

Hitched 1251

Chapter 1251

"You say one's the master and one's the pet, but honestly, those two are like brothers. Even Elliot and Emmett never treated White like a pet," Elysia Thorne said with a gentle smile.

"White's part of our family," she added softly.

Tarquin Bradford's gaze softened. No wonder White and Evan were so close- what they had was a bond forged through thick and thin.

"You mean Bernard? Evan's mentor?"

"Yeah, I just call him Bernard," Elysia replied.

There was a time she wouldn't have shared any of this mountain stuff with Tarquin. Even though they loved each other, she'd kept it all to herself. But now that she was about to bring him home to meet her grandparents, there was no point hiding it anymore.

"Elliot and Gerald are two peas in a pod, Elliot's always hanging on Gerald," she explained. "Evan's the same way with Bernard. Emmett takes after Quincy, always following him around. And me? I spent most of my time with Grandma."

Tarquin looked at her, half-amused. "One grandma, three grandpas?"

"Not quite," Elysia laughed, shaking her head. "There are five of them, actually. There's also Howard and Walter."

Tarquin blinked. "Wait, what?"

Seeing his confused expression, Elysia playfully smacked his arm. "Don't get the wrong idea. They're not couples-just a group of old friends who stuck together. They all went through tough times when they

were young, so when they got older, they moved out to the countryside together, started a kind of found family. They've always looked after each other like real siblings."

Tarquin asked, "So, how old are they?"

"They're all over seventy now," she answered.

"And their names?"

"I never really asked about their real names, but I know they're good people," Elysia said, her voice softening. "If they weren't, they wouldn't have helped Mom and me for nothing."

Tarquin was curious. "So, how do you all live out there?"

"Well, Grandpa and Grandma grow

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most of our food themselves. And anything we can't get in the countryside, Gerald finds a way bring from town-groceries, books, medicine, clothes, yo@name it. He'd sneak it all in for us."

"How?" Tarquin pressed.

"I honestly don't know," Elysia admitted. "But all the books I've read, all the things

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett needed growing up, Grandma's medical equipment, Grandpa's tools-Gerald got it all."

"Does Gerald have money or something?"

"No clue if it was all his, or if they pooled it. Never really thought to ask."

Tarquin grinned. "So what do your grandpas do for fun?"

Elysia grinned back, thinking. "Gerald's a finance nerd-loves reading money magazines and watching the stock market.

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Bernard's into boxing and dorest

of the heavy lifting around the

house. Quincy's an artist-anything creative or beautiful in our home,

that's him. Howard's a total

gamer-he keeps the WiFi and

electricity running. Walter's a bit of a mad scientist-loves making

fireworks. Evan learned a lot from him, actually. And Grandma? She's into holistic medicine-acupuncture, herbal stuff. She taught me everything I know about healing."

Tarquin just stared, speechless.

Ever since they'd come back from Silver City, the socialites back in Jindale City had been gossiping. They couldn't trash Elysia's

background anymore, so now they whispered about her "mountain years" with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. They said the kids grew up in a rundown little village, never had enough to eat, and barely made it through.

"They say we grew up dirt poor, hanging around with a bunch of hillbillies," Elysia snorted. "What a joke."

If only those snobs knew-her so-called 'hillbilly' grandparents were legends in their own right.

Chapter 1252

But who were these people, really?

Tarquin thought about it. If these were truly the leading figures in their respective fields, even if he hadn't met them personally, he should at least have heard of them. But, listening to Elysia talk, he couldn't quite put any names to faces.

Elysia noticed Tarquin's furrowed brow and mistook it for nerves. She gave him a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry," she said easily, "Grandma and the grandpas are super easygoing. They treat me and the kids like family, and they'll treat you the same way."

Tarquin shook off his thoughts. "So, what did they do before they moved out here?"

She shrugged, "Honestly, they were just regular folks. Sure, they had their hobbies, but they were happiest working the land, growing vegetables and raising animals."

Tarquin: "..."

They chatted idly all the way to the airport, where their private jet was already waiting.

A couple of hours later, the seven of them landed in Darkfort City.

As soon as they got off the plane, there were people waiting for them-polite and respectful to a fault.

Darkfort wasn't far from Jindale City, both up north. Tarquin had invested a lot in this region, pouring money into local businesses and contributing to the city's growth. The taxes alone he paid every year were a significant sum.

If they hadn't kept this trip under wraps, the mayor himself would probably have shown up to greet them at the airport.

The family grabbed a quick lunch at a diner near the airport-burgers and fries for the kids, coffee and sandwiches for the adults. They didn't linger; instead, they hopped into a van and headed straight for the mountains.

By the time they reached the foothills, the sun was already setting.

With the kids in tow, they didn't want to risk hiking in the dark. Instead, they checked into a charming countryside bed & breakfast known for its homemade pies and cozy rooms.

They decided to rest for the night and head up the mountain in the morning.

They'd booked a suite for the family. The baby bunked with Tarquin and Elysia. Elliot, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah shared the other room.

That night, as was her habit, Elysia tiptoed into the boys' room before going to bed herself, checking to make sure they were covered up. Even in August, the nights in Darkfort could get chilly, and a light blanket was a must.

She quietly opened the door and was surprised to see Elijah standing by the window.

The little guy was silhouetted in the moonlight, gazing out at the mountains as if deep in thought. The other three boys were already fast asleep.

Elysia's heart skipped a beat-was Elijah sleepwalking?

She hurried over to him.

Hearing her approach, Elijah turned around, his little brow furrowed in concern.

Elysia knelt beside him, lowering her voice. "Elijah, honey, why aren't you sleeping? Is it too different from home?"

She figured maybe the new place was making him restless. Tarquin had picked the nicest B&B around, but for Elijah, who'd grown up with every comfort, it was still a big step down.

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Unlike his brothers, who'd spent their early years running wild in the countryside, Elijah had always been at Tarquin's side-raised in penthouses and country estates, never lacking for a thing.

But Elijah just frowned at her, saying nothing.

Elysia reached up to gently smooth his hair, about to say more, when Elijah suddenly spoke.

"Mom, you had it really tough, didn't you?"

Elysia blinked. "What?"

He looked at her, his expression earnest, older than his years. "Living out here in the mountains is hard. You were here for five years, right? You must've gone through a lot. But I promise, from now on, I'll take care of you. I won't let you suffer again."

Elysia felt her heart swell. Was this what had been keeping him up at night— worrying about her?

He saw the roughness of the mountains and thought she must have suffered. It made him want to protect her.

She stared at him for a long moment before finally speaking.

"Elijah, you've got it all wrong. I never suffered."

She smiled softly. "Sweetheart, happiness comes from two places-what's around us, and what's inside us."

Chapter 1253

"Life hasn't always been easy for me," Elysia said softly, running her fingers

through Elijah's hair. "I've had my share of tough breaks. But these years in the

mountains with you, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett? I've been really happy."

Elijah looked troubled, his lips moving like he wanted to say something, but no

sound came out.

"I know the cabin isn't exactly a five-star hotel," Elysia continued, smiling, "but we

have each other. That's what matters most. So, Elijah, don't get all sad thinking

your mom's had it rough, okay?"

She cupped his cheek, her touch gentle. "But I have to say, it means the world to me that you care so much. It makes me feel even luckier."

Elijah was always the quietest of her boys, a little more reserved than Elliot, Evan, or Emmett. Still, he leaned into her touch, almost like he was soaking up her warmth.

Elysia pulled him in for a hug. "I love you, Elijah."

He hugged her back, patting her shoulder like a tiny grown-up. "Love you too, Mom."

Her heart swelled, and it took her a moment to steady herself before she smiled again. "We've got another early morning hike tomorrow, so let's get some sleep, alright?"

Elijah nodded, climbed into bed, and snuggled under the patchwork quilt.

"Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

She tucked the blanket around him, making sure he was warm, then left for her own room.

Tarquin was already lying in bed, the lamp casting a soft glow over the room.

Their baby daughter was asleep in her crib, cheeks rosy and peaceful.

Tarquin lifted the covers in invitation. "You took your time."

Elysia didn't answer right away. She

checked on their little girl first, then

slid into bed and curled up against

Tarquin's side, her cheek pressed to

his chest. He wrapped his arms

around her, noticing right away that

something was off.

"What's wrong?" he asked, voice gentle.

Elysia's eyes prickled with tears.

"When I went in to check on the kids,

Elijah was still awake, standing by

the window just... lost in thought.

He's been so worried about me

about how hard things have been

out here. But he never wants to talk

about it."

Tarquin frowned, concern etching his brow. "Is he okay?"

"He's just sensitive. He worries about me, but keeps it all inside."

Elysia took a shaky breath. "Honestly, I feel so lucky. What more could a mom ask

for than kids who care about her so much?"

She looked up at Tarquin, voice soft. "When I first found out I was pregnant, I was

shocked, nervous-honestly, terrified. Choosing to have them, especially with

everything going on, felt like jumping off a cliff without a parachute."

"If one of my friends was in that spot now, I don't know if I'd have the guts to tell

her to go through with it. Raising kids alone is so hard."

She grinned, tears sparkling in her

eyes. "But I got lucky. The boys are

sweet, loving-total angels. Every

time I look at them, I know I made

the right choice. We've been through

so much, and somehow, we ended

up together. My life feels complete."

Tarquin tightened his embrace, resting his chin on her head. "I know I let you

down back then. The pain you've gone through, the tough times-it was all

because of me."

Elysia didn't argue. Instead, she looked up at him, her voice steady. "But this

happiness? It's because of you, too. I'm telling you this to share my gratitude, not

to make you feel guilty."

He understood, pressing a kiss to her hair. "We're going to keep being happy.

Happier every single day."

She smiled, snuggling closer. "Yeah. We will. I know it."

Wrapped in each other's arms, listening to the steady rhythm of their hearts, they

drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 1254

Early the next morning, Elysia was up before sunrise.

After chatting with the innkeeper, she rolled up her sleeves and made scrambled

eggs and pancakes for the kids, along with some simple sides-crispy bacon,

hashbrowns, and a bowl of fresh fruit.

She knew everyone had different tastes, and the kids hadn't really eaten much the

night before the local food just wasn't what they were used to. Today was the

first day they'd be heading into the mountains, and from here on out, it was going

to be picnic meals and campfire food for a while. Elysia wanted to make sure her

family got a good breakfast in them while they could.

The innkeeper and his wife were true Darkfort City locals, blunt and friendly. They went on and on about how adorable the kids were, then started complimenting Elysia, and even threw in some praise for Tarquin.

"I swear, your whole family looks like you stepped out of a magazine!" the innkeeper's wife said. "We've had so many families stay here over the years, but none as good-looking as yours!"

After all the flattery, she turned serious for a moment, giving them some advice:

"When you head up the mountain, follow the marked trail. Stick to the signs- don't wander off on the smaller paths, it's easy to get lost out there. And if you see a sign telling you not to go somewhere, don't ignore it. Most of these mountains are just untouched wilderness-real wild, not part of any park. Nobody goes in there. It's dangerous."

She lowered her voice. "Just last week, they carried out a few bodies. Some folks went off-trail, adventurers or something. They got attacked by wild animals-one

had his head bashed in, another was half-eaten. Whatever did it, it wasn't human.

There's all kinds of dangerous creatures out there, not just bears or wolves. Some say there's things in those woods that nobody's ever seen."

"Don't go exploring just because you're curious," she added. "It's not worth it."

Elysia nodded, genuinely grateful for the warning.

Maybe it was all her years living in the mountains, but she wasn't scared so much as concerned for the kids. She finished up breakfast and went to wake them.

Over coffee, she told Tarquin about the deaths in the woods. Tarquin just nodded.

"It was a group of wildlife photographers snuck into the restricted area to get pictures. They got mauled by animals. The coroner found animal DNA in the wounds-nothing to do with people."

Elysia frowned, letting out a sigh. She felt bad for them. She didn't mind going into the mountains herself, but she'd never recommend it to people who didn't know what they were doing. The wild was no joke.

"If I hadn't lived out here for years, and if it weren't for White and Evan, I'd never drag my family out here for an adventure," she said. "There's so many fun places in the world you don't have to choose the most dangerous one. It's not worth risking your life."

"No worries," Tarquin said, giving her a reassuring smile. "We'll be fine. I've lived in these hills for five years and never seen anything like 'wild men.' Still, we'll keep our guard up."

After breakfast, the seven of them set out-just family, no bodyguards, no entourage.

The first part of the hike was along a narrow, winding trail. Evan and White led the way, the boys practically bouncing with excitement. The wilderness was home for them-Evan especially, who'd grown up at the foot of these mountains and knew every rock and tree.

Baby, on the other hand, was more used to being pampered by Keith Garcia. Not much stamina. After a little while, she started to lag behind, her little legs

struggling to keep up.

Tarquin, carrying the biggest backpack, just scooped her up and settled her on his shoulders. He was strong as a bull and twice as energetic.

They hiked on, taking breaks here and there, until they reached the edge of the restricted area by afternoon.

Elysia eyed the warning sign, cautious. "Evan, are you sure this is the right way?"

He nodded confidently. "It's the safest route. And there's a perfect spot to set up camp just a little ways in-I checked it out before."

"Alright," Elysia said, "let's get moving. We want the tents up before dark."

With Evan leading the way, they slipped past the sign and into the forbidden woods. The air was cooler and seemed to hum with danger.

Elysia's heart pounded, but years of mountain living had made her tough. She wasn't scared-just alert. Emmett was the same, a little wary but not afraid.

Baby clung to Tarquin, wide-eyed and nervous, not letting go for a second.

After about an hour, they reached a

bubbling creek with a big, grassy

clearing perfect for tents. The

forest at night could be treacherous,

with hungry animals prowling for

food. The tents were for more than

just comfort-they were their best

shot at staying safe.

They dropped their packs and took a breather. Tarquin got to work setting up

tents, with Elliot and Elijah helping. Elysia took Evan, Emmett, and Baby to gather

firewood and get a campfire going.

Baby finally started to relax. "Mommy, look! Mushrooms! Can we put these in the

stew?"

She reached eagerly for some bright red and white mushrooms growing under a

tree, but Elysia caught her hand just in time.

"Whoa, slow down! Those are fly agaric mushrooms-they're poisonous."

Baby's eyes went round as saucers. "But they're so pretty! Really, they can hurt you?"

Elysia nodded. "Some of the prettiest mushrooms are the most dangerous. You have to be careful with wild things out here. If you see something weird, ask Mommy before you touch it, okay?"

The deep woods were dangerous for a lot of reasons-the unpredictable weather, the confusing terrain, the wild animals, and all sorts of toxic bugs and plants. Even the most innocent-looking things could be deadly out here.

Baby nodded seriously. "Okay, I promise!"

Elysia smiled and ruffled her hair.

As they walked away from the tree

and the poisonous mushrooms,

neither of them noticed a deadly

viper pinned to the trunk above their

heads skewered through the body,

held fast by a broken-off branch. It

hadn't been Evan or Tarquin who'd

done it.

Chapter 1255

Evan had already spotted the venomous snake in the tree, but before he could do

anything, someone else was quicker.

The scar-faced tough guy-they called him "the Boss"-hadn't come to Darkfort

City with them, but somehow he'd tracked them all the way out here.

That snake? The Boss had taken it out with one swift shot.

Evan glanced to his left, feeling a little grateful.

Anyone who looked out for his family was a friend of Evan Thorne's.

If the Boss and his old mentor could ever put aside their differences, Evan would

be the first to shake his hand. But if he ever hurt his mentor...

Evan frowned, deciding to keep his distance for now and instead hurried after

Elysia and Baby.

By the time they'd gathered enough dry firewood and made their way back,

Tarquin, Elliot, and Elijah had already set up the tents and were washing up by the

creek.

Watching Tarquin work, Elysia couldn't help but think,

Now, that's the kind of man you want to marry.

Sophisticated, but never fussy.

Can handle a business meeting or whip up breakfast.

Since they hadn't ventured deep into the wilderness yet, the first night went off

without a hitch. No wild animals, no emergencies.

They caught a few fish, lounged inside the tent, chatted and laughed it felt

almost like a camping trip at Yellowstone.

The next morning, they headed deeper into the woods.

The further they went, the more critters they saw-everything from creepy

crawlies to poisonous bugs.

Baby, who was always a bit skittish, spent most of the day clinging to Tarquin, who

carried her without complaint.

With no cell signal, and the compass spinning uselessly, they had to rely on Evan

and White to find their way.

By evening, just as they finished setting up camp, it started pouring-classic

mountain weather: sunny one minute, buckets of cold rain the next.

Luckily, the tents were up just in time, so everyone stayed dry.

Evan, though, couldn't help but worry about the Boss.

Out in this storm, with no shelter, anyone could get sick fast-and up here, that

could be a death sentence.

After some hesitation, Evan confessed to Elysia.

"Mom, I need to tell you something..."

When Elysia learned there was someone trailing them-someone who even knew

Bernard she was floored.

Evan hurried to reassure her,

"Don't worry, Mom. He promised me he wouldn't approach Bernard without

permission. And he's helped me a bunch of times-he's saved my skin. I can't just

leave him out there in this storm."

Evan didn't mention the history between the Boss and Bernard, but Elysia was

still concerned.

"Evan, your great-grandparents don't like strangers. They want a quiet life. What if

he breaks his word?"

Tarquin spoke up for the Boss,

"If Bernard doesn't want to see him, I'll handle it. I won't let anyone disturb

Grandma and Grandpa."

Elysia hesitated, but with both Evan and Tarquin pleading, she relented.

"Alright. He can sleep in your tent tonight. When he comes in, make sure he gets

some hot tea to warm up."

"Thanks, Mom!" Evan grinned and shot out of the tent like a rocket.

"Wear your raincoat!" Elysia called after him, worried.

Tarquin just smiled, "Don't worry. He'll be back in a flash. We'll get him changed

and dry."

Outside, the Boss was sheltering under a giant leaf, soaked to the bone.

When he saw Evan, he looked surprised.

"What are you doing out here?"

"Come on, you're staying with us tonight. It's too dangerous to stay out," Evan

said, grabbing his arm and leading him back.

The Boss hesitated, "Your mother doesn't know me. She'll be scared."

"She won't. Mom's got a good heart. I already told her. C'mon-the rain's not

stopping, you'll get sick!"

Evan all but dragged him inside.

Elysia looked surprised for a second

at the sight of the Boss's scarred

face-it was hard not to be startled,

the scars looked like rough tracks

across his skin. But she quickly

recovered, poured a mug of hot tea,

and handed it to him.

The Boss nodded his thanks and wrapped his hands around the mug, warming

up.

By morning, the rain had stopped.

When Tarquin stepped outside, he

saw the Boss grilling fish over the

fire. Tarquin had no idea where he'd

found such big fish, since there

wasn't a stream nearby, but they

were golden and sizzling.

Tarquin wandered over. The Boss looked up once, then went back to his cooking.

Tarquin broke the silence,

"Evan's a loyal kid. You treat him well, he'll never forget it. But if you go back on

your word... well, he doesn't forgive easily."

The Boss frowned, saying nothing.

Tarquin continued,

"I don't know what happened between you and Evan's mentor, but that person

means the world to him. If you hurt him, Evan will never forgive you."

Again, the Boss just stared at the fire, silent.

Just then, Evan burst out of the tent, nose in the air,

"Smells amazing!"

The Boss cracked a rare almost-smile, handed him the biggest fish.

"Is it cooked?" Evan asked.

"Yeah."

"Looks delicious! I'm taking it to Mom-she loves fish!" And off Evan ran, bouncing

toward Elysia's tent.

"Mom, breakfast! Grilled fish!"

For the first time, the Boss's eyes softened a little.

Tarquin squinted, then let it drop.

From then on, the Boss became an

unofficial part of their group. Except

for Evan, he barely spoke to anyone,

but he always took the lead

alongside Evan during the day and

at night stood guard outside the

tents, keeping wild animals at bay.

Elysia felt bad about him sleeping outside, and sometimes asked Evan to invite

him in. But unless it was raining, he always stayed on watch.

They trekked through the mountains for several days before finally arriving.

But before they could even see the old folks they'd come to find, they noticed

something was off...

Chapter 1256

The animals in the dense forest suddenly scattered in all directions, panicked and screeching as if something terrible had just happened.

Birds exploded out of the trees, wings flapping frantically as they shot up toward the sky.

It was like something monstrous had just crashed into the woods-a predator, a disaster, something that sent every living thing running.

Tarquin, Elliot, Evan, and Elijah all frowned in unison, tense and alert.

Even the big guy with the scarred face-usually impossible to rattle-was glancing around warily, brows knit.

Elysia pulled Emmett and Baby close, her whole body stiff with worry.

The air felt charged with danger, every shadow hiding a possible threat.

Suddenly-thwup!

A muffled gunshot echoed through the forest. Someone was using a silencer.

A flash of color tumbled from above-a brilliantly plumed bird dropped out of the sky and landed right at their feet.

Its feathers were stunning, all bright blues and reds and yellows, the kind you'd only see in rare nature documentaries. But its head... its head was just gone. A bloody mess, shot clean through.

Everyone stared, eyes wide with shock.

Baby whimpered and squeezed Tarquin's neck, burying her face so she didn't have to see.

Elysia's jaw dropped, panic written all over her face.

There was more movement in the distance. Tarquin's eyes narrowed. "We need to hide. Now."

If the bird had been shot, it meant someone else was close-and armed.

Behind them, a slope covered with tall, wild grass offered the perfect place to duck out of sight.

Tarquin hustled Elysia and the kids behind the grass, keeping close.

The scar-faced guy moved like a ghost, scrambling up the nearest tree and vanishing into the leaves.

Evan looked like he wanted to follow-higher ground meant a better view-but Tarquin placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "Not yet."

Then, in a low voice, Tarquin asked Elysia, "Do your grandparents hunt?"

Elysia nodded, then immediately shook her head, anxious. "They'll shoot rabbits or wild boar to put food on the table, but a bird like that? Never. Grandpa would never hurt something so beautiful."

Elliot's little face scrunched up. "And we're really close to their place. Strangers shouldn't be out here, not unless they got seriously lost."

"Even if someone did wander in by accident, Grandpa and Grandma would find a way to send them back out. They'd never let outsiders hang around, much less hunt."

Which meant whoever was here, with a gun, was here for all the wrong reasons. Elysia's voice trembled. "Do you think Grandpa and Grandma are okay?"

Tarquin's face darkened, but before he could answer, a group of men in camo gear and baseball caps came striding out of the trees, rifles slung lazily over their shoulders.

They marched right up to the dead bird, picked it up, and one of them grinned with pride.

"Told you I could shoot it in the head. Didn't touch the body. Come on, admit it— you're impressed!"

Another man chimed in, eager to please. "Man, you're the best shot I've ever seen. No wonder you're the boss!"

The leader laughed. "Let's go find something bigger. I want to bag a bear before sunset!"

He tossed the bird aside, ready to move on.

Suddenly, one of the men lost his footing and slipped, tumbling down the slope until he crashed hard against a big rock at the bottom.

He yelled in pain, clutching his groin, while the guys up top roared with laughter.

"Dude, you bust your balls? Gonna be singing soprano for the rest of your life?" they jeered.

"Hope you didn't break anything important! How you gonna keep the family line going now?" They laughed even harder.

The guy staggered to his feet, face twisted in pain. "Even with busted balls, I'd still last longer than any of you "

He stopped dead, eyes widening as he spotted Tarquin, Elysia, and the others hidden nearby.

Evan tensed, ready to jump in, but Tarquin and Elliot moved fast-one grabbing the man's wrist, the other signaling to the group to stay calm and not make any sudden moves.

Chapter 1257

These guys were clearly trouble, but before doing anything rash, they needed to figure out exactly who these people were and why they'd shown up here in the

first place.

One of the men, clearly rattled, was already waving his shotgun at them. "Who the hell are you?!"

"Hey! Over here! There's someone down here!"

He shouted up the hill to his buddies.

A group of men, seeing the look on his face and realizing he wasn't kidding, scrambled down the muddy slope.

When they spotted Tarquin and the others, they all froze in shock-then immediately raised their rifles, aiming at the family.

Baby, never having experienced anything like this before, burst into tears on the spot.

She clung to Elysia, burying her face in her mother's chest. "Mommy, I'm scared... I'm scared..."

Elysia hugged her daughter tightly, her own heart pounding in her chest. "Shh, it's okay. It's okay. Don't be scared."

Tarquin stepped in front, shielding Elysia and the kids behind him.

The man in charge barked, "Alright, talk. What the hell are you doing here?"

Tarquin lied without missing a beat. "Summer vacation. Just took the kids out for a little adventure."

The man narrowed his eyes. "You brought kids out here? Into the middle of nowhere?"

"Yeah. They love exploring."

He snorted. "There are a million safer places to take your kids. Do you even know where you are?"

Tarquin shrugged. "Not really. We got lost."

The guy eyed their group seven people, kids and women, clearly a family. After a moment, he relaxed a bit, lowering his gun just slightly.

But his gaze lingered on Elysia, running up and down her figure. He cleared his throat and snapped, "Alright, up the hill. You're coming with us. Try anything funny and I'll blow your heads off."

A flash of cold anger flickered in Tarquin's eyes, but he swallowed it down, keeping his cool. He turned back to Elysia and the kids. "Do as they say. Just follow them."

So, the whole family trudged ahead, with the armed men in camo trailing behind, guns at the ready.

"Damn, what a haul today! This is better than bagging a grizzly," one of the men chuckled darkly.

"God must really love us, huh? Just what we needed, right when we needed it," another sneered.

"Check out the lady though no way she's a mom, looks barely twenty. Fresh as a daisy, huh-OW!"

The man was mid-laugh when he suddenly shrieked and went sprawling to the ground.

Not only did he fall, he managed to knock down the guys in front, behind, and to the sides of him too.

One banged his head on a rock; another got his cheek scratched by a branch.

"Goddammit, what's wrong with you?! That hurt like hell!"

The culprit breathing hard and wide-eyed, stammered, "Swear to God, I saw a snake! It was about to go for my eyes, tongue flicking out and everything. Nearly gave me a heart attack!"

The others rolled their eyes.

"Are you nuts? It's broad daylight-what snake? I didn't see anything."

"Yeah, you're just looking for trouble, man! You got blood on me, dammit!"

The leader cut them off, irritated. "Save it. Get your asses up and keep moving!"

The men herded the

as

family forward in

they walked-but now their attention

was on the so-called "spalette

Evan snorted under his breath, slipping White back into his jacket sleeve.

If he wasn't so desperate to figure out who these people were, what they were doing in the mountains, and what connection they had to Great-Grandpa and Grandma, he would've dealt with them already.

How dare they talk about his mom like that. If only he could-

But Evan gritted his teeth and held back, forcing himself to keep walking.

Then, as they pushed deeper into the woods, a small cluster of wooden cabins came into view through the trees.

Elysia, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett all stopped dead in their tracks, unable to hide the shock on their faces.

This place they'd lived here for five years.

This was Grandma and Grandpa's home.

Chapter 1258

But... this place is supposed to be completely off the grid. How did this rough bunch of men even find it?

Grandma and Grandpa were always so gentle and kind-they'd never hang out with people like this!

Elysia and the kids were marched into the old wooden cabin.

The moment the gate creaked open, all four of them-mother and sons-were swept up by a rush of emotions: joy, nerves, even a bit of dread.

They'd lived here for five whole years.

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett-this was where they'd grown up.

It was in this very place that the three brothers learned to talk, to walk, to do all sorts of things...

This cabin held just about every flavor of memory for them-sweet, bitter, and everything in between.

Mostly sweet, with the occasional sting.

So as soon as they stepped inside, memories came flooding back. They couldn't help but feel excited and happy.

But... where were Grandma and Grandpa?

Normally, the second they came home, the grandparents would be the first at the door, arms open, faces beaming with delight.

Why weren't they coming out? Why wasn't anyone welcoming them home?

And why were there suddenly so many armed strangers in the yard?

Who were these men, and what were they doing in Grandma and Grandpa's house? What was their connection?

Elysia and her three boys were torn-half flooded with relief, half gripped by worry for the older couple.

They ached to see Grandma and Grandpa, but none of them dared call out, afraid of what might have happened.

Tarquin and little Elijah, though they'd never been here before, could sense something was off with the four of them.

It clicked: this must have been their home once.

Tarquin and Elijah were uneasy too. Why had these men brought them here? Did they know the old folks? Or had they taken over the place?

Had something happened to Grandma and Grandpa?

All seven of them were weighed down by dread.

Closest to the gate stood a small two-story cabin-Bernard's place.

Bernard was a big fan of martial arts, and he was good at it. He'd always taken the room nearest the entrance to keep everyone safe.

Suddenly, with a loud creak, a window on the second floor swung open.

Elysia's heart leapt she thought it was Bernard. She looked up, hope shining in her eyes.

But-

Instead of a familiar face, there was a scowling stranger glaring down at them.

"Didn't I send you guys out to work? What are you doing back so soon? Did you catch any "

He broke off, noticing Tarquin and the others. His eyes narrowed.

"Who are they?"

The man leading their group quickly piped up:

"Brock, we ran into them on the trail. They were lost-family out here for summer break, got turned around in the woods. We brought them back, you know, just being neighborly. And look, there's a real beauty with them."

in

He winked up at the second-floor man, eager to please.

Brock-if that was his name-looked down at Elysia, licking his lips, Adam's apple bobbing.

"Bring the woman up here. I'll talk to her myself. Lock the rest up for now!"

Tarquin's eyes narrowed-he knew exactly what Brock had in mind.

He was just about to make a move when suddenly, another man burst in, stumbling and out of breath.

"Brock! Brock! It's bad-something's

happened! We ran into a wild man! Some of our guys got hurt real bad Brock told me to come get help!"

Wild man?

The whole family stared. Even Brock looked thrown.

"What wild man?"

"I swear, Brock! He had centipedes

crawling all over his face-Set

the hell out of us! He was so didn't even get a shot off."

we

"You gotta come quick—if you're late, Brock might get ripped to shreds by that lunatic!"

Centipedes on his face?

No, not a wild man-just the scarred tough guy from before.

The family of seven put it together. No need to wonder anymore. They kept their

heads down and stayed quiet.

Chapter 1259

``text

Brock totally bought it. Without a second thought, he leapt straight from the

second floor, landing with a heavy thud.

"If it really is some wild mountain man, I'll strike it rich! Let's go!"

With his words, the whole crew swaggered out of the old ranch house and headed

past the white picket fence. But after a few steps, Brock remembered Elysia and

the others. He turned and barked,

"Leave this chick for me! Nobody touches her until I get back, you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, Brock, don't worry! She's all yours."

Brock shot Elysia a sleazy grin before turning away, barely sparing a glance for

Tarquin or the kids.

To him, they were nothing-just harmless pests. Guns made all the difference,

after all. What could a few children and an old man do against that?

Once Brock and his men left, the little family of seven were herded into a bare,

musty room. Before the door slammed shut, one of the goons threw out a

warning:

"Sit tight and wait for Brock. Don't try anything stupid. This place is crawling with

our boys. If you think you can run, you're dead wrong. Don't make us use these."

The man waved his shotgun for emphasis and locked the door behind them with a

heavy clunk.

Evan rushed to the door, tugging at it, but it was sealed tight. No way out.

"White, go! Find Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma!"

White, their clever old sheepdog, understood right away. He gave Evan's hand a

lick, then wriggled his way through a gap by the floorboards and was gone.

Elysia was wringing her hands, her voice trembling with worry.

"This is Grandpa and Grandma's

home! Why would these people be

here? They must be gone-if they

were here, they'd have come out to

greet us as soon as we arrived!"

"But this is their only place up in the mountains," Evan said quietly. "If they're not

here, where else could they have gone?"

Tarquin squeezed Elysia's hand gently. "Maybe... maybe they moved somewhere

else?"

Elysia shook her head fiercely.

"No way! Did you see the vegetable

garden out front? All those tomatoes

and zucchini are thriving-Grandpa

and Grandma must be taking care of

them. When we left, they promised

they'd stay here. They said we could

always come back and find them!"

Her voice cracked, and she blinked back tears, worry etched deep on her face.

"I'm scared something's happened. There are so many of them, and they have guns..."

Elliot and Evan looked worried too, but they shared a knowing glance.

"Don't worry, Mom," Evan said.

"Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma

have lived in these woods their

whole lives. They've handled wild

bears and coyotes, for heaven's

sake-these thugs are nothing."

"The worst that could've happened is they saw trouble coming and slipped out early," Elliot added.

"Or maybe they just went into town for supplies and haven't come back yet.

Maybe these guys broke in while they were gone."

Elijah, the youngest, piped up, "This is deep wilderness. If they couldn't take care

of themselves, they'd never have chosen to live here. Don't worry, Mom."

Their reassurances helped a little, but Elysia was still on edge. She forced herself

to nod so she wouldn't frighten the kids.

Time dragged by. Then, finally, White squeezed back into the room, tail wagging.

Everyone looked at him anxiously. Evan knelt down. "Well? Did you find them,

boy? Are Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma safe?"

Chapter 1260

Evan stuck his tongue out, making a face as he translated for White.

"Great-grandpa and Great-grandma aren't here, but all their stuff still is."

"Every cabin's got someone on guard. Every place to stay is already taken."

"The storage shed is packed with all kinds of animal pelts and meat. And... there are over a dozen dead black storks."

Elysia's brows shot up in alarm. Black storks-those were on the endangered species list!

They were called the "pandas of the bird world" because they were so rare. And these people had killed more than ten?

Were these poachers?

But her grandparents had lived in these mountains for years, treating the animals as friends. How could they possibly allow people to kill so many protected animals?

Wait. Maybe they hadn't allowed it—but what could they do?

There were so many intruders, all of them armed. What could her grandparents possibly do against them?

Elysia's worry deepened, both for her grandparents and for the animals that had suffered.

"White says that when these people arrived, Great-grandpa and Great-grandma had already left," Evan said suddenly.

Elysia blinked in surprise. "They left? What do you mean?"

"They went out. Left the place."

"Where did they go?"

"No idea yet. White heard that they left yesterday evening. Not long after, these people showed up."

Elysia felt a little bit of relief.

At least her grandparents hadn't been caught by these people.

"Don't worry, Mom," Elliot piped up. "I'll ask White to look around some more."

White could talk to the animals in the forest, so it'd be easier for them to get info. After sending White off with his new mission, Elliot furrowed his brow and turned to Tarquin.

"Dad, shouldn't we get someone over here and ask a few more questions?" Tarquin nodded he had the same thought. "I'll take care of it."

He walked to the cabin door and knocked.

It took a while before someone strode over, scowling. "What do you want?"

Tarquin didn't waste words. He slid a watch through the crack of the door.

"You can sell that secondhand and get at least five hundred grand."

The guard's eyes went wide. He snatched up the watch, checked it over, and slipped it into his pocket.

Tarquin laid out his terms, calm as ever. "I'm thirsty. I want some water."

"Tough luck," the guard snapped. He had the watch, but he wasn't about to open the door.

Tarquin didn't seem surprised. His tone was mild, almost casual.

"If I can hand you a watch worth half a million, it means I'm loaded. I've got plenty more valuables on me. If you don't want to trade water for my money, I'm sure someone else will. I'll just shout for the others."

The guard bristled, feeling threatened. He hissed, "Try yelling, and I swear I'll shoot you all right now!"

Tarquin raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Will you? Your boss said not to touch us before he left."

He took a deep breath, looking ready to shout. The guard lunged to stop him, panicked. "Shut up!"

His tone was harsh.

"I'll get you a bottle of water, but if you're lying about the money, I'll break your legs."

Tarquin said nothing, just waited.

The guard hurried away and

moments later, he slipped inside the

cabin, shutting the door fast behind

him-obviously, he didn't want

anyone else to know about his little side deal.

He pointed his gun at Tarquin. "Where's the rest of the stuff?"

A flash of cold calculation darted through Tarquin's eyes. With a swift move, he grabbed the gun and turned it on the guard.

"Don't move."

The guard froze, stunned. He only realized he'd been tricked when Tarquin pulled the trigger.

Click.

The empty chamber snapped, and

the guard's eyes nearly popped out of his head. He collapsed onto the

floor, breath coming in

shallow bursts.

"Please—please, don't kill me!"

Tarquin's expression was icy. "Answer a few questions, and I won't."

The man nodded frantically. "Ask—just ask!"

Tarquin's voice was calm and dangerous. "Who are you people?"

The man's face twisted in fear. He hesitated, but with the gun pointed right at him, he caved immediately.