

Hitched 391

Chapter 391

No matter if Elysia is my real mom or not, or if she's the woman Dad's been searching for, I like her, and she likes me. That means we're family!

I want this mom, and I want a complete family. Even if she's not the woman Dad's been looking for, can't Dad try to like her for me?"

Tarquin was taken aback by his son's words, "You want me to be with her? What if she's not your mom, and your real mom comes back? What then?" "Whether Mom comes back or not has nothing to do with you being with her."

Tarquin frowned, "I promised your mom I'd make her the happiest and most dignified woman in the world!"

Elijah challenged, "So, she can't be happy or dignified without marrying you? Only marrying you makes her happy and dignified? Dad, isn't that a bit narcissistic?!"

Tarquin was left speechless by his son's retort, "..."

Elijah continued, "Taking responsibility doesn't necessarily mean marrying Mom. Just like paying back a favor doesn't have to mean committing your life. Maybe your insistence on marrying her is actually her misfortune."

Tarquin's lips moved, but he didn't know how to argue back.

He had always wanted to find her, to be with her. He believed in a lifetime commitment, especially since they had been intimate; it seemed right to be together. But, his son's words made some sense...

Elijah added, "Right now, I just want Elysia to be my mom, and I want Dad to be with her. Of course, I won't force you, Dad. I just hope you can try. If after trying, you still don't like her, I won't blame you. But if you won't even try, I'll be really sad."

Tarquin quickly said, "I didn't say I wouldn't try."

How could he bear to make his son sad?

"So, you agree?"

Tarquin didn't answer immediately. He looked at his son for a long moment, then glanced inside the room, "Did she teach you to say all this?"

Elijah shook his head, "She doesn't even like you, why would she tell me to say these things?"

Tarquin frowned again, "..."

Elijah pushed, "So, do you agree or not?"

Tarquin, looking into his son's hopeful eyes, felt as if he had lost his right to choose. "I agree!"

Elijah's eyes lit up, "Great, then it's settled. From today, Dad will start pursuing Mom!"

Tarquin, reluctantly and confused, hummed in agreement.

Elijah emphasized again, "A gentleman's word is his bond. Since you agreed, Dad, you have to follow through! I'll be watching! Don't let me down! And, Dad, stop wondering if she's really my mom or not. You have to forget the past and wholeheartedly pursue Mom!"

After saying this, Elijah went off happily to find Elysia.

The little guy had achieved all his goals for the day. He prayed that Mom wouldn't leave, giving his silly Dad a chance, which she agreed to. Then, he had a little talk with his silly Dad, pressuring him to let go of everything and start pursuing his mom. Although his Dad was reluctant, he agreed!

So the little guy was really happy.

And his silly Dad was really confused.

He was supposed to start pursuing Elysia today?

He was supposed to pursue Elysia?

Even though he didn't know if she was really the one!

Tarquin was bewildered!

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In the hospital room, Elysia was still on edge. The moment she saw Elijah return, she quickly whispered,

"Elijah, did you tamper with the paternity test Dr. Benjamin ran?"

Elijah, covering for Elliot and Evan, admitted with a nod, "Yeah."

"You're amazing! How did you manage that in such a short time?"

Elijah fibbed, "I called a buddy to slip a fake test result into the file. Don't worry, Mom, Dad and Uncle Benjamin have no clue. And I've already talked to Dad. He won't force you into another test."

Elysia, both shocked and delighted, exclaimed, "Really?"

"Yeah!"

Elysia was overjoyed. "That's fantastic!"

No more worries about the paternity test!

Curious, she asked, "Elijah, he can be so tough to deal with. How did you convince him?"

Elijah explained, "Dad really listens to me and cares about how I feel. I told him I didn't want him digging into your and my relationship anymore, and he agreed right away. From now on, Mom, just live your life at ease. I've got your back, and Dad won't dare run another test on his own."

Elysia was deeply moved and planted a kiss on Elijah's cheek, "Elijah, you're Mommy's little hero!"

Elijah's cheeks flushed with embarrassment, not used to being kissed by a girl.

He pursed his lips, held his breath, and stood stiff for a while before speaking again,

"Mom, you remember what you promised me, right?"

Elysia knew what he was referring to and fell silent for a moment.

She knew she couldn't be with that man; agreeing to spend time with him was just a waste of time. But if it could make her son happy, it was worth it.

"Of course, I remember. Don't worry, I won't go back on my word. I'll give it a try."

Elijah was thrilled, so much that he wanted to return the kiss to Elysia.

But he didn't make a move, instead just staring at Elysia, his breathing erratic and too shy to actually kiss her.

His cheeks were beet-red.

"Why's your face so red all of a sudden? Are you feeling okay?" Elysia asked.

Elijah quickly looked away, his heart racing, "No, it's nothing."

Elysia, still concerned, checked his forehead to make sure he wasn't feverish, then carried him back to his hospital bed,

"Elijah, rest for a bit. I'll call you when dinner is ready."

"Okay, Mom, can you make a portion for Dad too?" Elijah looked at her with hopeful eyes.

Elysia hesitated for a second but then nodded, "Alright!"

She didn't feel like cooking for him, but she couldn't bear to refuse her son.

While Elysia was busy cooking, Elijah texted Elliot, briefing him on the mini-meeting between him and their mom.

Elliot and Emmett were in good spirits.

Since Tarquin agreed not to probe into their mom's past, their beloved mom wouldn't have to live in anxiety and fear anymore.

But Evan had strong opinions, scoffing,

"Mom doesn't even like him, and now she has to spend time with him? That's just torturing her. Having to face someone she dislikes every day, she'd feel sick to her stomach."

Elliot responded, "As long as he stops investigating her, she can peacefully coexist with him."

"Hmph! Mom will never fall for that jerk Tarquin, it's a waste of time!"

"It's not a waste. If she still doesn't like Tarquin after this period, Elijah will join us in leaving. We're buying time for Elijah, not for Tarquin."

Evan felt somewhat better, pouting, "Mom will definitely not fall for that loser Tarquin. Our mom deserves better!"

The four little ones had vastly different attitudes towards the situation between Elysia and Tarquin.

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Elijah was wholeheartedly rooting for Elysia and Tarquin to hit it off, loving both his mom and dad without reservation.

Evan, on the other hand, was a different story. His heart belonged solely to his mom-she was his goddess, his queen, and his little princess all rolled into one! And Tarquin? In his eyes, Tarquin was nothing!

The kid just couldn't see Tarquin fitting into their lives, plain and simple. Evan thought Tarquin was far from worthy of his goddess mom! Elliot and Emmett were more on the fence. Of course, mom was the number one person in their hearts, but dad... well, he was optional. Whether they wanted a dad around depended entirely on how mom felt about it. If mom liked him, then he was in. If not, then it was a no-go! So, with the current situation, Elijah was over the moon, Evan was miffed, and Elliot and Emmett were just cruising, content as long as their beloved mom was happy.

Elliot, ever indulgent, patted Evan on the head and said, "I know you're not thrilled right now, but think about Elijah. We're doing this for him, and you're his big brother, right? Big brothers should look out for their little bros, shouldn't they?"

Evan's eyes lit up. "Elijah's going to call me brother?"

"Of course! Elijah came into our lives later, so he should definitely call you brother. I've talked to him about this, and he's thrilled to be your little bro." Evan seemed to fancy this role, quickly adding, "Elijah is my brother, and I'd go through hell and high water for him!"

"So, you'd be okay with putting up with some delays for Elijah's sake, right?"

"Yeah! But only if that loser Tarquin doesn't upset mom!"

Elliot chuckled. "Don't worry, Elijah will take good care of mom."

Evan felt better and glanced at his wrist where White was resting, saying, "As the big brother, I should get Elijah a gift. Hey, White, how about you take a trip back home and bring back one of your distant cousins as a present for Elijah?"

White, who had been dozing off, opened one eye to look at his young master, flicked his tongue out, and then snuggled back into his sleeve. Evan pouted. "Stingy! It's for Elijah, not just anyone. Elijah is my brother! And yours too!"

White didn't respond, ignoring him.

Suddenly, Evan had an idea and asked Elliot, "When is mom coming back?"

"I'm not sure," Elliot replied. "Mom and Elijah just got to know each other, so she'll definitely want to spend more time with him. Why, you need mom for something?"

Evan squinted his eyes, a mischievous glint appearing, "I'll tell you when mom gets back."

...

In the hospital, Elysia had prepared dinner, and Elijah eagerly volunteered to fetch Tarquin.

After the kids had their little meeting, Tarquin was all over the place. He didn't head back to the room but instead found his way to the smoking area at the end of the hallway for a cigarette break.

"Dad, dinner's ready."

Seeing the little guy coming out of the room from a distance, Tarquin immediately stubbed out his cigarette and went to meet him.

Taking a break with a cigarette had cleared his head. He agreed with what Elijah said; his feelings for Elijah's mom were more guilt than love.

And even if he needed to take responsibility, it didn't necessarily mean he had to marry her.

Still, he was going to keep looking for her, just as he always had!

Once he found her, he'd follow her lead.

If she was willing, he'd be with her.

If she had moved on and they couldn't be together, then he'd offer her a hefty compensation.

No matter what, he was determined to make amends for the mistakes of the past and to fulfill the promises he had made!

So, until he found her, he wouldn't get involved with any other women, including Elysia.

However...

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If Elysia turned out to be the one, it would be a win-win for everyone!

Elijah liked her, and since she was single after her divorce, he could pursue her without any hesitation!

But if Elysia wasn't the one... He wouldn't allow himself to develop any feelings for her until he had found Elijah's mother.

He wanted to keep himself available for Elijah's mom unless she didn't want him. Only then would he consider moving on with another woman.

Agreeing to pursue Elysia to make his son happy was just a spur-of-the-moment decision.

His main task now was to figure out if Elysia was really the one!

Until the results from Benjamin's test came back, he was certain. But now, doubt had crept into his mind.

So, he had to do another paternity test!

Of course, this time he couldn't go about it as openly as before. He had to be sneaky about it.

And he couldn't treat Elysia the same way he had been either. After all, he couldn't be sure she was the one yet!

"Daddy!" Elijah had made his way to him.

Tarquin snapped back to reality, sorted out his next steps, and felt better.

He looked down at his son with a loving smile and scooped him up,

"Didn't I tell you I'd be right back after your call? What brought you out here?"

Elijah said, "I had something to tell you."

Tarquin narrowed his eyes slightly, "Something left unsaid?"

"It's all said. I just worried you'd forget."

Tarquin chuckled affectionately, "No chance. If I promised you, I'll do it."

Chasing after Elysia, huh?

His heart might not be in it, but he could play the part.

As they walked and talked, Elijah let out a sigh of relief, thought of something, and then asked anxiously,

"Daddy, do you even know how to woo a lady?!"

"Elijah, you think you need to teach me?"

Elijah frowned, "I'm a kid, I don't know how! And I don't need to, but you have to, or how will you win mommy over?"

Tarquin said, "Maybe I'll ask your Uncle Keaton for some advice."

"No way! He's a total player, you can't learn from him!"

Tarquin couldn't help but laugh. If Keaton heard Elijah calling him that, he'd be mortified.

"Then I guess I'll have to do some research on my own, figure out how to win a lady's heart."

"Yeah! Go for it, Daddy!"

Looking into his son's bright eyes, Tarquin felt deeply moved.

Regardless, Elysia had a significant impact on Elijah. When she was about to leave, Elijah nearly fell ill. Her staying made him instantly happier.

Seeing Elijah's current state, nothing like a child with psychological issues, warmed his heart.

Inside the hospital room, Elysia was dishing up some noodles.

Elijah needed something light and easy to digest after waking up, so she made him some simple noodle soup.

As soon as the father and son returned to the room, Elijah gave Tarquin a look, signaling him to help in the kitchen.

Tarquin glanced at Elysia unintentionally, catching only her silhouette.

After hesitating for a moment, he decided to follow his son's wish, put down the little guy, took off his jacket, tossed it on the couch, and rolled up his sleeves to head to the kitchen.

Elysia had just ladled out a bowl of soup intending to serve it when she heard someone behind her, "Let me help."

Startled, she nearly dropped the bowl, but Tarquin caught it just in time!

However, some soup splashed onto the back of her hand, causing her to wince in pain...

Tarquin, holding the bowl with one hand, quickly grabbed a paper towel with the other for her.

Elysia, feeling awkward, glanced at him and took the towel,

"Thanks, I've got it."

Tarquin also felt a bit uneasy, handed her the towel, and took the bowl outside.

After all, not too long ago, they were at odds over the paternity test. Suddenly acting polite felt awkward for both.

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Oh, the drama at the dinner table could rival any Thanksgiving family gathering gone awry. But here they were, Elijah having summoned his parents to an unofficial "peace treaty" meeting over dinner. The stakes? Whoever lost their cool first would be in the bad graces of their son. So, there they sat, feigning harmony for the sake of their boy.

But let's be real, the so-called peace was as thin as the broth in their bowls, all for Elijah's eyes. Deep down, both Elysia and Tarquin harbored their own schemes.

At Elijah's request, Elysia had whipped up a bowl of noodles for Tarquin as well. Three bowls of noodles, three people, all pretending this was the picture of domestic bliss.

Throughout the meal, Elijah couldn't stop singing praises about Elysia's cooking, pushing Tarquin to join the chorus.

"Dad, isn't mom's noodles the best?"

That question came with a side of a stern glance from the little guy, a clear warning.

Tarquin could only muster a "...", internally scoffing at the overemphasis on a simple bowl of noodles. "It's just noodles. How fancy can it get?" But out loud, he praised, "Delicious! Absolutely wonderful!"

Elysia, on the receiving end of the compliment, couldn't care less internally but responded with a cheerful, "Glad you like it. There's more in the pot." The table fell into an awkward silence soon after, only to be broken by a swift kick to Tarquin's leg from under the table. It was Elijah, sending covert signals of distress to his dad.

Tarquin, utterly confused, tried to decipher his son's silent messages, much to Elijah's frustration.

Post-dinner, as Elysia busied herself cleaning up, Elijah seized the moment to lecture Tarquin.

"Dad, you're the one who's supposed to be wooing mom, not me. You gotta pick up the slack and not rely on me to remind you!"

Tarquin wanted to protest that it was Elijah who had set this whole charade in motion, but he kept it to himself, asking instead, "What were you trying to remind me of?"

"To find something to talk about with mom! Girls like sweet talk. You can't win her over by being silent. You need to charm her with words, dad. Mom's easy to please that way."

"...Right, got it," Tarquin mumbled, slumping toward the couch before Elijah's exasperated tug pulled him back to reality.

"You can't just say it; you need to act on it! Go help mom in the kitchen!"

Reluctantly, Tarquin made his way to the kitchen, where Elysia was washing up. Upon seeing him, she immediately dismissed his offer to help. "What are you doing here? I don't need help."

But Tarquin, driven by his son's insistence, coldly replied, "Elijah asked me to help."

Their interaction was anything but warm, each preoccupied with their own cunning thoughts. Tarquin pondered how to secretly obtain a sample for a paternity test with Elijah, while Elysia dreamt of whisking her son away from Tarquin, leaving her troubled past behind for a fresh start.

Meanwhile, Benjamin's arrival with news of Elijah's discharge from the hospital stirred new plots in Elysia's mind, her gears turning at the thought of escaping the hospital's confines and the chains of her current life.

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Today was a landmark day for them; she had just reconnected with her son, Elijah, and was eager to bring him home for a reunion dinner with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. Maximizing happiness was her mission.

She found the perfect moment to discuss her plans with Tarquin, "This afternoon, once Elijah is discharged, I'd like to take him to my best friend's house."

Tarquin squinted at her, waiting for her to continue.

"My kids and Elijah have become fast friends. They were really worried when they heard he was sick. Now that he's better, they're dying to have him over for dinner," Elysia explained. Worried he might object, she quickly added, "Don't worry, it's not an overnight stay. Just dinner, and then I'll bring Elijah right back."

Tarquin proposed, "Why not have your kids come to my place? I'll host dinner."

"No way!"

"Why not?"

"The kids wouldn't feel at ease at your house."

"Then I'll take them out for dinner."

"That won't work either. We're planning to cook a meal together at home."

Tarquin studied her for a few moments, "Alright, you handle it."

Elysia hurriedly asked, "You agree?"

"Yeah."

Elysia's eyes sparkled with surprise; she hadn't expected him to agree so readily and found herself warming up to him significantly. Despite his good looks, she often thought of him as somewhat useless. But today, he proved he could step up when it mattered!

Before she could softly thank him, he suddenly asked, "What do we need to buy? I can have someone pick things up in advance."

"We've got it covered," she assured.

"What do your friend and your kids like?"

"Pardon?"

"It's my first formal visit; I should bring something."

Elysia blinked, "You're coming over?"

"Yeah, I'll come with Elijah in the evening."

His casual tone took her aback, "You're coming too?!"

"Of course, I want to be there for Elijah."

"No, you don't need to come. I can take Elijah by myself and bring him back after dinner."

She hadn't intended for him to join; his presence would surely reveal the secret of the three little ones!

Yet, Tarquin calmly responded, "That's not happening."

Elysia frowned, "Why not?!"

"You can take Elijah to your place, but I must come along."

"Why do you need to come? I can take good care of Elijah!"

Tarquin didn't bother explaining, "If you don't agree to me coming, then Elijah can't go either."

"You... don't trust me?! Are you worried I can't take care of Elijah properly?"

His concern wasn't her caregiving skills but the fear of others harboring ill intentions towards Elijah. Seeing his silence, Elysia grew anxious,

"Elijah will be going to my place, not somewhere unknown. My friend and her three kids adore him; we'll take great care of him. You should have peace of mind. Moreover, for Elijah, getting used to new environments and people is beneficial for his psychological recovery. He has to take this step sooner or later! You can't be by his side forever!"

Elysia made a compelling argument, and Tarquin felt a stir of emotion.

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Elijah really needed to get out more, mix it up with new faces and places.

There was a brief silence before Tarquin glanced over at Elijah, making sure the little guy wasn't paying attention to their conversation. He then spoke, "You know, if you want to take Elijah for a while, that's cool. Let's make a deal."

"A deal? What kind of deal?"

Tarquin was upfront, "I want to do another paternity test. I need your sample."

If she agreed, it would be way better than him sneaking around behind her back. Once the results were in, he could openly discuss it with her.

Elysia's face dropped, her heart racing, "You still want to..."

"Shh, keep it down! I'm not forcing you, just proposing an idea!"

"But you promised Elijah you'd stop snooping around! Breaking your word is low!"

Tarquin furrowed his brow, "I'm just discussing it with you!"

"Well, let me make it clear, I don't agree! End of discussion!"

Tarquin saw her strong opposition, he frowned but didn't lose his temper or force the issue. His son was nearby, and he wasn't about to upset her and make his son unhappy. Plus, what if she really was the one he was looking for? If he upset her now, he might regret it later.

"If you don't agree, then you don't agree. I was just asking," he said, trying to appear nonchalant.

Elysia took a deep breath to calm herself down before asking, "So, can Elijah go with me later?" "Sure, I'll drive you over, and pick you up later."

Seeing his agreement, Elysia lit up, "No need for a ride, Elijah and I can take a cab back."

Tarquin gave her a look, "I'm offering a ride for safety reasons."

Elysia paused, then nodded, "I get it."

Later that afternoon, after completing the discharge procedures, the trio left the hospital. Elijah was eager to hang out with his buddies, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, so he was in a great mood. Elysia was all smiles too, thinking about the happy times ahead, she couldn't contain her joy. Tarquin's mood was harder to read. Not exactly happy, but not sad either, his expression was inscrutable.

They rode in the same family Volkswagen, with Lowell driving and the trio in the back. Elijah was sandwiched between Elysia and Tarquin.

Midway, they stopped for a bit, Tarquin and Lowell stepped out. Elysia thought they were just hitting the restroom, but when they returned, their arms were loaded with bags of snacks and various gifts, enough to fill the trunk.

Elysia was surprised, "Why all this? You're not even coming up."

Tarquin replied coolly, "It's a little something for Elijah's visit. A token of appreciation."

Elysia, "...." You had to give it to him, he was thoughtful when it came to Elijah. When Elliot, Evan, and Emmett went over to their friends' houses in the neighborhood, she liked to prepare some treats or small toys for them to take along too. It's the little things that parents do. No matter what she thought of him, as a father, he was doing alright.

Arriving at the apartment complex, Elysia and Elijah got out, and Blossom was already waiting at the entrance. To avoid Tarquin coming up, Elysia had arranged for Blossom to meet them outside.

Seeing them, Blossom cheerfully greeted, "Elysia!" But as she approached and caught sight of Tarquin, she froze in her tracks!

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Although Tarquin and Professor Folly were quite chummy, Blossom had never met the man before.

And boy, did he leave an impression!

The guy looked, well, otherworldly!

Elysia knew her lovestruck friend was at it again and called out, "Blossom!"

Snapping back to reality with an awkward laugh, Blossom hurried over, "Coming, coming."

"This is Elijah's dad, Mr. Bradford, and over here we have Elijah's uncle, Lowell. And this is my BFF, Blossom," Elysia introduced.

Tarquin was the epitome of a gentleman, "Pleasure to meet you."

Lowell, with a grin, said, "Nice to meet ya, Ms. Blythe. Just Lowell is fine."

Blossom, nearly drooling in awe, nodded eagerly, "Nice, nice. Since you're here, why don't y'all come in for a bit?"

Elysia's face dropped, and she subtly nudged her friend!

Invite them in? The kids were still upstairs!

Oh, this woman. A handsome face and she loses her mind.

"They're busy, let's get going. We've got dinner to make," Elysia hurried Blossom away.

Blossom, head over heels as usual, called out during their goodbye, "Drop by anytime, our door's always open!"

Elysia could only sigh.

After the group left with their gifts, Tarquin and Lowell headed back to their car.

"Keep an eye on them," Tarquin instructed.

"Don't you worry about Elijah. I'll have a couple more guys check in," Lowell assured, then dialed to make arrangements before starting the car and asking Tarquin, "Mr. Huber called around noon, wanted to catch up. You in?"

Tarquin hesitated, then decided, "Let's go see him."

Suddenly, he felt something off, quickly turning to look out the window with a sharp gaze full of animosity.

But the corner was empty, nobody in sight.

Frowning, Tarquin asked, "Have we found that nutjob who tried to throw a dead cat into Elijah's room?"

Lowell, knowing exactly who he meant, nodded reluctantly, "Vanished into thin air. Oh, and there's something I forgot to show you. Watch this."

He found a video on his phone and handed it to Tarquin.

The video showed Elysia standing alone downstairs on the night Tarquin met with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. Initially, she seemed to be waiting and watching the entrance.

But then, suddenly, she turned around sharply...

As if someone had called her name.

After looking around and seeing no one, she turned back, only to spin around again a second later, this time facing the darkness, her lips moving cautiously as if questioning who was there.

Her conversation, fragmented as it was, grew increasingly anxious.

Then, she checked her phone, and whatever she saw nearly drove her to despair...

Ending with her fainting right there.

"And no suspicious figures were found in the complex that night?"

Lowell confirmed with a nod, "None. The security footage was untouched. Initially, the guards thought Ms. Thorne was talking to herself, but something felt off to me."

"She wasn't talking to herself. She was communicating with something."

Tarquin used the word 'something' instead of 'someone,' sending a shiver down Lowell's spine.

He was already a bit of a scaredy-cat, and the mention of ghosts or spirits had him breaking out in goosebumps.

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"Ms. Thorne got spooked?"

Tarquin's voice was ice-cold.

"All this talk of hauntings, as if! Even if there were such things, they wouldn't dare cause trouble on my turf! It's gotta be someone playing tricks! Did anyone check the lip-reading expert on that video?"

"Yeah, but the footage was too blurry. They couldn't make out what Ms. Thorne was saying."

Tarquin stared at the video, lost in thought for a moment.

"Look around, see if there's any hidden gadgets or something!"

He tossed his phone to Lowell and lit up a cigarette.

Over the years, he'd seen his fair share of bizarre incidents. Apart from unexplainable phenomena that might occur in old ruins, in populated living areas, specters simply didn't make the cut!

It was always people pulling stunts!

And frankly, people are far scarier than any ghost!

If it had been a ghost chatting with Elysia that night, he wouldn't be worried. But the thought of someone masquerading as a ghost to communicate with her? That was troubling.

What sane person goes around pretending to be a ghost?

Only someone off their rocker would do such a thing!

What could someone possibly discuss with Elysia in the dead of night to scare her like that?

After a few drags of his cigarette, Tarquin said in a deep tone,

"We need to step up the investigation, find this nutjob!"

Lowell looked startled and tense,

"Tarquin, do you think the person who played ghost with Ms. Thorne is the same one who left a dead cat in Elijah's room?"

"It's a strong possibility. Let's find this person first!"

He sensed this individual was mysterious and dangerous, hiding some dark secrets!

Perhaps these secrets involved him, Elijah, or maybe even something about Elysia!

After the car had left, a shadowy figure emerged from the corner, chuckling as he watched them go.

Then, looking up at the floor where Elysia was, his eyes filled with adoration,

"Lil' Elysia's happy, my lil' Elysia, heh heh..."

"Ding-dong, ding-dong." The doorbell rang.

Elysia was still prepping ingredients when Blossom went to answer the door, only to find a delivery guy standing there, looking curious. "What's up?"

The delivery guy spoke softly, "Your cake has arrived."

Blossom was even more curious, "I didn't order any cake."

"Isn't this the address? Aren't you Elysia?"

"Elysia?" Blossom glanced at the order, indeed it had Elysia's name, phone number, and their address.

"It's ours, thanks a bunch."

After signing, Blossom brought the cake inside, "Elysia, did you order a cake? Is it someone's birthday?"

Elysia, who was in the kitchen julienning potatoes, replied, "Not me."

"Not you? Then who ordered this? It's got your name and number."

"Let me see." Elysia looked at the order and indeed, it was placed under her name, with a note to avoid mango.

She's allergic to mango.

"The delivery isn't a mistake, but I definitely didn't order it."

Elysia also asked the kids, but it wasn't them either.

Blossom suggested, "I bet it was Elijah, that dashing dad of yours."

"But why would he order a cake when it's nobody's birthday?"

"To celebrate, of course! Today's a big happy day."

Elysia didn't get it. They were happy about recognizing Elijah, but why would he be?

And then...

Elysia scrutinized the card attached to the cake, her brows furrowing,

"It couldn't be him! Look at what's written on the cake. If it were from him, he'd never write something like this!"

Blossom tilted her head, looking curious,

"This... Yeah, doesn't seem like his style at all!"

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The card read:

"I've climbed mountains, crossed rivers,

Witnessed the rebirth of nature, in an endless cycle,

Now, you are my mountain, and you are my river too.

-To Elysia."

Anyone with a romantic bone in their body could tell, this was a sweet, heartfelt message.

If Tarquin had been sure she was the one he'd been searching for, he might have pursued her relentlessly. But uncertainty kept him at bay.

It wasn't him who sent the cake!

Nor was it the kids!

So, who could it be?

Blossom, ever curious, asked, "Elysia, looks like you've got an admirer. Has anyone been courting you lately?"

"Nope."

Blossom looked puzzled. "Could it be a secret admirer then?"

Elysia shook her head, "I barely made a peep about coming back, and I've been all wrapped up with Elijah. Haven't really seen anyone else. Who would have a crush on me?"

"Well, you never know with secret admirers. If you knew, it wouldn't be a secret, right? Someone's gone to the trouble of sending you a love note. It must be from someone who's got a crush on you."

Elysia frowned, considering how different her life might have been if she hadn't been forced to drop out and marry, like Blossom, with a normal graduation and a regular job. Maybe then, a secret admirer wouldn't seem so far-fetched.

But after everything she'd been through, the idea seemed impossible!

Yet, there was no denying the romantic gesture of the card.

Elysia pondered over this mystery for a while but couldn't make heads or tails of it.

The cake seemed all the more mysterious.

Emmett came out, eager for a bathroom break, and spotted the cake, his excitement palpable, "Mommy, mommy, are we having cake today?" The little guy had a sweet tooth.

Elysia was torn. She couldn't possibly allow the kids to eat something of unknown origin, but Emmett was looking forward to it so much! "It looks so yummy," Emmett drooled.

After a brief hesitation, Elysia nodded, "We'll have it tonight."

"Yay!" Emmett scampered off to the bathroom, thrilled.

Elysia pulled out her phone, "Which bakery is this cake from? I'll order a fresh one."

"Moonlight Dessert House's premium range, definitely not cheap.'

Elysia browsed through an app, her eyes widening at the prices.

6 inches for \$120.

8 inches for \$175.

10 inches for \$230.

She was startled by the prices, clearly out of her league.

And these were just for single-tier cakes. The double-tiered one Blossom was holding would be even pricier!

In her book, a decent 6-inch cake from a high-end bakery would run about... \$50?

Seeing Elysia's shock, Blossom leaned in for a look and was equally taken aback, "Told you it wouldn't be cheap! That place is all the rage online, a real hotspot for influencers, and their prices are through the roof. This double-layered one's gotta start at \$400 at least. Geez, someone's really into you, Elysia. Your secret admirer must be loaded!"

Elysia snapped back to reality, her anxiety mounting.

She couldn't fathom who it could be and decided to put the matter aside for now, biting the bullet to order a smaller, more affordable cake for the kids. Then she told Blossom, "Let's just keep it for now, until we figure out who sent it."

Unidentified food was a no-go for her kids, but given its price, she couldn't just toss it. What if it needed to be returned?

Blossom agreed it wasn't wise to let the kids eat it just yet. With no room in the fridge, she found a temporary spot for it.

Elysia went back to chopping potatoes, while Blossom washed the greens by the sink.

Seeing Elysia weighed down with thoughts, Blossom comforted her, "If you can't figure out who your secret admirer is, don't sweat it. Being admired is hardly a bad thing, better than someone holding a grudge."