Ruling 1791

Chapter 1791

The more Mark listened to Arianne, the more he felt that something had changed. “What’s gotten into you? Previously you wouldn’t even utter a swear word, yet now you’re able to say it so casually?”

Arianne recalled what she had just said and realized that there was nothing wrong with it. “Is there a problem? Wasn’t I speaking the truth? It’s only the two of us here, so is there a need to be reserved in our speech?”

Mark raised his hand and helplessly pinched Arianne’s cheeks. “All right, I’m heading to the company now. You’re only allowed to say such things to me, but you can’t go around saying it to others casually.”

As she watched Mark walk further and further away, Arianne rubbed her cheeks, which had been pinched by him and still carried his warmth. ‘I’ve managed to make him yield to me after all.’

At night, Melanie gave her a call to tell her that Mateo’s restaurant was going to open up officially and he had invited them to come there together.

Arianne was definitely not going to reject such an offer, so she agreed to it instantly.

However, Mark was unhappy. “Are you that familiar with Mateo? Why would you need to go to his newly opening restaurant? That’s silly.”

Arianne could not be bothered to reply to him, so she merely stood before her mirror and applied cosmetics on her face. ‘The weather’s been becoming hotter recently, and my face is easily getting oily. It’s a good thing that my skin’s doing a good job of not popping out any pimples.’

When someone did not receive a reply, he said in a muffled voice, “You’re not allowed to go!”

Arianne turned her head to look at him. “My friend’s friend is my friend as well. Since they’ve already invited me to go, how could I refuse? I’m just going to join in on the fun, so why do you have to be so petty about it? I don’t know what goes on in your mind everyday, but whatever it is, I don’t want to know. Are you going to be free over the weekend? Why don’t you show Smore around in your office then? Didn’t you say you wanted to nurture your son? Children should start learning from a young age. Otherwise, don’t come telling me how frustrated you are when he fails to meet your expectations.”

With that, Mark stopped talking and merely pulled the blanket to play dead.

Arianne heaved a sigh. ‘Based on his tone, I can tell that he’s being serious and it’s not a joke. There was actually room for negotiation when I said I was going to Mateo’s place tomorrow, yet he just shot me down and forbade me from going so casually.’

After Arianne was done applying her facial products, she smiled at the mirror with a satisfied look on her face before switching off the lights and going to bed.

Just as she laid down, Mark pulled her into his arms. “You smell very nice…”

Arianne teasingly placed her face closer to Mark. “It’s nice, isn’t it? I’ll let you kiss me.”

How could Mark possibly resist such “seductions”? He instantly kissed her on the lips. “I don’t just want to kiss you on the face…”

…

The next day, Mark actually brought Smore to his office, allowing Arianne to have more time to relax. Hence, she got out of bed, tidied herself up, and went to meet up with Melanie and Tiffany.

After they had shopped around nearby and it was almost noon, the trio headed towards Mateo’s restaurant.

It had to be said that Mateo was very good at what he was doing. Whether it was selecting the location of his restaurant or its theme, he had managed to set it up very nicely. Therefore, on the first day of his restaurant’s opening, he was met with close to full occupancy.

The restaurant mainly sold Chinese dishes. Arianne had had her fair share of Chinese in the past since such dishes were rather common and popular in that area.

Mateo had already reserved a place for them beforehand. After tasting his restaurant’s dishes, Arianne was slightly surprised. ‘The dishes here actually taste better than the ones I’ve had in the past. They’re unique.’

Melanie praised non-stop as well as she said, “It seems that Teo is planning to stay in the country long-term and develop his career; he’s put a lot of effort into opening up this restaurant. In fact, this restaurant is rather high class. He’s managed to get many people’s praises right on the first day of his opening. It’s probably because the Rodriguezes have managed to gain the favour of many people. However, with these kinds of dishes, he’s bound to receive a lot of returning customers, so he’s going to rely on the quality of his dishes in the future.”

Chapter 1792

Both Tiffany and Arianne loved Chinese dishes, so Tiffany began to preach as she said, “I’ll come here whenever I feel like having Chinese dishes in the future. I just really like the food here. I’m not going to eat for free though. The food here is absolutely delicious!”

Mateo was only able to find some time to greet the trio when they were halfway done with their food. “I’m so sorry, I was held up with work just now. Please order whatever you want, don’t be shy. I’ve also told the kitchen to give your table the best treatment; your food will be prioritised when it’s being served so you don’t have to wait for too long.”

Tiffany jokingly said, “You’re such a nice guy…”

Then, Mateo blinked his eyes at her. “Why, of course, I’ve got to take care of my friends. You’re Melanie’s friends, so you’re my friends as well. There’s no need to stand on ceremony. I’m going to go back now, enjoy your meal.”

As they watched Mateo leave, Tiffany whispered, “Melanie, does he fancy you? Or did he… fancy you in the past? Aren't both of you childhood friends? Both of you look right and are compatible with each other, so did you have that kind of idea in the past? In my opinion, when a man not only treats a girl well, but even her friends, he definitely doesn’t think of her as just a friend!”

A hint of shock flashed through Melanie's eyes. "What are you blabbering about, Tiffany? Don't let anyone else hear you say that… He and I… are just childhood friends. We haven't met each other for many years now and only contact each other once in a while. Plus, he's been overseas right after he graduated from university, so how could he possibly have fallen for me?"

Arianne nibbled on her spoon as she muttered, "Has he really never fallen for you? To be honest, Mateo's quite a nice guy, be it his family background, appearance, or personality. I've got quite a good eye for people, but it's a pity that you're already married and with a child. However, since you haven't brought Millie with you today, anyone who doesn't know you would definitely not think that you're a mom. Just a glance at you is enough to see what a young, beautiful, and elegant woman you are…"

Melanie felt embarrassed after the array of compliments. "Arianne, why are you joining Tiffany in blabbering? I noticed that Tiffany's character has begun to rub on you after being with her for so long."

TIffany unhappily objected as she said, "What do you mean? Are you saying that I haven't got a nice personality while Arianne does?"

Melanie laughed hysterically. "When did I ever say that? In fact, it's not that I don't feel that you're nice at all, but that you're the best! Whatever it is… Alejandro's already flipped once because of my meeting with Teo, so let's not joke about this anymore and just eat. After we're done eating, let's pay the bill and leave. He's busy here, so I don't want to be too much of a bother to him."

Tiffany pouted her lips. "There you go, look at how much you still care about Alejandro's feelings. You whine everyday and say that you would like to get a divorce, but I've never seen you actually getting it done. Don't rush in denying it—both Ari and I have clearly seen what you've just said subconsciously. We've seen right through you!"

In fact, Melanie did want to deny it, but Tiffany had interrupted her before she could, so she decided that she might as well not explain herself. She was afraid that Alejandro would flip and go mad again, but she was even more afraid that he would set his sights on Mateo, nothing more. Melanie was very clear on what Alejandro was capable of doing, so she did not want to get Mateo involved in any troubles.

On the other hand, at Alejandro's manor.

Alejandro sat in the living room as he smoked, the air filling with a faint layer of smog. Even the ashtray in front of him was almost full.

Jett, who stood beside him, lowered himself as he whispered, "Mateo returned suddenly without telling anyone what his plans were. However, before he returned, he made all the arrangements necessary for his matter overseas within a short period of time. It would seem that he really intends to have a long term stay in the country."

Alejandro extinguished the cigarette in his hand and heaved a long sigh. "Melanie has gone to the restaurant that he opened. I refuse to believe that he's back in the country just to open up a restaurant; that's merely the Rodriguezes' side business. Do you think… Melanie loves Chinese cuisine?"

Chapter 1793

Jett went in headstrong as he answered, "I'm… not sure what Madam likes. Shouldn't you be clearer about that than me?"

Alejandro's face turned eerily dark. "I do know, but… I don't want to jump to conclusions, which is why I'm asking. In that case, I suppose it's true then? No wonder she's so adamant on divorcing me. In the past, no matter how big of an error I made, I neither laid a finger on her, nor wronged her in any way.

She’s now asking for a divorce while Mateo has returned so coincidentally. If it were you, what would you think of it?”

However, Jett chose to remain silent. He did not think that Melanie was that kind of person, but Alejandro’s assumption was rather logical as well. Hence, he did not know whose side he should be on.

When Alejandro realized that he would not receive the answer he wanted from Jett, he stopped asking any further.

Finally, Jett was able to heave a sigh of relief. He then helped Alejandro clear out the ashtray that was completely filled.

It was 3 PM when Melanie returned home. Alejandro was playing with Millie on the swing in the patio. Melanie could not help but admire the peaceful scene before her for a moment, as it was a rare sight. Then, when Millie saw her, she waved at her. “Mommy!”

Melanie walked up towards Millie and caressed her hair. “Were you a good girl at home today?”

Millie nodded her head with a serious expression on her face. “Yes, I took an afternoon nap like a good girl and played with Daddy like a good girl. Mommy, next time bring me along when you go out, ok? I’m a good girl…”

Melanie was slightly embarrassed. “Mommy didn’t bring you out today, which was only once in a while. Today wasn’t a good time, I’ll bring you out next time.”

Just as she said that, Alejandro interrupted her and said, “That’s right, it’s only natural that you couldn’t bring your child with you when you’ve gone to meet Mateo.”

Melanie frowned before turning to walk away. She did not wish to argue with him on such trivial matters. The more adamant Alejandro was on the matter, the more exhausted she felt.

Noticing that both her parents’ expressions had changed, as Millie sat on the swing, she raised her head to look at Alejandro and asked, “Daddy, what’s wrong?”

Alejandro retracted the dark expression he had beneath his eyes and turned it into a faint smile. “Nothing, you go ahead and play on your own. Daddy has got some stuff to discuss with Mommy first and then I will be back soon.”

The moment Alejandro turned around, the smile on his face completely disappeared. Then, he swiftly entered his house and headed upstairs before pushing open his bedroom door.

At that moment, Melanie was just getting changed. When she heard the sound of the door opening, she subconsciously covered her chest. “What are you doing?!”

Alejandro walked towards her and grabbed her wrist. “Tell me the truth, are you asking for a divorce because you knew that Mateo was coming back beforehand?”

Melanie had a surprised look on her face. “What the hell are you talking about? We hadn’t been in contact for over half a year, so how would I have known that he was coming back? I told you, we just

met by chance, he treated me to a meal, and I went to his restaurant today. What in the world are you thinking inside that head of yours? I can't help it if you let your imagination run wide, but don't treat me like this!"

Alejandro silently suppressed his anger and the strength in his grip unknowingly increased, causing Melanie's wrist to hurt more. She felt both aggrieved and angry. "Let go of me! You're hurting me! If you knew that you were going to be so worried, then you should've gone with me today instead of causing a ruckus when I came back. How did you treat me when I was completely devoted to you? Now, you've learned how to come up with unnecessary suspicions and make groundless accusations. Is all this really necessary? If you really can't wait until 100 days are over, we can just get a divorce right now and save us both from further torment! I can't deal with this anymore anyway!"

Chapter 1794

'Divorce, again with the divorce!'

Alejandro flung his hand away from her and slammed the door as he left. 'I get so frustrated every time she brings up the divorce!'

Alejandro immediately headed to his office, since it would be more peaceful than staying at home.

However, Alejandro still could not calm down even after he arrived at his office. He called out to Jett. "Go tell Mateo that I would like to meet him. If he doesn't dare meet me in private, something's definitely wrong with him! I don't care whether you have to tie him up or whatsoever. 'Invite' him over whatever the cost!"

Jett was slightly hesitant. "Sir, I don't think it would be a good idea to bring him over to the office, would it? There are too many eyes around here, so if word gets out to Madam…"

Jett's words had sent Alejandro a reminder. "I must be clouded by anger to not have thought of it myself. Set up the meet at a place then. Also, be discreet about it. I don't want Melanie to find out about it, at least until I meet him. I don't want anyone to ruin my plans."

Jett acknowledged his instructions and turned around to leave.

At 10 PM, Alejandro and Mateo met at a villa in the suburbs.

The patio was not very humid, thanks to the night breeze. In fact, it was able to slightly calm the nerves of an angry person.

Mateo was completely unfazed by Alejandro's "invitation" and seemed to be very calm. "I'm so sorry for keeping you waiting. I was too preoccupied with my work."

Since Mateo was a love rival, Alejandro could not see eye-to-eye with him no matter how he looked at him. That was especially true when Mateo seemed to be provoking Alejandro by not having a guilty expression on his face in the least whatsoever.

Alejandro gently scoffed. "Regardless of whether you're busy or not, you still came, didn't you? You know why we're here."

Mateo was startled for a moment before he sat on the chair opposite of Alejandro. "What do you mean? I don't really understand, but you could be frank and straightforward about it."

Jett presented Mateo with a cup of tea. Mateo smiled and said, “Thank you.”

Suddenly, Jett was hit with a strange feeling. ‘Based on Mateo’s personality, both he and Melanie are quite alike. They’re both very friendly people.’

Alejandro was not one to beat around the bush, so he said, “Stay away from Melanie. If I catch you looking for her for whatever reason, you’re going to have to bear the consequences yourself!”

Mateo continued to remain calm. “I didn’t look for her for no reason. We’re both friends who grew up together since we were kids, so would you really mind so much even when we haven’t met for such a long time? To tell you the truth, I’m actually glad that you called me over today because at least it shows that you care about her. Things aren’t like what I’ve heard, that you’ve mistreated her…”

Alejandro said in a cold tone, “You seem to be very well aware of her condition. Did those rumors even manage to find their way overseas?”

Mateo did not deny it. “No matter what it is, it’s not like what you think. So, please don’t treat me like your love rival. I only wish the best for Melanie, since we’ve known each other for many years after all. If that’s all, I’ll be taking my leave now.”

Before Mateo could get up, Jett took a few steps closer towards him. Obviously, Mateo was not allowed to leave yet.

A hint of coldness flashed through Mateo's eyes. "Mr. Smith, is there something else? Come out with it all at once. I'm quite rushed for time."

Alejandro lit a cigarette. "Why did you return to the country so suddenly? Don't tell me you did it just to open up a restaurant. You were doing quite well overseas previously; plus, things seem to be peaceful within the Rodriguez family, so there's no reason for you to have returned."

Mateo had a slight frown on his face. "Aren't you prying a little too deep into my personal matters, Mr. Smith? I've told you, Melanie and I are childhood friends. I can't help it if you don't believe me. I'll try my best not to bother her in the future. I suppose you should be more at ease, right? Also, while I'm at it, I would like to remind you that you can't confine the person you love. You need to be understanding and tolerant towards her as well. Otherwise, she will only feel exhausted."

Chapter 1795

'Exhausted you say? Melanie did say that as well…'

Alejandro extinguished the cigarette in his hands and suddenly leaped up to grab onto Mateo's collar. "Don't you dare put that expression on your face as if you know her very well!"

Mateo calmly released himself from Alejandro's grasps. "I don't know her very well, just a little bit more than you do, that's all. I came back because of someone, but it's not her, so you can be rest assured."

This time, Alejandro did not have Jett stop Mateo when he tried to leave. Before Mateo left, he told them that he wouldn't tell Melanie about their meeting.

The next day.

Arianne got off work in the afternoon and had intended on inviting Mark to Mateo's Cantonese restaurant for lunch, but she ended up having to go alone, since he had sudden business to attend to.

Unsurprisingly, during the second day of the restaurant's opening, business was still booming similar to the first day. However, Arianne was lucky that she could be served, so she chose a table for two and sat down. Just as she was done ordering her dishes, Mateo showed up and said, "Are you here alone today?"

Arianne hurriedly stood up. "Yes, I didn't know what to have for lunch and remembered that your food is quite nice, so I came over. I've already ordered my dishes, so you can go on and continue with your work. Don't let me bother you."

After she said that, Mateo turned around and told the cashier that Arianne would eat free of charge. Arianne hurriedly said, "There's no need for that, how could I not pay for my meals? If you do this, how can I continue coming here?"

Mateo was extremely generous as he said, "Don't worry about it, you'll be able to eat here free of charge from now on. There's no need for you to feel pressured about it."

Arianne was stunned for a moment. She only felt that the man before her was really too good at gaining favours. However, it was exactly because of that reason that she could not patron his restaurant regularly since she could not just eat for free without feeling embarrassed. "Al… All right then… Thank you."

After that, instead of walking away, Mateo sat opposite Arianne. “I’m not busy at the moment. Why don’t we have a small chat?”

Arianne sat down as well and nodded her head. “Of course, what would you like to talk about? About Melanie?”

Arianne had asked this all because Mateo and Melanie were childhood friends. Therefore, apart from that, there didn’t seem to be anything else that Arianne and Mateo could talk about.

Mateo had a slightly helpless expression on his face. “Why would you think that I would like to talk to you only about Melanie’s matters? Oh, right, last night… Alejandro looked for me and asked me to stay away from Melanie. He seemed to have misunderstood something.”

Arianne was slightly startled. “Has it become so serious that he went looking for you privately? Did he do anything to you?”

Mateo shook his head. “Actually, he didn’t. However, I don’t think it’s a problem. It makes sense that he would misunderstand me. The angrier he is, the more it shows that he cares about Melanie, which I’m glad for. I did return to the country for someone, but that person isn’t Melanie.”

Arianne’s interest became piqued. “You returned to the country for someone? A girl? If that’s so, then that girl sure is lucky. There aren’t many men like you left anymore.”

Mateo looked at Arianne and asked with a serious expression on his face. “What kind… of man am I?”

Arianne thought about it for a moment before she said, “The kind that lets others feel comfortable when they talk to you. You don’t cause others to feel uncomfortable around you. I suppose girls would find it hard not to fall for you normally, wouldn’t they? Who’s the girl? Why don’t you tell me? I might just know her. You’ve been away from the country for a few years now, so I might be able to help you assess her if I know her.”

Mateo’s eyes turned sharp. “You’re well acquainted with her, but I can’t tell you who she is. From the beginning, she’s been the light of my life and that has never changed. I have no idea why I hesitated in the past; I clearly had the chance, but I just had to drag it. Until finally… She got married and gave birth to a child. As for me? All these years, I’ve never been able to let her go, nor have I been able to love another person. Hence, I could only come back here to look for her and seek some closure, even if it’s an unhappy one.”

Chapter 1796

Arianne was slightly surprised. ‘The woman’s already married and has a child, yet Mateo still came all this way especially for her. Why does he sound like he’s planning to steal the woman?’ However, Arianne did not dare to voice her thoughts, so she could only be as subtle as possible. “She… She’s already married and has a child? In that case… What kind of outcome are you hoping for? Could it be… you’re hoping for her to get a divorce and be with you?”

However, Mateo merely shook his head. “I don’t expect her to be with me. In the past, just one look at her was enough to make me want to protect her, yet I kept stopping myself from doing so. I’ve waited for a hug from her for so many years… All I want is just a hug. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

Arianne heaved a sigh of relief. “Just a hug? That’s easy. Since she’s the light of your life, then I’m sure the two of you know each other. Therefore, since the two of you have known each other for so many years, I’m sure she wouldn’t be stingy enough to give you just a hug, would she? I can understand what you’re thinking; you just want to seek closure and move on from the past to fill up the void of regret in your heart. I hope that you will be able to receive that hug soon.”

A warm smile appeared beneath Mateo's eyes. "Thank you, I hope that that day comes soon as well. I'm going to go and work now; you must come here more often."

Arianne nodded. "I will, thank you."

After Mateo left, Arianne carefully thought through what he had just said. 'I know who that woman is? Not only do I know who she is, but I'm also well acquainted with her? I can't think of many people other than Melanie and Tiffany, so who could she be? I thought it was Melanie, but Mateo said it isn't her. I'm completely stumped.'

After tasting the Chinese food before her, Arianne became anxious once again. 'I do want to come often, but Mateo just won't take my money.' After pondering for a while, Arianne returned to her office and asked Melanie for Mateo's contact details so that she could transfer the money to him. She had especially taken notice of the prices on the menu.

Mateo was probably very busy because he took more than an hour before he replied to her and returned the money to her. 'I told you that it's free of charge, so there's no need for you to stand on ceremony.'

Arianne thought that it was troublesome to type, so she sent him a voice message. "I can accept your kindness if you allow me to eat for free for once or twice, but I can't have you doing that long term. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to have the courage to visit your restaurant again. If you really think that it's not appropriate for you to charge me, you could give me a slight discount. Moreover, I can't have you make a business loss all the time. The food at your restaurant is really nice; I really love eating Chinese cuisines."

Mateo replied with a smiley emoji and did not leave another message. ‘Does this mean he’s agreed to it?’

On the way home at night, Arianne brought up Mateo’s restaurant during her chat with Mark. “You really made a huge loss by not going for lunch with me. The Chinese cuisine at Mateo’s restaurant is really good. I’ve decided, I’ll go to his place for Chinese dishes whenever I don’t feel like eating at our company’s cafeteria! I’ll bring you along when you’re free next time!”

Mark did not want to hear another man’s name from her mouth, especially one who had sent her home before. “Stop bringing up another man’s name in front of me. If you do, I’ll make sure you don’t get the chance to have your Chinese cuisine at his restaurant anymore.”

Arianne rolled her eyes at him. “What’s wrong with me talking about cuisines? If you don’t want to eat it, fine. I’ll go myself!”

Mark remained silent and merely shot her a glance as he groaned.

When Arianne suddenly recalled Mateo saying “light of his life”, she teasingly asked, “Mark, do you have a light of your life? Would a person like you see a woman as the light of your life and keep it in your heart for a long time?”

Chapter 1797

Mark had never divulged on his past relationships, and he did not intend to let loose a whiff of a clue now. “You said so yourself. How is it plausible that someone like me could ever deign to pine for anyone? As if there’s anyone in this world who’s worthy.”

‘As if anyone’s worthy’? What, not even Arianne herself was worthy?!

She swung a fist gently at him. “Oh, sorry I’ve asked, then! I forgot that none of us mortals deserve someone as highfalutin and above-it-all as you. Yep, none whosoever deserve your immortal affection; nope, nada, zilch!”

Anyone who could read between the lines would hear her offended undertone. Yet, Mark seemed to have committed one of the cardinal sins the male species was sometimes accused of—either their crippling inability to interpret things beyond their literal meaning, or their inclination to feign that inability. “Do refrain from stating the obvious.”

Arianne was miffed. “Oh, so even I’m unworthy, then? Someone’s making this seem as if I was the one who was pining for you back then!”

Mark’s lips quivered slightly. “Please. You’re not someone I’ve pined for—you’re someone I’ve made mine.”

Damn him and his gift of gab. He always possessed just the right amount of suave glibness!

A busy mundane life always seemed to make time pass faster. A week passed in what felt like a blink of an eye, and by next Monday, Smore would begin formal schooling. Truthfully, there was still a summer break before his school formally began, but the Tremonts had signed their son up for summer classes to help ease him into his school life, with the side hope that their son could learn something too. Smore had become quite naughty at home, and no one knew how to discipline him.

Everything related to Smore's schooling willingly fell under Mark's jurisdiction. This was his only progeny, after all; he needed to make sure that his boy started strong right at the beginning of the race. It being preschool was not an excuse for him to take it lightly.

Finally, Arianne had a weekend free from agendas. She thought of Mateo's Chinese food restaurant—she had not visited the place for a few days since the last time. Seeing that today was a good day to gather with Melanie and Tiffany, she quickly invited them by calls.

Tiffany's eager assent was within the same second she understood it was a lunch invitation. While chatting with Melanie, meanwhile, Arianne recounted to her friend about her last visit to Mateo's restaurant. "The last time I went there, Mateo made everything I ate on the house. It's a bit embarrassing, you know? He also chatted with me and told me that Alejandro had gone to see him…"

A loud silence permeated from the other side of the phone. It made Arianne stop herself immediately.

"He—what?!" Melanie's outburst shattered the unsettling spell. "Alejandro went to see him?! What—did—he—do—to—Teo?!"

Melanie did not know about this, Arianne realized, biting her lips helplessly. "Er… maybe I shouldn't have mentioned this…? Okay, this is all on me. I was just… saying… Uh, Alejandro didn't seem to have done anything to him? If that helps? I mean, Mateo didn't sound distressed when he talked about it. Maaaybe it was just an innocent tête-à-tête between men? …Come on, Melanie, don't overthink this, would ya? Alejandro isn't that rotten a person, right? He's certainly above making things hard for a person over trivial, unfounded claims, right? Look, if you're gonna talk to Alejandro about this specific incident, please pay attention to your toe and attitude. Like, don't blow this issue up."

Melanie, however, could not force herself from calming down. "On what grounds does it have to do with that, huh? There's nothing immodest between Teo and I—don't you think his stupid intervention

just crossed the line?! It's not like I haven't made myself clear to him—I've explained, so why is he still acting this frickin' way? God, I swear, his late-blooming 'love' is worth less spit than weeds on a sidewalk! And that's if we delude ourselves into thinking this is out of 'love'; for all I know, he might just be pissed because I've stopped following him around and wagging my tail like he's my master and I his slobbering dog!"

Her uncharacteristically harsh choices of word betrayed the raw pain Melanie had suffered since she was bound to Alejandro's side. Even Arianne could glimpse the wealth of her abject desolation. "Melanie, please, chill a little. If you're gonna question Alejandro in this state, you're only gonna make things worse. It's… what men are like, you know. They are always a bit childish when it comes to relationships. The way you deal with this has got to be correct, or else it will seem like you're hiding something shady."

Even through the phone, Arianne could hear Melanie's response. It was a sigh, heavy with her lion's share of helpless desperation.

Chapter 1798

"I heard you, Arianne. I'll talk to him about this with my attitude in check. Then, later, I'll be eating with you and Tiffany at Teo's place. I don't give a damn about what he thinks. I'm gonna go there with my head held high, and I'm gonna let him know myself!"

Just like that, Melanie terminated their call, leaving Arianne with her mind dancing on pins and needles. What had she done? She was the one who brought this up, which meant that if a heated altercation between Melanie and Alejandro broke out, part of it was on her.

Meanwhile, Melanie wasted not a minute more before driving all the way to Alejandro's office. Despite it being a weekend, he was working overtime again. The man was renowned for being doggedly focused on his work, which likely stemmed from his troubled life experience in the past. Knowing full well that the survival of the Smith family's wealth and legacy was on his shoulders, while he still had much to learn and do, Alejandro usually sacrificed his weekends away slaving after work.

Melanie bulldozed inside as far as his office door before Jett stopped her in her tracks. “Sorry, Madam, but Mr. Smith’s in the middle of a meeting with one of his partners. You’re all right with waiting for a bit?”

Melanie peered into the interior of her husband’s office through the crack of his slightly ajar door. Her eyes made out Alejandro talking to someone sitting across him. It subsided her rage somewhat, and she changed her mind.

“Well, if he’s busy, then I’m afraid I’ll have to trouble you as my messenger, Jett. Tell him I’m gonna have lunch at Mateo’s restaurant with Tiffany and Arianne today, and I’m not bringing Millie along this time,” she announced. “If this pisses him off, then tell him to suck it up and enjoy it eating him inside. I mean, get real! All this time being with him has never brought me a single day of genuine joy, either. We’ve always been stuck trying to tolerate each other’s existence, haven’t we? So, why waste time and effort in being considerate of this annoying other half, amirite?

“Oh, and by the way? Tell him that if I found out he’s gone looking for a fight with Teo one more time, he can flush this marriage down the toilet. I wouldn’t stay until a hundred days have passed… Hell, I wouldn’t stay for even a goddamned day!”

Jett was so shocked by the attitude in her words that he instantly broke into a cold sweat. “M-Madam! It isn’t like that at all! It’s n-nothing like what you’ve imagined. Please, calm down for a bit—”

“Oh, I am calm, all right,” Melanie cut his reply with the steel in her voice. “I’ve simply had enough with my dumb self willingly being trapped in this suffocating cage of his making. How did he regard me back when I was still a dumb gal who thought that he and my daughter are all my world needs to be complete, hmm? Oh, he just thought I was a trifling accessory with no worth! Seriously, I’m done being his property. I have the personal agency to construct my own social circle; I have the agency to look for a modicum of fun and thrills in my laughably pathetic life. And him? He’s got not a goddamned rationale

to deny my agency! So, there. Tell him what I've said exactly as I've told you, no editorial required. That's all; I'm out."

After strutting out of the office, Melanie looked up at the cerulean dome above her. After all these years, this was the first time she felt most thoroughly relaxed and liberated. This was the first time she had ever unleashed her true feelings and spoken for herself in front of Alejandro, and only God knew how amazing this felt.

She proceeded to the restaurant and met Arianne and Tiffany. Rounding the table, she patted her skirt and folded it close to herself before taking her seat. "Sorry for the tardiness, girls. I guess I'll be the one treating the party this time."

Tiffany giggled. "Wow, look at you, Mel! Someone's different from usual, innit? I dunno if it's the makeup or somethin', but hot damn, gurl you are guh-lo-wing!"

A mirthless smile shadowed Melanie's lips. "It's nothing. I guess I finally understood something about my bedeviled life. I have no obligation to suffer slavishly and I refuse to do so anymore. All of us are given only a few decades to roam the Earth… Why squander it by clipping your own wings?"

Cold tingles crept into Arianne's heart. "Um, Melanie? Did you just… argue with Alejandro? You two didn't, uh, have a war over it, right?"

"He was busy with work when I came to see him, so we didn't actually talk face-to-face," she answered calmly. "But I've unloaded what I've been meaning to say to Jett; he'll pass the message. Now, I'm freed."

Arianne was suddenly regretting her choice to invite Melanie to this restaurant. The whole debacle started precisely because Alejandro misunderstood Mateo's intention, and now Arianne—in what she now looked back as a lapse in her usual senses—invited Melanie to the very thing that kickstarted it?

In her defense, Arianne only did it out of an innocent craving for good food and her desire to hang out with her besties…

Chapter 1799

Melanie seemed to have read Arianne's mind. "No, Arianne. This has got nothing to do with you. Even if you kept this a secret from me, I would have found out about this, so don't think this happened because of you," she pointed out. "In fact, I'm happy and grateful... You didn't choose to be biased toward him despite his connection to you. If we really think about this… He's your brother-in-law, isn't he? He's family. I'm not."

Melanie's analysis of their complex relationship had reached a depth beyond Arianne's cognizance, and it made her feel pretty ashamed of herself. Frankly, she had never once cared for Alejandro the way a decent sister-in-law was supposed to do, particularly since Mark did not exactly enjoy the warmest of kinship with him. Granted, with a backdrop as charged and tumultuous as that, Arianne felt as though she could never be a good sister-in-law even if she tried.

Mateo was always in his restaurant these few days, but at least he was not as busy as he used to be a few days ago. Naturally, after seeing that the women had arrived, he sat with them and in on joined their conversation. While they were waiting for food, he brewed a kettle of savory rose tea for them and personally served the girls.

He poured the cup in front of Arianne first.

The women froze. Out of the three, Melanie should be Mateo's closest friend—so why did he opt to serve Arianne first? This was especially since she was sitting on one end of the table with Tiffany while Mateo sat on the other end with Melanie. People usually pass drinks to their neighbors sitting next to them first, do they not?

It did not take long for all three of them to recover, of course. They figured it was just a personal quirk undeserving of special attention.

It would have passed as quickly as the shock did, too, were it not for Tiffany's penchant for friendly ribs. After a sip of her tea, she broke into a toothy grin and quipped, "Gee, I wonder! Does Ari visit your restaurant frequently on her own? Y'all seem to enjoy quite a relationship, don'cha—serving her your exquisite tea first, hmm? And here I thought your best pal Melanie would be the first!"

It was Mateo's turn to freeze in mid-action, but he returned to smiling almost immediately. "My, my. You're surprisingly observant! But I'm afraid there's no noteworthy 'tea' from this… if you catch my drift, aha. I'm of the opinion that the order of who gets their tea served doesn't mean much if every customer gets their share in the end, right? Oh, and by the way, Arianne has only come here alone once or twice. And since you're all Melanie's besties, I have no choice but to treat all of you equally."

Arianne chuckled and slapped Tiffany on the back. "What was that for, Tiffie? If your mouth is really this free, you should fill it with actual tea… preferably till you choke on it!"

Mateo's attention lingered on Arianne for a moment. "Whelp, I'll be heading to the kitchen to oversee their cooking. You girls go on."

Melanie nodded. "All right. You've got things to do; don't let us keep you."

Tiffany could only restrain herself until Mateo was out of sight before letting loose her unbridled fangirling. “O-M-G. This guy? Is soooooooo soft! And his hand, gals! Did y’all see his bee-ew-tee-ful hands? His fingers are soooo slender and fair, it’d be a waste if he doesn’t do hand-modeling! And then there’s his dreamy smile… Every time I see him breaking into that grin, I just can’t stop myself from smiling along!” she gushed. “I swear to gawd, if it isn’t for the fact that I’m already married to Jackson, this pudding is mine!”

Melanie’s lips twitched unconsciously. “Hello, Earth to Tiffany? Isn’t Jackson just as soft to you? He’s pretty husband-material too, isn’t he? Or are you simply this easily smitten?”

Tiffany waved. “Smitten? Ooh, that’s too heavy a word choice, my sweet Melanie. What I’ve professed was simply a declaration of admiration! But... you’re right. My Jackson is pretty soft, too. But don’t let who he is today fool you. Before meeting me, he was like, the opposite of soft—hell, he really knew how to get around and changed his partners like a true f**kboy! The point is, my undying love for Jackson shouldn’t stop me from admiring other men, you dig? Everyone I’ve met in my life has the potential to join the beautiful landscape I call my life! I might be barred from actually touching these beautiful people, but is it wrong to stop and gaze at them the way you enjoy a scenery, hmm?”

Before Arianne knew it, she had secretly begun to compare Jackson and Mateo mentally. If the latter was like a spring breeze billowing under the warm rays of a golden sun, then Jackson was the debonair, charming schemer who was not always honest to everyone around him. They were two splittingly different, though Arianne thought Tiffany’s lovable simple-mindedness was the better complement to Jackson’s genius.

Melanie, who insisted on paying, went to the counter after they finished their lunch, leaving Arianne and Tiffany to wait in their seats. After payment, she went to see Mateo in the supervisor’s room, which was walled out as a separate unit from the dining area. It also doubled as Mateo’s working office, and right now he was examining every Chinese recipe saved in the computer.

He was so deep in his thoughts that he had failed to see Melanie's arrival. Nonetheless, she approached him briskly before asking, "So, about that crush who still lives in your heart. It's Arianne Wynn, isn't it?"

Chapter 1800

Mateo's body immediately stilled. When he whipped his face upward to consider Melanie, his signature practiced grin was completely absent. "How did you… know?"

Melanie breathed a quiet sigh. She was relieved; it turned out that Mateo was not pining for her, and yet, she could not help but be simultaneously worried for the path her old friend seemed poised to tread.

"Your friend can tell, Teo. And unless I'm mistaken, our reunion in the supermarket wasn't a coincidence at all, was it? You planned for it. I was never the reason that compelled you to come back; that had always been Arianne," she said. "You knew Arianne's my friend, so you used me to help make you closer to her. I don't mind being used this way, Teo, but I think I should warn you—Mark Tremont's wife isn't someone you should set your eyes on. Ever."

He curled his lips into a flitting, pained smile. "I know, I know. I've never harbored any funny ideas either, if this helps. But, seriously, how did you piece it together? Have I been acting so obviously?"

He was worried—worried that Arianne might have noticed, too.

Melanie patted his shoulders good-naturedly. "You haven't changed since we were kids. Your habits and mannerisms remain as I remembered… Or maybe I just know you this well? See, I can tell from the way your eyes linger on Arianne, even if you do it unintentionally. Or that little priority you intuitively assigned to her back there when you were serving us tea. Or you freezing up when Tiffany was ribbing you about it. We were sitting next to each other, you recall. I could feel your muscles tense.."

Mateo's lips thinned. "I'm sorry, Mel. I shouldn't have used an old friend like this but… I confess, I eagerly got close to you not only because you are my childhood friend, but also because you're good friends with Arianne Wynn. Can you please keep this a secret? Guard it from others? Especially Arianne. She… I… I'm worried that if she knows, she might never come back here again."

Melanie nodded. "I'm a reasonable woman, Teo. I know better than to tell her about this. However, excuse me for asking, but what exactly do you plan to do? Honestly, how did you even know she loves Chinese food? I've been friends with her for a while, and she only picks Chinese restaurants sometimes when we hang out. There's no sign showing she likes it in particular."

Her inquiry was like a piper's song drawing Mateo's memories back to his university days. "It was when we were studying in the same university," he murmured. "One day, I overheard her conversation with Tiffany—they talked about how much they love Chinese food, but wished it didn't make her sick whenever she had it too frequently. Ever since then, I decided that I'd learn Chinese cuisines and make dishes that would never make her sick no matter how many times she ate them…

"Mel, listen to me. I don't necessarily want to secure a happy ending for myself. Neither do I wish to discombobulate her life with my baggage. You know me well, yes? Then you know I speak the truth…"

Melanie was hard-pressed to answer him with anything other than a few comforting words. She and Mateo went way back; she knew his roots and his core. But to fall so hopelessly in love with an impossibility that later clung to Mateo's heart for this many years? Melanie could not help him even if she tried.

When the women finally stepped out of the restaurant, Tiffany quickly identified Alejandro's car parked just outside the eatery. "Ooh, Melanie, looks like a certain someone you know is here again… He ain't here for trouble, I presume?"

Melanie's eyebrows creased. "You two get going. Goodbye."

Arianne held her hand and squeezed it a little. "Okay, then. But please, if you can, don't fight him."

Melanie nodded and headed in Alejandro's direction. In response, the latter rolled down his window and lit up a cigarette. "Jett told me you came to see me in the office."

He sounded so placid—there was not a crease of rage in the flatness of his tone. It sounded as though he was merely greeting her.

"Then you know I've also passed him a message that must be said," she replied in an equal amount of nonchalance. "Unless you're itching to hear me repeat it personally for your listening pleasure?"

Alejandro exhaled a puff of fog. "I'm free starting late afternoon today. Let's go home."

Melanie was a little baffled. What was his bourn to be here, if not to inquisite nor an ax to grind…?

Could it be that he was simply bidding his retaliation until she was home, and then all hell breaks loose?

Melanie said nothing. She spun on her heels and started toward her car—she had driven to the restaurant by herself, so she would be going home the same way.