

Hitched 1731

Chapter 1731

Keaton had no idea why he felt so irritated, but a dark cloud hung over him.

Down in the underground parking garage, he watched Winona and Shane walk into

the elevator lobby before finally pushing his car door open and stepping out.

Just as his boots hit the concrete, Winona unexpectedly doubled back.

Seeing him, she froze.

Keaton froze right back.

A moment later, Winona instinctively pulled her jacket tighter around herself.

She was naturally slender, and at three months pregnant, she wasn't showing much. Combined with her casual clothes, her baby bump was completely hidden.

Still, she protectively shielded her stomach out of pure habit.

Winona stepped forward, taking the initiative to speak. "What are you doing here?"

Keaton's lips twitched. "I live here."

Winona looked surprised. "You live here?"

Keaton nodded. "Yeah."

The moment he found out she had bought a luxury condo in this exclusive complex, he immediately paid top dollar for the unit right next door.

He hadn't thought much of it at the time. She bought one, so he bought one too.

He didn't even know why he felt the need to do it.

Winona stared at him with a suspicious gaze for a moment before asking, "Are you in a bad mood today?"

Keaton lied smoothly. "No. What makes you think I'm in a bad mood?"

"If you need someone to vent to and don't have anyone else," Winona offered slowly, "I can still be a sounding board."

Keaton was about to brush her off when he caught sight of Shane standing by the elevator doors. His brow furrowed. "That might not be convenient anymore. Your guy over there might have a problem with it."

Winona glanced back at Shane. "He won't. He knows about what happened between us. He won't overthink it."

Keaton's frown deepened into a scowl. "You told him about that night?"

Winona nodded calmly. "Yes."

Shane even knew she was pregnant.

A surge of irrational anger spiked in Keaton's chest, making him lose his grip. "Why the hell would you tell him?" he demanded sharply. "Didn't we agree to keep it a secret? That was our private business. Why would you share that with him? What right does he have to know?"

Startled by his sudden outburst, Winona blinked in surprise. "He's not an outsider," she argued. "He's..."

"He might not be an outsider to you,

but he is to me!" Keaton snapped, cutting her off entirely. "Why does he get a front row seat to my life? Didn't want anyone else knowig about that night!"

Winona frowned. "He's not going to tell anyone."

"And how do you know that?" Keaton challenged coldly.

"Because I trust him," Winona said defensively. "He's..."

"You trust him, but I don't!" Keaton interrupted again, his voice rising. "Besides, it's not exactly something- to be proud of. Why broadcast it to the world? Couldn't you just keep it between us?"

Winona's expression darkened. "What is that supposed to mean? Not something to

be proud of? Are you saying that sleeping with me was embarrassing for you?"

Keaton jolted. That wasn't what he meant at all.

He opened his mouth to backtrack, but sensing the tension, Shane suddenly jogged over. "Winona! Is everything okay?"

Winona shook her head sharply. "I'm fine. Let's go."

Without sparing Keaton another glance, she spun on her heel and marched toward the elevators.

Shane shot Keaton a dark, warning glare before wrapping a protective arm around Winona's shoulders and leading her away.

Keaton stared at their retreating figures, his breathing ragged and his heart pounding against his ribs.

He hadn't meant to upset Winona. That wasn't what he was trying to say at all. He didn't even know why he had snapped like that.

He just hated the sight of Shane. Even the mention of the guy rubbed him the wrong way.

Watching the elevator doors close behind them, Keaton was half a second away from chasing after them when his phone buzzed with a new text.

[Keaton, the background check on that student, Shane Gould, is done...]

Chapter 1732

Shane Gould, twenty-two years old, raised in the Albion. Albion-Zhinorian.

Family background and parental identities unknown.

But according to the investigation, he attended elite Albion boarding schools since childhood, and his daily wardrobe consisted of top-tier designer labels.

His inner circle was entirely old money, and he frequented exclusive, high-end

venues.

Simply put: the kid was loaded.

Shane himself was exceptional. He had been a straight-A student his whole life, the textbook definition of the golden child every parent wished they had.

His private life was spotless. No bad habits, no messy romantic history, and he was currently single.

Reading the report, Keaton felt a bitter sting of inadequacy for the first time in his life.

Especially when he saw the phrase "no messy romantic history." His insecurity skyrocketed.

He had fully expected Shane to be some lazy toy boy using his pretty face to leech off wealthy women.

Instead, he was a one-in-a-million catch.

Keaton's face was thunderous, his mood hitting rock bottom.

If Shane had some dirty laundry, Keaton could have marched right up to Winona and demanded she dump the guy.

But how could he expose someone who was literally flawless?

Utterly oblivious to how completely irrational he was acting, Keaton paced around his car, practically vibrating with frustration.

He leaned against the hood for a long time before finally pulling out his phone to mess around on it.

Moments later, Yvette called him, sounding ecstatic.

"Keaton, you actually got the exclusive couple's gaming skin already?! You're amazing! You're the best cousin in the world! Send it to me right now! My crush is going to absolutely love it!"

Keaton pressed his lips together in disdain.

"Ask Shane out on a date, and I'll send it to you right now."

Yvette hesitated. "Why would I ask him out? He's not the guy I like!"

Keaton scowled.

"Cut the crap. Are you going to ask him out or not? If you don't, I'm giving the skin to someone else."

Yvette panicked.

"No, wait! Fine, I'll do it! That's my crush's absolute favorite skin!"

"But I need to figure out how to approach him. He's just best friends with my crush. I barely even know the guy."

Keaton dismissed the excuse.

"You two went to the same

university. Bumping into each other in the same city back home is the perfect excuse to grab coffee. You can use it to get intef on your crush.

Yvette brightened. "You're right! I'll call him right now."

Satisfied, Keaton pocketed his phone, got back into his car, and moved it to a new parking spot.

He sat in the driver's seat, staking out the lobby.

Soon, Yvette called back.

"It's done! We're meeting up soon, and he's on his way. Send me the skin!"

Keaton hadn't seen Shane walk out yet, so he asked,

"What exactly did you tell him?"

"I lied and said I was in trouble and desperately needed his help with something."

"Did he ask why you didn't just call me?"

"Yeah, but I told him you were busy hanging out with your girlfriend!"

Keaton's face instantly darkened. "Yvette, are you out of your damn mind?"

Yvette fired back. "What did I do wrong?!"

"I don't even have a girlfriend right

Keaton snapped

apped. "You're on

Now people

are going to whisper that I'm taken!"

Yvette was speechless.

"Who's whispering about you? I only mentioned it to Shane... Wait a minute. When you say 'people,' you mean Shane!"

"Why do you care what Shane thinks? Because you're terrified he'll tell Winona that you're off the market! Am I right?"

Keaton stiffened. "How do you know Winona and Shane know each other?"

Yvette scoffed.

"That's none of your business. But k

saw

Shan at the restaurant t

was sitting right m

Winona, the mega-star herself!

"You dragged me there to pretend to be your girlfriend just to put on a show for her, didn't you?!"

"And now you're making me lure Shane away so you can get her all to yourself!"

Chapter 1733

"Are you seriously falling for Winona?"

Keaton remained dead silent.

Yvette's voice pitched up into an anxious squeal.

"Let me warn you right now, Keaton, Winona is my aunt's absolute idol!"

"Before bed last night, your mother spent an hour raving about how amazing Winona is and demanding I become her biggest fan!"

"If you dare try to date her just to break her heart, your mom will literally kill you!"

"Quit spouting nonsense!" Keaton grumbled. "When you see Shane later, you better clear the air and tell him I'm single."

Yvette sounded conflicted.

"But..... stealing another guy's girl is just plain wrong. If I help you, aren't I just an accomplice to a home-wrecker?"

"What if I piss Shane off, and he talks trash about me to the guy I like?"

Keaton rolled his eyes so hard it hurt.

"If he had made things public with Winona and I still chased her, that would be stealing his girl. The point is, they aren't even official!"

"And I'm not trying to steal anyone. Winona and I are just friends. Go ask your aunt if you don't believe me!"

"I needed Shane out of the way because I have private business to discuss with her.

I can't exactly talk with him breathing down my neck."

The moment the words left Keaton's mouth, he saw Shane stepping out of the elevator lobby.

The younger guy walked straight to Winona's car and hit the unlock button on her keys.

Before getting in, Shane deliberately glanced over at Keaton's usual parking spot. Satisfied that it was empty, he climbed into the driver's seat and drove off.

Keaton quickly spoke into the receiver.

"Alright, I'm hanging up. I'm sending the skin now. Put whatever you two do today on my tab."

After ending the call and transferring the gaming skin to Yvette, Keaton started his car, pulled back into his designated spot, and headed toward the elevators.

He had pissed Winona off earlier, and he needed to go smooth things over.

Otherwise, the knot in his chest wouldn't loosen.

Plus, he had a mountain of things he needed to get off his chest. He would explode if he didn't say them.

Upstairs, Winona was answering a call from Shane.

"His car wasn't in the garage. He probably already took off, so just get some rest."

"You're pregnant, Winona. You need

to stay relaxed. Don't

people and trivial

mood."

"Call me if you need anything. I'll try to head back early."

Winona chuckled softly.

"I know-. Go do your thing. Stop fussing over me like I'm a child."

Just as she hung up, the doorbell rang. "Who is it?"

Keaton stood outside. "It's me."

Winona was caught off guard. Hadn't Shane just said he was gone?

She walked over to the door and checked the video monitor. Sure enough, Keaton was standing right there.

And he had changed his clothes, looking as sharply dressed as a groom on his wedding day.

Remembering the unpleasant

encounter in the garage, Winona et

frowned slightly. Without opening the door she asked through the intercom,

"Do you need something?"

Keaton held up a sleek bottle of liquor to the camera. "Let's talk."

"I'm not in the mood to drink right now," Winona replied smoothly.

Keaton paused. "Fine, no alcohol. What about tea?"

Winona truly wasn't in the mood to deal with him.

"If it's nothing urgent, let's take a raincheck. I just got back and I'm exhausted. I really want to rest."

Knowing she was still mad at him, Keaton quickly insisted, "It is urgent!"

Winona sighed. "Then go ahead. I'm listening."

"Open the door. Let's talk face to face," Keaton urged.

Not wanting to let him in, she said, "Just talk through the door. I can hear you perfectly fine."

Keaton's voice carried a stubborn

edge. "If you don't open this door f'm

to have to drag Elysia into this

Worse, my mother."

Instantly irritated, Winona yanked the door open and glared at him.

"Are you out of your mind? Are you incapable of speaking unless it's face to face?"

Keaton looked at her with the pathetic, guilty eyes of a scolded child. "Yeah."

Winona stared at him, feeling entirely helpless, as if she had just thrown a punch at a cloud of cotton.

Chapter 1734

Keaton's eyes pleaded with her. "Can you just let me inside first?"

Winona hesitated for a few seconds before stepping aside.

Keaton shamelessly slipped inside. Terrified she might kick him out, he didn't wait for an invitation, making a beeline for her sofa and sitting down.

His eyes remained locked on Winona, following her every move like a loyal puppy desperate for affection.

Winona felt incredibly awkward. Still, out of basic courtesy, she poured him a glass of water, sat across from him, and pulled a throw pillow over her pregnant belly.

"I really need to rest, so make this quick."

Keaton looked at her, his face steeped in remorse.

"My attitude down in the garage was out of line, and I'm sorry I upset you. Even though I wasn't really mad at you, I still took it out on you. I apologize."

Winona remained silent.

Keaton's tone was dead serious.

"About that night... I have to clear this up. I was never embarrassed by it! I just..."

He shifted uncomfortably. For the first time in his life, he was realizing how incredibly difficult it was to coax a woman.

In the past, smoothing things over with women had been effortless, a game he played with his eyes closed.

But sitting here now, he was completely at a loss for words.

After struggling for a long moment, Keaton finally found his voice.

"I just... the second I heard you told Shane, I lost my temper. I was thinking..... sure, things between you two are great right now, but what if things go south later?"

"If you two break up and he gets vindictive, he could leak it. It would destroy your reputation. You're an A-list actress, Winona."

Winona furrowed her brow, staring at him intently.

"So, what you're saying is... the reason you didn't want me to tell anyone was to protect me?"

Keaton neither nodded nor shook his head.

"...I just don't think you should have told Shane. If you confided in Elysia or Blossom, I wouldn't have cared."

Winona was utterly baffled.

"Why is it okay for Elysia and Blossom to know, but not Shane?"

Keaton replied without missing a beat. "Because Elysia and Blossom would never sabotage you!"

Winona fired back, "Shane would never sabotage me either!"

Keaton frowned. "You really trust him that much?"

Winona nodded emphatically.

"Absolutely! In my eyes, he is just as solid as Elysia and Blossom."

Keaton immediately blurted out, "What about me?"

Winona looked confused. "What about you?"

"Am I reliable to you?" Keaton demanded bluntly.

"As a friend," Winona said slowly, "You're very reliable."

Keaton pressed closer. "And when it comes to romance?"

Winona paused, choosing her words carefully but opting for brutal honesty.

"It depends on the type of affection. Family and friendship? You're rock solid. Romance? You are a complete disaster."

Keaton was struck speechless.

He stared blankly at Winona, his breathing growing erratic.

He looked as though he had just been mortally wounded, visibly furious yet deeply aggrieved.

Winona watched him suspiciously. She couldn't empathize with him or begin to understand his violent shift in mood.

She had given him a completely objective evaluation. What was he so angry about?

It wasn't like she had completely condemned him as a human being.

Did he honestly not know his own track record with women?

Sure, he had been destroyed by his first love, which offered some excuse, but the reality was that he, was a textbook playboy who burned through relationships for fun.

Calling him a disaster in romance wasn't exactly character assassination—it was a

fact.

"Are you seriously in love with Shane?" Keaton suddenly demanded.

Winona blinked in shock. "What?"

Keaton's expression was stormy as he pushed forward.

"Usually,

men bury their messy

pasts. The only time they confess everything is when they meet the love of their life."

"Because wiping the slate clean is the only way they can dive into a new relationship with no reservations."

"The fact that you confessed to him about our night together proves that you love him and that you desperately value this relationship!"

Winona stared at him in disbelief. "What the hell are you babbling about?!"

Keaton's face grew even darker.

Chapter 1735

"I'm not babbling! You're completely in love with him!"

"You recently canceled all the movie contracts and reality shows I got you. That was because of Shane, wasn't it?"

"You're terrified he might misunderstand our relationship. You're so scared of upsetting him that you're trying to cut all ties with me!"

Winona's eyes widened, staring at Keaton in utter shock.

Of course not!

She backed out of her contracts because of the baby!

The moment she made the decision to keep this child, her baby became the single most important thing in her life.

She was practically swimming in cash; there was no need to keep working herself to the bone.

Right now, her only priority was a healthy pregnancy. Work could wait until later. Furthermore... Keaton actually thought she was dating Shane!

Good god, Shane was her...

Before Winona could process the absurdity, Keaton plowed on, his brow furrowed fiercely.

"You love him, so you're protecting him. You don't want him getting jealous of me, so you need to draw a hard line. I get that!"

"I can even understand you dating a boy who's barely out of college!"

"Dating younger guys is the trend right now. Plenty of gorgeous women love toy boys!"

"But take a hard look around-how many of those relationships actually survive in the real world?"

"You told me your ultimate dream was to stand on an international stage and accept an award for your acting. Now you're throwing your entire dream in the trash for a younger boy?"

"Do you have any idea what breaking those contracts means? It means you're going to be replaced!"

"The entertainment industry breeds beautiful women by the second. The moment you step off the gas, someone else takes your spot!"

"You are at the absolute peak of your career! You're one inch away from everything you've ever wanted, and you're just giving up!"

"Is Shane really that important to you?"

Winona was speechless. Shane wasn't the important one here-it was the baby in her womb!

Unaware of the truth, Keaton only grew more furious the longer he spoke.

His pent-up rage had been building for way too long.

Two months ago, when Winona had abruptly flown out of the city and paid astronomical penalty fees just to terminate all her contracts, he had been completely blindsided.

He had a lingering suspicion that she was trying to cut him off, but he couldn't be sure.

Because her attitude toward him never felt like a permanent goodbye.

It wasn't until he saw Shane today that all the puzzle pieces snapped into place.

Winona really was severing ties with him because she was in a relationship.

Keaton felt suffocated by irritation and rage. He had no idea why, but the anger was boiling him alive.

"You've always been so rational! How did you suddenly turn into such a lovesick idiot?!"

"Did your last relationship not ruin you enough? Can't you learn a single lesson and stop letting romance blind you?!"

Winona remained silent.

He actually believed she terminated her contracts to date Shane and put distance between them.

Had he been throwing a tantrum all day over this?

But that didn't make sense. She had

been dealing with the contract

terminations for twee

hadn't exploded then.

In fact, the terminations went so

smooth

because of his

behind-the-scenes influence. He had

definitely pulled strings for her.

Which meant his fury today had nothing to do with her career. It was entirely centered on Shane!

Winona narrowed her eyes at him. "Do you have a problem with Shane?"

"Of course I have a problem with him!" Keaton shot back instantly. "A massive problem!"

"Do you two have some kind of history?" Winona tested the waters.

"No!"

"Did you know him before today?"

"Never met him!"

"So today was your first time seeing him?"

"Yes!"

Winona was utterly perplexed. "No grudges, no bad blood, and you've never even

met the guy. Why do you hate him so much?"

"I..." Keaton choked on his words.

She was right. No bad blood, never crossed paths. Why the hell was he practically seeing red over the kid?

Chapter 1736

The room plunged into a suffocating silence.

Keaton's brow furrowed, his face dark as he stared silently at the glass of water in front of him.

Winona sat across from him, her brow equally furrowed as she studied him with deep suspicion.

His hatred for Shane seemed entirely based on the false assumption that they were dating.

But even if she was dating Shane, what did that have to do with him?

Was he...

Good lord, did he have feelings for her?!

Was Keaton Huber falling for her?

The sheer magnitude of the thought terrified Winona, her eyes going wide.

Her heart rate spiked, her stomach twisting into knots.

After taking a moment to steady her racing pulse, Winona cautiously probed,

"Do

you

have a problem with Shane because you think he's dating me?"

Keaton stayed rigidly quiet.

Their eyes locked for a moment before Keaton was the first to look away. Scowling, he muttered,

"I genuinely consider you a friend. Seeing you throw away your dreams for him is just frustrating! Plus, I don't think he's good enough for you. That kid just screams bad news."

Winona was dumbfounded. Shane was an impeccably raised, outstanding young man, and Keaton was seriously claiming he looked like a criminal.

A saying suddenly flashed through her mind:

A lover sees perfection, but a rival only sees garbage.

Keaton was viewing Shane as a romantic rival!

Which meant... he actually liked her!

Winona's heart dropped into her stomach. God in heaven...

Before she could utter a single word, Keaton pushed up from the sofa.

"Whoever you like, whoever you want to date, that's your business. Nobody else can dictate your life. I'm just offering some friendly advice. Nothing more."

"Since my presence upsets him so much, I'll keep my distance from now on."

"But I'm going to say this one last time: a woman's happiness is in her own hands. Don't go banking your life on a man."

"Lovesick fools rarely get happy endings."

With that final bitter remark, he turned and marched out of the apartment.

Winona sat frozen in shock for a long time before scrambling up and rushing to the door to look out into the hallway.

The corridor was completely empty. Keaton was gone.

In a complete state of panic, Winona swallowed hard a few times, hurried back into the living room, and dialed Elysia's number.

"Elysia, we have a massive problem!"

Elysia was at home prepping dinner. Tarquin, Elliot, Evan, and Elijah were

due back soon, so she was geet.

head start on the meal.

Hearing the sheer panic in Winona's voice, Elysia instantly dropped what she was doing.

Her mind immediately jumped to the pregnancy. "What's wrong?"

Winona stammered, "Elysia... I... I..."

Elysia's heart began to pound. "Don't panic. Just breathe and tell me what happened."

Winona's breathing was erratic. "I just figured out something terrifying!"

Elysia braced herself. "What is it?"

Winona swallowed heavily again before forcing the words out in a single breath.

"I think Keaton Huber is in love with me!"

Elysia froze. "What?!"

Winona rushed to explain, "I'm serious! I swear I'm not just being delusional!"

Elysia took a second to process it. "Did he confess his feelings to you?"

"No! But he came to see me today, The way he was acting, the things

he said it's so obvious! He thinks I'm dating Shane, and he completely lost his mind over it!"

Elysia was bewildered.

"But Tarquin asked him about this recently, and Keaton swore up and down that you two were just friends. He explicitly said he didn't have feelings for you."

Winona paced the room frantically.

"That's exactly what I thought! But today proved that's totally false! He didn't say the

words out loud, but he might as well have!"

"You have to believe me. My intuition is never wrong about this kind of stuff!"

Chapter 1737

"If I wasn't entirely sure, I wouldn't be throwing this out there!"

"Do you think... is it possible he found out about the baby?"

"Did he suddenly decide he liked me because he realized I was carrying his child?" Elysia gently reassured her.

"Don't let your imagination run wild. Keaton definitely doesn't know about the baby. If he knew, he would have confronted you directly."

"If he really is falling for you, I highly doubt it has anything to do with the pregnancy."

Winona sounded completely baffled. "But if it's not the baby, why would he ever fall for me?!"

"Why wouldn't he?" Elysia replied smoothly. "You're beautiful, talented, and an incredibly lovable person."

Winona pinched the bridge of her nose.

"It's just too unbelievable! Never in a million years did I think he would catch feelings for me."

Elysia countered with a laugh.

"Look at that massive global chess championship that's been all over the news lately. A Koryon player managed to win the entire tournament without actually winning a single match! It's a big world, Winona. Anything can happen."

Winona let out a heavy sigh.

"Keaton got destroyed by his last relationship. He practically swore a blood oath that he was done with love and wanted to live the rest of his life as a carefree bachelor."

"He doesn't get to control love," Elysia noted sensibly. "When it truly hits, nobody can stop it."

Winona felt a massive headache forming.

"What am I supposed to do now? I don't have feelings for him! I just want to raise my baby in peace."

Elysia knew Winona had zero romantic interest in Keaton. Her entire plan was to quietly give birth and raise the child as a single mother.

Whenever Keaton eventually found out, she would lay her cards on the table.

But her vision for the future absolutely did not include Keaton Huber.

Keaton suddenly falling for her threw a massive wrench into her perfectly structured plans, leaving her totally lost.

Elysia tried to soothe her friend's anxiety.

"His feelings are his problem. You just keep living your life exactly how you want to."

"Besides, him liking you is a million times better than him hating you."

"Because if he cares about you, he's going to care about the baby. Even if he discovers the truth right now he won't try to force you to go

of it.

"Even if you two never end up together, he'll be an incredibly loving father to this child."

They always said a child could elevate a mother's status, but plenty of times, a mother's worth became the child's greatest blessing.

Winona sighed deeply.

"I just don't want to get overly entangled with him, and I definitely don't want any drama. Being ordinary friends was working perfectly fine!"

"But if he has feelings for me and the feeling isn't mutual, it's just going to turn into a miserable situation for both of us."

"Honestly, I don't want him to be unhappy."

"Whether it's for the sake of our

friendship, the baby, or the immense

respect have for r

and

Janelle, I genuinely just want him to be happy."

Elysia offered a gentle smile.

"I know. Just listen to me: stop letting your mind spiral. You're pregnant, and you cannot afford to be stressed right now."

The two friends talked for a long time until Winona's nerves were fully settled, and they finally ended the call.

Elysia was just about to dial Tarquin to see if she could reach him and get an update

on Keaton, when an unknown number flashed on her screen.

She answered cautiously. "Hello?"

Shane's voice drifted through the speaker.

"Elysia? Hi, it's Shane. Are you free right now?"

Elysia blinked in surprise. "I am. Is something wrong?"

Shane sighed. "I need a massive favor. Could you come down to the police precinct and bail me out? didn't want to stress Winona out, so I didn't tell her."

Elysia was floored. "Why are you at a police precinct?!"

"I got into a fistfight with Keaton," Shane muttered sullenly. Elysia was utterly speechless.

Chapter 1738

By the time Elysia arrived at the police precinct, Keaton hadn't left yet.

He was sitting alone on a bench in the main lobby, his long legs crossed. His face was bruised, his expression violently dark, and the aura around him was terrifyingly

cold.

Shane was leaning against the wall several feet away, looking just as bruised and miserable.

Seeing Elysia walk through the doors, Shane immediately straightened up. "Elysia."

Keaton jerked his head up. Seeing Elysia instead of Winona clearly surprised him. Whatever conclusion his mind immediately jumped to made his brow furrow sharply. Elysia cast a brief glance at Keaton before walking straight over to Shane.

"Are you hurt badly?" she asked.

Shane shook his head.

"Nothing serious. I just need you to sign some paperwork so they'll let me go."

"Alright."

Elysia walked over to the desk officer to handle the bail process. Once the paperwork was signed, she told Shane to head outside first.

Then, she approached Keaton. "Are you okay?"

Keaton scowled back at her.

"Why didn't Winona come? Was she trying to avoid me?"

Elysia paused before delivering the honest truth.

"No. Winona has no idea this even happened. Shane was terrified of stressing her out, so he kept her in the dark and called me to bail him out instead."

Some of the icy tension melted from Keaton's face, but his lips quickly pressed into a thin, bitter line.

"The fact that he could drag you all the way down here proves that Winona must really be head-over-heels for him."

"Hmm?" Elysia was confused by the leap in logic.

Keaton's voice was dripping with sour jealousy.

"If Winona wasn't crazy about him, you wouldn't give a damn about the guy. You certainly wouldn't be rushing down to a police station just because he made one phone call."

Elysia stared at him.

"You obviously like him just fine," Keaton muttered bitterly. "And Winona practically worships the kid."

How could they not like him?

Shane was Winona's biological cousin!

Winona's aunt had passed away early, and Shane was the only family she had left on that side.

Not to mention, he had spent his entire life overseas, so they rarely got to see him.

Elysia opened her mouth to clear up the colossal misunderstanding, but Keaton suddenly pushed himself off the bench.

"You guys might love him, but I despise him."

"Give him a warning for me. The only reason I'm letting this slide today is out of respect for Winona. But if he crosses me again, I'll destroy him."

Throwing out that final threat, he turned on his heel and strode out of the precinct.

By the time Elysia followed him outside, Keaton's sports car was already peeling out of the parking lot.

Watching his taillights vanish into the night, Elysia let out a long breath.

Winona's intuition had been spot on. Keaton Huber had absolutely fallen for her.

Practically every word out of his

mouth was laced with pure,

unadulterated jealousy His massive jealousy

grudge against Shane was

undeniable proof that he viewed the kid as a romantic rival.

And then there was the physical fight.

Who was Keaton? The sole heir to the formidable Huber family.

Just like Tarquin, he constantly had an elite security detail trailing him.

If Keaton hadn't allowed it, there was no physical way Shane could have landed a single punch.

If Keaton hadn't actively held his bodyguards back, Shane would be in the ICU right now.

He despised Shane, yet couldn't bear to inflict any real damage on him—undoubtedly because of his feelings for Winona.

In its own twisted way, it was an undeniable declaration of love.

"Thanks again for tonight, Elysia."

Shane walked over, snapping Elysia out of her thoughts.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "But what exactly happened between you and

Keaton? Why did things get physical?"

Shane exhaled heavily.

"It was pure luck. There was an

accident on the road, and traffic was deadlocked: We ended up parked right next to each other. I couldn't stand the sight of him he looked like he wanted to kill me and one thing led to another."

"Did he throw the first punch?" Elysia asked.

Shane shrugged honestly. "We pretty much swung at the exact same time."

Elysia raised an eyebrow. "You hated the sight of him because he's been targeting you?"

Shane scowled.

"It's entirely because of Winona. I

know she made the unilateral

decision to keep the baby, but\

watching her sacrifice her entire life like this makes me sick for her."

"She's an A-list actress at the absolute peak of her fame! Walking away now to give

birth is professional suicide."

"Keaton is clueless about all this, but it's still his blood. He bears half the

responsibility for everything she's throwing away."

Chapter 1739

Elysia remained silent.

She couldn't say whether Shane's perspective was right or wrong.

Human nature was inherently selfish; everyone fiercely protected their own blood.

From Keaton's standpoint, he was totally in the dark, meaning he hadn't maliciously done anything wrong.

But from Shane's perspective, Winona was bearing an agonizing burden, and Keaton was the undeniable root cause of her suffering.

"For the record, Keaton genuinely views you as a romantic rival," Elysia offered lightly. "That's why he was ready to kill you."

Shane looked bewildered. "I thought he didn't have feelings for Winona."

Elysia shrugged casually. "He didn't before. But he certainly does now."

Shane was too stunned to speak.

Elysia smiled softly.

"Keaton isn't actually a bad guy. His aggression toward you is purely because he's falling for Winona. Once you finally get a chance to clear up the fact that you're related, all of this will blow over."

"You rarely get time to come back home. Go enjoy yourself, and don't let tonight's drama ruin your mood."

Shane nodded in agreement. "I get it. Thanks again, Elysia."

Elysia grinned. "Don't mention it. Go back and keep Winona company."

"Please don't breathe a word of this fight to her," Shane pleaded.

Elysia chuckled and nodded. "My lips are sealed."

After parting ways, Elysia hopped into her car and drove back to Number One Mansion.

On the drive home, she couldn't help but think that if Keaton was genuinely ready to abandon his playboy ways, he and Winona would make a wonderful couple.

Winona wouldn't have to raise the baby alone, and the child would grow up in a complete home.

Plus, Richard and Janelle already adored Winona. They were absolutely desperate for a grandchild, so they would inevitably spoil the mother and baby rotten.

The real question was: had Keaton actually turned over a new leaf?

And could Winona ever learn to love him back?

Elysia let out a soft breath.

Matters of the heart were always impossible to predict.

...

Elysia had only been home for a short while when Tarquin, Elliot, Evan, and Elijah finally arrived.

Emmett and Baby came bounding in right behind them.

"Mommy!" The five little ones shouted in unison, stampeding toward her.

Elysia's eyes lit up with delight. "How did all of you end up coming back together?"

Tarquin chuckled. "We were passing by their school, so we just picked them up on the way."

Overjoyed, Elysia crouched down to wrap them all in hugs, showering each child with kisses.

After soaking up all their mother's affection, the kids excitedly scampered upstairs to play.

Elysia turned to head into the kitchen, but before she could take a step, Tarquin pulled her flush against his chest.

"I-Mmph..."

His lips crashed down on hers,

completely cutting off her words. He

kissed her until they were both

breathless, and it wasn't until Elysia

lightly nipped his lower lip that he finally repented.

Tarquin slowly pulled back, his eyes dark with lingering desire.

Elysia's cheeks burned fiercely, her breathing ragged. "Stop messing around. I have to make dinner."

Tarquin's hands remained firmly locked around her waist, keeping her pressed flush against him.

"Let Heath handle dinner. We're going to the bedroom."

The flush on Elysia's cheeks deepened to a brilliant crimson.

"Absolutely not! I'm making the kids their favorite creamy mashed potatoes. They only like it when I make it."

Tarquin sighed in mock defeat. "We've all been away for days, yet you clearly love the kids more than you love me."

Elysia giggled. "You are such a jealous mess! Don't worry, I made your favorite too." Tarquin's eyes narrowed playfully. "Oh? And what exactly is my favorite?"

"Of course I know. You love Spaghetti Bolognese, roasted broccoli, and a good steak."

Tarquin's lips quirked into a devastating smirk. "Wrong. My absolute favorite thing to eat is..."

He leaned in and whispered

something filthy against her ear,

causing a deep, mortified earne

flood all the way to the ups onh ears.

She practically kicked him in the shin, violently shoving her way out of his embrace. "Behave yourself! I'm going to cook. Go rest for a bit, and I'll call you when the food is ready."

But Tarquin just followed her

straight into the kitchen. Elysia shot him a deadly glare. "Are you asking for a beating?"

Tarquin chuckled warmly.

"I promise I'll behave. I'm just here to be your sous-chef."

Chapter 1740

They stepped into the kitchen together. Tarquin washed his hands before smoothly tying an apron around his waist.

Taking advantage of Evan's absence, Elysia finally asked the burning question.

"What is the deal with Evan? How did he get to be such an incredible fighter?!"

"Bernard personally taught him martial arts," Tarquin explained calmly. "That's why he's so lethal. He just never competed in official tournaments before, so you had no idea what he was truly capable of."

Elysia's expression turned serious.

"I knew Bernard was skilled in martial arts, but I never imagined he was a literal master!"

"Both the great-grandfather and great-grandmother were legends in their own right," Tarquin noted softly.

Elysia let out a long breath.

"That makes sense. Given how miraculous the great-grandmother's medical skills were, they clearly weren't ordinary people."

"The kids and I were beyond lucky. Not only were we saved from the brink of death, but we were rescued by such extraordinary people!"

Tarquin's voice softened completely.

"Baby, Elijah, and I were just as lucky. If they hadn't saved you, we never would have had a complete family, and we certainly wouldn't be this happy."

Elysia's tone filled with profound gratitude.

"That's why we have to remember everything they've done for us. We owe them for the rest of our lives!"

"We'll owe them for lifetimes to come," Tarquin agreed completely.

Elysia nodded, before her anxiety crept back in.

"But Evan was so high-profile today. Not only did he crush the tournament, but he openly challenged the fighters from Japan and Koryon. Aren't you worried they might try to retaliate?"

"Don't worry," Tarquin assured her. "Aside from our own people, nobody knows his true identity. He's perfectly safe."

Elysia exhaled in relief.

"Evan's fiery personality is exactly like Bernard's-he lives for the fight. If Bernard wasn't living off the grid right now, he definitely would have jumped into the ring right alongside Evan!"

"Bernard had such fierce pride in his heritage. Just the fact that those guys insulted our Zhinorian Grandmaster would have been enough for Bernard to rip them apart!"

"I wonder if Bernard had any way of watching the tournament from out in the mountains. Evan definitely did him proud today!"

"Oh, make sure you save all the footage of Evan's matches! We can show Bernard the next time we visit the mountains."

Hearing her excitement, a wave of grief washed over Tarquin. Bernard would never get the chance to see it...

Masking his sorrow perfectly, he just nodded. "I will."

Desperate to change the subject, Tarquin asked, "What's going on with Keaton and Winona?"

"I was just going to ask you about that!" Elysia exclaimed. "When exactly did Keaton fall in love with Winona?"

Tarquin's eyes narrowed. "He's in love with Winona?"

Elysia nodded with absolute certainty. "Yes!"

"I had no idea. I literally asked him about it right before I flew to Thyania, and he swore he had zero feelings for her. Are you sure Winona didn't just misread the situation?"

Elysia pursed her lips.

"There is zero mistake. I literally saw him this afternoon, and he was drowning in jealousy! He genuinely thinks Winona's cousin is his romantic rival..."

While Elysia filled Tarquin in on all the Keaton drama in the kitchen, the kids were keeping themselves busy upstairs.

They were currently online, spearheading a massive cyber counter-attack against trolls from Japan, Koryon, and Thyania.

The foreign trolls had previously sworn that if any Zhinorian fighter managed to make it to the finals they would livestream themselves eating dirt and formally apologize to all Zhinorians on camera.

Well, Evan had just decimated Thyania's top fighters and utterly humiliated several veteran masters from Japan and Koryon.

Even though he had left before the tournament officially ended, the whole world had been watching. Evan won, which meant Zhinora won!

Now, all the foreign trolls were playing dead, and some had even deleted their social media accounts entirely out of cowardice.

Did they really think they could just run away from the consequences?

The kids absolutely refused to let them off the hook. They compiled every single arrogant boast the trolls had ever made and pinned them straight to the top of the global trending lists.

Then, they hacked into the networks of multiple countries, forcefully broadcasting the glorious

victory and the trolls cowardly

retreat onto screens across the entire world.