

Hitched 1361

Chapter 1361

Tarquin: " _ "

Lucian leaned forward, his voice gentle but serious. "Tarquin, do you know why your parents went to Karl Town all those years ago?"

"...I don't."

"Your dad had a close friend from overseas. Very secretive guy. His name was Nice Eilman. He worked at a local newspaper in Karl Town. It was Nice who got your parents out there."

Tarquin frowned slightly. "Nice..."

"You recognize the name?"

"It rings a bell."

Lucian nodded. "You probably know his father. Nice himself wasn't famous, but his dad-Eddie Eilman-was a world-renowned biologist from Alerasia."

Tarquin's eyes widened in realization. "Oh!"

No wonder the name sounded familiar. Back when he was in the mountains, chatting with his grandma about viruses, she'd given him a list of the scientists behind the foreign virus research. Eddie Eilman was right at the top.

His grandma had even singled Eddie out, saying he was the key member of his research team.

Lucian continued, "I don't know every detail, but I do know that Nice invited your parents to live in Karl Town. A few years later, Nice handed over his father's research to them. Not long after that, your parents had their 'accident.'"

"I've always suspected their deaths weren't just some random car crash. But I never had proof, so I kept quiet."

Tarquin was silent, taking it all in. Finally, after all these years, the pieces were coming together.

No wonder his parents had access to such a dangerous virus! They weren't doctors or scientists-in Karl Town, they were nothing more than test subjects, lab rats. Test subjects would never be allowed near such sensitive research.

But now it all made sense. Their friend could get close-Nice, the peace-loving foreigner.

Nice knew how dangerous the virus was. So he risked everything, using his father's credentials to steal the research and hand it over to Tarquin's parents.

His parents tried to smuggle the virus and the data back home, risking their lives. Instead, they were killed, murdered on foreign soil.

And the Eilmans-father and son-died because of it, too.

That's why the new virus the base was working on was only halfway between the fourth and fifth generations. They'd lost their core scientists and all the original data. Now, a new group of researchers was starting from scratch

His grandma had warned him: this virus was engineered specifically for people like them. From the first generation to the eighth, it had been refined step by step.

The real eighth-generation virus was the finished product-capable of one- hundred-percent targeted infection. If you caught it, and didn't have the antidote, you were as good as dead.

In other words, if someone released the eighth-generation virus on the world, foreigners wouldn't even get sick. Only people like Tarquin and his family would be infected. No one would be spared—one hundred percent infection rate.

It wasn't an exaggeration. This was a biological weapon designed to wipe them out.

If it was ever released, it would devastate their country.

That's why foreign powers were pouring so much effort into finding those missing samples and research data. That's also why, - when Tarquin's country got wind of the truth, they dropped everything-mobilizing land, air, and sea-to bring people home.

Walter had been right all along: there's never been real peace in this world.

There are always countries, organizations, and people scheming to start wars. They're like rats hiding in the sewers-never fighting in the open, always plotting in the shadows.

This is still a world where only the strong survive.

If you don't want to get pushed around or beaten down, you have to get stronger -no matter what.

Chapter 1362

Tarquin pressed his lips together, his eyes burning with a mix of pride and hate.

His parents had given their lives because of the real Gen-8 virus.

They died saving their people.

That made him proud-damn proud.

But thinking about those foreign powers who plotted against them made his blood

boil with rage.

Stepping out of the Lucian family's mansion, Tarquin paused at the front gate and stared straight into the security camera.

"If you want the real Gen-8 virus, come and get it," he said, his voice cold. "Let's talk face-to-face, if you've got the guts."

This was meant for the mysterious watcher. Tarquin was sure the guy was keeping tabs on Lucian's place.

He'd played defense for too long. It was time to go on the attack-not just to take down the shadowy enemy, but to blow their whole operation sky-high.

Anyone who hurt his country deserved to pay.

Outside, Tarquin found Axel leaning against the car, arms crossed. Axel didn't say much he never did-but he shot Tarquin a look, clearly picking up on his mood.

Tarquin stood next to him, tempted to pull out a cigarette. He stopped himself, remembering how much Elysia hated the smell.

With his hands shoved in his pockets, Tarquin stared at the street and asked, "If you found out someone close to you betrayed you, would you ever forgive them?" Axel's reply was icy. "Never. Showing mercy to an enemy is cruelty to yourself."

Tarquin narrowed his eyes at Axel, then smirked. "You're right."

With a deep breath, Tarquin opened the car door and slid into the driver's seat. He called over, "Hop in. Lucian doesn't need watching tonight. Go home, get some rest. Tomorrow, come ski with us."

"Skiing?" Axel raised an eyebrow. "What about Sabrina Stevenson and Zane? We're just letting them go?"

Tarquin shook his head. "If we're always hovering, they'll never make a move. Let's back off, give them room. Don't worry-I've got it covered."

Axel nodded. "Alright."

When Tarquin got home, Elysia was still awake, propped up in bed, studying her grandmother's old notes. Medicine wasn't her passion, but she'd promised her grandma she'd learn, and she meant to keep her word.

She'd actually been learning a lot lately.

Seeing Tarquin come in, she closed her notebook and asked, "You're home late. Did you eat?"

"Yeah, grabbed a bite."

He sat on the bed and kissed her. "Kids and your folks asleep?"

"Out like lights."

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"Couldn't. Figured I'd read Grandma's notes. Oh, by the way, Old Mr. Stevenson -Victor-arrived in Jindale City."

"Yeah, he got in this afternoon."

Elysia looked worried. "What's the plan with the antidote? I heard Sabrina and

everyone from the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association are infected."

Tarquin shrugged. "Don't stress. There's an antidote, nobody's dying."

"But how are you getting it to them?"

"Benjamin Lawson will handle it. Trust me, no one's going to suspect your grandma or you."

Elysia let out a sigh of relief.

"One more thing-did you see the

news about Zane and Winona?

Winona totally wrecked Zane,

Gand

now Priscilla is threatening to press

charges against her."

Tarquin grinned—he actually enjoyed hearing that. He couldn't stand Zane.

He snorted, "Let her try. If she does,

the cops will go for her son first. They've got no proof it was Winona. Don@worry, Zane's not that stupid. He won't let his mom sue

Then something clicked. Tarquin turned to Elysia and asked, "Wait-how'd you

hear about Zane getting taken down? Did Winona tell you herself?"

Chapter 1363

"I saw it online—it's trending everywhere!"

Tarquin let out a delighted laugh. "Priscilla really is Zane's mom, through and through!"

Seriously, what man would ever want something this humiliating broadcast to the world?

Most people would do anything to keep it under wraps, but no-Priscilla had to go shouting it from the rooftops!

No doubt, once Zane wakes up, he's going to lose his mind.

Elysia picked up her phone from the nightstand and held it out for him to see.

"Look-Winona and Zane are trending at number one, and Keaton's right behind them at number two!"

After Zane was rushed to the hospital today, Priscilla heard what had happened to her son's, well, "manhood," and she just collapsed in the hallway, wailing like she'd lost the lottery and the family dog in one day.

She went on a public crusade, calling out Winona and claiming Winona had "cut off" Zane's... you know. She thought she'd rally the whole country to her side, get everyone to condemn Winona as some sort of monster.

Except, when her hysterical meltdown hit the internet, people didn't exactly jump on the bandwagon.

Nobody felt sorry for Zane—they were too busy cheering on Ms. Newsom.

Comments flooded Winona's social accounts:

"Ms. Newsom, you're a legend! Let me kneel before you!"

"I'm next! I don't bow to anyone, but I bow to Ms. Newsom!"

"Kneeling! Absolutely kneeling! All hail the Queen!"

"Forget Ms. Newsom—this is an ancestor! I'm here to pay my respects!"

Winona gained over eight million new followers in just a few hours—and they were all real people, not bots.

Haters became fans, skeptics became supporters.

The entire internet was in an uproar!

People raised the banner for Winona, cursing Zane for getting exactly what he deserved.

Everybody hates a homewrecker-and everybody hates a cheater even more.

He climbed the social ladder on his wife's

and instead of being ne

gra, he tried to ruin her whole

family and steal their legacy!

Seriously, nobody in their right mind would defend a guy like that.

Janelle immediately became Winona's number one fan.

She pulled every string she had, dropped cash, leveraged her connections-all to support Winona.

She didn't just post about it on her own account; she even hijacked Richard's phone to post from his, too!

And when even that wasn't enough, she rallied the Huber family's entire PR team.

She even called up Mrs. Windham, Mrs. Murphy, and the rest of her high-society friends to join in.

Outsiders thought she was doing it to teach Richard a lesson-like, if he ever stepped out of line, she'd snip" him too. Poor Richard-everyone was feeling sorry for him.

Except Richard himself-he was worried sick about their son!

Winona was amazing, sure, but also a little scary. If she could do that to Zane,

what was stopping her from doing it to their precious boy?

But Janelle didn't see it that way. She said,

"If our son ever gets together with Winona, he'd better toe the line! If he cheats and Winona decides to make e

him a eunuch—well, he had it coming! And the Huber family would have no right to complain!"

"In fact, if there was a law that said cheaters lost their, ahem, equipment, maybe

men would finally behave!"

Richard could only stare, speechless. "..."

While the whole country was roasting Zane, they didn't forget to poke fun at Keaton too:

"The Huber family has a son, just turned thirty. One wrong move and he's out on the street!"

"Unloved by Dad, ignored by Mom—Mr. Huber is the family's black sheep now." Elysia turned to Tarquin.

"Do you really think Mr. Huber and Janelle are going to cut Keaton off?"

"Nah—the Huber family only has one son. They'd never actually disown him."

"So why are they making such a big show out of all this?"

Chapter 1364

Tarquin didn't dare admit that it was his idea for Winona to bring dinner over-and that things had gotten awkward because of it.

After all, he was the one who'd set up the whole meal delivery thing.

And Keaton? Well, his reputation wasn't exactly great, and Elysia's feelings about him were pretty clear.

She was fine being friends with Keaton, but the moment romance came up, she'd scrunch up her nose and roll her eyes.

If she found out that the Huber family had gotten the wrong idea because of that dinner that they wanted Winona to become their daughter-in-law-who knows if Elysia would blame him?

So as far as anything between Keaton and Winona went, Tarquin figured it was best to just play dumb.

He quickly switched the subject.

"Don't stress about Keaton," he said. "I heard from Lowell you guys are going skiing tomorrow?"

"Yeah... The kids are excited, and my parents are into it. We're all planning to go," Elysia said.

"What, you're not inviting me?" Tarquin teased.

Elysia shot back, "Didn't you say you were busy?"

"Who told you I was busy?"

Elysia blinked, surprised and suddenly hopeful. "Wait, you're free?"

Seeing the excitement in her eyes, Tarquin felt a warm flutter in his chest. He shot her a crooked smile and gently pinched her cheek.

"You want me to come that much?"

Elysia nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely!"

"And why do you want me there?"

"Because when you're around, I have more fun," she said, not missing a beat.

When Tarquin was there, she could just relax and be playful, like a kid again-she could lean on him and let go.

But when he wasn't, she had to be the grown-up, thinking about the kids, her parents, keeping everything together.

It wasn't about being forced to act a certain way-it just happened naturally, depending on whether Tarquin was around.

So lately, she'd gotten a little clingy.

If they were heading out to have fun, she honestly hoped he'd be there, too.

Tarquin just melted, looking at her with nothing but warmth and affection.

"For you, babe? I'm at your beck and call, twenty-four-seven. Not going anywhere."

Elysia grinned, cupped his face, and gave him a quick, sweet kiss.

Just a brush of the lips-she meant to pull away, but Tarquin wasn't

having any of it. He slipped his net

behind her head, holding her close, turning the tables.

The kiss deepened, the air shifting from light and playful to something much more heated.

Tarquin's hand slid beneath her pajama top, his fingers tracing lazy circles at her waist.

Elysia knew exactly where this was heading. Her heart raced as she pushed at his chest, trying to protest.

"Cut it out, we've got skiing tomorrow!"

He grinned, voice low and rough with want. "That won't slow us down tomorrow."

With that, he popped open the top few buttons of his shirt, revealing a hint of tanned, toned chest-impossible to ignore.

Still holding her close, he leaned in, continuing to kiss her, his hand never leaving her waist.

Elysia, thoroughly trapped, slapped a hand over his mouth.

"You-you haven't even showered yet!" she blurted, desperate for

distraction, hoping he'd take the net

and cool off.

Tarquin looked down at her, eyes dark with mischief.

hint

A heartbeat later, he scooped her up and headed straight for the bathroom.

"Let's

together," he said with

rin. "And while we're at it

let's

about those TikTok videos

watched today."

Elysia's eyes went wide. "Hey! You-mmph-!"

...

The next morning, Elysia was woken up by Evan bouncing on the bed.

"Mom! Get up! We're going skiing today!"

Elysia's eyes flew open. She tried to sit up, but Tarquin still had her locked in his arms, holding her tight from behind.

She sighed, still lying down. "Okay, okay, I'm up."

"And Dad, too! Grandpa already made pancakes. You two are the only ones still in bed!"

Elysia blushed. "Alright, alright, we're coming."

Once she heard Evan's footsteps retreat, she tried to pry Tarquin's arm from her waist. "Let go!"

Instead, Tarquin just pulled her closer.

She wriggled around in his arms, like a little caterpillar, turning to face him—

Chapter 1365

"Evan already called us. Time to get up!"

Tarquin didn't even bother opening his eyes, just mumbled lazily, "Let me snooze a bit longer."

Elysia pinched his cheek hard.

"Snooze, my foot! The kids are all up and here we are, still lazing around. Aren't you even a little embarrassed?"

Tarquin just flashed his annoyingly charming smile, eyes still closed. "Not embarrassed at all. Where's the rule that says parents have to get up before the kids?"

"Shameless! Get up! If you don't, I'm really gonna lose it!"

Tarquin finally peeked an eye open, lashes fluttering, looking like he'd just stepped out of a comic book. "Morning kiss?"

Elysia leaned in and gave his chin a playful bite. "Morn-ing!"

Tarquin chuckled, grabbed her chin, and planted a firm kiss on her lips, eyes full of affection. "Good morning."

Elysia rolled her eyes, threw off the covers, and headed for the bathroom.

Last night, Tarquin had taken his time but had been gentle. And since he only wanted her once, she didn't feel uncomfortable this morning.

As Elysia started brushing her teeth, Tarquin followed right behind.

She brushed. He brushed.

He stood so close behind her that his chest pressed into her back, resting his chin right on top of her head.

Elysia stared at their reflection in the mirror, completely exasperated. She rinsed her mouth and then glared at him in the mirror. "Are you planning to drip toothpaste foam all over my hair?"

Tarquin turned to rinse his mouth, then immediately plopped his chin back on her head, grinning at their reflection. "Hey, are my teeth white?"

Elysia rolled her eyes so hard it could've been an Olympic sport. "Are you five years old? Move!"

Tarquin wouldn't budge. "Let me see if yours are whiter."

Elysia bared her teeth at the mirror. "Whiter than yours!"

He spun her around by the shoulders. "Let me get a good look."

One look led to another, and soon he was kissing her...

The kiss got deeper and deeper until Elysia, flustered and red-faced, stomped on his toe.

"Ow! Are you trying to kill your husband?" Tarquin yelped.

She was breathless, cheeks burning. "Why do you have to be like this? Get out, I don't want to brush my teeth with you!"

She tried to push him out, but Tarquin just stood there, laughing "C'mon, the kids and your folks are downstairs waiting. If we hurry up and share, we'll save time.

Elysia shot him a murderous glare. "You are so annoying in the morning. Behave, or else!"

...

By the time they finally made it downstairs, half an hour had passed.

As soon as they appeared, Baby dashed to the bottom of the stairs. "Daddy! Mommy!"

Seeing the whole family waiting for them, Elysia felt her face burn with embarrassment. She gave Tarquin a not-so-subtle kick, then rushed down to scoop Baby up in her arms.

She kissed her daughter's cheek. "Baby, you all ready?"

"Uh-huh! Mommy, I want to take Lan with us skiing. Grandpa says Lan's brave enough."

Baby was hugging Lan close to her chest.

Elysia nodded. "If you want to bring Lan, we'll bring him. Let's all go together."

Most bunnies tend to get skittish in

new places but Lan was different. Maybe it was from hanging out e for so long-Lan was.

Baby had taken Lan to all sorts of places, and he'd never been scared.

Now, compared to when Keith first brought him over, Lan had grown twice the size-round and fluffy, like a tiny teddy bear.

Lan was a gift from Keith. Every time Elysia saw the bunny, she thought of him.

If Keith were still here, he'd be glued to Baby's side, just like Lan is now.

Some things, she supposed, just never got easier.

Chapter 1366

Elysia snapped out of her thoughts, ruffled the hair of the little one nestled in Baby's arms, and waved at Pamela Patel and the kids.

After the hellos, she turned to the children.

"Alright, have the best time today. But remember, after all the fun, tomorrow means back to preschool-no fussing, no whining. You've all gotta go."

The mere mention of preschool triggered a chorus of mixed reactions.

Baby's face fell immediately—she hated being away from Mom and Dad, and she couldn't even bring Lan along.

Elliot and Elijah weren't thrilled either. To them, preschool was for babies.

Evan and Emmett, on the other hand, didn't really mind. They liked meeting new friends and playing games. The only downside? Spending the whole day away from Mom.

Still, whatever Elysia said, went. If it made Mom happy, that was enough.

"If that's what you want, Mom, we promise-we won't make a fuss!" they chimed in unison.

Elysia grinned. "Tomorrow, both Daddy and I will drop you off."

"And Grandma and Grandpa, too!" came Clayton Hawkins' cheery voice, emerging from the kitchen with a tray full of pancakes and bacon.

Tarquin followed right behind, carrying a stack of scrambled eggs and toast.

As soon as Elysia and her husband came downstairs, Clayton had hustled off to the kitchen to get breakfast ready, with Tarquin helping out like a pro.

Elysia, with Baby in her arms, led the way to the dining room. "Dad."

"Alright, kids, go wash your hands, breakfast's ready! Eat up and we'll head out after," Clayton called, his apron straining at the ties, his face beaming. Ever since he'd found his daughter again, the once-legendary sea captain had become a devoted family man-and he was loving it.

After breakfast, the whole family piled out the door, a merry little parade.

Lowell was already at the curb with a gleaming black SUV, engine humming. Axel was there too, leaning against the car.

But Axel wasn't here for snowball fights or tobogganing-he was just looking for an excuse to slip away for a bit. Tarquin had said last night: with them sticking close to home, certain folks were playing it safe. If the family went out, those same folks might finally make a move.

"Mr. Lowell! Mr. Axel!" the kids shouted, rushing over.

Lowell grinned and swooped down like he was greeting his own brood, arms wide open.

Axel just stood by the car, all in black athleisure, baseball cap pulled low, face impassive but somehow less chilly than usual.

He was almost... approachable.

Baby, on a mission, scampered straight to Axel and wrapped herself around his leg, looking up at him with big hopeful eyes.

"Mr. Axel!"

Axel, never one for hugs, awkwardly patted her head in what, for him, passed as affection.

Baby piped up in her sweet little voice,

"It's been so long, Mr. Axel! Did you bring me a present?"

Axel froze. Besides the odd birthday or Christmas gift for Elijah-and even then, always just an envelope with

sh-he'd never bought

presents for anyone.

"Uh... I'll owe you one next time," he mumbled.

Baby pouted, her disappointment theatrical.

"No present, huh..."

Axel looked completely flustered, unsure how to respond.

But before he could recover, Baby's eyes sparkled with a new idea.

"Then will you come with me to pick Ssom? She promised to gone

up

sledding with me, but

with me, but there's no one her. Let's go together, okay?"

Axel frowned. "She wants to come, she can grab an Uber."

"Nooo, I want you to come with me!"

"I'll have someone else take you."

"No! I want Mr. Axel! If you don't come, I'll cry, I really will..."

Axel

Blossom had put Baby up to

knew exactly what Blossom we

thinking-he wanted no part of it.

He opened his mouth to refuse, but Baby was already sniffing, her eyes going

glassy with real tears welling up.

He was doomed.

Chapter 1367

It's honestly hard to watch.

Axel pressed his lips together, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else, but when the little girl's face started to crumple and she looked about to burst into tears, he caved. "Alright, let's go."

Instantly, Baby's mood did a 180-tears gone, replaced by a huge grin. She grabbed Axel's hand, bouncing in place. "Thank you, Mr. Axel!"

She turned and called over her shoulder to Elysia, "Mom, I'm going with Mr. Axel to pick up Blossom!"

Elysia shot Axel a look of pure resignation. The whole world knew Blossom had a crush on Axel. Unfortunately, Axel-like Keaton-was a hardcore bachelor.

Difference was, Keaton didn't believe in marriage, but he had no shortage of girlfriends.

Axel? He avoided relationships altogether. Didn't even flirt.

Elysia knew exactly what was going on-Blossom had probably roped Baby into matchmaking. She just waved them off. "Go on, then."

Tarquin watched Axel with a knowing squint, secretly impressed with Blossom's tactics. If he'd asked Axel to go pick up Blossom, Axel would've flat out refused. But with Baby asking? Axel was helpless.

Elysia, Tarquin, a few other kids, and family friends Clayton and Pamela all piled into the SUV for the ski resort.

Meanwhile, Axel started up his Jeep, buckled Baby into the back, and headed off to get Blossom.

They'd barely made it out of the driveway when Baby piped up, "Mr. Axel, call Blossom for me! I want to talk to her."

Axel hesitated. "...I don't have her number."

"Call my mom, then! She'll give it to you. Mom has Blossom's number!" Baby insisted.

Axel paused, then, resigned, unlocked his phone and punched in a string of numbers. He handed the phone over.

Baby's eyes widened. "Wait, I thought you didn't have Blossom's number?"

Before Axel could respond, Blossom picked up. "Baby?"

"Hi Blossom!" Baby chirped.

"Hey, Baby! Why do you have Mr. Axel's phone?"

"We're together! Mr. Axel is weird," Baby announced.

"Huh?"

"He said he didn't have your number, but he just called you anyway."

Axel sighed.

Baby kept going, "Blossom, we're coming to pick you up. Don't forget to bring me something yummy!"

Blossom sounded thrilled. "I've got it all ready! I'll wait for you at the preschool entrance."

"Here, you talk to Mr. Axel!" Baby chirped, shoving the phone into Axel's hand.

Axel didn't say a word-just hung up.

Buckled in her car seat, Baby stared at Axel. "Mr. Axel, why didn't you talk to Blossom? That's kinda rude, y'know."

Axel struggled to explain. After a long pause, he finally muttered, "I don't like her, so I don't want to talk to her."

Baby's big eyes went even wider,

confused "How come you don't like Blossom? We all love

Blossom-she's so nice! And she really likes you. She even said she wants to be your wife someday."

Axel's expression was frosty. "Don't listen to her nonsense."

Baby shook her head, all innocence. "It's not nonsense! Blossom's super serious. She said she'll have a bunch of babies with you, and they'll call me big sis!"

Axel gripped the steering wheel tighter, eyes fixed on the road ahead, jaw clenched. He had no idea how to answer that, so he just pulled out his secret weapon for keeping kids quiet he found a cartoon on his phone and handed it back to Baby.

Blossom's preschool was the fanciest private school in Jindale City, nestled right in the middle of the gated community. It was barely a ten-minute drive from Number One Mansion.

A few minutes later, Axel spotted a familiar silhouette up ahead.

She was wearing a black tracksuit and a matching baseball cap—just like Axel's usual style. Even her sneakers were the same brand and color he always wore. Axel frowned, pulling the Jeep to a stop right next to Blossom.

Chapter 1368

Blossom hurriedly swung open the car door and hopped into the passenger seat, flashing Axel a bright grin. "Hey."

Axel just shot her a cold look, not saying a word.

Blossom was used to it by now, so she didn't take it to heart.

She closed the door, buckled her seatbelt, and turned around to smile at Baby in the back seat.

"Here you go, I brought you something. Thanks for coming to pick me up, Baby." Baby's eyes lit up at the sight of the snacks. "Thanks, Blossom!"

Blossom chuckled, "You're welcome!"

The little girl settled quietly in the back, munching away and watching cartoons on her tablet.

Blossom then opened another small container, like she was showing off a prize, and held it out to Axel.

"Try this! I got up early to make it myself."

Axel kept his eyes on the road, ignoring both her and the food.

Blossom pouted. "You won't even try it unless Baby tells you to, huh?"

Axel frowned. "I don't eat sweets," he answered, his tone colder than the January wind.

Blossom didn't mind. She was just happy he finally spoke. She muttered, "How do you know it's sweet if you don't even look? Here, try this one, it's savory, not sweet at all."

Axel started to say something, but Blossom cut him off, "I've got all the flavors— sweet, tangy, spicy, you name it."

Axel just glared in silence for a long moment, then said icily, "I'm not getting

married, ever. I'm not interested in dating, either. You're wasting your time on me."

Blossom jutted out her lip. "Just because you don't plan on it doesn't mean it'll never happen."

Axel: "I don't like you."

Blossom: "That's fine. I like you anyway."

Axel's frown deepened. "... You're a girl!"

Blossom grinned, her cheeks turning rosy. "Exactly! If I were a guy, maybe I wouldn't like you. It's because I'm a girl that I do."

She was a little shy after saying it so directly, but with someone like Axel, if she played coy, they'd never get anywhere. She just liked him Simple as that.

Axel snapped, "Stop liking me!"

Blossom lifted her chin defiantly. "Why? You can't tell me how to feel. My feelings are my business! And I really, really, really like you!"

Axel was never the talkative type. Now he just glowered in silence, opening and closing his mouth as if searching for words, but finding none.

Blossom teased him, "You never saved my number, so how do you always call me? You must have memorized it, right?"

Axel's face flushed crimson, and he barked, "Say one more stupid thing and I'll get out right here. You can drive Baby to the ski resort yourself!"

Blossom mumbled under her breath, "Fine, I won't say anything. Jeez, so grumpy, just because I like you."

Axel: "..."

As the car sped away from the city, somewhere else, in the city hospital-

Zane lay motionless in his hospital bed. He wouldn't eat, wouldn't drink, wouldn't speak. Yesterday, without any anesthesia, Winona had given him a "snip job" that left him in so much pain he passed out.

When he woke up, he was in the hospital.

His mom, Priscilla, had been wailing in the hallway, making enough noise for the whole city to hear. She announced to anyone who'd listen that he was "ruined for life," that he'd never be a real man again, never have kids, never have sex.

She even wanted to drag in a local reporter to take pictures of his misery, hoping

the internet would rally with her and curse Winona together.

Aside from the moment he'd screamed at Priscilla to shut up, Zane hadn't said a word since.

He felt like he was already dead, but the constant bustle of nurses and his

mother's endless complaints kept reminding him he was still alive.

He'd lost the one thing that, in his mind, made him a man. He would've rather lost an arm or a leg than that.

Chapter 1369

Without it, how could he ever be with Elysia?

How could he ever give her the perfect happiness she deserved?

Priscilla was sobbing beside him, her voice shrill and choked with anger.

"That witch Winona is just pure evil! If I'd known this would happen, the Livingston family never should've married her!"

"I told you from the start, I didn't want you to marry her! Skinny as a scarecrow, you could tell she'd never be able to give us a son!"

"And look how it turned out! Not only did she fail to give the Livingston family a son, she ruined your chances of ever having any children at all!"

"What did our family do to deserve this? To end up with a conniving, venomous woman like her?"

"My poor boy, you don't even have a single child to call your own! Oh, what a tragedy..."

"If I'd known it would be like this, I should've let Sarah have that baby... Oh, God..."

The baby growing inside Sarah had been Zane's.

She was over five months along, the baby already formed. But Zane and Priscilla had gotten rid of it.

Zane did it for Elysia. The moment he met Elysia, he never wanted another woman to bear his child.

Priscilla did it because she'd heard Sarah was carrying a granddaughter.

She only wanted a grandson, not a granddaughter. So she secretly slipped Sarah some abortion pills, and then gave her a peanut butter cookie.

Sarah was severely allergic to peanuts.

The pills and the allergic reaction together-Sarah lost the baby.

Now, mother and son both regretted it with every ounce of their being.

If they hadn't been so cruel, the Livingston family would at least have a child now. But instead...

Winona hadn't just been ruthless; she'd destroyed everything. Zane hadn't just lost his manhood-he'd lost any hope of ever having children.

Not even IVF was an option for him now.

His entire future, the family legacy, ended with him.

Priscilla's face twisted with bitterness.

"It's all that witch Winona's fault! You have to get back on your feet, son. You have to make her pay!"

Zane's jaw clenched so hard it hurt. In a rage, he snatched the glass water off the nightstand and hurled it across the room.

Priscilla shrieked, "Son! Oh, my God..."

MS

Zane was panting, his face blotchy red with fury. "If you want to cry, do it outside!"

"I'm not dead yet!"

Priscilla pressed her lips together, looking hurt and pitiful.

"I'm just heartbroken for you, my boy. You don't have a single child-what are you going to do?"

Zane gritted his teeth.

"If I can't have kids, I'll adopt. I'll raise one from a baby, raise him as

SoWe'll be just like real fathe

wn other

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son."

and

Once his big plan succeeded, he'd take the money and run away with Elysia.

They'd go somewhere no one knew them, start fresh, adopt as many kids as they wanted.

As for the bedroom stuff... So what if he couldn't anymore? He still had hands, and other ways.

He could still make Elysia happy.

Thinking about it gave Zane a new surge of confidence.

His phone buzzed. A video message. It was Tarquin, with Elysia at the ski resort. Fresh powder everywhere, Tarquin standing behind Elysia, arms around her as they shot down the hill together.

They

essed in matching

gear, bundled up tight, faces hidden.

But

slaughter and sai Ski

rang out, pure and joyful.

Zane's breath came short and fast, jealousy flaring white-hot.

He should be the one behind Elysia, keeping her safe, making her laugh. Not

Tarquin! Who the hell was he, anyway?

The jealousy was maddening.

Zane saw red, grinding his teeth as he shot off a message in reply.

"Come see me. Now."

Chapter 1370

5:00 PM. The ski resort.

Blossom was still pestering Axel to teach her how to ski. She'd been at it all day.

The thing was, Axel wasn't even dressed for skiing. No gear, no intention of hitting the slopes, and he was clearly ignoring her.

Blossom didn't mind. If he ignored her, she just kept at it, relentless.

Honestly, skiing wasn't even the reason she was here.

Chasing after Axel had made her shamelessly persistent.

If Axel glared at her, she'd just flash him a goofy grin.

If he rolled his eyes, she'd wink back, all flirty.

It wasn't until Axel's phone started ringing that she finally paused.

He stepped aside to take the call, and Blossom waited a few steps away, watching him like a fangirl staring at her celebrity crush, eyes shining with admiration.

Whatever was said on the other end of the line, Axel's face darkened, the air around him turning even colder.

Blossom's brows knit together, worry written all over her face.

As soon as he hung up, she hurried over.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Axel didn't even glance her way. He just strode off towards Tarquin.

Blossom trailed after him like a puppy.

She was bundled up in a puffy ski suit and clumsy on her skis, wobbling along like a Benny's penguin.

Suddenly, a group of girls swooshed her way, barely slowing as they shouted, "Move it! You're in the way!"

Blossom panicked, her brain short-circuiting. She tried to dodge, but nerves got the best of her. She lost her balance and went tumbling down the slope.

"Ahhh-!"

Her scream echoed, but the girls just laughed and skied away without a care.

They were after Axel too, but he'd shot down

their flirty attempts with

enough icy glares to freeze a lake. They couldn't even get near him.

Sure, Axel wasn't exactly warm to Blossom either, but at least she could stick around him.

The other girls were jealous, always trying to mess with Blossom, but with Axel nearby, they didn't dare.

Now, seeing Axel distracted, they'd seized their chance-deliberately bumping Blossom, hoping she'd get hurt and embarrass herself. After all, falling at a ski resort? Totally normal. No one would blame them.

Axel heard the commotion and turned. Blossom was rolling down the hill, shrieking the whole way.

His heart skipped-he started towards her, but a tall guy got there first, stopping Blossom's fall.

Axel couldn't hear what the guy said, but it was obvious he was checking if Blossom was okay.

Axel's frown deepened as he glared at the group of girls, his eyes icy cold.

They just giggled and disappeared into the distance.

"Blossom!" Elysia called, kicking off her skis and rushing over in snow boots.

Tarquin joined Axel. "What happened?"

"She fell," Axel answered flatly, not bothering with details.

Tarquin pressed, "Aren't you going to check on her?"

"Not my responsibility," Axel said coolly.

Tarquin hesitated, then said, "That guy seems really into Blossom. He's been watching her all afternoon. Looks like a college kid-pretty dsome, too."

"Not my business," Axel snapped.

Tarquin sighed. "Hey, chasing after someone when you've blown your chance?"

"That's a rough road, trust me. Been there, done that."

Axel's jaw tightened. "I need to get to Mariana Land."

The subject change caught Tarquin off guard. He straightened, suddenly serious. "Why?"

Axel's voice was cold. "Zane's in trouble. Some guy showed up as a reporter, asking about that hit on you."

"We checked him out the press credentials are real, but the guy isn't. He's not a reporter; he's working for Wayborn's crew."