

Hitched 1801

Chapter 1801

"Besides, staying with the Huber family means the baby gets to know their true home. It'll bring joy to the whole family tree."

With the offer presented so warmly, Winona couldn't find it in her heart to refuse. "Alright, I'll impose on you for a few days, Janelle. But Richard really doesn't need to move out on my account."

Keaton immediately chimed in. "What about me?"

Winona shot him a flat look. "Don't you usually avoid staying at the main house?"

Keaton lied through his teeth without missing a beat, claiming the plumbing was wrecked at Riverside Manor, the wiring was blown at Regent Hills, the oceanfront villa had no hot water, and the heating was broken at the lake house. In short, every single one of his properties was entirely unlivable, leaving him no choice but to move back home.

Winona knew exactly what game he was playing, but she held her tongue in front of Janelle and Richard.

Thankfully, Janelle was fiercely protective of her. "Then you can go stay in a hotel," she told her son bluntly.

Keaton stared at his mother in utter disbelief. "Mom, did you forget? I'm the father of your future grandson."

"Which makes you entirely secondary to the mother of my future grandson," Janelle retorted.

Suitably silenced, Keaton sulked while Winona lowered her head to hide a soft smile.

Suddenly, a prickle of unease washed over her, as if she were being watched. She glanced up, scanning the room.

Instead of catching whoever was staring at her, her gaze landed on a young man deep in conversation nearby.

He looked to be in his early thirties, undeniably handsome and charming, laughing effortlessly with the people around him.

Catching Winona's gaze, he turned slightly and offered a polite, acknowledging raise of his champagne flute.

He seamlessly resumed his conversation right after, seemingly paying her no further mind.

Yet, just that single glance made Winona's heart skip a painful beat. A suffocating wave of dread washed over her, chilling her to the bone.

Keaton noticed her sudden tension. "You know him?"

Winona snapped back to reality, giving a noncommittal response. "He looks familiar, but I can't quite place him."

Janelle followed her gaze. "That's Jae-hyun Kim, the Koryon owner of First Love Bakery. He's quite the heartthrob among the younger crowd these days. You've probably seen him trending online."

"Mrs. Murphy's niece invited him."

"Apparently, she's quite smitten with him, so Mrs. Murphy asked me for an extra invitation on the sly."

Winona frowned subtly at the information. She cast one last lingering look his way before dropping the subject.

The party was in full swing. With Janelle needing to play hostess to the other socialites, Winona slipped away to find Elysia and Blossom.

Elysia, ever the caretaker,

immediately checked her over to et

ensure she wasn't too exhausted

before asking, "How did thing

go

with Keaton?"

"We laid everything out on the table," Winona replied. "The baby will take his last

name, but they'll be raised by me."

"And he agreed to that?"

"Yeah."

Blossom chimed in enthusiastically.

"I used to think Keaton was the

a worst choice for a stable

relationship. With his playboy reputation, I figured anyone who dated him would lose the mind."

"But now, I'm honestly rooting for you two!"

"I'm completely obsessed with Richard and Janelle. They're incredible!"

Winona smiled softly.

"Richard and Janelle have been so wonderful to me. As for Keaton.. we'll just have to take it one day at a time. If he wants to pursue me, I'll give him a chance. Whether it works out or not is up to fate."

She let out a long, shuddering sigh of relief.

"Getting the truth about the baby out in the open feels like a massive weight has

been lifted off my chest. Keeping secrets is exhausting."

Elysia smiled gently.

"Are you hungry? Grab a pastry. They're from First Love Bakery, and they're to die for."

Winona paused, her hand hovering. "First Love?"

Elysia nodded.

"Every socialite in Jindale City is obsessed with their desserts right now. Janelle specially ordered a batch for today."

"Don't worry, the ingredients are completely organic and safe for your pregnancy." Winona frowned, the image of Jae-hyun Kim flashing uncomfortably in her mind.

Chapter 1802

Elysia noticed her expression. "What's wrong?"

"Elysia, have you ever met the owner of this bakery?" Winona asked.

Elysia shook her head.

"I've picked up orders a few times, but I've never seen the man himself. Why?"

"I just saw him a few minutes ago," Winona murmured. "There's something off about him. I can't quite put my finger on it, but he gave me the creeps."

Blossom looked confused.

"How could he be creepy? He's gorgeous. Half the girls in the city are swooning over him."

Pulling out her phone, Blossom quickly pulled up a picture of Jae-hyun Kim and showed it to her.

"Is this who you saw?"

Winona nodded.

"That's him. It's so strange. He looks perfectly charming in this picture, but in person, his vibe is just... unnerving."

Before Elysia or Blossom could respond, Winona shook her head, trying to dismiss the thought.

"Maybe I'm just exhausted and overthinking things."

She took a bite of the pastry and hummed in approval. "Their desserts really are incredible, though."

Elysia and Blossom didn't press the issue any further.

Blossom looked between the two of them and sighed dramatically.

"Look at you two. One of you has kids running around, and the other is about to pop, and here I am, totally single."

"God, when is Axel finally coming back?"

Winona turned to Elysia. "I thought you said Axel was coming back for the holidays?"

Elysia nodded. "He is, but I don't know the exact date. I'll ask Tarquin about it tonight."

Blossom pouted, looking positively pitiful.

"Please tell Tarquin to drag Axel back here immediately. I'm practically wasting away."

"First of all, I miss him so much it physically hurts."

"And second, my parents are riding me so hard about getting married that I'm about to lose my mind!"

"You guys have no idea how intense Folly and Hollis have been. Ever since they got back to Jindale City, every single conversation revolves around Lancelot!"

"You'd think two highly educated professors would be above forcing their daughter down the aisle!"

"It gets worse. My dad sat me down yesterday and literally gave me a lecture on the evolution of mankind!"

"He went on this whole rant about how if women don't marry and reproduce, the human race will collapse."

"Oh, please. Like the survival of the species rests entirely on my shoulders? Am I really that vital to humanity?"

"I had no idea a college dropout like me held such high social standing!"

"Besides, dinosaurs laid eggs, and look how they turned out-extinct!"

At the mention of Lancelot, Winona and Elysia exchanged a knowing glance.

Just the day before yesterday, Lancelot had tried to take them out for lunch.

Winona had been out of town, and Elysia was swamped, so they had to reschedule.

Even though the meetup didn't

happen, it was blatantly obvious why

he wanted to see them-it was about Blossom. With the holidays approaching, both sets of parents were desperate to see them finally settle down together this year.

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Lancelot had been harboring a massive crush on Blossom for years. Now that they were all older his patience was understandably starting to wear thin.

Winona and Elysia had discussed it privately, and they both agreed that Lancelot was a catch.

He was handsome, possessed a stellar character, had a gentle temperament, and came from a great family.

The Spencers weren't billionaires, but his parents were respected university professors, and Lancelot had carved out his own impressive career.

He had been the golden boy of their school days—a straight-A student and the guy everyone swooned over.

Now, not even thirty, he was already holding a prestigious position at Jindale University. He was the definition of an academic elite.

From his background to his personal achievements, he was a perfect match for Blossom.

More importantly, his devotion to her was undeniable.

Even Winona and Elysia couldn't find a single flaw in him.

Growing up, Blossom had endlessly bossed him around, yet he had stayed quietly

by her side, always looking out for her.

As kids, he had spent ninety percent of his allowance buying her favorite spicy snacks.

And on more than one occasion, he had nearly lost his life protecting her.

He had nearly drowned for her, been in a car crash for her, and taken a brutal

beating from local thugs just to keep her safe.

Recently, when she had been

kidnapped in Silver City, he had thrown himself into danger without a second thought, almost getting killed by the captors.

Even his decision to major in archaeology had been entirely for her.

Back then, Folly and Hollis had been dead set on Blossom following in their footsteps into the field of archaeology.

Chapter 1803

But Blossom had never been academically gifted, nor did she have any interest in digging up dirt. She couldn't pass the exams, and she didn't want to.

It caused a massive rift with her parents, leaving her thoroughly depressed for months.

Lancelot saw her struggling and, without a word of complaint, enrolled in the archaeology program himself to appease her disappointed parents.

His sacrifice made Folly and Hollis ecstatic, which in turn took the pressure off Blossom.

Over the years, Lancelot had never formally confessed his feelings, but every single action he took screamed of his love for her.

The only problem was... Blossom was completely oblivious.

Perhaps they were just too familiar. She saw him as a brother.

She would fight tooth and nail for Lancelot, even die for him, but she simply wasn't in love with him.

Whenever Winona and Elysia discussed it privately, they couldn't help but sigh in pity.

It was a classic romantic tragedy the childhood best friend rarely beat out the thrilling newcomer.

Nibbling on her pastry, Winona carefully tested the waters.

"Blossom, do you really not feel any romantic spark with Lancelot at all?"

Blossom shot back, "Does your left hand feel a romantic spark with your right?"

Winona paused. "...I just think he's a really great guy."

Elysia agreed. "He really is. He's practically flawless. If you decided to be with him, I'd fully support it."

"I'd back you too," Winona nodded.

Blossom immediately bristled.

"You two better not betray me! We're supposed to be a united front. You can't join Folly and Hollis's side!"

"I'm in love with Axel, and I refuse to marry anyone else!"

Elysia gently tried to manage her expectations.

"What if Axel doesn't want to settle down?"

Blossom slumped, looking utterly heartbroken.

"Then I'll just cry my eyes out. And if the crying doesn't take me out, I guess I'll die a lonely spinster!"

Elysia and Winona exchanged helpless looks.

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Later that afternoon, as the party wound down, Blossom had fully intended to ride back with Elysia.

But as they stepped out of the venue, Lancelot was waiting by the entrance.

He wore casually tailored clothes and sleek silver-rimmed glasses, looking every bit the refined gentleman.

His striking looks were already

drawing lingering stares from the

departing socialites, who whispered among themselves

trying to figure

out who he was.

"What's he doing here?" Blossom muttered in surprise.

The answer was obvious he had come to pick her up.

"Are you riding with us, or are you going with him?" Elysia asked.

Blossom rubbed the back of her neck. "You guys go ahead. I guess I should have a talk with him."

She jogged over to Lancelot and climbed into the passenger seat, leaving with him.

As they pulled away, Lancelot rolled down his window and offered Elysia a polite, warm farewell.

Tarquin stood beside his wife, his eyes narrowed as he assessed the other man. He recognized Lancelot from their chaotic encounter in Silver City.

While Tarquin had zero personal interest in Blossom, he scrutinized Lancelot with the intense, calculating gaze of a rival.

He was doing it for Axel.

On the drive home, Tarquin glanced at Elysia.

"What's the current situation with Lancelot and Blossom?"

"Both sets of parents are aggressively trying to set them up," Elysia replied.

"And Blossom's stance?" Tarquin asked.

Elysia sighed.

"She's not interested in Lancelot. She's holding out for Axel. Speaking of which, when is he finally getting back

idn't you say he was

returning for the holidays?

Tarquin nodded slowly.

"He should be back in the next couple of days. I'll check in with him tonight."

Pausing for a moment, Tarquin looked at Elysia with rare earnestness.

"Axel doesn't have the same 't have advantages as Lancelot. He has no family to advocate for him. Since you're the closest thing he has to a

sister do me a favor and put in a good word for him with Blossom's parents."

Tarquin had specifically mentioned her parents, not Blossom herself.

After all, dating was between two people, but marriage meant joining two families.

No matter how deeply Blossom felt for Axel, if Folly and Hollis fiercely opposed the union, a happily-ever-after was practically impossible.

Elysia studied Tarquin's expression.

"You've never actually given me the full story on Axel's background."

"Blossom jokes that he's as cold as ice, but honestly, he's even more guarded than that!"

"What exactly did he go through to end up this way?"

Chapter 1804

A shadow crossed Tarquin's features, his brows knitting together as dark memories surfaced.

"Axel had a tragic upbringing..."

Before he could elaborate, his phone buzzed. It was Booker Murphy, inviting him to the Blissful Pub.

Keaton's sudden plunge into fatherhood was massive news, and the guys were eager to drag him out for drinks and merciless teasing.

With all the parents hovering at the party earlier, they hadn't been able to properly celebrate. Now, it was time for a private boys' night.

Through the receiver, Gale Windham's loud laughter and drunken jokes echoed in the background.

Hearing the commotion, Elysia smiled at Tarquin.

"Go on. I'll take the kids home. We can talk later."

Tarquin told Booker he'd see him shortly and ended the call. He then instructed the driver to pull over at the Blissful Pub, which was conveniently on their route.

Turning back to Elysia, he murmured, "I'll give you the full story on Axel later. Just know that he's had it rough. Aside from us, there isn't a single person in this world who cares whether he finds happiness."

"We met as kids and practically raised each other. He's my brother in every way that counts, and I just want to see him happy."

Elysia softened. "Does Axel actually have feelings for Blossom?"

Tarquin offered a pragmatic response.

"...He definitely doesn't push her away, which means there's a real chance. Honestly, if he lets Blossom slip through his fingers, he's probably going to die a bachelor."

There was a time when Tarquin hadn't understood the downside of solitude.

But ever since he had built a life with Elysia, the mere thought of returning to that lonely existence was unbearable.

A home was just a house without the warmth of a loving partner.

Being truly alone was a miserable fate.

He had experienced both sides, and the joy of having a family was unparalleled.

That was why he was pushing so hard for Axel and Blossom to make it work, so he could have a warm home of his own.

A tight-knit brotherhood was incredible, but it could never replace the deep, fulfilling love of a family.

Elysia frowned thoughtfully.

"The Spencers are a warm, stable family, and they completely adore Blossom. When it comes to family dynamics, Axel is at a massive disadvantage."

"And let's look at their careers. Axel might be loaded, but his line of work is highly volatile and dangerous. Lancelot's job is safe and respectable."

Forget Folly and Hollis-even she and Winona just wanted Blossom to have a safe, peaceful future.

Tarquin countered smoothly.

"Career isn't an issue. Axel could step into a CEO role tomorrow if he wanted to. His personal net worth, blows past eighty percent of the billionaires in this country

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Elysia raised an eyebrow. "The real question is, is he actually willing to walk away

from his current life?"

Tarquin went silent.

The answer was painfully obvious: No, he wasn't.

Axel thrived in the dangerous, adrenaline-fueled underbelly of the world Asking him to suddenly settle down into a mundane corporate life was nearly impossible.

Elysia let out a soft sigh.

"Folly and Hollis know Lancelot inside and out. They have zero clue who Axel really

is, which means they're absolutely going to pick Lancelot."

"So, look at it objectively-whether it's family background, career stability, or parental approval, Axel has no leverage."

She and Winona had admitted to each other in private that even they would choose Lancelot.

His credentials completely overshadowed Axel's, and most importantly, a life with Lancelot guaranteed Blossom's safety.

Tarquin's tone was calm and resolute.

"But Blossom is in love with Axel. And that is his ultimate trump card."

Elysia couldn't deny that. Outsiders could only do so much; matters of the heart always came down to the people involved.

Blossom's undeniable love for Axel annihilated every logical advantage Lancelot possessed.

But...

"She loves him now, yes, but feelings don't last forever in a vacuum. If Axel keeps shutting her out, they'll never work. Besides, he's constantly out of the country. They barely even see each other."

Tarquin's eyes darkened slightly.

"If everything goes according to plan this time around, Axel is going to change."

Chapter 1805

"Once he's back, I'm forcing him to take an extended vacation. He needs time to properly court Blossom and build something real with her."

If this old vendetta was finally settled, the crushing weight that had suffocated Axel for years would vanish.

He would finally be able to let his guard down.

Freed from that immense pressure and darkness, perhaps he would finally let some light into his life.

Elysia nodded thoughtfully.

"Lancelot is a good man, so I'm certainly not going to speak ill of him. But when the opportunity arises, I'll definitely advocate for Axel with Folly and Hollis."

A slow, devastating smile curved Tarquin's lips. He leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead.

"On Axel's behalf, thank you."

A short while later, the sleek luxury car pulled up to the entrance of the Blissful Pub. Tarquin bid Elysia goodbye and stepped out into the night.

Elysia remained in the car, watching over the sleeping children as they continued their journey home.

They hadn't gone far when her phone buzzed. It was Diane Han.

Diane was Mrs. Murphy's niece, making her Booker Murphy's younger cousin. Elysia barely knew the girl. They had only just met at the party today.

Diane had eagerly sought them out to introduce herself and swap contact info.

Moving in the same elite circles and wanting to save face for Booker, Elysia, Winona, and Blossom had all politely obliged when Diane asked for their numbers.

Staring at the caller ID, Elysia felt a flicker of confusion.

Why would Diane be calling her?

She swiped to answer. "Hello?"

Diane's sickly-sweet voice chirped through the speaker. "Elysia! It's Diane. Booker's cousin?"

"I remember," Elysia replied politely. "Is something the matter?"

Diane sounded breathless with excitement.

"I just spotted your car! I'm driving right behind you. Could you pull over for a second? I have a little gift for you."

Caught off guard, Elysia glanced out the rear window.

The road was packed with traffic, making it impossible to single out Diane's car.

Not wanting to be rude, she agreed. "Alright."

Hanging up, Elysia instructed her driver to pull over to the shoulder.

Moments later, a flashy sports car swerved to a halt right behind them. Diane

hopped out, holding a beautifully wrapped gift box.

Elysia stepped out onto the pavement to meet her.

"Elysia!"

Diane bounded over with a wide, beaming smile, shoving the box into her hands.

"My boyfriend just made these

pastries from scratch and they are absolutely to die for Take them

home for the kids. Don't worry, everything is completely organic."

Elysia glanced down at the packaging. Stamped clearly across the front was the logo for First Love.

"Your boyfriend made these?" Elysia asked, raising an eyebrow.

Diane flushed a deep, rosy pink, looking like a smitten schoolgirl.

"Yes! Jae-hyun, the owner of First Love Bakery. We officially made things exclusive today!"

Elysia blinked in surprise. She had

heard rumors just hours ago that Diane was pursuing the elusive Koryon baker but she hadn't

expected them to lock it down so fast.

Flashing a polite smile, she said, "Congratulations. I'm very happy for you."

Diane practically glowed.

"Thank you so much! Enjoy the treats, and next time, I'll make sure to bring you wedding favors!"

"I look forward to it."

As Elysia took the box, Diane continued, her tone turning slightly conspiratorial.

"You know, my boyfriend just moved here, and he doesn't really know anyone yet. It would mean the world to me if you and Tarquin could look out for him and help him get established."

Diane was barely in her twenties—young, naive, and completely blinded by love.

She had been dating Jae-hyun Kim for exactly one day, yet she was already using

her family's social capital to pave the way for his business.

After all, breaking into the Jindale City elite as a foreigner required serious connections.

Before Elysia could formulate a diplomatic response, the passenger door of the sports car swung open, and Jae-hyun Kim stepped out into the streetlights.

He offered a lazy wave, a perfectly charming, practiced smile curving his lips.

As Elysia's eyes met his, her heart slammed painfully against her ribs, and a sudden, visceral wave of dread washed over her.

Chapter 1806

The face was completely unfamiliar, yet a strange sense of déjà vu washed over her.

It was as if she had seen him somewhere before, but couldn't quite place it.

And whatever the feeling was, it unsettled her deeply.

Elysia frowned, a flicker of instinctual hostility darkening her gaze.

"Jae-hyun, come over here and say hi to Elysia," Diane called out.

Dressed in a sharp, trendy coat with his hands casually tucked into his pockets, Jae-hyun strolled over with an effortless smile.

Diane linked her arm through his and made the introductions. "This is Elysia, the woman behind the Bradford Group."

Jae-hyun looked at Elysia, seemingly oblivious to her guarded expression. He offered a gentlemanly hand and spoke in slightly accented English, "A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Bradford."

Elysia eyed him warily. After a moment's hesitation, she gave his hand a brief, polite shake before quickly pulling back. "Hello."

His expression remained warm and inviting. "Diane mentioned you're a fan of the pastries at our shop. Please drop by First Love Bakery anytime-it's always on the house for you."

Elysia gave a noncommittal nod. "Right. Thanks."

Inside the car, Elliot narrowed his eyes, watching the exchange through the tinted window.

Elijah stirred awake beside him. "What are you looking at?" he asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Mom," Elliot replied simply.

Elijah followed his brother's gaze. "Who are those people talking to her?"

"One is Booker's cousin, and the other is the owner of First Love Bakery," Elliot said. "Look into him."

"Huh? Look into who?"

"The bakery owner."

Elijah looked confused. "Why?"

"Look at how tense Mom is," Elliot pointed out. "Every muscle in her body is coiled tight. There's definitely something off about that guy."

Elijah studied the scene for a moment before nodding. "Leave it to me. I'll dig up everything."

"Good."

Elliot rolled down the window and called out, "Mom!"

Elysia was desperately looking for an out, and Elliot provided the perfect excuse. She turned back to Jae-hyun and Diane. "The kids are awake, so I need to get going. We'll catch up later."

"No problem! Bye, Elysia," Diane chimed in cheerfully.

Elysia offered a tight, polite smile and turned back toward the car.

Jae-hyun watched her walk away, his gaze lingering long after she had slipped inside the vehicle.

Diane had to tug his sleeve to break his trance. "Jae-hyun? Should we get going too?"

Only then did he snap out of it, flashing her a brilliant smile. "Of course."

But just before he turned away, he cast one last, indecipherable glance in the direction of Elysia's departing car.

Elliot watched him through the rearview mirror, his young eyes sharp and calculating.

"When did you two wake up?" Elysia asked as she buckled her seatbelt.

"Just a minute ago," Elijah replied.

Elysia glanced at the back, where Evan, Emmett, and the baby were all still dead to the world.

Those three had played the hardest at the banquet today and were completely exhausted.

"Mom, do you have some kind of grudge against that guy?" Elliot asked suddenly. Elysia blinked, startled. "What?"

"You just seemed really tense when you were talking to him," Elliot observed.

"Was I that obvious?" she asked, surprised.

"Not to everyone, but I could tell," Elliot said. "You looked like you hated him." Elysia let out a heavy sigh.

"I honestly don't know what it is. I

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have no history with him, I don't even know him. But looking at kim gave me this weird sense of deja vu like I knew him, but didn't."

"Whatever it is, I really don't like him. It felt like we were sworn enemies in

a past life. I'll just keep my distance from now on

Elijah and Elliot exchanged a silent, knowing look.

Elysia signaled the driver to pull away. Pulling out her phone, she opened her group

chat and specifically tagged Winona.

[I just ran into Jae-hyun Kim. Totally freaked me out!]

Winona replied almost instantly. [What happened? Is everything okay?]

[It's so weird,] Elysia typed. [He's a complete stranger, but I swear I've seen him before. And my gut instinct was just screaming that he's bad news!]

Chapter 1807

Winona was quick to validate her. [Right?! That is exactly how I felt when I saw him at the banquet today!]

[He even shook my hand, and it gave me full-body chills,] Elysia replied.

[Wait, didn't you head home with the kids?] Winona asked. [How did you even run into him?]

[I bumped into Booker's cousin, Diane, on the way back. We chatted for a bit. Turns out she's dating Jae-hyun, and they were together.]

[If both of our alarm bells are going off, that means there's definitely something wrong with this guy!] Winona declared.

[Whether there is or isn't, we need to stay far away from him. Women's intuition is a very real thing, and it rarely misses.]

[Agreed,] Winona texted back. [Keep your distance and avoid him at all costs. Where are you now?]

[About half an hour from home. You?]

[I'm with Janelle. We're almost at the Huber estate.]

[Janelle is wonderful to you, so just relax and enjoy your time there. But if you ever feel uncomfortable, just give me a signal and I'll find an excuse to bring you over to my place.]

Winona sent back a flurry of hugging and kissing emojis. [Got it!]

The two of them chatted back and forth for a while, but Blossom remained noticeably silent in the group.

Both knew she had left with Lancelot and figured they were probably caught up in a deep conversation, so neither dared to interrupt her.

Half an hour later, Elysia's car pulled up to Number One Mansion.

Before she could even step out of the vehicle, she spotted two very familiar figures waiting near the entrance.

Her eyes lit up with unbridled joy. She practically threw the door open and rushed toward them. "Mom! Dad!"

"Irene!" Pamela cried out, hurrying over to pull her into a tight embrace. Clayton followed close behind, his face stretched into a warm, easy smile.

Elysia hugged Pamela fiercely before throwing her arms around Clayton.

"Why didn't you tell us you were coming?" she asked, laughing. "The kids and I would have picked you up at the airport!"

"We wanted it to be a surprise!" Clayton chuckled.

"Grandpa! Grandma!"

All five little ones were wide awake now, and seeing Clayton and Pamela sent them into an absolute frenzy of excitement.

They scrambled out of the car, practically tripping over themselves as they raced toward their grandparents.

Clayton and Pamela were overjoyed, bending down to scoop the kids into their arms, showering them with hugs and kisses. The driveway was filled with the sound of happy giggles for several minutes.

"Where's Tarquin?" Clayton asked, looking around.

"He had a business dinner, so he'll be back a bit later," Elysia explained. "He had no idea you guys were flying in today. If he knew he would have! definitely canceled his plans to be here."

"Oh, let the man work. We're not going anywhere, we can catch up with him tomorrow," Clayton said dismissively.

"I thought you guys weren't coming for another few days!" Elliot said, beaming.

Clayton looked down at his grandson with absolute adoration.

"The New Year is right around the corner! We weren't about to miss celebrating it with our favorite people."

"Your grandmother was heartbroken that we couldn't make it for the countdown on New Year's Eve, so there was no way we were going to miss this one."

The kids nodded enthusiastically in agreement.

The family made their way inside the sprawling mansion, the atmosphere bubbling with love and lively chatter.

But if Number One Mansion was lively, the Huber estate was operating on a whole different level.

Word of Winona's arrival had reached the staff long before her car even pulled through the gates.

The staff hadn't just laid down plush runners across the courtyard; they had fully re-carpeted the grand staircase inside with ultra-soft material.

Every coffee table corner and sharp edge in the living areas had been meticulously baby-proofed with padded guards.

Anything remotely sharp or hazardous had been completely removed from the premises.

They were terrified that even the slightest accident might harm Winona.

On top of that, the entire estate was decked out in festive ribbons and floral arrangements. The joyful energy rivaled the biggest holiday bashes of the year.

When Winona finally arrived, the household staff was lined up along the red carpet, practically vibrating with

2ement as they tried to steal

a glance at her baby bump.

An heir to the Huber legacy! Everyone was absolutely thrilled.

Chapter 1808

They weren't just excited about the baby-they adored Winona too.

They clamored to greet her, with a few eager staff members even throwing out a respectful "Mrs. Huber."

Winona was completely overwhelmed. She blushed furiously, looking like a bashful newlywed.

It wasn't that she was overly timid; the sheer scale of the reception was just jaw- dropping.

The hospitality of the Huber household was practically a tidal wave.

Janelle beamed with pride, her smile stretching from ear to ear as she personally handed out generous holiday bonuses to the staff to celebrate.

The atmosphere was electric, every single person in the estate swept up in the jubilant mood.

Back with the Livingston family, Winona had been treated like dirt.

But here, with the Hubers, she was treated like absolute royalty.

Yet, where there was joy for some, there was sorrow for others.

Later that evening, Elysia received an unexpected call from Lancelot, asking if she was free.

"What's going on?" Elysia asked, pausing her dinner prep in the kitchen. "Do you need something?"

"If you have some time, could you swing by Blossom's place?" Lancelot's voice was tight. "She got into a massive fight with her parents. She's in tears."

Elysia froze. "What happened?"

Lancelot let out a heavy, ragged sigh. "Me."

Elysia fell silent, the pieces slowly clicking into place.

"I know Winona is pregnant, so I didn't want to bother her with this," he continued. "If you're busy, I can "

"I'm free. I'll be right there."

Elysia hung up, quickly explained the situation to Clayton, Pamela, and the kids, grabbed her coat, and rushed out the door.

Folly and Hollis lived in the Faculty Courtyard, a charming but older residential complex subsidized by the university.

It lacked underground parking, and street spaces were notoriously tight, meaning outside vehicles were strictly barred from entering. Elysia had to park outside the gates and walk the rest of the way in.

The moment she stepped out of her car, she spotted Lancelot.

He was standing alone beneath a pomegranate tree near the entrance, his brow furrowed, radiating a quiet, suffocating grief.

Elysia hurried over to him. "Why are you waiting out here?"

Lancelot blinked, snapping out of his daze. "I was waiting for you."

They walked into the courtyard together. "Is Blossom okay?" Elysia asked. "I tried calling her on the drive over, but it wouldn't connect."

Lancelot sighed. "She smashed her phone. That's why you couldn't reach her."

Elysia gasped. "She smashed it?!"

"Yeah."

"Was the fight really that bad?"

"She broke down crying. So did Hollis."

Elysia's brow creased with worry. Blossom had definitely clashed with Folly and Hollis growing up, but that was mostly just teenage rebellion over academics.

As an adult, she rarely saw them, so their reunions were usually peaceful and warm.

They hadn't had a genuine blowup like this in years.

"Who is Axel, really?" Lancelot asked abruptly.

Elysia faltered, caught off guard by the question.

Lancelot adjusted his glasses, his gaze fixed on the pavement.

"The first time Blossom mentioned having feelings for Axel, I assumed it was a lie-

a convenient excuse to avoid settling down and getting married."

"But today she looked me in the eye and told me she's completely serious about him. That he's the only man she'll ever be with, the only man she'll ever commit to."

"I... it hurts like hell, but I also don't understand it. Even when we lived apart, we talked almost every single day. She never mentioned having a crush on anyone."

"I've been in Jindale City this whole time, and I haven't seen any other guys hovering around her."

"When did she fall for him?"

"And who exactly is this Axel guy?"

Elysia could see the raw devastation etched into Lancelot's features e looked dangerously fragile like a pane of glass that would shatter at the slightest tap.

Chapter 1809

Elysia let out a long, helpless sigh.

"Axel is Tarquin's right-hand man, practically a brother to him. He's been out of town on business recently. As for Blossom... I think it was essentially love at first sight."

"To be completely honest, I don't know much about Axel personally. I don't know his background or where he really comes from."

"But I can promise you that he is a good man."

Anyone who Tarquin trusted as a brother wouldn't be a bad person.

Both Axel and Lowell were deeply honorable men.

Lancelot's frown deepened. He pushed further.

"Does he even like her? Blossom told me she's still the one chasing him."

Elysia hesitated for a moment before giving him the unvarnished truth.

"I don't know for sure. From what I hear, he has some feelings for her, but whether they'll actually end up together is another story."

The despair in Lancelot's eyes deepened.

"She'd rather choose a gamble that might go nowhere than choose me."

Elysia's heart ached for him. She struggled to find the right words to soothe the massive blow to his ego and heart. After a long beat, she finally spoke.

"She's always seen you as family, Lancelot. In her eyes, you're the closest thing she has to a brother."

"The fact that she was totally honest with you means she respects you too much to keep you on the hook as a backup plan. She cares about you deeply."

Lancelot drew in a sharp breath, his eyes rimmed with red.

"I know she cares. But... I've loved her for so long. There's literally no room left in me to love anyone else."

"When we were kids, we used to play house in this very courtyard. She was always my bride. Since then, I've never pictured a future with anyone else."

"I thought we'd eventually just get married. I never saw this coming."

A wave of sorrow washed over Elysia, but she had to be the voice of reason.

"You can't force love, and nobody can dictate how it happens. You

can't even control your own heart, let alone someone else's know you're hurting, but please... don't hold this against Blossom."

Lancelot managed a sad, hollow smile.

"How could I? I love her too much to ever harbor resentment toward her."

"Even if she doesn't choose me, I won't hate her. I just want her to be happy."

"But before I step aside, I need to know exactly what kind of man Axel is. If he can give her the happiness she deserves, I'll walk away. If he can't, I won't let her throw her life away on him."

Hearing his resolute declaration, Elysia felt a lump form in her throat.

Lancelot was a truly incredible catch. It was a damn shame things hadn't worked out.

"You should head up," he finally said.

"She definitely doesn't want to see me right now, and I don't want to

make things worse. Just text me once you've calmed her down, okay? I need to know she's alright."

Elysia nodded. "Alright. It's freezing out here, so head home soon."

Lancelot gave a slow nod. "Yeah."

Elysia walked into the aging building alone and began the climb up the stairs.

Pausing on the second-floor landing,

she glanced out the hallway window. Lancelot was still standing frozen beneath the pale streetlamp. The light stretched his shadow long across the concrete a stark lonely silhouette drowning in heartbreak.

She sighed again. Love was such a brutal, relentless force.

Because of her feelings for Axel, Blossom had shattered Lancelot's heart, alienated his parents, and devastated her own. She was isolating herself, pushing away the people who loved her most.

Was it really worth all this collateral damage?

And in the end, would she even get her happy ending?

Chapter 1810

When Elysia finally reached the Blythe family's door, Folly was the one who answered it.

He looked thoroughly surprised to see her. "Elysia? What are you doing here?"

"Lancelot called me. He told me Blossom got into a huge fight with you guys and was in tears."

Folly scowled and let out a harsh breath.

Instead of letting her inside, he stepped out into the hallway, pulled the door shut behind him, and lowered his voice.

"Elysia, give it to me straight. What exactly is going on between Blossom and this Axel character?"

Elysia decided not to sugarcoat it.

"She's entirely serious about him, Folly. She's deeply in love with him."

Before, Elysia had assumed Blossom's crush was just a fleeting infatuation, the kind a teenage girl might have for a celebrity.

After all, Axel was drop-dead gorgeous with a physique that could put A-list actors to shame.

His intense, brooding aura made him undeniably magnetic.

It made total sense that Blossom would be swooning over him.

But when Blossom gave Axel the protective talisman she had worn around her neck for over twenty years right before he left town, Elysia realized just how high the stakes really were.

The tiny charm wasn't worth much monetarily, but to Blossom, it was everything. She guarded that talisman with her life.

She constantly preached that it was her ultimate lifeline, never taking it off for a second—not to shower, not to sleep, not for anything.

She genuinely believed she had a fragile destiny and had narrowly escaped death several times as a child.

It was only after getting that charm that her life had stabilized. She was convinced she would have died years ago without it.

Whenever she spoke about the piece, her tone was deadly serious.

She'd always insist that some superstitions were worth believing in and vowed to wear it until the day she died.

And yet, she had unclasped it and handed it over to Axel.

In Blossom's eyes, that was the equivalent of offering up her own soul to keep him safe.

If that wasn't true love, what was?

Folly pinched the bridge of his nose, his expression grim.

"Is it because she feels indebted to him? Because he saved her from that

kidnapping in Silver City?"

Elysia immediately shook her head.

"No. She had already fallen for him long before that."

"When did they even have the time to really get to know each other?" he demanded.

"They haven't, really," Elysia admitted.

Folly's face darkened with rage.

"So you're telling me my daughter is throwing her life away on a purely one-sided obsession with a man she barely knows s?

Elysia remained silent, confirming the bitter truth.

Folly looked like he was going to have a stroke.

"Has she completely lost her mind?! In what universe does this Axel even compare to Lancelot?! We've known... Lancelot his entire liferte has a safe, stable career, and he adores

hert"

"And Axel? He's a complete mystery, his line of work is clearly dangerous, and the

kicker is he doesn't even want her!"

"She is going to send her mother and me to an early grave!"

"She was foolish as a kid, and it seems she hasn't grown a brain cell since!"

Elysia completely understood his frustration. Fathers were notoriously critical of any man their daughters brought home, but this situation was uniquely explosive.

Axel's lifestyle involved real, visceral danger.

What father would willingly let his daughter marry into that kind of risk?

Beyond that, Lancelot was visibly devoted to Blossom, whereas Blossom was the one hopelessly chasing Axel.

Naturally, a parent would prefer the man to be the one fiercely pursuing their daughter.

Because in the brutal game of romance, the one who falls first is always the one who ends up bleeding the most.

Steeling herself, Elysia tried to run interference.

"Axel really is a good person, Folly. And he's remarkably accomplished."

But Folly cut her off.