Ruling 1721

Chapter 1721

Tiffany pretended to have a relaxed expression on her face. “How could it be her? You’re overthinking things. I just slipped and fell accidentally. It’s my fault for not listening to you. I just had to wear that dress with the long hem but couldn’t wear heels that were too high, so I ended up tripping… But you tell me the truth, is our child really fine? There was quite a distance from the cruise to the coast, so a long time must have passed. Our child must’ve been in danger, wasn’t she?”

How could Jackson possibly tell the truth? He reached out his hand to tidy up Tiffany’s hair. “How could she be? We asked the cruise to turn back to land first thing. The ambulance arrived right on time as well, so you and our child are just fine. The baby just had to be placed under observation in an incubator due to premature birth, so stop thinking too much and scaring yourself. Just as you wished, it’s a girl. You must be happy, aren’t you? I heard from the doctor that she’s very cute…”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “A baby born prematurely will look like a toad, so she’s definitely going to be ugly. How could she be cute? Oh, right, you haven’t told my mom or your parents about this incident, have you? Better not tell them and scare them. They’re very old already; we wouldn’t want to give them a shock.”

Jackson did not want for Tiffany to be unhappy, so he could only force himself to smile. “All right, I won’t. I won’t tell them. However… I don’t think I can hide it from my mom. She needs to see you every day to be at ease, since you’re pregnant. Now that she can’t find you, do you think she’ll be able to be at ease? Don’t worry, I’ll work it out. I’ll stay here and accompany you, so you should get a good rest.”

When Tiffany fell asleep, Jackson was no longer able to smile. He still had not regained his senses from the shock. When he saw Tiffany’s bloody state, the energy from his whole body had been sucked dry from him and his mind had gone completely blank. ‘I never ever want to feel that kind of despair again. It’s too painful…’

At 4 AM, Jackson stood outside the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and looked through the transparent window at his daughter. ‘She looks much smaller than the other babies and her entire body is completely red. The other babies are moving their limbs around and crying, but she’s just so quiet there, not even moving an inch.’

At that moment, no matter how mentally strong Jackson was, his eyes turned red. ‘If Tiffany sees our child in her current state, she’s probably going to break down and cry.’

The next day, Arianne woke up early and prepared to go to the hospital to visit Tiffany. Arianne had had a nightmare the entire night and was unable to get much sleep.

Smore asked with a confused expression. “Mommy, how’s Aunt Tiffie? I saw her bein’ taken away by a car with a lotta blood. Did something happen to baby sis?”

Arianne almost cried. “Nothing… Aunt Tiffie will be fine, and baby sis will be fine as well. Baby sis has had a much harder time to come into this world than you did, so you must take good care of her in the future, understand?”

Smore nodded his head with a serious expression on his face. “Don’t worry, Mommy, I’ll take good care of baby sis. When can I meet her? I want to get married with her and have little babies, then go to school together!”

Arianen instantly laughed. “You’ve got the order wrong. You need to meet baby sis first, go to school together, then get married and have little babies when you’re old enough, understand? Baby sis is still in the hospital at the moment because she’s still too little. She’ll have to grow up a little more before she can meet you and play with you. Why don’t we have breakfast first? You can go play with Granny after breakfast. Mommy and Daddy have to go to the hospital to visit Aunt Tiffie.”

Smore pouted his lips. “Can’t I go too? I wanna see Aunt Tiffie as well.”

Mark was just going down the stairs when he heard what Smore said. In response, he said, “All right, let’s go together. However, you cannot be naughty. You must be a good boy, understand?”

Arianne sighed. “Mark, you… Have you contacted Alejandro? Yesterday’s incident… He and Melanie didn’t seem too happy. Tiffany was with Melanie when the incident happened…”

Mark casually said, “When have I ever interfered with their matters? You think Tiffany’s fall had something to do with Melanie?”

Chapter 1722

Arianne combed through her thoughts for a second before concluding, “I don’t think Melanie did it. That wasn’t the first time Melanie and Tiffie were ever alone together—if harming Tiffie had always been her goal, then she would have done it long before our wedding day, right? Let’s just… ask Tiffie what really went down later when we see her.”

Smore did not understand his parents’ conversation. He just wanted to visit the hospital as soon as possible, so he started wolfing and slurping down his food. Unthinkably, instead of chiding the child for his bad dinner behavior, Mark merely laughed.

Arianne rolled her eyes. “If I ate like that in the past, you’d smite me in the head with a ladle or something! I call this the TDS—Tremont Double Standard!”

Mark laughed even harder. “I did not hit you; that’s not true, that’s bunkum! I’ve never raised you like my daughter—I certainly never parented you like you were my daughter. The only difference between us is that I’m ten years your senior. I’ve never babied anyone before Smore was born, either.”

Arianne was tongue-tied. That liar—he had always been super disciplinarian to her!

The Tremonts soon arrived at the hospital. Arianne put all of the nutritious supplements on a table nearby and studied Tiffany, who was already wide awake and conscious. She was brimming with brio, though her sallow, pale face and pallid lips—a result of losing too much blood yesterday—did not reflect it.

Smore rushed toward her and called out, “Aunt Tiffie!”

Tiffany beamed brightly and caressed the boy’s face. “Hi, sweetie!”

Mark’s attention was, naturally, on his own best friend first. Watching Tiffany for the entire night in the hospital, Jackson looked almost no better than her. Mark patted his shoulders and suggested, “You ought to get some rest yourself. She isn’t going to leave here in this state anytime soon. If watching her in this ward until she’s discharged is your plan, you’ll probably get sick really soon.”

Jackson rubbed his eyes. “Oh, I’m gonna be fine, man. My mom’s coming over later; I’ll leave when she’s here. Pretty sure she’s already on her way by now.”

Mark leered at Tiffany for a second before murmuring, “You and I, outside for a bit.”

Tiffany glanced at the two of them before turning back to Arianne. “Suspicious much? Why do they need to talk someplace we can’t hear?”

Arianne sat on a chair by her bedside. “They aren’t having secret backdoor meetings, Tiffie; it’s me who wants to have a private talk with you. Do you remember what happened back then? How did you fall?”

Tiffany hesitated. She promised Melanie that she would keep her lips sealed, right? If she broke that rule for Arianne, it was only a matter of time before someone else knew, too… right? And when they happened, Tiffany would not be able to keep the secret under wraps anymore, even if she tried.

Arianne was no fool. She could guess that there was more story to her accident from her friend’s behavior. “It’s okay to tell me the truth, Tiffie. Unless you somehow don’t trust me anymore...?”

It worked. Tiffany finally loosened her mouth. “It was Melanie’s brother—he pushed me. I don’t know how the hell that scumbag heard it; he knows Alejandro and I have a history. He thinks that I’m the reason why Melanie hasn’t gotten her second child yet or why she hasn’t tried to bear Alejandro a son. They’re worried he’s gonna dump her using that as an excuse and foil the Larks’ interests or something. The whole thing’s frickin’ stupid—like, Melanie and Alejandro are pretty happy with one another, guys! I can’t believe this random mofo almost killed me because of this lame-ass insignificant nothingburger!

“Here’s the thing: she didn’t know that her family thinks this way. At that time, it was just Melanie and me meeting her brother—so I’m guessing that idea was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Honestly, if Melanie had followed what her brother threatened her to do and not cried out for help, or if she had waited to scream only when I was seriously done for… both my baby and I would have been done for. Melanie isn’t involved in any of this; she’s innocent. She saved me even though she knew me surviving that death fall would mean the Larks might get incriminated. This is why I’ve promised her I’d keep this a secret, Ari. And I’m telling you to do the same—don’t tell Jackson, I mean it. That boar’s only gonna charge straight at the Larks without giving a damn to anything else!”

Chapter 1723

Arianne's heart sank. The only reason why Tiffany could keep this promise she made with Melanie was because she thought her baby was okay. Should she know that the baby had not left critical condition, Tiffany's charitable attitude might crack.

"Okay, I got you. I'm not gonna tell anyone about it. God, Melanie's also a victim, isn't she? I mean, she and Alejandro's relationship might be… affable, but it doesn't mean he loves her. And Melanie knows it," Arianne remarked. "And her brother has doomed her with this. Alejandro's wary nature will compel him to treat this incident as anything but an 'accident'. I've got a bad feeling that the relationship between Melanie and Alejandro is unraveling."

The injustice Melanie suffered aggrieved Tiffany. "That sh*tbag can't even see how good a wife she has been to him! Goddammit, does he even have half a brain?! But as long as I keep this a secret, their relationship will be safe, right? I mean, how is he supposed to blame it on Melanie without any evidence backing him up, hmm? God, he likes to fancy himself doing all these bullsh*ts for my sake—even though whatever was between us crashed, burned, and died a gazillion years ago!" she fumed. "Back when I was still a dumbass, all head-over-heels for him, he took my family and fortune away. It's only now when he finally realized what a piece of crap he had been… But, honey, it's too late; you missed me already and I'm not coming back! If he's gonna miss Melanie by blaming her for something she didn't frickin' do this time, then he frickin' deserves to be alone and wifeless for the rest of his miserable life!"

Arianne reached out to tuck the corner of her hospital sheet in. "Chill, Tiffie. You're still bedridden, remember? Are you sure other people's woes should be your priority right now?" she teased. "Anyway, we'll be leaving as soon as Jackson's parents are here. You'll focus on getting yourself back up and healthy again, okay? You know what they say: whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. This is God testing you, I bet. Besides, you got a daughter just like you've always wanted, Tiffie! Isn't this the best news ever?"

Mentioning her daughter brought a smile to Tiffany's face. "Ooh, now that's what I'm talkin'! Girl, I'm frickin' ecstatic! I just wish I could see how she looks…"

Right on cue, Summer and Atticus burst into the ward with the urgency of a whirlwind. Atticus, terse and reticent as ever, expressed his anxieties through his gaze, while Summer instantly launched into a teary moan, unrestrained.

“My little angel! How could you ask Jackson to be the messenger for something as big as this?! I almost swooned when I heard about it over the phone!” she howled.

Tiffany hee-hawed. “Oh, but I’m totally fine! Y’all don’t have to worry about me—see, I’m perfectly not-in-mortal-danger, right? Anyway, Jackson had been watching me for the entire night, so we should let him go home and rest. Just leave my care to a nurse or hire an attendant for a few days, ok? I’m not so delicate, you know.”

Summer caressed Tiffany’s cheeks in pity and love. “Oh, miss me with that malarkey! No way I’ll feel safe having any random stranger taking care of you, sweetie. Natch, I’m the one to take up this momentous task! And who told you that you’re not delicate, huh? Don’t say that. I wish I were the one who got hurt instead of you. Seriously, God, what did this poor child do to suffer like this? Your mom trusted this family with your welfare and happiness, and we failed,” she said. “Seriously, wasn’t Jackson with you that day? How the hell did he let you fall like that, goddammit? Urgh, my pounding heart just won’t still even now—I’m still shocked!”

Arianne quietly retreated to a corner. She wished Shelly could have at least half of Summer’s love for Tiffany in her. Just half of it, and none of the crazy chaos and imbroglios they had suffered for months would have befallen them. Frankly, she was jealous of how bonhomie Summer and Tiffany were together.

Not that she was any less blessed; at the very least, Mark more than covered the gap with his love and care.

……

Melanie sat alone in a completely darkened room in the Smith Estate, staring at the curtains covering the room's windows with eyes unseeing, as though she had turned into a statue.

Alejandro had not returned home at all last night, just as she had not left her seat here since last night.

"Mommy? Mommy!"

Melissa's voice was the piper's tune that dragged her back to reality. She moved her hands, stiff from inaction, and lifted the little girl up before placing her onto her lap.

"Millie, l-l-listen. If… If, one day, Mommy can't stay with Daddy anymore, please don't… Please don't blame Mommy for not taking you with her, okay? Your Daddy… He won't let me bring you with me; he'll never allow that. B-But he loves you; he will treat you very, very kindly… It's M-M-Mommy who's done wrong, all right?"

Unsurprisingly, Melissa did not understand a word Melanie said. Instead, she raised her head and considered her mother's face, her eyes tracking Melanie's tears that rolled off her cheeks. She reached her little hands out in an attempt to wipe them away, mewling, "Don't cry, Mommy."

The innocent voice of the child pounded on the battered wall Melanie had desperately constructed around her heart, and it crashed, tumbling completely. A deluge of tears escaped from Melanie into a

pained sob, as she wrapped her arms around her poor daughter for what little comfort she could salvage.

It was then that they heard the sound of a car screeching through the gate.

Alejandro had returned.

Melanie sat up, wiping away her tears haphazardly. She placed Millie down and rose, pulling the curtains away. Blinding, uncaring sunlight poured into the room, and she let it dispel the gloom that had settled inside as much as it could.

Chapter 1724

Footsteps neared the door. Melissa was quick to recognize it as her father's and sprung toward its direction in childlike blithe. Her tiny stature made it impossible for the kid to reach the doorknob, though it did not matter, as a second later, the door cracked open softly from outside, as though whoever was coming in predicted the little girl's presence to stand behind it.

Seeing little Millie, Alejandro bent down and carried the girl in his arms. "C'mon, standing behind the door again? You know someone might hit you with the door one day, and that's not very nice, is it? Next time, stand farther away from the door, okay?" he admonished kindly. "Anyway, go play with your toys downstairs. Daddy needs to talk to Mommy for a bit, okay?"

Melissa mimicked Melanie sniffling. "Daddy, Mommy cry, sniff-sniff, argh-argh…"

Alejandro shot Melanie a complicated, indecipherable look and handed Melissa to her nanny.

Alejandro closed the door and faced Melanie, who stood before the window twiddling her thumb in anxiety. “What is it?”

He marched toward her and demanded stormily, “Where is your phone? Someone else was there when Tiffany fell off the stairs, wasn’t there? My men found a f**king half-burnt cigarette on the floor where it happened, woman, and I know for sh*t that you don’t smoke. So who. Was. It?!”

Melanie dared not look at him in the eyes. Her phone had been snatched away from Nikolai back then. “T-There was no one there but Tiffany and me. My phone… I dropped it somewhere. And that half-burnt cigarette, maybe it was just someone else who was smoking there sometime before or after—”

Alejandro’s disbelief spurred him into clutching her shoulders. “Look—at—me! Look me in the eyes and then talk!”

Melanie turned her face away and struggled against her. “Let me go, you’re hurting me—! I told you, I was the only one there! You… You could say… I was the one who pushed Tiffany down and I won’t have any alibi to prove otherwise, would I? If taking out your steam for Tiffany’s sake is what you want, then go ahead! You… You already thought it was me, didn’t you? So skip all this interrogation and just… assume you know everything already! It was me who did it, okay?”

Alejandro shoved her away. “I can’t f**king believe I trusted you. You… you… Divorce!” he exploded. “I’m divorcing you!”

Melanie froze in a millisecond. She had expected it—anticipated it, even—but when the words fell off his lips, she still felt a sharp, stinging stab to her heart, so agonizing that her breath stilled.

A second or two crawled on. Melanie suddenly smiled.

“Ah, I knew it. It doesn’t matter whether this happened at all; you’d divorce me someday anyway. It’s all right, then. It’s better this way… It’s liberation for both of us, isn’t it? You only married me because Grandpa made you.”

She never thought that the family who had always seemed to love her had seen her as a mere pawn for their gain. She was just a naïve girl who thought marrying Alejandro was out of her own free will, but everything turned out to be a calculated setup, with her family pulling the strings from the get-go.

Alejandro turned away wordlessly and strode away. It had only been a few minutes since he stepped inside his home, and already he was gone. When would he come back? Nobody knew.

Melanie forced her tears down her throat and changed into a new set of clothes before applying some slight touch-up on her face. She planned to bring Melissa out on a simple shopping trip, even if it were only to buy some groceries.

She was not going to have that chance anymore.

Melanie did not bring a nanny with them this time. A few feet away, a car suddenly pulled over right beside her, causing Melanie to cradle her daughter into her arms warily.

The window went down, revealing the driver to be none other than Nikolai Lark!

She scanned the surrounding frantically before hissing, “Are you out of your mind? Why are you here?! If someone sees you—!”

Chapter 1725

Nikolai interjected before Melanie could finish her sentence, “Oh yeah? Is there something I should be afraid of? What, you mean Alejandro Smith? I, a big brother, am here to see my sister. What’s wrong with that, hmm? Besides… I watched him leave with my own eyes. Here, take your phone. I’m only here to return it. Leaving it with me is a bad, bad idea; it invites troubles, I know. That Alejandro called you, you know, but I didn’t answer it and I shut it down completely. He must have asked you about that, right? And I trust that you didn’t tell him anything?”

Melanie snatched the phone from him and slipped it into her handbag. “Please go, now. And don’t come for me anymore!”

Nikolai lit a cigarette nonchalantly. “Pfft. I warned you, Melanie. But you just had to bring this onto yourself, huh? With Tiffany Lane still alive, the cat will jump out of the bag any time now,” he murmured. “Be decent and recognize that the blame is all yours. The last thing I want is you dragging our family down with your piss-poor judgement… Christ! Despite doing it for you, you spat on my goodwill and almost got me into trouble. I swear to God, you’re a f**king disappointment, Melanie!”

The woman in question hung her head quietly. Regardless of how he framed it, she had no regrets saving Tiffany. If her brother had killed a mother and her baby that day, Melanie would never know peace in her life again.

As though finding harsh censures an insufficient outlet, Nikolai only became more and more riled up. He started barking, “Sh*t. Sh*t, sh*t, sh*t! How did our family produce a f**king mistake like you?! It doesn’t f**king matter if you marry into a powerful family if you don’t even know how. To. Make. A.

Man. Stay! How long has this stupid, fruitless marriage been going on, huh? Tell me why the f**k Alejandro isn't the least bit in love with you yet?! It's because you're a worthless excuse of a b*tch, isn't it?! I'm telling you, if he divorces you because of this fiasco, you can sh*t yourself knowing you can never come back to the family!"

Melanie clenched her teeth tight before relaxing them. "You're in luck, then, Nikolai. He's already divorcing me," she seethed quietly. "Relax. I'm not coming to you, either. Not even then. But answer me this… Do mom and dad know…? Do they know about what you've done? Were they… really the ones who told you to…?"

At the height of his lividity, contempt began to surface in Nikolai's eyes. "Ha. What else? Even if you hadn't brought Tiffany to me that day, I would have found another chance to do it."

Melanie's hands were shaking so hard that she almost dropped her daughter. The truth had been revealed: it was not just her brother who was in on this—her parents were in it too. None of them cared about her. The only thing that had mattered since the beginning was the family's future.

Melanie had been anticipating the truth, yet it still felt like a punch to the gut. It did not matter if she consented to it or not; she was the designated scapegoat. She would be completely abandoned and kinless after the divorce, because not even the Larks wanted her anymore.

Realizing the truth of her reality, however, gave her a chance to accept things as they were. It was liberating.

"Good. From now on, my ties with the Lark family are no more. Don't any of you dare commit those transgressions in the name of my wellbeing again because none of you—not a single one of you—had ever cared for me, after all. All you people care about is the family's stupid interest, so stop… Stop

sh*tting me with those toplofty and highfalutin excuses! Get out of my sight; I don't ever wanna see your face ever again!"

Nikolai flicked his cigarette outside the window. It landed by Melanie's foot as his car skidded away on the asphalt road.

Melanie put her daughter down and stood still, her feet rooted to the spot. The girl, meanwhile, picked up the cigarette and cast it into a public trashcan nearby. "Mommy says throwing trash everywhere is no-no…"

It was then that Melanie was struck with an epiphany.

Time was running out for her. She should not fixate on her woes and adversities when her remaining time could be better spent on being with her daughter.

She took up Melissa's little hand and gripped it. "C'mon, Mommy's buying you some really tasty treat, and then we'll play together, and then I'll buy you a lot of pretty clothes, because… Well, your Daddy never fusses about these things, does he?" she said. "Mommy's only worried that when I'm gone, you might run out of things to wear, you know?

"Millie, my sweet little Millie… In the future, when you live with your Daddy, remember to be good and listen to him, okay? I know he's got a nasty temper, but you must be considerate and never fight him, understand?"

Melissa seemed to have caught on the undertone, because a pout had seized her lips. "What about Mommy? Mommy don't want to live with Millie ant-nee-more?"

Melanie willed a smile to crack out from her lips, but her effort did not manage to stop wet, hot tears from breaking out; she was smiling and weeping at the same time. “It’s all Mommy’s bad. But Mommy… will always love you.”

Melissa suddenly swung her mother’s hand off before crying, “Don’t want clothes! Don’t want treat! Don’t want to play! Millie don’t want Mommy to go—!”

Chapter 1726

When a grown-up breaks down, they bawl. Their emotions erupt out of them in a split-second.

Melanie could not even spare enough mind to the fact that her daughter was standing right next to her—she dropped to her soles into a pitiful crouch and bawled, howling in grief and agony, all the while a part of her reminded herself that she had not wanted to cry at all.

In the late evening, Melanie prepared a sumptuous meal for the family and texted Alejandro, telling him to come home for dinner.

She had already finalized her divorce agreement; Melissa’s custody would go to Alejandro, since Melanie did not know if she would have a destination to go or an abode to stay. It would be fine—Alejandro had always treated her daughter with utmost love and care. He could be bad to the entire world, but he would never be so to his kid. Letting Alejandro raise Melissa was not a bad choice at all.

The clock was close to nine at night. The food was losing their last remnant of warmth. It was then that Alejandro finally came home.

Melanie had deliberately donned the dress she had put on the first time she met Alejandro face-to-face: the same vermillion dress with a halter neckline formed from its straps, and the same effortful, carefully-done make-up. She would suppress her tears for tonight, she decided.

It would end the way it started.

Alejandro was blasé to it all. His eyes hardly lingered on her before marching to the dining table and taking his seat.

He left his fork and knife untouched. “What is it?”

He must have forgotten all about it, Melanie realized. He did not remember the red dress; did not remember their first meeting.

Her lips curled into a slight smile as she gently pushed the divorce agreement forward. “Give it a read. If you find no problem in it, please sign here.”

It was then that Alejandro’s attention finally fell onto her. It stayed for a good few beats before he picked up the paper and skimmed through it. Halfway through his reading, he suddenly broke into a smile. “No problem… No problem at all. How could there be any problem when you’ve asked for nothing at all? You sure you won't regret this? I can give you a hefty sum and a house—wouldn’t want some spectators and commentators calling me a miserly sh*tbag.”

Melanie shook her head. “That won’t be necessary. I’m capable of working for my living. I don’t want anything from you,” she replied. “But, there is one small request. No matter what happens between us, Millie… She will always be my daughter. I don’t mind you taking custody of her, but please allow me to see her occasionally… please. I just want her to remember that she still has a mother who loves her dearly—”

Alejandro’s grip tightened against his conscious will and crumpled the paper, though the smile on his face did not crack. Instead, he reinforced it with a new undercurrent of fury and other unreadable sentiments, making one wonder if his smile was forced.

“You don’t want her, woman. Why even bother to put up that fake ‘Mommy Loves You’ persona? You can demand whatever it is under the sun and I’ll give it to you, but not this. You won’t get to see Millie; not ever!”

Even the most soft-spoken woman would bark when her right to her child was challenged; Melanie was no different. “You can be cruel to me, Alejandro, but can’t you at least show some decency when it comes to our child? I nurtured her when she was inside me for nine months; I’ve endured all maternal hardships right down to giving birth. And you think none of those amount to the right to see my own daughter?!”

The smile on his face vanished in a second. His eyes were trained onto her, unblinking. “And what about you?” he seethed. “You think you’re merciful?”

Melanie froze in shock, her tongue at a loss for a retort. Was he referring to Tiffany’s incident, or Melanie willingly giving up custody?

...It was most likely Tiffany's incident. It had always been this way, had it not? Tiffany ruled Alejandro's heart, with his daughter coming in as a close second. But Melanie? She did not even make it to his heart in the first place.

Alejandro ignored her completely and slammed the agreement on the dining table right in front of her. He rose and marched upstairs.

Melanie stayed unmoving on her seat with a table of warmthless food keeping her company. Time crawled on for a long while before she picked up her phone and texted Tiffany.

'I'm sorry, Tiffany,' she wrote. 'Alejandro and I are in the middle of a divorce. I guess this is my retribution, huh? I'll shoulder all of the consequences, but please remember your promise. If you want someone to pay that debt back, I'm always ready. I just… wanna tell you I'm sorry.'

Chapter 1727

Tiffany received Melanie's text.

She instantly sat up from her bed, ignoring the ensuing protests of pain all over her body. "That dumbass Alejandro is serious about divorcing Melanie! For real! What the f—?!"

Jackson, who was sitting by her bedside, shoved a freshly-peeled apple into Tiffany's hand. "The hell do you care about someone else's marriage? What, your body's suddenly not hurting anymore?"

She frowned, her eyebrows knitting tightly. "No, no, it's just that… Alejandro must have divorced her because he thought Melanie was the one who pushed me, b-but it wasn't her at all! Melanie's a

sweetheart through and through; for Christ's sake, we are frickin' besties! Oh God, oh my God… What about Millie, huh? Poor girl is still so young…"

Jackson cocked an eyebrow. "Seriously? You're seriously worrying about some other guy's marriage right in my face—aren't you at least worried that I might be jealous? Babe, Alejandro didn't ask for your input before he decided to divorce Melanie. It means this divorce between them is only a matter of time. It means it's got zero connection to you," he explained. "Honestly, it had always been nothing more than a political marriage, so don't overthink it, okay? It ain't that complicated."

Tiffany could not calm herself down at all. "But Melanie must have told Alejandro she was the one who pushed me. I know she did! How else can you explain this? They were happy and good and everything just a while ago! Like even if she's trying to protect her daughter, she wouldn't have chosen divorce!"

Jackson thought about it for a minute. "Hey, babe, think about it. What's the point of being in a loveless marriage held together only by the existence of the couple's offspring, huh? Back then, Alejandro had to bend to Don's will back when he was still alive, but the old man's gone to see the Maker. Who's there to rein that boar now? Who's stopping him from a divorce?—Wait a second. If you fell off the stairs by yourself by accident, then why did Melanie feel compelled to tell Alejandro she pushed you?"

Finally realizing her gaffe, Tiffany slapped her hands over her mouth.

Jackson feigned a scowl. "Tiffie, tell me the truth! Did someone push you down the stairs?!"

Tiffany shook her head, but it was too late. Her previous action had exposed her.

Jackson's face darkened. "Goddammit, are you going to tell me or what?!"

Bereft of a choice, Tiffany braved through the one option she had not wanted. “Okay, okay, I’m telling ya’! Just… promise me you’re not gonna look into it like, at all, okay? Because I promised Melanie about that, and I don’t wanna break it. Anyway, so… Melanie wasn’t the one who pushed me. If it weren’t for her, God knows neither the baby or I would be alive. She, uh, introduced me to her big brother, Nikolai Lark, and he was the one who pushed me down the stairs… Um, ya see, he somehow knew Alejandro used to be with me… and so he did what he did. He thought my presence was the monkey-wrench in the works, ruining the relationship between Melanie and Alejandro and making their divorce possible, and then the alliance forged between the Smiths and the Larks would go up in smokes, and then the Larks would lose whatever they profit from this marriage and stuff like that.

“After falling down the flight, I was sorta knocked out-cold, but there was this one teensy frame of time when I’m actually still semi-conscious. I’m sure of what I heard, Jackson. Melanie was the one who insisted on crying out for help to save me. I’m tellin’ ya, she didn’t know jack about her brother’s plan, because her brother just did it suddenly. Think about it, honey—if she really wanted to kill me, she would have listened to her brother and waited until I was barely alive to finally call for help, ‘cause you know if I died, there would be virtually no one who knew how it happened. She could have lived the rest of her life without ever getting caught. She knew what helping me could mean to her life and she still didn’t let it stop her. She didn’t hurt me—she f**king saved me.”

Jackson’s spleen skyrocketed from zero to a hundred in a snap. “God-f**king-dammit, Tiffany! Why didn’t you tell me earlier? Why was this kept a secret?!”

Nikolai must be on his way back to Ayashe by now. Had Jackson known it was him, he would have made sure that bastard could not leave the Capital at all!

Chapter 1728

Granted, Tiffany knew she was in the wrong. “Urgh! I knew telling you would only complicate things… Look at me, hey! I’m fine, aren’t it? Isn’t that good enough? Besides, Melanie suffered enough already, don’cha think? I get that her brother’s the perp and that means she’s somewhat connected to this whole thing, but she’s innocent, you know? So can we please, please-please-please, just drop this?”

Jackson's eyes reddened in furious frenzy. "Even if she deserves pity, so what? Does that mean our daughter doesn't?! Our little angel can't even leave her incubator!" he bristled. "You chill the eff out, Tiffie. I know who wronged us. I know Melanie isn't one of those bastards and I'm not the type to drag an innocent person into my revenge. But those real culprits—those mother**kers are gonna pay for what they f**king did! I have no qualms leaving Melanie out of this since her brother was the one who pushed you, but that's all. The rest of the Larks have got hell to pay, and come hell or highwater, I will make them!"

Jackson almost never erupted in fury in front of her, so when he did, Tiffany was so earnestly terrified that she pressed her lips shut. In her mind, however, trepidations roared. This was bad—really, really bad. Thanks to her, Melanie and Alejandro were about to be divorced, and now she broke the promise she made to Melanie!

A tinge of guilt colored her mind blue. Oh, this was all Jackson's fault! Why did he have to lure her into telling the truth?

She waited until Jackson's fury petered out a little before finally piping up very gingerly, "Uh, ya know, we should probably discuss this before we act…? Like, mebbe you can just get someone to pay back unto Nikolai Lark only? That's good enough, right? I just think, uh, we shouldn't blow this whole thing out of proportions. Such as, well, taking it out on the entire Lark family. 'Cause that's Melanie's people, Jackson, and I don't know how to face her the next time we meet if you've done something terrible to her flock…"

Jackson side-eyed Tiffany peevishly. "For Christ's sake, her family sees her as nothing but their fallguy, okay? Trust me, she's probably barred from returning home after she's divorced, too. This entire thing must be the Larks' idea! You can't possibly believe Nikolai alone wanted to harm you, can you? …F**k. Just leave your nose out of this, Tiffie. I'll handle it while you lie down here like a good girl!"

A moment later, he called Summer and asked his mother to come over before hurriedly leaving Tiffany's ward. After the big reveal of who was behind this, Jackson would not waste a second in taking up actions.

Tiffany, meanwhile, seized the chance to duck inside the bathroom before calling Melanie to give her the heads-up. She eschewed the details; instead, Tiffany simply told Melanie that she failed to contain the secret, and now Jackson knew all about it.

She had expected Melanie to chastise her. Yet, unthinkably, Melanie sounded unperturbed. "I expected that to happen. None of us are fools—it won't stay a secret for long. Besides, I know I've done everything expected of me as a daughter. No matter what happens to them from this point onward is no fault of mine," she said, before adding, "Tiffany… Thank you. I'm sorry, too, that my brother hurt you."

Tiffany was at a loss for words. Jackson's guess was spot-on, was it not? The Larks… They had disowned Melanie.

After the call ended, Melanie texted Nikolai. Her message was simple: 'Jackson knows it was you.'

In response, Nikolai called. "What. The. F**k did you say?! Didn't we make it clear that you're the one who should be rightfully blamed for this, huh?!" he fumed. "What the f**k—our family spent years raising you, and this is how you're gonna repay us, b*tch?! Don't you f**king know that the Tremonts and the Wests are always in cahoots? Raising Jackson's ire automatically raises that Mark Tremont's! You snitching c*nt— you've brought doom to our family!"

Melanie's heart was already too broken to care. "Please, our family raised both of us. You're their son, and all of the family wealth's been cleanly divided between you and Miklan, while I'm no more than a fodder. What else do you people want from me? Yes, admittedly, I wanted to shoulder all of the blame at first. But Jackson knows it was you now. The fact that I still have it in my heart to warn you about it is

a testament to my honor and care for the family that has done much for me. But then again… all of you have disowned me as well. From this point onward, no matter what happens has got nothing to do with me anymore. That's all."

She hung up the call, halting the relentless barrages of Nikolai's most vulgar philippic from reaching her.

She closed her eyes in pain as her mind raced through memories of her childhood. Growing up, her two elder brothers had treated her with a surfeit of love and care, but now the memories felt unreal, as though they were just figments of a dream.

Everything was cheery and warm back then; how did it come to this? Must humans always change and mutate into someone else, given enough time? Was the day she married into the Smiths the same day her family no longer saw her as one of their kin, and more of a useful stranger?

Or could it be that they had always been hideous monsters wearing masks, pretending to be loving, caring people?

Regardless, Melanie was not in a position to save anyone, not even herself; she did not have a place to go after her divorce. There was nothing she could do for the family, even if she wanted to.

Chapter 1729

Mrs. Lark came to the Capital from Ayashe the very next day. Alejandro was not at home, leaving only Melanie, along with her daughter, waiting by the entrance to greet her.

Melanie could tell what awaited, yet a large part of her refused to believe it or accept it as reality. How could she, when she remembered how vehemently her mother had objected to her daughter marrying a disabled man? She would not have cared so much if she saw Melanie as a mere pawn, right?

But then Melanie watched how fury oozed from every movement her mother made since disembarking from her car, and her heart sank. Fear began to claim her, and she stumbled a few steps back from the incoming presence. “Mom, I…”

Mrs. Lark scowled with daggers in her eyes. “Don’t you dare! I am not your mother… I don’t recall having a selfish excuse as my daughter!”

Selfish?!

At that moment, Melanie felt every drop of blood in her body gel. It was early summer, yet she felt cold, nipping steel in her veins.

“Me… selfish? Did any of you people speak to me before going ahead with that crazy plan? You people were ready to commit sins while pretending it’s for my sake. I chose the right thing to do, and now I’m the selfish one?” she retorted. “Two innocent lives! Do you even understand the weight of human lives?”

Mrs. Lark’s eyes searched the house, as though trying to see if Alejandro was at home.

Melanie understood her intention right away and called her out coldly, “Oh, don’t be scared now. Alejandro isn’t at home at the moment. In fact, since he’s divorcing me, he won’t even be home these days. So go ahead, state your piece however you like!”

Enraged, Mrs. Lark slapped her daughter across the cheek. “You think I wouldn’t hit you even if he were around? If he reserved even a modicum of fondness for you enough to protect you, then he would have let you bear him an actual scion already, stupid! The Smith family has so much legacy that there’s no way they will do without an actual heir. Isn’t it obvious then? If he’s given up on you providing him an heir, that means you’re just an unwanted deadweight waiting to be jettisoned!”

It was then that Mrs. Lark noticed Melissa, terrified and shaken, sticking by her mother’s side. Her face twisted into a disgusted grimace before hissing, “What a mistake!”

Her cheek burnt, but her heart ached worse. Her mother saw her daughter the same way she saw her—a “mistake”, a fodder.

And this was what her mother had always thought of her all along. Her family had only treated her kindly because they needed to mold her into becoming an attractive marriage candidate. They banked on her as a means to secure useful connections for the family’s interests, nothing more.

But Melanie had braved through her brother’s merciless tongue-lashing before, so the sting of her mother’s words cut less deeply this time. At most, they just made her despair more trenchant.

“You can lambast me all you want, but please, leave my daughter out of this. Don’t worry; I don’t plan to come back to the family after I’m divorced. I don’t plan to be a deadweight to all of you, or to become irritating dirt in your eyes,” she said. “Feeling better now? If yes, glad to hear it—you can go now. I suppose I’m honored that you’ve come so far from Ayashe just to slap my face.”

Mrs. Lark's bile rose once more. She raised her hand before Melissa's nanny stepped between them. "Excuse me, Ma'am, but I'm afraid you can't do that. Madam Smith isn't some child; she's a member of the Smith family. She is not to be insulted by anyone!"

Mrs. Lark responded by decking the nanny's face. "Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me like that?! Am I supposed to seek permission from the Smiths just to teach my own daughter some well-deserved lessons, huh?! Even Alejandro is my junior. I'm his mother-in-law, for God's sake! Before the divorce is finalized, he will have to pay his due respect to me!"

The nanny took a blow to her face without breaking out a yelp; her firm, unyielding stance did not even falter. She simply considered Mrs. Lark with a deadpan expression before stating, "Yes, you are Mr. Smith's senior, Ma'am. Hence, you may express your tantrum on me; that's not a problem. But you simply cannot do it to Madam. Otherwise, Mr. Smith will be deeply displeased."

A smile dripping with scorn shadowed Mrs. Lark's lips. "Oh, really? I didn't know Alejandro's the kind to give a damn at all. Really, though, why would he care if a useless trash of a woman gets a bit hurt? They're already on their way to divorce, anyway! Why the hell would you mean anything to him, Melanie?"

Suddenly, Alejandro's voice rang. "Because nothing's been done to make that divorce happen yet, has it?"

Millie bolted toward Alejandro, who was disembarking his car. "D-Daddy!"

Chapter 1730

Alejandro picked the little girl up and cooed, "There, there; okay. Go play with your toys. Daddy will be with you after he's done with some unfinished business, okay?"

Melissa, already in a mood to report the bad guy, sniffled before complaining in her squeaky voice, “That grandma hit M-M-Mommy! She hit Mommy!”

Alejandro pinched her cheek. “Aww, got it. Daddy knows.”

Seeing how kindly Alejandro treated Melissa drew doubts in Mrs. Lark’s heart. How could an esteemed family of their standing, which traditionally demanded an heir rather than an heiress, see any need to dote on a girl? What kind of powerful family would ever be fine with not having a son?

The nanny dutifully approached him to take Melissa away. Melanie, meanwhile, looked positively embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Alejandro. This… this is an altercation between my mother and me. It doesn’t concern you.”

Alejandro narrowed his eyes slightly. “Yes, I agree. It’s none of my business. But you’re having your silly spat on my property, and she laid her hand on a member of my family. So, what the hell is that about? Go on; I’m all ears. I’m not the kind to turn my back against reason, am I?”

There was no way Mrs. Lark would tell the truth. She was not stupid—she could tell that Alejandro knew nothing yet. Yet, Melanie herself decided to keep mum as well. Now that Jackson had caught wind of the truth, the probability of the Wests calling the Tremonts in as their ally to destroy the Larks had become all too real. Throw Alejandro into that dangerous alliance, and the Larks would perish before they could even struggle.

She was utterly disappointed with them, and yet… She could not find it in her to watch a family she had called home for twenty-odd years crash and burn, either.

Seeing both sides sinking into silence, Alejandro announced impassively, “Maybe we should get inside, sit down, and have a good civil talk. We are family, aren’t we? No need to have all these ugly, public altercations reflecting poorly on us.”

He was the first to stride into the house. Mrs. Lark, meanwhile, shot Melanie a stink-eye that oozed fury and disappointment, hoping that it could deter her daughter from mentioning the wrong things.

What claimed poor Melanie’s mind, however, was the broiling agony burning her cheek. She wondered if her face had started to swell a little—from the force alone, Melanie could tell that Mrs. Lark had put all of her anger into it.

The women took their seats in the living room, and Mrs. Lark began, “I heard you’re considering a divorce with my daughter. Why is that? You must have a reason, don’t you? Is my daughter falling short in her wifely virtues, hmm? Ever since she married into your household, she has been confining herself at home to help maintain order in this house. She devotes herself to taking care of your kid. Heck, look at her—she’s turned dowdy because of it!

“Or maybe your issue with her is her temperament? What, she’s an unreasonable harpy who gives you a hard time?” Mrs. Lark continued. “If yes, then why haven’t I heard of the two of you fighting, huh?”

Alejandro shot Melanie a sideway glance. “Ask her yourself.”

Melanie’s lips quivered into a mirthless smile. Ask her? And what is she supposed to answer? That she hurt the woman who ruled Alejandro’s heart, and that he went ballistic, and so he wanted to divorce her? Was that it?

She drew a sharp, long breath before answering, “I… I was the one who asked for a divorce. Our marriage is a loveless one, and so… it’s become a shackle to us both. I don’t see the point in it anymore.”

Never in Mrs. Lark’s wildest imagination had she ever expected Melanie to be the one putting divorce on the table. Suddenly, there was another loud crack in the air as she decked Melanie on her face again.

“How… dare you?! You have no right to want a divorce!” she fumed.

Alejandro’s expression darkened. “Touch her again. I. Dare. You.”

Mrs. Lark was not at all intimidated. “And what right do you have to halt me from teaching my daughter a lesson, huh?! It’s my godforsaken fault that she turned up a sorry, embarrassing excuse!”

Alejandro yanked Melanie behind him, shielding her. “A divorce or not, it’s a personal affair between the two of us. You never should have come here just to prattle about this to her face. Get real; if the two of us want it to happen, your opinion won’t deal a dent in changing our decision. Jett, escort her out of here!”

Jett, who had been standing guard by the door, immediately walked inside. “Allow me, ma’am!”