

Hitched 1421

Chapter 1421

Number One Mansion.

Just as dawn was breaking, everyone had already gathered.

Clayton and Pamela, Blossom and Winona, and Keaton and Booker Murphy were all there, along with Gale.

Everyone was dressed in the same black attire, waiting in the grand foyer of Number One Mansion for Tarquin.

The kids had woken up early too, looking especially sharp today.

The four brothers were dressed just like Tarquin-black suits and trousers, crisp white shirts, black ties, and matching armbands. Each wore a white lily pinned to their lapel. Their hair was slicked neatly back, all in the same style.

Elysia and Baby wore matching black dresses with simple blazers over the top. Their hair was pulled back in low ponytails and their makeup was subtle, elegant, and solemn.

After Tarquin returned, everyone gathered together to discuss a few final things.

By a little after five in the morning, Tarquin was on the road with Elysia and the kids.

On the drive, Elysia reached out and took Tarquin's hand.

"I saw online-the Bradford women went to the old estate again to stir up trouble?"

Tarquin gave a wry, dismissive snort. "If they want to dig their own graves, I'll let them."

Elysia squeezed his hand gently. "You know exactly what kind of people they are. Don't let them get to you—they're not worth it. They're nothing like your mom."

Tarquin nodded. Women like them—would they ever put country or family above themselves?

They claimed his mother didn't deserve a place in the Bradford family plot, but honestly, having her there was a blessing for the Bradfords. If it weren't for his father's grave, he'd never have allowed it.

"I'm not angry," he said. "Today, they're the ones who should be upset."

Elysia nodded, giving his hand another reassuring pat, then twined her fingers with his.

She didn't say anything else—just sat silently by his side, quietly supporting him. The five kids were unusually quiet today, too. They sat in the backseat, not squabbling or chattering, their faces serious and respectful.

The church wasn't open to the public today. At the entrance, besides Tarquin's own people, there were a few plainclothes security-Soren's men.

Tarquin led Elysia and the kids inside.

Soren was kneeling at the altar rail, hands clasped in prayer for Elizabeth. The priest said softly, "A soul who kneels so long carries a heavy heart." Soren had been there since last night, kneeling motionless for hours.

Tarquin walked up, gave a respectful bow, and called quietly, "Soren."

Soren opened his eyes slowly, red-rimmed and tired. "You're here," he said, his voice hoarse.

Tarquin looked at Soren with a pang of sympathy.

He stood up for his parents' love, but

he also respected Soren

deeply-admired his sincerity, his selflessness, the way he loved without claiming or disrupting always protecting, always caring, even if it meant loving from afar.

And he couldn't help but pity Soren-devoted all his life, never able to win the heart he yearned for,

forever

fin a prison lave had

built.

Just as the priest had said: a soul marked by suffering.

Soren turned away to wipe his eyes, not one for small talk. He glanced at Elysia,

then at the kids.

Elysia greeted him politely, then nudged the kids forward.

"This is Soren. Say hello to Soren."

In perfect unison, the kids chorused, "Hello, Soren."

Soren rose stiffly from the kneeler.

"Good, good," he said, voice thick with emotion "Come on, kids. Pay your respects to your grandmother. She loved children more than anything."

The kids stepped forward solemnly, joining Tarquin and Elysia as they lit candles and knelt to pray for Elizabeth.

They bowed respectfully to the priest and the attending elders, thanking them for watching over Elizabeth these past days.

The priest took the white marble urn holding Elizabeth's ashes from the altar, and placed it carefully in the sturdy oak box Tarquin had prepared.

Tarquin lifted the box in his arms, and Elysia gently draped a scarlet cloth over the top.

Chapter 1422

Embroidered across the velvet was the image of their family of seven-along with Elizabeth Kendrick's name.

They said their goodbyes to the monks at the abbey, and Tarquin personally carried Elizabeth's urn down the hill.

But just as they reached the foot of the hill, a squad of soldiers appeared.

They stood in crisp formal uniforms, waiting at the roadside.

Army, Navy, Air Force-the whole works.

As soon as they saw Tarquin holding Elizabeth's urn, every one of them snapped

to attention and saluted, heads bowed in respect.

Tarquin was caught off guard. "..."

After the salute, one of the officers stepped forward to explain,

"The higher-ups learned that Elizabeth and Kendrick would be laid to rest together today. They asked us to come and pay our respects."

"Given the current situation, their heroic deeds can't be shared with the public yet. But we can't let our heroes go unrecognized. We're here to honor her and escort her back to her husband."

Tarquin understood. He nodded, hugging his mother's urn tightly and bowing in gratitude.

The officers then turned to Soren, saluting once more. "Commander!"

Soren returned the salute. "Let's go. We can't be late for Elizabeth's burial." The group piled into the cars, heading toward Number One Manor.

Tarquin had planned it all out-he wanted to take his mother to see Number One Manor one last time, then visit her old house, and finally, to the cemetery.

Military vehicles led the way, a procession of black sedans following close behind. They were giving her the respect she deserved.

Elysia still had no idea about the details of the government operation. She was confused-why would the military brass come out personally to see them off?

Soren's presence made sense, sure.

But the heads of the Army, Navy, and Air Force? That was something else.

It wasn't the right time to ask, though, so she just kept quiet.

Tarquin caught her confusion and explained quietly,

"Dad and Mom died serving the country. They gave their lives for the nation's safety. That's why the military's here."

Elysia's eyes widened in shock. "!"

She'd always believed her in-laws had died in a family dispute over money.

She'd never imagined they were heroes.

Her respect for Elizabeth and Kendrick deepened.

She didn't ask for details, just frowned, her expression solemn.

"Your parents are our pride. We should all learn from them."

She turned to the kids-Elliot, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, and baby

Maddie-"You all need to learn from Grandpa and Grandma. They were heroes You're their grandchildren-you have to

remember what that means.

The five kids nodded together. "We'll learn from Grandpa and Grandma!"

Tarquin looked at his family, pride warming his chest.

In his heart, he whispered:

Mom, with such an amazing daughter-in-law and grandkids, you must be proud, right?

You used to ask me what kind of girl I wanted to marry.

Well, you can see for yourself—it had to be someone like Elysia.

No one else would do.

I love her, Mom. For the rest of my life, it's her and only her.

...

Their convoy rolled from the outskirts back into the city.

Onlookers gathered on every corner.

The news of Elizabeth and Kendrick being buried together had already gone viral overnight.

At first, everyone thought it was just another rich family drama But when

the

bootary vehicles pulled up the

whole city was stunned.

A military escort-that was the highest honor.

No one knew exactly what Elizabeth had done.

But they knew it had to be extraordinary.

Even with Tarquin's wealth, the military wouldn't show up like untess truly mattered

One luxury car after another crossed the city streets, flanked by military vehicles.

The spectacle left everyone speechless.

Soren gazed out the window, brow furrowed, and murmured,

"This is what a hero deserves."

Chapter 1423

Military vehicles led the way, government cars in tow, as Elizabeth made her grand return to Jindale City in a top-of-the-line luxury car.

Even though all that was left of her now was an urn of ashes, she still managed to cause quite a stir across the entire city.

It wasn't just the regular folks and politicians who took notice-every member of Jindale's high society felt the tremor of her arrival.

Elizabeth's name was anything but unfamiliar among the city's elite. After all, her whirlwind romance with Kendrick had been the talk of the town back in the day.

Most of the fancy ladies in the upper crust never liked her. To them, Elizabeth was just a girl from an ordinary background-she didn't have the pedigree, the connections, or the family money. In their eyes, she wasn't even worthy to shine their shoes.

When news first broke about her and Kendrick, no one thought it would last. But then Kendrick turned his back on the entire Bradford family for her, moved overseas, got married, and started a family far from the city's prying eyes.

Suddenly, those same society ladies were green with envy. In their world, love was in even shorter supply than loyalty. The women who'd never known real affection just couldn't stand to see someone else adored so deeply by her husband.

They didn't even bother to get to know Elizabeth. Instead, they joined in with the Bradford family's whispers, spreading rumors that Elizabeth was some kind of manipulative temptress who'd cast a spell on Kendrick.

Then, when Elizabeth and Kendrick were killed in a car accident abroad, the gossip hit a fever pitch.

"See? Trouble follows a pretty face," they crowed.

"I said it from the start-Elizabeth was never respectable. Mr. Bradford was bound to run into trouble with her. Guess I was right."

The tall tales only got wilder from there: Some said she'd been cheating overseas and was murdered by a jealous wife. Others claimed she was keeping a boy toy who killed her in a rage. A few even whispered that her marriage with Kendrick fell apart after she got involved with a foreigner, and that they'd plotted to have each other killed.

No one had a kind word for Elizabeth. Not a single one.

Even after Tarquin took over as head of the Bradford family, the whispers never stopped:

"So what if her husband loved her? So what if her son's a big shot? She died a tragedy—the Bradfords never accepted her!"

"She'll never set foot in the Bradford estate-not in this life!"

"She'll never be buried with Kendrick!"

"She'll never be recognized as Kendrick's wife!"

But now, here she was-coming home in a car fit for royalty, with military honors and government officials making way. It was the kind sendoff that shook the city

social scene to its core.

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The very same women who'd gossiped about her for years crowded around their

TV screens with their friends, eyes glued to the live coverage.

They needed to know: How on earth did Elizabeth, the woman they'd trashed for decades, manage to return with so much honor? Who the heck was she really, to get a military escort through the city?

Inside the luxury car, Tarquin held his mother's urn as they made their way to Number One Mansion.

He wanted to show her the home he'd built, to let her see her son's house and know the way-just in case she ever wanted to visit.

Next, he took her to the modest three-bedroom apartment where she'd once lived. The place was filled with memories of Elizabeth's youth.

This time, just Tarquin and his mother's ashes went upstairs. Elysia and the kids waited outside with the others.

Little Baby clung to Elysia's hand. "Mommy, how come we can't go up too?"

Elysia smiled gently. "This is where your grandma lived a long time ago. Let's give your dad and grandma a few moments alone, okay? We shouldn't bother them."

Emmett, ever curious, piped up, "Mom, do people really have souls after they die?"

Even Evan couldn't help but ask, "Mom, do you think Grandma knows we're doing all this for her?"

Elysia didn't have an answer.

Did people still exist after they were gone? Did souls really linger on, watching over the ones they loved? Was there another world out there, waiting for them?

She could only hold her children close, searching for comfort in questions that had no easy answers.

Chapter 1424

Is there really such a thing as past lives and reincarnation?

Can people remember their loved ones, their friends, and everything from before?

No one really knows the answer to these questions.

After all, who among the living can know what happens after death?

Elysia shook her head.

"I don't know, sweetheart. But what I do know is that it's a way for those left

behind to express how much they miss the ones they've lost."

"Doing these things... it helps ease the pain, at least a little."

"If you keep all that hurt bottled up inside, it's not good for you. Missing someone

so much can really make you sick."

The little girl tilted her face up, eyes wide and curious.

"Mommy, does everyone die?"

This time, Elysia nodded firmly.

"Growing old, getting sick, dying—it's just part of life. We're all just visitors here, passing through for a while, and then we move on."

The little one pressed her lips together, tears brimming in her eyes.

"But what if I don't want you and Daddy to die? I don't want to be apart from you and Daddy..."

Elysia quickly knelt down, gently wiping away her daughter's tears and pulling her into a comforting hug.

"Daddy and I aren't going anywhere. We'll always be with you, baby. We're not leaving you."

She was still too young to understand the bigger picture, so Elysia just comforted her as best as she could.

The little girl clung to her neck, sobbing softly.

"I... I just think about being apart from you and Daddy and it makes me want to cry. Is Daddy really sad right now?"

Elysia frowned, glancing up the stairs.

He must be. And not just sad-heartbroken.

After what felt like forever, Tarquin came down from upstairs, holding Elizabeth's urn in his arms.

His eyes were red-he'd clearly been crying.

Elysia's heart ached for him, but she didn't say a word. She just gathered the kids and quietly followed behind him, offering silent support.

They left the house and headed for the Bradford family cemetery.

On the way, Tarquin asked Lowell to take a detour. He wanted to bring Elizabeth to visit Keith Garcia first.

Tarquin didn't harbor anger toward Keith anymore. What he felt now was more complicated sympathy understanding, and a deep gratitude for the way Keith had cared for Baby Garcia.

Keith was buried in a scenic spot, peaceful and beautiful.

Tarquin brought Elizabeth to see him because he knew the connection they'd shared.

Elizabeth had always had a place in Keith's heart, and she'd kept Keith in hers for half a lifetime.

Bringing Elizabeth here was his way of letting them have a moment & together maybe even a chance to say goodbye. Maybe, if there really- was another world, they could look out for each other there.

Who really knows if there's a life after this one? Maybe there is, maybe there isn't. But just in case Targon wanted them to know where to find each other. fo

After visiting Keith, they finally headed to the Bradford cemetery.

Outside the gates, Allegra and the others were still in hysterics.

They'd been brought here by Tarquin's men, and they hadn't stopped wailing since.

They hadn't even realized the army had cleared the way for the procession.

When they couldn't get what they wanted from the living, they turned to the dead instead!

They cried and yelled, calling on the ancestors of the Bradford family, begging them to open their eyes and see what was happening.

"This is supposed to be the heir to the Bradford family? Look at him! He's going to destroy everything we've built!"

"He sent his own grandfather away, left him stranded overseas, unable to come home, living in misery!"

"He drove his own aunt to her death, and caused her son's death too!"

"My son Lionel-he died because of him!"

"He kicked us all out of the family estate, left it empty rather than let us live there!"

"And now, without even asking us, he wants to bury that shameless woman-his mother-in our family plot, right next to Hugh!"

"Elizabeth, that woman, what right does she have to be laid to rest in the Bradford family cemetery? Who does she think she is?!"

"Letting her in would be a disgrace to the Bradford family!"

"Oh ancestors, Tarquin's going to be the end of us! A century of family history, all ruined in his hands!"

"Please, all of you up there, open your eyes! Punish this ungrateful wretch!"

"We can't let him get his way! No matter what, Elizabeth does NOT belong in the Bradford family plot!"

Chapter 1425

They were crying and cursing at the same time, not forgetting to hurl insults and spiteful wishes at Tarquin and Elizabeth.

Suddenly, they noticed the convoy at the front-and froze in disbelief.

"Wait... are those military vehicles?"

"That can't be! Why would there be army trucks here? Tarquin was just bringing that wretch Elizabeth to the cemetery! What's the military doing here?!"

They could only stare as the military vehicles arrived first at the cemetery gates. Then, right in front of their stunned eyes, came the top brass from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, stepping out of those cars one after another!

And behind them, soldiers in various uniforms followed suit.

They stood tall, faces solemn and stern, rifles on their shoulders, forming a silent honor guard on either side of the cemetery entrance, ready to escort a hero on their final journey.

The Bradford family women were completely baffled, their tears forgotten as they gaped at the scene.

"Why... why are you all here at the Bradford family cemetery?" Allegra stammered.

It never even crossed their minds that these soldiers had come to lay Elizabeth to rest with the highest honors!

One of the officers eyed them with a frown. "You're with the Bradford family?"

Allegra nodded quickly. "Yes, this is our family's cemetery."

The officers' faces turned sour as they exchanged glances.

They'd already heard plenty of unsavory rumors about the Bradford family, thanks to Elizabeth and Kendrick. The Bradfords had never accepted Elizabeth—not even as a hero.

People who can't even respect a hero what kind of family is that?

Before the officers could say a word, Allegra started sobbing, pitching her voice to the heavens.

"I don't care what you're all doing here! Please, you have to help us! Tarquin is trying to bury his mother in our family cemetery without permission!"

"His mother-Elizabeth-she was notorious! Everyone knew she was immoral, no better than a woman of the streets. Our family never acknowledged her, never!"

"We can't have a woman like that buried with our ancestors! Everyone knows bad blood in the family grave brings bad luck! She'll curse all our descendants!" "She's going to ruin the Bradfords! Please, you have to stop this!"

The military officers were stunned—and furious.

What was wrong with these women? Did they really believe Elizabeth would bring misfortune to their family just by being buried there?

To them, being laid to rest in the family plot of a hero was the highest honor imaginable!

"Enough!" barked Soren, stepping out of the car. His lips were pressed in a hard

line and his eyes blazed as he marched straight up to Allegra.

"You dragged her name through the mud when she was alive, and now you won't leave her in peace even in death Tell me who's really ruining the Bradford family?"

"It's Gideon and all of you, his selfish followers! If it weren't for Tarquin holding the Bradfords- together, do you think there would even be a Bradford family left in Jindale City?"

"Do you think you could even keep your precious family cemetery?"

Allegra recognized Soren and all but shrieked at him, "We never

slandered Elizabeth! She was

shameless, and you weren't you one of her lovers? She was involved

with you when she was alive!"

But before Soren could reply, a couple of officers rounded on her.

"How dare you insult a decorated general and a national hero? Do you want to spend the rest of your life behind bars?"

"Take these women into custody! Hand them over to the local authorities. They need some serious re-education!"

As soldiers moved in to detain them, Allegra was left reeling. "What... General? National hero?!"

Soren glared at her, the veins in his forehead standing out with rage.

"You can say I loved her, but you can't call me her lover! I never hid my feelings for her-not from anyone!"

"And I'll say it now, loud and clear: I, Soren, love Elizabeth. I have loved her my whole life!"

"I have the right to love her, and I'm not ashamed of it. I don't care what anyone says!"

"And as for Elizabeth, her heart always belonged to Kendrick. From the beginning to the end, she loved only Kendrick!"

Chapter 1426

"She's never flirted with any man except Kendrick!"

"She's never done a single thing to betray Kendrick! She's been loyal to him from the very start-not once has she ever strayed!"

"So who the hell are you all to insult her? To curse her? To slander her?!"

Soren's voice shot up, practically echoing off the hillside. He was beyond furious

now.

"If we weren't living in a country of laws, I'd have put a bullet in you all myself!"

"Elizabeth doesn't deserve a spot in the Bradford family cemetery? Go ahead, drag out every Bradford ancestor you've got. Besides Kendrick, which of them can hold a candle to her honor?"

"She's a hero-she sacrificed everything for her country. Which of your precious ancestors ever did something that selfless?"

"Elizabeth joining your family's cemetery? That's your ancestors' privilege, not hers!"

Soren's shout thundered through the foot of the hill, the echoes ringing for ages.

If there really were such things as ghosts, you could bet every last Bradford ancestor was hearing him loud and clear.

Soren's pent-up rage and frustration burst out all at once. He'd said more in these few minutes than he had in the last two days combined.

Ever since they'd left the border, racing back toward Jindale City, he'd barely spoken. Even last night, holding vigil for Elizabeth at the old chapel, he hadn't said a word—the words had all been stuck inside him, rolling around in his heart.

When he finally saw Tarquin and the others this morning, he'd barely greeted them.

But watching Allegra and her crowd stirring up trouble-insulting and slandering a woman as kind, upright, and brave as Elizabeth—he just couldn't hold it in.

A pack of bitter, selfish women, sniveling and shouting at someone who'd given everything for others—it was sickening.

Allegra was stunned by Soren's outburst. She'd never seen him this angry, and she definitely hadn't expected him to hold such a high position.

Commander of the military district? Just the title alone was intimidating.

Trying her best to keep her composure, Allegra snapped back, "Hero? Elizabeth, a hero of the people? Really?"

"Since when is a hero someone who just seduces men? What's she actually done for anyone? All I've ever seen her do is chase after guys!"

"You can't just make her out to be some kind of saint because you've got a fancy title!"

"This is just plain corruption! Isn't it illegal to abuse your power like this?"

"Everyone here can see what's happening—he's just making up stories about Elizabeth because he's got a thing for her!"

"We know exactly what sort of woman Elizabeth is. If she's a hero, I'll personally have her name erased from the Bradford family tree!"

The other women all nodded in agreement, chiming in, "We'll take our names off the family record, too!"

An Air Force officer, who'd been

silent until now, finally exploded

"You're all talking nonsense! How dare you slander a national hero and a military commander like this!"

"The only reason you don't know what she's done is because some things are classified—national security and all that."

"But just because it can't be made public doesn't mean her sacrifices didn't happen!"

A grizzled Army officer stepped forward, eyes blazing. "Commander Tan risked his life every single day on the border, and you dare slander him? Have you no shame, no conscience?"

"Spreading lies about the commander and a national hero—you're making yourselves the enemies of the whole country!"

A Navy officer cut in, his voice like a whip, "Commander Tan is a hero who stood guard for us! You should be grateful!"

"If it weren't for people like him fighting on the front lines, you wouldn't be enjoying your safe, cozy lives back here!"

"And you should be thanking Elizabeth, too! If it weren't for the sacrifices she and her husband made, some of you might not even be alive right now!"

The truth about the threat they'd faced-the eighth-generation virus-was known only by those at the top. It was a bioweapon,

targeted specifically at the

countrymen. The risk had been

unimaginable.

If it hadn't been for Elizabeth and Kendrick's bravery, no one dared imagine what would have happened.

Even if the officers hadn't known Elizabeth personally, hearing Allegra spit such venom at a genuine hero was more than they could stomach.

Chapter 1427

In this world, there are countless stories of heroes whose sacrifices go untold.

Take the undercover agents and narcotics officers who died horrible deaths far from home-their photos and heroic deeds are rarely revealed to the public. Usually, their identities only come out when there's no family left who could be targeted for revenge.

That's the harsh reality-protecting their loved ones from retaliation.

The reason Elizabeth and Kendrick's story couldn't be made public was simple: the real Eighth Generation virus still hadn't been found, and the crisis wasn't over. If the truth got out, panic would spread like wildfire.

Mass hysteria is a monster of its own. The government would do anything to avoid

it.

People talk about peace and prosperity, but the truth is, it's all built on the backs of those who shoulder the danger for us.

Elizabeth was being escorted by government agents to make sure her name was cleared, to honor her as the hero she was. They couldn't let her sacrifice-or Kendrick's-be forgotten. The country owed them that much.

But then you had people like Allegra and her crew. They enjoyed the safety and privileges earned by these heroes, yet showed no gratitude. Instead, they spread lies, hurled insults, and even cursed the names of the fallen.

People like that deserve the harshest judgment.

As Tarquin walked forward, holding the urn with Elizabeth's ashes, Soren's voice rang out, cold and commanding.

"Don't take them away yet. Bring them along to the cemetery. I want them to see Elizabeth and Kendrick laid to rest together with their own eyes," he ordered. "If any of them so much as utters a word of disrespect, double their sentence. If they want to rot in prison, let them keep talking."

Allegra and her group fell silent, their eyes wide with shock as the military officers and soldiers saluted Elizabeth, honoring her sacrifice. They looked ready to faint from disbelief.

Tarquin passed by, shooting them a frosty glare, but said nothing.

Elysia and the children walked past next, casting furious looks at the group but refusing to engage. They might have been elders in the family, but respect had to be earned and they certainly hadn't.

Behind Elysia and the children came Clayton and Pamela. Further back were major military and political leaders: Richard Huber and Janette, the Murphy family, the Windham family old friends and allies of Kendrick's. Winona and Blossom, Keaton and Booker, all walked in solemn procession.

At the rear marched representatives from the Army, Navy, and Air Force, rifles on their shoulders, standing tall and proud. They were the honor guard, protecting the procession.

Everyone except the soldiers at the back stared straight ahead, faces set. As they passed Allegra's group, each person shot them a deadly cold look.

Allegra and her people knelt at the gates of the Bradford family cemetery, too terrified to even

breathe. All they could do was

watch helplessly, as Tarquin carried Elizabeth's ashes through the iron gates, leading the long, dignified procession.

No one dared protest. No one dared shout. The atmosphere was so commanding,

so overwhelming, that it silenced even the bravest troublemaker.

Once everyone had entered the

cemetery, Tarquin's men and the remaining soldiers herded Allegra's group inside as well, forcing them to witness Elizabeth and Kendrick's burial side by side, just as Tarquin and Soren had ordered.

Weren't they the ones who had claimed Elizabeth would never be admitted to the Bradford family cemetery? That she'd never be laid to rest with Kendrick? That the public would never recognize her as Kendrick's wife?

Well, now they had no choice but to watch the truth unfold before their very eyes.

Chapter 1428

Let them all see, then. Let everyone witness how Elizabeth entered the cemetery, how she was laid to rest, and how everyone finally accepted that she truly was Kendrick's wife.

At the top of the hill, the group gathered before Kendrick's gravestone.

Soren led the mourners, bowing his head in salute to Kendrick. Like Elizabeth, he was a hero.

Tarquin cradled Elizabeth's urn in his arms, staring at the photo of the handsome man on the headstone. He spoke softly, his voice low and steady, but with a tremor that betrayed his emotion.

"Dad, I brought Mom home."

A gentle breeze swept through the crowd, drying the tears from their eyes. There wasn't a dry eye to be found.

After all their struggles, these two star-crossed lovers were finally reunited.

At exactly ten in the morning-the appointed hour-it was time.

Open the casket.

Kendrick had died young, and had a traditional burial.

His grave wasn't one of those tiny plots you see nowadays. The coffin was old-fashioned, big enough to fit a full-grown man.

The grave had already been dug up that morning, and the solid oak coffin lay exposed.

They opened the casket. The lid creaked as it came off.

The women in the family broke down in tears.

Inside, there was no body—just an urn containing Kendrick's ashes, along with a few of his personal belongings.

Years ago, Kendrick and Elizabeth had died overseas. Their bodies had been cremated abroad and brought back home.

Still, the Bradford family insisted on following the old burial customs, almost as if the bodies were intact.

Kendrick's urn was set at the head of the coffin, and the rest of the space was packed full—but no sign of Elizabeth. Every memento was Kendrick's alone.

The Bradfords had refused to

acknowledge Elizabeth. They'd tried to keep the lovers apart in life, and

even in death they tried to erase her

from Kendrick's story.

They had buried Kendrick while scrubbing out any trace of Elizabeth—even going

so far as to perform rituals to keep her spirit away from him.

Tarquin stood aside, his brow furrowed and his eyes red.

Following the instructions of the priest, he handed Elizabeth's urn to Elysia and

led the group in a final prayer for Kendrick.

Then, he rolled up his sleeves and began clearing out the coffin.

He was going to replace everything in there with things that belonged to both Kendrick and Elizabeth-a wedding photo, the outfits they wore

on the wedding day, their favorite

paintings, handwritten notes so many tokens of their love.

Every item was a memory, a piece of their happiness.

As Tarquin worked, he couldn't help but notice small things-signs that someone

else had been inside the coffin before him.

He wasn't surprised. Whoever had spent so much effort searching for the "eighth-generation virus" and secret data surely wouldn't have ignored his father's grave.

But the intruder hadn't vandalized anything. Kendrick's urn was undisturbed, everything else neatly arranged.

Even earlier, before they'd opened the casket, Tarquin had checked the seal was still perfectly intact.

It meant that whoever had been here felt something for his father. No one treats their enemy's grave with that much care.

If it had just been about revenge, the casket would've been left in chaos, not

carefully closed up again.

Tarquin felt a sharp ache in his chest.

This only confirmed his suspicions.

Ding-his phone vibrated with a new message.

Tarquin's heart skipped a beat. He stopped what he was doing and pulled out his phone to check.

Chapter 1429

Someone had been texting him from a burner number-a bunch of messages, all weird.

"There's a chess set in the coffin. Don't take it out. I put it there."

"If you're worried, check it. The chess set's wooden, totally harmless."

"If you toss it out today, I'll just have to make another one and find a way to slip it in again."

"If you don't want me disturbing their rest, just leave the chess set exactly as it is."

"And one more thing-after you seal the coffin, light a candle for me, okay?"

Tarquin's face was stone cold. He didn't have to guess who sent it. It was the mystery man. Again.

He put his phone away and went to find the chess set.

He opened the box: inside was a hand-carved, wooden chess set. Even the letters on the pieces were scratched in by hand.

The pieces were a little rough, the letters uneven and downright ugly, some even misspelled.

The craftsmanship was nothing to brag about, but the thought behind it was obvious.

Hand-carved-way more meaningful than anything bought off Amazon.

Everyone knew Kendrick loved chess. It was his thing.

Tarquin had wanted to put a chess set in the coffin at the funeral, but Gideon wouldn't allow it.

Gideon only cared about money and power. Hobbies like chess? Didn't matter to him.

Tarquin stood there, chess set in hand, silent for a long time. In the end, he put it back in the coffin.

His dad liked it. That was enough.

Besides, he really didn't want that guy coming around to mess with his parents' peace anymore.

If he was right, Kendrick definitely wouldn't want to see that man again. Accepting the chess set was better than seeing its maker in person.

Tarquin took a deep breath, pulled himself together, and started sorting through the rest of the stuff.

He was searching for something.

When he found a square plastic lunchbox that looked like it was from another era, relief washed over him.

This was what he'd been looking for. Thank God it was still here.

But his relief twisted into something darker.

As he picked up the lunchbox, memories he'd tried to bury crashed over him, all at once.

It was the only thing he'd managed to put in his father's coffin.

Inside the box was an old

puzzle-one you could take apart and put back together, over and over is dad had given it to him, and they'd spent countless afternoons piecing it together.

When his father died, Tarquin was just a kid.

He still remembered begging Gideon to let him put the puzzle in the coffin.

Back then, Gideon was at the height of his power. Every little thing about the Bradford family was his decision.

He never accepted Elizabeth as his son's wife, so her things weren't allowed anywhere near Kendrick's grave.

That year, Tarquin had gathered a bunch of keepsakes from both his parents, wanting to bury them with his father.

But Gideon wouldn't have it.

He wouldn't let Tarquin put them in—and he wouldn't give them back, either. Instead, he burned everything.

Right in front of him.

et

Tarquin had just lost his parents; the pain was still raw. And there he was watching their belongings go up in flames. The loss doubled, tripled.

He knelt by the fire, sobbing so hard he thought he might break apart.

But nobody cared. Nobody comforted him. All he got was eye-rolls and sneers.

"No one in the Bradford family ever acknowledged that whore Elizabeth

as Kendrick's wife. At best,

just some secret fling."

Was

"A kid born to some woman like that is just as illegitimate! You're nothing but a bastard."

"If you weren't the only male heir left, you wouldn't even be allowed back here."

"Now that you're back, keep your head down and cut all ties with that woman Elizabeth!"

"From now on, whether you're here in the Bradford family or anywhere else, you've only got a father. No mother."

"Don't ever mention that woman again. She's a disgrace!"

Those words echoed in Tarquin's mind for the rest of the day, heavy as lead.

Chapter 1430

That night, the realization finally hit him.

Survival of the fittest, he thought. If you're not strong enough, you have to learn when to back down.

At his age, keeping his head down was just part of staying alive.

So that night, clutching the puzzle box in his small hands, he knelt in front of Gideon for the first time and called him, "Grandpa."

He begged Gideon to let him bury the puzzle with his father.

Gideon, dressed in a sharp suit and sipping his Earl Grey in the armchair, looked down at him for a long, icy second before finally snapping,

"Fine. You can put it in. But from now on, you do as I say.

If the press ever interviews you, you do not show any resentment toward me or the Bradford family.

And tomorrow at your father's funeral, you will not mention your mother-not just tomorrow, but ever. No matter where you are, you keep her name out of your mouth. Wipe her from your memory.

Remember this: you're a Bradford now. You have nothing to do with that woman Elizabeth."

As a child, he was powerless against Gideon's authority.

He shook with hatred, but in the end, he had no choice but to obey.

Only then did Gideon finally allow the puzzle to be placed into the coffin, to rest with his father.

Lately, searching for clues about the eighth-generation virus, he found himself remembering every detail of his parents' lives-especially that day they died.

He kept coming back to the puzzle box.

Because, right before his father died, he'd mentioned it.

He'd had plenty of toys growing up, but that was the only one his father ever talked about.

It was impossible not to be suspicious.

If his parents had really left any clues about the virus, it had to be in that box.

Tarquin let out a long breath and pulled himself back to the present.

He didn't open the puzzle in front of everyone. Instead, he quietly set it aside with

his other things and kept clearing out the coffin.

When it was empty, Tarquin followed

the minister's instruct

took Elizabeth's ashes from Elysia, and placed them

et to Kendricks

As the two urns sat side by side, eyes all around the gravesite grew red.

It was respect for heroes.

It was awe for love.

Separated for over twenty years, finally together again.

Maybe their lives hadn't been perfect. Maybe there were regrets.

But their love had found its ending.

Together in life, together in death-never apart.

With blessings from family and the prayers of the priests, the coffin was sealed, and new earth covered it.

Inside lay their most cherished belongings.

A new headstone had been set, with Elizabeth's name added and a photo of the two of them together.

At last, Kendrick and Elizabeth, the Bradford family's heroes, were at peace.

Soren took a medal and placed it on the grave himself.

Everyone saluted, bowed their heads.

The Bradford women watched, speechless.

The woman they'd always looked down on was now a heroine, lauded in a way they could only dream of.

Later that day, with urgent business calling, Soren and his officers said their goodbyes. Before leaving, they personally handed Allegra and the others over to local law enforcement-never letting Tarquin get involved.

If Tarquin had confronted them, it would've been just another family squabble.

But when the military stepped in,

national hero, it was on whol

accusing them of slandering a

different level.

Being wiped from the Bradford family records was the least of their troubles now.

For them, the sky had finally fallen.