Ruling 1831

Chapter 1831

Mark yanked his tie loose as a fit of anxious frenzy seized him, and he strode to the couch for a seat.

“So? You think I’m the one behind it too, don’t you?! A stupid requital against that Mateo Rodriguez? — You really believe that I would be behind any of this?!”

Arianne said nothing. She suspected him, but she doubted that suspicion just as much as she doubted him. When pressed, she had no idea what to say.

All her deafening silence succeeded in doing was to pour fuel into Mark’s fire. In the blink of an eye, he rose to his feet and grabbed Arianne by the chin, hard. “What are you implying? Melanie suspects me, and now, in her footsteps, so do you? If this were my doing, mark my words, I would not keep my lips shut on the matter nor bend over backward trying to hide it from you; rather, I would confess—plainly—to you that I want Rodriguez dead! So why am I being accused of a crime that I have not a single connection to, let alone pulled strings behind?!”

Pain flared in response to his tightening clench, and Arianne furrowed her eyebrows. “C-Calm down…! I… admit I did suspect you, but… but—”

She had not finished her sentence before Mark released his grip just as a flitting but tangible undercurrent—acute desolation, and many other complicated emotions that Arianne could not pinpoint— swept across his eyes. He let go of her sullenly before a slight, mirthless smirk crept into his face. “So, you did. Good, good. Suspecting malevolence in me all for this… other man; how magnanimous of you. Tell me, Arianne. Who am I in your eyes?” he sneered. “Who—the—f**k am I?!”

Smore sensed the direction the conversation was going and grabbed his mother's hand fearfully. "M-Mom, can you not fight with Dad, p-please?"

"It will be all right, sweetie," Arianne replied in an undertone. "We're not fighting. Not really. But you should probably go out and play, okay? Don't be scared…"

Smore refused to heed his mother. The Mark Tremont of now was terrifying for a child, and he was scared that the moment he stepped out of the scene, Mark would start throwing punches at Arianne. In the eyes of the child, Mommy was small and feeble and weak while Daddy had the upper-hand in every physical aspect he could see. If Daddy started going physical, Mommy could not possibly defend herself.

Fortunately, Mark was just as averse to the idea of starting an altercation with Arianne right in front of his son. Instead, he released his growing ball of fury into hurling an unfortunate antique china vase nearby, shattering it completely. Then, he took the residue of his broiling temper with him as he stormed upstairs.

His outburst shocked Smore, who visibly shuddered. Arianne could feel his tremor through his hand in hers, and as her heart ached she crouched to his height and pulled him into a hug. "Shh, shh. Don't be scared. Daddy is just angry; doesn't mean he's gonna hit us—he just won't. It's Mommy's fault for doubting him, you see? The most important thing between two people in a relationship is trust, and Mommy didn't do that well…"

"But Mom," Smore said, pointing at her foot, with his eyes reddening, "You're bleeding…"

It was only then that Arianne realized that a piece from the shattered chinaware had ricocheted from the ground and bloodied her foot. Still, it was a light nick that was in no way serious, so Arianne's immediate reaction was to check for Smore's injuries. The boy was within vicinity just like she was!

Arianne let out a sigh of relief; her cursory search revealed no wound. “Daddy didn’t do it intentionally, okay? And he didn’t know this would happen, too, so don’t cry, sweetie. Go, play. Mommy needs to talk to Daddy for a bit. In the meantime, you stay put at home these days and don’t go to school for the time being, okay? That way, Mommy wouldn’t have to worry about you.”

Smore’s fingers closed around the corner of her shirt, showing no sign of letting go. “But what if…? What if Dad hits you? He’s so… scary when he’s angry, Mom. Can you please, please, please not talk to him?”

Arianne could not understand what it was about Mark that terrified Smore. Was it because she was so accustomed to seeing the man’s tempestuous tantrums growing up that she could even characterize her impassivity as being numbed? Did she start out similarly to the way Smore reacted right now? In the past, whenever Mark’s belligerent temper reared its head, little Arianne would start to shiver in the clutches of abject terror—

Arianne instinctively wanted to remedy Smore’s souring impression of his own father. “Hey now, you can’t just… remember your father’s angry look all the time, you know? Isn’t he a good dad to you, hmm? He almost never hit you before, hasn’t he? And he dotes on you. Why are you scared? Besides, he doesn’t even get mad that frequently, either—so you shouldn’t think of him as a monster like that, understand? He won’t hit Mommy. Relax. See, you’ve only been with him for three years; you don’t know him enough. But me? I’ve been with him… for more than a decade…”

Chapter 1832

It had been more than a decade since she was bound to him.

Whether Mark would ever begin the spiral into domestic abuse—Arianne knew from the bottom of her heart.

Comforting Smore later, she started toward the stairs to where Mark was.

The shut door had become less of an entrance to the study, and more an impenetrable stone wall forced between the two of them, separating them—plunging them into oppressive gloom.

Downtrodden, she pushed it open. Her arrival was greeted by a pungent stench of cigarettes. It choked her so hard a fit of coughs began to seize her.

Hearing her sputters, Mark furtively crushed the ember on his cigarette to snuff it out. “Why are you here?” he bristled. “Leave me alone.”

Arianne willed herself to acclimate to the mire without letting out another sputter. “I’m… sorry… I admit… I suspected you… B-But I just want to be… honest with you! I’ve hoped against hope that it isn’t you, and c-compared to my suspicion… the amount of my faith in you is more!” she proclaimed. “So please… Don’t act like this! Y-You’re scaring Smore…!”

Frustration, strewn with guilt, quickly crossed his eyes. “Damn it, you think I’ve wanted that to happen?! If those Rodriguez bastards continue to incessantly vex us, I won’t hold back anymore!” he fumed. “If Mateo Rodriguez turns out too dead to come home, then maybe I should help his idiotic parents reunite with him in the afterlife, then! They’ve clearly branded me as the culprit no matter what, anyway!”

Arianne was just about to counter him when her phone rang again.

She looked up at Mark. Then, instead of walking away, she answered the call right in front of him.

It was Melanie, once again with more news about Mateo.

“Arianne! The kidnappers! They… They’ve sent a new message! They… They sent a parcel to Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez a-a-and… A-and… it’s… h-his thumb…”

Already Melanie’s voice faltered into a quiet sob. The message was obvious—Mateo might not be dead yet, but he had lost his thumb already. It was a warning written in blood; a herald to a certain death.

Arianne had to force an affectation of calmness. “W-What else? Did the kidnappers say anything else?”

“T-They left a m-memo in the s-s-same parcel. They said… They said they are p-punishing his parents,” Melanie squeezed the words between choked sobs. “P-Punishment for… calling the c-cops… They said if they don’t r-receive any money within t-three days, they will…. they will… they will kill him!”

Arianne felt strength seeping out of her legs. She felt them failing her ever so slightly, just as her tongue failed at giving her words that could comfort her devastated friend.

Mark suddenly snatched her phone from her hand. “Have an expert determine if that thumb was lopped off before or after he’s dead; the most important thing is to ascertain if Mateo Rodriguez is alive or gone. The Rodriguezes have powerful connections, don’t they? Mobilize those alliances and launch a full search for the kidnappers’ possible whereabouts. It’s highly likely that the abductor isn’t alone; even so, even the most manned cabal will quickly find a frequent transfer of an adult man like Mateo very inconveniencing, especially since a large part of the city has already been subjected under strict surveillance for his sake. If anything, you people should expect the abductors to have killed him already,” he told Melanie. “And if that’s the case, then maybe everyone should stop getting hung up over this for nothing!”

Just like that, he hung up.

He did not sound at all amiable; in fact, he even sounded a little too blunt and merciless. Tonal acridity aside, his observations were trenchant—at this point, the most important thing was to determine if Mateo was dead or alive.

Mateo Rodriguez's case had become a heated topic by now. Naturally, when the gravity of an incident involving Mark reached Jackson, the man could not sit out of his best friend's quandary. With Tiffany, he quickly visited the Tremont Estate.

Tiffany's latest spleen was directed at keyboard warriors shamelessly fabricating conspiracies and rumors on the internet. As soon as she plopped down on her seat, her indignant outburst followed. "God, Ari! You have no idea what those douchebags say about you on the internet! They are yammering about you being all knotted up with Mateo despite being a married woman, and that your 'slutty' behavior caused this entire tragedy! These stupid internet judges have already made up their mind that you're the biggest bad guy in this whole thing—they say it's you who murdered Mateo!"

Chapter 1833

One look at Mark's stormy expression prompted Jackson to quickly cup his hand over Tiffany's mouth. "—I mean, people say the sh*ttiest things everywhere on the internet, riiiiight? Who needs you to remind us all about it? So how about we zip our lips on this one, honey, and move on to discussing the solution," he quickly chimed in. "We didn't wanna intervene at first, but Mark's gotten dragged into it. It's in all of our best interest to solve this as soon as possible, because as it stands, this is seriously staining Tremont Enterprise too much."

Mark let out a steely sneer. "And the world never changes. Who cares about evidence or proof? All it takes to damn anyone to death is a someone's piehole. But I'm not just any weakling who can be taken

down by some unfounded rumor, and good luck on getting me to care about Rodriguez's abduction," he bristled. "Why should I squander my effort in saving him—what, just to prove that I'm innocent? I'm already innocent, for God's sake, whether I help or not. I have no obligation nor reason to be involved, and I couldn't give a damn about what these worthless bystanders say."

Jackson waited for a second to pass and argued, "Mark. Are you serious about not giving a care? I get it, man. Sh*t has hit the fan. It complicates us intervening… but us appearing to help will ultimately benefit you in the long run. Think about it. If Mateo could return alive and in one piece—great, hallelujah. But what if he turned up a piece of dead meat? What do you think the optics will be for you? How will the consensus characterize you? You said it yourself—evidence isn't exactly the prerequisite for disinformation and smear jobs here."

Mark was as stubborn as a mule. "Sorry, I missed the part where that's my problem. I especially don't buy that what these irrelevant louts say will be powerful enough to sandbag me into a corner, and I'm especially above wasting my time trying to analyze every bullsh*t they pulled out of their a**es. So, no thanks. I'm not going to do anything about this at all, period. I appreciate your intention, but I suggest you save up your energy too, Jack," he rebuffed. "As we speak, Mateo's severed thumb has been returned to the Rodriguezes. No doubt its analysis report will come out shortly... Who knows? Maybe the man's already met his Maker."

Tiffany shivered. "Y-You really think so? You really think Mateo is, um, dead? God help us, what a loss to the world that'd be…"

Jackson's finely-arched eyebrows immediately raised. "Whoa, whoa, whoa. 'A loss to the world'? Lady, you've only met him through Melanie for a while! And maybe had meals over in his restaurant a few times, so? Gonna explain to me why you're pulling that long face? ...Are you two really that close of friends?"

Tiffany was in no mood to argue with Jackson, so she sidled to Arianne before taking her seat next to her on the couch. "Ari, why are you so quiet today?"

Arianne shook her head to clear her thoughts. “Nothing. I just hope… Well, that Mateo’s still alive.”

Mark, expressionless, suddenly leaped to his feet and marched up the stairs.

Jackson stole a glance at his behavior, obviously befuddled, and turned back to consider Arianne briefly. Finally, he rose and followed Mark, whispering, “What’s the big idea now? Don’t tell me… You think Mateo and Arianne have something going on between them, Mark? Because I honestly smell nothing fishy about ‘em… Though, I have to admit, this Mateo is quite the chad, isn’t he? How does he do it—making three different women think he’s some sort of angel simultaneously?”

“Would you earnestly not mind your wife hugging some other man under any circumstances?” Mark muttered under his breath.

Jackson swore something in his chest shivered. “Uh hem, well… Yeah, you aren’t wrong in being pissed about it. F**k, I would be pissed too if it were me. By the way, Mark… You aren’t the one pulling the strings behind the scene… right?”

Mark whipped his head to face Jackson. “Et tu, Brute?”

The man quickly shook his head. “Whaaa? Natch, no! I was just saying! Well... You know you’re the biggest suspect for the time being, right? No wonder the Rodriguez family’s watching you like hawks.”

Downstairs, now that Jackson was absent, Tiffany allowed the full gradient of her dread to color her face. “Ari, if Mateo is really, really dead… what are we going to do?” she wondered aloud. “I know we’ve only met him for a bit, but I really feel like he’s a pure-hearted sweetheart, you know? Oh God, a guy this pure and good and nice just… vanished from this world like that. It’s giving me depression, okay? And then there’s the fact that he’s Melanie’s childhood friend! She must be in torment right now, huh?

“Like, imagine a person, alive and well, was just there with you a while ago then suddenly turns up dead and gone. You can never see ‘em again in a blink of an eye, just like that. Jesus Christ, isn’t that the single-most terrifying thing ever? It’s just like Robin jumping off the building all of a sudden back then. Even now, whenever my mind goes back to it, I feel so powerless…

Chapter 1834

Arianne pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “What do you think I can do? What can I even say at this point? You saw Mark’s attitude—he’s not gonna help, ‘period.’ Even if the consensus is literally pulling his reputation apart, he’s basically ossified into this goddamned attitude. At this point, I can only hope that Mateo’s abduction genuinely has zero connection to him.”

If Mark was the mastermind… Then Arianne would be exactly as guilty as the talking heads online painted her to be.

She would be the bane whose existence sealed Mateo’s fate.

She should not have met Mateo.

Tiffany widened her eyes. “Ari! No frickin’ way—you can’t really think Mark’s behind this, right? What the hell even makes you think that?!”

“It’s just! It’s, well, I… I mean…! I don’t think it’s him from the way he reacts?” Pressed and bedeviled, Arianne’s answer had turned into a disheveled meandering. “I pray it’s not him, I really do, and I don’t think it’s him! I just… I just want Mateo’s abduction’s timing to be a coincidence! I want all of this to have zero connection with Mark… And now, all I want is for Mateo to be safe…”

A rambling like that would raise suspicion even in the densest, most clueless woman, and Tiffany was one such person in one such situation. “A-Ari? You’re getting seriously hung up over this… aren’t you? You’ve got doubts, but you’re also hung up about yourself doubting him… right? Oh, Ari… You really shouldn’t. The boys are all still babbling about god-knows-what upstairs, so maybe Jackson’s gathered everything by now, you know? I can help you by asking him—you know, pry his piehole open and everything. Then we’ll know whether Mark was ever the culprit or not!”

Arianne shook her head. “No. Forget it. It’s only gonna cause trouble… So let’s just… wait and see.”

That night, Arianne dreamt of Mateo’s harrowing death.

She was not able to sleep a wink at all after that.

In the meantime, Mark continued working in his office despite the deluge of negativity Mateo’s case had brought.

The analysis report arrived soon enough. And from the severed thumb, the expert had determined that it was lopped off… from a corpse.

Mateo Rodriguez was already dead.

The news sucked out everything in Arianne's mind, leaving only blankness in its wake. She could not believe it. She could not.

If the kidnappers' goal was money, then why would they kill their hostage so soon?!

Arianne once again took up a trip behind Mark's back, this time to the forensic expert appointed to examine Mateo's severed thumb. He was a young fellow, yet he appeared confident in his ability. "I'm sure of it… Teo is dead. The only thing left to do is to capture those bastards and find Teo's body."

His words stunned her for a time; it was only after she recovered her senses that she remembered the examiner calling Mateo by his nickname. She was just about to comment on this when the man answered, "Teo's a long-time friend of mine. I didn't know that it would be me who would be the one to pronounce him dead."

Arianne made no reply. Her eyes merely meandered around, stopping by the nametag on the examiner's chest, before she turned around and dragged her feet away like a walking dead.

The sun outside was a bit too blinding. The dog days were upon the city, and dead bodies decompose faster in a stuffy weather like this. No one knew the method the kidnappers had used to dispose of Mateo's body. No one could tell if they could even find his body in the end.

Arianne's mind raced with harrowing scene after scene until she began to feel an assault of lightheadedness. Her gut was churning like a sea disturbed by a storm.

She threw herself under the shades of a tree next to the road and emptied the content of her stomach.

Out of nowhere came a packet of tissues. Arianne eschewed looking back at the owner of the helping hand and grabbed the packet, mumbling her thanks.

“You are… Arianne Wynn?”

She whipped her head to face him. It was the forensic expert from before; the one whose name she had managed to catch in a glimpse: Geralt Bernard.

Arianne’s ashen face nodded. “Y-yes. You… know me?”

Something burbled beneath Geralt’s eyes, something akin to an ambiguous smile. “Anyone who lives in this metropolis would have known all about Mrs. Tremont by now, no? I’ve heard that Teo met you before his abduction, Mr. Tremont was there when it happened, and that a skirmish ensued. I’ve got a question on my mind—does Mr. Tremont seem reasonable as a suspect?” he said. “You know how things are shaping up to be right now, right? The consensus online, the rumors and speculations permeating the internet… I understand your difficulties, but I have mine as well. Teo… can’t die without proper closure. I want to get to the bottom of this.”

Chapter 1835

Arianne’s denial was intuitive. “No! It wasn’t him, it’s got nothing to do with him! If mob consensus is enough to proclaim anyone as guilty or not, then what do we need the law for?! Look, I get that you’re his friend and this is something you must do, but Mateo’s fate saddens me too…”

Geralt scanned her quickly. “Hmm, I can tell. The case is weighing you down, which begs the question: why? Is it only because Teo liked you? Deep down inside, you must be afraid as well, aren’t you? Afraid of the possibility that Mr. Tremont was the one behind it?” he said. “You’re on a spiraling track into the eye of the storm, aren’t you? You feel guilty… thinking that Teo’s death is related to you.”

Was Geralt trying to bait her?

The realization of his intention propelled Arianne to recover her composure. Deadpanned, she replied, “You people of forensic science have quite a unique way of expressing yourself, don’t you? And you guys are really adept at holding yourself together without a crack on your façade, too. Regardless, you’re very likely wrong on this one. Mateo and I might not have known each other for the longest time, but we considered each other as friends. Discarding his one-sided affection of me, I was still delighted to have befriended him, especially since he was a very kind, nice guy. Naturally, his tragedy aches me—but that’s all there is to it.”

Geralt drew a shallow intake of breath. “I sense your rising wariness and hostility, though it’s not at all surprising. You were raised by Mark Tremont himself; I understand the instinct to defend. Besides, I wholeheartedly agree that consensus cannot be judged nor evidence of crime, but that is different from what I hope,” he said. “See, I hope that stab in your conscience will stay with you if the investigation reveals Mark Tremont to have played a role. It’s only fair for Teo that way.”

Arianne furrowed her eyebrows. Her gut instincts were telling her that continuing the conversation with this Geralt was ill-advised. “You should at least provide proof that this is connected to Mark first, don’t you think? It’s way too early to play jury and accuse him of anything!” she retorted. “Anyway, I’d rather be somewhere else, so you’ll have to excuse me. Thanks for the tissue.”

She quickly hailed a cab and left.

On the way to Tremont Tower, Arianne felt the throbbing in her head growing in intensity. She was drowsy, and she lost the fight against the creeping somnolence. With the last ounce of wakefulness, she told the driver to wake her up only when they had arrived at the destination.

Arianne lost count of time after that. At some point, she felt her body suspending in midair. Then a plunge before the ground crudely broke her momentum. Clambering footwork, disappearing from her ears.

Pain shot up her body, waking her up. The first thing Arianne saw the moment she opened her eyes was sharp, stinging light that blinded her into seeing only white. It forced her to shut her eyes immediately just to ease out of the discomfort.

It was then that Arianne smelled an unwonted stench that reminded her of drugs. It seemed to be emanating from near her nostrils, but it reeked the most while it was circulating inside of her nose. Her body seemed deprived of all strength, too. Arianne could not even pick herself up from the floor!

Where was she? Did she not just hail a cab to return to her office earlier?!

Everything in her surrounding was a plain reminder—Arianne had been abducted!

Her mind raced back to Mateo's fate. A deluge of fear sprung out from the deepest recesses of her heart.

It had been broad daylight—exactly the time Mateo was taken! Had all these kidnappers grown so flagrant nowadays?! Who in the world would want her harmed?!

Suddenly, she felt icy coldness scraping against her face. Someone had splashed a bucket of cold water onto her face, which compelled her to wake up more.

Arianne's eyes took some time to adjust to the light before they took in her surroundings more clearly. She was in what looked like an impregnable basement-cum-storeroom. Memorabilia of quaint times flanked her, occasionally punctuated by the presence of antique toys from a decade or so ago.

It seemed that it had just been cleaned. She could not detect a single speck of dust and even the floor she was lying on was spotless.

Whose basement could this be? Judging from its size, Arianne surmised that the house itself it belonged to must also be big.

She had a feeling that her abductors were Mateo's parents!

Outside of the spotlight, near a decrepit bookshelf, a trembling figure approached Arianne slowly.

"And in the end, you too end up experiencing this. Now, how shall I impart a taste of all that Teo must have suffered… to you?"

Chapter 1836

Arianne's heart thumped against her chest. The approaching figure was none other than Mateo's mother herself?!

The same woman who had appeared in the Tremont Tower, scraping her knees as she bawled and begged for her son's life, was now inching toward Arianne with malefic flames in her eyes. It was as though Mrs. Rodriguez could not wait to skin Arianne alive before severing every single tendon in her body!

Only God knows what sort of plan was nestling inside the skull of a mother who just lost her son. Frightened, Arianne began to wriggle backward as hard as she could—until a wall cut off her retreating path.

She was cornered.

In panic, Arianne's squirming body knocked a shelf behind her, causing a red toy car to fall from its perch. The toy, after years of storage, had been reduced by time to become easily dismantled; it instantly smashed into a mess of disassembled parts.

Mrs. Rodriguez lunged forward like a woman possessed, scrambling for the remnants and salvaging them into her embrace. "My Teo! How could you?! These were his things—mementos of his childhood! But you... You're so cruel, you want to take even these away from me?! It's all your f**king fault! Why did Teo fall in love with a slutty c*nt like you?! You're married! You're f**king married! Why did you have to do it to him…? Why seduce him… Why?!"

Her outburst ended with a gut-wrenching keen exploding out of the agitated woman as she pressed whatever remained of the toy firmly in her arms. Her tearful wail was so anguished, so heart-wrenching—suddenly, Arianne felt her initial fear displaced. She began her attempt to touch Mrs.

Rodriguez in some capacity. But whatever drug she had been subjected to had yet left her system, and her previous struggle to put distance between herself and the woman had already exhausted too much of her energy.

Arianne lifted her hand multiple times, but each time, she had to feebly relent to gravity pulling it back down. “M-Mrs. Rodriguez? I… I know Mateo’s death is hurting you a lot. But we really don’t have any evidence that irrevocably points to Mark Tremont as the mastermind! I admit, I went to see Mateo that night, b-but he was the one who requested that we meet. He said he wanted only a hug, but it escalated into a misunderstanding... And even that miscommunication has been resolved…!”

Her words only served to antagonize Mrs. Rodriguez. Suddenly, she looked up, and her hard, sullen eyes took the form of a death glare. “You think we’re stupid? Who in this city doesn’t know the nadir that Tremont scum is willing to go for his own sake? Had you never gone to see Teo, this tragedy would have never happened! Stop making excuses for him, you b*tch! Who else would dare to commit such an atrocity other than that son of b*tch?!” she hissed darkly. “You… It’s you, it’s all you. Your fault! It’s your fault! Teo isn’t coming back anymore, he’s gone now, and it’s all because of you!

“I’ve only recently learned why he has never had a girlfriend, or why he never expressed any will to marry. He had no one! Because a b*tch had possessed his heart for years… Well, then! Go and keep his company in the afterlife, why won’t you?!”

Despair. Arianne felt a weight of despair seizing her. She could not possibly talk any sense into Mrs. Rodriguez—not at this moment. Arianne’s abduction was premeditated; the grieving woman must have planned it for a while now, she was sure.

Back there, Arianne had been so anxious to leave after her unnerving conversation with Geralt that she did not notice how coincidental the cab was to have pulled over for her at the right time. After that, she missed out on the driver’s atypical behavior. Worse still, Arianne had then fallen asleep almost as soon as she got in. And since the driver was likely one of Mrs. Rodriguez’s people, he must have done his part in bringing her here while Arianne was in deep slumber.

“Mrs. Rodriguez, please. I-I-I know I won't be able to do anything against you no matter what you plan to do with me. But know this, M-Mateo’s feelings for me come off as just as much of a s-shock as they are heavy! Before he told me about it, I had no idea he liked me, okay? I had no idea that it was me who had made him distance himself from other women for years!” Arianne explained. “I’m really sorry, Mrs. Rodriguez; I mean it. But please, you can’t just make up a conclusion of what happened out of thin air, can you?! More importantly, what’s done is done. Shouldn’t our main focus right now be on locating Mateo’s body and waiting for the cops to bring the culprits to law? And once we apprehend the criminals behind his abduction, the truth will be out!

“Listen. What can you achieve from killing me right now? Your son still won’t come back, while you’ve signed yourself up to a baleful end! Mateo was the only heir to the Rodriguez family’s business legacy, right? If you doom yourself with this, well, what do you expect your family to do next? I’m not saying all of this because I fear for my life or anything; I just want to advise you—don’t resort to actions that can bring you regret just because of a pain you’re feeling right now. I firmly believe that if the law enforcers could prove that Mark was the one behind it, then they won’t let him get away with it. It’s completely unnecessary to damn yourself like this, trust me!”

Arianne tried, but her attempt at appealing to her captor’s better angel did nothing to calm Mrs. Rodriguez down. Instead, she responded by clawing at Arianne’s face with her sharp-edged nails. “Shut the f**k up! Teo’s dead, you skank! Can’t you see yet? I’ve lost everything… There’s nothing about this family that can keep me anymore! But as long as there’s a way to avenge my poor, unfortunate son, I… will..

“And don’t think I know nothing about the shady business the Tremonts dealt in the past. Of course that Tremont bastard can evade the law; it’s not difficult at all for him, is it? As long as there’s ‘no evidence’, he’s practically untouchable, isn’t he? Well, then. All will be fine… as long as you die today!”

Chapter 1837

Arianne was in so much pain that she couldn’t but grimace; she could feel her warm blood flowing downwards from her cheek. Soon, a red “flower” bloomed on the front part of her shirt, near her chest.

Then, Arianne realized that her handbag was nowhere to be seen. ‘My phone’s in there, so it seems that I won’t even be able to call for help. Also, the acoustics in this basement must be very good based on its structure, so nobody will probably be able to hear me even if I shout as loud as I can. Furthermore, even if the Rodriguezes do hear me, I doubt anyone’s going to save me. They’re probably only going to torture me even more.’

Mrs. Rodriguez was in a crazed state when she found a fruit knife and forcefully pressed Arianne against the floor. Then, she gritted her teeth as she said, “My Teo’s thumb has been chopped off, so you’re going to suffer the same as him!”

Arianne’s forehead broke into beads of cold sweat. ‘Mrs. Rodriguez is so strong, I can’t seem to wring free no matter how hard I struggle.’

Just as the knife was about to cut the skin of Arianne’s finger, somebody kicked open the basement’s door. Then, Geralt rushed inside. “Let her go, Mrs. Rodriguez!”

When Mrs. Rodriguez saw Geralt, she regained some rationale as she slightly shifted the knife in her hand away. “Ralt? Why are you here? How did you know that… I kidnapped her? You’ve always been on very good terms with Teo, so you won’t stop me, will you? I’m sure you would want me to seek revenge for Teo as well, wouldn’t you?”

Geralt glanced at Arianne and had an expression of mixed feelings on his face. “Mrs. Rodriguez… The situation isn’t as you think it is. We’ve got to wait for the kidnappers to be caught and Teo’s body’s to be found before we come to a conclusion. Don’t you know this is illegal? Teo’s already gone, so are you still going to involve yourself any deeper than you already are?”

When Mrs. Rodriguez noticed that Geralt was defending Arianne, she growled as she said, “I’m not afraid of getting involved deeper! I’m willing to do anything at all, so long as I’m able to avenge Teo! I’ve already got everything planned out—once I kill Arianne and Mark, I’ll kill myself, so there’s no need to wait for the police to come and find me!”

With the knife in Mrs. Rodriguez’s hand, Geralt did not dare to make any sudden moves. Instead, he silently crept towards Arianne and stood between the both of them. “Mrs. Rodriguez… Please don’t do this, all right? Why don’t you calm down and carefully consider this: what would Teo think if you killed Arianne, the person whom he fancied for so many years? The night that Arianne met Teo, she did it so that Teo could let go of his past, so what wrong has she committed? This entire situation has got nothing to do with Arianne at all…”

‘I had no idea Geralt would end up becoming my saviour. As expected of a medical examiner, they’re always able to speak so logically.’

After Arianne was able to be clear of Geralt’s attitude towards her, she was slightly relieved. The water in her hair had mixed together with her sweat as it flowed into the wound on her face, causing a stinging pain that felt unpleasant.

It was possible that Mrs. Rodriguez was reminded of Mateo when she looked at Geralt. Although she was still in pain, her rationality slowly returned to normal. Suddenly, she released the knife in her hands and choked as she said, “Ralt, will you help me? Will you help seek justice for Teo? Will you help me look for evidence that shows that Mark Tremont was the one who caused Teo’s death? So long as you promise me, I’ll release Arianne.”

Geralt paused for a moment before he nodded his head. “I will, Mrs. Rodriguez. I’ll be taking her with me now, so please don’t do anything foolish anymore. By the way, Teo did leave me a letter meant for you previously. I’ll hand it to you when I get upstairs in a moment.”

Then, Geralt assisted Arianne as they left the basement. The basement was so suffocating that Arianne breathed in the fresh air outside desperately.

Afterwards, Geralt brought the letter and handed it to Mrs. Rodriguez before he led Arianne away from the Rodriguezes. 'So, the room above the basement is actually the Rodriguezes' manor. I must say, Mrs. Rodriguez is very bold. She had already readied herself for suicide once she took my life.'

Chapter 1838

Mrs. Rodriguez waited until both Geralt and Arianne had left before she opened up the personal letter that Mateo had left her. After she read it, Mrs. Rodriguez's mouth gaped open. By the time she regained her senses and wanted to ask Geralt some questions to clear some things up, his car had already driven away.

…

During the journey, Arianne was shivering non-stop. She was not sure why she was shivering as well; all she knew was that she was very cold despite the sun shining outside. In this kind of weather, it would be extremely dry and hot if the air-conditioner was not on in the car.

Geralt seemed to have noticed that something was wrong with Arianne, so he asked worriedly, "What's the matter? Are you cold?"

Arianne nodded her head. "Yes… a little… Could you increase the temperature of the air conditioner please?"

Geralt adjusted the temperature of the air-conditioner with one hand while holding the steering wheel with the other. “Done… But how could you be feeling cold in this weather? Is it because you were too frightened just before? Don’t worry, you’re safe now; you’ll be fine after you relax for a while. About that… Teo’s mom shouldn’t have done that, but could you please not pursue the matter? I’ll make sure to counsel her later on so that she doesn’t do anything irrational again.”

Arianne, who had just cheated death, found it difficult to regain her composure. ‘When I was confronting Mrs. Rodriguez in the basement, I thought I was calm enough, but now that I’ve escaped from there, I realized I’m not even the least bit calm. I’m frightened for my life and am still shivering until now.

‘I was so close to death’s door! I was so close to not being able to see Mark and Smore ever again!’

When Arianne stopped shivering so much, she said, “I know, I won’t pursue the matter. I can understand why she did it anyway. However, I won’t be able to go home in this state, nor would I be able to go to my office. If Mark finds out about this, he definitely wouldn’t leave this matter alone. Could you drop me off at a shopping mall so that I can buy another set of clothes to change into? I’ll also need to tend to the wounds on my face while I’m at it.”

By the time Arianne was done with everything, it was already close to 6 PM. Arianne asked Geralt to drop her directly at Tremont Enterprise. In fact, she had actually thought of hailing her own taxi, but her trauma stopped her from doing so—she did not want to experience being kidnapped for the second time.

When she arrived home, she looked at the mirror to check her wounds. ‘It’s a long wound, quite deep as well. I bled quite a lot before. I wonder if this will leave a scar…’

Arianne had already thought of her excuse. When Mark returned home and asked her about her wounds, she would just say that she accidentally fell and scratched herself. ‘Things are already messy enough now. I can’t let Mark find out about this incident.’

Before Mark returned home, Mary asked first. “Ari, what happened to your face?”

Arianne sighed. “I got unlucky and fell on the road, ending up with a scratch. Don’t worry, I’ve already tended to my wounds. I just need to wear a mask for the next few days ‘cause this is too ugly.”

Mary seemed to have some suspicions about Arianne’s explanation. When sizing her up, she noticed the wound on Arianne’s right thumb. “Did you really fall down? Sir called this afternoon to ask about you, saying you weren’t in the office. Your phone was also not in service before.”

Arianne panicked a little as she moved her hand behind her back. Mrs. Rodriguez had intended to cut off her thumb earlier, and although she didn’t actually go through with it in the end, there was a slight wound left behind. “I lost my phone along with my handbag. I guess someone stole it. It was missing when I came out of the bathroom at a cafe. Gosh, I was too careless. Today’s such an unlucky day for me. Don’t worry, I’ll give Mark a call later.”

After that, Mary did not probe any further. However, she inwardly complained at how careless Arianne had been. ‘Not only did she fall while walking, she even got her handbag stolen.’

After receiving Arianne’s phone call, Mark swiftly returned home.

When Arianne was confronted with Mark's inquiring gaze, her guilty conscience kicked in. 'My face and hand have wounds on them, and I've also lost my handbag. Although my explanation fooled Mary, will I be able to fool him?'

Chapter 1839

Mark frowned when he saw the shocking wound on Arianne's face. His tone also became panicked as he said, "What happened to you?! Where did you go? What happened?"

Arianne did not dare to meet his gaze and could only lower her head as she calmly said, "I fell, hence the wound. I didn't ignore your call on purpose. I lost my handbag, including my phone, wallet, and some other stuff. I'm sorry… for making you worry, but I'm fine."

Mark was no fool. He could tell whether or not the wound on Arianne's face was due to a fall after looking a little more closely. "Tell me the truth, don't lie to me. I'm very clear with your character. Who else would be more clear than me about your tells when you lie?"

Arianne had expected Mark not to believe her, so she pretended to be calm as she dragged Mark back to the bedroom. Then, she whispered in his ear as she said, "I said that because I was afraid that Mary would be worried. Truth is, my handbag wasn't stolen. Actually, I was robbed, and the wound on my face was from when I got scratched while struggling with the robbers… I was absolutely shocked at the time, but they merely wanted my money, so they didn't harm me. It's fine since I'm all right, right? Why don't we forget about it?"

Mark dropped all his suspicions and pulled Arianne into his embrace. "You scared me… I thought you had gotten into some kind of trouble… Can't you just not leave my sight? Why did you have to leave the office all of a sudden? You didn't even bring any guards with you. Don't do that ever again!"

Although Mark sounded domineering, it was mostly because he was concerned. Arianne hugged Mark back around his waist and laid safely in his arms. “All right, it won’t happen again. I’m sorry…”

Arianne’s cajoling had always worked on Mark, so no matter how angry he was, everything would be fine the moment she cajoled.

Suddenly, Smore pushed the door open and entered their bedroom. “Stop being so lovey-dovey. When can I go back to school? I haven’t met Lil’ P for a few days now. I want to play with him!”

Mark regained his serious expression and released Arianne. “Ahem, what nonsense are you on about? Do you know what lovey-dovey means? Didn’t I tell you not to go to school for the time being? Just treat it as your summer vacation. Don’t worry, you might be very passionate about going to school now, but that’ll pass very soon. After that, you’ll be crying and whining, saying that you don’t want to go to school anymore. I know because I’ve been through that, understand?”

Smore had a dubious look on his face. “I have so many friends at school, while it’s so boring here. I don’t want to stay at home. You didn’t want to go to school because you’re lazy!”

Mark was unable to refute Smore’s statement. ‘He wouldn’t believe me since he hasn’t experienced it for himself. Everybody’s the same anyway, so he’ll learn when he gets to that point. That’s how people learn from their mistakes.’

Actually, Arianne had not known that Mark did not want to go to school in the past. To her impression, he was the kind of person who would be very serious about going to school and doing his work. Forget everything else, he should have excelled academically. ‘Now that I think about it, Mark probably didn’t have a choice at the time. After all, he was the Tremonts’ successor, so it was not up to him whether he wants to or likes it. No matter how much he refuses, he still has to buck up and get it done.’

That night, Arianne had another nightmare.

Not only did she dream of Mateo's death, she even dreamed of herself being murdered by Mrs. Rodriguez.

As Arianne woke up in shock due to her nightmare, she disrupted Mark's sleep as well.

Mark switched on the lights and looked at her before he asked her in a daze. "Nightmare?"

Arianne shrunk herself into his arms and did not say a word. Mark was not aware of how frightened she was when she thought that she wouldn't be able to see him again. The devastation she felt in her dream kept on lingering in her mind adamantly…

Chapter 1840

Mark had actually noticed Arianne's abnormal behaviour over the past two days. He pondered for a moment before he said, "Ari, no matter what others think of me, I hope that you will believe me when I say that Mateo's death has got nothing to do with me. I haven't done anything to him. You don't have to feel guilty about this matter when it has got nothing to do with you at all. I hope that you'll… be able to have a good rest."

In fact, Arianne did feel a little guilty; the suspicions she had against Mark had always been there. That had always been true even if Mark had already personally told her that he did not do it.

However, Arianne suddenly believed him from the bottom of the heart at that moment. ‘He might be cruel in his tactics, but he wouldn’t cover up and deny whatever he’s done. It’s just as he said: if he’s done it, he’ll admit it, and there’s no need to hide the fact. What other reasons do I have not to believe him?’

“I trust you. Mateo’s death has got nothing to do with you.”

…

The next day, when Arianne left the house, she put on a mask to cover up the wound on her face.

As usual, she instructed Mary not to let Smore leave the house. ‘Tremont Estate is big enough for Smore to move around. Even I was kidnapped in broad daylight—if Smore does meet a bad person, he won’t even have a sliver of chance of escaping.’

To date, Mateo’s case of abduction and murder was still unresolved. The abductors had literally left no traces of their tracks, while Mateo’s body still remained missing, apart from his thumb.

Until the true culprits were brought to justice, Mark was the prime suspect of the case, and Arianne had been utterly criticized on the internet. Because of this matter, the atmosphere within Tremont Enterprise had become heavy, so much as to affect the company once again.

However, Mark was already immensely annoyed by some company matters, so he naturally had no time to be bothered with other problems. He would rather avoid whatever there was on the internet as much as he could.

When Arianne took out her phone to look at the news, Mark unhappily said, “Don’t look at that nonsense, or it’ll affect our mood. Go ahead and let them say as they please. I’ve got a lot of matters to look into in the office recently, so I won’t be able to go home with you. I’ll ask Brian to send you back, accompanied by two bodyguards. Remember, don’t go walking around on your own anymore. I’m worried for your safety.”

Arianne quietly put her phone back in her bag. The phone she was currently using was the same as the previous unit and it was now being used as a spare. ‘The handbag that I left at the Rodriguezes’ manor has my identification documents in there. I’ll have to find some time to ask Geralt to help me retrieve it. I wonder if Mrs. Rodriguez has gotten rid of it… There are some documents that would be quite tedious to do redo.’

When they arrived at the company’s entrance, Brian noticed that paparazzi had gathered around by the entrance, so he diligently drove the car to the underground basement. Unfortunately, one of the paparazzi caught onto him and someone seemed to have shouted, causing a swarm of them to follow the car down to the garage.

Brian did not dare to drive too fast since the garage was only dimly lit; however, that soon allowed the paparazzi to surround their car.

The paparazzi kept on banging on the car window. It seemed that their microphones could very well extend through the windows. No matter how exceptional the acoustics in the car were, it still could not block off the determined voices of the paparazzi who were thirsty for their scoop.

“Mr. Tremont, do you have anything at all to do with the kidnapping of Mateo Rodriguez?”

“Mr. Tremont, some say that your wife and Mateo Rodriguez were having a secret affair and that you’d beaten him up once you found out about it. Did you exact your revenge because of this incident?”

“Mr. Tremont, please answer us. The people are saying that you’re the one who caused Mateo Rodriguez to meet his death. What’s your opinion about this?”

Mark’s face darkened as his hands balled up into fists. He seemed as though he was about to rush out of the car and hit someone.

However, Arianne grabbed his arm and whispered, “Let them be. Let’s not get out of the car but wait for security to chase them away…”

Brian was shocked by the situation before him and hurriedly took out his phone to call for security.