

## **Hitched 1761**

### Chapter 1761

Keaton himself had once said it. He had claimed that Winona missing out on Callum was the biggest loss of her life.

He had even said that if Winona had married Callum instead of Zane, she would have been treated like an absolute princess.

The more Keaton thought about it, the tighter his chest became.

It wasn't quite a matter of betraying a friend, considering Winona and Callum had never actually dated. But he still felt a pang of guilt for falling for a woman his buddy had loved.

On top of that, Callum's reputation was infinitely better than his own playboy track record.

If the Newsom family had to choose, they would pick Callum in a heartbeat.

Who would ever choose a guy like him?

Sure, plenty of women threw themselves at him, but how many respectable women from good families would actually agree to marry him?

Anyone who did would become the laughingstock of their elite circle.

After all, he was known as a heartbreaker. A jerk.

Even if Winona had to choose for herself, she would probably go with Callum.

Callum was a director, which meant they shared the same industry and interests. More importantly, Callum had literally saved her life.

Keaton furrowed his brow, his heart sinking like a stone.

A sudden wave of regret washed over him. For the first time in his life, he truly wished he could take it all back. Why had he spent his younger years sleeping around?

Why hadn't he cared about his reputation?

He had carelessly trashed his own image.

A suffocating weight pressed down on his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Tarquin knew him too well and silently sighed.

Like Keaton, he had assumed Callum was dead.

Hearing the news of his survival today had initially sparked a rush of pure excitement. Having a good friend back from the dead was a miracle.

But after the initial relief wore off, Tarquin started worrying about Keaton.

This new development threw a massive wrench into Keaton's pursuit of Winona. Tarquin tried to offer some comfort.

"Winona views Callum exactly the same way she views you. There is no romance there. It is strictly friendship."

Keaton remained silent.

Tarquin was about to say something else when Keaton suddenly spoke up. 'settles it.'

Tarquin was confused. "What?"

"What time is dinner tonight?" Keaton asked.

"Six-thirty."

"Jinpeach Restaurant, right?"

"Yeah."

"Who is going to be there?"

"Me, Elysia, Winona, Callum, Gale, and Booker."

"Got it," Keaton said. "I will be there on time. I will handle the drinks.

bringing a couple of my best bel.

to welcome him back.

Tarquin stared at him, trying to read his expression, "What do you mean

that

it? What are you

"Content bo

planning?"

"I am going to break the deadlock," Keaton declared.

Tarquin raised an eyebrow. "What deadlock?"

"That

"The current one."

"You mean between you, Callum, and Winona?" Tarquin asked.

"Exactly."

"And how exactly are you going to do that?"

"You will find out tonight," Keaton said firmly. "Just wait and see."

Tarquin hesitated, studying his friend carefully.

"You are not planning on starting a

fistfight with him, are you?

did with Shane?

Keaton scoffed. "Are you out of your mind? The guy is my buddy."

"Then what is your plan?" Tarquin asked, his curiosity piqued. "You will see when we get there," Keaton said. "Catch you later." Tarquin just shook his head.

Chapter 1762

At six o'clock that evening, Keaton arrived at Jinpeach Restaurant.

He arrived thirty minutes early. Instead of heading straight to the private dining room, he made a detour to the kitchen.

He tracked down the head chef and specifically mentioned that there would be a pregnant woman in their party, instructing them to be incredibly careful with the ingredients.

He demanded they avoid anything unsafe for expecting mothers. If a dish had to include certain spices or components, they needed to place warning labels next to it.

Once he was satisfied with the arrangements, he finally made his way to the private room. He had barely reached the door when a familiar voice called out.

"Keaton."

He whipped his head around. A few feet away stood Tarquin and Callum.

Callum was dressed in a mid-length trench coat, his hands shoved casually into his pockets, a warm smile spread across his face.

Keaton froze for a second before striding toward him. "Callum."

Callum stepped forward to meet him. "It has been a while."

The two men locked into a fierce embrace. Keaton's voice was tight with emotion.

"You could have at least given us a heads-up before you just showed up."

Callum chuckled. "I wanted to give you a surprise."

Keaton took a deep, shaky breath.

"Surprise, my ass. If we had known you were alive a day sooner, we could have started celebrating a day sooner. It has been so long without a word. We all thought you were dead."

"Don't worry," Callum said with an easy smile. "I have got nine lives. I am not that easy to kill."

Keaton pulled back, looking him up and down. He let out a heavy exhale and clapped Callum firmly on the shoulder, speaking from the bottom of his heart.

"I am just glad you made it back in one piece."

Callum said softly,

"My dad mentioned that you spent a lot of time and money looking for me after I went missing. I cannot thank you enough. I owe you."

"Cut the crap. Friends do not keep score. Just sit down and tell me how the hell you survived."

Callum let out a long breath. "It is a long story."

Before he could elaborate, Gale and Booker arrived.

Seeing Callum standing there, the two of them nearly lost their minds.

"Thank God you are alive."

"You survived a disaster like that. You are destined for greatness now."

As the group exchanged chaotic, heartfelt greetings by the door, Tarquin stood

quietly to the side, keeping a close eye on Keaton.

Seeing that his friend was keeping it together, Tarquin finally stepped in.

"Let's take this inside."

They had barely taken their seats when Winona and Elysia rushed into the room.

The moment Winona locked eyes with Callum, the tears spilled over. Even Elysia choked up at the sight of him.

Callum had risked everything for Winona, and Elysia was incredibly grateful to him. They had all lived with the horrifying assumption that Zane had murdered him. Seeing him sitting there safe and sound was completely overwhelming.

Noticing Elysia tearing up, Tarquin walked over, wrapped an arm around her, and gently guided her to sit beside him.

Winona, however, completely broke down. Tears streamed down her face as her voice cracked.  
"Callum."

Keaton's brow furrowed. He wanted to tell her to calm down, to remind

her that extreme stress was not good for the baby, but the words died in his throat. Content belgrigs

Callum immediately stood up and walked over. He gave her a polite comforting hug before helping her into chair He grabbed a tissue and handed it to her

"Take a deep breath. I heard you are expecting. Getting this worked up is not good for you or the baby."

Winona took the tissue, but no matter how fast she wiped her eyes, the tears kept falling.

She desperately wanted to calm down, but the dam had burst.

Her heart was overflowing with gratitude and a crushing sense of guilt.

Callum had been captured and tortured because of her.

Over the past few months, she had frantically searched for any news of his whereabouts and had even anonymously sent a massive amount of money to his parents.

When every lead went cold, she truly believed he was gone.

The guilt had been eating her alive.

Seeing him alive and well was a massive relief.

But when her gaze dropped to his hand and she saw his missing fingers, a fresh

wave of devastation crashed over her.

Chapter 1763

Callum offered her a gentle smile.

"Everything I did, I did willingly. You did not force me into anything. Even if the worst had happened, it would have been on me, not you. You have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about. Besides, I am sitting right here, perfectly fine. So please, stop crying."

Winona's lips trembled as she stared at his missing fingers through tear-blurred eyes.

Callum chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

"I am a grown man. Losing two fingers is hardly the end of the world. I still have eight left. It does not affect my life at all."

Winona only sobbed harder. Watching her break down, Keaton felt his chest tighten with a mix of heartache and sheer panic.

His heart was in his throat, terrified that her intense emotional distress would harm the pregnancy.

Unable to hold back any longer, he chimed in.

"Callum coming back is a cause for celebration. Stop crying. If you make yourself sick over this, Callum is going to feel like the bad guy."

Catching on, Callum played along.

"He is right. You are practically royalty around here now. If my return causes you to end up in the hospital, I will never forgive myself."

Winona sniffled hard, desperately trying to pull herself together. She wiped her eyes and looked at Callum, her voice trembling but sincere.

"I will remember what you did for me for the rest of my life."

Callum smiled warmly. "Deal. If I ever need a favor, I know who to call."

Winona nodded vigorously. "Anything. Whatever you need, I will do it." Sensing an opportunity to shift her focus, Keaton looked over at Callum. "Alright, tell us. How exactly did you make it out alive?"

Callum settled back into his chair beside Winona and began his story.

"When I first heard the rumors about Winona's situation, I did not immediately suspect Zane. The red flags actually started when Elysia sent me a specific video."

"At the time, there were already whispers in the industry that Winona's manager had died overseas two months prior."

"But in the video Zane gave Elysia, the manager was clearly alive and well."

"That was when I knew something was wrong. I was not completely sure if the rumors about her death were true, so I kept it from Elysia and flew overseas to investigate, myself."

"The moment I found solid proof that Zane was hiding something, his men grabbed

me. He must have been having me tailed the entire time."

"I tried to make a run for it, and in a fit of rage, they cut off two of my fingers as a warning."

"Eventually, my luck turned. The place they were holding me caught fire, and I managed to slip away in the chaos."

"I was found by some locals who saved my life."

"The downside was that I took a serious blow to the head during the escape and lost my memory. It only came back recently."

"As soon as I remembered who I was, I went straight to the police. That was when I found out Zane's empire had crumbled and Winona was safe."

When Callum finished, a heavy silence blanketed the room.

He had recounted the nightmare with such casual ease, but everyone at the table was completely horrified.

The summary sounded simple enough, but the reality of living through it was undeniably terrifying.

If he had not been incredibly lucky, he would be dead.

Callum let out a sigh.

"I honestly never imagined Zane was capable of such depravity. I never liked the guy back in college, but always assumed my hostility toward him was just because of Winona."

"Turns out, men have a sixth sense too."

"Deep down, I must have known he was a monster and that he would destroy her. If I had known how bad would have thrown my

it would and done

sride out the

whatever it took to break you two up. Even if you never looked my way, at least you would have been safe from a psychopath like him."

He looked at Winona, his eyes filled with profound tenderness and regret.

Chapter 1764

The private room remained quiet for a moment before Tarquin finally broke the silence.

"There is no use dwelling on what-ifs, and there is no cure for regret. The only thing that matters is that we got a good ending."

The rest of the table nodded in agreement. "He is right. We got a good ending."

The nightmare was over. Zane was a wanted fugitive with a massive bounty on his head, living out his days like a cornered rat without a shred of freedom.

More importantly, Winona was safe and unharmed.

Callum had miraculously cheated death and was sitting right in front of them.

The heavy atmosphere lifted as the servers began bringing out the food.

The spread was incredibly lavish. With every dish placed on the table, the waiter specifically noted whether it was safe for expectant mothers. They highlighted which dishes should be eaten in moderation and which ones were highly recommended for pregnancy.

A specially prepared, nutrient-rich soup was set directly in front of Winona.

Elysia leaned in and whispered to Tarquin.

"The service at Jinpeach Restaurant really is on another level."

Tarquin just offered a faint smile, his gaze shifting toward Keaton.

Tarquin had handled the reservation, but he had completely forgotten to mention the pregnancy to the kitchen. Since he had not said a word, the only person who could have arranged all of this was Keaton.

They always said love was in the details, and Keaton's feelings for Winona ran incredibly deep.

Tarquin let out a quiet mental sigh and looked back at Callum and Winona.

Callum was acting exactly as he used to. He sat right next to her, playing the perfect gentleman, seamlessly serving her portions of all her favorite dishes. He still remembered exactly what she liked.

Winona's face lit up with a radiant smile as she looked at him. Sitting shoulder to shoulder, they chatted and laughed with effortless chemistry.

Tarquin had no idea where Callum's head was at. Would he pick up his pursuit of Winona right where he left off?

And more importantly, would Winona finally give him a chance?

His eyes flicked back to Keaton.

Keaton was constantly stealing glances across the table, clearly having lost his appetite.

There was no doubt that Keaton valued Callum as a brother.

He was genuinely thrilled that Callum had survived.

But that did not stop the sheer, undeniable jealousy from eating him alive.

Tarquin still had no clue how Keaton planned to break this deadlock.

Shaking his head slightly, Tarquin picked up a slice of lemon from the dessert platter and dropped it onto Keaton's plate.

Keaton, who had been staring

1.get

blankly into space, snapped out of his trance when the bright yellow fruit landed in front of him. He looked at Tarquin with a scowl.

"Want it?" Tarquin asked casually.

"No," Keaton snapped, his face darkening.

Without missing a beat, Tarquin picked up a piece of perfectly shelled crab meat and placed it on Keaton's plate.

It was Keaton's favorite.

Keaton narrowed his eyes, shooting Tarquin a look that clearly asked, \*What the hell are you doing?\*

Tarquin met his gaze, his eyes

silently conveying a message. \*Even

if you los

the gur), you still have you

boys. Bros fook out for each other\*

Keaton pressed his lips into a thin line and rolled his eyes so hard it hurt. "Get the hell out of here."

His voice carried across the room, causing the entire table to stop talking and stare at him in confusion.

Keaton shifted awkwardly in his seat.

Tarquin smirked and raised his glass. "Alright, let's have a toast."

The distraction worked. Everyone raised their glasses.

Winona and Elysia clinked glasses filled with fresh juice.

After dinner, Callum naturally offered to drive Winona home.

Keaton immediately stepped in. "Let Tarquin and Elysia take her. You are coming with us to the bar."

Elysia turned to Tarquin in surprise. "Are you leaving early too?"

Tarquin caught the subtle glare Keaton was shooting his way. He knew exactly what was happening. Keaton was trying to get rid of him.

Though he had no idea what Keaton's endgame was, he decided to play along.

"I will go with you. We will drop Winona off and then head back to

so

Number One Mansion. I have early meetings tomorrow, so I am going to pass on the late-night drinking."

Chapter 1765

"Go hang out with the guys, Callum," Tarquin added. "Elysia and I will make sure Winona gets home safe."

Callum glanced at Keaton, then nodded.

"Alright. Drive safe."

Winona turned to Callum before she left.

"My parents heard the news about you. They want to see you. Let's arrange a time

to get together soon. They want to thank you in person."

Callum offered a warm smile.

"They do not need to do that, but I will definitely come by and pay my respects. We can set up a time later."

Winona nodded. "Sounds good."

Once the three of them were gone, Keaton turned his attention to Gale and Booker.

"You two can screw off as well. Do not follow us."

Gale and Booker stared at him, bewildered. "What are you talking about? Are you two going on a date or something?"

"Exactly," Keaton deadpanned. "We need some alone time."

Gale and Booker rolled their eyes.

"What the hell do two grown men need alone time for?"

"Don't tell me you gave up on women and switched to men."

Keaton flipped them off. "Get out of here."

Laughing, Gale and Booker turned to Callum.

"We are heading out. Keep at it, man. We believe in you. You will definitely win her over this time."

"For sure. Hell, with everything you did, I am almost tempted to marry you."

They were completely oblivious to the fact that Keaton had fallen hopelessly in love with Winona.

Callum laughed along with them, but his eyes darted toward Keaton.

Keaton looked downright miserable. His brows were tightly knit, and he was practically radiating frustration.

Callum waved goodbye to Gale and Booker.

"Drive safe. We will catch up later."

"You got it. Later."

Oncever alone, Callum 4s car and they headed o the passenger seat t

toward the Blissful Pub

The drive was quiet. Keaton pulled out a pack of cigarettes and offered one to

Callum. "Want a smoke?"

Callum shook his head. "I quit."

Keaton looked surprised. "You quit? You used to smoke like a chimney. How did you manage that?"

Callum stated matter-of-factly,

"When Zane's guys locked me up, they did not exactly provide smoke breaks. After

a while, the cravings just stopped."

Keaton went silent.

He lit a cigarette for himself, rolled down the window, and took two deep drags before speaking.

"You really went through hell for Winona."

Callum shook his head.

"It was not hell. I chose to take that

risk

Sr. Getting caught was

my

own bad luck, and escaping was was a miracle. None of it was her fault.

Keaton flicked his ash out the window, offering no response.

Callum studied him for a moment. "Are you seeing anyone right now?" "No," Keaton muttered.

"Why not?" Callum asked. "That is not like you at all. Have you not found anyone you like?"

Keaton hesitated before speaking. "It is not that. I just have not confessed yet." Callum's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"Why wait? You have always been a straight shooter. If you want a girl, you make a move."

Keaton's jaw clenched. "She is different."

"Or maybe you just treat her differently," Callum suggested.

Keaton let out a slow exhale.

Callum smiled.

"Falling in love for real is a good thing. We are not getting any younger, It is time to leave the wild days behind and find a girl you actually care about to spend the rest of your life with content

He looked out the window at the passing city lights and made a suggestion.

"Pull over by the bridge. Let's get some fresh air before we hit the bar."

Keaton nodded. "Alright."

Chapter 1766

They parked the car by the curb and stood near the bridge, letting the cold wind hit them.

Callum looked straight at him and asked,

"Keaton, you wanted to be alone with me. Is there something on your mind?"

Keaton frowned, remaining silent for a moment.

Callum continued,

"I'm a lightweight. A few drinks and I'm out cold. If you wait until we start drinking, I probably won't hear a word you say."

"Whatever it is, just say it here. We're buddies. We can talk anywhere."

Keaton pinched the bridge of his nose, taking a long moment before finally meeting Callum's gaze.

"Callum, I truly consider you a friend. I'm genuinely thrilled that you made it back alive."

Callum nodded earnestly.

"I know. I feel the exact same way about you. I view you as a brother. So just spit it out. I'm listening."

Keaton let the cold breeze wash over him. After a long silence, he finally spoke.

"I've fallen in love with Winona."

Callum was stunned into silence.

Keaton frowned deeply and explained,

"I'm sorry. I know you've loved her for years... I didn't even realize when it happened. By the time I noticed, it was too late. I was already in too deep."

"There was nothing between us at first. I don't even know how it escalated to this point. I just..."

"I'll be honest with you. When I heard Tarquin say you were alive, I was thrilled. But then my mind went straight to Winona, and I felt a suffocating wave of guilt."

"I feel terrible for doing this to you. I knew how much you cared about her, and yet I ended up falling for her the moment you were gone."

"I actually considered stepping aside today. But the mere thought of giving her up felt like my chest was being ripped open!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't do it. I'm no saint, and I'm not capable of sacrificing my own happiness just to play the hero."

"I kept you here tonight because I needed to come clean."

"And to tell you that I plan to compete with you, fair and square."

"I know

incredibly slim, but I have to try

met

don't want to live with this regret for the rest of my life." "content

"Is the baby she's carrying... yours?" Callum asked quietly.

Keaton shook his head. "No."

"And you don't mind?"

Keaton didn't hesitate.

"Not at all love her. I love everything about her, and that

s her baby. If she'll have

vice that child as my o flesh

and blood

"You really fell hard for her, didn't you," Callum murmured.

Keaton flared his nostrils, taking a deep breath.

"Believe it or not, I love her more than I love myself."

He took another steadying breath and looked Callum dead in the eye.

"If you're pissed, hit me. Take your best shot. I promise I won't fight back, just leave me breathing."

"But once you're done, the gloves are off. We compete fairly."

"And if I don't punch you?" Callum asked. "Does that mean the competition is off?" Keaton shook his head violently.

"No! Letting you hit me is just to let you vent! No matter what happens, I am not giving up on Winona!"

Ever since he received the news of

Callum's

agonizing

return today, he had been

over how to navigatet

impossible situation.

this

Since stepping aside was impossible, honesty was the only way forward. He had to

be transparent and fight for her openly!

Whether he could actually win her heart was a different story, but he had to try!

He needed to seize this chance so he wouldn't spend the rest of his life drowning in regret.

Hearing this, Callum let out a sudden burst of laughter and clapped Keaton on the shoulder.

Chapter 1767

"I'm rooting for you, man!"

Keaton froze, utterly bewildered. "What?"

Callum smiled broadly.

"The second I saw you today, I knew you'd changed. You've become so mature and grounded."

"You used to be such a careless playboy, never taking anything seriously. Now you look like a proper gentleman, a real decent family man."

"I was wondering who had the power to reform you like this. It makes perfect sense that it's Winona!"

"She always was incredible, an absolute goddess."

Keaton was entirely lost. "Did you hear a word I just said?"

Callum nodded with a grin.

"Loud and clear. You're head over heels for Winona."

Keaton looked at him suspiciously. "And you aren't mad? You aren't jealous?"

Callum shook his head and let out a long exhale.

"In the past? Sure, I would've been furious. I probably would've beaten you to a pulp. But now... not anymore."

"Why not?" Keaton pressed instantly.

"Because I'm not in love with her anymore," Callum said, staring out at the horizon.

Keaton was shocked. "You're not?"

Callum nodded. "I gave my heart to someone else. I fell in love with another girl."

"Who?"

Callum's expression softened.

"An ordinary girl from abroad. You guys haven't met her, but I owe my life to her." "When I escaped that fire, the people who took me were still hunting me down. I was severely injured and wouldn't have made it, but she found me."

"Her family didn't have much money, but she gave everything she had to nurse me back to health. I was incredibly moved, and spending so much time together, the feelings just naturally grew."

"As soon as my memory came back, I proposed to her. We're officially married now."

Keaton's eyes went wide. "Are... are you serious?"

Callum pulled out his phone and swiped through his gallery to show him.

"Look. Here she is. These are our wedding photos, our marriage certificate, and our home overseas."

"She was supposed to fly back with me this time, but her mother felt it, so she had to stay behind. I'll bring her back to meet you all when get chance.

the

Keaton was utterly speechless.

The shock was so profound he temporarily forgot to celebrate. Callum laughed.

"If you don't end up with Winona now, it'd be a crime against nature. Even the universe is clearing the path for you! If Földn't already have a wife, I'd definitely be fighting you tooth and nail for her."

Keaton's breathing hitched. "You... you aren't messing with me?"

Callum raised an eyebrow.

"Do I look like I'm joking? If I still had feelings for Winona, my fist would have

connected with your jaw the second you opened your mouth!"

Keaton stood there in a daze for a moment before a sudden, foolish grin broke across his face. He started laughing uncontrollably.

Callum laughed right along with him.

"But let me warn you, there's a long line of guys who are interested in Winona. If you love her this much, you better do confess before someone else beats you to it

Keaton nodded, bursting with excitement.

"I know! That was my plan all along. As soon as we finished talking, I was heading straight to her place!"

When Callum suddenly returned, Keaton had felt a massive wave of urgency.

He couldn't afford to wait anymore!

He had to lay all his cards on the table with Winona. As for whatever happened after... he'd face it when it came!

Keaton pulled Callum into a fierce, bone-crushing hug.

"We were destined to be friends. We'll never have a reason to fall out! You're the best buddy a guy could ask for!"

With that, he let go, sprinted back to his car, and barked at the driver to step on it, speeding away!

Callum watched the fading taillights, a warm smile lingering on his face.

But a second later, his smile dropped completely.

"Damn it! So much for being the best of friends. He really just left me stranded out here?!"

Chapter 1768

By the time Keaton pulled up to the Newsom family estate, it was already ten at night.

The main villa was completely dark, save for a few pathway lights glowing in the courtyard.

Were they asleep this early? Keaton wondered.

Unable to wait until morning to confess his feelings, he sent Winona a quick text.

[Are you asleep?]

When she didn't reply, he sat in his car, staring up at her dark bedroom window, agonizing over every passing minute.

After half an hour of radio silence, she still hadn't texted back.

Keaton finally gave in and dialed her number.

The line rang endlessly, but no one picked up.

Was she really sleeping that soundly? he thought, puzzled.

A sudden knock on his window made him jump.

Seeing a figure standing outside the car, he rolled down the window.

The man outside greeted him politely.

"Good evening, Mr. Huber. I'm part of the security team for the Newsom family. We've met before."

Keaton responded courteously. "Hey, is everything alright?"

"I recognized your car and figured I'd come check," the guard said. "Are you looking for Ms. Newsom?"

"Yeah. Is she already asleep?"

"No, sir. She left earlier. She isn't home."

Keaton was surprised. "When did she leave? What's she doing out this late?"

"Mr. Newsom left this afternoon for a business trip out of town," the guard explained. "Caroline and Winona left about an hour ago. I don't have the details on their plans."

Keaton mentally calculated the timeline. An hour ago meant Winona had practically just gotten home before leaving again.

What could possibly require both mother and daughter to head out together in the middle of the night?

"Do you know when they'll be back?" Keaton asked.

The guard shook his head.

"They didn't say, but they definitely won't be back tonight. You shouldn't wait up out

here. The nights are getting colder, and you might catch a chill."

"They really aren't coming back tonight?" Keaton pressed.

The guard nodded. "Yes, sir."

Still feeling uneasy, Keaton thought for a moment, then reached into his console, pulled out a fresh carton of Sovereign Imperials cigarettes, and handed it through the window.

"Thanks for the heads-up. I'll head out now."

The guard was profoundly flattered. Ridley Newsom himself spent thousands of dollars on his smokes, let alone someone of Keaton's immense status!

The value of this single carton was astronomical.

Besides, it wasn't every day you got your hands on a luxury item from a billionaire.

Men like Tarquin Bradford and Keaton Huber operated in a different stratosphere. Forget them offering a gift just having them accept a light from you was enough to boast about for years!

The guard waved his hands nervously.

"Mr. Huber, you're too kind. I just wanted to let you know. I can't accept something this expensive, I..."

Keaton interrupted him smoothly.

"Take it. Share it with the rest of the guys. With the family away, we appreciate you all keeping a close eye on the place."

Caught between awe and the fear of offending him, the guard waged a brief internal war before finally accepting the carton.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Huber."

Keaton offered a polite, completely unpretentious smile, put the car in drive, and pulled away.

Once he was gone, the other guards swarmed over.

"Holy hell, Sovereign Imperials! Mr. Huber is seriously generous!"

"And people claim he's

unapproachable. Not only did he talk

to us bu

he was incred

polite

He's way better than those arrogant

trust fund brats who look down on

everyone!"

"Exactly. Whatever his reputation with women might be, the guy has absolute class and manners!"

While the guards showered him with praise, Keaton was driving with a heavy mind. After leaving the estate, he tried calling Winona again, but it still went unanswered.

Just as his anxiety began to spike, his phone buzzed with a message from Shane Gould.

[Did you need Winona for something?]

Keaton quickly typed back.

[Do you know where she went? She's not home and isn't answering her phone or texts.]

Chapter 1769

Shane replied, [She and Caroline stepped out of the car to run an errand. She left her phone in the backseat.]

[You guys are together?] Keaton texted back instantly.

Shane: [Yeah. Linda and I are in the car right now while they handle something outside.]

Keaton: [Is it a good time to call?]

Shane bypassed the text and dialed him directly.

"Is it an emergency? If you need her right now, I can step out and go find her."

"No, it's not urgent," Keaton said. "Where are you all heading at this hour?"

"Back to my hometown," Shane replied.

"In the middle of the night?" Keaton asked, bewildered.

Shane hummed in confirmation.

"We just got a call. Some relatives back there are threatening to mess with my mom's grave. We're driving overnight because we couldn't risk waiting until morning."

Keaton went quiet.

So that was why the whole family had mobilized in the dark. It involved Winona's late aunt.

What horrible timing. The moment he was finally ready to lay his heart on the line, a family crisis erupted.

"She's back," Shane suddenly said. "I'll hand the phone over."

Keaton heard Winona's voice in the background. "Who is it?"

"It's Keaton. He's called you a bunch of times. Said he needed to talk to you," Shane replied.

Taking the receiver, Winona said, "Give me a second, I'll call you right back."

True to her word, Keaton's phone rang shortly after they hung up.

He answered immediately. "Hey."

"My phone was left in the car, so I didn't see your messages," Winona explained. "What's going on?"

Keaton's lips parted, but he hesitated. This was hardly the right setting for a romantic confession!

He let out a silent sigh of defeat.

"Just a few things, but it's nothing that can't wait. Is everything okay with Aunt Jade's situation? Do you need my help?"

"Not for now," Winona said. "I'll let you know if we do."

"Alright. What exactly is going on over there? Shane mentioned his relatives were threatening to tamper with the grave."

Winona sighed heavily.

"Mr. Gould's family is always looking for a reason to cause drama. They've been trying to mess with her burial site for a while."

"Since Shane is back in Zhinora, my mom figured we might as well just relocate the headstone and her remains to the Gresham family

cemetery. It put her rig

Vel

next to

my grandparents, and if make it

easier for us to visit with floral tributes anyway."

Her in-laws never valued her, but her own family certainly did.

"What happens when Mr. Gould passes?" Keaton asked. "Won't they be buried together?"

Winona let out another quiet, bitter breath.

"He remarried a long time ago. They won't be sharing a plot."

"Listen," Keaton said gently. "You're

pregnant: You can't let this stress et

you out

you

alt call me

into any tr

mediately.

it."

"I will. Thanks, Keaton."

"How long do you think you'll be gone? When are you coming back?" Winona exhaled wearily.

"I honestly don't know. Knowing how impossible Mr. Gould's relatives are, this won't be sorted in a couple of days. Factoring in the cemetery arrangements and the eulogies, we'll probably be gone for a little over a week."

Keaton was crushed. Over a week. That felt like an eternity!

The thought of not seeing her for that long left him completely anxious.

Winona suddenly spoke up.

"I have to let you go. They're waiting for me, and we need to get back on the road. We'll talk when things settle down."

Snapping back to reality, Keaton nodded. "Alright, safe travels. Seriously, call me if you need anything."

"Will do!"

After hanging up, a wave of melancholy washed over Keaton. His confession was ruined, and now he had to survive an agonizing separation!

\*Ding-\*

His phone suddenly chimed. It was a new text from Shane.

[Are you in love with Winona?]

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Keaton hesitated for only a second before typing back: [Yes! I am!]

Shane: [Is this just a passing phase?]

Keaton decided on absolute honesty: [I don't know what the future holds, but I know how deeply I feel for her right now.]

Shane: [Winona has already been through enough heartbreak. If you're just looking for a fling, do us all a favor and stay away from her!]

Keaton frowned, silent for a few seconds before he responded.

[I am betting my life on these feelings. If this is just a phase, and I ever do her wrong, I will end myself.]

[Screenshot this and keep it as evidence. If that day ever comes, you can throw these exact words in my face.]

A few minutes passed before Shane finally replied.

[If you're truly serious about her, then I support you. Good luck! Let me know if you need an inside man.]

Staring at the screen, Keaton couldn't suppress the wide grin spreading across his face.

It was the oldest trick in the book: if you want to win a guy over, start by taking care of the girl he loves.

Ever since he discovered Shane was Winona's cousin, he had been trying to get on his good side.

Thanks to their rocky start, Shane had wanted nothing to do with him.

But the second Keaton pulled some strings to fly Linda out from Europe, reuniting

the young couple, the kid's attitude had pulled a complete one-eighty!

Keaton quickly typed back. "Thanks for the support, Shane."

In the car, Shane stared at his screen in disbelief.

The sheer audacity of this guy! He wasn't even dating Winona yet!

Catching the bizarre look on his face, Linda nudged him. "What's wrong?"

Winona and Caroline turned to look at him as well, their eyes full of concern. Shane cleared his throat awkwardly. "Nothing."

Assuming he was stressed about the situation with his mother's resting place, Caroline offered a comforting look.

"Don't you worry about a thing. You've got me here. I won't let the Gould family lay a finger on you."

Shane offered a faint smile. "I know."

Having grown up in the UK, Shane felt entirely disconnected from his extended relatives back in Zhinora.

Caroline, on the other hand, had endured decades of dealing with them!

To put it mildly, the Gould family members were absolute nightmares!

Shane's mother was Jade Gresham. After she passed away, Mr. Gould had packed up and moved Shane to the UK.

The Gould relatives had immediately

swooped in, forcefully occupying the family's old ancestral estate and

claiming all the antique furnishings for themselves.

Over the years, they had set their greedy sights on a city apartment that still belonged to Jade's estate.

They had issued a vile ultimatum: hand over the deed to the apartment, or they would desecrate Jade's grave!

They threatened to dig up her remains and scatter them to the wind!

Mr. Gould had remarried long ago and barely spared a thought for Jade anymore,

so the threat to her grave didn't phase him in the slightest.

But it completely enraged Caroline!

She and Jade had been incredibly close, and there was no way in hell she was going to let her sister's resting place be violated!

In Zhinora, the tradition of laying loved ones to rest with respect was paramount, prioritizing peace in the afterlife above all.

Disturbing a grave was a profound insult, ensuring the deceased could never truly rest, and anyone who cared for them would fiercely oppose it!

In reality, the apartment in the city wasn't even a luxury property, totaling no more than a few hundred thousand dollars in value.

That was pocket change for someone like Shane or the Newsom family.

But it was the principle of the matter—it was Jade's legacy!

The Gould relatives had zero legal claim to it, yet they were acting. incredibly entitled and using the most sickening threats imaginable to extort it. It was infuriating!

Caroline refused to swallow the insult, so she adamantly denied them a dime!

When Jade was alive, those exact relatives had treated her terribly. Why should they get a cut of her estate now that she was gone?

Besides, human greed knew no bounds.

If she caved to their demands this time, what would stop them from holding the grave hostage for something else next year?

The stress of the situation had been keeping Caroline up at night, until she finally landed on the perfect solution: relocation.

By moving Jade's remains directly into the private, heavily guarded Gresham family cemetery, she would end the war with the Goulds once and for all