

Hitched 1791

Chapter 1791

Cormac Murphy's eyes bulged. "Of course it hurts!"

Richard Huber slapped his thigh.

"Good! If it hurts, that means I'm not dreaming! Good lord, I'm actually going to have a grandchild!"

Cormac was speechless.

The rest of the crowd stared in stunned silence.

Janelle, embarrassed by her husband's antics, opened her mouth to scold him, but Winona quickly intervened.

"Richard is just thrilled. Let him have his moment."

Janelle sighed, taking Winona's hand as tears spilled over her lashes.

"Winona, you've been through so much," she choked out. "To think you're already four months along and we had no idea. You and the baby must have felt so alone..."

Winona quickly wiped away the older woman's tears.

"It hasn't been hard at all. Your grandchild has been perfectly well-behaved. I haven't had any morning sickness, and I've been eating and sleeping just fine."

Janelle wept openly.

"You are a godsend to the Huber family! Please, don't stay on your feet. You must be exhausted, come sit down."

Winona smiled warmly. "I'm not tired, Janelle."

"Even so, you shouldn't be standing. Pregnancy takes a toll on the body."

Janelle gently guided Winona toward the sofa, but Keaton suddenly stormed over and grabbed Winona's wrist.

Without a word, he pulled her toward the elevators.

Winona stumbled, caught off guard by his sudden momentum.

Janelle's eyes went wide. She smacked Keaton hard on the arm.

"What on earth are you doing? She's pregnant! Can't you be a little more gentle?!"

Richard rushed over. "What's going on? What happened?"

Knowing Keaton wanted to speak with her in private, Winona offered a reassuring smile.

"It's fine. Keaton and I are just going upstairs to one of the private suites to rest for a bit."

Janelle nodded frantically, turning a stern glare on her son.

"Don't be so rough! Make sure you take good care of her!"

Richard scowled at him. "Gentle! Watch your strength!"

Keaton gave a curt, dismissive nod. "I know!"

With that, he ushered Winona into the elevator.

Left behind, Richard was practically vibrating with nervous energy, entirely unsure of what to do with himself.

He whirled around and barked at the manager of the Jinpeach Restaurant.

"Tell the kitchen immediately! We

have an expectant mother at the et

banquet tonight. They need to be incredibly careful with the food preparation! Maximum caution!"

"Remove anything from the menu that's unsafe for pregnant women!"

"And clear out any flowers or plants in this ballroom that have strong scents or might

irritate her! Get them out of here now!"

"Perry! Get over here!"

Richard's assistant jogged over. "Yes, Mr. Huber?"

Richard commanded,

"Send out a company-wide memo. The Huber family is celebrating! Every single employee, from the top executives down to the janitorial staff, gets triple pay for the next three months! Double their bonuses, too!"

"And slash the prices of all our retail products by fifty percent!"

Perry gaped. "Mr. Huber, a fifty percent discount... we'll take a massive loss."

Richard waved a hand dismissively.

"I don't care! Let us take the hit. The

Huber family can afford it! Also,

allocate another hundred and fifty

metfon

focal

million dollars to local nursing

homes and orphanages. Consider it

good karma for my grandchild!"

Perry nodded furiously. "Yes, sir! I'll get it sorted immediately."

Richard strode over to Janelle and, right in front of the entire crowd, pulled her into a sweeping embrace.

"Our family owes Winona everything, but we owe you too!"

"You had the foresight to see it. Winona truly is our lucky charm. Marrying you was the greatest blessing of my life!"

Janelle flushed crimson at the public display.

"Oh, stop it. Act your age, everyone is staring."

Richard chuckled, finally letting her go. "You handle the guests here. I need to head home for a bit."

Janelle blinked in surprise. "The banquet is about to start. Where are you going?" Richard stood taller than he ever had, absolutely buzzing with triumph.

"I'm going to the Huber Family Chapel! I have to share the good news with our ancestors!"

Chapter 1792

Richard Huber marched out of the banquet hall with his chest puffed out, radiating an arrogant swagger.

Even after he disappeared, his elated, booming laughter echoed through the room.

His unabashed pride was a bitter pill for the rest of the guests, stirring up intense envy.

The crowd seethed with jealousy, left wondering when they would finally get a grandchild of their own.

Wealth and power were old news to this elite circle. At their age, their corporate empires were stable; the desire for money paled in comparison to the desperate longing for an heir.

But their playboy sons clung tightly to their freedom, dodging marriage and fatherhood like the plague.

Because of that, adding a new baby to the bloodline was the ultimate status symbol. It was just that no one ever expected Richard Huber to be the first to claim that glory!

Out of everyone, his son was by far the most reckless and unpredictable.

At every social gathering, whenever the topic of continuing the family line came up, Richard would always lower his head, eyes red as he quietly nursed his drink.

He would sit there, swimming in humiliation, looking like he wanted to crawl under the table.

Once he had a few too many, he'd even tear up, complaining that he couldn't control Keaton and that the Huber legacy was going to die out.

Yet somehow, that exact rebel son was the first one to secure an heir!

Meanwhile, all their supposedly well-behaved sons hadn't produced a single thing. The promises of engagements this year and babies next year had evaporated. The holidays were fast approaching, and there wasn't even a whisper of progress.

Cormac Murphy whipped his head around, scanning the room for his own son. The moment he locked eyes with him, Cormac's expression crumbled.

"Booker..."

Booker Murphy's stomach dropped. The second he met his father's gaze, he knew he was dead meat.

"Crap, crap, crap. Here comes the lecture."

The last time Tarquin Bradford revealed he had a child, Cormac had been so jealous he'd dragged Booker around, weeping about it for three straight days.

Now that Keaton was expecting, his dad was going to start the whole routine over again.

It didn't matter who had a kid; Booker was always the one suffering the collateral damage.

Gale Windham, a fellow victim of

velget

this parental pressure, understood the danger perfectly. He shot Cormac a wary glance and muttered to Booker

"I can't save you this time, man. I'm out of here! Let's grab drinks later!"

Without another word, Gale turned on his heel, terrified that if he lingered a second longer, his own father would corner him.

But he hadn't even taken two steps before Mr. Windham's furious roar ripped

through the air behind him.

"Gale Windham! You freeze right there!"

Gale's mouth twitched violently. He swore under his breath.

Steeling himself, he kept walking, pretending he hadn't heard a thing.

A second later, Mr. Windham's voice skyrocketed in volume.

"Gale, you absolute disappointment! I told you to stop, did you hear me?! Security at the door, grab him!"

"You bastard! You're a liar! You even lied to your own father!"

"Three years ago, you promised me a grandchild. You made that promise every single year! I was actually moved. I went around telling everyone you were so much better than Keaton!"

"Turns out you've just been stringing me along this whole time!"

"Your reputation as a 'good son' is built entirely on lies!"

Gale's head pounded. There was no escape. He spun around, pasting on a placating smile to calm his father down.

"Dad, everyone is staring. This is humiliating! Cut me some slack!"

"You've been stringing me along for three years and I haven't even seen the shadow of a grandchild!" Mr. Windham bellowed. "You don't deserve slack!"

The entire room was watching. Gale wanted the floor to swallow him whole. "Dad, let's just go. Come on, let's head up to the lounge. I'll tell you a secret..." Through sheer desperation, Gale managed to coax his father upstairs.

He pushed open the door to a random suite, only to find Cormac and Booker already inside.

Cormac was sitting in an armchair, staring deadpan at his son.

"Booker, hit the floor. Your father needs to beg you for a favor."

Chapter 1793

Booker dropped to his knees with a heavy thud, bowing his head in total defeat.

"Dad, let me beg you first. I'm your own flesh and blood—please let me off the hook. A kid happens when it happens! I can't force fate, Dad!"

Cormac's eyes welled with dramatic tears. "Booker, I'm ready to call you 'Dad' if it helps..."

Gale couldn't hold it in. A burst of laughter escaped him.

Mr. Windham's face darkened furiously. He launched a swift kick, sending Gale stumbling right into the room.

Mr. Windham's roar practically took the roof off.

"You have the nerve to laugh? Take a good look at yourselves, you two absolute clowns! Look at what you're doing to us old men!"

"Get down there with Booker! The both of you are going to sit there and listen!"

The two miserable bachelors exchanged a look. Booker scooted to the side.

"Come on, man. We ride together, we die together."

There was no dodging it. Might as well accept their fate.

Back downstairs, the high-society wives were clamoring over each other to get a look at the paternity report, practically salivating with envy.

They swarmed Janelle, singing her praises and telling her how blessed she was—a doting husband, an obedient son, and now a grandchild on the way.

Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Sewell were suffocating on their own jealousy. The sheer bitterness was enough to give them high blood pressure.

Even though they knew a verified paternity test couldn't be faked, they couldn't bite back their venom.

"Who knows if that piece of paper is even real? Maybe it isn't Keaton's kid at all! Could just be some random bastard!"

"That little tramp Winona has always been loose, she—"

Smack! Smack!

Before they could finish, Janelle bared her teeth and slapped them both squarely across the face.

Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Sewell stared at Janelle in absolute shock.

The rest of the socialites froze, stunned into silence.

Janelle glared at the two women. Two slaps weren't nearly enough. She lunged forward landing several more harsh blows, plunging them straight into a chaotic brawl.

The grand ballroom echoed with the sharp cracks of skin hitting skin, followed by shrieks and wailing.

Eventually, the surrounding crowd had to physically pry them apart.

Mrs. Sewell and Mrs. Miller's makeup was smeared, their faces swelling rapidly as they sobbed uncontrollably.

"Janelle, you psycho! You've crossed the line! How dare you attack us in public!"

Shielded by Mrs. Windham and Mrs. Murphy, Janelle had walked away practically unscathed, save for some slightly messy hair.

She caught her breath, her expression ice-cold.

"In the past, I put up with you. I

comments to protect our fanet

tolerated your backhanded

business ties and public image."

"Our husbands work together. I couldn't just sever those connections over petty drama."

"And out in public, we represent our families. I never hit you before because I refused to stoop to your level."

"But those business deals and that reputation mean absolutely nothing compared to Winona and my grandchild!"

"I will scrap the business. I will ruin my own image. But I will never let anyone drag my family's name through the mud!"

The ballroom plunged into a dead silence as everyone stared at Janelle.

Janelle smoothed her hair into place and addressed the stunned crowd.

"I apologize for making a scene. It's Richard's birthday, and I'm causing chaos at my own party."

"But I couldn't hold back. They had the audacity to stand right in front of me and repeatedly badmouth Winona and her baby!"

"Let me make this perfectly clear. I

don't care if you gossip about me

my back But you do

Cat

t Winona or my grandchild

"I don't care who it is. If you talk trash, I will strike you down."

"If anyone threatens them, the Huber family will destroy you."

Chapter 1794

Spotting the commotion, Mr. Miller and Mr. Sewell scrambled over.

Seeing their husbands arrive, Mrs. Miller and Mrs. Sewell threw themselves at the men, wailing in grievance.

"Honey, she hit me!"

"She attacked me too!"

"It wasn't just us she was slapping! She completely disrespected the Miller and Sewell families!"

Neither Mr. Miller nor Mr. Sewell were decent men. They both had strings of mistresses and felt no real love for their wives.

However, their wives represented their public standing. Having them assaulted in front of the city's elite was a massive blow to their egos.

Scowling, both men glared at Janelle with open hostility.

"What the hell is the meaning of this?!"

Tarquin Bradford stepped forward smoothly, silently positioning himself right beside Janelle.

He didn't say a word, his expression entirely unreadable, but the message was crystal clear: he was backing her up.

Nobody was going to bully Janelle while Keaton and Richard were away.

Instantly intimidated, Mr. Miller and Mr. Sewell dropped their aggressive fronts, forcing awkward smiles.

"Mr. Bradford... Mrs. Huber. What seems to be the problem here?"

Janelle's voice was frigid.

"They claimed Winona was sleeping around. They said the child she's carrying isn't

a Huber, but some random bastard!"

The surrounding crowd murmured, expressions turning sour.

"The pate

test was already verified. They're

spreading malicious rumors!

They practically asked to be slapped!"

"Good for Mrs. Huber. A couple of slaps is getting off easy. She should have knocked them out!"

"They're always whispering about other people having no class. Turns out, they're the classless ones!"

"Classic miserable behavior. They can't stand seeing someone else happy. They're just jealous of her!"

"Wait, didn't they just say earlier that the Hubers were cursed to die out, and that they'd kill themselves if a Huber heir was born?"

"Yeah, I heard that! They both said it!"

"Well? Go ahead, do it!"

It wasn't just the women talking either. Some of the male executives chimed in.

"The Millers and the Sewells really married a pair of nightmares."

"Birds of a feather, right?"

The relentless chatter filled the air.

The crowd mercilessly piled on.

Mr. Miller and Mr. Sewell, both men in their fifties, flushed bright red. The public humiliation was absolutely unbearable.

Janelle's voice cut through the noise.

"Since Richard isn't here, I'll speak for the Huber family. As of this moment, we are

severing all ties with the Miller and Sewell families."

"There will be no further business between us."

"Any ongoing partnerships are terminated immediately. We'll pay out whatever breach-of-contract penalties are required by law."

Panic flared in the two men's eyes.

"Mrs. Huber, let's not be hasty! This is an extreme overreaction!"

"We've been partners for years. Breaking things off so suddenly won't just hurt us—

it'll be a massive blow to the Huber corporation as well!"

Janelle's frown deepened, her resolve unshakeable.

"I don't care how big the blow is. It doesn't compare to Winona and my grandchild's reputations. The Huber family is more than willing to take that financial hit." Content-

As Mr. Miller and Mr. Sewell spiraled into panic, Tarquin suddenly spoke up, his tone unnervingly calm.

"The Bradford family is also cutting all business ties with you. Effective

permanently."

The two men's eyes nearly popped out of their skulls.

Losing the Hubers was a heavy financial loss.

But losing the Bradfords was an absolute death sentence!

Tarquin's influence was absolute. If he blacklisted them, nobody else in the industry

would dare do business with them again.

Realizing their frantic pleading was

getting them nowhere, the furious husbands violently shoved them out of the ballroom, dragging

them home in utter disgrace.

Janelle turned and offered Tarquin a sincere thank you before instantly smoothing out her demeanor.

"Please don't let this little

let

interruption ruin the evening," she announced warmly. "Tonight is a double celebration for the tubers. Let's enjoy ourselves.

The crowd immediately snapped back into a festive mood, offering their enthusiastic congratulations to her.

The commotion had been loud enough to catch the attention of Elysia Thorne and Blossom Blythe.

Standing by the railing on the second floor, they had witnessed the entire scene unfold.

Blossom's eyes gleamed with unshed tears.

"That was incredible. I'm so relieved Winona is with the Hubers now. Richard and Janelle are such wonderful people."

Chapter 1795

"Just look at Janelle, and then think about Zane Livingston's mother. It's night and day."

"That awful Priscilla actually had the nerve to criticize Winona, calling her

disrespectful, dramatic, and a failure of a daughter-in-law!"

"She should have taken a long, hard look in the mirror!"

"If she had loved Winona even half as much as Janelle does, Winona would have treated her like her own mother."

Elysia completely agreed with Blossom.

Empathy was a two-way street. What woman went into a marriage not wanting a good relationship with her in-laws?

If things turned toxic, was it really always the daughter-in-law's fault?

If every mother-in-law treated people with Janelle's level of sincerity and warmth, no one would ever have a fractured family.

...

Inside the penthouse suite.

The moment Keaton stepped through the door, he pressed Winona against the heavy wood.

His eyes were bloodshot, his brows drawn together in torment as his chest heaved with frantic breaths.

"Tell me the truth," he demanded hoarsely. "What is going on with this baby?"

In his volatile emotional state, his grip on her wrists was completely unchecked.

Winona winced, her brows pulling together. "You're hurting me."

Keaton flinched, instantly releasing her. A faint red ring had already formed on her pale skin.

Guilt and heartache slammed into him.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. I... I'll get a doctor!"

He spun around toward the door, but Winona grabbed his arm.

"My wrist is just a little red. It's not a real injury. Why on earth would you call a doctor?"

"It looks pretty bad," Keaton insisted, staring at it.

Winona let out a soft sigh. She knew he was spiraling in a panic, completely unmoored.

Taking his hand, she led him out onto the private balcony.

Two woven chairs sat facing each other. Winona gestured for Keaton to sit down, then took the seat across from him.

The afternoon sunlight streamed in, casting a comforting, golden warmth over them.

Winona looked into Keaton's eyes, her demeanor entirely calm.

"The baby really is yours. It happened that night."

A violent shudder ripped through Keaton. Even though he already knew the answer deep down, he couldn't help but ask.

"You... you didn't just make it up to fool my parents and the press?"

Winona shook her head. "No."

"The paternity test..." Keaton swallowed hard. "It's real?"

"Yes."

His voice cracked.

"You... you're carrying my child?"

Winona's expression was solemn, her tone unwavering. "Yes."

Keaton stared at her in utter disbelief. His pupils blew wide as his breathing hitched,

his chest rising and falling erratically.

The baby was actually his.

He never could have anticipated this in a million years.

He had spent the last hour coming up with countless gruesome ways to murder the deadbeat guy who d
knocked her up-only to find out that the guy was him.

He was going to be a father.

Good lord, he was actually having a child!

In stark contrast to his overwhelming shock, Winona remained remarkably

composed.

"I didn't find out I was pregnant until after I dealt with the fallout from Beatrix Sutton."

"I was completely thrown. It was so

surreal. It's my first pregnancy, and the realization that there was a tiny life growing inside me felt like pure magic."

"But then I thought about it long and hard."

"You're the only man I've been with in the last two years. I knew without a doubt the

baby was yours."

"You've always been against

marriage and kids. And after

everything I went through with Zane,

I had no plans to start a family

either. Logically, it didn't seem right,

to keep the baby

"But I thought about it for a long time, and I decided I wanted them."

Winona lowered her head, resting a gentle hand over her flat stomach. Her voice softened beautifully.

"I believe this baby is a gift from above. The universe saw everything I lost and sent

me this child to make up for it. I have to cherish them."

"Financially, I'm secure enough to raise a child on my own."

"The only reason I kept it a secret from you was because I was terrified you'd force me to get an abortion."

"I can hold my own, but against you? I'm nothing. If you didn't want this baby, I knew

I wouldn't stand a chance of keeping them."

"That's why I hid the truth. I-"

Winona's words broke off as she suddenly heard the choked sound of sobbing.

Her head snapped up. At some point while she was talking, tears had begun streaming endlessly down Keaton's face.

Chapter 1796

A thirty-year-old man was crying so hard his entire body shook, tears streaming down his face.

Now it was Winona's turn to be at a loss for words.

She didn't know how to comfort him, so she stood up to grab a tissue.

The moment she stood, Keaton suddenly shot to his feet and pulled her into his arms. "I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry. Something this huge happened, and you had to carry it all by yourself. You had to go through all that fear alone. I'm sorry, Winona. I'm so sorry..."

Winona stiffened.

She wanted to push him away, but couldn't bear to do it. Yet, leaving things as they were felt incredibly awkward. After a long moment of silence, she finally spoke. "You don't need to apologize. I'm the one who should be saying sorry to you."

"This baby is yours just as much as it is mine. I didn't discuss it with you. I made the decision to keep it on my own, and I hid it from you this whole time. That was my fault."

Keaton shook his head, his voice choked with emotion. "You were right! Whatever you say is right. Whatever you do is right. It's all my fault. I messed up. I failed you and the baby."

He wept openly, overcome by a mix of intense relief and overwhelming guilt. An unexpected pregnancy was a life-altering event for a woman. Not only did she have to figure out how to handle it entirely on her own, but she also had to live in fear because of him. He felt like an absolute failure of a man.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Keaton accidentally tightened his grip. The pressure made Winona's ribs ache, and she tried to soothe him. "Okay, okay. I was right, you were wrong. Can you just let go first? You're hurting me again."

Hearing that, Keaton immediately released her. His eyes were red, panic flashing across his face. "Does it hurt? Where? Let me see. Should I call a doctor?"

Seeing his hands shaking, Winona let out a quiet sigh. Keaton was entirely a wreck today. She gently forced him to sit back down, handing him the tissue she had grabbed. "I know your head is spinning right now. Let me talk, and you just listen."

"First, when it comes to this baby, you did nothing wrong. It was an accident, and I'm the one who chose not to tell you. So you don't need to feel guilty at all. You are not at fault."

"Second, I am absolutely having this baby."

"The baby can take your last name. You, Richard, and Janelle can visit anytime, be close to the baby, and even have them stay with the Huber family every now and then."

"My only condition is that the baby lives with me. Do you agree?"

It took a while for Keaton to calm down. He wiped his face, offering neither a nod nor a shake of his head. He looked at Winona and asked tentatively, "Can't we raise the baby together?"

Winona shook her head. "That brings me to us."

"I know you have feelings for me, and I know you're serious about this, but I'm sorry. I just don't feel the same way."

"Don't overthink it. It has nothing to do with my past, or yours. It's simply that I don't see you that way."

"Deep down, I think you're a great guy. We can be friends, even family, but we can't be lovers."

"You know as well as I do that love can't be forced."

"And I'm just not the type of person who can compromise on something like this."

"I don't want to settle. I refuse to just make do."

Ever since she realized Keaton had fallen for her, Winona had seriously considered their dynamic.

On paper, they made perfect sense, and the baby would have an intact home.

But she refused to sacrifice her own chances at true love and a happy marriage just for the sake of the baby.

She loved this baby fiercely. Yet, she didn't believe a loveless marriage could provide the right kind of love for a child.

She didn't love Keaton. Forcing a

relationship with him would only yet And if she wasn't happy but wasn't

leave her suffocated and miserable.

could

she ever raise a happy child?

So, Winona, felt it was best to draw a clear line now. Honesty was the only way forward. Even if they couldn't be a romantic couple, they could still be family.

A bitter knot tightened in Keaton's chest. He felt a suffocating wave of despair and

an overwhelming sense of loss. It hurt deeply.

But he had anticipated this outcome.

If Winona actually had feelings for him, she wouldn't be having this conversation with such composed detachment.

Only friends and relatives could be this painfully rational. Love was always far more fragile and complex.

Still, he understood her completely. Love couldn't be manufactured.

He would rather face her rejection than force her to trap herself in a relationship she didn't want.

Rejection wasn't the end of the world, as long as he had the chance to win her over. And he would. He would pursue her with everything he had.

Chapter 1797

Keaton took a deep breath. Wiping the last of his tears, he looked at Winona with red-rimmed eyes. "Can I at least have the chance to pursue you?"

Before she could answer, he rushed on. "Just consider it a favor to my parents. They adore you!"

"Or a favor to my grandfather, and all my ancestors. After all, you've certainly enjoyed your fair share of their vintage wine."

Winona was utterly speechless.

Keaton pressed on shamelessly. "Do it for the baby, too. I mean, I'm the father. The baby definitely wants us together. You have to at least give it a shot, for the baby's sake."

If the baby could speak, it would probably be thanking him sarcastically for using it as a bargaining chip before it was even born.

Seeing Winona's silence, Keaton laid out his logic. "Think about it. You're just giving me an opening. Whether or not I actually win you over is entirely up to you."

"But later, when the baby grows up and asks why you didn't end up with their dad, or why they didn't get a traditional home..."

"...you can look them in the eye and say that you tried, but it just didn't work out, and you couldn't force it!"

"And I promise, I just want the chance to try. I won't harass you, and I won't do anything to make you uncomfortable. Deal?"

Winona pursed her lips, sighing internally. He had just weaponized his parents, their unborn child, and generations of the Huber family's ancestors. What else could she say?

"Fine. But you can't disrupt my life."

A bright, relieved smile broke across Keaton's face. All he needed was an inch! "Winona, you're the best! You're an absolute angel sent to save me!"

"If it weren't for you, I'd never have a child. I'd never get the chance to be a father, or be a decent son to my parents!"

"Before you, I was just a disappointment and a complete mess. With you, I'm suddenly the poster boy for success in our circle!"

Winona pressed her lips together, but Keaton immediately continued. "Don't doubt it!

I bet Booker's and Gale's dads are reading them the riot act right now, telling them they need to be more like me!"

Winona gave him a deadpan look.

Keaton laughed softly. "My mom always said a good woman lifts a man up. You're clearly a good woman."

Winona's cheeks grew warm, and she shifted uncomfortably. "Who's lifting you up? Stop talking nonsense."

Keaton just smiled. His gaze shifted to the slight curve of her stomach, his eyes softening with tenderness. "Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?"

Winona shook her head. "I don't know yet. It's a surprise for a few more months."

Keaton looked at her stomach with a sense of pure wonder. After staring for a long time, he asked, "Can I touch my baby?"

Winona hesitated. If he had just asked to touch her, it would be a hard no. But phrasing it as touching his baby? She found it impossible to deny him.

She gave a small nod. Keaton

immediately stepped closer, crouching beside her, and gently rested his palm against her stomach. Exentoths,

her

Winona could feel the intense heat radiating from his hand. It made her incredibly self-conscious but she stayed quiet.

After holding his hand there for a long moment, Keaton looked up. "Did the baby move?"

"No," Winona replied, shaking her head.

"I thought so. Why aren't they moving?" Keaton asked, puzzled.

"I don't know," Winona admitted.

"Did they move when my mom touched you earlier?" Keaton asked.

Winona nodded. "Yes."

Keaton's face fell into exaggerated disappointment. "Why does the baby move for my mom but not for me? Does this little troublemaker already hate me?"

Winona swatted his arm lightly. "You're the troublemaker. This is a good baby."

Keaton looked genuinely crestfallen. "What do I do? The baby is ignoring me." Winona rolled her eyes. "Deal with it."

Keaton looked utterly pathetic. "Am I really that repulsive? You don't like me, and now the baby doesn't like me either."

"But at least you got to know me before deciding you didn't like me. The baby hasn't even met me yet! Why the hostility?"

Without thinking, Winona tried to

comfort him. "You just said it yourself. You haven't spent any time together, so it's perfectly normal for the baby not to react yet."

That was exactly what Keaton had been waiting for. He immediately pounced "You're absolutely right! The baby doesn't like, me because we haven't bonded! That means I need to spend more time with the baby!"

"Winona, please let me move in with you guys. I need to bond with my child."

Chapter 1798

Winona pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing. "Mr. Huber, I can see exactly what you're trying to pull here."

Keaton remained silently defiant.

Winona shot him down instantly. "You can bond with the baby all you want. But moving in with me? Absolutely not."

Keaton gave a sheepish grin. "But if we don't live together, how are we supposed to spend enough time bonding?"

"You don't need to live together to bond," Winona countered. "And do you really think I don't know what you're up to? You think I'm stupid?"

"I thought they said pregnancy brain lasts for three years," Keaton quipped. "Why didn't you get it?"

Winona just stared at him in disbelief.

Downstairs, Richard's booming voice suddenly echoed up. "Where's Winnie? Where's my grandbaby?"

Hearing that, Winona quickly stood up and headed for the door. They had said everything that needed to be said, and she was eager to escape being alone with Keaton.

Keaton immediately scrambled after her. "Slow down. Let me help you."

Winona opened her mouth to decline, but Keaton cut her off. "My parents are losing their minds today. They're treating you like a national treasure. As far as they're concerned, you're practically helpless right now."

"If I don't escort you downstairs, they're going to tear into me for not taking care of you."

"Knowing my dad's temper, he might actually kick me across the room."

"There's a huge crowd out there. Just play along and save me some face."

"Besides, we're having a baby together. We have to at least put on a show of being an affectionate couple in front of everyone, right?"

Winona frowned, confused. "Why do we need to put on a show?"

Keaton sounded entirely justified. "To stop the gossip! Otherwise, people are going to start speculating about how this baby came to be, and what's going to happen next. They'll definitely be whispering behind my parents' backs."

"Plus, you said it yourself. If we can't be a couple, we can be family. I'm the father, you're the mother. That makes us family, doesn't it?"

"What's wrong with family helping each other walk? Is there some reason you're embarrassed?"

Winona found herself completely outmaneuvered. Refusing his help now would only make it seem like she had something to hide.

Reluctantly, she let him take her arm. As they walked, she reminded him, "Make sure you talk to Richard and Janelle about what we discussed earlier the baby staying with me."

"Don't worry," Keaton replied. "Your word is basically law to them now. They'll listen

to whatever you say. You have way more influence than I do."

They reached the elevator bank just as Booker, Gale, and their fathers were standing there.

Winona immediately tried to pull her arm back, wanting to put some distance between herself and Keaton.

Instead of letting go, Keaton grabbed her hand, lacing their fingers together in a tight, deliberately showy grip.

Flushing with awkwardness, Winona tugged twice but couldn't break his hold. She had no choice but to offer a polite greeting. "Hello, Mr. Murphy. Hello, Mr. Windham."

Cormac Murphy and Mr. Windham

looked at her with warm,

grandfatherly affection You're a

good girl, they praised. "You've done

an incredible thing for the Huber family."

"We were just saying we want Booker's and Gale's girlfriends to spend more time with you. Maybe some of your good luck will rub on them. We hope you won't find them too annoying."

Winona offered a polite smile. "Not at all. Being pregnant at home gets boring

anyway. They're welcome to come over whenever they like."

Both older men nodded approvingly. "Such a good girl. And Keaton's a good man, too. You're both wonderful!"

Their gaze shifted to Keaton, filled with newfound respect. "Keaton, you've really stepped up. We completely underestimated you."

Keaton beamed, looking thoroughly pleased with himself. Behind their fathers, Booker and Gale were grinding their teeth, shooting daggers at Keaton.

From the look of it, they were ready to drag Keaton into an alley and beat him senseless the moment they got the chance.

Because Keaton had suddenly produced an heir, the two of them were enduring absolute hell.

Chapter 1799

Keaton narrowed his eyes mischievously. "Come on, guys, that's not fair. We've been friends for years. You can't just ice me out because I'm having a baby."

"Mr. Murphy and Mr. Windham aren't getting any younger. You should really be more considerate of how much they want grandchildren."

"It's time to stop talking about waiting ten or twenty years to have kids!"

Booker and Gale froze in sheer horror.

Cormac Murphy and Mr. Windham whipped their heads around, their faces turning purple with rage.

Sensing the sudden, explosive shift in the air, Winona subtly elbowed Keaton and shot him a glare. "Why are you stirring the pot?" she hissed under her breath. "Booker and Gale didn't even say anything!"

Keaton shrugged casually. "They were communicating with their eyes. And it's true -they've been planning to avoid having kids for the next two decades."

Right as the words left his mouth, the elevator doors slid open.

Realizing the catastrophic danger they were in, Booker and Gale lunged for the elevator, but their fathers blocked their path.

Cormac Murphy and Mr. Windham turned to Winona and Keaton with terrifyingly calm expressions. "You two go on ahead. We need to have a private chat with our boys."

Suppressing a grin, Keaton quickly pulled Winona into the elevator and hit the button to close the doors.

The moment the doors shut, the deafening roars of both fathers echoed through the hall. "You ungrateful bastards!"

Keaton burst out laughing. Winona shook her head in disbelief. "You're a terrible friend."

"Don't worry," Keaton said smoothly. "I only throw my friends under the bus. I'd never do that to you. I always prioritize the woman I want over my buddies."

Winona rolled her eyes. "Are you actually proud of that?"

"Absolutely," Keaton replied, his voice softening. "Falling for you is something I'm incredibly proud of."

The unexpected confession caught Winona completely off guard.

She met his gaze for a split second before her eyes darted away. Staring intensely at the floor, she felt a sudden, frantic flutter in her chest.

While she stared at the floor, Keaton kept his eyes fixed on her, his gaze burning with a heat she could practically feel.

Unable to handle the intense scrutiny, Winona was just about to snap at him when Keaton playfully dragged his thumb across her palm.

A jolt of electricity shot up Winona's arm, and her face flushed a furious crimson.

She threw her head up, ready to

chew him out, but the elevator doors

abruptly chimed open. Janelle and

several high society ladies were standing right there. Both sides froze in surprise.

Noticing Winona's flushed cheeks, the ladies chuckled teasingly. "Keaton, are you bullying Ms. Newsom in there?"

"With Ms. Newsom expecting, you two young lovebirds can flirt all you want, but you need to show some restraint. Don't let things get too out of hand."

Catching their blatant innuendo, Winona's face turned an even deeper shade of red.

Janelle smoothly deflected, stepping forward to take Winona's hand with a warm smile. "I was just coming up to find you two. The party is starting, and Richard is eager to see you."

Still blushing fiercely, Winona stepped out of the elevator. "Did he need me for something?"

Janelle grinned. "He's waiting to give you your gifts."

At that moment, Richard was standing in the center of the ballroom, laughing boisterously with his guests. "I used to think I'd never get the chance to hold a grandchild in this lifetime. But heretam turning fiftyeight, and my first grandchild falls right into my lap! Hahaha..."

Noticing a glaring red mark on Richard's forehead, Winona frowned in concern.

"What happened to his forehead?"

Janelle pressed her lips together,

shaking her head with an

exasperated laugh. "He went to the family cemetery to share the good news He was so overwhelmed while paying his respects that he

literally bumped his head against the stone monument. I don't know how he managed to bruise it that badly!"

"He bruised it paying respects?" Winona asked, stunned.

Janelle nodded. "I know. A bit dramatic, right?"

Winona couldn't argue with that. It was definitely dramatic.

Janelle's smile softened. "The surprise you gave him today has made him happier than I've seen him in decades. Honestly, he wasn't even this thrilled when I was pregnant with Keaton!"

After all, marriage and children had been the expected, standard progression of Richard's early life.

But this grandchild was an absolute, miraculous blessing that he never saw coming.

Chapter 1800

The gifts Richard presented to Winona were staggeringly extravagant. Beyond the deeds to several luxury estates and the keys to a fleet of high-end cars, he gave her a massive twenty percent stake in The Huber Group!

Winona was completely floored.

Aside from Janelle and Keaton, every single guest in the room was left in shock!

After all, even as the sole heir, Keaton currently only held twenty percent of The Huber Group's shares. Janelle, as the matriarch, held the same amount.

By handing Winona an equal twenty percent, Richard was publicly declaring that she was just as vital to the family as his own wife and son.

Within the corporate hierarchy of The Huber Group, Winona was now an equal partner to Keaton and Janelle. In the world of elite billionaire dynasties, this was entirely unprecedented.

The most shocking part was that Winona wasn't even married to Keaton!

It was standard for wealthy families to reward the mother of an heir, but Richard's immense generosity went far beyond anyone's expectations.

While the crowd was still reeling, Richard made another announcement. "In addition

to what I've just given, when Janelle and I pass on, every single cent of our remaining personal estates will be left entirely to Winnie and our precious grandchild!"

The entire room gasped collectively.

Panic flared in Winona's chest, and she quickly tried to refuse. "Richard, this is too much. I can't accept this."

Richard beamed. "It's exactly what you deserve!"

"Winnie, I know you aren't struggling for money, and throwing millions of dollars at you might seem a little gauche."

"But the truth is, Janelle and I just want to make one thing perfectly clear. You can bring this baby into the world with absolute peace of mind."

"No matter what happens between you and Keaton, you will never have to worry about your future, or the baby's future."

"Janelle and I are going to make sure you are taken care of."

"We can at least guarantee that you and this child will never want for anything as long as you live."

Winona took a deep breath, a heavy lump forming in her throat.

She had only come to the party to share the news because she wanted to see Richard and Janelle happy. She hadn't expected a single dime from them.

Yet, the pure, unconditional support they were showering her with moved her beyond words.

Tears welled in Winona's eyes as she wrapped her arms tightly around Janelle. "Thank you, Richard. Thank you, Janelle," she choked out.

Janelle rubbed her back gently, comforting her the way a mother would comfort her own daughter. "Richard and I made this decision because we love you and this baby she murmured softly. "Please don't let this feel like pressure."

"You're doing the hard work of carrying our grandbaby. You've earned every bit of this. As for whatever goes on between you and Keaton, we're staying out of it."

"If it's meant to be, you'll end up together. If it's not, you're still family to us. As long as you don't cut us out of your lives, we'll be thrilled."

Overwhelmed by the raw emotion of it all, Winona held Janelle even tighter and openly sobbed into her shoulder.

She wasn't blind. She knew exactly how rare this kind of unconditional love was.

Other than her own parents, no older generation had ever treated her with such genuine warmth.

Back when she was married to Zane Livingston, his mother, Priscilla, had lived in her house and spent her money, yet had never offered Winona anything but cold glares and cruel remarks.

"Meeting you and Richard is the greatest blessing of my life," Winona whispered tearfully.

"I promise you, no matter what happens, Keaton and I will never be strangers. Even

if we don't become a couple, we'll always be family."

Janelle smiled and nodded. "Good, good. Today is a celebration, and everyone is watching. Let's dry those tears."

Winona wiped her eyes, nodding.

As the party began winding down, Keaton seized the opportunity to quietly urge Janelle and Richard to pitch an idea to Winona: bringing her to stay at the Huber estate after the festivities ended.

Since Caroline and the rest of Winona's family were out of town, Janelle was already worried about her staying in an empty house. She immediately brought it up.

Winona was hesitant to accept, but Janelle cut her off smoothly. "Don't worry. If you stay with us, I'll formally ban Keaton from the property. He won't be allowed to sleep there so you won't have to deal with any awkwardness."

Richard immediately chimed in. "If it comes down to it, I'll move into a hotel, too. You and Janelle can have the house to yourselves. We just can't stand the thought of you being all alone in the Newsom estate right now."