

Hitched 511

Chapter 511

Elysia beamed with pride as she received compliments about her children. With a gentle smile, she responded, "When they were little, it was all on us parents, but now that they're growing up, it's you teachers who bear the brunt. My boys, Elliot and Emmett, are angels, but Evan, well, he's the rascal of the bunch. If he steps out of line, feel free to set him straight. I won't coddle him."

Keith chuckled, "Evan's not just a rascal; his defining trait is wanting a sister so badly he's gone and made a bunch of honorary sisters at school." The other two female teachers couldn't help but join in the laughter, "Exactly, after he's done in his own class, he starts scouting in ours." "It's clear he's desperate for a sister. With your family's good looks, a daughter would be absolutely stunning. You should really consider having another one."

Elysia offered a wry smile in response, knowing full well Evan's obsession with having a sister.

After exchanging pleasantries at the elevator, the teachers departed, and Blossom quickly linked arms with Elysia, eager to head home, especially given the recent passing in the neighborhood that had her on edge.

Once inside, Blossom couldn't help but bring up Keith, "That was Keith I mentioned before. Handsome, isn't he?"

Elysia nodded, "He's quite the looker, indeed."

"And it's not just looks. He's a gentleman through and through. Despite being a PE teacher, there's nothing rough or uncouth about him. He's like the golden boy of our kindergarten—well-liked by everyone and practically our mascot. Last year, we barely needed to advertise for enrollment. Just posted his picture, and moms were lining up to enroll their kids. While other schools struggle, we've had to turn people away, all thanks to Keith." Elysia, putting away groceries and taking off her coat, teased, "If he's such a catch, why don't you go after him?"

"He's out of my league. There's a whole lineup of girls after him, and I've heard his family's pretty well-off. He's got high standards."

"Why would he choose to work at your kindergarten, though?" Elysia wondered aloud. Blossom's kindergarten wasn't the top in Jindale City, and it seemed odd for a well-to-do heir to take up a position there.

"Hard to say. Might have something to do with his late mom. Rumor has it she used to teach there, and maybe he's there because of some issues with his stepmom, missing his real mom," Blossom speculated.

Elysia shifted the conversation away from Keith, showing little interest in his backstory, "How are you feeling now? Still got a headache?"

"Much better, though last night was a nightmare."

Elysia touched her forehead, "You're still a bit warm. Was it Keith and the others who woke you?"

"No, got woken up by a call from Eloise's eldest across the hall. So annoying."

Blossom sighed at the mention of their neighbors, "People say you raise kids for your old age, but what a joke. With everything that happened, he still wouldn't come back. Eloise passed, and he's probably not even going to show. What a waste raising him."

Elysia, aware that Eloise's son had settled abroad, frowned, "If he's not coming back, what will happen to Eloise's place?"

"She's been moved to a nursing home," Blossom replied with a tinge of frustration.

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"Is he gone?"

"Yep. Wonder if Eloise regrets sending her son to study abroad. Maybe if she hadn't, he wouldn't have settled overseas and stayed away for good."

Elysia replied, "That has nothing to do with studying abroad; it depends on the person. Knowing him, even if she hadn't let him go abroad, he wouldn't have been any more devoted."

"That's true. By the way, have you thought about sending Elliot and the others overseas?"

"It depends. If we can afford it and they want to, why not? It'd be good for them to broaden their horizons and learn something new."

"Aren't you worried they'll end up like Eloise's son, not coming back?"

"I'm not worried at all. They love me too much to leave me behind. And I wouldn't let them settle abroad anyway. After all the effort to raise them, they should work here, contribute to their own country. Why should they work for another country? I'd be proud to see them serve our nation, but not if it's for someone else."

Blossom chuckled, "You still have that patriotic spirit from our college days."

"Of course, I may be ordinary, but my love for the country burns bright and will never change!" Elysia said proudly, then asked, "Where are the kids?" "Still sleeping, missed breakfast."

"Let them sleep. I'll make some chicken soup for lunch, give everyone a little boost."

Elysia grabbed the groceries and headed to the kitchen. Blossom leaned on the doorframe, "I saw the note you left me. You went to the police station to see Elijah's dad?"

"Yeah. I felt sorry for him, no parents and a bunch of terrible relatives. I thought I'd represent Elijah and check on him."

"You're too soft-hearted. After what he did to you, and you still feel sorry for him."

"If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have my wonderful kids. It's all in the past now, I've moved on."

Blossom sighed, "Moving on is good, no need to dwell on it and upset yourself. How is he doing, anyway?"

"Better than I expected, actually."

"When can he get out?"

"Not sure, he mentioned the day after tomorrow morning at the latest. By the way, did they figure out who the victim was?"

"Turns out it was a burglar who had been hiding out in Eloise's place, got panicked when discovered and jumped. I've been to Eloise's so many times recently and never noticed."

"He must have been hiding on purpose. You wouldn't have seen him."

Elysia made a cup of ginger tea for Blossom and started preparing the chicken, "Why did Eloise's son call you?"

Blossom sipped the warm tea, "He wants to sell the house but it's hard for him being abroad, so he asked for my help."

"Though with the death happening there, it might not be easy to sell."

"True, but it's in a great location, close to schools, shopping, and the subway. If we price it low, it should sell."

Suddenly, Blossom remembered something and looked at Elysia, hesitating before saying, "Elysia, the reason I came back late last night was because Zane suddenly reached out. We talked for a while at the coffee shop."

At the mention of Zane, Elysia became alert, "What did he want?"

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Blossom paused for a moment before she said, "Zane's been asking who your husband is, but I'm clueless too. He just told me to find a way to get it out of you."

"What does he want with my husband?" Elysia asked.

"He says it's for your own good. He wants to track down your husband and then confront him, urging him to divorce you ASAP."

Elysia knew Zane meant well, but this only unsettled her more. She felt there was something off about how Zane was acting towards her.

Blossom continued, "He also told me not to let you know he came to me in secret, but I figured you had your reasons for keeping quiet. Sneaking around to get information from you felt wrong. I didn't want to do that."

"Yeah. Blossom, thanks for understanding."

"What are you thanking me for? We're sisters. Whatever you decide, I've got your back."

After thinking it over, Elysia said, "The reason I haven't said anything is because my husband and I had a secret wedding and signed a confidentiality agreement when we got married. Talking about it, whether for me or for him, just wouldn't be right."

Blossom was surprised, "You signed a confidentiality agreement to get married?"

"Yeah."

"This isn't like getting married at all, it's like making a business deal!"

Elysia's marriage was indeed a business deal between the Thorne family and the Bradford family! She always said Tarin had a bunch of crazy relatives. Well, wasn't it the same around her? The Thorne family, every single one of them was a character!

Blossom was furious, "I knew it! You were doing so well in school, why on earth did you suddenly drop out to get married?! Did your foster parents force you?"

"Yeah."

"Those monsters!"

"But, being forced to drop out and get married also led me to cut ties with them. I don't see it as a loss, don't feel bad for me, it's all in the past now." Blossom's eyes immediately welled up with tears, "You were working so hard on your studies, looking forward to the future, and then to be forced to drop out! And after that, to be forced into marrying someone you didn't love! Elysia, how painful that must have been for you!"

Was it painful? It was...

She wasn't the brightest, but she had worked tirelessly, averaging less than four hours of sleep a day during her senior year. They say the early bird catches the worm, and she was that bird, using her diligence to get into the college of her dreams. Only to be forced by her foster parents to drop out after just over a year.

Seeing Blossom cry, Elysia quickly wiped her hands on her apron and passed Blossom a tissue to dry her tears, "There, there, it's all in the past. I didn't tell you or Winona back then because I didn't want you to feel bad for me."

But Blossom was deeply upset, "Being forced to drop out, forced into marriage, and then slandered by some jerk, leading your husband to disdain you, saying you were unfaithful, subjecting you to ridicule... Elysia, how did you endure those dark times all by yourself?"

Elysia offered a faint smile, "Things changed when I got pregnant, didn't they? From then on, I wasn't alone anymore. My kids helped me chase away the darkness and led me towards the light. Look at me now, I've reached the light at the end of the tunnel, so don't feel bad for me, okay?"

Blossom sobbed, "You deserve all the happiness in the world after what you've been through. It's like the universe owes it to you!"

Elysia laughed, "The universe doesn't owe me anything. I'm content with my wonderful sons."

"That's not enough! You should have more to make up for all the hurt you've faced!"

"More?!" Elysia laughed, "Most people have one or two kids, and here I am, outperforming with my bunch. I'm already ahead of the game." Blossom mumbled, "To be fair, your kids' dad did quite the job, managing to have so many in one go."

Elysia's cheeks flushed red. It wasn't just one time. Back then, she was dizzy and confused by his touch, but she could remember, it was at least three times!

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Elysia, cheeks flushed with emotion, quickly changed the subject.

"You know, life is all about moving forward. And I believe fate is fair. Life can either be a smooth sail or a rollercoaster of highs and lows." Blossom nodded in agreement.

"Exactly. Look at you. After your great sorrow came great joy. The harder the past, the sweeter the present.

And then there's me. My life's been pretty steady, so I haven't experienced those extreme ups and downs. Winona's pretty much in the same boat, isn't she? Her life's been quite even-keeled too."

When Winona's name came up, Elysia's brows furrowed slightly, and after a moment of silence, she said, "Let's keep my story between us for now. If Zane asks you, just say you couldn't get anything out of me."

"Got it."

In the children's room, Elliot stood by the door, catching every word of their conversation.

He had woken up to use the bathroom when he overheard Blossom mention Zane's inquiry from the previous night. Curiosity piqued, he lingered by the door.

He already knew about the mysterious connection between Blossom and a secretive figure, thanks to Tarquin.

Tarquin suspected that Blossom had gone to meet this mystery person last night but ended up chatting with Zane instead. However, Axel had kept his distance to avoid raising alarm, so the details of their conversation were unknown until now.

Elliot quietly closed the door and dialed Lowell,

"Mr. Lowell, please inform Tarquin that Zane's chat with Blossom last night had nothing to do with the mystery person.

Also, I've found evidence that could clear his name, but there's a risk in going public with this video. He needs to decide how to handle it.

If this evidence won't work, I'll figure out another way to get him out."

Lowell was surprised, "You found evidence already?"

"Yeah, just sent it to you. Show it to him."

"Alright, will do."

After hanging up, Lowell checked the evidence Elliot sent. He was both shocked and impressed.

And he couldn't help but think: Why couldn't I have a son like that?

But then, considering his own intellect, he quickly shifted his thought:

Why isn't Elliot Tarquin's son? With their combined strengths, their enemies wouldn't stand a chance!

At the police station,

Lowell relayed Elliot's message to Tarquin word for word.

Upon learning that Blossom and Zane's meeting wasn't about the mystery person, Tarquin inquired, "So what did they talk about?" "Elliot didn't say. Should I ask him?"

"No need." If Elliot chose not to share, there was no point in pushing for details.

Tarquin watched the video evidence Elliot had found, unsurprised. He had noticed the tiny camera on the earpiece Elliot gave him. During the scuffle, it had fallen but was quickly pocketed again. The camera had recorded everything inside the room.

His confidence in his safety rested on this piece of evidence. No matter what tactics his enemies tried, this video could prove his innocence.

He had kept it to himself for a couple of reasons. First, to ponder over the content of his conversation with the mystery man. Secondly, to see who else, besides the Bradford family, was eager to see him dead.

After a moment of silence, Tarquin decided,

"Give the video to Josiah. Have him bypass his direct supervisor and go straight to Mitchell."

Lowell was uncertain, "We've never dealt with Josiah before. Can we trust him?"

"He's trustworthy, a smart and upright man."

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Before Lowell showed up, Josiah had just come looking for him.

Josiah said, "Mr. Bradford, I believe you didn't kill anyone. Take a look at this video evidence. I've had our tech department verify it. It's a fake. Someone knows you're innocent and deliberately sent this fake evidence to make it easier for me to frame you! I've always known we have a mole in our ranks. But I'm outmatched and outgunned. Taking them on directly could cost me my life. So, even though I knew this evidence was fake, I didn't dare go public with it, much less confront those people head-on. I'm not afraid to die, but I have a family to think about. I'm laying my cards on the table with you, hoping you might help me find a way to protect myself and my family without getting my hands dirty."

Tarquin asked him, "Why don't you want to get involved in their dirty business?"

Josiah said, "Despite my age, my initial resolve to become a cop hasn't changed! Plus, I believe what goes around comes around. I'd rather live with a clear conscience."

That's why Tarquin thought of Josiah as a clever and upright man. If he wasn't clever, charging at those people blindly could have gotten him into serious trouble already. If he wasn't upright, he would have joined them in framing others by now.

Lowell was unaware of these details, but if Tarquin believed in him, that was endorsement enough. Lowell then wondered, "Tarquin, why go to Mitchell instead of directly to Inspector Yuri?" Yuri, being the top dog in the department, would have more authority.

Tarquin explained, "Yuri's been under the weather lately, taking some time off to recuperate. Let's not bother him with this minor issue; Mitchell can handle it."

"Got it," Lowell acknowledged. "And tell Josiah to keep that video under wraps. Also, let's leak some info saying there's a high chance I'll be sentenced to death, that the higher-ups are already reviewing it."

He was done playing games; it was time to flush out the rats!

The next day, December 29th.

In the morning, when Keaton came to visit, he brought breakfast from the Jinpeach Restaurant. As he walked in, he teased, "Look at you, living the high life! I take a short trip, and I come back to find you dining on the state's dime. Impressive."

Tarquin lit a cigarette, ignoring him. Keaton continued, half-mockingly, "What, not enjoying your government-sponsored meals? Or is it the lack of love and care? Look at you, all worn out, poor pup." Referring to Tarquin as a "pup" due to his single status.

Tarquin shot him a glance, "Dressed like a peacock first thing in the morning, just to annoy me?"

"You wouldn't understand. This is a new shirt my girlfriend bought for me! Notice that? Girlfriend-bought!"

Tarquin scoffed, "Is this the first time you've ever worn new clothes?"

Keaton replied, "Am I wearing clothes? This is love, my friend. But I guess a lone wolf like you wouldn't get it."

Tarquin snorted disdainfully, "Your daddy's love? I'm not envious!"

Keaton pursed his lips, "Believe it or not, if I tell my dad you're looking to replace him as my father, he might just go rant over your dad's grave!" Keaton's and Tarquin's fathers were close friends. After Tarquin's parents' accident, the Bradfords had taken him in, and Keaton's father had often helped him in secret. Tarquin held Keaton's father in high regard. Keaton knew how to use that to his advantage.

But Tarquin had his ways to counter, quickly bringing up Jessamine, "Would you believe if I told Jess you ditched her carefully arranged blind date to hang out with some D-list girlfriend?"

Keaton was speechless, "You're unbelievable!"

Tarquin sneered, "You're the pup, I'm the alpha!"

Keaton grimaced, "I'd advise you to be kinder to me. I'm the only one who bothers to bring you food."

Tarquin showed his indifference, but Keaton added, "Don't underestimate this simple breakfast. Do you think this is just any meal? This is all my love for you!"

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Tarquin squinted his eyes, glancing over at the insulated lunch box Lowell had just dropped off. Inside was a breakfast that Elysia had asked Lowell to bring over. Noticing Tarquin's distraction, Keaton also looked at the lunch box on the table. "What's this about?" he asked.

Keaton reached out to touch it, but Tarquin slapped his hand away. The slap was hard and loud, turning Keaton's hand red immediately. "Damn, what was that for?!" he exclaimed.

Tarquin extinguished his cigarette, opened the lunch box, and the aroma instantly filled the air. Keaton, intrigued, said, "Breakfast, huh?"

Tarquin took out the breakfast items one by one, lining them up in front of him. It was similar to yesterday's but noticeably more generous. Elysia probably thought he didn't get enough to eat the day before. Keaton was incredibly impressed.

"This definitely isn't some free meal from the government, nor does it look like something from a diner. Damn, who cooked this for you personally? Lowell isn't known for his cooking skills, right?"

Tarquin wiped his hands with a wet wipe, a smug look on his face. "Sure, I'm single, but that doesn't mean I'm unloved. This, my friend, is what you call charisma, get it?" He didn't forget to throw a jab back at Keaton. "See this? Does this look like an ordinary breakfast to you? You can't even buy this with money. It's all love!"

Now it was Keaton's turn to be less impressed. "It's just breakfast, and you're making a big deal out of it!"

Tarquin scoffed, "Try getting yourself locked up and see if any of those flings of yours bother to bring you a meal, let alone a homemade one!" Keaton grimaced, knowing well they'd all steer clear of him. Not a single one would show up. But he wasn't heartbroken; he wasn't serious about them either. It was all just for fun, a fair exchange.

After pondering for a moment with a sly grin, Keaton exclaimed, "No way! Did Elysia make this for you?" She was the only one he could think of.

As for Nola, well, she had a 'smart' mom. Tarquin doubted he'd be seeing much of her, especially now. Nola's mom would surely be telling her to keep her distance, to watch from afar. If Tarquin got sentenced, they'd instantly switch sides. But if he walked free, they'd come running back, pretending to

care.

Tarquin conceded silently, leaving Keaton surprised. "Elysia's really stepping up, huh? Given how you usually treat her, I'd have thought her keeping her distance was already kind. Didn't expect her to actually care about you!" Tarquin continued eating his breakfast, remaining silent.

Keaton added, "Speaking of Elysia, she called me last night."

Tarquin immediately looked up. "What did she call you for?"

"To ask about Callum."

"Huh?"

"She couldn't get in touch with Callum all day and asked me to help out."

"Why does she need Callum?"

"Don't know."

Tarquin frowned. "Then why did she come to you for help?"

Keaton explained: "Don't you remember? After Oriana kidnapped her, I apologized, and she asked me to get in touch with you, well, actually with Tarquin. You then had Callum go to the meeting in your place, which led to Elysia meeting Callum and getting all upset. That's the thing, she knew I was acquainted with Callum too, so when she couldn't reach him, she came to me for information."

Tarquin's face soured. "She knows I know Callum too. Why didn't she ask me for help?"

Keaton narrowed his eyes. "Jealous, are you?"

Tarquin, taken aback, frowned. "No, just stating facts. She's obviously closer to me than you. I'm just curious."

Keaton raised an eyebrow. "Well, that's debatable! Maybe in Elysia's eyes, she's closer to me. Why else would she ask for my help and not yours? That tells me I'm considered a friend in her book, and you're nothing."

"....." Tarquin's face darkened, his breakfast suddenly tasting bland. He promptly kicked Keaton out. Then he had Josiah call Elysia, telling her to come over, now!

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Elysia was torn.

"Kids make choices, adults want it all!"

Tarquin remained silent, just watching her, waiting for her to decide.

After a moment, Elysia said hesitantly, "If I really have to choose one, it would definitely be to ensure your safety."

A flicker of something passed through Tarquin's eyes as he squinted. "Not interested in money anymore?"

"Of course, I am."

"Then why choose my safety over money? If I'm safe, you won't get paid."

"That's not necessarily true. If you're safe and sound, you'll probably be in a good mood, right? Maybe you'll just decide to generously give me a ton of money out of the blue. You know, like those tycoons on TV shows who throw money around when they're happy."

Tarquin was taken aback by her logic, something most wouldn't consider. "Do you even remember your condition?"

"Of course, I just have to answer a question, right?"

"Right. And if you don't answer it properly, you'll end up broke for life."

What?!

Elysia's eyes widened. "Don't spout nonsense! I refuse to be broke; I'm destined to be rich!"

Tarquin teased her, "I cursed you in my mind during our bet today. If you don't answer my question seriously, you'll indeed end up broke."

Elysia was flabbergasted. "What's wrong with you! You can't just curse me!"

"I didn't really curse you. Just a heads-up not to back out."

Elysia glared at him, clearly annoyed.

Tarquin remained unfazed. "If you answer seriously, you'll definitely get rich."

That seemed to soothe Elysia a bit. "I'll answer seriously. What's your question? Ask now."

"...We'll talk about it after we get out."

Elysia pouted. "Then why did you even call me here?"

"Just wanted to know, with the holidays coming up, how do you plan to spend them?"

Elysia stared. "You rushed me over here just to ask that? Seriously, you're unbelievable! I was halfway through cooking when the police called, and I rushed over here, worried sick, only to find out you're fine! You... why are you like this?!"

Tarquin found her reaction amusing. She reminded him of a tiny, harmless husky puppy, trying to act fierce but utterly adorable.

"On New Year's Eve, I'm planning to head back to the old family home for dinner with Elijah. If you're free, why not join us?"

"Huh?"

Tarquin explained, "Elijah suggested it. It's your first year knowing each other, and he wants you to spend the holiday dinner with him."

Hearing about Elijah softened Elysia's expression. This year marked their first holiday together, and she too wanted to celebrate the New Year's Eve with Elijah, enjoying a festive dinner.

But... she didn't want to dine with his troublesome relatives.

"You've always said you're not on good terms with your family. Why have dinner with them?"

"Elijah and I are going back to pay respects to my dad."

If not for this reason, he wouldn't bother going back to the Bradfords, nor would he bring Elijah along. Elysia hesitated. She wanted to accompany Elijah, but what if those dreadful relatives recognized the kids? The children had met Tarquin before, and thanks to Emmett's makeup skills, they weren't recognized. But at the old family home, with so many relatives around, what if someone noticed something was off?

Her principle was clear: it was better for the kids to avoid Tarquin and his relatives as much as possible. Preferably, they would never meet again.

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"Are you worried about your and the kids' safety? Don't be. With me around, no one's going to mess with you," Tarquin assured.

Elysia responded awkwardly, "Give me some time to think about it."

Tarquin didn't push her. "Alright, just let me know when you've decided."

"Okay." And with that, Elysia left.

Tarquin lit up a cigarette, sinking into a moment of solitude as he smoked.

Later, he called Josiah into the room. "Spread the word to those guys that I'm bringing Elysia in, like I'm leaving her in charge of my last wishes." Josiah paused, his eyes flickering as he caught on. "Got it!"

...

With Tarquin's recent troubles, the business world was in turmoil. And it wasn't just the business sector; other circles were feeling the heat too. Especially after Josiah leaked the news about Tarquin's "last wishes," the instability only grew.

Tarquin was a titan, a man whose mere presence could shake the entire economy. And now, with rumors of his demise, his vast influence meant that many were losing sleep over the potential fallout. Some were elated, others worried. But for the general public, life went on as usual, oblivious to the storms within the upper echelons.

Elysia was one such person, unaware of Tarquin's true stature and the extent of his influence. So, her concern for him was pure and unfiltered, free from any ulterior motives.

On New Year's Eve morning, Elysia paid another visit to the station. She came to discuss the evening's dinner plans with Tarquin and brought him breakfast.

"I've talked it over with Elijah and the kids; we're all coming to your family's old house for dinner tonight. Is there anything we need to prepare or be aware of?"

Hearing she was coming, Tarquin's mood visibly brightened as he started on the breakfast she'd made. "You don't need to bring anything. Just wait at home with the kids; I'll come get you once I'm done here."

Elysia, still slightly worried, asked again, "Are you sure you'll be able to get out today?"

Tarquin, slightly annoyed, retorted, "You worry too much. What's going to happen when you actually get old? You've asked a hundred times already." Elysia, speechless at his complaint, simply asked, "So, what time will you be able to leave?"

"Don't know. Why, do you have plans?"

"It's New Year's Eve. If you get out too late, all the shops will be closed, and you won't be able to buy anything!"

"What do you need to buy on New Year's Eve?" Tarquin wondered.

Elysia was taken aback. "Don't you buy things for the New Year?"

"I've never really celebrated New Year's," Tarquin admitted calmly. "When I was a kid, I celebrated with my parents. But after they passed, it was just me. There's not much point in celebrating alone. With Elijah, we tried for the first couple of years. But the holiday only made him miss his mom more. The more festive it got, the sadder he became. So, we just stopped celebrating."

Elysia's heart clenched in sympathy for both Elijah and Tarquin. New Year's, the grandest of traditions, yet here were father and son, choosing not to celebrate. She pictured them, isolated in their quiet home, surrounded by the joy of others, yet engulfed in their own solitude and longing. It was a thought that pained her deeply.

Chapter 519

This cantankerous man, whether as an orphan in his youth or later as a father to Elijah, had always been a figure of pity. And her Elijah...

They say the holidays make you miss your loved ones more, each festive season intensifying that yearning.

Most kids love Christmas, seeing it as the most joyous time of the year.

But for her Elijah, it was the most torturous period annually.

No more.

Never again!

She was back, and she vowed never to let her Elijah spend another Christmas alone.

From now on, every Christmas would be celebrated together with Elijah!

Elysia sniffled, her tone much softer, "Blossom mentioned wanting to take the kids out shopping today, to buy new clothes and shoes, and maybe pick up some holiday goodies. Is there anything specific you need that I can pick up for you?"

Tarquin's expression remained unreadable, silent for a moment before speaking, "New clothes and shoes?"

He and Elijah had always had their clothes custom-made, never needing to shop for them separately.

"Yeah, it's a tradition to wear something new for Christmas. Kids especially look forward to new outfits for the holidays. It makes them sad not to have that. Growing up, I only ever got to wear my younger sister's hand-me-downs during the holidays, and it always made me feel left out. So, I've made it a point to get new outfits for my kids every year."

One for each, ensuring all three little ones had their share.

This year, though, there would be four sets needed, including one for Elijah.

Tarquin said, "Just pick out whatever you think is best."

"Okay, so I'll get one for Elijah, and one for you too?" She wasn't sure when he'd have the chance to shop himself, so Elysia cautiously asked. Tarquin looked at her for a while, then grunted a 'hmm', "Use the card I gave you. There's no limit. Spend freely."

Spend freely?

Elysia immediately bounced back from her prior dejection, thrilled, "So I can spend however I like?"

"Hmm!"

"Thank you, Sugar Daddy!"

Tarquin: "...So money-minded, you must have been broke in your last life!"

Elysia said, "I'm not worried about my last life. As long as I'm not broke in this one, it's all good. What kind of clothes do you want?"

"Just pick out anything, as long as it's not childish."

"Got it! What size are you?"

"Ask Lowell."

Elysia rolled her eyes, "Poor Lowell, has to remember everything, almost like he's your better half. When you do get a wife, wonder if you'll see Lowell as a rival."

A wife?

Strictly speaking, he already had one, though they'd never met. His "wife" was someone the Bradford family had arranged for him years ago to curb his influence, reportedly after consulting a fortune teller for their compatibility.

It was said that she would bring him bad luck.

Ironically, after they got married, his fortunes soared instead of plummeted!

A cold smirk crossed Tarquin's face at the thought.

Elysia, oblivious to his expression, saw that he had finished eating and began to tidy up, "I'll leave this here for now and head straight to the mall from the station. If you manage to get out today, you can help me bring it back."

After her instructions, she left, only to turn back at the door, reminding him, "Don't forget to pick this up, okay? It cost quite a bit, you know, a whole bunch of dollars."

Tarquin: "..."

Watching her leave, he felt an inexplicable sense of annoyance.

He couldn't tell if it was because of her, or because of himself.

But while he was irked, Elysia was anything but.

After all, she didn't fancy him. Her concerns for him were out of pity, mainly for Elijah's sake.

Chapter 520

Instead, she was absolutely thrilled today.

Just the thought of hitting the mall later and spending however she fancied had her buzzing with excitement. After leaving the police station, she immediately called Blossom.

Blossom and the kids were already on their way to the mall, and they agreed to meet up at the main entrance. The plan was to shop for clothes at the mall first and then hit the market for some holiday shopping. This year, Professor Folly and his wife couldn't make it back from their archaeological dig abroad, leaving Blossom solo. It just so happened she'd be joining them for the New Year celebrations.

Half an hour later, they all met up at the entrance of the mall. As soon as Blossom saw Elysia, she teased, "Look at you, all smiles. Hit the jackpot, did you?"

"Yep! Big time! Today, I'm buying whatever I want, all on me!"

Blossom looked skeptical, "Really rolling in it, huh?"

Elysia flashed her platinum card, "Please, call me Lady Moneybags!"

"No way, some random guy gave that to you?"

Elysia glared at her, "Cut it out. For today, he's not some random guy, he's Mr. Bradford."

As for whether he stays 'some random guy' or becomes 'Mr. Bradford' permanently, that'll depend on how he plays his cards. No dough, he's just some dude; but with cash in hand, he's Mr. Bradford!

Blossom's envy was almost tangible, "Lady Moneybags, I bow down to thee."

"Yeah, yeah, got it, got it. Today, cling to me, and whatever you want, I'll buy. Sky's the limit!"

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, the little ones came running over from the square.

"Mommy!" "Mommy!" "Mommy!" "Mommy!"

Their adorable voices immediately drew the attention of passersby. Being New Year's Eve, the streets were bustling with folks out and about, getting their last-minute shopping done. Hearing the commotion, many turned to look towards Elysia. With a face blooming like a peach, she grinned from ear to ear, lovingly patting one and pinching another.

"Don't worry, he'll definitely make it out today. Come on, mommy's gonna buy you some new clothes."

The kids, already confident that Tarquin would be fine, were over the moon. Off they went into the mall, with Lady Moneybags Elysia leading her little lords on a spending spree! Everywhere they went, they were the envy of all,

"Good heavens, those little munchkins are too cute, I could kidnap them all!" "So adorable, I wonder what color of sack they'd prefer!" "Goodness, suddenly my life feels incomplete, I need a munchkin!" "I need four!" "..."

Elysia couldn't have been prouder, wealthy, beautiful, with kids, and sans a man! To her friends, she was nothing short of royalty!

After a morning of wild shopping, they were all exhausted yet exhilarated. Having finished their spree, Elysia and the kids headed back to Future Community, while Blossom took a detour to her parents' place to hang up some holiday decorations. Uncertain about Tarquin's release time, Elysia and the kids didn't join Blossom.

Once back at Future Community, Emmett was busy getting Elliot and Evan ready with makeup for the evening's New Year's Eve dinner. Elysia collapsed onto the couch, pulling a classic slouch. Watching the kids buzzing around full of energy, she couldn't help but smile contentedly, though inwardly she joked about her own stamina: Man, I'm getting old, a day of shopping nearly did me in!

Suddenly, the doorbell rang. Thinking it might be Tarquin, she quickly instructed the kids to stay in their rooms, doors closed, until they were fully dressed and ready. Then she went to answer, "Coming, coming, who is it?"

No response. Elysia frowned. If it had been Tarquin, he would've answered by now. Instead of opening the door right away, Elysia peeped through the peephole. The sight of the person outside made her heart skip a beat, nearly screaming in shock, her expression completely changing!

