Ruling 1781

Chapter 1781

Melanie had not enjoyed such a restful sleep for such a long, long time. She hit the sack early and woke up only after the morning broke.

By the time she was up, Alejandro had already gone to his office. Melissa had woken up, too, all dressed up tidily before fashioning her hair into a two twirly pigtails. The good little girl was playing by herself in the living room.

The nanny told her that Alejandro had been accompanying Melissa in the nursery room for the entire night and, as a result, the little girl had not thrown a crying fit. Then, it was Alejandro who dressed Melissa up and tied her hair; he stayed long enough to keep his daughter company for breakfast.

He had not woken Melanie up because he saw her sleeping too soundly.

Melanie's mind could not help but veer off into imagining him—wearing a Very Serious Face, to boot—tying Melissa's hair. Oh… What a horrifyingly jarring scene!

Melanie had a simple breakfast before departing to the West family residence with Melissa in tow. She had been planning to visit Tiffany for a while, but there had been things keeping her. Now that both the mother and her daughter had been discharged, Melanie thought any delay in visiting them would reflect badly on her character. Even now, every time her mind wandered off to that day, disconcertion would pool in her stomach.

Melanie had expected a censure from Summer if she showed up in the residence, but she decided to brace through it. For her trip, she bought quite a lot of gifts.

Unexpectedly, Summer greeted her with one of the warmest welcomes, with quite an extolling praise for Melissa's beauty at its tail. The way she welcomed her bode no resentment.

Tiffany was almost fully recovered. Now, she could eat, drink, sleep, and do every day functions with little trouble—it lifted Melanie's spirit from the mire within her. "Oh, Tiffany, I should have come seen you earlier, but I hadn't gotten the time… I'm so sorry!"

Tiffany gently tugged her to the couch before having her sit down. "Oh, psssh! Girl, I'm fine as eff. I'm just happy to see ya'—because ya' know what this means. Girl Talk Hour!" she replied cheerfully. "Oh, been meaning to ask: how's things between you and Alejandro? Still in the tug o' war of divorce? If you ask me, I think… he's not that bad, is he?"

Melanie's eyes darted to Summer standing nearby and found herself too embarrassed to answer. Luckily, Summer read the room well and quickly offered, "I'll fix something cool for you girls; you two continue along. Honestly, I can't really catch up with the topics you girls are onto, and that just makes me feel so ancient… Hahaha!"

Melanie waited until Summer vanished into the kitchen before finally answering, "It's not about him being 'good' or 'bad' anymore. Last night, he wanted me to give him another chance—a period of a hundred days, to be precise. If I still wanna divorce him after that, he says he'll let me go. To tell you the truth, I haven't decided if I should agree to it or not. It's just… Since we've married, last night was the first time he suddenly went against his usual nature and accompanied Millie to sleep for the entire night. He cared for her, and then after the two of them woke up, he managed to not screw up Millie's wake-up routine, too. I mean, just take a look at her hair! Can you believe he braided it?"

Tiffany grabbed Melissa into her arm and studied her carefully. "—Oh. My. Gawd. He did this? It isn't even a bad pigtail, too! This is it, sistah; he's sworn to pull you back to him now. Like, this is a far cry from his old, arrogant, prickly self!" she exclaimed. "Just say yes, man. It's just a hundred days! I heard

folks say that all it takes for anyone to form a new habit is… twenty-one days! And how many sets of twenty-one days are there in a hundred days, hmmm? If he keeps his performance up all the way till then, you don't have to divorce him no more, right? If he loses his act after a few days, you can pack the eff up and skedaddle out of there after a hundred days, right? Ain't no loss right there!"

Melanie's mind was rocking once more. "Uh, let's just skip this topic. I really want to think this through—I've ruminated on this decision for so long that I've forged enough resolve for it, you know? I can't just falter because of some stuff he says. Anyway, how's your daughter? She's fine… is she? I was only relieved when she was discharged. I'm glad she's fine—otherwise, this guilt's gonna haunt me for the rest of my life."

Tiffany willed a smile to crack out of her lips. "Oh, of course. She's... super."

She did not mention the possible dent in her daughter's cognition, of course. The last thing she wanted was to make Melanie be hounded by guilt stemmed from something she did not commit.

Lil' P, meanwhile, had just returned from a romp outside. The first thing that caught his eyes was Melissa nestling in her mother's arms. Next to the just-returned-home, unpleasing, ugly little thing they told him was her little sister, Melissa was a lot easier on his eyes. In fact, he stepped forward and tugged on Melissa's hand without any sign of reservation or decorum, announcing, "Come, I'll show you what to play!"

Chapter 1782

Melissa was a timid child, so her instinct compelled her to slap away Lil' P's hand before diving even harder into Melanie's embrace.

"Millie… What's the matter?" Melanie intoned helplessly. "This is Lil' P. Go on, Big Brother Lil' P has a lot of stuff to show you for playtime. Why are you such a scaredy-cat?"

The frightened Melissa continued to balk silently at Lil' P, her expression betraying reluctance.

Lil' P was not the type to give up so soon. Quickly, he pulled out every single delicacy, snack, and toy he had been hoarding in secret. "Ooh, look! Do you want to play? I'll let you have all these tasty snacks!"

That succeeded in seducing Melissa for quite a bit. She briskly turned to Melanie with eyes inquiring for her opinion. Melanie placed her on the floor. "Go on. Have fun with Lil' P."

At first, Melissa was still too timid to indulge, but it did not take a long time before she became accustomed enough that her inner predilection for rough and tumble play surfaced. Suddenly, the girl and Lil' P were having an indoor romp so exciting that not even a few trips and stumbles did anything to stop her.

Tiffany's attention coursed through the wealth of gifts Melanie brought. Surprised, she commented, "Sis, you could have just shown up with just your and Millie alone—what's with all this extra stuff? As if our friendship's gotten so weak that we need all these excesses to fortify it or something! What, is that what you think of our sister energy, huh? You think it's gotten weak and faltering, hmmmmm?"

Melanie chuckled and patted her on the back good-naturedly. "Hey now, that's not true! I'm only… trying to apologize for my brother's gross transgression, you see? You're also done with your confinement, right? When you're finally allowed to go out, I'll treat you to something nice! Whatever you like is on me!"

It was only by lunchtime when Melanie finally got to see Tiffany's daughter. Fortunately, the child had been regaining her brio since she was home; she was livelier and livelier every day—though not without

the downside of her keening becoming more and more sonorous. The girl had gotten so loud that Tiffany had graduated from seeing her as the apple of her eye to becoming more and more annoyed.

“If I’m being honest, this girl is ridiculously ugly,” she remarked. “Like, maybe it’s because she’s born before her time or something, but I reaaaaally wonder if our effort and care will ever restore her original good looks. Like, come! On! My firstborn is pretty hawt, isn’t he? If his sister turns out to be permanently several levels below him, I can probably bust out my womb to try again…”

Lil’ P reeled out of himself single-mindedly, chewing his food just in time to chime in, “Oh yea, Mommy, she’s like, suuuuuper ugly! Try again at having a new sister, Mom!”

Tiffany flicked the boy’s forehead in fury. “Excuse you, mister! She’s your darn sister! Ya ain’t got no rights commenting on her unflattering outlook—only I can do that! You shut that trap of yours and don’t ever say she’s ugly anymore, or so help me, I’ll smite you so hard your baby teeth come off early!”

Lil’ P, however, seemed to have grown more and more gutsy as he grew up. Instead of fearing his mother, he simply rolled his eyes at her. “I’m tellin’ the tooth! I want Millie; don’t want Little Sister! She’s super ugly!”

The entire exchange drew out a fountain of guffaws from Summer, who was shaking in joy. “I swear to God, this little man’s a chip of his old man’s block! Jack was like him when he was young, too. He wants only things that pleases his eyes! Hon, your husband always insisted on picking his own outfit-of-the-day! If he didn’t find it fitting his beauty standards, oh boy, he would reject the hell outta it! Heck, I remember… When he was three years old, he got this fashion obsession dictating that his shoes must leave his ankles exposed. Boy, if I accidentally gave him socks that were slightly too long? That lil’ rascal would rather skip school than go out there with his ankles covered! Eh, Lil’ P here is obviously taking after his pops, huh?”

This was the first time Tiffany had ever heard any stories about Jackson's history of shifting kinks and fashion statements, which immediately hooked her interest. "Whoa, whoa, whoa! What do we have there? Was Jackson always such a pain in the butt, huh? I bet he must have tasted quite a lot of your fury, hadn't he?"

Summer laughed. "Oh, Lord bless him, no. I hadn't had the luxury of time to squeeze his bad habits out of him, had I? I was always knees-deep in the company's affairs back then. I basically let him play out his nature and do whatever he liked. Honestly, he's been a weirdo since he was a kid that I just got used to his shenanigans, ya know?"

Two coughs escaped from the ever-so-taciturn Atticus sitting next to Summer. Since he was already gone ever since Jackson was still a young boy, hearing Summer mentioning all these tidbits of his son's life growing up was a surefire way to incite his remorse and embarrassment.

Chapter 1783

Summer leveled a meek glare at him. "Do you mind? We're eating here!"

Melanie mulled over her decision for a while before choosing, "Um, Mr. And Mrs. West? Regarding Tiffany's incident, I… I, once again, want to make it clear that I'm very sorry for the horrid transgression my brother had done—"

Summer waved dismissively. "Bah, it's all in the past, child. What's the point of bringing this up? As long as our little Tiffie and her kid—bless them—came out okay, we're fine. Honestly, if it weren't for you, Tiffie might not even have had the fortune to be here having this meal with us! If an apology is what we demand, it ain't yours that should be offered, you dig?" she replied. "We aren't unreasonable people, Melanie. We can tell gold from dirt. You might be a Lark, but you're definitely not cut out from the same cloth as those jerks.

“I do lament this small, upsetting thing, though: my sweet little granddaughter suffered from a serious case of perinatal asphyxia, dooming her cognitive abilities somewhat. It’s just… such a hard thing to brace, you get me?”

Panicked, Tiffany fired a barrage of very loaded glances at Summer to no avail. The latter simply missed them.

Melanie was taken aback. “W-What do you mean….? The kid… Her cognitive abilities... Damaged?”

The thing about cognition—was that it was something that perdured for the rest of a person’s life.

The somber topic tightened Summer’s chest. “God, let’s just… Let’s just drop this and focus on our meal. I mean, we can’t push toothpaste back into the tube, can we?”

Tiffany’s mind was aflame with panic. Well, now that the cat was out of the bag, Melanie’s short-lived relief over the incident was gone again, wasn’t it?

Melanie and Melissa left the West Family residence by late afternoon—to Lil’ P’s utmost reluctance. The little boy had grown so attached to his new friend that he would rather leave home to be with Melissa. No matter how hard Tiffany tried to drag him away, he would not buck. In the end, Atticus had to forcefully grab the boy in his arms before running back inside.

Melanie suddenly grabbed both of Tiffany’s hands tightly with her head slightly lowered. “From the bottom of my heart, Tiffany, I’m sorry. All that the Larks owe you… I’ll make it up with all I can, I swear.”

Tiffany detested interactions like these. “Okay, okay! Give it a rest already, hon! If you’re gonna keep apologizing all super-severely every time we hang out, I’m gonna bump you down my sisterhood ranking, I’m warning you!” she quipped. “Seriously, though. However badly my daughter suffers, your family’s basically just as effed, too, right? We’re even, man. Ya’ don’t have to hyperfixate on this, especially since the one who should feel sorry was never you to begin with! All right now, don’t overthink this, mmkay? You gotta bolt from here with Millie as quickly as you can, hon; otherwise, my son’s gonna run away from home!”

Melanie laughed despite the tears rolling in her eyes. “O-Okay. Take care of your health now, okay? We’ll talk some other time. Goodbye.”

Despite Melanie’s car already vanishing into the horizon, Lil’ P had not stopped bawling since he first started before they left. He cried so hard that his sister joined in on the crying cacophony. Poor Summer felt as though her ears were going to implode. “Arrrghh! Shh-shh-shush, stop crying already, okay? Millie’s gonna come back and play with you another time! She’s only going home for the time being! ...Lord Almighty, what do you think you’re doing, young man?”

Lil’ P sniveled hard between his crestfallen tears. “I wanna change my sister! I want Millie to be my little sister, not this one!”

Tiffany rolled her eyes immediately. “You really think you can replace your sister with another girl just because you wanna? Pssh, please. You need to git gud, son. Good enough that when you grow up, you can marry her as your damn wife! That’s the way of a competent man—only a wimp is content with being a crybaby!”

Lil’ P suddenly looked up at his mother with his most solemn expression yet. “Oh yeah? I’ll marry her as my ‘damn-wife’ when I grow up! Then we can play together every day!”

Summer shivered at the implication. “The hell do you know about marriage, punk? You’ll do more good picking yourself up from the floor and washing your face of that snot and those tears. Or else! I’m telling your dad...”

There was no one else in the family whom Lil’ P was more terrified of than Jackson. His grandparents and mommy basically coddled him every day—they would not even want to upset a single hair on his head. His mother, Tiffany, was all bark and no bite. Grandpa Atticus didn’t have the heart to see a child cry.

This was why the only person who had the least trouble disciplining his son was his father. A single threat prefacing with his name was all Summer needed to get the child to behave. Instantly, Lil’ P followed Atticus into the bathroom to wash his face.

Chapter 1784

Melanie eschewed heading home straight away after her visit to the West Family residence. Instead, with Melissa in tow, she went on a grocery-shopping spree with her mind already drawing up everything the house was lacking.

The duo came out of the supermarket soon after. Melissa was suddenly struck by the jejune need for her mother to carry her, but Melanie’s hands were completely full of groceries by then. “Millie, come now, be a good girl. How about we have a little walk to our car first? Once we’re there, Mommy can put this stuff down and then carry you in her arms, okie? The car’s in the supermarket’s basement; it’s not toooo far, is it? Come on, let’s be a good girl.”

Melissa refused to be reasoned. She fell onto her butt and sat on the floor before weeping to herself. She was not known to bawl loudly, so her antics did not attract much attention from disinterested passerbys.

Still, Melanie was a little hard-pressed as to what to do. A situation like this was dime a dozen to every housewife who had ever experienced grocery-shopping with a young toddler without external help. Once the child started acting up, the mother—like Melanie right now—would find herself quite stuck and powerless. It was not like she had an extra pair of arms!

Just then, Melanie heard a voice, cool as a breeze, ringing from beside her. “Hey, hand me your stuff. I’ll help you take ‘em to the basement.”

Surprised, she turned, and her eyes linked with a pair of penetrative ones on the man’s face.

She exclaimed, “…Teo?! Oh my God, when did you return?”

Mateo Rodriguez—Melanie believed he counted as her childhood friend. The Larks had moved to a new place when she was ten, but before then, Mateo was her neighbor. They remained as close friends throughout junior high, but after he chose to complete his senior high in the Capital, their correspondences dwindled gradually. Once a blue moon, though, the two still talked to each other through the phone. The last they had ever talked was about half a year ago, though.

The friends had not seen each other in person for so long, and the difference between them was stark. Mateo was still the same man Melanie remembered: there was always a limelight on him no matter where he went. He was handsome. He was also very rich, which cultivated an upper-class air of regality that was now seeping out of him. It made him stand out even more.

In comparison, Melanie was… lame. Her hands were full of groceries after a solo trip to the supermarket with a toddler who was crying for hugs while she could only gawk, helpless. She was an unglamorous, hapless housewife.

Just thinking back on her youthful days in comparison to her state now, Melanie suddenly felt quite self-conscious. “U-Uh, this is embarrassing… Sorry for the trouble.”

Mateo took the grocery bags from her hands and flashed her a slight smile. “Oh, it’s no trouble at all. I’ve wanted to talk to you as soon as I got here, but I guess happenstance beat me to it and made us meet here instead. Hey, if you don’t mind… Would you be free for a catch-up tonight? I heard you’re married, but I didn’t expect to see your daughter having grown so big already! You know, it was my parents who showed up at your wedding back then. I was stuck abroad then; couldn't come back for it. Hope you don’t hold it against your old pal.”

Melanie shook her head. “Oh, no way. Why would I? ...Gosh, speaking of which—here I am with a kid of my own while you’re mysteriously still a bachelor despite all these years. Why is that?”

Mateo sighed dejectedly. “Aww, don’t go poking on that old wound! I’ve had no luck finding the right gal, and since I firmly believe in quality over quantity, I haven’t gone and adventured around,” he answered. “You know… There used to be a girl that I had a huge crush on, but before I could confess to her, she married. I haven’t seen anyone else who could do what she did to me; a woman who just… imprints on me the moment I lay my eyes on her. Anyway, this is why my relationship score is still a huge blank after all these years. You’re… not gonna make fun of me for this, right?”

Melanie’s heart skipped a beat. A girl who was married before he could confess his feelings to her? Why did it fit Melanie’s description?

She, admittedly, once had her eyes on Mateo before. But it was more of a puppy love—something that came about as her yearning for romance was beginning to bloom. Melanie would hardly consider that flitting infatuation as anything of real substance. But more importantly, the Larks moving introduced distance between them, and so that transient, childish crush faded in her mind.

Mateo did not seem to intend on continuing the conversation as they made their way to the parking basement. He helped put and organize them into the trunk before complimenting, “Wow, she’s sweet! I can’t buy her even if I really wanted to, but it turns out you own one.”

Melanie tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. “My husband bought it for me just recently. Now, I need to get back home first, but I’ll talk to you again later, right? You’ve come home from abroad—I think that’s an occasion befitting me treating you to a diner.”

Mateo did not reject her offer. “Mm, sounds great! Honestly, I just wanna catch up with you over a hearty meal,” he said. “See you soon; be careful while on the road. Oh, and by the way, your daughter is incredibly gorgeous… just like her mother.”

Melanie’s face flushed pink. She drove and fled the parking basement in a frenzy.

She was really starting to think that the girl Mateo referred to was herself… But could it be? Could his crush really be Melanie Lark?!

Chapter 1785

Once they had returned to the estate, Melanie swiftly ordered the nanny to watch Melissa for the night. She was going somewhere, after all, and it would be pretty inconvenient to bring a toddler along.

Since it was, effectively, a catching-up dinner with an old friend, Melanie was poised to doll herself up to be more presentable for the occasion—a feat that required a bravura makeover and a skillful choice of outfit.

By the time she was there at the chosen fine-diner, Mateo was already there, waiting. Upon seeing her, he rose to his feet and readied her chair for her with the most classically-gentlemanly flourish.

“What would you like to have for this fine evening? I remember your favorite food, but I don’t know if time has introduced or removed some of them,” he started. “Either way, I gotta brag about my memory, heh.”

Once again, Melanie found her heart skipping a beat. After so long, Mateo still remembered what she liked?

Her head lowered. “Nothing’s changed. So, just follow what your memory serves,” she replied softly.

After ordering their food, Mateo flashed her a playfully toothy grin. “Why are you always looking downward? I remember you as a waaaay more confident gal. Unless… Don’t tell me seeing me makes you bashful! Hee hee. What’s there to be bashful about between us?”

Melanie braced herself to lift her head up, though she had not garnered enough courage to meet his eyes. “I-I’m not bashful! …Uh, speaking of which, how long do you plan to be here?”

Mateo paused for a moment before answering, “How long, huh? Well… Methinks it’s gonna be quite a long, long while. There’s this… thing that has been sitting inside a little locket in my heart for years, and I suppose I just want it to be fulfilled. Well, not exactly ‘fulfilled’, to be honest—more like ‘freed’, with an actual closure for it so that I can finally put it down,” he reeled off. “I’m not some twenty-year-old anymore; I can’t be a bachelor forever, can I? But before I can do something about the girl who got away but stay in my heart, I’ll never be able to move on and admire all the other fish in the sea.”

The more he explained, the more that strange visceral feeling ballooned within her—it just sounded more and more like he was talking about her covertly. Quietly but purposefully, she pivoted from the topic to a new one. “How’s Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez?”

“Simply splendid,” Mateo replied, nodding. “And you? Has time been kind to you? I heard you’ve married into the Smiths… I trust that means you’re having a swimming life as well.”

Melanie skirted mentioning her plan for a divorce or the fact that she no longer belonged to her family. “Yeah. Simply splendid.”

Suddenly, as though he remembered something, Mateo fished out a delicate black jewelry box and pushed it to her. “Look what we’ve got here! A gift for the fair lady, from me to you. I, uh, hope you like it. Disclaimer first—I’m not exactly good at evaluating aesthetics for gifts, though I’m pretty sure you remember that. Anyway, try it on and see.”

Mateo was so good-natured, so effusive with his cheery, sunny eagerness that Melanie could not come up with any worthy excuse to reject him. She accepted the box and opened it.

It was an elegant pendant. Everything—from its design to its material—was masterfully crafted and outstanding. In other words, Mateo’s pessimistic self-assessment of his taste was false; instead, he was adept at delighting a woman.

Melanie gave it a cursory look and, without showing any sign of putting it on right there and then, closed the box. “It’s pretty gorgeous, Teo. But gosh… You’ve gone out of your way to prepare a gift for me,

while I've come here with my hands empty. Sorry, I haven't thought of this at all, and now I'm just… so… embarrassed…"

Mateo laughed with his mouth closed. "Come on. I'm a man; I can't accept gifts from my lady friend."

As the two chatted, any initial timidity was gradually and surely banished.

Back in the Smith estate, Alejandro returned to find Melanie absent while her daughter was at home. After an inquiry—also known as "baiting the nanny into telling him"—he discovered that his wife had gone to see an old friend.

The trouble was this: if that "old friend" meant Arianne or Tiffany, Melanie would have addressed them explicitly.

Questioning, he called Melanie, but she declined answering him.

That little change in her usual behavior fanned his insecurity. Just what sort of 'old friend' would compel Melanie to not answer his call?

Chapter 1786

A few dextrous inputs later, Alejandro obtained Melanie's exact location.

For some reason, anxiety bubbled within him as he stood outside the fine diner—it was one of those establishments meant for couples, he realized. What if it was a man who was eating with her right now?

He forced his composure to remain and descended the car before heading inside the restaurant. It was all too easy to descry the one silhouette that was so familiar that it was impossible for him to miss; she was sitting right next to the window. Then he saw him—Mateo Rodriguez, sitting across her on that same table.

Spleen skyrocketed within Alejandro, but he halted his step and stood still. He dialed Melanie's number again.

He watched her pick up the phone. Watched her push the call away with a skillful tap. Watched her not breaking her composure, as though the call did not happen, before jumping right back into a lively conversation with Mateo, laughing.

It was the first time Alejandro had ever experienced the broiling rage of a man scorned. Storms pooled over his mien as he stormed his way swiftly to Melanie's table. "Old friend, huh? Now what kind of old friend would mind if you answer your husband's number?"

Hearing Alejandro's voice, Melanie leaped to her feet with a thud. "Why are you here?!"

Alejandro leveled a quick glare at her before training his eyes on Mateo. "So, you're gonna explain or what? Beg pardon, mate, but I'm gonna have to ask you to explain your a**. Why are you dining in a refined place like this with my wife?"

Mateo was not the least bit panicked. He, too, rose to his feet with aplomb and studied Alejandro with interest. Then, he extended a hand to him. “You must be Alejandro Smith, yes? Your reputation is quite far-reaching! I am Mateo Rodriguez; I think I’m qualified to be called Melanie’s childhood friend. Though... we haven’t exactly seen each other for a pretty long time.”

Alejandro espied the jewelry box laying before Melanie’s seat, and a veneer of hardened steel coated his eyes. He ignored Mateo’s hand—still raised in midair—and hissed, “Home. Now.”

Mateo was not embarrassed at all; he retracted his unreciprocated gesture as though it was something natural to be expected. “You’re having a misunderstanding, methinks. Melanie and I were just catching up for old time’s sake over a simple meal.”

And yet Melanie was heavily dolled up—a telling detail that Alejandro did not miss. No other explanation made a lick of sense to him.

Melanie was earnestly worried that Alejandro might create a scene right there and then, so she snatched Alejandro’s hand and lowered her voice. “Stop it! This isn’t what you think it is… You want me to go back? Fine. We’ll talk when we’re back in the estate. Teo? I’m so sorry for this. Seems that I have to go now… I’ll be footing the bill. Also, thank you for the gift.”

Mateo, big-hearted as he was, nodded. “No worries, I understand. Go, don’t let me keep you. Oh! You don’t have to pay; lemme handle it.”

Melanie tugged Alejandro out of the establishment before finally releasing a sigh of relief. “Why are you here?”

The longer his eyes stayed on that cursed box, the more it looked like an eyesore to Alejandro. “What was gonna happen if I weren’t here, huh? Spending your night elsewhere from home tonight?”

Melanie frowned. “What do you mean? Our marriage isn’t annulled yet; I know there are lines not to be crossed. At the very least, I know better than to drink myself stupid, offer myself up for any woman, and then go home with her mark on me! You might be a disgusting, debauch scumbag, but don’t, for one second, think that’s true for literally everyone else in the world. Honestly, why are you even here? Hoping to catch an affair in action? Please. Teo and I are childhood friends, for God’s sake. We met by happenstance just this evening, which was why we planned to catch up at night over an innocuous meal!

“You know what puzzles me the most? You never gave a damn about what I did in the past. So why is whoever I’m eating with suddenly a big deal to you now? Wow, should I be honored for how rare this is?”

Alejandro reached his boiling point. In retaliation, he raised his voice too. “It was just a f**king lipstick stain—and that was proof that I’ve f**ked other women?! You think I offered myself to them of my own volition? Hell, those sluts threw their disgusting kisses all over me themselves; I didn’t know jacksh*t about it!” he fumed. “Don’t f**king twist that one-time incident to fit your biased narrative while you’ve been blatantly—shamelessly—addressing that man only with an affectionate ‘Teo!’ all the damn time. Look at yourself! Look at how dressed-up you are for an ‘innocuous’ meal… You’re f**king telling me that the two of you share no feelings for each other?!”

Melanie was suddenly reminded of the cryptic words Mateo had said, causing her sense of righteousness to falter a little. Yes, she harbored no romantic undertone at all, but that did not mean Mateo’s intention was as innocent as hers, did it?

Chapter 1787

Just as she remained silent for a few seconds, Alejandro was so angry that he immediately kicked a car that was parked by the side. “We’ll talk about it when we go back!”

Both of them each drove their own car during the journey back, hence it was only natural that there wasn't any interaction between them. When they both returned to Alejandro's manor, Melanie did not seem to be in a good mood because of what Alejandro had just said.

However, Alejandro had an even worse expression on his face. It was as though Melanie had not gone out for a meal with Mateo, but he had caught her in bed instead.

When Millie rushed up towards Alejandro, he did not pick her up to hug her. Instead, he had the nanny take Millie away. "Melanie Lark, upstairs with me, now!"

Frankly, Melanie was slightly frightened when she saw the look on Alejandro's face. 'Who knows what's going to happen the moment the bedroom door closes? He has actually never laid a hand on me, but I've never seen him so angry before…'

However, Melanie still followed Alejandro to the bedroom with the pretense that she had not done anything wrong. The moment she entered, Alejandro locked the door behind her. Then, he pulled her into his arms and violently sealed her lips.

Initially, Melanie did not struggle since Alejandro was already very angry, hence struggling more would only anger him further, causing their discussion to break down even faster. However, gradually, Melanie began to suffocate and Alejandro had begun to hurt her. Thus, she rejected him with all her might and finally evaded his kiss. Then, she took a deep breath of fresh air and said, "What are you doing?!"

Alejandro did not reply and picked Melanie up before throwing her onto the bed. Then, he said with a cold voice, "Aside from this, what else can I do? You're my woman, is there a problem?"

Melanie thought that Alejandro was being unreasonable, plus there was a little humiliation in his actions, so her eyes began to turn red.

Alejandro frowned and released her hand as his movements became slightly more gentle. However, he did not expect for Melanie to slap him in the face the moment she lifted her hand.

Alejandro was frozen on the spot and angrily glared at her. “Are you crazy?!”

Tears began to well up in Melanie’s eyes as she looked down at him. “I’m not crazy, you are. Did that slap hurt? Are you very angry? However, your actions have hurt me so much more than that slap!”

Alejandro’s face turned so dark that it was frightening. He was very angry because almost no one had ever dared to slap him. He would neither slap her back nor lay a finger on her, but he would use another method to seek his revenge!

Melanie yelled out from the bottom of her heart, “I want a divorce! I can’t stay here for a second longer!”

Then, Alejandro got off the bed and lit up a cigarette before he casually said, “Sure, I’ll get Jett to send me a copy of the divorce papers over here right now, so long as you have the courage to sign the papers. Mateo seems to have the intention of staying for a while on this trip, doesn’t he? The Rodriguezes seem to have been developing rather well over the past few years, but they’re far from coming near the Smiths. Hence, destroying them will only take a matter of minutes. Try me if you don’t believe me! Stop bringing up divorce every time, and try coming up with something fresh.”

Melanie was so angry that she could not even utter a word.

After Alejandro was done smoking, he gave Jett a phone call. “Find out the reason why Mateo has returned to the country. I want an answer right now!”

‘If I find out that Mateo has returned for Melanie, I’m definitely not going to let that asshole leave the Capital! Both profit and women are lines that I’ll never let anyone cross!’

Chapter 1788

During the weekend, in order to avoid Alejandro, Melanie asked both Arianne and Tiffany out for a mini gathering. She intentionally let Alejandro know where she was going so that he wouldn’t go “berserk” again.

Both Arianne and Tiffany did not bring their children with them, hence it was only Melanie who had brought Millie with her. Tiffany even teased Melanie as she said, “After going through so much trouble to come out to play, you’ve actually brought your daughter with you as well. Wouldn’t you find it annoying? Melanie, you should take it easy occasionally; everyone knows that you’re the ‘perfect mother’...”

Melanie looked slightly fatigued because of the sleepless nights caused by Alejandro’s torment. “Millie is a good girl, so I bring her with me wherever I go. Plus, it’s not annoying since I’m used to it.”

When Arianne noticed that Melanie did not look well, she asked with a concerned expression, “Are you alright? Are you sick? You look very pale…”

Melanie was feeling depressed inside and initially did not intend on saying anything but ended up spilling the beans as she said, “I’m not sick, I’m just feeling exhausted. A childhood friend of mine has returned to the country and he asked me out for a meal when we coincidentally bumped into each other. However, Alejandro actually found me and thought that I was having some sort of unspeakable affair with my childhood friend… Explaining the situation to him was useless as well, so I’m very frustrated. When he found me, I was just in the midst of having a meal with Teo at a western restaurant. I have no idea how he could actually think about the situation that way; he’s never said anything even when I used to return home late at night.”

Tiffany heartlessly said, “That’s good, it shows that he cares for you. He didn’t care about you in the past, so he did not mind it at all. What do you have to be frustrated about?”

Melanie heaved a sigh. “It’s not as simple as you think. I no longer want to wait for another 100 days anymore, I want to have a divorce immediately. However, he’s now using Teo to threaten me whenever I bring it up. I can’t just get an innocent person involved in this, can I? He won’t listen to my explanation and thinks of me like that without properly investigating the matter. I’m so angry! I don’t care if it’s because he cares about me or whatever; he’s in the wrong no matter what. What’s Teo going to think of me in the future?”

Arianne pondered for a moment before she said, “At this moment, you shouldn’t show that you’re angry. The angrier you are, the more suspicious you will appear. Men are all the same—the moment they come to a conclusion about something, your explanations will only look like you’re hiding something from them. Therefore, the only thing you can do now to make him feel secure is to go with the flow instead of against it. I know that the two of you are now arguing about getting a divorce, so this may be a little difficult for you, but you won’t be able to get what you wish for for the time being, would you? Therefore, why don’t you wait for a while until this matter dies out? Who knows, you might just change your intentions of getting a divorce by the end of it. Tiffany’s right though, from a certain point of view, he’s treating you like this because he cares for you.”

Melanie felt slightly uneasy. “Is that true? But, why do I get the feeling that he’s doing it because that’s just how he is? I never had many guys around me in the past, so he was more relaxed. However, now that Teo has suddenly showed up, he’s finally triggered the sensitive side of him. Based on his character,

he'd never allow anyone to harm his profits, including his woman. Moreover, I'm more like his personal asset to him, so it's a little forced to say that he cares for me."

Arianne and Tiffany looked at each other. 'Are things really as Melanie described? There's no man who would wish for his woman to have an affair with another man; this is a true fact, whether he loves her or not.' At that thought… They did not know how they should answer her.

Chapter 1789

Suddenly, Melanie's phone rang. She took a look at the notification on the screen and gently took a breath before she answered the phone call. "Hello? Teo?"

On the other end of the phone call, Mateo spoke with a very relaxed tone. "What are you busy with these days? You left in a hurry the last time, so there were many things that I wasn't able to talk to you about. I doubt your husband would mind if we meet up in daylight this time, so why don't we go out for a meal?"

Melanie was slightly aggrieved as she looked at Tiffany and Arianne before she agreed. "Sure, give me an address and I'll be right there. Also, is it ok if I bring along my two friends? About last time… I'm really sorry, my husband has a strange temper."

Mateo laughed as he said, "No worries, it's understandable. In fact, I'm happy that he cares for you. It was my mistake for not thinking it through and calling you out at night. I'll send you the address now, come over with your friends then."

After the phone call got disconnected, Melanie went off to meet Mateo after calling Tiffany and Arianne along with her. The address that Mateo sent her was nearby where Melanie was at that moment, so she did not even need to waste any money to hail a taxi.

The more understanding Mateo was, the more Melanie felt embarrassed. ‘Compared to Alejandro, who’s petty, it’s even harder to interact with Mateo.’

Mateo had reserved a VIP room at a high class restaurant nearby. When the trio arrived, he warmly greeted them and said, “You’ve arrived quite early. Please, have a seat and order whatever you’d like to eat. Help yourselves.”

Such a wealthy gentleman who did not seem to have a shred of arrogance in him subconsciously made them feel comfortable. In fact, even Arianne suddenly had a good impression of Mateo, the kind that two strangers would have when they first met each other.

After they sat down, Mateo handed over the menu to the three ladies like a gentleman and casually played with Millie. “Do you still remember who I am? We’ve met before.”

Millie laughed so much that a row of pearly white teeth showed. “Yes, you helped my mama carry stuff. Nice guy!”

Indeed, a likeable person would be liked no matter where they went, even Millie had a good impression of Mateo.

After they were done ordering, Mateo suddenly looked at Melanie with a serious expression and asked, “When you went back home the other day, did your husband give you any trouble? I’ve always felt uneasy ever since and thought of calling you, but I was afraid that it would cause an even bigger misunderstanding. He seems to have misunderstood something, hasn’t he…?”

Melanie forced a wry smile. “No, it was resolved after I explained the situation to him; he’s not that petty. You shouldn’t worry about it. In fact, it’s me who should be apologizing to you.”

Mateo heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s good then.” As he said that, he looked at Arianne. “We meet again, Arianne.”

Arianen was slightly startled. “Huh? Mr. Rodriguez, have we… met somewhere before?”

Mateo laughed as he said, “You probably never noticed me, but we were both in Southline University. It’s probably because of a coincidence, but I’ve got a deeper impression of you in my head. Also, I’ve got a rather good memory; I remember that you and Tiffany were together most of the time. Oh, that’s right, I also remember that the two of you and Will would form a ‘three man team’.”

‘In that case, the three of them were actually schoolmates.’ At that thought, Melanie was slightly surprised as she said, “Were you really schoolmates? What a coincidence.”

Arianne scoured through her memories to try and recall, but she really couldn’t remember Mateo being there. ‘However, it’s no surprise though. I was focused solely on my studies at the time, so I never paid attention to whoever was in the school. In the past, I had Tiffany and Will within my circle of friends, but now, there’s only Tiffany…’

Chapter 1790

“I’m sorry, but I really can’t recall, probably because I was more of a bookworm back then,” said Arianne embarrassedly as she smiled.

However, Mateo did not seem to mind. “It’s fine, there were so many people in the university, so it’s perfectly normal that you wouldn’t notice me. I suppose it’s a kind of fate that we were in the same university previously.”

At the dining table, they chatted happily and had a lot of common topics to talk about.

After they were done eating, Arianne announced that she had to leave first. She had to pay more attention to Smore since he was going to attend school soon. Before Melanie or Tiffany could offer to send her back, Mateo took the lead and said, “I’ll send you home and come back to meet up with Melanie and Tiffany later on. It was so difficult to meet some of my acquaintances ever since I returned to the country; it’s boring, staying at home alone.”

Mateo’s character made it really hard for others to reject his offer, so Arianne nodded her head and accepted his offer.

On the way home, Mateo inadvertently asked about Will. “Why haven’t I heard about Will from you? I heard that the two of you didn’t end up in a relationship together. You… married Mark Tremont.”

Arianne had long but moved on from that matter, so she said in a relaxed tone, “I suppose we weren’t meant to be. However, it’s fine though. We’ve both got our own families and are living well. Mark treats me pretty good as well.”

Mateo turned his head to glance at Arianne. “Is that so? Then… That’s good…”

‘Was it just me, or was there a hint of disappointment in his words just now?’ However, when Arianne recalled that the two of them weren’t actually familiar with each other, she dropped the idea.

Mateo drove Arianne directly to the main gates of Tremont Estate. When Arianne got out of his car, she waved towards him and said, “Sorry for bothering you. Bye now, drive safe.”

As she watched Mateo drive off into the distance, Arianne finally turned around and entered the gates. Just as she arrived at the patio, she noticed that Mark was standing not too far away from her with a dark expression on his face. Hence, she explained, “A schoolmate of mine sent me home; he’s Melanie’s childhood friend. The four of us had a meal together and I had to come home first, so he gave me a lift.”

Mark frowned as he said, “In that case, why didn’t Tiffany or Melanie send you back? Both of them had driven on their own, hadn’t they?”

Arianne smiled and gently punched Mark on the chest. “Oh so sour, the pot of vinegar has spilled; I better hurry up and hold it upright. If you’re really concerned about it, I’ll bring you along when I go out with my girl friends again next time. It just so happens that we’re short of a pair of hands to carry our shopping bags.”

Was Mark such a cajoling person? He lightly scoffed and said, “In your dreams. Do I seem like the kind of man who carries shopping bags? If I see another man drive you home ever again, I’ll consider him my love rival and handle him as such.”

Arianne laughed hysterically. “Who would dare to be Mr. Tremont’s love rival? Could you have more self confidence in yourself? You actually dare to think of the stuff that I myself wouldn’t even dare imagine. Also, since you’ve been at home the entire day, did you teach Smore how to read and write? I don’t want him to be clueless when he goes to school.”

Mark had a headache whenever he thought about that. “He has no interest in reading or writing at all. All he likes to do is play with his toys and draw. Plus, you couldn’t even deal with him, so what makes you think I could? Raising a child is so tiring; I’ve given up after just taking care of him for the morning. Therefore, I’ll leave the afternoon session to you while I head back to the company. I’ll be back as soon as I’m done there.”

Arianne rolled her eyes in return. “Men are all the same, hoping to take the shortcut in whatever you do and hiding away in a faraway place whenever something annoying comes up. Could you be a little more capable? Women have had to do everything to give birth to a child from start to finish while the men contribute so little. Who gives you the right to neglect your own son?”