

Hitched 1431

Chapter 1431

After the officers left, Tarquin asked Elysia to take the kids home first.

He still needed to head back to the old family house with the monks.

Elysia offered him a few words of comfort, then led the kids and her parents away.

Winona and Blossom left with them, while Keaton and Booker stayed behind.

It wasn't until they'd left the cemetery that Winona finally blurted out,

"Jeez, today was intense, Elysia. I had no idea your folks were national heroes! I've never even heard a whisper about it before."

Elysia replied,

"I only found out today, too. Tarquin told me they gave their lives for the safety of the people, but I don't know the details."

Winona looked shocked.

"I always thought the Bradford family had them killed over the inheritance. I mean, your dad was the sole heir, right?"

Blossom nodded quickly.

"Same here. That's what everyone's been saying all these years!"

"Seems like they must've been on some top-secret mission abroad or something," she added, "otherwise, why would there be so many military bigwigs at the funeral?"

Clayton, who was driving, let out a sigh.

"Not all heroes get the spotlight. They kept this under wraps for over twenty years. Must've been tough on them."

Elysia frowned,

"All these years, the Bradfords' rumors made her out to be someone she wasn't. People who didn't know the truth judged her so harshly. But now-now the country's set the record straight."

After today, no one would dare say another bad word about her.

She was a recognized national hero.

She died for her country and her people-a true martyr.

Anyone who insulted her now would be going against the nation itself.

Everyone in the car nodded in agreement.

Only Elliot, sitting quietly, knew the real reason his grandparents were considered heroes.

He knew about the eighth-generation virus, but he couldn't say a word.

That was classified-no good would come from talking about it.

His mind was racing: had they found any new clues about the virus or the mysterious figure today?

It was almost dawn before Tarquin finally came home.

The moment Elliot heard the front gate, he shot awake.

He tossed off his blanket, jumped out of bed, and raced to the window Spotting Tarquin he hurried door.

Just as he stepped into the hallway, he nearly bumped into Elijah.

Elliot blinked in surprise. "You're still up, too?"

Elijah nodded. "Waiting for Dad."

Elliot knew Elijah was just as curious about the virus and the mysterious person as he was.

Earlier that day, Elijah had pulled him aside to ask about it.

Elliot hadn't held back-he'd told him everything.

Elliot was about to say something when Elysia appeared from the master bedroom dressed in her

She looked at them, surprised.

"Elliot, Elijah, why are you two still up?"

The brothers hesitated.

"...We couldn't sleep."

Elysia walked over and knelt down to ruffle their hair.

"Worried about your dad?"

Both boys nodded in unison.

"...Yeah."

Elysia smiled softly.

"Don't worry. Burying your

dad,

was sad, but for your

also a relief. He won't be

broken up about it." .

The boys nodded again, reassured.

Just then, they heard movement downstairs. Spotting Tarquin coming in, all three hurried to meet him.

He was still in his black suit from earlier, looking a little worn out, but his eyes were gentle.

"Why aren't you all asleep yet?" he asked.

Elysia watched him carefully, finally relaxing when she saw there was no sadness

on his face.

Chapter 1432

She helped him take off his coat, gentle as always.

"Did you get some sleep? Or just lying there?" she asked softly. "Did you finish everything?"

"The cemetery's all settled, but the monks are still at the old chapel, holding services. They say they'll need three more days."

"Do we need to go over there?"

"I'll go myself. Just wanted to come home and check in. I'll head back in a bit."

Elysia took his coat and hung it up in the entryway closet.

Elliot, their little boy, grabbed a pair of slippers from the shoe rack. "Daddy, change your shoes!"

Tarquin grinned. As soon as he slipped on the slippers, Elijah, his younger son, picked up his dress shoes and tucked them neatly inside the cabinet.

Tarquin gave Elijah's hair a gentle ruffle, his eyes full of warmth.

The four of them headed toward the living room. Tarquin glanced around. "Did Mom and Dad head out already?"

Clayton and Pamela had moved out at the beginning of the month. The house was quieter now.

"No," Elysia replied, "they stayed tonight. They're worried about you—and about me and the kids."

She lowered her voice, "I gave them a little something to help them sleep. Your dad left you some dinner too. Want to eat?"

She knew he probably hadn't had a bite all day.

Tarquin nodded. "Yeah. Is there any soup?"

"You want soup?"

"Yeah, kind of craving it. But if not, no big deal."

"I can whip up some chicken noodle. It won't take long. You hang out with Elliot

and Elijah—I'll call you when it's ready."

"Thanks, hon. You're the best."

Elysia grinned. "You sweet talker."

She disappeared into the kitchen. Tarquin wasted no time—he led the boys upstairs to the study.

Truth was, he wanted soup just to give her something to do. The business about the eighth-generation virus... he didn't want her worrying about that.

As soon as the study door closed, Elliot piped up, "Daddy, did you find anything today?"

Tarquin reached into his pocket and took out a small plastic box. He popped it open.

"Come on, let's work on this together."

Elliot and Elijah leaned in, curious. "What is it?"

"It's a puzzle your granddad gave me when I was your age."

Elliot picked up a piece and read it aloud: "King City?"

Tarquin explained, "Your grandpa used to use this to teach me all the cities in Zhinora. He'd say, 'Wherever you are never forget where you came from. The blood in your veins makes you who you are, son Never forget your homeland, never forget her shape.'"

Both boys sat up straighter, eyes shining with pride.

"Grandma and Grandpa are real heroes," Elliot declared. "We're proud of them!"

"We'll learn from them and never forget our roots!" Elijah chimed in.

Tarquin's heart warmed at their enthusiasm. He tousled their hair affectionately. "They'll be proud of you too. Come on, let's put this puzzle together."

The three of them quickly assembled the pieces, revealing a detailed map of Zhinora, with every city labeled.

But-

Elliot frowned. "Hey, we're missing a piece. Is that all of them?"

Elijah double-checked the box and looked around. "Nothing else. That's all we've got."

Elliot turned to Tarquin. "Was it

always like that? When you did

With Grandpa, was this piece

missing?"

Tarquin's brow furrowed. "Don't bother looking. Your grandpa took that piece out on purpose."

When he'd done the puzzle as a kid,

it was always complete. The

missing piece now-his father had. removed it deliberately

Elliot and Elijah exchanged a look, realization dawning.

"The real eighth-generation virus... is there?!" Elliot gasped.

Tarquin's expression turned grim. "Border City."

Chapter 1433

Elijah's voice was tight with emotion.

"So Grandma and Grandpa left the virus in Border City?"

Elliot looked confused.

"But Border City's our territory. If they already brought the virus and all the files back home, why didn't they hand them over to the government?"

"Didn't the government send a whole team to greet them back then? Why didn't they turn over the virus and the files?"

Tarquin went quiet, deep in thought. Honestly, he didn't know all the details. But one thing he felt sure of the stuff was still in Border City.

Right before his dad passed away, he'd whispered two words to Tarquin: "Puzzle pieces."

Back then, Tarquin was just a kid. He'd thought his dad was reminiscing about their afternoons spent piecing together those thousand-piece jigsaws, sipping cocoa and munching on chocolate chip cookies.

That's why, at the funeral, Tarquin had swallowed his pride and begged Gideon to let him slip that battered old puzzle box into the casket with his father—he thought it was just a sentimental gesture.

But over the years, as he grew older and started putting things together, suspicions crept in. He'd wanted to dig up the grave, just to get that puzzle box back.

Still, he was afraid the mysterious figure lurking in the background would catch on, so he waited. He told himself he'd grab the puzzle when his parents were finally laid to rest together.

Turns out, his instincts were right. When Kendrick mentioned "puzzle pieces" before he died, it was code for the location of the 8th generation virus.

He hadn't told Tarquin directly-Tarquin was just a boy, too young to protect something so dangerous, and saying too much could've gotten them all killed. Kendrick had to keep it cryptic, just in case anyone was listening. Whether Tarquin would figure it all out when he grew up... well, that was just fate's call.

Now, Tarquin finally understood. The torch had been passed to him. Figuring out how to solve this bio-crisis was up to him now.

Tarquin frowned, answering his son's questions as best he could.

"Maybe someone on the government team was a mole. Your grandparents didn't trust them, so they held onto everything."

"Or maybe they set up a diversion-handed the virus and the files off to someone trustworthy, someone who could sneak them back home. Meanwhile, your grandma and grandpa stuck around overseas to act as bait."

"Only... they never got the chance to tell the authorities what really happened. Something went wrong before they could."

Elliot's brow furrowed. "So all these years, the virus has just been sitting in Border City? And whoever brought it back never dared make a move?"

Tarquin let out a long breath.

"Maybe they were too scared to act. Or maybe... they didn't even realize what they were carrying. Who knows at this point?"

Elliot pressed, "Border City's huge, Dad. Are you sure about where the virus is?" Tarquin shook his head. "No. First, we need to find out who brought it back home." Both his parents had died overseas-it couldn't have been them. There had to be someone else.

Elijah asked anxiously, "Dad, do you have any idea who it might be?"

Tarquin rummaged through his memories, a hazy but oddly familiar face surfacing in his mind.

He frowned. "Not sure. But I have a suspect."

Elijah jumped in, "Who is it? Tell me and I'll look into him right away!"

But Tarquin shook his head. "No. Not now."

Elijah blinked. "So... you want to send someone to Border City to investigate?"

Another shake of the head from Tarquin. "We're not doing anything. Not yet."

Elliot and Elijah stared at him, surprised. "Why not?!"

They finally had a lead—shouldn't they be jumping into action?

Tarquin's frown deepened. "Because someone's watching us."

The boys fell silent, instantly catching on. If they started digging now, after opening the casket, whoever was tailing them would get suspicious.

This clue was too precious, and the consequences of mishandling the 8th generation virus were way, way too big to risk even the tiniest mistake .

Chapter 1434

Elliot shifted his focus away from the virus, turning his attention to the mysterious stranger.

"Dad, have you found any new leads on that guy?"

Tarquin's brows drew together, and at the mention of the stranger, his entire face turned cold as ice. In his eyes, you could see pure anger, disgust, and disappointment all tangled together.

It took him a while to answer. When he finally spoke, his voice was clipped.

"That's between me and him. You two don't need to get involved, and definitely don't go poking around on your own."

"If I need your help, I'll ask you."

"For now, if you have some free time, maybe try to track down Gerald and Howard."

Gerald and Howard had left the house days ago, but strangely, there hadn't been a single word from them since. No one had a clue where they were.

Elliot and Elijah exchanged a look, both frowning, but nodded in understanding. "Alright. Got it."

Just then, Elysia finished preparing a late-night snack. She knocked on the door and poked her head in. "Food's ready!"

As she came closer, her eyes landed on the jigsaw puzzle spread out on the table.

"Working on a puzzle?"

Elliot and Elijah both nodded. "Yeah, it's one Grandpa left behind."

Elysia paused, glancing at Tarquin. She picked up a puzzle piece and smiled softly.

"Looks pretty old-school."

Tarquin started gathering up the puzzle pieces. "C'mon, let's head downstairs to eat. I'm starving."

"Okay."

The four of them packed up the puzzle and went downstairs to share their midnight snack-grilled cheese sandwiches and hot chocolate around the kitchen table.

After eating, Elliot and Elijah, sensing the adults wanted some time alone, headed upstairs to bed. Soon, only Tarquin and Elysia were left downstairs.

Tarquin moved to start washing the dishes, but Elysia stopped him.

"Aren't you in a hurry to leave?"

"No rush."

"Then why don't you go upstairs, take a nice hot shower and relax? I'll handle this."

She started carrying the dishes into the kitchen, but Tarquin followed her in. "Let me do it."

Elysia rolled her eyes.

"Oh, please. Washing a few plates isn't going to kill your wife."

Tarquin grinned, relenting. He kissed her hair, grabbed a dish towel, and headed out to tidy up the dining room instead.

Once everything was neat and spotless, he finally retreated to the master bedroom for a shower.

The past week had left his nerves strung tight worrying about his parents' burial arrangements and constantly turning over thoughts about the eighth generation virus: Now, with his parents finally at rest and a few new clues in hand, he could finally let himself relax, just a little.

Border City. Of all places, it was Border City.

Surprising, yet... not really, considering Border City's reputation.

"Babe, I left some clean clothes outside your door. I'm going to go check on Elliot

and Elijah, make sure they're asleep."

Elysia's voice brought him back to reality.

"Thanks," Tarquin called back, and Elysia slipped out.

He finished his shower and stepped out wrapped in a towel. A neatly folded shirt and pair of slacks waited for him atop the dresser, and the sight made him smile. That quiet warmth in his chest-this was what real success felt like. Not just a thriving career, but a family that made you feel at home.

belongs to

He didn't bother with the dress clothes Elysia had set out. Instead, he strode into

the walk-in closet and pulled on comfy pajamas.

Just as he finished, Elysia returned, raising an eyebrow.

"Not going out again? Why the pajamas?"

"I thought I'd get some rest before heading back out. Are the boys asleep?"

"Barely. They waited up for you, but finally just crashed."

Elysia noticed his wet hair and grabbed the blow dryer, patting the chair beside her.

"Come here. Let me take care of that."

Tarquin didn't argue. He sat down, letting her dry his hair.

When she was done, they climbed into bed together. Elysia, sensing the weight on his mind, didn't wait for him to reach for her. She stretched out her arm, inviting him to rest his head on her shoulder.

"C'mere. Let me hold you for a while."

Tarquin didn't hesitate he buried his face in her arms like a child, finally letting himself relax.

They say every man is a child at heart. In this moment, it couldn't have been more

true.

Chapter 1435

Elysia held him close, her voice soft and soothing.

"Everyone's singing your parents' praises now. The government's cleared their names. They can finally rest in peace and so can you. You don't have to worry anymore."

Tarquin responded, his voice muffled by her shoulder.

"Finding Mom's ashes and laying her to rest beside Dad, with everyone watching... That's been my dream for years. Now it's real. I'm happy, really. You

don't have to worry about me."

Elysia's heart ached for him. She gently patted his back.

After a quiet moment, she called to him, "Honey?"

"Yeah?"

"Your birthday's coming up."

Tarquin opened his eyes, lifting his lashes to look at her. "And?"

"You'll be staying at the old house these days, right?"

"Not for the whole time. If anything urgent comes up, just call me."

Elysia smiled. "Well, while you're there, make sure you eat well and get plenty of sleep. When your birthday comes, I've got a huge surprise for you. Sound good?"

Tarquin's eyes narrowed playfully. "How huge are we talking?"

Elysia grinned, making it sound even more dramatic. "Super, super huge."

Tarquin chuckled. "Can you tell me now?"

Elysia shook her head right away.

"Of course not! If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise! And I need to see how you behave. If you're good, you get your present. If not, no surprise this year."

He laughed again. "Alright, I'll be good."

"So now, close your eyes and go to sleep. Be a good boy."

"...Okay."

Elysia held him, gently rubbing his back and humming a lullaby, just like she used

to when Elliot, Evan, and Emmett were little.

Tarquin was truly exhausted. He fell asleep in no time.

At three-thirty in the morning, he woke up in Elysia's arms.

He'd only slept for a couple of hours, but it was the best sleep he'd had in ages.

He glanced at Elysia, still fast asleep, and a soft, happy smile crept onto his lips. Carefully, he moved her arm and slipped out of her embrace

She stirred, frowning slightly and pouting in her sleep.

With her eyes closed, she instinctively burrowed closer to him.

Tarquin chuckled, his heart full of affection, and pulled her back into his arms.

She snuggled in, finding a comfortable spot before drifting off again.

Tarquin waited until she was sound asleep before finally getting up to leave.

The next morning, when Elysia woke up, Tarquin was already gone.

She felt a twinge of disappointment, but she wasn't surprised.

Reaching for her phone, she found a note from Tarquin under it:

'Good morning, sweetheart! I'm back at the old house. If you miss me, just call. Always loving you your husband.'

It was scribbled on a heart-shaped sticky note, his handwriting strong and bold, the words sweet as honey.

Every bit of it radiated love.

Elysia's little pang of disappointment vanished instantly, replaced by warm, giddy happiness.

She didn't want to wake him up, so she stretched, got out of bed, and went to make breakfast for the kids.

After breakfast, she dropped them off at preschool, then headed to Tanhe Manor to meet Winona.

She wanted to go shopping with Winona and get everything ready for Tarquin's birthday.

The security guard at Tanhe Manor recognized her and waved her through as soon as he saw her.

Elysia carried the breakfast she'd

Winona, making through the neighborhood toward her friend's house.

"Elysia!"

A familiar voice called out behind her.

Elysia turned and saw Keaton, just getting back from outside.

Beside him stood a stunning young

woman gorgeous, with a sweetne

smile and curves that turned heads. She looked about twenty

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A classic knockout body, angelic face-guys would call her a total bombshell.

Keaton only ever went for natural beauty. Every single girlfriend he'd dated was a stunner, and none of them ever looked fake. Each one prettier than the last.

The girl on his arm now was hanging on to him, looking all cozy and close.

She eyed Elysia up and down, her stare dripping with hostility.

Elysia pressed her lips together, a bit speechless.

She'd heard from Winona that in just over twenty days, Keaton had already cycled through three girlfriends!

This one must be his fourth since that whole mess where he got punched.

Keaton grinned and greeted her, "Hey, here to see Winona?"

Elysia was about to answer, but the girl cut her off.

"Winona? You mean THE Winona, the movie star?"

Keaton nodded, "That's her. She lives here too. Are you a fan?"

The girl wrinkled her nose, clearly unimpressed.

"Please, as if I'd like her! Why would you live in the same neighborhood as

someone like that? I heard her private life is a total train wreck, and she's always stealing-"

Elysia's eyebrows drew together in annoyance, but Keaton quickly stepped in, sensing the tension.

"Hey, maybe don't believe everything you see on Insta gossip, okay? Most of that stuff is just rumors."

The girl pouted, leaning into Keaton and whining,

"Everyone says it's easier to get close to someone famous if you're their neighbor. You're not, like, involved with her, are you?"

Keaton laughed, "Wow, someone's overthinking. If there was anything between me and her, would I really bring you here? I don't do the two-timing thing. I'm a one-woman guy."

That finally got a smile out of her.

"So you picked me over her? Guess that means I'm better than Winona! Pretty soon, I'll be even more famous than she is."

Elysia, frowning, hadn't planned to butt in, but couldn't help herself.

"New girlfriend?"

Keaton just smiled, "Yep. Let me introduce you this is Alicia."

"Weren't you single yesterday? When did this happen?"

"Last night."

Elysia didn't hold back, "So, how long do you plan to date this one?"

Alicia bristled, "Hey, what's that supposed to mean?!"

Elysia ignored her, shooting Keaton a look.

"Wow, Keaton, you really have no standards anymore. You'll go for anyone now, huh?"

With that, she spun on her heel and walked away.

Normally, she wouldn't have said

the

something like that to Keaton but way this Alicia girl disrespected. Winona was just too much

Alicia was steaming.

"Hey! Come back here! Do you even hear yourself? You-"

Keaton put a hand out to stop her.

Alicia looked up at him, all wounded and pouty.

"Babe, did you hear what she just said to me? Aren't you going to stand up for

me? Ugh..."

Keaton shrugged, "You started

talking trash about her best friend!

What did you expect? May

your mouts in theck next

keep

your mouth in check next time.

Alicia just stared at him.

"She's

Destie? Ugh, no

whenet

wonder she's so nasty Birds feather they're both just-

Keaton's eyes narrowed. "You keep going, and we're done."

Alicia realized he meant it, so she quickly clung to his arm, trying to seem sweet again.

"Okay, okay, but she started it! I'm the one who got attacked first!"

Keaton just smirked. "Yeah, I heard. But honestly? You kinda brought that on yourself."

Alicia: "..."

Chapter 1437

Alicia was fuming inside, but she didn't dare show it. Instead, she pouted and turned on the charm.

"Come on, babe, the only reason I don't like those girls is because I'm scared they'll steal you from me! I'm sorry, okay? Don't be mad, please? I'll watch what I say from now on."

She punctuated her apology with a quick kiss on Keaton's cheek, her eyes sparkling flirtatiously.

Keaton just raised an eyebrow. "Benny can pull off cute, but act too clueless and you're just being dumb. Maybe try thinking before you talk, yeah?"

Alicia nodded eagerly. "Got it, I promise!"

As they strolled down the street toward home, they spotted Elysia slipping into the house next door. Alicia's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait a sec-babe, you live next door to Winona?"

"Yeah," Keaton shrugged.

Alicia's tone turned instantly sour. "How come you two live so close, huh...?"

Keaton grinned and teased, "Not as close as you—I mean, you're right here in my heart."

Elysia, who'd just stepped inside, rolled her eyes so hard she nearly saw her brain. Whatever little soft spot she'd had for Keaton was officially gone. When it came to relationships, that guy was absolutely hopeless—just look at the girlfriend he'd picked!

She shut the door, kicked off her sneakers, and padded into the house.

The living room was empty. Figuring Winona was probably still upstairs sleeping, Elysia left her be. She set a bag of bagels and coffee on the dining table, then tiptoed around, quietly picking up Winona's clothes from the couch.

She'd barely started folding when a piercing scream split the air—from next door. It sounded just like Winona.

Elysia froze. Why the hell would Winona's voice be coming from Keaton's place?

Without even bothering to put her shoes back on, she dashed to the front door and cracked it open, listening hard.

From the other side of the wall, she heard Keaton shouting, "Are you nuts? Why the hell are you hitting her?!"

Alicia's voice was shrill and tearful. "She tried to steal my boyfriend! Of course I hit her! Slut! Homewrecker!"

Winona yelled, "Are you freaking insane? Keaton, who even is this chick?!"

Yep, that was definitely Winona. Elysia didn't hesitate-she ran straight over to

the neighbor's house, pounding on the door.

"Winona, are you in there? Keaton, open up!"

Keaton cracked the door open, "Elysia, I was just "

"Move!" Elysia shoved past him and hurried into the guest room.

Winona was sitting on the bed in her pajamas, clutching her head, blood seeping through her fingers.

"Winona!" Elysia cried, rushing to her side.

Winona looked up in surprise. "Elysia? What are you doing here?"

"Tell you later. Let me see your head."

"I'm fine. Was just sleeping and then this psycho attacked me out of nowhere!"

Alicia was still sobbing and shrieking

in the background. "You're the psychot You're sleeping in my. boyfriend's bed and you have the nerve to act innocent you tramp! You witch!"

Winona looked like she was about to leap off the bed and throw hands. "Say one more word and see what happens!"

Elysia ignored Alicia's ranting and held Winona back, focusing on checking the wound.

Meanwhile, Alicia turned to Keaton, bawling for backup. Winona

snapped, "Keaton, you better explain what the hettis going on right now of I swear she's not walking out of here!"

Keaton just muttered, "Let's check your injury first."

"Screw that! I want answers!"

But Keaton turned to Elysia instead. "Hospital?"

Elysia nodded, her face pale. "Call 911. The cut's deep, it'll need Get the first aid

Get the first aid kit-stop the bleeding."

Content

"Okay, okay!" Keaton said, hurrying off to grab the kit.

Chapter 1438

Elysia brought over the first aid kit and knelt down next to Winona, carefully cleaning the cut on her arm. "Hang in there, okay? This might sting a bit."

Winona gritted her teeth, her whole face contorting in pain. "Yeah, I can tell- ouch!"

Elysia winced in sympathy, her brows furrowed. "Sorry, sorry, I'll be quick."

Keaton hovered nearby, guilt written all over his face. He looked like he wished he could disappear.

Meanwhile, Alicia glared at Winona from behind Keaton, her arms crossed and a look of smug satisfaction on her face. If looks could talk, hers would scream, "Serves you right."

By the time Elysia finished stopping the bleeding, the ambulance still hadn't arrived. Winona was sweating from the pain and growing angrier by the second.

She shot Keaton a death glare, her jaw clenched. "Don't just stand there—say something! Who is she? Why did she attack me?!"

Keaton's face fell. "That's my girlfriend. She saw you sleeping here and thought you were trying to seduce me. She just... lost it, grabbed the first thing she could find and threw it at you."

Elysia's eyes widened in disbelief. "She didn't even ask first? Who does that? Is she nuts?"

Alicia, still peeking out from behind Keaton, snapped back, "You're the crazy one! Who the hell are you anyway? Why do you even get a say in this?"

Elysia had had enough. She straightened up and shot back, "Because I'm Mrs. Bradford, that's why!"

Alicia's jaw dropped. She whipped her head toward Keaton, desperate for confirmation. "Babe, is she... is she actually Mrs. Bradford?"

Keaton just sighed and nodded.

Alicia's entire demeanor changed in an instant. She started breathing fast, and then-like a switch flipped she was all apologies. "Oh my God, Mrs. Bradford, I am so s sorry I didn't recognize youlove heard so much about you but never seen you in person. Please forgive

so

me, I would never have picked a fight with you if I'd known-really, I'm so sorry."

She kept bowing her head, tripping over her own words. Who knew if she was actually sorry, but she was definitely scared.

Everyone in town knew the Bradfords—especially how much Mr. Bradford doted on his wife. And Elysia's own family was just as influential. Getting on her bad side was like asking for trouble.

But when nobody responded, Alicia tried to defend herself. "I mean, I walk in and see some girl crashed out on my boyfriend's bed—what was I supposed to think? It's not every day you find a random woman in your boyfriend's bedroom!"

Keaton groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose the whole reason Winona had been sleeping in his guest room was for her own safety so she wouldn't be alone Zane showed up again. It was his idea, and he'd totally forgotten to mention it to Alicia.

So when Alicia barged in and saw Winona, she'd just freaked out and started swinging. Winona hadn't even had time to react. Neither had he, honestly. If he'd been thinking straight, Winona never would've gotten hurt like that.

But there was no way he could explain all that in front of Alicia, so he made something up. "Her place was packed last night-she had a party too many people, not enough beds. I wasn't even home, so she crashed in the guest room for the night."

He gestured toward the hallway. "Check for yourself, it's the guest room. If she was really trying to seduce me, would she choose the guest room? And look at what she's wearing-does that look like someone trying to seduce anybody?"

Winona was still in her long-sleeved pajamas, hair a mess and no makeup in sight. She looked like she'd barely made it through the night, let alone had any energy to plot seduction.

Chapter 1439

Alicia put on her best fake apology face.

"I'm so sorry, Ms. Newsom. I totally misunderstood, and I'll cover all your medical bills. I'm young and stupid-please don't hold it against me, okay?"

She wasn't apologizing for Winona's sake.

She just wanted to calm down Elysia. No way was she dumb enough to cross Mrs. Bradford!

And, hey, playing the victim might even score her some points with Keaton.

Alicia thought she had it all figured out. Too bad Winona wasn't having any of it. Winona shot back immediately, "Nope! I don't accept your apology!"

Alicia blinked, thrown off. "Excuse me?!"

Winona said, "If it really was just a misunderstanding, I could let it go. I get it—if I walked into my boyfriend's house and found a strange woman there, I'd be pissed off too. That's normal."

"But you didn't hit me because of some misunderstanding!"

"You only started swinging when you saw my face. If it were anyone else, you wouldn't have snapped like that!"

"So come on, spill it-what exactly do you have against me?"

Alicia froze. She hadn't expected Winona to read her like an open book!

It was true-she'd lost it because the woman in question was Winona. If it had

been another girl, she wouldn't have gone off like that.

As for the reason... Alicia quickly shoved it aside and stuck to her story.

"No way. We've never even talked before. How could I have a grudge against you? You're reading way too much into this."

Winona snorted.

"If I've misjudged you, I'll eat my hat-hell, I'll hand you my eyeballs to play hacky sack with!"

Alicia started to get nervous under Winona's stare and turned to Keaton for help. "Babe, I swear, I didn't do anything! She's totally making stuff up, I—" Her voice broke into dramatic sobs, like she was the real victim here.

Before Keaton could say anything, the ambulance finally arrived.

Elysia helped Winona up. "Come on, let's get that wound checked at the hospital. We'll sort this out later."

Winona nodded. "Sure."

Alicia cowered behind Keaton, peeking out at Winona like some innocent little daisy.

Winona just rolled her eyes and waved Keaton over.

"Keaton, come here. I need to talk to you."

Keaton didn't think twice. He walked over and started, "Look, this is all my fault. I should have "

Before he could finish, Winona shoved him aside, strode over to Alicia, and grabbed a fistful of her hair. Then-smack, smack, smack, smack!

The sound of those slaps echoed through the room.

Elysia: "?!"

Keaton: "!"

Alicia shrieked, "Ow! Ow-ahhh!"

Winona only stopped when her own hand started to sting

By then,

Alicia's face was already se ne?

like a dinner roll-split lip and and all.

up

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Ignoring Alicia's sobbing, Winona turned to Keaton and said, "Sorry Mr. Huber. Turned your little girlfriend into a punching bag. What can't say? kornetty and I dont take crap from anyone

Keaton: "..."

Elysia, snapping out of her shock, silently gave Winona a mental high five.

As soon as they stepped outside, Elysia's phone started buzzing. Tarquin was calling.

"Heard Keaton called an ambulance. You're at Tanhe Manor too-what happened?"

Elysia, still fuming, snapped, "Oh, you're not busy now?"

"I'm free. What's going on?"

Elysia nearly spat, "Why don't you

ask your dear buddy? His new

girlfriend just bashed Winona's head the ER

open I'm taking Winona toe

for stitches!"

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Elysia hung up without another word.

Winona shook her head. "Why are you so mad at Mr. Bradford? He didn't do anything wrong. Poor guy's totally innocent."

Elysia was fuming.

"Innocent? Not even close. He and Keaton are thick as thieves-if Keaton messes up, Bradford's guilty by association!"

She knew Keaton was getting the short end of the stick, but this whole mess started with him!

Alicia was his plus-one-his responsibility, period!

While Elysia and Winona climbed into the ambulance, meanwhile, the two "drama magnets" were on the phone with each other.

Drama Magnet #1: Tarquin.

"I just called Elysia. She didn't say much, but she's furious. What the hell happened?!"

Drama Magnet #2: Keaton.

"Don't even get me started. I just started dating someone new and she-"

Tarquin cut him off, voice icy.

"I don't care how you fix this, but you better sort it. I'll tell you right now: if my wife bans me from hanging out with you over this, we're done."

Keaton: "Aw, come on-"

"And before we're done, I'm kicking your ass!"

Tarquin hung up before Keaton could answer.

Keaton just stared at his phone. "... Seriously?"

Before he could process, Janelle's number lit up his screen. She sounded frantic.

"I just heard Winona's at the hospital! She hurt her head, needed stitches-what the hell happened?"

Keaton sighed. "It's... complicated."

Janelle snapped, "What do you mean, 'complicated'?"

"I mean, it's not something I can explain in a sentence or two."

"Put Winona on the phone. I'll ask her myself."

"I'm not with her. I'm at home."

Janelle's volume shot up.

"Winona's hurt and you're at home? Why aren't you at the hospital with her?!"

Richard was pacing in the background, chiming in with a sarcastic, "And you're supposed to be courting her? Winona gives you the time of day, she must need her eyes checked!"

Janelle was losing it.

"Are you out of your mind? How could you let her go to the hospital alone? Even if you don't love her don't you care as a friend? My God, Keaton, what am going to do with you?"

"Wait a second-knowing you, if a pretty girl got hurt, you'd be the first

one to rush in Why didn't you,

with her? Did Winona tell you not to come?"

Keaton hesitated. "... Yeah."

Janelle's tone turned deadly serious.

"Why would she tell you not to come?"

Keaton was silent.

"Did you hurt her?"

"No! I'd never lay a hand on a woman."

"Then why? Was she hurt because of you? Keaton, did you get yourself a new

girlfriend again?!"

"It's all a big misunderstanding."

Something clicked for Janelle, and she exploded.

"Keaton, you ungrateful brat! You're going to drive me insane!"

"Mom—please, just let me explain—"

"I don't want to hear it!"

"Mom—"

"Don't call me Mom! I don't have a son like you!"

The line went dead. Janelle had hung up.

Keaton stared at his phone, defeated.

A minute ago she was calling him her darling boy, now she's disowned him.

Figures—Janelle's always loved Winona more!