Ruling 1841

Chapter 1841

Soon after, a group of security guards rushed to the garage. Inevitably, there would be some form of physical struggle during the process. However, some of the paparazzi actually took the opportunity to record the process and then state that the security guards were “exerting violence” on them, reporting live that Mark was allowing his men to do so on purpose.

Arianne felt both angry and helpless. ‘Would they even listen to our explanation if we were to talk nicely? Would they be willing to leave after that? The only choice is to act, but the moment that’s done, they’ll treat it as violence. What the h*ll do they want?!’

While Arianne remained frozen, there were numerous times where she resisted her own urge to get out of the car to argue with the paparazzi. ‘It’d be better to let the matter die out on its own. The moment I get out of the car, the situation will only get even more out of hand.’

After struggling for a long time, the paparazzi were finally chased out of the garage. Then, Mark helped Arianne walk towards the lift while also protecting her. “I’ll ask Brian to bring a few bodyguards and send you home in a bit. In the meantime, you shouldn’t come to the office for the time being.”

Arianne asked with a concerned tone, “What about you?”

Mark paused for a moment before he said, “I’ll be fine. I can’t hide, not when Tremont Enterprise needs me. With things as they are now, the moment I stop coming to the office, it’ll be chaos. I’ve been through matters worse than this, so there’s nothing for me to be afraid of. Plus, I’m no longer a child.”

‘Mark’s right. He has managed Tremont Enterprise since he was 18 years old, so what hasn’t he seen before? I suppose this matter is nothing but child’s play to him.’

Sometime after 11 AM, Mark arranged some bodyguards to help Arianne leave the company while Brian drove. Arianne wanted to retrieve the items that she left at the Rodriguezes’ manor as soon as possible, so she asked Brian to drive her to meet Geralt.

The moment Brian found out that Arianne did not intend to return directly to Tremont Estate, he hesitated for a moment. “Madam, sir has specifically instructed me to drive you directly home…”

Arianne looked through the window to scan her surroundings. “Don’t worry, the paparazzi aren’t following us. Just do as I say. I’ll just be meeting someone and it’ll only be a few minutes.”

Brian hesitated for a moment before finally agreeing to her request.

When Arianne met Geralt, she went straight to the point and said, “I left my handbag back at the Rodriguezes’ manor last time. Could you please help me retrieve it at your soonest convenience? My identification documents and phone are in there. It’s fine if they’ve been disposed of already. Otherwise, I think it’d be better if you could return them to me. The documents would be rather tedious to redo. Also, there’ll be trouble sooner or later if my things are left there.”

A light flashed across Geralt’s eyes. “About that… I knew that you were going to ask for them sooner or later, so I helped by asking for them earlier. However, Mateo’s mom was also afraid that there would be trouble if your stuff were left there, so she had already gotten rid of them by then. I’m so sorry, but you’re going to have to reapply for your identification documents. By the way, Mateo’s mom asked me to extend her apologies to you as well. She only went to such extreme lengths because she was too aggrieved. Also, thank you for not pursuing the matter.”

‘They’ve been disposed of already?’ Arianne felt slightly helpless. “Fine… Forget about it then. I’ll reapply for them when I have some time later. It’s extremely hard for me to leave the house at the moment, what with those paparazzi short of swarming Tremont Estate’s main gates now. By the way… about Mateo’s incident, Mark has got nothing to do with it, so I hope that the police will be able to crack the case soon.”

Geralt’s brow creased slightly. “How could you be so sure that it has got nothing to do with him? You’ve been with him for many years, so I’m sure you’re clearer than anyone else on his character… He’s not some kind of saint.”

Arianne disliked others speaking about Mark like this, so she was slightly unhappy. “That’s right, he’s not some kind of saint, but I trust him when he says he didn’t do it. If someone suspects him, they’d better bring out some evidence to prove it. He knows very well that I dislike that part of him, so he has long but given up on doing such things on a whim now. Plus, my gut is telling me that he’s not lying to me. All right then, I’ll be off now.”

Chapter 1842

When Arianne returned to her car, Brian hesitantly said, “Madam, why did you come here? If it’s this place… It could only mean that you’re here to find out more about Mateo Rodriguez’s matter, couldn’t it?”

Arianne merely shook her head. “No, you’d be better off not asking. Let’s go back now.”

Brian did not believe her, however, and continued on that topic. “Madam, you couldn’t possibly start to doubt sir’s innocence in Mateo’s murder, could you? I’m sure there is someone who knows about this matter within the Tremonts. Why don’t you ask Henry since he’s sir’s most trusted person? At least you wouldn’t have to feel bad that way.”

Arianne half jokingly said, “Wouldn’t asking Henry be a complete waste of effort? Whatever Mark has asked him to do, he will never breathe a single word about it and will bring it to his grave.”

Brian was deemed speechless. He could not come up with another comment even after pondering for a moment.

Then, Arianne sighed. “That’s enough; I do trust Mark. I really didn’t come here because of Mateo’s incident, so you mustn’t tell Mark about this. If he finds out, he’ll definitely come after you for it.”

After that, Brian did not utter another word. That was because he could neither offend Mark nor Arianne.

That afternoon, Melanie brought her daughter along with her as they visited Tremont Estate.

Now that Smore had someone to play with, he became less restless.

Arianne asked Mary to brew a pot of tea while she and Melanie chatted on the patio.

Melanie seemed to have been in a bad place based on her slightly haggard look. In fact, regardless of how exquisite her make up was to try and cover up, the fatigue beneath her eyes was still very much visible.

Arianne poured Melanie a cup of tea. “You don’t seem to be sleeping well these few days, but the same goes for me as well. The moment I found out that Mateo passed away, I’ve been having nightmares constantly. The thing you were worried about previously… how you felt that Mark had something to do with the matter—you can rest easy now. It wasn’t him. I trust Mark.”

Melanie did not seem to have a huge reaction to what Arianne had just said. “All of that isn’t important anymore when he’s already dead. Till now, I still refused to believe that Teo’s gone. All he wanted to do when he returned here was to meet you… If he wasn’t so adamant about thinking about you and didn’t insist on returning, none of this would’ve happened… Why did he have to be such a stubborn person?”

Arianne did not wish to talk about the matter anymore, as her mood would become heavy just at the mention of it. Therefore, she subtly changed the topic. “How are you and Alejandro recently? Have you two stopped mentioning the divorce?”

Melanie sighed. "I supposed we're getting by. He and I will never be able to go back to how we used to be anyway, so how could I be in the mood to think about our relationship after Teo's incident? However, Alejandro has actually not tried to provoke me; he's even thinking of ways to make me happy. Also Millie's suddenly sticking very close to him. I'm thinking of going on living. like this for my daughter, since Alejandro is no longer ignorant of my existence and is treating me quite well. Who knows, I might just end up being silly and fall for him again?"

Arianne could tell from Melanie's statement that the latter most likely did not intend on getting a divorce with Alejandro anymore. 'Although she may seem very casual about it, I'm guessing she's long but changed her mind already. Didn't she say she wanted to get a divorce because she could no longer, bear to stay with him? Yet how she's saying she bear with it for her daughter. I'm guessing she's just using her daughter as an excuse to cover up what her heart really feels.

‘Yeap, who could possibly give up so easily on someone they fell in love with at first sight? We humans will meet with countless people within our lifetime, but it’s always the ones whom we fall in love with at first sight who’ll be the most special.’

After a moment, Melanie suddenly said, "Arianne, I'm sorry, I must've caused you a lot of mental stress, haven't I? I was the one who told you that I suspected Mark, so you must've been influenced by me because of it. However, it was merely a suspicion out of hope that Teo might be fine... I'm sorry for causing you to have nightmares. Since the matter has got nothing to do with Mark, you don't have to feel guilty anymore."

Chapter 1843

Arianne did not reply to what Melanie had just said. 'I'll definitely feel some kind of mental pressure since the matter happened close to me.'

The weather was pretty humid that day, and feeling a little suffocated, Arianne took off her mask.

The moment the scar on Arianne's face showed, Melanie asked in shock, "What happened to your face? I was wondering why you were wearing a mask even under this hot summer's day, but I just thought you were down with the flu and didn't want your son to get infected!"

Arianne determined that there was no need to hide her face from Melanie, since the latter definitely would not tell Mark anything. "If I told you that I was abducted by Mateo's mom, would you believe me? I almost died in her hands and it was Mateo's friend, Geralt, who saved me. Geralt's the medical examiner who verified the finger belonging to Mateo; you might know him. Mark doesn't know about this matter. I didn't dare tell him because I don't intend to pursue the matter."

Melanie swiftly scanned her surroundings and heaved a sigh of relief when she realized that, apart from their two children, there was no one near them. "Are you serious?! I always thought that Teo's mom was a very understanding and gentle woman. I think the shock of Teo's death must have overwhelmed her for her to have done such a thing. Ariane… you're such a nice person. You're able to stop pursuing the matter even after something like that happened to you. I thank you on behalf of Teo."

Arianne helplessly laughed. “Geralt did beg me not to as well. Plus, Mateo was your childhood friend and such a nice person, so I can understand. Anyway, I’m fine, so there’s no need to pursue the matter. I just hope that the real culprit will be caught soon; at least Mark can be proved innocent.”

A few days later, Geralt suddenly called Arianne, saying that he wanted to show her something.

Arianne was slightly curious and guessed that it probably had something to do with Mateo's incident, so she went off to meet Geralt without any hesitation. She had to use various tactics before she could finally get rid of her bodyguards, since Mark would not allow her to go out alone. Arianne did not think that it was appropriate for Mark to know about the matter.

Geralt drove her to a rural area where there was an unfinished building that had been abandoned. There was little to no one around: that area and the walls of the unfinished building were filled with s. which were moss Further the stairs, which not well developed, did not seem sturdy; there were cracks everywhere that would make anyone uneasy upon looking at them.

However, Geralt seemed to be a lot braver. After all, he was a medical examiner. Hence, he walked in front and kept on reminding Arianne, who was behind him, to watch her step.

Arianne had a slight acrophobia, so she did not have the courage to even look down once as she climbed upstairs. ‘What could Geralt possibly want to show me in this run down building that seems to be able to crumble away at any moment?’

After climbing a few floors, Arianne noticed that there was a cordon set up by the police, normally used to block off anyone from entering the area. Then, her knees suddenly gave way and she almost fell. Thankfully, Geralt managed to grab onto her. “What’s the matter?”

Arianne’s voice turned slightly shaky and she struggled to take another step forward. “Has Mateo’s body been found…? Is it here?”

In fact, Arianne did not dare to take a deep breath to smell the scent in the air. ‘If Mateo’s body’s been dumped here, it’s definitely going to be filled with maggots that will reek. Even if the police were done with their investigation and had moved the body, the stench will still be there.’

However, Mateo merely shook his head. "Not his body, that still remains to be found, but the crime scene where Teo's incident first happened. When Teo was kidnapped, this is the last place he was brought to while he was still alive. There are some blood stains on the scene, so it would seem that Teo had been through quite an ordeal before he died. Teo's finger had also been chopped off here. Additionally, we found miniscule traces of human cells here, and the test results show... that they are skin cells belonging to Teo's finger. By the time Teo's finger had been lopped off, he was already dead. Hence, his body would no longer serve much of a purpose: We're guessing his body's been dumped. somewhere nearby, but we still can't find it. Under this kind of weather, no one could possibly bear with the stench of a dead body, let alone lugging it around with them as they run; there's no point to it."

Chapter 1844

After listening to that, Arianne felt her heart becoming tighter. She did not even dare to think of how the kidnappers had tortured Mateo to death before chopping off his finger.

When she saw how bold Geralt was as he walked past the cordon to enter the bloody crime scene, Arianne was slightly worried. “Wouldn’t you contaminate the crime scene?”

Geralt stopped in his tracks to look at her before gesturing her forward. “Don’t worry, the investigation here is done. The cordon will be removed at any moment. The thing that I wanted to show you is here.”

Arianne frowned as she hesitantly walked a few steps forward; within the cordoned area was a wooden chair that was filled with dust. There were also some pieces of rope scattered and blood splatters that had already begun to turn black. The scene before her was extremely chilling to the bone.

Then, Geralt bent down as he slowly pulled away a piece of rock that was as big as his fist. “Look here.”

Arianne went forward and saw some scratch marks beneath the rock, which seemed to have been forcefully carved with something hard. There were also traces of blood on it, and the markings weren’t clear or regular. Coupled with the fact that Arianne was not a forensics personnel, she did not find the markings strange. “What about it?”

Geralt extended his fingers and seemed to connect the markings with his finger. “Take a closer look. Wouldn’t these scratch marks become a certain word? After our investigation ended, I kept thinking that there was something weird with the crime scene, so I came back alone and found this.”

‘A certain word?’

After Geralt drew in the air with his finger, Arianne could recognize the markings to form a crooked “M”.

She could almost imagine how cruelly Mateo was tortured as he was dying; he had struggled to leave that mark as the life within him slowly drained from his body...

‘But what does this “M” mean?’

Arianne suddenly felt a little dizzy for reasons unknown, possibly due to the hot weather, so she was in no mood to make any guesses. In fact, she felt a little nauseous when faced with the bloody scene before her, so she could only turn her back agains it "What does the 'M' mean? Die Mateo deliberately leave it at the time? Could it be merely a coincidence? Could it be that he had randomly scratched the floor as he struggled?"

Geralt remained silent for two seconds before he said, “They don’t seem to be randomly scratched, but rather, are part of Mark’s name.”

Instantly, Arianne’s body froze as the look on her face changed. “What are you saying?!” ‘Could Mateo have left this to tell everyone that the person who killed him was Mark?!

‘Can we really conclude that Mark was the one who did it based on these few unclear markings?!’

Geralt expected for Arianne to have such a huge reaction, yet he calmly said, "When you told me that Mark̈ has got nothing to do with this matter, I was really willing to believe you. However, now that the evidence is right in front of us, it's not up to me not to believe anymore. Apart from this, the investigation team. have also found a gold cross necklace that Teo used to wear on the crime scene. On the cross, there were traces of it being scratched as well, my guess is that he used that to carve the word 'M' on the ground. However, since the body isn't here, the investigation team closed their search here very soon. In fact, I haven't had the time to report about them markings to my superior yeet. Stop lying to yourself, don't you think that the amount of love that Mark has for you is too extreme and terrifying? He doesn't even believe that you and Teo are innocent, that's why he's able to do something like this!"

Arianne had gone through a lot before she could finally believe Mark, hence she did not wish to doubt him again. She endured her nausea and disgust as she bent over to take a good look at the markings on the floor. ‘No matter how I look at this, this is an unfinished “M”...’

Then, Arianne tried her best to make the markings seem clearer, hence she used her finger to rub against the dust and blood stains on the floor until her finger began to ache.

Geralt quickly-pulled her away. "I know you refuse to believe it, but there's no need for you to do this.... Under this kind of environment and weather, who is to tell what kind of bacteria you might contract if you've got a wound on your finger. You will have toive me for being" meticulous of cleanliness, it comes with the job. I didn't bring you here. for a particular reason, but I think that Teo died because of you. So, if you were to continue to stay with that monster, Teo's death would be completely in vain. If Mark is able to do this to Teo, who knows when he'll do the same to you. You should stay away from this kind of person, this is my sincere advice!"

Chapter 1845

At that moment, Arianne only had one thought in her head. However, it was neither to leave Mark, nor be fearful of him. She only wanted to protect him!

“Geralt… can you… not report these markings? Just turn a blind eye to this. After all… it’s just some very messy markings that somehow form an ‘M’. We will never know whether this was left here by accident or if it was deliberate. Plus, this won’t be concrete evidence to evict Mark… There are so many words that can be formed with an ‘M’, so how could you be sure that it’s directed at Mark?!”

Geralt frowned. “Are you really going to… defend Mark senselessly? I’m not saying this because I’m siding with Teo, but it’s all because… you’re the woman that my best friend has fancied for so many years. I’m only advising you because of Teo. Are you really going to wait for the day you finally die in Mark’s hands?”

Determination filled Arianne's eyes. "He would never lay a hand on me, and even if he does, I won't regret protecting him. Isn't that what it means to love someone? Loving him without any reason, without any conditions, and he would do the same for me as well. Would you believe me if I were to tell you that Mark would do everything he can to get me out of trouble if I actually did kill someone? Don't worry, I won't ask you to help me for free. Let's use the incident where Mateo's mom kidnapped me in exchange and we both let the other off the hook. If you have any other concrete evidence that proves Mark was the one who did this, show it to me! There will come a time where I won't be able to defend him anymore!"

Geralt heaved a heavy sigh, as if to show his helplessness. He took out a piece of handkerchief to wipe off the dirt on Arianne's finger. "I don't have any other concrete evidence; these markings aren't able to prove anything as well. I don't know whether Mark loves you or not, but I do know that you love him enough. Forget that I brought you here today. Let me drive you back."

Arianne regained her senses and said, "You don't have to, I'll go back myself. I won't be able to explain myself if Mark saw you. Thank you."

As Geralt watched Arianne disappear by the stairs, he lifted his leg and wiped off the already faint markings.

After leaving the abandoned building, Arianne stopped in her tracks and turned around to look at the building. Something in her heart seemed to be falling apart.

'That's the place where Mateo was right before he died, yet here I am, protecting his "killer".

'I no longer have any doubts about Mark. In fact, regardless of whether Mark actually did it, this is the only thing I can do. Everyone has their. own selfish moments and would do their best to protect the thing they want to, whether it's right or wrong.'

When Arianne returned to Tremont Enterprise, she took a shower and felt extremely dizzy, so she laid down to take a short nap.

While Arianne was in a daze, she felt an itch on her face, so she half opened her eyes. She met Mark's gaze, which was filled with gentleness—he was the one who had kissed Arianne on the cheek just now.

Feeling at ease, Arianne was able to close her eyes again. Her lips curved upwards slightly. "You're back already? What time is it…? I didn't feel so good, so I was taking a short nap…"

Mark stood upright and took off his shirt. "It's stil early, so you can get some more rest while I take a shower. I won't be eating dinner at home later, as lye still got matters to attend to at the office. By the way, I heard that you went out on your own today? Why didn't you bring your bodyguards with you? I told you that your safety is of the utmost importance at the moment, so could you not let me worry about you?"

At the mention of her going out that day, Arianne instantly woke up and no longer felt tired. She pretended as if nothing was wrong as she said, "I just wanted to go out and buy something, and it'd be wend o have. a bodyguard with me. Relax, I don't go out often."

Mark bent over and lovingly pinched Arianne's nose. "What am I supposed to do about you? You just keep disobeying me."

Chapter 1846

Mark’s gentle look made Arianne recall Geralt’s words. ‘Would Mark really kill me? Would he be as cruel as he is to others…’

Then, Arianne unexpectedly asked, “If I were to do something you find intolerable, would you want me dead?”

Mark was slightly startled before he answered. “No, if I couldn't tolerate it anymore, I’d just get a divorce. Why would I need to take your life? Get some rest, I’ll take a shower now.”

‘A divorce you say…

‘If it really comes to that, would he really be able to divorce so easily?’

As she heard the sound of rushing water, Arianne laid in bed and raised her hand. Then, she followed the messy markings that Mateo left as she drew in the air. ‘It would really be hard to carve out the word “Mark” if a person was dying, so is that why only an “M” was left behind?’

…

Mateo’s body still had yet to be found, so the Rodriguezes could not wait any longer. A month later after the incident, they announced that they would conduct a funeral for him.

Arianne found out about the news via Melanie. Mark had been too busy at the office to be bothered with any other news. Arianne wanted to attend the funeral, but she was afraid that it would be a bad idea. After all, both she and Mark were people who could cause the entire situation to blow up again.

On the night before the funeral, Geralt sent Arianne a text message. ‘Tomorrow is Teo’s funeral. I suppose you won’t be going, would you?’

Arianne was still hesitating at that moment, so she replied. ‘I don’t know, I haven’t decided yet. It might not be convenient for me to go, you know that…’

Out of the blue, Geralt replied with two words. ‘That’s good.’

Arianne was slightly confused, so she asked. ‘What do you mean? You sound like you don’t wish for me to be there. Are you afraid that Mateo’s mom would cause me any harm again? To be honest, I’m not afraid. I merely want to have a clear conscience.’

Geralt texted to explain himself. 'It's not that; she won't do anything against you anymore. However, I'm worried that your presence there might not be good. Now that the. situation is so complicated, it would be better for you to lay low. Furthermore, the media will be there, so I'm worried that they would write some kind of nonsense again.'

Arianne had already thought of these factors, but regardless of whether Mark had killed Mateo, she should attend his funeral anyhow. Mateo travelled all the way back to the country so that he could meet her and receive a hug from her. Not only did he keep her in his heart for so many years, he even opened up a Chinese restaurant for her. Therefore, the amount of feelings that had been put into her was not something that she could ignore. She had to attend his last funeral.

Hence, without giving Geralt an accurate answer, she merely stated that she would consider again before she made her decision.

The next morning, Mark woke up very early and got changed into a well-tailored suit as usual. It would seem as though he had to return to his company very soon.

Arianne waited for Mark to leave. She wanted to attend Mateo’s funeral but did not intend to tell Mark about it.

When she was helping Mark adjust his tie, he suddenly asked, “Today’s Mateo’s funeral, isn’t it? I have no idea what the Rodriguezes are thinking, holding a funeral when the body isn’t found yet.”

Arianne's hand froze for a moment. "Um... they've probably determined. that he's dead already, so there's no need for them to wait any longer. I suppose the funeral has to be done later rather than waiting... sooner endlessly for the body to be found.

Mark had noticed Arianne’s micro reaction. He knew that she would be attending that day, but he did not intend to expose her intentions. That was because Mark was very clear about Arianne’s character.

He was extremely mindful if another man were to hug her, but he would be very generous if she were to attend another man’s funeral.

When Mark's car drove off into the distance, Arianne changed into a pure black dress. It would not be appropriate for her to put on makeup to attend a funeral, so she did not spend too much time making herself look nicer.

Chapter 1847

En route to Mateo's funeral, Arianne passed by the man's Chinese restaurant.

The day was still young, so naturally, the shop had not opened, and at that moment it looked rather barren. Empty, even.

As empty as a place would be when its master was gone, Arianne reckoned.

She put on a pair of shades and a mask once she reached her destination to avoid recognition. Although many had shown up to pay their last respect, which should make her stand out even less, Arianne still felt a little antsy and unsafe about her appearance.

The ever-perceptive Melanie quickly located Arianne despite the volume of people after a careful glance. They nodded at each other in acknowledgement and had a simple exchange.

And then they let silence drown them both.

As below, so above. Grey overcast hung above the crowd today, with none of the sun's light in sight. The air was sultry; it was as though a dollop of the endless dark clouds in the sky had taken to cling to every attendant, squeezing against their chest with no sign of letting go.

Everyone was comforting Mr. and Mrs. Rodriguez. Mrs. Rodriguez, in particular, was holding Mateo's picture in her hands with uncontrolled tears welling in her eyes. She looked so fragile and infirm; Arianne wondered if she would topple just by a gust of wind. God, the woman had looked so much gaunter than she last saw her.

Despite their tragedy, the grieving family still had to brace the crew of relentless media and reporters, whose chase for stories had brought them to the funeral as well.

Arianne and Melanie stood at a distance away from the focal point, consciously putting in a wide berth. It was then that Geralt Bernard, dressed in a black suit, suddenly materialized nearby. He yanked Arianne's wrist and said in an undertone, "You're here?"

Arianne was a little puzzled by his reaction. As she retracted her hand from him quietly, she replied, "Yes, I am. I've thought about this, and I believe I should say my last goodbye. In the end, Mateo and I were still friends… even if for a while. Don't worry about me. With this mask on, they won't recognize me."

Geralt seemingly chewed his words before lowering his eyes to the floor pensively. A while later, he murmured, "Thought you wouldn't be."

Two reporters began striding toward them, apparently recognizing the forensic expert and wanting to ask for more intimate details about the case from him. Worried that the reporters would notice Arianne, Geralt quickly walked away and left her.

"You two close with each other?" Melanie asked quizzically.

“No. We only met a few times because of Mateo’s case.”

Melanie considered Geralt's back as he dissolved into the crowd at a distance and suddenly felt a strange. feeling tugging at her heart "Um, why do I get the feeling that he doesn't want you to be here? That's weird, isn't it? I personally think you should attend Mateo's funeral, too..."

Arianne shook her head. "I don't know what's on his mind. I firmly believe I should be here, too, which is why I am. Well, not that I can get any closer-I don't want any of the Rodriguezes to recognize me and become, you know, agonized. So I'm just gonna stay here. Your go ahead."

Melanie nodded. She turned and walked away.

Across the venue, a black car had pulled over by the roadside. Through its window, Mark Tremont scanned the funeral and its grandiosity before his sight finally rested on Arianne.

He was concerned that trouble might befall her while she was there, so he decided to watch her clandestinely from afar—he had no plans of physically showing himself.

Brian, who was on the driver’s seat, seemed to be sitting on pins and needles. “Mr. Tremont, if I may? Uh, you know Madam is only attending a funeral, right…?”

Mark shot him a look. “What’s your point? Of course, I knew she was attending; I was the one who approved it, wasn’t I? Am I a monster in your eyes?”

Brian inhaled sharply. “Oh, n-no! Definitely not! Good! I, uh, was just worried that you didn’t know…?”

Funerals were always both sullen and boring. To dispel his own boredom, Mark rolled down his window and lit up a cigarette, shifting his attention to the scenery around him briefly before going back. to watching Arianne. -

She was gone.

The first jolt of panic rocked him. “Where is she?”

Brian looked on, confused. “Hey, where the h—? Wasn’t she just there? She’s probably gone somewhere for now. I bet she’s gonna leave the funeral with Melanie when it’s over later—”

The rest of Brian’s words were already lost as white noise to Mark, whose eyes desperately searched the crowd for that one silhouette.

Chapter 1848

A child about seven to eight years old had led Arianne away to a place where no other person was in sight. Noticing the kid’s full black getup, she asked, “So, you’re a relative of the Rodriguez family?”

“Yeah,” the child nodded. “Um, you know, they told me Mat’s dead, but I’m not very sure about it? Do you think they are being serious? ‘Cause if he’s dead... doesn’t that mean Mat’s never coming back?”

Arianne found herself too hard-pressed to answer him. She could not bear to cut into a child's hope with a blade as cruel and blunt as reality.

The duo continued forward until the funeral almost faded out of sight. Arianne stopped in midtrack in confusion and took off her mask. "Where are we going, honey? You told me someone's looking for me, yeah? Where's that person now?"

The child looked around them, his head swinging wildly. "Hey... wait a minute! This is the place, though! OK, is that guy ditching us?"

Arianne was just about to say something when a pair of hands suddenly reached out from behind—and enveloped her nose and mouth tightly.

Before she could let out a cry, an unknown drug had knocked her out.

Hearing the sound of tires veering away from him, the boy turned around. And found Arianne gone. All there was left of his brief companion were the shattered pieces from her shades and a dusty mask, both lying innocuously on the ground.

He ran after the car for a few paces and stopped. Complicated, dangerous scenarios were predictably unknown to the young boy's simple, innocent mind, so he abandoned the chase and gave into his whim to play by the roadside.

Brian—who was on Mark's explicit order to look for Arianne—had been weaving in and out of the crowd to no avail. As his search remained fruitless over time, the man's confidence was losing fast.

That was when he noticed a child playing by himself in the distance. Quickly, he approached him and asked, "Hey, you, kid! You seen a woman in a black dress anywhere?"

"Er, don't know if you've noticed, but everyone's wearing black today."

Anxiety was gnawing at the edge of Brian's mind. "Hers is a dress! She wears a mask! Have you seen her?!"

"Oh, yeah! I totally did," the boy exclaimed in recognition. "Someone's been looking for her, and then I helped by bringing her there, but when we arrived he was gone, and then she disappeared too, but I think she probably just left in a car, which was not very polite of her for not telling me she was leaving…"

She left in a car?

Brian had the child lead him to the exact spot where Arianne supposedly left and instantly noticed the broken shades and mask on the ground.

His heart plummeted into an icy pool.

Without further ado, Brian bolted back into his car. “Mr. Tremont, suspect something foul has happened to Madam! Her shades and mask... they were on the ground! And the lenses were shattered too, as if someone stomped on them.... There was even a footprint on it!"

Mark’s complexion snapped immediately.

“F**k! Go and f**king find her instead of standing there like a dumba!” he fumed uncontrollably in expletives. “If anything happens to her, you can kiss your a goodbye!”

With a single order, every single lackey working for the Tremont family was instantly mobilized in a search around the entire area. Unfortunately, the child was the only one who had any knowledge of Arianne’s last whereabouts. There was simply no new information.

Possessed by his frantic search, Mark had discarded his clandestine cover and personally shown himself in the funeral. In a flash, every reporter on site swarmed toward him and hounded him, all of them scrambling and jostling to pry Mark's motive for appearing in Mateo's funeral.

Abject fear for Arianne’s safety had completely taken hold of him; he had no time nor the mood to play ball with the media. With an exasperated signal, Mark ordered his bodyguards to shove the reporters out of his way.

The Tremont family’s uninvited appearance had introduced chaos into the funeral. Chaffed, Mrs. Rodriguez jeered, “Mr. Tremont! What’s the meaning of this?!”

Mark lost all control over his composure and lurched, grabbing a fistful of Mrs. Rodriguez’s collar. “Where. Is. She?!” he bellowed coldly. “What did you people do to her?!”

Panic flickered in Mrs. Rodriguez's eyes-a flash too quick for any observer to seize-before she rescinded it. "I have not a goddamned idea what you're yammering about Mr. Tremont! Look around you, are you seriously considering brutalizing a hapless woman in front of everyone?!"

As though the sharp escalation was not sensational enough, the media had now scrambled to press their respective shutter in the hopes of immortalizing this moment into the press.

Brian, now bathing in panicked sweat, could only cry futilely, “No, stop! Stop——!”

Chapter 1849

When Melanie finally understood what had transpired, she quickly ducked aside to call Alejandro for help. “Something terrible has happened—Arianne went missing while attending Mateo’s funeral! And now your brother has gone mad from worry… God help me, I don’t know what to do!”

Naturally, this bombshell sucker-punched Alejandro into confusion. “Hold on. Arianne went to Mateo Rodriguez’s funeral? And Mark is attending it too?!”

Melanie was not in the mood to divulge the details. “The most important thing is that Arianne has somehow gone missing,” she repeated. “And Mark—for God knows why—is here, like right now, conducting this frantic search for her. From the looks of it, no one’s found her yet. My God, Alejandro, it’s pure chaos! Please come here as soon as possible!”

Without another word, Alejandro hung up. Melanie understood that he was not going to turn his back against such a request and let out a sigh of relief.

She tucked her phone safely and strode toward Mark and Mrs. Rodriguez, admonishing, “Mr. Tremont, please calm down for a moment, okay? Right now, escalation isn’t the best way forward, and continuing this skirmish here isn’t helpful either…”

Evidently, Melanie had scraped her usual tic of calling Mark by his name now that they were in public scrutiny. She would not want anyone to suspect some sort of deeper relationship between them.

Mark managed to calm down—however little. After all, it was starting to dawn on him that Arianne must have already left the area by now. Besides, judging from the look on Mrs. Rodriguez’s face, he figured that the woman’s lips would remain tight even if she knew something.

The most important item on Mark’s priority right now was to find Arianne. He must prevent misfortune from striking her.

Mark released his grip from Mrs. Rodriguez’s collar. He was just about to leave when the woman suddenly grabbed his arm and tugged toward herself, hard. “What, explaining this humiliating sh*tstorm before you leave is below you now? How do you expect me to preserve my dignity after all the crap you’ve put us through, huh? Huh?! Oh, we all know that you Tremonts are part of the 1%, the frickin’ ultra-rich elites, aren’t you? So, you fancy that privilege gives you people the right to terrorize anyone you like whenever the mood kicks in, huh?!”

Mark struggled against her grip, but the woman suddenly seemed possessed by an inhuman strength—it was as if she was trying to make sure he could never leave even if the effort killed her. Utterly vexed, Mark erupted, “Let me go! I’m in no mood to squander precious seconds with you!”

It was Melanie’s turn to be bemused. This was not the Mrs. Rodriguez she remembered at all—the woman was never this disagreeable and unreasonable in the past. Panicked, she chimed in, “Please, Mrs. Rodriguez! This whole thing is turning into a circus as it is now… We should go back to carrying out his funeral, okay?”

Mrs. Rodriguez, however, remained oblivious to Melanie’s plea. Her mind was made—she was going to lock Mark into this snafu no matter what!

Brian knew a stalemate when he saw one. Left with no other choice, he could only resort to shoving the woman away with slight but untactful force, before he joined the other bodyguards in flanking Mark as the man fled.

Mrs. Rodriguez remained on the ground where she had fallen and broke into a loud rant in front of the media, "Everyone under the sun. knows... that Mark Tremont is the man behind my son's untimely death! But I'm hamstrung from obtaining justice, all because we can't obtain that 'critical evidence' that proves it! Mateo, my poor, scorned son, can't even have a funeral in peace and without that bastard's malicious sabotage... Oh, Father in Heaven, why do you allow this to happen to us?!"

The reporters had turned into sensation-starved vultures giddily feasting on a dramatic story that just kept giving. Now, their lust for al scoop had compelled them to surround Mark's car, preventing it from going forward. They squawked and squealed and shouted over one another in a mad scramble for more content.

No matter how adept Brian’s driving skill was, the man knew they were utterly trapped. He could stomp on the accelerator and force the car out of its human wall, but someone would get hurt. Neither could he rely on the bodyguards to disperse or break out a path because the guards were completely outmanned.

A bloodshot-eyed Mark frantically cried, “Drive already!”

“I can’t, Mr. Tremont!” Brian pushed back, cold sweat bathing his forehead. “We might kill someone!”

Mark slammed his fist onto the back of the driver seat. “What the f**k about my Ari, then?! What if someone kills her?! Do you have any idea just how much danger she’s in? Foot to the pedal, you dolt!”

Brian gritted his teeth in preparation.

Just then, Melanie’s car suddenly veered out of nowhere before seemingly hurling to the reporters.

“Out of my way, all of you! My brake’s busted, so if any of you get under my wheels—the fault is all yours!” she screamed.

Alas, these reporters were not completely fearless for their lives. In the blink of an eye, all of them had ducked to the curb. It provided an opening; Brian stomped on the accelerator and the car shot out of the crowd and hit the asphalt at high speed.

Melanie drove her car away from the site as soon as she saw Mark successfully escaped. Honestly, her heart had been pounding loudly in dread when she made her daring gambit-her driving skill was never something to write home about, after all; she had always adopted a conservative driving style. Had there been a single stroke faccio neglect back there, Melanie could have seriously knocked someone out cold.

Chapter 1850

Words of Arianne's disappearance quickly reached Tiffany and Jackson. Then, with help from Alejandro, three powerful families launched into a massive, city-wide search together.

All through his life, Mark Tremont had never known true fear as he was experiencing now. For once, he was terrified of vengeance against him—in the form of Arianne, who would die like Mateo did!

He could not live without her!

The day quickly died into the night, but the things that had happened in the former did not end in the latter. In fact, the night only seemed to have pushed outward frenzy into inward anxiety.

Mark was chain-smoking in his study while he held his phone with his other hand. All to make sure that he would not miss any new development about Arianne's whereabouts.

Smore pushed open his door fearfully and poked his head out from behind. "Dad? Um, when is Mom coming home?"

Mark froze in mid-action. Then, came his croak, "Soon, little man. Very soon… She'll be back… You just have to be a good boy in the meantime."

In the meantime, out somewhere in the most remote mountains was a mansion. In one of its rooms, Arianne slowly but surely recovered her senses while lying on a queen-sized bed.

Her mind was still foggy, but amid that haze, Arianne could hear a voice saying, "…Accidentally added too much punch to that drug, but I suspect no major harm. She should be awake very soon, too. After that, the right amount of bedrest and nutrition should patch her up nicely."

She wanted to open her eyes to see its owner, but her eyelids were too dense to fight. She could not even determine if the voice belonged to someone she personally knew.

Footsteps. They were fading away from her. Arianne continued to battle her drowsiness until she finally gained control of her eyes.

She opened them to the darkness of the room, limned only by a placid streak of moonlight from the window that was nonetheless enough to adjust her vision.

She had no idea where she was. The only thing she understood was that she had been forcefully taken away back at the funeral.

Arianne waited. When she could finally move her body, she wriggled and wobbled out of the bed—not without struggles—and rose to her feet. Unfortunately, she soon discovered that the door and the window had been locked from the outside. She could not open any of them at all.

She tried again and again before despair crashed onto her, causing her to fall back onto the floor. Her activities since waking up may be small and light, but they were enough to deplete all of the energy she currently had. Worse, her head was still cripplingly dizzy.

Suddenly, she heard footsteps nearing the door.

She pushed herself up into a crawl and hid behind the door, but not before grabbing a table-lamp placed near the headboard as her makeshift weapon. She was going to get out from wherever she was!

The knob began to turn. Her heart turned from beating to pounding so hard she felt like it was going to leap out of her throat.

The door opened, but it was only an old woman with a few locks of white hair laced with her naturally-colored majority.

Arianne froze. She could not bring herself to attack such a frail old person, so she turned to exclaiming, “Who are you?! Where am I?!”

The old woman followed the direction from her voice and looked at her, a little bewildered. "Miss Wynn! What are you doing behind. the door? You're late for a meal girl You haven't had anything for a full day. I bet you must be starving ļ

Arianne was in no mood for food. How could she, when Mark and Smore were still waiting for her to go home? “Didn’t you hear what I asked? I said—where am I?!”

The old woman ignored her question entirely. “You’re late for a meal,” she simply repeated.

Arianne hurled the table lamp to the floor in fury. “I’m not eating anything! Who abducted me, huh?! Tell them to come out and face me if they’ve got the balls!”

The old woman simply bent down to clean remnants of the lamp from the floor with a deadpan expression. Her lips remained tightly-sealed.

Arianne gritted her teeth and sprung out of the room. Strangely, the old woman was neither concerned nor showed signs of stopping her-and for a good reason. Arianne quickly discovered that every door and window in the rest of the house was bolted and locked.

She was trapped in a mansion with pompous furnishing. Any random painting hung on the wall cost a fortune!

Arianne's genuine befuddlement multiplied. If she was taken hostage to bargain for money or even someone's life, then she should still be bound by a rope and left on some dirty, shady corner. Why would she end up in this grand mansion?

Come to think of it, the only “torment” she received up to this point was the revolting tang in her tongue, left by whatever drug her mysterious captor had used on her. She had not bene subjected to any other sort of torture.

So, who could this captor be?

And what the heck did they want to do with her?!