Ruling 1301

Chapter 1301

Alarm bells went off in Mark's mind. "You two can't possibly intend on leaving me with two kids, could you? I'll go mad! You're not allowed to leave!"

Arianne wasn't about to listen. "We'll be back soon. You're not going out anyway, so why can't you watch them? One of them is your son and the other is your best friend's son. Thanks for the help!"

She quickly slipped away after that. Mark's protest remained suspended in his throat. He'd never had to take care of two kids before. What if they both wake up all of a sudden? The very thought of it was a nightmare…

Tiffany twisted her body around along to the loud music as she drove. "I never had the guts to be reckless whenever the baby was in the car. I suddenly feel as if the world is perfect again. Mark Tremont's time has finally arrived!"

Arianne smiled quietly. She was imagining how unprepared Mark would be when the kids awoke. Would he call her at once and urge her to come home?

To their surprise, they received no word from Mark, even though they had been out for more than three hours. Tiffany shifted uncomfortably. "This can't be. My son doesn't sleep that long. He cries for milk when he wakes up. Still no news from Mark?"

Arianne wasn't sure either. "Maybe… Mary helped soothe the baby? Do you think we should go home now?"

Tiffany couldn't help worrying, so they had to end their shopping trip, for now.

They returned to the Tremont Estate to find absolute silence downstairs. Tiffany put down all of her shopping items and scurried upstairs. She pushed the door open and was immediately rendered speechless. She didn't walk any further.

Arianne followed her upstairs and looked in as well—Mark was standing in front of the cot, holding Aristotle and playing with Plato. Aristotle no longer viewed the baby with enmity but was carefully reaching out to touch Plato's little cheeks. He looked amazed and excited.

To label Mark as "super dad" would not be an overstatement after this. He was perfectly capable of handling two kids and didn't need Mary's help. But the most miraculous of all? Contrary to Tiffany's earlier prediction, Plato was actually behaving himself, lying down quietly instead of crying.

Mark saw the mystified look on both women's faces and sulkily said, "Are you done having fun? If you've had enough, please take your sons away. They woke up ages ago. I've been coaxing them, one after another, for more than an hour."

Tiffany let out a sigh of relief. She took her son and lovingly took a whiff off his head. "Thank you for your help, Mr. Tremont. But could you please step aside? It's my son's feeding time. Just a short while will do."

Mark put Aristotle down and walked out. Arianne and Tiffany shared a smile. "Not bad. I can't believe that he would be capable of babysitting two babies. I only left because Mary was around."

Tiffany felt a slight change in her impression of Mark. “I always thought that Mark was that kind of… you know… lofty guy who’d never hold his own son. Looks like I was wrong. You picked a good guy, Ari. Although, Will still trumps him and suits you better.”

Arianne carried Aristotle and sat on the bed. “I don’t think so. I think it’s kind of written in the stars—who ends up with whom and who is only a passerby… Will is great and maybe he’s more compatible with me in certain aspects, but I fell in love with Mark. Will was more like a first crush, just the start of love. That’s not really love.”

Tiffany suddenly remembered something and grinned wickedly. “Don’t forget to put on that little present I got for you tonight, show it to Mark.”

“What present?” Arianne asked warily. “It’s not…”

Tiffany nodded. “That’s right. It’s exactly what you’re thinking. I got one for myself too.”

Arianne felt uncomfortable. “You wear it on your own. I don’t want it. You and Jackson might enjoy kinky games, but Mark and I don’t.”

Not only did Tiffany not take the gift away when she left, but she also deliberately told Mark about it. “I bought an outfit for Ari. Remember to ask her to put it on for you tonight.”

Mark was curious. “What kind of outfit needs to be worn at night?”

Tiffany grinned and didn't reply. However, her smile seemed mildly lewd. Arianne had a great urge to kick her to the heavens. "Get lost! Drive safe."

Chapter 1302

Once Tiffany had driven away, Mark turned around and asked Arianne, "What outfit has she bought for you? Why do you have to wear it at night?"

Arianne was too bashful to show her face. "Nothing. Stop asking."

Mark was never one to wait for an answer from someone else's lips. He pulled out the outfit, intending on finding out. When he had a clearer view of the outfit, he couldn't help blushing then stuffing it back into its packaging.

At night, when Aristotle had fallen asleep, Mark pulled out the outfit. "Could you put this on?"

"No way!" Arianne objected bluntly. "Don't tell me you're into this sort of thing too!"

He inched closer towards her. "It wouldn't hurt to try…"

She had ten thousand refutations in her mind but yielded after he wore her down.

She clearly noticed Mark's Adam's apple quiver. He couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Tonight, she was destined for another bumpy ride.

…

Ayashe, Lark Mansion.

Jett was packing up the luggage on the side while Alejandro sat in front of Melanie's dressing table in silence.

Melanie looked very upset. "Grandfather isn't pushing you to go back, why the rush?"

"I've been here for quite a while and I've kept you enough company," Alejandro replied calmly. "Why don't you come with me, then?"

Melanie hesitated. She knew exactly how Alejandro felt about her. She really wasn't comfortable with going to the capital with her pregnant belly. Her home felt much better. She had initially thought that Alejandro could wait for her due date, since he had been staying for so long. Unfortunately, he booked a plane ticket for a flight home tonight before even discussing it with her.

One can never persuade a man into staying when his heart was already set on leaving. She understood this and smiled. "Forget it, you go ahead. I can't keep you here anyway."

Alejandro checked the time on his watch, got up, and said, “Almost time. Jett, have you finished packing? We can go now.”

Jett checked the luggage again. “Mm. We’re ready.”

Melanie walked towards the window and turned her back to him. “I won’t be sending you off.”

Alejandro paused, walked towards her, then reached out and pulled her into his arms from behind. “I will definitely be with you when you deliver the baby. Since you like it here, stay then.”

Melanie didn’t respond. She could never discern the level of sincerity in his gentleness.

The plane landed in the capital at 12AM. They were met at the airport by staff members. Once Jett had put the luggage into the car boot, Alejandro said, “Go home, Jett. I’ll give you two days off. Go home and see Tanya and the baby.”

Chapter 1303

Jett nodded and watched the Smith family car leave, then hailed a cab and left as well.

Previously, when he was all alone, he had nothing much to worry about. However, after the baby was born, he would always long for his kid. It felt good to have a family. His family would always be waiting

for him to come home, no matter what. The image of Tanya holding the baby appeared in his mind before he arrived home. This was a comforting and assuring feeling.

However, he did not inform Tanya of his return this time, worried that she would actually be silly enough to stay up all night waiting for him.

He gently opened the door when he arrived home, went back to his bedroom, and took out a fresh set of clothes. Then, he went into the bathroom. He had to wash the dust off before seeing the baby.

After his shower, he hesitated for a moment, then decided to go into the master bedroom, where Tanya and the baby were sleeping. To this day, he and Tanya still slept in separate rooms. He didn't come home very often anyway. As he gazed at the little one, fast asleep in the darkness, his lips curved into a gentle smile. He held the baby's tiny hand, reluctant to let go.

The lamp at the head of the bed suddenly turned on. Tanya sat up. "Jett, you're home? Why didn't you tell me? Have you eaten? Would you like me to make something for you?"

Jett straightened up and shook his head. "No need, I'm not hungry. I'll ask the housekeeper to do it if I am. You don't have to do anything. How is everything? Do you have enough money?"

"We're fine. We have money," Tanya quickly replied. "You don't have to give me any money next month. I have more than enough to cover the housekeeper's salary too. I don't spend a lot, so we're left with quite a bit every month. You're back… That means Alejandro's back too, right?"

Jett didn't answer and simply nodded. Alejandro's return to the capital was more complicated this time because Don Smith has been admitted into the hospital. Now, it seems that Don Smith had sent

Alejandro away on purpose. However, Alejandro somehow managed to catch wind of the matter in Ayashe. Change was arriving for the Smith household.

Noticing his silence, Tanya carefully asked, “Maybe… You could sleep here tonight? The housekeeper has washed the sheets in your room while you were away, and they haven’t been changed yet. It’s so late, let’s not worry about that now.”

Jett fell momentarily silent and said, “It’s fine, I can change them on my own. You go back to bed.”

Just as he was about to leave, Tanya suddenly got up and wrapped her arms around him. “Jett! Please stay. I… I want us to live together, like a normal husband and wife…”

The implication in her words couldn’t be more obvious. Jett was no celibate nun. He must confess that he had considered this before. However, his rationality got the better of him. “I’m tired. Let’s rest for now. I’ll be home for the next two days. If you need anything for the house, I can shop with you.”

Tanya held onto him, firmly refusing to let go. “Why won’t you touch me? Aren’t we married? Or have you never thought of it before?” Her heart was set on him long ago. Her worry was that he had no feelings for her.

Jett turned around and faced her. “Are you doing this because you feel like you owe me? I may have been taking care of you, but you’ve given me a baby. We don’t owe each other a thing. Aren’t you still in love with Jackson? Doing it with a man you don’t love won’t make you happy. I don’t like using force. You don’t need to feel as if you owe me.”

Tanya shook her head profusely. “It’s not like that… After experiencing all of that, I finally realized that this ordinary life is the real deal. I only did all of that out of jealousy towards Tiffany. I don’t have feelings for Jackson anymore. I regret everything I’ve done, deeply. Am I unbearable to you? Is that why you’ve refused to look at me? I don’t care if we got married simply because of Alejandro; I just want to live the rest of my life with you. I want to know how you feel. If you really don’t have any feelings for me… I won’t mention this again.”

Chapter 1304

At this point, Jett had run out of excuses. However, he was still hesitant. He was worried that Tanya hadn’t considered the prospect carefully. “Maybe… You should give this more thought? I’ll think it over too. Tomorrow morning, we’ll give each other an answer.”

Tanya had carefully considered this long ago. She had been thinking about it for days and nights. “Okay. My decision won’t change. I’ll wait for your answer tomorrow.”

The next morning, Tanya woke up early in the morning to make breakfast. Usually, their housekeeper would take care of it, but since Jett was home, she wanted to do it herself.

The housekeeper, Hannah, held the baby as she watched her work. “You’re so agile, madam,” she commended sincerely. “What does your husband do? He’s never home. I haven’t really seen him in the house since the baby was born. This little one may not be close to him.”

Tanya wasn’t sure of how to explain Jett’s job and slyly explained, “Him? His job requires him to go out of the country all the time. It’s all to support the family, so I can understand. The baby will be more attached to him later.”

Hannah’s eyes filled with admiration. “You’re such a sensible and steadfast wife; it’s no wonder he can move around without worry. Not a lot of men would have this sense of responsibility at his age. I’ve met

so many lazy men who rely on women all their lives or still live with their parents. You've picked a good one, ma'am."

Tanya loved hearing praises about Jett. Her heart would feel so full whenever she heard these compliments. The only problem was that she and Jett were not living like normal husbands and wives.

Jett woke up at almost 9AM, as he had arrived home late last night. Tanya prepared a new toothbrush for him. "Time to wash up and come to the dining table. I've made breakfast."

Jett saw the vigor on her face and was suddenly reminded of their agreement last night. "I've… considered it."

Although she had been waiting for his answer, Tanya couldn't help feeling nervous when he was ready to give his answer. "You should wash up first. We'll talk during breakfast! I'm going to feed the baby."

He nodded and went into the washroom with his toothbrush.

Tanya was still breastfeeding in the bedroom when he finished washing up. He decided against sitting down for breakfast and walked into the bedroom instead.

Tanya instinctively shielded her chest when she heard the door open. She blushed when she saw that it was Jett. "Go and have breakfast, I'll be done soon…"

Jett did not try to avoid her out of awkwardness. He strode forward, his gaze fixed on the suckling baby. “Is breastfeeding hard?”

Tanya was taken aback then softly replied, “It’s not hard at all. It’s for the baby.”

He suddenly lifted his gaze towards her. “I’ve thought it through. I agree, things are pretty good between us now. Let’s stay together and give us a try. If you don’t mind, that is. If you wake up one day and realize that you’re still in love with Jackson, you’re free to go. You can leave the baby with me if it’s too much of a burden. I’m just worried that you’ve made this decision on impulse. I guess you could say that this is a way out. If that does happen, you wouldn’t have anything to worry about.”

Chapter 1305

Tanya shook her head. “I’ve made a lot of wrong decisions. I did not give myself any leeway this time. I’ve given this a lot of thought. Thank you, Jett. Since you’ve given me a way out, I’ll give you one too. If you’re ever fed up one day, I’ll leave. I won’t take anything from you.”

The pair had pretty much given their answers. Tanya’s worries were finally put to rest.

Meanwhile, at Smith Manor.

Alejandro sat silently in Don Smith’s room. Don Smith's picture of Alejandro was placed by his arm. It depicted the real Alejandro, not him, the imitation.

He noticed that Don Smith would gaze longingly at the picture whenever he was free. He would stay very still for more than half a day.

Don Smith was now in the hospital, one in the capital. His illness had become too severe for him to be moved back to Ayashe for treatment. Hence, he had to summon their personal doctor in Ayashe. He knew that this was his chance to gain full control of the Smith family. If Don Smith got through this, he would have to endure a few extra years. However, if Don Smith died, no one could stand in his way…

He was perfectly capable of making a decision, but he hesitated for some reason.

That old bigot did not share any DNA with him. They did not actually get along. He couldn't understand why he was hesitating. Was this his conscience?

The thought of that felt like a joke to him. However, the smile on his face felt horrifying.

The bodyguard next to him gasped. "Sir… Would you like to visit Don Smith at the hospital?" He reminded him in a trembling voice. "The car is ready."

Alejandro put the picture on the bed, got up, and said, "Let's go."

He brought a lot of nutritional products along the way to the hospital. He told himself that this was simply for show.

Don Smith's personal doctor stopped him when he arrived at his bed. "Sir, Don Smith's condition is severe. It's best to avoid any visits. Please leave."

He looked around the tightly secure hospital ward and curled his lips into a sneer. “This isn’t the ICU. Why can’t I see him? Are you afraid that the old man might stop breathing with me around? Or did he tell you to do this?”

The personal doctor didn’t dare say too much but simply barred his entry at the door.

Alejandro did not insist on barging in. He stuffed the nutritional products into the personal doctor’s arms. “Then give these to him for me. Tell him that I was here.”

The doctor gulped out of fear and nervousness. “O-okay. I’ll let him know when he’s awake.”

Alejandro scoffed, turned around, and left.

If he really wanted to go in, no one would have been able to stop him. He just wanted to see if the old man could survive on his own. It would be best if he died now; at least he wouldn’t need to waste his effort.

Chapter 1306

The private doctor breathed a sigh of relief once he left and went into the ward.

Don Smith was awake. It seemed that he had heard every word of the conversation between Alejandro and the doctor.

The doctor filled Don's ward cabinet with the food Alejandro brought, explaining, "The food is safe. None of it contains allergens or other food particles that are off-limits. You know, he's not as terrifying as you made him out to be, Sir. He even left us alone very quickly."

Don stared at the heap of food pensively. "Spoken like someone who doesn't know him, Doctor. He's only here to see how much longer I have. Once he detects a possibility that my malady's turning for the better, he'll devise something else to bring forth my death; I guarantee you that. I want you to be honest with me, Doctor—how much longer?"

The doctor sighed. "Even to the best of my abilities, I'm afraid three more months might be the maximum, Sir. I cannot predict anything after three months," he answered candidly. "Such a short amount of time left… Surely, he has enough patience and mercy to accommodate that, right?"

"Oh, one could only hope," Don remarked, chuckling. "Discharge me from the hospital the moment my sickness seems a mite relieved. There's no reason to spend my last days bound to a hospital bed, right? I would miss the sun. I want to go back to Ayashe—I want to return to the place where I started, you see.

"And if… he has any conscience left in him, he should keep me company until the end of my road. Oh, how I wish I'd be able to live long enough to see the birth of my great-grandchild…"

Soon, news of Don's return to Ayashe came to Jackson and Mark. It illustrated how fickle a person's life starts to become after they passed a certain age; when one's old, one could never tell when it would be their last day.

Alejandro was with Don on the latter's return trip. After knowing for certain that he had only three months left to live, Don's gasconade was renewed. No matter how impatient Alejandro was, Don was sure that the young rogue could tolerate three months' time.

Jackson, for his part, had the nagging feeling that Alejandro's true identity would not remain a secret for long. The moment that the old Smith patriarch died would mark the moment when all of Alejandro's hell broke loose.

Wary and disconcerted, Jackson had taken up the task to follow Tiffany's every move—a decision that both pleasantly surprised and confounded Tiffany.

"What's with you following me around? In the past, if you ever had a minute to spare, you would waste it on working overtime, but now? Gee, a girl can't even go shopping with her besties without you stalking around like the goddamned secret service!"

Jackson wanted to explain himself, but he had no way to do that. He counted himself lucky that his wife was always so neglectful of the finer details in life that she hardly suspected anything from him.

Back in the Smiths' estate, Alejandro had become relatively guileless. He stopped butting heads with his old man and took up the duty to feed Don his medicines.

As the old man's granddaughter-in-law, Melanie was obliged to stay in the Smith estate to care for Don. News of Don's projected lifespan, however, worried her so much that she turned gaunt. Melanie's gut instincts told her that Alejandro only married her under Don's pressure, so if he died, Alejandro might void the marriage.

Just the thought that this could happen despite the fact that she was still pregnant with their child took away Melanie's appetite.

Once Alejandro was out of Don's room, she went inside. "Hello, Grandpa. I… have something I would like to talk to you about."

A genuine, tender smile shadowed Don's lips as he beckoned her to take a seat. "I'm all ears, Melanie. If you don't speak it now, you might never have the chance."

The implication of his death colored Melanie's eyes red. "Grandpa, do you… Do you truly only have three months left to live? Why must you go so soon?"

Don was remarkably at peace with his forthcoming end. "Why? Well, that's what we humans do, don't we? We're marked for death the moment we're born—no one fools the Reaper. My time's coming, Melanie, as it should be. Don't be sad over what is inevitable; not when grief could be harmful to the precious one inside you."

Melanie held rolling tears back from spilling and let out the real root of her anguish, "I know all about it, Grandpa. Alejandro doesn't want me—all he cares about is Tiffany Lane. When you're gone, he will… he will immediately divorce me. The Smiths don't need the Larks to prop up their standing and wealth, which makes me a hindrance to him… A-And it's in his nature to remove everything getting in his way to do what he wants. I know what I am, so I'm fine… But the child. I… I feel so bad for it."

Don sighed. "Oh, you poor thing. Don't you worry, alright? Grandpa would never allow such a thing to happen to you. Even if I'm physically gone, I'll make sure he cannot go rogue. I've made plans to bring out the best-case scenario, Melanie, so don't worry. He wouldn't dare to divorce you. My only regret is that I can't watch your baby come to life with my own eyes. Oh, how I wish I could live till then. Anything to give me a chance to see him once…"

Chapter 1307

Melanie spotted the confident sparks in Don's eyes and understood that the old patriarch had his contingency plan mapped out. It reassured her a little.

Still, she could not bear to see the old man die with regrets. And so, a bold and almost-crazy idea took form in her mind. "Grandpa, I was thinking… What if I undergo surgery to deliver the baby earlier than expected? I could do it after two more months. That way, you could see it before you go," she suggested. "I know it's still a bit too early relative to the expected time of delivery, but I doubt it'll impart too severe an effect on the baby."

Don's expression turned austere. "That's a horrible idea, Melanie! You must not be reckless just because you pity me. You can't force a baby to come out early like that; a mother's womb is the best place for it to grow. Please, don't entertain these crazy ideas because of some words an old geezer said… And really, Melanie, this is your weakness: you're too altruistic! Don't you know that men are always interested in wild, wayward women over self-sacrificing altruists?"

"And yet, everyone knows that if a man loves a woman, she could be anything—even a beggar—and he would still see a queen in her. But if a man has no love for her, then it wouldn't matter how hard she works and presents herself—everything she does is wrong in the man's eyes," Melanie replied with a self-deprecative laugh. "He doesn't love me, Grandpa. I have no leeway to be anything but 'altruistic.' It's precisely because of this 'weakness' that has made it easier for him to tolerate my existence so far."

Don gave another heavy sigh, and suddenly, all of the vim he had erstwhile accumulated seemed to have left him. Quickly, Melanie helped him lay down while cooing, "Take a rest, Grandpa. I won't disturb you anymore."

…

It was midnight when Jackson suddenly paid the Tremont Estate a visit.

Mark's sudden rise from their bed roused Arianne from her sleep. "Hey, where are you going?"

"Jackson's here," he answered, "He needs my help. Go back to sleep."

Arianne's sleep receded. "It's the middle of the night. The only reason he would be here at this hour is that there's an emergency. I'll go downstairs with you to see what's going on. Did he come alone? Tiffie's not with him?"

Mark nodded, and the two descended the stairs. There, a very anxious Jackson was already waiting in the living room. He was ashen with worry.

Arianne could almost guess what was haunting him. After pouring two cups of water for the men, she sat down next to Mark and asked, "Jackson, why run over here in the middle of the night?"

Jackson looked positively forlorn. "I can't even sleep at night anymore! Every time I close my eyes, all I see is that douchebag Alejandro and his douchebaggy face, Christ! You guys, don't tell Tiffie a single word of my visit, okay? I'm here this late at night because I had to wait till she went to sleep.

"I've hired someone to do some digging," he continued, "And apparently, the old Smith patriarch only has three months left before he kicks the bucket. Time's passing, man. Alejandro's gonna inherit the Smith family business very-goddamned-soon. Then, when he returns to the Capital, the first sh*t he's

gonna do is tell Tiffany that he's—surprise, surprise!—Ethan-f**king-Connor all along! Aaargh! Just imagining how this sh*t's gonna go down is driving me nuts!"

Arianne pulled back her cuffs. "God, does he remember he was the one who dragged Tiffie into hell years ago? If he really wants to atone for his sins, the only way to do that is to commit to his role as Alejandro Smith and never cross paths with Tiffie again," she commented. "But no, we're dealing with an obsessive psycho here. For his need to clear away that feeling of guilt, he doesn't care if he's making things worse for literally everyone else. The shortest word to describe him would be plain-old 'selfish.'"

Mark rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Well, why don't you confess the truth to Tiffany before he does—as a sort of mental inoculation? That way, when Alejandro confronts her with his secret, she wouldn't be too terribly thrown off or get triggered," he suggested. "Tiffany's well-known for being insensitive, so who's to say she can't accept the truth forever just because she didn't take it very well that one time? Maybe all she needs to buffer the shock is enough time."

Arianne was inclined to agree with Mark. It used to be better for her best friend to remain blissfully ignorant, but that was only because no one wanted a pregnant woman to be shocked. Now, the only caveat was gone, and the best way to solve this was to reveal the truth to Tiffany as soon as possible.

Chapter 1308

Jackson, as it turned out, agreed with Mark as well, though not without trepidation. "But who's going to be the harbinger of bad news, huh? Because I'm not doing it! How about you, Arianne? You're her bestest-friend-in-the-whole-wide-world or whatever girls called each other, right? You also know her temperament better than I do."

Arianne was quick to back away from the responsibility.

“Uh, but you’re married to her, right? Aren’t you more suited to this important job? Besides, you’re the one who knows how to soothe women in all kinds of mental states. Look, I’ve helped sweep the truth under the rug for so long, she’s probably going to rip me to shreds when I tell her about it, okay? So, yeah! You go and do what you do best! Just don’t pick me for the job, okay?”

Mark watched the two of them pass around the role and spoke up, “The two of you, enough! We could do it together, alright? So no one gets to be free.”

Jackson stared at him in skepticism. “By ‘together,’ you included yourself too, right?”

Frankly, Mark was a bit unwilling—but he was a man loyal to his “bro,” so he had to accept it. “Fine, fine. That includes me. Happy? Good. Now that we have a plan, we should all go back to sleep. Bring her to my place this Saturday. We’ll tell her it’s for a gathering.”

Jackson nodded worriedly. “Mm, kay. I’ll be, uh, going home now before she realizes that I’ve disappeared. Pinky-promise, y’all—we’re facing the Tiffany Hurricane together with no backsies! I don’t want nobody suddenly pulling out of this pact and leaving me behind as the sacrifice! …God, I’m scared sh*tless! Seriously, when this is over, I’ll happily repay y’all by scrubbing your floor and toilets!”

Arianne laughed in amusement. “Who said anything about scrubbing toilets? God, look at how terrified you are! Alright, let’s settle this once and for all on Saturday. You should stop tormenting yourself over it and go to sleep now. I mean, just look at the rings around your eyes! You can compete with a panda looking like that!”

Jackson had thought that his midnight trip was secretive enough. Yet, almost immediately after he stepped through the main door of White Water Bay Villa, he was almost shocked to death by Tiffany, who had disheveled hair and had donned a white sleeping gown with spaghetti straps.

She stood at the top of the stairs, her eyes piercing him. “Where. Have. You. Been? Look at how suited up you are. Wow, you even drove!”

Jackson’s heart skipped a beat out of guilt. “Er, I went out for… A midnight snack! I was too lazy to make my own, but I was so hungry that I couldn’t sleep. And when I saw how deeply you were sleeping, I didn’t want to wake you up!”

Tiffany strode toward him with skepticism in her eyes and ran her nose all over him, sniffing.

“You lie! I smell nothing! What kind of food leaves no smell? You’re lying to me!” she announced.

Jackson was at the verge of breaking down. “N-No! I mean, I drove around the city, but I didn’t find any food I liked, so I went home, and boy, I’m still so hungry! Er, I just remembered that we still have some food left over in the kitchen, so I’m gonna head there and make something to eat. You want some?”

Tiffany started to think he was hiding something.

“Oh no you don’t, darling. I’m buying this—because it’s ridiculous! It’s completely against your usual shrewdness and goal-oriented character! You would never go through the trouble of driving around at midnight just to come home empty-handed.”

Jackson gave a mirthless chuckle. “Wow, since when have you become Sherlock, huh? I gotta admit, that’s some good deduction there—but this really did happen. I mean, what other explanation do you have? None, right? That’s right! So you have no other options to believe but mine,” he countered.

“Anyway, that’s enough. I’m going to make something to eat. If you want some, you can wait over there. If you don’t, go back to sleep.”

It was then that Tiffany—in the speed of lightning—grabbed Jackson by his crotch with a dangerously sweet smile. “Oh, I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t do anything unforgivably evil behind my back, that’s all. Can’t you just relieve me of my dread right now, mmm? How about this: I’ll do the cooking later. You would be way too spent by then, anyway.”

Jackson’s legs trembled. He never seemed to have enough of sex before marriage, but now, she was the one who kept shooting him the look that said she was never getting enough. It was a look that made his heart race in panic.

He wondered if he had played a little too hard before marriage. Why else would his flesh feel weak even when the heart was willing?

Chapter 1309

Tiffany licked the corner of her lip in satisfaction after their tango was over. “Ooh, that was not half-bad! Now, stay right there like a good boy while momma makes you something yummy for your tummy like she said she would. You’re usually the one who serves me; now, I should return the favor to my sweetie.”

Jackson laid sprawling on the couch, inert. He was definitely spent.

He wished his “momma” would remain this carefree and blithe forever. He wished she had never known that nightmare personified known as Ethan Connor.

It was Saturday night. Jackson and Tiffany, as promised, went to the Tremont Estate for the “gathering.” For maximum merriment, Tiffany decided not to bring her newborn son with them.

Knowing that one of Tiffany’s favorite foods was hotpot, Arianne had prepared all of the usual materials and dishes beforehand. Tiffany was so eager to start that she leaped onto her seat and heated the pot, exclaiming, “You know me best, Ari! Just look at how fresh and juicy this beef roll is—now that’s premium meat right there.”

Arianne shot Jackson a loaded look, but it seemed to have frightened him instead. “Er, let us eat now. Why is everyone just standing there staring?” he said weakly.

Arianne rolled her eyes, annoyed. Just as she expected, Jackson’s resolve turned to jelly when the time called for it. Still, Arianne herself was not going to start the conversation, and she avoided being the first to talk by focusing on cooking a slice of beef for Smore.

When everyone had settled into their feasting mood, Mark finally addressed the elephant in the room. “Ethan Connor is still alive.”

Tiffany froze. “W-What? Why bring this up? Y’all don’t really think that I still care about his whereabouts, right?”

With someone else doing the hardest part, Jackson found the courage to continue. “Honey, Alejandro Smith… is Ethan Connor. The real Alejandro died in South Africa—and the old patriarch of the family himself knew about that. However, the Smiths had no one else as their heir, so this bootlegged Alejandro became all they have. Don Smith had no choice but to concede Ethan as the ‘real’ Alejandro.”

Tiffany put down her fork and leveled the rest of the party with a deadpan expression. “Excuse me, but are you guys trying to be funny? What the heck, how could Alejandro even be Etha—”

She did not finish her sentence before her suspicion caught up to her.

Tanya had accused Jackson of being her child's father, but it turned out that the birth father was Jett, who was Alejandro’s right-hand man. Now that Tiffany really thought about it, the connection became so painfully evident that even the most obtuse schmuck could see it.

What about how Alejandro saved her from a premeditated accident? How else could he have appeared at the right time and place if it was not because he caught wind of a plot to harm Tiffany? No one would be so willing to put their life on the line for a hi-bye friend.

Nevertheless, the revelation that Alejandro had always been Ethan was bone-chilling. The devil who personally delivered her to hell had now become so obsessed with her that he would do anything for her. How was that for abject terror?

Tiffany’s body began to quake. “All of you… You knew this all along, didn’t you? I was the only moron who knew nothing. Sure, I’ve wondered, now and then, why Alejandro tried so hard to ingratiate himself to me, but I never found the answer. Now? It’s all coming together. This is the most preposterous and yet undeniable sh*t of the century! All of you decided to hide it from me, right? So why burst my bubble now? Why tell me?”

“We only hid this from you because you were pregnant,” Jackson explained. “None of us dared tell you this legitimately-insane twist. But now, the only guy who could tame and control Alejandro—the old patriarch, Don Smith—is on his deathbed. We thought that if there was ever a chance to tell you the truth, this was it. Alejandro’s in Ayashe at the moment, but he’ll no doubt return to the Capital once the

old man has gone to see his Maker. He has been hiding under the guise for so, so long. None of us thinks that he's gonna keep up the charade any longer.

"Don't you get it, Tiffie? The reason why Ethan came back wearing the skin of the dead Alejandro… is you."

Chapter 1310

"Stop it!" Tiffany interjected furiously. "Him, doing this for me? Who frickin' wants this nightmare around anymore? I don't because he wrecked my life enough! Hell, had it not been for that piece of sh*t, my dad might still be alive now, and my family would not have suffered so much hardship, and I—! I wouldn't have gone through so much pain. Isn't doing just one of all of these enough? Why can't that disgusting piece of sh*t just let—me—live? I bared my heart to him—I loved him for three frickin' years, and what did that douchebag do to repay me? He used and abused me! And now the same jacka** comes back, uninvited, with the delusion that he 'feels sorry' and wants to atone for his sins? F**k him!"

The more she thought back on how Alejandro had methodically tried to ingratiate on her since they first met, the more terrifying everything seemed. God, how she dreamed to never, ever cross path with anything related to Ethan for the rest of her life!

Her emotional outburst stunned Smore into a stupor, so Arianne quickly pulled the boy into her embrace, soothing him.

"Tiffie, please, calm down a bit. Look, you're the only one in this entire world who knows Ethan the best, which is why he has come back for you—to make peace with the haunting guilt in his mind for maltreating you. Right now, he's an obsessed sicko forever doomed to the hell the moment he missed you when you were at your best. The thing that keeps him going is his perverted desire to be back in your good grace," she pointed out. "But ultimately, you're the master of your relationships. You have Jackson and a lovely son now. Whatever Ethan does is between himself and God. We're only telling you this because we want you to be mentally prepped for what is to come, so that when he tells you this himself, you won't get knocked out in consternation."

Tiffany was so furious that she laughed scornfully. “Okay, I get it. But man, I’ll have to be seriously coked out of my senses to accept whatever pitiful ‘atonement’ that piece of sh*t could offer! The sh*ts he done to me? All those pains he had given me? He can never atone for even a single one of them!” she cried. “He thinks he loves me, but he doesn’t. He loves no one but his disgusting frickin’ self. How else could he allow himself to hurt me over and over and over again? How else can he justify his dirty attempts to break me and Jackson apart, huh? All that d*ck wants is to make himself feel better. He can then wrap himself up with this cute little fantasy about how even the worst kinds of sins can be ‘atoned’ for. Ha, joke’s on him!

“I bet y’all thought telling me this would kill me, didn’t you? Ha, hell no! I’m very riled up, but ultimately? I don’t give a f**k if he’s Alejandro or Ethan. I’ll never let that monster do whatever he wants to me again. Never again!”

Mark slid a plate full of beef rolls to-and-fro before Tiffany. “Are you gonna have that?”

The woman shot him an exasperated eye roll. “Excuse you, but doesn’t your big brain tell you that your action isn’t exactly fitting to the atmosphere right now?”

Mark did not mince his words and called her out. “What do you mean? You always stuff your face with food whenever you’re upset. Isn’t now the precise appetite boost for you to stuff this down?”

Tiffany admitted nothing, but her hand betrayed her by immediately picking the rolls with a clamp and cooking them with the hotpot’s boiling broth.

The broth continued to bubble, but the dread in everyone's heart gradually receded until all that was left was relieved peace. It became clear that in their overt circumspection, Tiffany's friends had severely underestimated Tiffany's mental fortitude. The woman was not as dumb as they had thought—she could be perceptive to the finer details and clues, too. This was why when Alejandro's real identity was revealed, all Tiffany's reaction amounted to was an emotional outburst.

Tiffany dumped the well-cooked beef rolls into Jackson's plate and said sweetly, "Now, I know why you hated it so much whenever I said a word to Alejandro. I'll definitely listen to you more from now on, hon."

Jackson licked the corner of his lip. "You better keep this promise for the sake of my mental health. Oh, and by the way, I'm starting to feel a little full. You can have them; oh, don't add any more to my plate."

Tiffany shot him a lethal glare.

Jackson immediately recanted his statement by burying his head into the food she prepared for him. Just as he thought, a woman's words needed to be taken with a grain of salt! She could be flashing you the sweetest grin in one second and suddenly turn into an ogre in the next.

Still, Jackson was grateful that he could finally move on from this mental burden. From now on, he told himself, no matter what happened, they could genuinely confront it together.

Of course, despite Tiffany's boast, she was still a little affected by the reveal. Her spirits were low throughout their journey home.

Jackson had one hand on the wheel while the other ruffled her hair reassuringly. “Hey now, I’m with you. Have no fear.”

She slapped his hand away snippily. “Me, in fear? Ha! Oh, by the way, I need to go to my mom’s place real quick right now.”