

Hitched 1771

Chapter 1771

Relocating a grave was a massive undertaking, and since the plot was located inside the Gould Family Cemetery, it wasn't Caroline's place to step forward.

Mr. Gould refused to get involved, leaving the responsibility squarely on Shane's shoulders.

As Jade Gresham's biological son, Shane had every right to move her grave, and no one else had any grounds to object.

But knowing the utter lack of morals among the Gould family relatives, this was never going to be easy.

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The next day, the sun was already high in the sky by the time they reached their destination.

Shane's hometown was a rural farming community just outside Haverbrook City. It was entirely flat plains, dominated by endless stretches of vibrant green wheat fields.

The wheat was still short this time of year, leaving the scattered headstones across the fields clearly visible.

There were no large-scale municipal cemeteries out here; people were simply laid to rest on their own agricultural land.

Even with the recent shifts toward cremation, the urns were still placed inside caskets and buried traditionally beneath the soil.

The Gould Family Cemetery sat at the far edge of a field, meaning anyone trying to reach it had to cross straight through the crops.

Unfortunately, that specific wheat field belonged to Shane's paternal cousin.

Pulling their cars over on the shoulder of the dirt road, they could immediately see several figures in the distance, violently digging into the cemetery dirt with shovels. Caroline's heart leaped into her throat. "Are those animals already digging her up?!" They had received word late last night that the Gould relatives planned to excavate Jade's grave today, even threatening to throw her remains to the feral dogs.

That was exactly why they had driven through the night to get here!

Frowning deeply, the group piled out of their vehicles and marched toward the cemetery.

The moment they reached the edge of the field, a middle-aged woman in drab clothes stomped over with a shovel, shouting at the top of her lungs.

"What do you think you're doing? I'm warning you, don't step foot on my property!"

The woman screaming at them was Penny Gould, the wife of Shane's cousin.

She might have looked like a simple, hardworking farmer on the outside, but she was rotten to the core.

Threatening to dig up the grave had been entirely her idea. The holidays were approaching, and she wanted to extort a valuable city property from them so she could use it to find a wife for her son.

Caroline had dealt with this woman before. She glared at her.

"Have you lost your minds? Desecrating a grave is a felony!"

Penny scoffed, her face twisting with contempt.

"We aren't touching a stranger's grave! This is our family cemetery, and we can do whatever the hell we want with it. What business is it of yours? Your last name isn't Gould!

Shane stepped forward.

"My last name is Gould! If you touch my mother's grave, I'll see every single one of you in prison!"

Penny furrowed her brow and looked him up and down. "Who the hell are you?"

"Shane Gould. Jade Gresham's son."

Penny froze. Her face darkened, and she turned around, screaming toward the cemetery.

"Get over here!"

A mob of men holding shovels

stopped their digging and marched

over. Two of them were older,

around their fifties, while the other to

three were in their thirties.

Penny pointed a dirty finger at the group.

"They brought Jade's kid back."

One of the older men-Shane's paternal cousin-eyed him with clear distaste.

"I'm your older cousin. You're a

grown man, don't you know how to greet your family? I guess spending all that time overseas made you forget where you came from

Another man chimed in.

"He doesn't just eat Western food, he sleeps with foreign women too. He's a traitor,

a complete sellout! Pathetic!"

Winona's temper flared instantly.

"Are any of you Goulds actually capable of acting like civilized human beings? Send someone who can speak like a normal person, or we're done talking!"

The man who had just spoken turned purple with rage.

"You little bitch! Did you just insult us? I'll cave your skull in with this shovel!"

Shane immediately stepped in front of Winona, his expression turning cold.

"I didn't come back to argue with you people. I came to relocate my mother's grave!

I'll be the one moving her, so you can drop the shovels."

The mob of relatives froze, caught completely off guard.

They hadn't expected this play at all. If he moved the grave, what leverage would they have left to extort the city property from him?!

Chapter 1772

Penny's face was a mask of furious indignation.

"You can move the grave, but only after you sign that city apartment over to us!"

The rest of the mob eagerly backed her up. "Yeah! Hand over the deed, or she stays in the ground!"

Caroline glared at them, barely containing her disgust.

"On what grounds? Shane is moving his own mother's grave. What does that have to do with you?!"

Penny put her hands on her hips, looking every bit the unhinged lunatic she was.

"It has to do with us because we say it does! Save your breath. Today, you either hand over that property, or we dig Jade up and throw her bones to the mutts!"

Caroline gritted her teeth. "Don't you dare!"

Penny shrieked at the top of her lungs.

"Try us! I'm telling you right now, if we don't get that house, we are going to desecrate Jade's grave!"

With that, she turned her venomous gaze onto Caroline, mocking her openly.

"A useless old hen who couldn't even give her husband a son! You should be hiding at home in shame, but instead you have the nerve to stick your nose in our business?!"

"Are you so desperate for a boy that you're pretending Shane is yours? What a joke. His last name is Gould, not Newsom!"

"You..." Caroline gasped, pointing a trembling finger at Penny, completely overwhelmed by the sheer audacity.

Penny slapped Caroline's hand away and roughly shoved her shoulder.

"Stupid bitch! Your husband is going to dump you eventually for not giving him an heir!"

The forceful shove sent Caroline stumbling backward, nearly knocking her to the dirt.

Winona saw red. She shoved Penny back hard. "You evil hag! Touch my mother again and see what happens!"

Penny blinked in shock for a second before rolling up her sleeves and lunging at Winona.

"You little slut! You dare put your hands on me? I'll beat you to death!"

Seeing Penny charge like a raging bull, Shane quickly pulled Winona behind him and grabbed the woman's wrist in a vise grip.

"If you throw a punch, I'm calling the cops!"

Acting like a rabid dog, Penny leaned down and sank her teeth right into Shane's hand!

She clamped down so viciously that she immediately broke the skin, drawing blood.

Shane let out a shout of pain and violently yanked his hand away, throwing Penny off him.

Seeing this, Shane's paternal cousin and the rest of the mob cursed loudly, raising their shovels like weapons as they charged.

"Son of a bitch! You think you can throw hands on our turf? Kill these bastards!"

The Newsom family's driver and bodyguards instantly leaped into action, stepping to the front lines in a matter of seconds, they disarmed the farmers, snatching the shovels away and delivering a brutal beatdown to the aggressive mob.

Realizing they were completely outmatched, Penny threw herself onto the dirt path and began to wail at the top of her lungs.

"Help! Assault The rich elites are beating up innocent, working-class people! I can't live like this! Is there no justice in the world? Assaulting people in broad daylight! Us poor folk suffer so much! Oh, the O humanity!"

Within minutes, a crowd of curious neighbors and villagers had gathered around them, whispering and gossiping about the spectacle.

Winona couldn't believe the Gould relatives were acting like such unhinged thugs. Without a second thought, she pulled out her phone and dialed 911.

The police arrived shortly after. Before Winona or anyone else could explain the situation, Penny decided to play the victim.

"Officers, you have to help us working-class folks! They're bullying us!"

"When my sister-in-law was still alive, she wanted to buy a house but didn't have the cash, so she borrowed a huge amount of money from me! Now that she's dead, her son is refusing to pay us back!"

"Do you know how hard it is for people like us to scrape by? We asked them to repay the debt, and they refused! We asked them to give us the house to settle it, and they refused that too!"

"My oldest boy is of marriage age! How is he supposed to find a good wife with no money and no property?!"

"Officers, you have to get justice for us! Oh, God!"

Winona rolled her eyes so hard they nearly stuck in the back of her head. She didn't hesitate to interject.

"You and your husband have five kids. You raised four boys and a girl purely by farming this land. You can barely keep yourselves fed. So tell me, where exactly did you get this massive fortune to lend to my Aunt Jade?"

Penny shrieked defensively.

"None of your damn business where we got the cash! We lent it to her, end of story!"

Winona held her hands out. "Show me the IOU. If you have the paperwork, I'll pay you back every single cent right now."

One of the officers looked at Penny. "Do you have a signed contract or an IOU?" Penny's face turned ugly.

"My husband and I are illiterate! We

don't even know how to write our own names; how were we supposed to draft a contract? Besides we

In

were family! Who writes up a legal

document to lend money to their own flesh and blood?"

Chapter 1773

The officer shook his head. "Without proof of a loan, your claims hold no legal weight."

Hearing that, Penny immediately threw herself back into the dirt and started wailing hysterically again.

The police officers rubbed their temples, clearly exhausted by the drama. Seeing that Winona's group was significantly more rational, they pulled her aside to get the real story.

After getting a clear picture of what was going on, the lead officer frowned and addressed Penny.

"Crying isn't going to fix this. Just because you have less money or scream the loudest doesn't make you right."

"The law requires evidence. If you can't provide any, you can't prove anyone owes you a dime!"

"And let me remind all of you-whether that grave is in the middle of a farm or in your family cemetery, if you dare dig it up without authorization, you are committing a felony!"

Shane's paternal cousin bristled, shouting defensively.

"His whole family moved overseas years ago! That city apartment is just sitting there empty! It's a total waste! What's the problem with letting us live in it?!"

"That little bastard Shane still has Gould blood running through his veins! We're all family! Why shouldn't we be entitled to his property?!"

"If anything, since they struck it rich, he should have bought us a few houses out of sheer respect, without us even having to ask!"

The rest of the Gould relatives nodded vigorously. "Exactly!"

This time, before Winona could even respond, the officers openly rolled their eyes. This went way beyond a lack of education—it was sheer, unadulterated entitlement. "People are entitled to the money they earn," the officer said firmly. "You didn't raise him, and he has zero obligation to support you."

Seeing that strategy fail, Penny pivoted immediately.

"Fine! But we have total control over our own farmland, don't we? We worked our fingers to the bone planting that wheat, and we aren't letting them trample all over it! They can move the grave if they want, but they are absolutely forbidden from stepping foot on our crops!"

It was a blatantly malicious demand.

The only way to access the cemetery and relocate the grave was to cross through her specific plot of land.

The crops at this time of year were incredibly resilient; even if they were trampled, they would easily bounce back.

Under normal circumstances, this could have been resolved with a small cash payout or a simple gift to smooth things over.

But it was obvious Penny's family was dead set on getting their hands on that million-dollar apartment.

The officers sighed helplessly, turning back to Winona and Shane.

"This crosses into a civil dispute. We can't intervene. It is technically their land, so you'll have to negotiate an agreement privately."

Winona frowned. There was clearly no negotiating with these lunatics.

Unless they completely caved and handed over the deed to the apartment!

Forget about her mother-even she couldn't swallow that kind of

absolute injustice. Why the hell ne

should these greedy bastards get anything?!

But if they didn't cave, they wouldn't be able to move the grave. And leaving Jade out here meant these psycho relatives would inevitably try to vandalize it the second they looked away!

Small-town folk had a reputation for being kind and simple-hearted, but not everyone fit the stereotype!

Some were just vicious, bitter, and entirely unreasonable!

Caroline turned to the officers in desperation.

"Officers, surely you can see this is just extortion! They are being completely unreasonable purely to steal my sister's property!"

The officer sighed. "I understand, ma'am, but they legally own the farming rights to that field. Our hands are tied."

Seeing they had Caroline backed into a corner, Penny's group smirked and scoffed.

"If you want to walk through our

field, you'd better show us some real

sincerity! Otherwise, just leave the grave where it is. Don't worry, we

promise we won't touch Jade's resting place!"

But the predatory glint in their eyes screamed something else entirely:

If you don't move her right now, we'll tear it apart the second the sun goes down!

The situation was completely stacked against them. Caroline was suffocating under the stress, hot tears brimming in her eyes.

Winona's mind was racing, trying to find a way out, as she glared daggers at the wicked woman.

Penny glared right back, practically foaming at the mouth.

"What the hell are you looking at? You want a piece of me?! You little slut! Keep staring and I'll gouge your damn eyes out!"

"You..." Winona was about to fire back when someone gently pulled her by the arm.

Keaton Huber's voice suddenly resonated from right behind her.

"The word 'psycho' has truly never been more perfectly embodied than by this hideous old woman."

Chapter 1774

Winona gasped, whipping around in shock.

Keaton was standing right there, looking effortlessly sharp in a dark tailored suit and a sleek pair of sunglasses.

"What are you doing here?!" she blurted out, absolutely stunned.

He slid his sunglasses off, revealing that undeniably handsome face. Flashing a

brilliant smile, he held up a high-end thermal food carrier.

"I brought you breakfast. I specifically picked it up in Jindale City. It's all your favorites, and still piping hot."

Winona stared at him, entirely lost for words.

"...You drove hundreds of miles just to bring me breakfast?"

Keaton chuckled softly.

"Of course not. I was worried you wouldn't be used to the local food out here, so I brought the executive chef from Jinpeach Restaurant, along with all the ingredients for the dishes you love."

Winona was speechless. Looking up at his striking features, she felt an undeniable pull, her defenses crumbling just a fraction.

She was genuinely touched by the gesture.

Suddenly, Keaton handed her a plush, pristine white hand warmer.

"Here, keep your hands warm. I made sure to get a white one, so it's appropriate for visiting a cemetery."

It was the dead of winter, and Haverbrook City had recently been hit by a severe cold front. The rivers were frozen solid, and every breath materialized as a white plume in the freezing air.

It was brutally cold.

Winona had checked the weather before leaving Jindale City and deliberately worn a heavy coat, but her hands were still practically numb.

Keaton gently took her freezing hands and tucked them inside the plush warmer. A wave of comforting heat instantly washed over her skin.

He looked at her with a smug, playful expression.

"Toasty, right? I've been keeping it warm for you the whole drive. This thing works miracles."

Winona remained silent. The heat traveled from her fingertips, spreading through her entire body until it seemed to settle right in her chest.

The gesture felt incredibly sweet, melting away the icy stress that had been gripping her heart.

Before she could even say thank you, Keaton turned away to greet Caroline, Shane, and Linda.

They were all completely stunned to see him there.

Caroline wiped her tears, her voice raspy.

"Keaton, how did you know we were here?"

"I was on the phone with Winona and Shane last night," Keaton replied smoothly.

Caroline blinked. "Did you drive all the way from Jindale City just for this?"

"Yeah, I heard you were running into some trouble, and I wanted to make sure things went smoothly. I also wanted to pay my respects to Aunt Jade."

Caroline was overwhelmed by his thoughtfulness.

Keaton continued.

"It's freezing out here. Why don't you all head back to the cars and eat Warm yourselves up. I'll handle things on this end, and once everything is settled, you can come back out to pick her up."

Caroline looked at him anxiously. "Handle things? Do you even know what's going on?"

"I'm fully aware."

"And... you think you can fix this?"

Keaton smiled reassuringly. "Absolutely. Just leave it to me."

Winona glanced over his shoulder, Several black SUVs were parked along the shoulder of the dirt road flanked by a formidable line of men in matching dark suits.

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Her instincts immediately flared. "The cops are literally right there, Keaton. You can't start a riot."

Penny and her mob had already spotted the imposing backup, and their arrogant bravado had noticeably deflated.

Still, knowing the police were standing nearby, she swallowed her fear and stubbornly barked back.

"I don't care who you are, we aren't scared of you!"

"I'm warning you, the government is cracking down on organized crime! One wrong

move and the cops will throw all of you in a cell to rot!"

Keaton didn't even acknowledge the woman's existence. He kept his eyes on Winona and explained casually.

"Moving a grave requires a lot of manpower. They're just here to help with the heavy lifting. Besides, if I wanted to resort to violence with need an

army You don't use a sledgehammer to crack a nut."

these people, would el

Winona frowned, clearly confused. "Then what are you planning? They are completely unhinged!"

Penny began to shriek again. "You're the unhinged one—"

Keaton simply shot the woman a single, predatory glare, and she snapped her mouth shut in sheer terror.

A second later, she resorted to her default tactic, throwing herself back onto the ground and throwing a massive tantrum.

"Oh, Lord! Look at this injustice! These rich elites are using their money and power to bully us working folks! Oh, God, help us!"

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Keaton didn't spare her a single glance. He simply turned to Winona.

"You already know they are completely unreasonable, so stop trying to reason with them. If you want to handle a mob of lunatics, you have to stoop to their level."

"I called in a few specialists to handle this, but they won't be here for a bit. Take Caroline back to the car and get some food."

"Don't worry. As long as the cops are standing right there, they wouldn't dare lay a finger on Aunt Jade's grave."

Overhearing this, Penny thrashed wildly on the ground, screeching like a banshee.

"Even if God himself came down from the heavens, you wouldn't get past me! The only way you're crossing this field is over my dead body!"

"The police and the whole village are watching! Let's see who has the guts to lay a hand on me!"

"Push me any further, and I won't even care about the house anymore! I'll risk my life to drag all of you down to hell with me!"

"I have nothing to lose, and you wealthy snobs have everything! I'm not afraid of you!"

"I've been tough as nails my whole life! Ask anyone in a ten-mile radius-nobody messes with Penny Gould!"

"And a useless bitch who can't even produce a male heir thinks she can take me on?!"

"If you don't start negotiating properly, I swear on my life I won't let Jade rest in peace, and I will make all of your lives an absolute living nightmare!"

Caroline clutched her chest, utterly disgusted by the vile display. "Look at this. She's just a deranged lunatic!"

Keaton gently supported Caroline by the arm.

"Don't let her get to you, Caroline. Let's head back to the car. She'll get what's coming to her soon enough. Just let her scream until her throat goes raw."

Caroline wept softly as she walked.

"Jade must have been cursed to end up with such a vile, heartless sister-in-law!"

"Do you really think I care about the money, Keaton? That apartment isn't even worth that much in the grand scheme of things. If they were actually decent people, what would it matter if we gave it to them?"

"The point is, they treated Winona's aunt like absolute garbage when she was alive!"

"It makes me sick! I just can't stand seeing them get away with this!"

Keaton offered her a comforting smile.

"Stress is bad for your health. It's not worth making yourself sick over a bunch of lowlifes. Take a deep breath. We'll be the ones laughing in the end."

Caroline sobbed, shaking her head.

"I thought since I'm just an outsider, it wouldn't be my place to step in and Shane could handle it since he's no idea they could be this shameless!"

her biological son had ce he's

Shane's eyes were bloodshot. "It's my fault. I'm completely useless."

"Don't blame yourself," Keaton said firmly. "Blame them for being greedy psychopaths. Honestly, your father should have been the one dealing with this mess."

Shane remained silent, staring at the ground. Winona chimed in.

"Mr. Gould remarried years ago. Whatever feelings he had for my Plus,

aunt have long since faving.

he's spent so much time abroad that the concept of relocating a grave doesn't mean much to him anymore. He couldn't be bothered to fly back and handle

it."

"The title for that city apartment is currently under Shane's name, so Mr. Gould just told him to deal with it himself."

"Shane is exactly like my mom. He refuses to give an inch to those vultures."

"He's absolutely right," Keaton declared. "You never negotiate with terrorists."

Once they were safely inside the spacious luxury SUV, Caroline continued to cry.

"That deranged woman is

impossible to deal with! She refuses

to listen to reason, and the second

things don't go her way she throws herself on the ground and plays the victim!"

"Karma has a way of catching up to people like that," Keaton said easily. "We just need to sit back and watch the show."

"Caroline, it's time for breakfast. Let's get some food in you."

"Moving a grave is a massive operation. Odds are we won't have time for a proper meal until this afternoon, so we need to fuel up while we have the chance."

As he spoke, he unpacked the lavish meal he had brought, arranging the gourmet dishes on the SUV's pop-up dining table.

The group stared at the food, completely lacking an appetite. The stress had tied their stomachs in knots.

Keaton leaned forward, taking on the role of the exceptionally caring and supportive son-in-law to comfort Caroline.

"Let me handle Aunt Jade's situation. I promise you, I will make sure she is relocated smoothly and with the utmost respect."

"Winona is pregnant, and the baby needs nutrients. If you don't eat, Winona won't

eat, and if she doesn't eat, the baby starves."

Caroline was completely checkmated by his logic, left staring at him in stunned silence.

Chapter 1776

Keaton turned his attention back to Shane. "Don't let it get to you. I've got this handled. Just stay here and get something to eat with Winona and Linda. Listen to me."

They all took a moment to compose themselves. Mindful of Winona's pregnancy, they picked up their silverware and started to eat.

Keaton slid a warm slice of quiche onto Winona's plate. "Your favorite. Careful, it's still hot."

Winona glanced at him, then quickly lowered her head. A lump formed in her throat.

The situation with Aunt Jade's grave was an absolute mess. Dealing with an unreasonable nightmare like Penny Gould felt impossible-she wouldn't listen to reason, and they couldn't exactly resort to violence. It was incredibly frustrating. Caroline was completely out of options. Shane was still just a college student who hadn't experienced the harsh realities of the real world, leaving him powerless against someone so vindictive. And Winona? She didn't know if the pregnancy brain was getting to her, but she couldn't come up with a single viable solution. All she could do was sit there, furious and anxious.

Keaton's presence brought her a profound sense of comfort. It was as if she had finally found a pillar of support, someone she could truly rely on.

They had barely finished eating when a sudden commotion erupted outside the car.

Caroline quickly looked out the window, her brow furrowing. "Isn't that Penny's father, Mr. Phelps? Did she actually call for backup?"

Seeing an older man leading a large crowd toward the property line, they all scrambled out of the car, terrified that the mob was going to forcefully desecrate the grave.

"Don't panic," Keaton said calmly. "I'm the one who called them here."

The group stopped in their tracks and stared at him in disbelief. "You called them?"

"Yeah."

Caroline was bewildered. "Why on earth would you invite Penny's relatives here?" Before Keaton could answer, Penny, who was sprawled out on the lawn, started wailing at the top of her lungs. "Dad! Uncles! Cousins! You finally made it! These people are trying to kill me! They think just because they have money, they can treat me like dirt. You have to stand up for me!"

Even the police officer on duty assumed the crowd was Penny's backup. Fearing a riot, he was about to step in and de-escalate the situation when Mr. Phelps let out a thunderous roar.

"You absolute disgrace of a daughter! You're going to ruin us all!"

Everyone froze in stunned silence.

Mr. Phelps's face was purple with rage. "Before the sun even came up today, your brother got a call from the mayor's office. He was chewed out by his superiors! They told him that if he can't even keep his own family in line he has no business serving the public! I was wondering what we could have possibly done wrong, and it turns out it was you causing trouble all along!"

Penny's older brother worked for the local government, which had always been her trump card was the main reason the locals

Haverbrook City never dared to cross her.

Penny looked outraged. "I never used his name to bully anyone! I didn't even mention him!"

Mr. Phelps was shaking with fury.

"He was hauled in by the Ethics Committee for an investigation this morning! He's about to lose his job, and you're still making excuses!"

Penny gasped, her eyes wide. "He's being investigated? Is... is that true?"

"It's true!" Mr. Phelps bellowed.

The rest of the Phelps family eagerly jumped in to air their grievances.

"It's a disaster! How did our family produce such a toxic burden? You're destroying our lives!"

"I worked my whole life to get a management position! I got promoted yesterday, and demoted before breakfast today!"

"My son has it worse! He's been at his company for twenty years, and today his name magically appeared on the layoff list. He's going to lose his job!"

"The fiance's family showed up at my grandson's house at dawn to call off the wedding! They said our family was cursed and they refused to marry into it!"

"What sin have we committed to deserve this?"

Penny's cousin glared at her with pure hatred. "You're a mother yourself. Don't you care about the karma you're leaving for your own kids?"

Chapter 1777

"Because of you, the town development project bypassed our street completely!" her cousin continued to yell. "They developed four blocks and deliberately skipped ours! The investors explicitly stated you were the reason! Now the entire neighborhood is ready to string us up!"

Winona stood there in absolute shock. She turned to Keaton. "Did you do all of this?"

Keaton nodded. "I told you earlier, bad people always get what's coming to them. If we can't reason with her, her own family certainly can."

"When did you even have time for this?" Winona asked.

"After we got off the phone last night, I had some free time," Keaton explained smoothly. "I looked into the situation and realized Penny was going to be a stubborn obstacle. So, I targeted her maiden family. Every time Caroline came to pay her respects in the past, these people enabled Penny and made things difficult. It was time they faced the consequences and turned on each other. Look at them—the second their own bottom line is threatened, they explode. People only care when it's their own skin on the line."

Just as Keaton finished speaking, Mr. Phelps barked at Penny. "Stop your crying! You have no right to shed tears! Get out of the way and let them move the grave in peace! Have some respect for the dead!"

"Exactly! Move it!" the relatives chimed in.

The Gould family members, who had been backing Penny, tried to protest. "This is Gould family business! What right do you have to interfere?"

The Phelps family, already pushed to their breaking point, didn't waste a single word. They simply lunged forward and started throwing punches. The police officers couldn't even hold them back.

Once the scuffle settled, they tossed Penny aside and marched over to Caroline. "We are so incredibly sorry. This is all our fault for not keeping that nightmare in check. Please don't hold this against us. You have my word-you can walk right over her manicured lawn to move the grave!"

Caroline was taken aback. The sudden reversal gave her emotional whiplash, and she struggled to process it.

Keaton, however, narrowed his eyes. "That doesn't seem right. It is her property, after all. We wouldn't dare step foot on it unless she gives us explicit permission."

Hearing this, the Phelps family immediately turned their wrath back on Penny. "Get over here and say something!"

Penny just lay there, sobbing and refusing to move.

Her father stormed over and shoved her hard. "Get up!"

Penny felt utterly humiliated and bitter. "Dad, do you know how much that city apartment is worth? I..."

"Shut your mouth! It doesn't matter what it's worth, because it doesn't belong to you!"

The other relatives began shouting over each other.

"You're obsessed with stealing someone else's property, but you don't care that you've ruined our lives?"

"Apologize right now! Even if you took this to the supreme court in King City, you'd still be in the wrong!"

"Listen to me, Penny. If you don't fix this today, we will disown you!"

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Penny collapsed onto the grass, tears and snot streaming down her face. You're trying to drive me to an early grave! Oh, God..."

Several other elderly men in their seventies followed suit and lay down on the ground, with Mr. Phelps leading the way.

"If you don't apologize right now, I'll die right here for you to see! You ungrateful wretch!"

"Dad!" Penny screamed.

"Don't call me Dad!" he roared.

The surrounding villagers pointed and whispered, while the rest of the Phelps family

glared at her with thinly veiled disgust.

Unable to withstand the crushing

pressure, Penny forced herself to

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stand up Gritting her teeth, she spat

out bitterly, "Fine. Walk on it.

Before Caroline could respond, Keaton interjected. "I don't think so. Your attitude is quite frankly terrifying."

Mr. Phelps immediately shoved Penny again. "Watch your tone!"

Penny's eyes were bloodshot, but she forced her voice to soften. "Go ahead and move the grave. I won't hold it against you."

Keaton let out a cold laugh. "You might not want to hold it against us, but we certainly have a few things to hold against you." .

Chapter 1778

Penny glared at him. "What more do you want?"

Keaton's expression hardened.

"First, respect for the dead is paramount. You severely disrespected Aunt Jade, and you need to go to her grave and apologize, lest karma catches up with you. Second, you stood there screaming at us like a lunatic. You owe us all an apology, especially Caroline. And third, the old Gould estate legally belongs to Shane. None of you have any right to occupy it. You need to vacate the premises immediately."

Penny's face turned red with fury. Apologize?! Not only did she lose out on the expensive city apartment, but now she had to give up the old estate too?

"I'm already doing you a massive favor by letting you cross my property!" Penny shrieked. "You have no right to make demands! We won't do it!"

"That's fine," Keaton replied smoothly. "But just know that from this day forward, anyone associated with you will never see a good day again."

The moment the words left his mouth, the Phelps family surged forward, shoving and berating Penny. "What do you mean you won't do it?! Are you really trying to destroy us all?"

After a few moments of relentless pressure from her own blood relatives, Penny finally broke. Weeping uncontrollably, she stumbled forward.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried to steal the apartment, and I shouldn't have taken over the estate. I apologize. I'm so sorry, Jade..."

She dragged her feet toward the cemetery, the rest of the battered Gould family limping behind her. As soon as they reached the edge of the grave, they broke down completely, sobbing out their apologies.

"We're sorry, Jade. We were wrong. We shouldn't have disturbed your peace, and we shouldn't have made things so hard for your sister and your son..."

Caroline stood nearby, tears streaming down her face. In that moment, the overwhelming relief of justice was mixed with a profound, aching grief for her late sister.

Keaton gently placed a hand on Caroline's shoulder. "Caroline, the cemetery director said the best time for the exhumation is approaching. How about we leave these people to their misery and focus on moving Aunt Jade?"

Caroline took a deep, shaky breath and grabbed Keaton's hand tightly. "Keaton, I owe you a massive debt."

"Please, don't say that," Keaton replied softly. "I was more than happy to step in."

Caroline was incredibly moved. "If you don't mind... I'd love to treat you like my own son from now on. I will see you as my own flesh and blood. If anyone ever tries to cross you, they'll have to go through me first!"

Without missing a beat, Keaton smiled brightly and said, "Mom!"

Caroline froze.

Winona and Shane stared at him, their jaws practically hitting the floor. He had said it so naturally, without a shred of hesitation!

Keaton looked at Caroline, his smile warm and utterly charming. "From now on, you're exactly like a real mother to me."

Caroline finally snapped out of her daze, a wide smile breaking across her face. "Good, good, good."

"Let's go take care of Aunt Jade," Keaton said. "I've got the crew ready to go. They know exactly what to do, we just need to oversee it."

Caroline nodded enthusiastically. "Yes, let's do that!"

Keaton offered Caroline his arm and escorted her toward the grave, looking every

bit the devoted son. Realizing the others hadn't moved, he glanced back. "Come on, let's go."

Both Winona and Shane knew exactly what game he was playing. Shane shot Winona a knowing look, causing her cheeks to inexplicably flush.

The rest of the process went smoothly. Once the casket was brought up, the priest said a final prayer, and the remains were carefully loaded into a specialized transport vehicle bound for the

Gresham family's private cemetery.

Following Keaton's advice and with his financial backing, the old Gould estate was

designated to be transformed into a public library for the local children.

Before leaving, Keaton handed Penny a crisp thousand-dollar bill to cover the

damages to her lawn. He liked to keep things strictly business.

But he couldn't resist one final parting shot. I honestly pity you. Look at you you raised four sons and combined, they still don't amount to a fraction of the success of one daughter. And yet, you still favor boys over girls. Caroline raised an absolute star, while you raised a pack of failures. What a miserable life."

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Penny let out a choked gasp, clutched her chest, and passed out cold. The paramedics had to cart her away.

The Gresham family estate was a three-hour drive from Haverbrook City. Due to limited seating, Keaton drove his own car.

During the ride, Caroline sighed

wistfully. "That Keaton... he seems

so carefree usually, but when it

comes down to business he's incredibly reliable. He stayed calm, collected, and had everything completely organized."

Shane glanced at Winona and couldn't help but put in a good word for Keaton. "You

can't judge a book by its cover. Keaton is a solid guy all around. I bet he'll make a great dad someday."

Chapter 1779

Winona shot him a glare. Were they on a first-name basis now, acting like best friends?

Caroline glanced at Winona's growing belly. "It's just a shame about his reputation as a playboy. Otherwise, he and Winona would make a lovely couple."

"A prodigal son returning is worth his weight in gold," Shane argued smoothly. "Making mistakes when you're young isn't the end of the world, as long as you learn from them, right, Caroline?"

Caroline nodded in agreement. "If Keaton truly has changed his ways, whoever marries him will be a very lucky woman."

Shane immediately seized the opening. "So, if he were to pursue Winona, would you be okay with it?"

Caroline didn't even hesitate. "Absolutely. As long as he's committed to turning over a new leaf, cuts ties with his past flings, and treats Winona right, he has my full, one-hundred-percent support."

Shane smiled triumphantly. "I support it too. What about you, Winona? Thoughts?" Winona rolled her eyes and refused to entertain the conversation.

A little while later, when Caroline stepped out of the car to use the restroom at a gas station, Winona lunged over and snatched Shane's phone right out of his hands.

The little punk had just sent a voice memo of their entire conversation to Keaton! Winona pursed her lips. "Traitor!"

Shane rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I only sent the last part! I didn't send the bit about the baby. Come on, tell me the truth. Do you like him?"

"Adult matters are none of your business," Winona scolded.

"I'm just trying to make sure my future nephew has a good dad!" Shane protested.

"There are millions of men in the world. You think I can't find him a dad?"

"Finding a dad is easy," Shane countered. "But there's only one biological father. A stepdad will never measure up to the real thing!"

Winona narrowed her eyes. "You're trying awfully hard to sell him to me. Did he pay you off?"

"His money couldn't sway me," Shane said defensively. "I'm saying this because I genuinely think he's a good guy! I really believe he's changed. Why don't you just give him a chance and see how it goes?"

Winona rolled her eyes again and ignored him, turning her gaze out the window as she sank into her own thoughts.

For the next few days, they stayed at the Gresham family estate. After Jade Gresham's remains were properly laid to rest, they held a beautiful memorial service and read the eulogies.

Keaton stayed the entire time, working tirelessly to handle all the arrangements. Whenever someone asked who he was, he introduced himself as Caroline's son. No matter the setting or the audience, he called her "Mom" with total ease.

Caroline was thrilled to have suddenly gained such a devoted son, and she spent the entire week beaming with joy. Winona's grandparents and uncles were equally fond of him.

A week later, Keaton finally had to leave. Before heading out, he pulled Winona aside to say goodbye.

"I have some business to take care of back home, so I have to head out. If you need anything, call me anytime. My phone is on twenty-four seven. Even if it's the middle of the night, don't hesitate."

Winona knew Richard's birthday was coming up, and Keaton had to return to oversee the massive banquet preparations.

"Drive safe," she said softly. "And... thank you for everything you've done this past week."

Keaton shook his head quickly. "Don't mention it. I wanted to be here. Being able to see you every day makes me... it makes me really happy."

A heavy, charged silence fell between them.

Keaton stood there, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. He stared down at Winona, his heart hammering against his ribs. He knew this wasn't the right time or place for a sweeping confession, but the urge to tell her how much he loved her was almost unbearable. Yet, the fear of immediate rejection held him back.

After an agonizing internal debate, he swallowed the words. He scratched the back

of his neck, a helpless smile on his face. "Well, I guess I'll get going."

"Okay. Bye."

Keaton wanted desperately to pull her into a hug, but he didn't dare cross the line. "Take good care of yourself and the baby. Just remember to take it easy, you're pregnant. Don't push yourself."

"I will."

"I'm really leaving now."

"...Bye."

Keaton let out a long breath. Too scared to hug her, too scared to kiss her, but entirely unwilling to just walk away, he did the only thing he could

think of—he awkwardly reached out and gave her a gentle pat on the head.

As soon as his hand left her hair, he turned and practically fled to his car like a thief

in the night, his heart threatening to beat right out of his chest.

Once safely in the backseat, he stared down at his palm, completely intoxicated by the lingering feeling of her hair.

His driver watched him in the rearview mirror, amused by how painful the goodbye seemed to be. "Are we actually leaving, Boss?"

Keaton's face darkened. "Drive!"

The driver chuckled and pulled the car onto the main road.

They had driven a considerable distance down the street when Keaton suddenly rolled down his Window He leaned halfway out of the moving car, cupped his hands around his mouth, and screamed at the top of his lungs.

artalled down his

"Winona! I love you! I love you! I am so crazy about you—!"

Chapter 1780

"Ah!"

Keaton's head slammed violently into a passing street sign!

Groaning in pain, he scrambled back inside the car. Before he could even brace himself, the driver slammed on the brakes in a panic. Keaton flew forward, his forehead cracking against the back of the front seat.

The driver twisted around, eyes wide. "Are you okay, Boss?"

Keaton rubbed the back of his head, then massaged his throbbing forehead. His entire skull felt like it was ringing. It took him a long moment to regain his bearings.

"I'm fine!"

The driver let out a massive sigh of relief, unable to hold back his exasperation. "What were you thinking, Boss? You had all that time face-to-face with Ms. Newsom and didn't say a word. Then we're halfway down the block and you decide to hang out the window and shout it?"

"Good thing I was driving at a snail's pace because I knew you didn't want to leave, otherwise that could have been lethal! If you wanted to yell, you should have told me to stop the car first!"

"Besides, we were so far away. There's no way Ms. Newsom even heard you."

Keaton scowled, rubbing his bruised ego. "You don't think she heard?"

The driver sighed. "Boss, even someone with military-grade hearing wouldn't have caught that from this distance, let alone a pregnant civilian."

Keaton frowned, genuine disappointment washing over him. "Zero chance?"

Seeing how genuinely distressed Keaton looked, the driver rolled down his window to check the breeze. "Well, the wind is blowing in her direction. So, maybe? Boss, do you want me to turn the car around so you can just say it to her face?"

Keaton stared blankly for a long moment before sinking back into the leather seats. "Forget it. Just keep driving."

The driver couldn't help but laugh. "This is the first time I've ever seen you lose your nerve over a woman! You didn't even have the guts to confess to her face!"

Keaton crossed his long legs, leaning against the door defensively. "What does a single guy like you know? It's not about losing my nerve!"

The driver chuckled and eased the car back up to speed. "I know, I know. It's true love. Look, Boss, if you're really worried she didn't hear you, and you're too embarrassed to go back, why don't you just text her?"

Keaton paused. That actually wasn't a bad idea.

He pulled out his phone, his stomach twisting in knots. He typed out a message, deleted it, and retyped it before finally hitting send.

[Have you thought about what we discussed regarding the baby?]

Before Winona even had a chance to reply, his anxiety spiked, and he rapidly fired off several more messages.

[I wasn't acting on impulse when I said that. I've thought about it endlessly.]

[I swear to you, I promise that if you agree, I will never let you or the baby

down will love and raise that child Flesh and

as if it

were

blood.]

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[If I ever break my vow, may I lose everything and suffer for the rest of my life!]

Winona's reply came through almost immediately.

[Don't talk nonsense. Can't you say something positive, like wishing for a lifetime of happiness?]

Keaton grinned like an absolute fool at his screen.

[I just wanted to prove how serious I am.]

[We can get Elysia, Tarquin, your parents, and my parents together to act as

witnesses. If I ever go back on my word, I'll let them all disown me!]

Winona was still trying to piece it all together.

[Why did you suddenly have this idea? We were just together the other day and you never mentioned it. Did something happen?]

Keaton decided to be completely honest.

[There are no secrets in elite circles. The news of your pregnancy couldn't be

contained. It's already spreading among the socialites.]

Winona: [You heard nasty rumors about me and the baby? Is that why you wanted to rush and give the baby a stable family?]

Keaton: [Yes.]

Winona stared at the screen, her heart swelling. She typed back a deeply sincere response: [Thank you.]

She had anticipated the complications. As a single,

high-profile celebrity, a sudden\

pregnancy was bound to attract vicious gossip and public scrutiny.

But never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that a man would step up, completely disregarding the social fallout to shield her and her unborn child from the malicious rumors.

And she certainly never expected that man to be Keaton Huber.

Especially since he was doing all of this without even knowing the child was biologically his.

She wasn't made of stone. How could she not be entirely moved by him?