

Hitched 471

Chapter 471

At that moment, in the heart of Future Community.

Zane had just arrived at the Blossom residence. Upon seeing Elysia, he immediately asked, "Are you and the kids all right?"

"Hmm?" Elysia was a bit confused.

Zane elaborated, "I only just found out that the child Nola's pregnant with is your son. Has Nola been giving you and the kids any trouble?"

It was evident Zane was genuinely concerned, with worry and anxiety written all over his face.

Elysia then understood the reason behind his hurried visit and quickly reassured him, "No, we've already talked it out."

Zane was surprised, "Talked it out? How? Nola didn't give you any trouble?"

"No, she contacted us through the school today. We've already met privately and talked things over. Don't worry about it."

Zane let out a sigh of relief, "I was scared when I heard the news. You've been away from Jindale City for years and might not know the situation. Nola's been involved with Tarquin, the CEO of the Bradford Group, which made her quite bitter and arrogant. She's not easy to deal with."

Hearing her husband's name, Elysia was momentarily taken aback.

Zane, mistaking her reaction for fear, reassured her further, "But Nola is a public figure, and now that the buzz has died down, they probably won't bother your child anymore. Don't worry too much."

Elysia inquired, "Ms. Slater and Mr. Bradford have a thing?"

Zane nodded, "Yeah, for years Nola has been parading around as Mr. Bradford's girlfriend. Later, Mr. Bradford clarified they were just friends. Maybe they broke up after getting together, or something. Anyway, their relationship is definitely not ordinary."

Elysia frowned in thought.

Blossom came over with some tea and sat next to Elysia, handing Zane a cup, "Let's put Nola's chapter behind us. No need to stress over it." Zane nodded, taking a sip of the tea, then asked Elysia, "Have you filed for divorce yet?"

Elysia snapped back to reality, "Not yet."

A flash of displeasure crossed Zane's face but disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, "Why not? Is he unwilling to sign?"

Elysia didn't want Zane involved and explained, "He's been busy lately."

Zane frowned, "No matter how busy, there's always time for such matters. Why don't you give us his details, and we'll try to reach him for you?" They still didn't know who Elysia's husband was, and Zane's attempts to find out had been fruitless.

Elysia shook her head, "No need. I can handle the divorce myself. By the way, have you heard from Winona lately? Last time she said she'd be coming back, but it's been days."

Elysia was still unwilling to disclose her husband's identity, leaving Zane a bit frustrated.

However, he didn't show it, shrugging helplessly, "She's gone off the grid again. Her agency seemed a bit upset after our last contact, but her manager assured me she's fine."

Elysia frowned, "When will she be back?"

"I'm not sure. Some big projects can take years to film. But don't worry, Winona knows you're back. She'll find a way to come see you."

Just then, Zane's phone rang.

He glanced at it and smiled bitterly, "Work stuff. I was supposed to be in a meeting when I heard the news and couldn't help but come over. Now that I know everything's fine, I should head back. The office is hectic."

Elysia and Blossom stood up to see him off, exchanging pleasantries. At the elevator, Zane looked at Elysia with a hint of reluctance, "Don't be a stranger. Whatever it is, big or small, you can always count on me."

His gaze lingered with an intensity that made Elysia slightly uncomfortable, causing her to frown involuntarily.

Zane quickly turned to Blossom with a smile, "Both of you are dear to Winona. With her not around, I've got to step in as your guardian. Otherwise, Winona will have my head when she's back."

Blossom, ever so trusting, simply laughed it off.

Chapter 472

"Given your attitude, we'll definitely put in a good word for you with Winona when she gets back. Maybe she'll soften up a bit toward you." Zane chuckled, "Alright, then you guys better head back. I've got to dash for a meeting at the office. Let's catch up when we're free." "Sure thing," Blossom waved goodbye.

Elysia, snapping back to reality, waved at him too.

As soon as the elevator doors closed, Zane's expression shifted instantly.

Stepping out of the elevator, he returned to the call he had earlier, "What's the problem now?"

"You've got a tail."

"Who?!"

"Not sure yet, looks like it's more than one party."

Zane furrowed his brows as he got into his car, slamming the door with force, "Could it be someone from the Newsom family?"

"Possibly, has the old man noticed anything odd?"

"His daughter's been out of touch for a while; he's getting anxious."

"Didn't you show him the video?"

"I did, and he bought it, but that old fox is cunning. We can't take him lightly."

"Should we take him out?"

"Not yet, the timing's not right!"

"The only thing we're sure of is someone named Callum is on your tail! He's been snooping around for Winona lately, seems like he caught wind of her agent's mishap but isn't quite sure, so he's digging deep."

A vicious gleam crossed Zane's eyes,

"Callum once had a thing for Winona. His digging might just be because he can't reach her. Don't sweat it; we'll find an opportunity to deal with him. Focus on finding out who else is poking around!"

"Got it."

After hanging up, Zane tossed his phone into the glove compartment and massaged his temples.

Looking up at the building, his face creased in frustration, "Elysia, when will you ever see the truth behind my actions? Sigh..."

Zane lingered for a while before leaving. Axel, hiding in a corner, watched him go, eyes narrowing.

Upstairs, Blossom asked Elysia curiously,

"What happened to you just now? You seemed troubled all of a sudden."

Elysia countered, "Did you notice anything off about Zane?"

"Huh? No, he seemed the same to me." Blossom was even more clueless than Elysia.

Elysia sighed, feeling something was off about the way Zane looked at her, but couldn't quite place it. It was an unsettling feeling.

Taking an excuse to head to the restroom, Elysia messaged Callum,

[Have you found anything about Winona recently?]

Callum replied with promising news. He was on the verge of final confirmation and would reach out proactively once done.

Elysia's heart raced inexplicably at the message. Was it bad news?

It took a while before Callum responded again, suggesting they meet in person to talk.

The more Callum withheld, the more Elysia feared the worst. Gathering her courage, she asked if something happened to Winona.

It seemed her agent had run into trouble.

Before Elysia could inquire further, Callum sent another message,

"Don't mention this to Zane yet; I'm still confirming. And don't scare yourself. A friend mentioned seeing Winona a few days ago; she's probably fine."

Elysia felt a bit relieved, "Okay, I'll wait for your news."

Putting away her phone, Elysia took a deep breath.

She trusted Callum more than Zane.

Later that afternoon, due to a last-minute issue, Blossom had to return to the nursery school.

Elysia was left to do a thorough cleaning at home.

Taking advantage of the clear weather, she stripped all the beds to replace the linens with fresh ones and tossed the dirty ones into the washer. After cleaning the kitchen and bathroom, she also tidied up the bedrooms.

The four little ones helped out, making the chore time lively and filled with laughter, a precious moment of mother-child bonding.

Meanwhile, Tarquin was also busy.

After leaving Blissful Uncle's Bar, having delegated his responsibilities, he made a quick stop at his villa to pick up some groceries before heading back to Sunshine Community.

Living alone, he busied himself in the kitchen.

Though he was reluctant to host this dinner, having promised his sons, he intended to make it a good one.

In his mind, he was hosting Elijah, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett for dinner. Elysia, on the other hand, was merely an extra mouth to feed.

But he didn't mind her company; after all, he had something to ask her tonight.

Chapter 473

But Elysia wasn't exactly thrilled about freeloading off of anyone, even if Elijah was all for it.

The moment she heard Elijah had invited the trio over for dinner at their place, she was on edge.

"Why do we have to eat there? Can't we just have dinner here? Whatever you guys want, I can whip it up."

She was really not keen on the trio mingling with Tarquin.

"There's no need for you to cook, Mom. Dad's decided to put on the chef's hat tonight. We've all agreed to have dinner there."

Elysia was skeptical. "He's cooking? Is today some special occasion?"

"Nope."

"Then why is he inviting everyone over for dinner?"

Elijah scrambled for a reason.

"Dad bought me a new LEGO set, and I thought it would be fun for us brothers to build it together, and, you know, have dinner there too."

Elysia probed further, "Can't we bring the LEGO set here and build it?"

"It's not really convenient. It'd be hard to transport once it's assembled."

Elysia was worried. "..."

Elliot came to her rescue, trying to comfort her.

"It's just dinner, Mom. Don't overthink it. We'll have Emmett do our makeup really well. Tarquin won't recognize us. And the more you resist, the more suspicious it seems. Better to just go with the flow."

Elysia glanced at Elliot, then back at Elijah.

Elijah's eyes were shining, full of hope.

Elysia wanted to refuse, but her heart wouldn't let her, especially with Elliot's logic. Resisting would only raise more doubts.

"Alright... I agree!"

"Thanks, Mom!" Elijah's face lit up with excitement, his cheeks flushing with joy.

Come evening, Elijah sneakily messaged Tarquin.

Dad, we're on our way back. Are you all set?

Almost, dinner can start at 6:30.

Elijah quickly asked, "Did you prepare a surprise for Mom?"

A surprise?

It's just dinner, why would Elysia need a surprise?

Tarquin squinted, pausing for a moment before lying, "Yes, I did."

Elijah immediately responded, "Dad's finally got it! You're the best! Go, Dad!"

Tarquin "..."

Clearly, saying he had prepared something was the only way to keep his son happy. If he had said no, his son would definitely be disappointed.

As for the surprise... easy fix!

He knew exactly what Elysia liked.

Half an hour later, they arrived.

Elijah burst in, "Dad, we're home! What goodies did you make?"

It was clear the little guy was thrilled, his usual cool demeanor all but forgotten.

Tarquin, donning a deep blue pullover and an apron, emerged from the kitchen, tall, handsome, and warm.

"I've prepared a seafood feast, along with a few side dishes."

He glanced past Elysia, greeting the trio, "Welcome to our home."

The trio politely nodded back.

Elysia, seeing that Tarquin hadn't recognized Elliot and Evan, finally relaxed.

Noticing four pairs of children's slippers neatly arranged at the door, she felt a pang of emotion.

She had to admit, when it came to kids, he was incredibly thoughtful. Knowing the children were coming, he had even prepared slippers for them. The young ones shed their coats, slipped into the slippers, and dashed into the kitchen.

"Wow-"

Tarquin had gone all out with the seafood, fresh and lively, much to the kids' fascination.

After causing a ruckus in the kitchen, they retreated to Elijah's room.

Elysia was stunned by the spread!

Once the kids were gone, she quietly asked Tarquin,

"This, this..... this blue lobster, and this huge crab, and all of these, they look expensive. How much did all this cost, oh my goodness! I thought you were broke. Where did you get the money for this?"

"..." Tarquin's look of disdain said it all. To him, she was always going to be obsessed with money.

Chapter 474

When most people see a spread of seafood, they think of a gourmet feast. But all Elysia could see was dollar signs!

Before Tarquin could even open his mouth, Elysia was already firing away, "You handed me a cool million this morning, and now you're splurging on this fancy seafood dinner. What's the deal? Where is all this money coming from?"

Tarquin remained silent, which only made her more anxious and afraid, "You... you didn't get involved in something illegal, did you?!"

Tarquin was at a loss for words, "Is your brain just filled with mush?"

"Your brain is the one filled with mush!" Elysia snapped back, and then pressed on, "If your money is clean, why can't you just say so?"

Tarquin, head down and wearing gloves, meticulously arranged the lobster and king crab layers into the oven, then moved on to start frying some vegetables, clearly trying to ignore Elysia.

But Elysia, standing right beside him, wouldn't stop badgering him, raising her voice, "Don't forget you're a father! Everything you do affects Elijah! You can't get involved in anything shady, not for Elijah's sake."

Tarquin, annoyed by her nagging and initially wanting to send her away, turned to look at her, remembering he had something to ask her, "I'm not involved in anything illegal."

"Then where did the money come from?"

"Some opportunities are meant to be kept secret, you know?"

Elysia was momentarily taken aback, suspiciously asking, "So, you made a fortune through legal means?"

Tarquin's eyes narrowed slightly, "A small fortune."

"A small fortune? You gave me a million dollars! And you can afford all this seafood, it's definitely not 'small'! How did you earn it?"

"What's it to you?"

"Teach me, I want to make a fortune too."

Tarquin was speechless...

Claiming bankruptcy, she believed him instantly.

Claiming he made a small fortune through legal means, she believed him again.

If he didn't know she was already a mother of three, he'd mistake her for a college student.

Gullible as ever, her clear eyes radiated sheer naivety.

Seeing her taking the bait, Tarquin decided to play along, "I might consider letting you in on it, but first, answer my question."

Elysia immediately widened her eyes in eagerness, "Ask away! I'll tell you everything I know!"

Tarquin found her innocence somewhat endearing. It was, after all, relaxing to be around someone so uncomplicated.

He didn't inquire about Zane; he had already gotten the information he needed from Keaton. He went straight to the point, "The night I last saw your son, who were you talking to downstairs? What did you talk about?"

He suspected the person Elysia was talking with that night might be the elusive figure he was investigating. Through Elysia, he hoped to dig deeper. At this, Elysia's expression changed dramatically, "Why, why are you asking this?"

Seeing her nervous, Tarquin said, "Just a heads-up, the person you were talking with that night was not a ghost; he was talking to you through a surveillance camera. That's why you could hear his voice but couldn't see him."

"How did you know?"

"I had Lowell snoop around the neighborhood and found that camera."

"And... then?"

Seeing her still nervous, Tarquin was sure her fear wasn't about ghosts but their conversation, "I want to know what you two talked about?" What did they talk about? Their conversation had ranged from her child and their parent-child relationship to the topic of murder!

Elysia's heart raced, "Nothing much!"

Tarquin narrowed his eyes, "Can't say?"

Elysia countered, "Why do you want to know what I talked about with someone else?"

Tarquin was straightforward, "I want to know who he is. I've been looking into him recently. I have business with him."

Elysia's heart skipped a beat, her voice anxious, "What business?!"

That person knew her secret and the kids', which terrified her at the thought of Tarquin finding him.

Chapter 475

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Tarquin squinted, his tone casual yet probing, "Personal matters, huh? Do you know who he is?"

"I don't know!"

Indeed, Elysia had no clue who the mysterious figure was, only that he was off-kilter, always whispering deadly suggestions in her ear.

If it weren't for the fact that this shadow knew her darkest secrets, she would have confided in Tarquin about the plot against him, urging him to watch his back.

She could never bring herself to harm him, even if it meant her secrets spilled out into the open. The thought of her children having a murderer for a mother was unbearable.

But what if the shadow turned to someone else to do his bidding?

Despite her mixed feelings towards him, he was the father of her children, and she couldn't bear the thought of him coming to harm.

And if something were to happen to him, the thought of Elijah's sorrow was too much to bear.

She didn't want Elijah to be heartbroken!

Elysia wanted to change the subject, her mind in turmoil.

Yet, she couldn't shake off her unease and finally asked, "Do you have a lot of enemies?"

"Hmm?"

She couldn't meet his gaze, fearing he might see through her, and pretended to busy herself with picking up seashells, "You used to be quite wealthy; I imagine you have your fair share of enemies."

Tarquin eyed her suspiciously, "...You could say that."

"Then... then you should be careful! Watch your back for anyone looking to stab you in the back!"

After a pause, she added, "And keep an eye on those closest to you. It's easy for someone to exploit a vulnerability in someone close to you to harm you. That kind of betrayal is the hardest to see coming!"

Tarquin was no fool; he caught the subtext in her words immediately.

"He wants to use you to kill me?"

Elysia's heart skipped a beat, "!"

Tarquin pressed, "What does he have on you?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about. I'm not being blackmailed by anyone!"

With that, Elysia hurried off to the bathroom, clearly avoiding the conversation.

Tarquin's gaze lingered on the direction of the bathroom, his expression darkening.

Today, he had learned two things: Elysia was being blackmailed by the mysterious figure, and this same person wanted to use Elysia to kill him.

He knew this enemy of his harbored unrequited feelings for Elysia, hoping to whisk her away and make her his.

But the news that Elysia was being blackmailed by this person, and that they intended to use her against him, was news to him.

Elliot had not mentioned this!

Was the boy unaware, or was he keeping it from him on purpose?

As Tarquin pondered this, Elliot suddenly appeared.

The young boy, under the pretext of getting a drink of water, came out to check on his mother, worried Tarquin might have upset her. Not seeing Elysia, Elliot asked, "Where's Mom?"

"In the bathroom. Elliot, Elysia is being blackmailed by the mysterious man. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Hmm?"

"What happened to sharing information?"

Elliot's dark eyes swirled in thought. He knew the secret involved their familial ties with Tarquin, which is why he had kept silent.

After a moment, Elliot explained, "It's Mom's personal matter. I didn't want to speak about it."

Tarquin asked, "Did you know he wants to use her to kill me?"

"Yeah, I knew. But I also know Mom would never hurt you, so I didn't tell you."

Tarquin studied Elliot for a moment before asking, "Do you think the mysterious man could be Zane?"

"Zane? Winona's husband?"

"Yeah."

"Why would you suspect him?"

"Because he's in love with your mom, and the mysterious man is too. There's a connection."

Elliot was taken aback, "Mr. Zane in love with my mom? Impossible, I've heard from Blossom that Mr. Zane adores Winona."

Chapter 476

Kids don't pick up on love the way adults do. Plus, Elliot hadn't really spent much time around Zane, so he missed the whole 'Zane's got a thing for Elysia' memo.

"I've done some digging," Tarquin said, leaning against the kitchen counter, a sudden craving for a smoke hitting him. "Turns out, Zane's been carrying a torch for your mom for years."

Elliot frowned. "So, he's a jerk."

Marrying mom's best friend but still pining for her? From an emotional standpoint, that's low.

Tarquin wanted a cigarette but didn't want Elliot inhaling secondhand smoke, so he resisted.

"He's not just a jerk, he's dangerous. Gage, the guy who messed with your mom two months ago? Zane took care of him."

Elliot blinked, taken aback. He knew about Gage.

He had planned to deal with Gage himself, but before he could, someone beat him to it. Despite trying, he never found out who it was the culprit was too clean.

Turns out, it was Zane!

If that was true, then stepdad was right: Zane wasn't just a jerk; he was dangerous!

The thought that someone so dangerous was lurking around his mom sent a shiver down Elliot's spine. After a moment of collected thought, he turned to Tarquin.

"Thanks for letting me know. I'll keep an eye on him from now on."

Tarquin just grunted, then asked, "So, you think Zane's the mystery guy?"

"I don't know... Have you ever crossed paths with Zane before?"

The moment Elliot asked, Tarquin knew where he was going with this.

They were on the same wavelength.

Tarquin furrowed his brows, sighing. "That's what's been bugging me. If this mystery guy wanted me dead, we must have some bad blood. But I've looked into Zane. We've never crossed paths. I can't find a motive for him wanting me dead."

Elliot added, "Another thing, the mystery guy said he wanted to kidnap my mom to make her his wife, but he doesn't actually like her. It's because of his 'precious' that he wants to take her."

"Precious?"

Tarquin paused, then remembered the shock he felt at the mystery man's words.

His heart skipped a beat, his expression visibly flustered. "What precious? A person?"

Elliot shook his head, "Don't know; I'm curious too. I asked him if he liked my mom and he said it didn't matter if he liked her or not, as long as his precious did."

Tarquin's brows knitted together.

Elliot went on, "Putting aside who this 'precious' is, just considering the fact that you and Zane have no history, and Zane genuinely loves my mom, it's unlikely Zane is our mystery man."

If Zane were the mystery man, he'd surely have a vendetta against Tarquin!

And when asked whether he liked his mom, he wouldn't have answered the way he did; he'd have been adamant about his affection.

Suddenly, the sound of the toilet flushing from the bathroom signaled Elysia would soon emerge, pulling both father and son from their thoughts.

Elliot quickly said, "No matter who the mystery man is, you should see the good in my mom. Wasn't it her warning to watch out for those around you that clued you in on the mystery man using her to get to you?"

Tarquin didn't respond, silently agreeing.

Elliot continued, "My mom's a good person. Even though she doesn't like you much, she doesn't want anything bad to happen to you." Tarquin remained silent.

Elliot grabbed some crab meat from the counter for White on his way out of the kitchen. White loved that.

Tarquin stared towards the bathroom, then lit a cigarette.

Just as he took a puff, his phone rang. It was Axel.

"Tarquin, the mystery man's made a move!"

Chapter 477

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, "Right now?"

"Just a moment ago, I followed him out of the neighborhood, and before I could even tell you, he spotted me."

Tarquin was surprised, "He spotted you first?"

"Yeah! And we exchanged a couple of moves; he's really skilled!" Axel's voice was heavy.

Tarquin's expression grew even darker.

True to his name, Axel was swift and sharp, moving like a shadow. It was rare for someone to notice him tailing them, let alone acknowledge his skills.

In the world of martial arts, being second best always meant you were no match for the top dog. And in that world, Axel was the top dog!

So, when Axel says this mystery guy is good, it means he could at least hold his own against Axel.

This was not good news for them. After all, this mystery person was out for blood, making him an enemy.

Tarquin, with a grim face, asked Axel, "Are you hurt?"

"No, and he isn't either."

"Where are you now?"

"Outside the neighborhood. I lost him after he figured me out. He engaged with me just to gauge my skills. After sizing me up, he just chuckled and ran off."

"Does he know you?"

"I don't know. We didn't talk; he didn't mention my name."

"Did you see his face?"

"No! He was wearing a mask and sunglasses. Couldn't see a thing."

"Can you tell if it was a man or a woman?"

"Hard to say in the dark, and with all that gear on, couldn't make out if it was a man or woman. But, Blossom is a suspect." "Blossom?"

"Yeah, the mystery person came out of the building where Blossom lives, apartment 2 in building 10, right after she got home. And about half an hour before, Blossom had just returned. It's suspicious timing, considering she left the building shortly after getting home."

"You think Blossom changed clothes and went out again?"

"Exactly. She's been caught dumping stray cat bodies multiple times, and the timing tonight just adds up. Plus, when I had someone knock on her door while I was tailing the mystery person, there was no answer, even though the lights were on. Can't be sure she was actually home."

If Axel had been tailing the mystery person while Blossom was confirmed to be at home, she could be ruled out. But now, with no response at her door, her suspicion grew.

Tarquin frowned deeply, lost in thought.

He couldn't believe it was Blossom.

Blossom, the daughter of Professor Folly, came from a reputable background. Aside from her parents being well-known academics, Blossom herself was as ordinary as they come!

Moreover, she had no reason to be their enemy, nor was there any motive related to Elysia that would make sense.

But, considering Blossom was not as sharp as Elysia and was known for her naivety, it wasn't impossible she was being used by the mystery person. "Find a way to test Blossom as soon as possible."

Blossom was not only close to Elysia and the three kids but also had interactions with Elijah. If Blossom was involved, Elijah could be in danger. They needed clarity, and fast.

"And, now that we know this guy is skilled, be extra cautious. Catching him comes second, your safety comes first."

Catching this mystery person was crucial, but not as critical as Axel's wellbeing.

"Got it."

After hanging up, Tarquin took a deep drag from his cigarette, weighed down by his thoughts.

This mystery person was becoming his biggest concern.

Chapter 478

First off, the mysterious figure wasn't just enigmatic and perilous; he was out for blood-specifically, Tarquin's blood. That alone was a glaring red flag.

Then there was the fact that this shadowy figure seemed to know things about Elijah's mom. Add to that the bone-chilling statement he made that left Tarquin reeling.

Any one of these reasons was compelling enough for Tarquin to want to drag this person into the light. And it had to happen fast.

He had a hunch that this person wasn't Zane or Blossom. But that didn't mean they were off the hook. Especially Blossom-her little stunt with the dead cat definitely tied her to this mess in some way or another!

And Zane, with his creepy obsession with Elysia, was definitely on the suspect list.

So, it was settled. He'd keep an eye on both of them. But there was another key player in this twisted game-Elysia.

And as if on cue, Elysia walked in.

Tarquin watched her, his gaze sharp, almost as if she were bait on a hook. The idea of using her to lure out the enigma played across his mind unbidden.

After all, if this mystery man wanted to whisk her away, what better way to draw him out than by using Elysia as bait?

Oblivious to his scheming, Elysia watched him light up a cigarette and couldn't help but chide, "The kids are around, you know. Maybe take it outside?"

Tarquin didn't respond, his expression unreadable.

Elysia, trying to ease the tension, ventured, "Are you still hung up on what I said earlier? I was just trying to look out for you. I've heard what Elijah said about people being after you over the years. Just a heads-up to be careful, that's all. No one's using me to get to you. And I definitely wouldn't harm you."

She was trying to dispel any doubts he had, keen on keeping her connection with the mysterious person under wraps.

Tarquin snapped back to the present, his expression softening a bit upon recalling Elliot's words.

Even though he couldn't fathom why she was being evasive, her roundabout way of showing concern did strike a chord. For the moment, he shelved the idea of using her to bait the mystery man and extinguished his cigarette.

He didn't call her out on her evasion but chose to reassure her instead, "I was just asking. Don't overthink it."

Tarquin was clear about where he stood with people if she was looking out for him, he could at least put her mind at ease.

Sure enough, his words worked like a charm, and Elysia visibly relaxed.

Taking a deep breath, she added, "Still, better safe than sorry, right? Just keep an eye out, stay cautious."

"Right," he agreed, the tension between them easing.

Elysia turned her attention to the undone seafood salad, slipping on disposable gloves to start prepping the steamed seafood.

Seizing the moment, Tarquin probed for more info about Blossom, "Why isn't your friend here today?"

His interest in Blossom overshadowed his suspicion of Zane. Zane was a maybe, but Blossom was a definite link to the mystery man. Elysia raised an eyebrow, "Blossom?"

"Yeah."

"She had some kindergarten event. Not sure when she'll be free."

"Why not give her a call? If she's done, she could join us for dinner."

Elysia eyed him skeptically, "Why this sudden interest in Blossom?"

His face gave nothing away as he explained, "Elijah mentioned Ms. Blythe was kind to him at Future Community. It's only polite to invite her over for dinner, especially with all this food. It'd be a shame to waste it."

Thinking of Blossom's love for seafood and not wanting the pricey shrimp to go to waste, Elysia hesitated for a moment before making a video call to Blossom.

Chapter 479

The phone rang for quite a while before Blossom picked up. "Hey, Elysia."

The sight of Blossom on the video call took Elysia by surprise!

She quickly shifted the camera away, worried Tarquin would see and scold her, saying, "Have you lost your mind, answering a video call in the shower?"

Blossom just chuckled and replied, "Come on, you're practically family. Plus, I'm all wrapped up in a towel now. Why are you calling at this hour anyway? Weren't you off to some guy's place for dinner?"

Some guy?

Tarquin's expression changed instantly. Was she talking about him?

Elysia's awkward attempt to smile faltered as she quickly changed the subject.

She showed Blossom around the kitchen, showcasing the seafood spread, and asked if she wanted to come over for dinner, mentioning it was Elijah's dad who had invited her over as a thank you for being so kind to Elijah.

Blossom practically drooled at the sight, "Holy moly! He's really splurging! That looks delicious! But I've got plans tonight, so I can't make it, what a shame! I would've loved some of that bluefin tuna and crab bisque. Hey Elysia, maybe you could pack some up for me?!"

No sooner had Blossom finished her sentence than the call suddenly dropped.

Elysia tried calling back but it was busy. She must have been receiving another call.

Tarquin asked Elysia, "Who's this guy?"

Elysia's attempt at a smile twitched as she bravely countered, "What guy?"

"The one Ms. Blythe just mentioned."

"You must have misheard, she didn't mention any guy!"

"Do you think I'm an idiot or just hard of hearing?"

Elysia: "...Alright, it's just a silly nickname we have for guys around us. We call them 'some guy' just for fun, it's not about you." Tarquin clearly didn't buy her story.

After looking displeased for a moment, he didn't press further; instead, his thoughts returned to Blossom.

Blossom was in the shower?

That meant when Axel had someone knock on her door earlier, she probably didn't hear it because she was in the shower.

If she had been at home all along, then she definitely wasn't the mysterious person.

He figured the mystery person was likely male, and Blossom might have just been used by him.

Tarquin asked Elysia, "Is Blossom seeing anyone? Or does she have any close male friends?"

Elysia, puzzled, asked, "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious."

Elysia frowned, "Are you interested in Blossom?"

Tarquin knew what she was implying; his interest in Blossom wasn't what she was thinking.

Unable to explain, he made up an excuse, "Asking for a friend."

"A friend? Lowell?"

"No, Axel."

"Who's Axel?"

"You don't know him, but he's met you guys."

"He's into Blossom?"

"Sort of."

Axel: ??? What the heck, man? Why are you dragging me into this?

Elysia was confused, "What do you mean 'sort of'?"

Tarquin explained, "He didn't say much, and I didn't ask too many details, just helping him out."

Elysia thought it over, "If you're asking about Blossom's relationship status, Axel must be interested in her. What's Axel like? What does he do? How old is he?"

"I was just asking, not playing matchmaker. Axel's a good guy, that's all."

Elysia pursed her lips, "It's fine, it's not like it's some big secret. Blossom's single, and she doesn't really have any close guy friends."

Tarquin was puzzled, "Really? No one?"

Chapter 480

"So, what's the deal between her and Zane?"

Elysia looked surprised, "You know Zane?"

Tarquin made up an excuse on the fly, "Had some business with the Newsom family a while back, heard of him through that."

"Oh, that makes sense. Blossom and Zane are a bit more than just friends, you could say, because Zane's wife is one of our close girlfriends." "Does she see Zane outside of group settings?"

"No."

Tarquin was puzzled. Who could be using Blossom? Could Blossom herself be the mysterious figure? The dead cat and the mysterious person seen leaving her apartment building certainly tied her to something sinister! Yet, there were no suspicious men around her...

"What's wrong?" Elysia asked, noticing his odd expression. Before he could answer, she quickly added, "Don't jump to conclusions. Blossom and Zane have a very innocent relationship!"

She had misunderstood, but Tarquin didn't bother to correct her.

Just then, Blossom returned her video call, apologizing for the abrupt hang-up earlier due to another call she had received.

"I get it. If you can't make it, I'll save you some leftovers."

"Thanks, Elysia, you're the best."

Elysia noticed Blossom had changed outfits. "Got plans tonight?"

"Yeah, got some errands to run."

"Can't they wait till tomorrow?"

"Nope, it's pretty urgent."

"What time will you be back?"

"Not sure, but don't worry, I'll be safe."

"Alright, just call me if you need anything."

Tarquin, overhearing their conversation, grew more suspicious. Blossom was going out tonight, and it was the perfect opportunity to uncover her connection with the mysterious figure.

"By the way, you never did tell me how you made your fortune. Got any tips for me?" Elysia suddenly asked.

Tarquin snapped back to reality, teasing, "What, did you die poor in a past life?"

Elysia pouted, "You don't understand. I've got sons to raise, get them through school, and hopefully save enough for their weddings."

Her thoughts drifted far off, making her laugh at the idea of her sons getting married.

"It's tough for a woman to raise sons alone. Didn't their father leave anything behind?" Tarquin inquired.

Mentioning the kids' father soured Elysia's mood instantly.

"Don't talk about him!" she snapped, visibly annoyed.

Tarquin wondered, "Bad news, huh?"

Elysia turned fierce, "The worst!"

Before Tarquin could say anything else, Elysia turned on the faucet, washed her hands, and left to find her son Elijah in his room.

Tarquin was left wondering if he had touched a nerve. He was curious about the man who fathered such great kids and why Elysia was so averse to discussing him. Was it the man's fault, or was there more to Elysia's story?

While Tarquin was lost in thought, a message from an unknown number popped up on his phone:

"Keep your people away from me. I've got other things on my plate and don't have time for your nuisances. Don't make me angry; it won't end well for you!"

Tarquin's concern deepened, and he immediately contacted Axel, "Where are you now?"

"Following Blossom, why?"

"You're tailing Blossom?"

"Yes."

Tarquin sighed, piecing together the night's plan in his head.