

Hitched 1751

Chapter 1751

First, as a celebrity whose pregnancy hadn't been made public yet, she worried about being recognized.

Second, she knew Keaton had feelings for her. Being alone with him always made her feel a bit on edge.

But hearing the pleading tone in his voice, she couldn't bring herself to turn him down...

On the flip side, Keaton's mood was the polar opposite. He was buzzing with excitement.

He dashed into his walk-in closet, sifting through the racks and inspecting every garment.

With a wardrobe full of this season's haute couture, he was actually stressing over what to wear.

After trying on several outfits, he finally settled on the perfect look for the day.

If he hadn't been in such a rush to pick up Winona, he would have modeled a few more options.

Over half an hour later, Keaton pulled up outside the Newsom family's home.

Just as he was about to call Winona, someone tapped on the window. She was already standing by the passenger door.

He quickly unlocked the doors and rolled down the window.

"Why are you waiting outside?"

Winona pulled the door open and slid into the seat. "I came out to wait for you."

"Have you been waiting long?"

"No, just a few minutes."

She buckled her seatbelt and pulled off her face mask.

She was completely bare-faced, without even a swipe of lip gloss. Dressed in a simple oversized hoodie, sweatpants, and sneakers, her look was as casual as it got compared to his.

After all, Keaton was dressed to the nines, sporting a tailored suit complete with a bowtie and a designer lapel pin.

Winona looked him up and down. "Are we heading to a red-carpet event or something?"

Keaton blinked. "Huh?"

"You're dressed pretty formally," she pointed out. "It looks like you're attending a gala."

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "Don't I always dress like this?"

She shook her head. "Not usually this buttoned-up."

"I had an event earlier today and didn't have time to change," he lied smoothly, handing her a cup. "Here, it's a decaf fruit tea. I made sure it's perfectly safe for pregnancy."

Winona took it with a smile. "Thanks."

Keaton started the engine and glanced at her. "How have you been lately?"

"I'm doing well."

"...I heard morning sickness can be pretty rough."

Winona laughed softly. "My baby has been an absolute angel. No sickness

at all we've been eating greasy

sleeping like a log."

He smiled warmly. "That's a relief."

and

She took a sip of her tea and asked, "So, how exactly do you need my help?"

"First, I'm taking you somewhere," Keaton replied. "Later on, I need you to ask Shane to meet us."

Curiosity piqued, she asked, "Where are we going?"

He kept his eyes on the road, playing coy. "You'll see when we get there."

As evening approached and the

sunset painted the sky in vibrant

hues they pulled up to an upscale beachfront restaurant

Seeing the heart-shaped

vel.

arrangement of candles and the sea of fresh flowers on the sand, Winona's heart skipped a beat, a

wave of panic setting in

She turned to Keaton, half-expecting a grand, unwanted romantic confession.

Instead, he pulled out his phone. "Give Shane a call and tell him to come straight here."

Winona eyed him with deep suspicion.

"You want to talk to Shane, but you set all this up?"

He flashed a dashing smile. "Do you know how to wrap a floral bouquet?"

"I can, but I'm not exactly a pro at it," she admitted.

"That's plenty good enough. Call him first, and then we'll get to work."

She stared at him in sheer bewilderment. "Work on what?"

He chuckled, pointing down the beach. "Look over there. Who is that?"

Under the canopy in the distance, a stunning foreign woman was enthusiastically waving in their direction.

Winona squinted, and her eyes suddenly widened in disbelief. "Linda?!"

Keaton nodded with a grin. "Yep, that's her. Shane's girlfriend!"

Utterly stunned, she turned back to him. "What is going on? How is Linda here?"

"I flew her in!" Keaton declared proudly.

"Just for Shane?" she asked, floored by the gesture.

He nodded. "You tell me. Is this a sincere enough apology?"

Chapter 1752

Finally understanding his master plan, Winona couldn't help but give him a thumbs- up.

"You're unbelievable!"

Linda was the girl Shane had been secretly in love with for years, but he had never found the courage to confess his feelings.

Thanks to Keaton's massive mix-up a few days ago, Shane had been pushed into finally admitting how he felt.

Now, the two were officially dating!

But with one in Zhinora and the other abroad, they were separated by thousands of miles and hadn't yet had the chance to see each other.

Under normal circumstances, they wouldn't have been able to reunite for another two or three months.

Shane had returned to visit his mother's grave and wouldn't be flying back until after the new year.

Meanwhile, due to her parents' strict rules, Linda hadn't been able to visit Zhinora.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, and it was easy to imagine just how much the new couple missed each other.

Now that Keaton had actually brought her all the way here, there was no way Shane wouldn't be moved.

The guy would probably burst into tears!

Winona couldn't help but marvel at the effort.

"It seems you don't just know how to sweep girls off their feet, you know exactly how to win over the guys, too!"

Looking like a kid praised by his teacher, Keaton eagerly took the credit.

"I pulled a lot of strings to get her here. If that brat still refuses to forgive me, you have to put in a good word for me! Look how hard I'm trying to make amends!"

Winona blurted out, without thinking.

"You two barely even know each other. Why do you care so much about getting his forgiveness?"

The moment the words left her mouth, she regretted them. The answer was painfully obvious.

Because he liked her, he was going out of his way to please the people she cared about.

She cleared her throat to ease the awkward tension, quickly changing the subject before he could answer.

"Shane just told me yesterday that Linda's parents wouldn't let her travel. How did you manage to get her here?"

Keaton paused for a beat before replying smoothly.

"As long as the incentives are right and the reasoning is solid, people can be remarkably flexible. Hurry up and call him. Don't spoil the surprise-let him be completely blown away!"

Winona nodded. "Right! I'll call him now."

After hanging up with Shane, she made her way across the sand toward Linda.

The loose sand made walking difficult, and she was moving fast. Keaton stayed close, hovering protectively.

"Slow down! Remember you're pregnant!" he cautioned.

Winona was in exceptionally high spirits. Her cousin's girlfriend had arrived, and Shane was going to be ecstatic.

It was a reason to celebrate!

She reached the canopy and pulled Linda into a warm embrace.

"It is so wonderful to finally meet you in person! Welcome to Zhinora!"

Linda knew exactly who she was;

they had spoken on video caet

plenty of times. Returning the hug she smiled and spoke in slightly accented English.

"You are even more gorgeous in person than on screen!"

Winona laughed. "I didn't know you were coming, so I'm dressed like a total slob.

Please excuse the mess."

Linda immediately shook her head. "Not at all. We are family now."

Winona nodded enthusiastically.

"Absolutely! We're family! I just got off the phone with Shane. He's not far from here and will be arriving shortly. He has been missing you, like crazy. When he sees you, he's going to lose his mind."

"It's all thanks to Mr. Huber," Linda said gratefully. "If it weren't for him, I wouldn't

have had the chance to visit you all."

Keaton, standing nearby, chimed in smoothly.

"No need for the formalities. Winona and I are peers. Just call me Keaton."

Linda corrected herself with a smile. "Keaton."

He nodded warmly, then turned to Winona.

"Don't stay on your feet too long. Sit down, chat, and you ladies can work on the

flower arrangements together."

Twenty minutes later, Shane arrived in a frantic rush.

By the time he reached the beach, night had fully descended.

He stared blankly at the sea of flowers and the twinkling fairy lights along the shoreline. Just as he pulled out his phone to call Winona a familiar voice drifted over the breeze.

"Shane!"

He froze, whipping his head around, and there she was the girl of his dreams.

Linda stepped out from the shadows, holding a vibrant bouquet, a brilliant smile lighting up her face.

Shock and pure, unadulterated joy exploded in his eyes. His breath hitched in his throat.

"Linda?! You... how are you..."

Before he could finish his sentence, she stepped forward, rose on her tiptoes, and pressed her lips to his.

Shane's heart hammered wildly against his ribs. He wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, dipping his head to deepen the kiss.

While the young lovers were lost in their reunion, Keaton and Winona were busy orchestrating the rest of the magic.

Chapter 1753

One handled the photography, while the other queued up the perfect romantic playlist.

After what felt like ages, a dazzling display of fireworks suddenly erupted in the night sky. Winona looked up, her eyes wide with delight.

"You even arranged fireworks?!"

Standing next to her, Keaton couldn't take his eyes off her radiant smile. The

corners of his lips quirked upward.

"Yeah. Do you like them?"

She nodded eagerly. "They're stunning!"

She excitedly held up her phone to capture the vibrant bursts of color.

Keaton casually pulled out his own phone, pretending to photograph the sky, but every single shot was perfectly framed around her silhouette.

She captured the fireworks; he captured her.

The pyrotechnics illuminated the beach for over half an hour. Gently resting a hand on her stomach, Winona whispered,

"This is the baby's very first time seeing fireworks."

A profound sense of satisfaction washed over Keaton. The grand romantic gesture might have looked like it was for Shane and Linda, but in reality, every detail had been curated for Winona.

He was simply using their reunion as the perfect excuse to spoil her.

As the grand finale crackled in the sky, he leaned in close.

"Let's head out. No need to keep playing third wheel for those two."

Winona agreed softly. "Okay."

They strolled side by side along the illuminated path lined with rose petals, making their way back toward the restaurant.

Noticing her shivering slightly in the ocean breeze, Keaton slipped off his tailored jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

Before she could protest, he cut her off.

"Your immune system is vulnerable right now. Catching a cold would be terrible for

the baby. Just wear it. Do it for the baby's sake."

Winona hesitated. "...Aren't you going to freeze?"

He shook his head dismissively. "I'm fine. Are you hungry?"

"Does this place serve anything good besides seafood?" she asked.

"Not really," he replied. "But I can take you somewhere else. What are you craving?"

She pondered for a moment. "I'm kind of in the mood for street food. Could we hit up the night market?"

Keaton shot the idea down instantly. "Absolutely not. The hygiene standards there are non-existent. You can't eat that while pregnant."

"A little junk food once in a while won't hurt," she muttered.

"Don't put a target on my back," he shot back. "If Elysia or your parents find out I

took you to a dirty food stall, they'll skin me alive!"

She couldn't help but laugh at his dramatic reaction.

"You're being ridiculous. As long as I don't overdo it, it's fine. I'm just pregnant, not made of glass."

But he held firm. "I'm taking you somewhere safe."

In his eyes, she was currently more delicate and precious than a national treasure.

While she slipped away to the

restroom, Keaton fired off a flurry of intense phone calls, demanding to know which high-end establishment could perfectly replicate street food flavors.

The ingredients had to be impeccably sourced, organic, and perfectly safe for a pregnant woman.

But the taste had to be gritty and authentic!

The problem was, street food relies

heavily on intense spices and

grease things pregnant women

were supposed to avoid. None of the top tier restaurants wanted to take the risk.

Left with no options, Keaton brought the hammer down on Jinpeach Restaurant.

Tossing an astronomical sum of money on the table, he aggressively strong-armed their executive kitchen into immediately whipping up a bespoke menu.

Thankfully, the culinary team at Jinpeach was world-class, and they somehow managed to pull off the impossible.

Whether it perfectly matched the greasy authenticity of a night market stall was debatable, but Winona was absolutely thrilled with the results.

Watching her eat with such delight made Keaton's night completely worthwhile.

By the time they left, the tip he dropped was large enough to bring the entire kitchen staff to tears of gratitude.

After dinner, Keaton wanted nothing

more than to stretch the evening

Out, but mindful of beasily

pregnancy fatigue could set in, he drove her straight home.

Before stepping out of the SUV, she turned to him. "Thank you for today. I had a really wonderful time."

He played it effortlessly cool. "Don't mention it. Shane is definitely having a much better night than you."

She laughed. "He's probably crying tears of joy right now. Just wait, he's going to insist on buying you a massive dinner to make up for everything."

"I'll hold him to it," Keaton smirked. "And if he bails, I'm coming after you for that meal."

"Deal! If he flakes, dinner is on me."

"Perfect. It's a date."

"Mhm!"

They lingered by the gates of The Newsom Estate for another minute before she finally opened the door and stepped out.

Watching her walk away, a heavy wave of disappointment washed over him, and his charming smile began to fracture.

Suddenly, she glanced back over her shoulder and waved. "Drive safe!"

He instantly plastered the grin back onto his face, looking entirely relaxed. "Will do. Goodnight."

He shifted into drive and slowly rolled away down the quiet street.

Keeping his eyes glued to the rearview mirror until her silhouette completely

vanished into the shadows, his mood plummeted straight off a cliff.

They had been apart for all of five seconds, and he was already missing her like crazy.

Chapter 1754

A long, heavy sigh escaped him.

Feeling frustrated and hollow, Keaton rolled down the windows, letting the biting night air hit his face to clear his head.

Suddenly, his phone buzzed through the car's Bluetooth. It was Janelle. The second he answered, she demanded,

"Where are you right now?"

"Just driving around. What's up, Mom? Everything okay?"

"Are you busy right now?" she pressed.

"No, not really. Tell me what's going on."

"Then come home immediately. I need to ask you something."

Before he could reply, she hung up. Keaton stared at the dashboard, listening to the dial tone, a knot of confusion forming in his chest.

When he walked through the doors of the Huber family mansion, he pulled one of the housekeepers aside.

"What's wrong with my mom today? Why is she in such a foul mood?"

The housekeeper lowered her voice nervously.

"Ma'am finally felt well enough to go out today, but she came back looking absolutely furious. We're worried Mrs. Sewell and her friends might have been making snide comments again."

Keaton was surprised. "She actually left the house?"

The housekeeper nodded quickly. "Yes, and she was in incredibly high spirits when she left."

Keaton frowned. "..."

Ever since he had confessed the truth about his unrequited feelings for Winona, Janelle had fallen into a deep depression.

She had been moping around the estate for weeks, completely isolating herself from society.

Hearing that she had finally emerged from her self-imposed exile was genuinely shocking.

"Do you know what prompted her to go out?"

The housekeeper shook her head. "No idea, sir."

"Where did she go?" he pressed.

"I believe she attended an afternoon tea with the other socialites."

Keaton's brow furrowed. If she was mingling with her usual high-society circle, running into Mrs. Sewell and that toxic clique was inevitable. They had probably targeted her over the rumors of the pregnancy to mock the Huber family.

Assuming she was just licking her wounds from their venomous gossip, he braced himself and strode into the living room.

"Hey there!"

Janelle was perched on the edge of the plush velvet sofa, her expression tight with anxiety, looking like she was carrying the weight of the world.

When Keaton suddenly materialized beside her, she jumped out of her skin.

"You absolute menace! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!"

Flashing a charming, unapologetic grin, he slung an arm around her shoulders.

"What's got my beautiful mother so lost in thought?"

Janelle swatted his arm away, her face stone-cold serious.

"Look me in the eye and tell me the truth. Is Winona pregnant?"

Keaton froze, his smile faltering. "Who told you that?"

"I was at the country club today, and I heard it straight from Mrs. Sewell and her gossiping harpies!"

Keaton was baffled. "They usually only obsess over the core elite. Why are they suddenly taking aim at Winona?"

Janelle rubbed her temples, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Because of me! They know how much I adore Winona, and since her mother and I have gotten so close

recently, Mrs Sewell loves digging up dirt on the guy just to humiliate

The world of high-society wives was a cutthroat battleground of passive-aggression.

To protect their family interests and maintain public decorum, they rarely engaged in open warfare, projecting an illusion of flawless harmony.

But behind closed doors, it was a viper's nest of rival factions and vicious cliques.

Over the past few months, the

Newsom family's prestige in Jindale City had skyrocketed. With her net worth soaring Mrs. Newsom had successfully infiltrated the upper echelon of the socialite hierarchy.

Given their shared connection through Winona, she naturally gravitated toward Janelle-which unfortunately painted a massive target on her back for Mrs. Sewell's clique.

As a result, Winona was suddenly under a very hostile microscope.

Keaton's jaw tightened.

"So how did they even find out about the pregnancy?"

Janelle leaned in closer.

"They hired private investigators to dig into the Newsom family's business."

"On top of that, Mrs. Newsom has been actively headhunting top-tier maternity nurses. She claimed it was for a relative, but everyone knows it's for Winona." "Keaton, look at me. Is it true? Is she really expecting?!"

Keaton exhaled slowly. "..."

He shouldn't have been surprised. There was no such thing as a secret in their world.

No matter how careful Winona had been, concealing her baby bump under oversized clothes and laying low, the vultures had still sniffed her out.

Seeing his grim silence, the last of Janelle's denial shattered.

"My God, she really is! Whose baby is it?!"

Keaton didn't answer. Instead, his eyes went dark. "What exactly were Mrs. Sewell and her friends saying?"

Janelle grimaced, clearly disgusted by the memory. The sheer cruelty of their words made her physically nauseous.

"Nothing but vile, baseless filth! You know exactly how poisonous those women are!"

"If one of their sons gets a girl pregnant, they call it a blessing. But the second a daughter ends up pregnant out of wedlock, they brand her a tramp!"

Keaton's hands clenched into fists, a lethal fury simmering beneath his skin. ".. Panic laced Janelle's voice. "Whose child is she carrying?"

Chapter 1755

Keaton kept his voice dangerously calm.

"I don't know. It's her private business. Keep this to yourself. Do not go interrogating

her. When she is ready to share, she will tell you on her own terms."

Janelle's face contorted with a messy storm of emotions. "..."

For a moment, she didn't know whether to pop champagne or burst into tears.

She was an old-school traditionalist who desperately craved grandchildren. To her, a new life was always a miracle worth celebrating.

But the crushing reality that the child didn't belong to the Huber bloodline felt like a knife to the chest.

If only it were a Huber baby, everything would be perfect!

Oh, for the love of God!

Why couldn't their family catch a break like that?!

She mourned the missed opportunity in silence, agonizing over the injustice of it all before finally composing herself.

"You're still checking in on her, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Why?"

"I need you to drop some things off for her."

Janelle marched into the massive pantry and immediately began ransacking the shelves.

She cleared out their most exclusive inventory of premium vitamins, organic prenatal supplements, and rare superfoods, stuffing them into several heavy canvas bags before shoving them into Keaton's arms.

"Find a casual excuse to bring these to her. They are absolutely vital for a healthy pregnancy!"

"Carrying a child takes a massive toll on a woman's body. She needs to rebuild her strength!"

"These will ensure both she and the baby get all the nutrients they need. A strong mother makes for a safe delivery."

Keaton stared at the massive haul. "...She's not even your daughter-in-law. Why are you acting like a fiercely protective grandmother?"

Janelle shot him a withering glare.

"Of course I am! I'd adore her even if she never looked your way! Now stop dawdling and take these over to her. As soon as she makes it public, I'll be there to pamper her myself!"

After loading the ridiculous amount of supplements into the back of his SUV, Keaton pulled over on a deserted stretch of road.

He made a quick, ruthless phone call, ordering his security team to hack the country club's surveillance and extract the audio and video footage from Janelle's afternoon tea.

The moment Janelle had walked into the sunroom, Mrs. Sewell's clique had swooped in like vultures.

Disguising their venom as false sympathy, they mocked her relentless desperation for a grandson, sneering that some bloodlines just weren't meant to endure.

They practically advised her to start planning for the extinction of the Huber family legacy!

After verbally eviscerating his mother, they pivoted their crosshairs directly onto Winona.

They trashed the Newsom family's parenting, claiming their household bred nothing but loose morals and scandal.

They sneered at her out-of-wedlock pregnancy, boldly declaring that Winona herself probably didn't even know who the father was!

They branded the unborn baby a bastard!

Another socialite suggested she had

traded sexual favors with a

high-powered billionaire to fund her

career implying the father was

some decrepit, eighty year

tycoon!

Someone even dragged Zane Livingston into the crossfire.

They spun a wild narrative that Winona had cheated on him during their marriage

and callously discarded him, pushing Zane into a vengeful rage.

They actually twisted Zane's horrific abuse, claiming Winona had brought it entirely on herself that she deserved every ounce of his cruelty!

Sitting in the dim glow of his

dashboard, listening to the toxic sludge spilling from those women's

mouths, Keaton's expression shifted into something predatory and pitch-black.

With a jaw cut from granite, he lit a

cigarette, inhaling deeply as he

stared blankly ahead. Finally, he

slammed the car into gear, flooring

the accelerator ontent belongs to

until he reached the

Newsom Estate."

His first instinct was to drag her outside for a confrontation, but as his thumb

hovered over her contact, he hesitated, then locked his phone.

The lights in her bedroom were completely extinguished. She had already gone to bed.

Pregnancy was demanding, and she needed every ounce of rest she could get.

Refusing to disrupt her peace, he parked the SUV on the curb, stepped out into the freezing night, and lit another cigarette, leaning heavily against the hood.

He tipped his head back, staring up at her darkened window.

He stood vigil outside her house for the entire night!

It wasn't until the first light of dawn cracked the horizon that he finally dialed her number. "Are you awake?"

Winona let out a soft yawn, her voice heavy with sleep. "Not really. What's wrong?" "...I'm outside your house. Come down. We need to talk."

Winona blinked, the lingering exhaustion instantly vanishing.

Throwing off the covers, she padded over to the window and peered through the blinds, immediately spotting the familiar silhouette of his Cullinan parked on the street.

"Why are you here so early? Is it an emergency?"

Keaton didn't mention he had been standing guard in the freezing cold for the past eight hours.

"Just come down. I need to say this to your face."

With that, he hung up.

Winona stared at the black SUV for a long moment before quickly tossing on a thick coat over her pajamas and rushing out the door, not even bothering to wash her face.

When Keaton saw her shivering in the morning air, he ushered her straight into the passenger seat.

The cabin smelled immaculate; he had rigorously ensured every trace of tobacco smoke stayed outside.

With the heat blasting, the interior was blissfully warm. Just as Winona opened her mouth to ask what was going on, he cut her off.

"I want to find a father for the baby you're carrying," he stated flatly.

Winona froze in shock. "What?!"

His brow furrowed as he looked her dead in the eye, his gaze stripped of all its usual

playful charm, leaving behind nothing but raw, absolute sincerity.

"How about me?"

Chapter 1756

Before Winona could get a word in, Keaton launched into his pitch.

"I know I might be a mess when it comes to romance, but I love kids. You've seen how I am with Elliot and Evan. I would treat your baby like my own flesh and blood. I never planned on getting married or having kids of my own, so if you agree, this baby will be my sole heir."

He rushed on, his voice earnest. "I don't have any experience being a father, but I swear I'd give it everything I have. I'd give the kid a happy, secure childhood and make sure they're protected for the rest of their life. Every cent to my name will go to them."

Winona was completely stunned.

She stared at him in disbelief, trying to process his sudden, chaotic proposal. She had no idea what had brought this on.

He obviously didn't realize the baby was already his. Was he seriously offering to play the doting father to another man's child?

Her lips parted, but words failed her.

Fearing a rejection, Keaton quickly laid out the pros and cons. "I know my reputation isn't the best. Having a guy like me as a father might not be a badge of honor, and people might whisper behind our backs. Getting tangled up in my mess wouldn't exactly polish your image, either. But think about it—you can give the kid a life of luxury, but can you give them a father's love?"

He leaned closer. "A kid can be perfectly happy without a dad, but having one is always better, right? And what if you get tied up with work? If you have to travel out of town on business, I'd be right here at home to keep them company. Having one more person to love them can only be a good thing. Plus, it solves your biggest problem. You wouldn't have to figure out how to explain the father situation to the public, and when the kid grows up, they won't be asking difficult questions about where their dad went."

Most importantly, if he claimed the baby, nobody would dare gossip about Winona's private life or call her child illegitimate. Winona wasn't aware of the vicious rumors already circulating about her, but she could see the logic in his proposal.

She just couldn't understand his motivation.

"Why would you suddenly come up with this?" she asked.

Keaton dodged the real reason. "It just came to me. Will you agree? I'm not joking. I'm dead serious."

Winona asked awkwardly, "So... you're volunteering to claim another man's kid? Did I misunderstand you?"

Keaton hadn't quite phrased it that way in his head, but he nodded. "My intentions are clear. You can look at it however you want. As long as you agree the baby you're carrying will be recognized as Keaton Huber's flesh and blood."

Winona was speechless. Whether she agreed or not, the baby was literally his flesh and blood.

It was a biological fact she couldn't change.

After a moment of silence, she tried to clarify. "Let me get this straight. You're suggesting that we live our separate lives, but tell the

world-and the child-that the baby is yours? Is that it?" She to'

Keaton neither nodded nor shook his head. "I want to help raise the baby as their father. And if... if you're worried about the lie being exposed, we could always get a marriage certificate and make it a sham marriage."

Winona's eyes widened in sheer shock.

Keaton was a notorious bachelor who had sworn off marriage forever.

Seeing her reaction, Keaton quickly backpedaled. "I'm not forcing you to marry me.

I'm just saying I'm open to whatever you want. I'll follow your lead."

Chapter 1757

Winona swallowed hard, her gaze locked on his face. "What exactly happened to make you act so impulsively?"

"I'm not being impulsive," Keaton replied with absolute certainty. "I've thought this through completely."

"But there's no benefit in this for you," she pointed out, highly suspicious.

Keaton countered immediately. "Of course there is. I get a kid out of thin air. I'm happy, and my parents will be thrilled." More importantly, if he claimed the baby, people would stop whispering about Winona, and he wouldn't feel the constant urge to hit someone. That alone was a massive win for him.

Winona reminded him of the social reality. "But if we don't get married, people will say you're irresponsible. They'll call you a deadbeat."

Keaton just laughed. "Do you think I care? My reputation is already in the gutter. I couldn't care less what people say about me." He only cared about what they said about her. No matter how many people he threatened, he couldn't stop the private whispers.

Giving this child a father was the only way to tear the problem out by the roots.

Winona furrowed her brow, studying him in silence.

She wasn't stupid. Keaton was willing to go to these extreme lengths for a child he didn't even know was his, all because of her. A man who vehemently opposed marriage was willing to swallow a lifetime of insults, happily claim another man's baby, and even walk down the aisle just for her sake.

That had to be love, didn't it?

It was impossible not to be moved. Yet, her feelings for Keaton were purely platonic. She would take a bullet for him, but she didn't love him romantically.

Taking a deep breath, Winona exhaled heavily. "Keaton, the baby I'm carrying is actually..."

Terrified of an outright rejection, Keaton quickly cut her off. "You don't have to give me an answer right now. Take your time. Think it over and let me know. I've already made up my mind, and I'm totally serious!"

"That's not what I mean," Winona tried again. "I'm trying to say that the baby is..."

A sudden knock on the window startled her. She turned to see her father standing by the car. She hurriedly rolled down the window. "Dad."

Keaton immediately greeted him as well. "Ridley."

Ridley Newsom eyed them both with a hint of suspicion but nodded politely. "Why don't you two come inside to talk?"

Keaton shifted awkwardly. "I just dropped by to say a few things to Winona. I didn't want to disturb you and Caroline."

"You're not disturbing us," Ridley said. "Breakfast is ready. Come on in and eat." Keaton politely declined. "No, thank you. I ate before I came over."

Ridley knew he was lying but didn't call him out. "Then at least come inside to chat."

"It can't be comfortable crammed in this car."

"We were just wrapping up," Keaton said. He had laid all his cards on the table. The rest was up to Winona. He reached for the bags Janelle had sent. "Take these inside. Let the security guards carry them for you, they're heavy."

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Winona glanced at the heavy gift bags and instantly recognized that the contents were incredibly

expensive Before she could protest, Keaton spoke up.

"My mom asked me to bring these. They're good for both you and Caroline, so just accept them. It's her way of showing she cares. If you refuse she'll probably overthink it.

Hearing that, Winona couldn't refuse. "Please thank Janelle for me. I'll come visit her

when I have some free time."

"Will do."

Chapter 1758

Winona pushed the car door open and stepped out. "Drive safe," she told Keaton.

He nodded. "Yeah. Just... call me when you've made your decision."

"Okay."

After bidding Ridley goodbye, Keaton drove off. Winona watched his taillights disappear down the street, her brow furrowed in a heavy sigh. The estate's security guards jogged over to relieve her of the heavy gift bags.

Ridley turned to her. "What exactly is going on between you two?"

"I already told you," Winona said softly. "We got drunk, things happened, and now there's a baby."

"I'm not talking about the baby," Ridley pressed. "I'm talking about you and Keaton. Didn't you say there were no feelings between you?"

"There aren't. Why?"

"Then why did he stand outside our estate walls all night?"

Winona froze, utterly stunned. "What do you mean, all night?"

"He showed up last night and stayed out there until morning," Ridley explained. "A full night."

Winona's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

Ridley pressed his lips together. "Of course I am. Why would I lie to you? The guards told me, and I even checked the security footage myself. He never left. He just stood there, staring up at your window. I had the guards clip the video and send it to you."

"My phone is upstairs. I didn't bring it down."

"Well, you can watch it later," Ridley said. "Right now, even our security guards are convinced you two are secretly dating."

Her mind racing, Winona quickly tried to dismiss it. "We aren't dating, so please don't overthink things. I'm going back to my room to catch up on some sleep. You and Mom go ahead and eat. I'll grab something whenever I wake up."

She hurried toward the house without looking back. Ridley called after her, "You still haven't told me what he wanted to talk about!"

"Nothing important!" Winona yelled over her shoulder.

"Slow down! You're pregnant!" Ridley scolded.

Winona offered a dismissive murmur of agreement as she rushed up to her room. The first thing she did was grab her phone and pull up the security footage. It was exactly as her father had described. Keaton had arrived the previous evening and waited outside the walk occasionally stepping out of his car to smoke. She couldn't blame the guards or her father for jumping to conclusions. The sight of Keaton leaning against his car, smoking quietly as he stared up at her bedroom window, was undeniably romantic.

Her heart raced as a wave of panic and confusion washed over her. She

immediately dialed Elysia.

"Elysia, are you busy right now?"

Elysia had just handed the kids over to Lowell for the morning school run. "Not at all. What's wrong? Miss me?"

"I just sent you a video. Watch it first."

Elysia clicked on the clip. A moment later, she gasped in surprise. "When was this? Last night?"

Winona's voice-trembled with

emotion. "Yes. The guards and my dad already know. He stood outside my house for an entire night! Then he called me this morning to come down and talk. He actually offered to act as the baby's father! He..

Meanwhile, across town, Tarquin was fielding a call from Keaton. He stepped out

into the courtyard to take it.

The moment the line connected, Keaton blurted out, "Tell Elysia to talk some sense

into Winona. I'm stepping up to be the father of her kid."

Tarquin paused. "Did something happen?"

Keaton didn't hold back. "The

secret's out. A bunch of gossips are

already whispering behind her back. That kid can't grow up without dad, they be branded

illegitimate! If I claim the baby as

mine, I'd like to see who dares to talk trash about them!" Contént belongs

After a brief silence, Tarquin asked, "Have you discussed this with Winona?"

"Yeah, but she didn't give me an answer. I don't know if she'll agree, so I need Elysia

to help me convince her. Tell her I have no ulterior motives. I just want to claim the

kid."

Tarquin took a slow breath. "Are you really this deeply in love with her?"

For once, Keaton didn't argue. His voice was muffled and heavy. "Right now? Yeah. But I don't know about the future."

Chapter 1759

"Let the future worry about itself," Tarquin advised. "Just confess your feelings to her. Trust me on this. Go tell her you love her."

If Keaton laid his heart on the line, regardless of whether Winona returned those feelings, she would undoubtedly confess the truth about the baby. It was ridiculous for him to be kept in the dark any longer. If Keaton was willing to claim another man's child, he certainly wouldn't let Winona get an abortion once he realized the baby was his own flesh and blood.

But Keaton balked. After a painfully long pause, he finally choked out, "I'm terrified."

Tarquin didn't laugh. His tone remained perfectly serious. "Being terrified just proves your feelings are genuine. How do you not understand that?"

Keaton sighed. "It's not that I don't understand it. I'm just afraid this is all a passing obsession."

Before Tarquin could reply, Keaton rushed on. "Let's just leave it at this for now. Let me secure my spot as the kid's dad before we worry about anything else. Go talk to Elysia and make sure she puts in a good word for me with Winona."

Tarquin sighed as the call ended.

A little while later, Elysia hung up with Winona and immediately turned to Tarquin. "Did you hear what Keaton did today?"

"You mean offering to play dad to Winona's baby?"

Elysia nodded enthusiastically, her face painted with disbelief. "I truly never expected him to go to such lengths. He really has fallen completely in love with her!"

"What did Winona say?" Tarquin asked. "Is she still keeping the truth from him?"

Elysia hesitated. "She hasn't told him yet. She was too shell-shocked. She said she'd find him later to talk things over."

"Today?"

"Probably. But definitely not right now. Keaton was up all night, and Winona doesn't want to disturb him. She wants to let him catch up on his sleep first." Elysia tilted her head looking at Tarquin with blatant curiosity. "If Keaton is so head-over-heels, why hasn't he confessed to her yet?"

"He's afraid his feelings are just a fleeting phase," Tarquin explained. "He's terrified

of falling out of love later and hurting her."

Elysia sighed heavily. "I worry about that, too. Is he a reformed player, or is this just

a three-minute passion? If he's truly changed his ways, I'll pray they end up together. But if this is just a temporary fixation, it's better if he stays away."

Tarquin shook his head. "Keaton is actually a very rational person. The fact that he's losing control like this proves his love for Winona is real. And if he's worried about hurting her, doesn't that show how much he cares? This isn't a passing phase. He's genuinely invested. He's completely wrapped around Winona's finger now. He's already surrendered his heart to her."

Elysia narrowed her eyes playfully. "Are you really that certain?"

"I speak from experience," Tarquin said smoothly.

Elysia stared at him for a few seconds before offering a conceding nod. "If Keaton really is that madly in love with her, I'm more than happy to be his wingwoman." After all, they already shared a child. If they ended up together, it would be the perfect happy ending.

"I'm still curious though," Elysia mused. "Even with him treading so carefully, didn't Shane give him any sense of crisis? If it were me, I would've confessed by now just in case a real rival showed up to steal her away! It's always better to strike first."

Tarquin's eyes narrowed slightly. It was a valid point. However, when it came to matters of the heart, the perspective of an outsider was

vastly different from the pers net

trapped in the emotional crossfire. Outsiders leaned toward logic, while those involved were drowning in emotion. If anyone else found themselves in Keaton's exact

position, they'd likely be just as cautious and terrified of confession.

After a bit more conversation, Elysia left to visit Winona at the Newsom estate. Tarquin headed to the office. He knew Keaton's mind was a chaotic mess, but the man had been awake all night and desperately needed sleep. He planned to check on him that afternoon.

However, nobody could have predicted the sudden curveball that afternoon would bring.

Chapter 1760

Callum had returned!

The same Callum who had been deeply in love with Winona since their college days, and who had vanished without a trace while investigating her whereabouts. If Shane was just a fake rival, Callum was the real deal.

When Keaton received the news, he was still dead asleep in his bed. Tarquin called to break it to him. "Keaton, Callum is back."

Keaton was still half-conscious, his eyes glued shut and his voice heavy with sleep. "Who?"

"Callum," Tarquin repeated.

Keaton mumbled the name, his brain slowly booting up. "Callum..."

The next second, he bolted upright in bed, all traces of exhaustion vanishing. "Callum is back?!"

"Yes."

"When?"

"This afternoon," Tarquin said. "He told me he tried calling you, but you didn't answer."

Keaton checked his call log and saw a missed call from an unknown number. "I slept right through it. I'll call him back in a minute. Is he okay?"

"I haven't seen him in person yet. I heard he's missing two fingers, but otherwise, he's fine."

Keaton's brow slammed into a furious frown. "Missing two fingers?!"

"Yeah. Zane's men cut them off."

Keaton clenched his jaw, processing the brutality of it before finally exhaling. Losing two fingers won't stop him from living his life. The most important thing is that he made it back alive! That crazy son of a bitch actually coming back out of nowhere had so many people looking for him and never found a single trace. I honestly thought Zane had killed him!"

"Escaping Zane with his life intact means he's a lucky man," Tarquin noted. Zane was known for his ruthless cruelty; surviving him was no small feat.

Keaton let out a long breath. "He is lucky. How did he manage to escape?"

"He didn't give me the details. We'll find out when we see him. We're meeting at Jinpeach Restaurant for dinner at six-thirty. Are you coming?"

Keaton didn't hesitate. "Of course I'm coming! My brother surviving a nightmare like that calls for a

celebration. We need to throw him a welcome back dinner, and I need to

hear exactly how he managed to slip through Zane's fingers."

"Alright."

"I'll hang up now and go wash up," Keaton added.

Noticing that Keaton hadn't yet connected the dots to Winona, Tarquin casually dropped a reminder.

"Winona knows, too. When she heard Callum had lost two fingers, she broke down crying on the spot."

Keaton frowned and sighed. "He went through hell because of her. She's been worried sick about him all this time. Now that he's back, she must be so overwhelmed and heartbroken for him, she..."

Suddenly, Keaton froze mid-sentence.

The realization hit him like a freight train as he remembered Callum's feelings for Winona.

Callum had been in love with her since college. When Winona first started dating Zane, a devastated.

Callum had dragged Keaton and

their friends out to drink his sorrows away. Later, Callum abandoned the financial sector and moved abroad to enter the entertainment industry as a director—a life choice entirely driven by his heartbreak over Winona.

And when he found out Winona had vanished, Callum risked everything, utilizing every resource at his disposal to track her down, which ultimately led to him being tortured by Zane.

Callum's love for Winona was real. It was profound, and it had spanned many years.

Furthermore, whether it was his family background, his flawless character, or his career-Callum was the perfect match for Winona!