

Alejandro would never let his daughter's need for embrace go unanswered. He crouched to her level and lifted the girl into his arm. "Have you been good at home today? Did you make your Mommy mad?"

Melissa pecked on his cheek. "Noooo! Millie is a good girl!"

A sharp pang of sadness suddenly hit Melanie. Unconsciously, she averted her eyes. "Wash your hands before eating."

Alejandro's eyes darted to her before putting Melissa down. "Alright, Daddy's gonna wash his hands. You get to your seat now."

Melissa docility returned to the table and took her seat on the baby chair. She looked up at Melanie and chirped, "Look, look! Daddy's eating with us today! Yayyyyy!"

Melanie returned her a brief smile since she did not know what else to respond. Of course, the little girl would act this ecstatic—a scene like this did not happen often at all.

Alejandro took his seat around the table shortly after. She was about to say something when he cut into the brief room before her words came out, “Let’s have dinner first; we’ll leave other things we wanna talk about for later, okay? I don’t wanna talk about divorce in front of Millie, okay?”

Melanie nodded.

He grabbed a piece of drumstick and placed it on her plate. “I faintly recall this as one of your favorites,” he remarked, before adding, “Are you okay lately? You look worn out and thinner.”

A shudder jolted through Melanie, causing her hand to quiver so much she almost dropped her fork. He remembered what her favorite food was; he’d noticed that she had thinned…?

His sudden act of care summoned a deluge of emotions roaring against her chest.

Seeing her hold her utensils motionlessly, Alejandro pressed his lips into a thin line. “What’s the matter? This might very well be our last dinner together, you know. Has that made you lose your appetite?”

She shook her head, pressing back the waves before she ate her first bite. Every now and then she would grab some of the side dishes and place them on Melissa’s plate, to which Alejandro would then mimic her and do the same.

“You focus on your dinner; I’ll handle Millie. I don’t think you’ve ever had a proper, hassle-free meal since she joined our family, so allow me to do something about that.”

Arianne was right. If he had no idea how to treat someone kindly, then perhaps imitating her actions tenfold would be a good start. It was the simplest and most direct way.

It was a very drawn-out dinner; it lasted longer than usual. Throughout it all, Melanie’s mind had gone through an internal roller-coaster ride, and it was only when a bored Melissa shouted about wanting to play outside that she finally put down her utensils.

They went to the courtyard. Melissa played with herself while Alejandro and Melanie stood side by side.

The night’s crescent moon had risen above the foliage. It scattered its pearly white aureole to the world below, limning the night with its serene glow.

They say the stars are mostly missing in a city’s night sky. Even when one trains their eyes hard enough to find them, they always appear as a lonesome, solidary little thing staring across great space to others like themselves.

How lonely.

Chapter 1780

“Have you really thought this through?” Alejandro asked suddenly.

“Yes. I hope that we can live our separate lives from now on,” Melanie replied placidly. “I’ve been thinking… when my single life is finally back on track, I wanna come back and take Millie away, okay? She’s all I have. Everything else I can let go, but not Millie. She… She is my life.”

The air was gelled by deafening silence. A few moments later, Alejandro looked up at the nightly dome above and drew in a deep breath.

“It’s true that I’ve taken too much from you. I agree with your proposal, but on one condition: we don’t divorce right away… Because I want to try again. Do it from the start once more, I don’t care; just let me try again. A hundred days is all I’m asking, okay? If I don’t succeed in changing your mind—if you’re still dead-set on your decision—then I’ll agree to your conditions. All of them. I’ll sign the divorce agreement with not a moment to lose. We’ve been together despite the odds for so long… What’s an additional period of a hundred days, compared to the mammoth share of time we’ve gone through together? You agree, don’t you?”

“But why?” she echoed aloud, baffled. “You can’t even convince me to stay with you after years. How’s that something a hundred days can change? Also… ‘Start over’? How many times can you start your life over? I find this completely unnecessary; just so utterly pointless. Why are we even considering wasting time on it?

“Alejandro, I don’t regret marrying you back then. On that day of our wedding, I was genuinely, sincerely happy. It was a strike of fortune that I could meet you… before it turned into the result of my most baleful luck. But I accept that, you know, so let’s just move on.”

That was meant to be the last word on the matter, and Melanie made this intention clear when she started toward Melissa. No sooner after she took her first two steps than Alejandro snatched her wrist and rooted her into place.

Then, with a yank, Melanie stumbled backward and crashed into his chest.

He smelled so familiar. So familiar, in fact, it was threatening to break the defenses in her eyes where her tears would pour. She instinctively pushed against him, murmuring, “Don’t… Please don’t…”

It only made him tighten his arms around her tightly and refuse to let go. “Don’t go. Please.”

Despondence. The tint of despondency lacing his voice was like a spell that had bound Melanie to give up struggling. She was frightened by how much her tears were mounting to burst, and in her fight to press them back, her breathing became featherlight.

“I don’t want to lose a person who loves me so much… whom I also love back,” he breathed in her ear. “I don’t wanna miss out on the things that matter the most in my life anymore. I just want… I just want to be with you—to be good with you. I know, I probably suck at relationships so f**king much that it makes you disillusioned. But I will work hard, I promise! I will make it my life’s mission to be the kind of person you love.”

Melanie froze. “W-Wha… What did you just say?”

She heard him; she heard every word of it. It was just that she could not believe that he’d said it. She had never seen him so crestfallen and dismal, nor had she ever heard him come so close to pleading.

Now that the most weighted of words had escaped him, Alejandro was no longer bashful. “I said—I don’t want to lose you. Just give me one last chance, okay?”

Melanie’s pounding heart thrashed against her chest. She had spent so many restless days fortifying her will, but now, it was slowly crumbling and disintegrating by his advance already.

She forwent giving him an answer on the spot. “I need to think about this. Also, our daughter’s just right there. Please don’t do this.”

Seeing her resolve shaken, Alejandro released his grip. “You should rest. Let me watch over Millie. I don’t have anything from work to worry about tonight, so it’s great that I could play with her.”

It was objectively true that Melanie had not gained much respite last night; it was obvious in how tired and sleepy she was right now. “Fine. Remind her to take bathroom breaks. Oh! She’s coming down with some snots, too, so remember to wipe that. I’m going to bed.”

Alejandro committed her words into his mind. “Gotcha. Go, sleep all the way to morning, honestly. Just chill. There’s nothing to worry about.”

Melanie finally released a long, drawn-out breath when she was in the safe confines of her room. She had always fancied herself as not easily distracted by attachments, and yet, back there… the things Alejandro had said had utterly disrupted her otherwise composed and resolute mind. It made her realize that it was not that she no longer held any love for him. It was just her heart, fatigued and battered, deciding to give up anticipating what this love could bring her.

But anytime he showed her little flashes of kindness, she started to doubt. Falter. Dawdle. Vacillate between choices. This was why many women out there felt compelled to stay trapped in their gilded cages, even if they had been domestically-abused or if they had too many altercations and quarrels to count. Women are creatures who simply cannot refuse any pitiful iota of kindness so long as it comes from someone who has a claim to their heart. A man could slap a woman with his one hand and hand her sweets with the other, and then suddenly she is beaming and smiling again as though nothing happened.

When stripped down to its fundamentals, how is a reactionary instinct like this any different from—pardon the French—being men's simping b*tch?

Alejandro had not subjected her to many of the cruelest, most depraved things a husband could do to his wife—which was why, in a way, that made him a cruel man in his own right.