

Hitched 631

Chapter 631

Back at the house, Elysia couldn't help but ask, "Why are you hiring so many caregivers? How much is this going to cost? Blossom and I can take care of him; there's no need to throw money away."

"All those caregivers put together still aren't worth as much as you."

"I... I'm free, you don't have to pay for me!"

Realizing she took it the wrong way, Tarquin pursed his lips in disdain. "I'd rather pay than have you take care of him!"

"...Isn't that just wasting money?!"

Tarquin looked down at her. "Or how about you take care of me, and I'll pay you."

Elysia was speechless. "What do I need to take care of you for when you're perfectly fine?"

"I can break an arm or a leg right now, make myself completely helpless."

Elysia: "...". She was utterly speechless!

She wanted to retort against his absurd spending habits, but her gaze inadvertently fell on their hands together.

Her heart started racing.

Their hands were still intertwined, his large palm enveloping hers tightly.

The warmth from his palm made her cheeks flush and her heart tremble.

"Mommy?!" Emmett suddenly appeared from his room, delighted to see her and quickly ran back shouting, "Mommy's back!"

Elysia's heart skipped a beat, and she immediately tried to withdraw her hand.

But she couldn't pull it away!

The harder she tried, the tighter he held.

After a few seconds of this standoff, Elysia looked up at him in surprise and anger, just in time to meet Tarquin's burning and ambiguous gaze.

His look was full of insinuation, as if he wanted to devour her whole!

Elysia's breath quickened, too nervous to speak, her eyes signaling him to let go.

Instead of releasing her, Tarquin's thumb started to slide gently over her hand, the movement loaded with suggestion.

His touch was like fire, making her all hot and bothered, her heart fluttering wildly.

Elysia thought she heard the kids jumping out of bed, becoming even more anxious. How embarrassing would it be if the kids saw them like this!

Feeling both embarrassed and annoyed, unable to free her left hand, she lifted her right hand intending to slap him!

Quick as a flash, Tarquin caught her wrist and pulled her into the bathroom, not even closing the door, pinning her against the wall and kissing her deeply!

Elysia's eyes widened in shock!

The kids were still in the house; they could come looking any moment!

And Blossom could be back at any time too!

"Mmm-"

She resisted, but Tarquin didn't give her a chance.

He held her wrists above her head, his legs pinning hers, and kissed her with a dominance that bordered on madness.

The kiss was fierce, carrying a hint of punishment.

Elysia couldn't hold out, her body going limp, until they heard the kids' voices from the living room,

"Hmm? Where's mommy?"

Emmett in his childish voice said, "I just saw mommy a moment ago."

Elysia's body shivered; she held her breath, daring not to move.

Tarquin finally let her go, but immediately drew close again, biting her lip as a form of punishment, his voice low and threatening,

"Every time you see him, I'll kiss you once! The longer you see him, the longer I'll kiss you!"

Elysia's lips were tightly pressed together, shocked and displeased. "?!?"

Tarquin frowned at her, his Adam's apple bobbing, clearly unsatisfied.

He lifted his hand, his thumb grazing her moist lips, cleaning off their mingled essence.

The gesture was both teasing and intimate!

Elysia, mortified, pushed him away forcefully. "You... you jerk!"

She quickly left the bathroom, and the kids saw her, exclaiming in surprise, "Mommy!"

Four little voices chirped at once.

Four tiny figures rushed into her arms...

Evan ran the fastest, not managing his speed and force well, lunging at Elysia and sending her crashing back into Tarquin's arms.

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Tarquin effortlessly won Elysia's affection...

Evan: "???"

The three little ones: "!"

Tarquin, with one arm around Elysia, looked down at Evan from his higher stance, "Watch it, if you bump into me, you're in big trouble!"

The four little ones: ".

Evan was half confused and half shocked, kind of getting it but not really???

Emmett was completely lost, clueless about the deeper meaning behind Tarquin's words, his big eyes blinking in confusion.

Only Elliot and Elijah, one with a slight frown and the other squinting slightly, their expressions unreadable as they glanced between Tarquin and Elysia.

Elysia's feelings at that moment were beyond words. Fuming, she stomped hard on Tarquin's foot and then turned to the kids, "Keith's back already, let's put this behind us... you guys go play in your room, I'll make lunch."

Elliot sensed Elysia's discomfort. Though unaware of what had transpired between her and Tarquin, he knew she wanted to send them away. So, Elliot immediately herded his three brothers back to their room, mentioning before closing the door, "Mom, no rush with lunch, we're not hungry yet." Once the door shut, only Elysia and Tarquin remained in the living room. Elysia turned and glared at him, "Be careful from now on! If you dare to make another move or talk nonsense, I'll... I'll thump you!"

After her heated declaration, she quickly retreated to her bedroom, even taking a vase with her for some reason.

Tarquin, smirking, watched her bedroom door for a moment, his grin reminiscent of a goofy squire! He stood there, chuckling to himself for a while before Keith came to mind, his gaze sharpening. Striding towards the children's room, he knocked softly and asked in a hushed tone, "Anyone up for some ice cream?"

After a few seconds, the door cracked open, revealing Evan and Emmett peeking out.

Evan said, "Not me!"

Emmett, unable to resist, admitted, "I do."

Evan quickly added, "Alright, alright, just to keep you company, I'll sacrifice and have a little bit!"

He then looked up at Tarquin, pretending to be picky, "What flavors do they have? I won't eat it if it's not good!"

Tarquin, indulging him with a smile, replied, "There's a new place downstairs, seems they've got a wide selection, you'll find something you like."

Evan mumbled, "But mom said we shouldn't eat ice cream, only a little in summer, and not at all in winter."

"It's fine, we've got heating at home, a little now and then won't hurt. If she gets mad, just say I forced you. If she's looking to scold someone, I'll take the hit."

Evan's eyes sparkled, "You promise?"

"Yeah, my word. Let's go."

Just as Evan was about to let out a squeal of excitement, Tarquin reminded him, "Keep it down, if she hears us, we won't make it."

Evan nodded eagerly, "Right, right, low profile."

He turned to Elliot, "Bro, let's go, ice cream time."

Elliot squinted slightly. He knew about the ice cream shop downstairs; it had been open for a while. Tarquin inviting them for ice cream wasn't just for the sake of it. He wasn't much into sweets, but he didn't refuse either, following them out. With mom not around, he had to look after his brothers, and he was curious about what Tarquin was up to.

At this hour, most people were either at work or school, leaving the café unusually quiet.

When the server spotted the group of five, her eyes widened in astonishment. The eldest was incredibly handsome, and the youngest, adorably cute.

Was this some high-flying CEO out with his charming kids, or perhaps a celebrity scouting locations for an upcoming film? The young and pretty waitresses couldn't help but feel their hearts flutter, cheeks flushing with a mix of admiration and shy excitement. A man like Tarquin, with his striking looks, regal demeanor, and an aura of unattainable sophistication, was the kind of man they only dreamed about!

"This rose already has its thorns," Elijah commented with a furrowed brow, catching the waitresses off guard and prompting awkward laughter as they scrambled to ease the tension.

"The kids are so handsome; your mom must be beautiful, huh?" one of them ventured, trying to make small talk.

Elijah, not usually one to engage with strangers, remembered his mother's advice on politeness and nodded earnestly, though he didn't elaborate further. His reserved nature made him seem even more unreachable than Tarquin.

Tarquin affectionately ruffled his son's hair, proud of Elijah's attempt to interact in an unfamiliar setting - a significant step forward for him. Before Elysia came into their lives, such progress would have been unimaginable. Elijah would have been anxious and disruptive, a challenge to manage outside the safety of home. Elysia changed everything, softening Tarquin's heart at the mere thought of her- truly, a gift from above, the most precious one could ask for.

"We're fine for now, but we'll call if we need anything," Tarquin informed the waitresses.

They quickly responded, "Of course, feel free to try some samples from our display area if you're undecided."

"Free samples?" Evan exclaimed, eyes lighting up with excitement.

Emmett, too, gazed eagerly at the waitress, who barely resisted the urge to pinch their adorable cheeks - such cuteness was irresistible!

"Sure, I'll show you where," she offered, anything to please these little charmers.

"Thank you!" The two young food enthusiasts eagerly followed, but not before Tarquin reminded them to take off their coats, considering the warmth inside.

Evan quickly shed his puffer jacket, stowing it away with practiced ease, while Emmett needed a bit more help from Tarquin, who took a moment to ensure his youngest was comfortable before letting them explore.

Turning to Elliot and Elijah, Tarquin asked, "Want to try some samples too?"

Both shook their heads, Elliot choosing a quiet spot to sit, making it easier for Elijah to relax in the cozy café setting.

Once settled, Elliot cut straight to the chase, "We sneaked out with you, so let's keep it brief and stick to the essentials."

Tarquin was taken aback. Elliot's sharpness was undeniable, making even the most astute adults seem dim by comparison. The boy's intellect and perceptiveness were a mystery, a gift that seemed to surpass even that of his late father.

Without beating around the bush, Tarquin dropped the bombshell, "Keith is trouble!"

Elliot froze, perplexed, while Elijah tensed up, worried. Without solid proof against Keith, such a bold accusation could easily backfire, casting doubt on Tarquin's motives. Could he be trying to tarnish Keith's reputation out of spite, or was there genuine concern behind his warning?

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After all, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett all had a great deal of respect and affection for Keith.

Elijah nervously glanced at Elliot, terrified that the fragile goodwill his dad had worked so hard to build in Elliot's heart might crumble.

Tarquin knew exactly what was making Elijah anxious, but he didn't expect Elliot to take his word for it. He spoke up to put Elliot on guard against Keith!

Elliot was sharp and cautious, especially when it came to matters involving Elysia. He would be extra vigilant. Whether he believed Tarquin or not, he'd be careful around Keith after hearing him out. Tarquin couldn't be there to watch over them around the clock. If the kids were mentally prepared, they could better protect themselves and Elysia when he wasn't around.

That was the whole reason he suggested they go downstairs for ice cream! Since they couldn't shake off Keith for the time being and hadn't caught him red-handed in anything shady, the best they could do was stay alert and minimize any chance Keith had to stir trouble!

As for whether Elliot might misunderstand his intentions, that was a minor concern compared to the safety of the kids and Elysia.

Elliot frowned, pondering Tarquin's silence before asking, "After Keith turned off the listening device, what exactly did he say?"

Tarquin scowled, "He made some disrespectful remarks about Elysia."

"Disrespectful... about my mom?"

"Yes."

Elliot's brow furrowed deeper. "What did he say?"

"You're too young; it's not appropriate for you to hear. But I'm not lying to you, Keith is bad news!"

The room fell silent for a moment.

Elliot then said, "I've done my own checking on Keith before. He seemed okay."

Tarquin and Elijah tensed, but then Elliot continued, "But I believe you're not lying to me."

Between Keith and them, he'd definitely trust Elijah and Tarquin more. Even though he'd interacted with Keith back in preschool, he hadn't really gotten to know Keith well enough to judge his true nature. But when it came to Tarquin, one being his biological father and the other his brother, he was clear about their character.

Hearing this, Tarquin and Elijah silently breathed a sigh of relief.

Elijah then spoke up: "Dad is a straightforward person. He wouldn't bad-mouth someone without reason! Keith upset Mom as soon as he showed up today! His so-called 'test' must have been premeditated!"

Elliot knitted his brows, "If that's the case, Keith buying the house across the street is suspicious."

Tarquin added, "He might have bought that house because of Elysia, but if he liked Elysia, he wouldn't have said those disrespectful things about her today."

"So, he's getting close to Mom for some other reason?!" Elliot and Elijah exclaimed in unison.

Tarquin nodded, "I believe so, but we still don't know his true intentions."

After saying this, Tarquin looked at Elliot, "Just to be safe, you should keep your distance from Keith. But when I talked to Elysia about moving and changing your schools today, she refused. Could you try talking to her?"

Without hesitation, Elliot answered, "No."

He knew why his mom was reluctant to move or change schools. She hadn't warmed up to him yet. Regarding the secrets of their origins, she was definitely still on guard.

With that thought, Elliot gave Tarquin a meaningful look and asked, "Did you upset Mom today?"

Tarquin froze, "When?"

Elliot was straightforward, "Just before we came downstairs."

Tarquin was silent. He had upset her. In a fit of jealousy, he had pinned her against the bathroom wall, kissed her, and even warned her.

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Elliot furrowed his tiny brows in a stern warning, "Before my mom takes a liking to you, hands off, buddy. And don't you dare make her do anything she doesn't want to!"

Elliot sounded like a protective father laying down the law to his daughter's suitor. Scratch that, not a suitor, just one of the potential candidates.

Tarquin's lips twitched, itching to say 'kids shouldn't meddle in adult affairs,' but he didn't want to upset Elliot. After all, Elliot was looking after Elysia like a doting dad with his little girl!

Tarquin didn't argue, "I won't make her do anything she doesn't want to." Stealing a kiss... that didn't count! And going further, like getting intimate, he definitely wouldn't force her.

Elliot gave him another meaningful look, shifting the topic back to Keith, "I can't convince my mom to move houses, but I'll warn her to steer clear of Keith. Once we're back, I'll do some digging on him."

Tarquin breathed a sigh of relief, nodding. Though he couldn't persuade Elliot to talk Elysia into moving, at least Elliot was aware that Keith was bad news. Mission somewhat accomplished. And with no evidence to back his claims, Elliot's trust was touching. This kid must really like him, must be really keen on having him as a dad! Even if it's not by blood, Tarquin was more than happy to play the role!

Thinking to himself, feeling a surge of fatherly affection, "What flavor of ice cream do you want? I'll grab some for you. Don't worry, if Elysia finds out, I'll cover for you."

...

Meanwhile, Elysia was oblivious to the fact that her 'home' had been 'invaded,' her kids thoroughly 'kidnapped'! She was busy ranting in her bedroom! She called Tarquin shameless, a scoundrel! And she was peeved: why should she get kissed by him every time she sees Keith? Who did he think he was to her! Yes, he was the father of her child, but that was it! What a jerk! She even cursed him for being a wasteful spender, thinking about all those caregivers, all that money, it made her cringe! As if she was the one paying!

After a good rant, she calmed down, then plucked a flower from the bouquet and began to tear its petals one by one, "He loves me, he loves me not, he loves me, he loves me not..." One moment she was testing if Tarquin liked her, the next if she liked Tarquin. Back and forth, wasting no small number of flowers. The last petal ended on 'he loves me,' and she was nervous. Had it been 'he loves me not,' she'd be just as jittery!

Hiding in her bedroom, she was like a startled fawn, alternately tearing petals, scratching her head, wringing her hands, and then lying on the bed kicking her legs in frustration.

When Blossom came back and saw the mess, she was shocked, "What in the world happened to you? Why all the flower petals?!"

Elysia looked up from the bed, her eyes pitiful, "Blossom, I think I'm gonna die."

"Stop talking nonsense, what's wrong? Is this about Elijah's dad and Keith?"

"It's not about Keith."

"Then it's gotta be about Elijah's dad! What did he say when he dragged you back here?"

", " He said he'd kiss me every time I see Keith! As often as she sees Keith, that's how often he'd kiss her! Elysia's cheeks burned as she stammered, "He didn't really say much. I was thinking about what Keith said, that him hitting Keith wasn't really about me, but because Keith provoked him..."

Blossom was sharp today, quickly catching on to Elysia's true feelings,

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"Are you wondering if he's into you or not?"

Though slightly embarrassed, Elysia nodded.

Perched on the edge of the bed, Blossom advised, "Just go up and ask him!"

"What?"

"Rip off the Band-Aid! Whether he likes you or not, at least you'll know where you stand. But... I think he's into you, even if it was just a spur-of-the- moment thing when he stood up for you."

Blossom couldn't help but gossip further, "What if he really does like you? What then?"

"I... I don't know."

"See? You're all over the place! Remember when I first suggested you two get together? You were so against it, said there was no way in hell! Now look at you."

Elysia didn't respond.

Blossom continued, "Your feelings have clearly changed. Maybe you're not head-over-heels yet, but there's something there. Anyway, I'm all for it." "Why?"

"First off, you two are a match made in heaven looks-wise. Plus, he's the father of your kids. Sure, he's hit a rough patch financially, but he's not exactly on the streets. He's got a modest house and a car, at least!

And it's obvious you've got a crush. If he feels the same, you'd be crazy not to give it a shot. It's rare to find mutual affection. Don't let it slip away!" Elysia grimaced, "But the past..."

"Forget about the past. Live in the moment. You know he had his reasons that day at the airport."

Elysia retorted, "Last time, you said to only look at the outcomes, not the reasons."

Blossom laughed, "That's because you didn't like him then!"

Elysia blushed, muttering, "I still don't."

Blossom winked at her. Elysia rolled her eyes, changing the subject, "I need to figure out how he feels first!"

"Just ask him outright. It's better to know for sure," Blossom encouraged.

"What if he says he doesn't? Won't that be awkward?"

"A moment of awkwardness is better than endless wondering. Besides, it's not like you're confessing your love; you're just asking a question." Elysia was swayed, deciding it was better to face the music sooner rather than later. No point in torturing herself with what-ifs.

"I'll ask him when he gets back!"

"Right on! You've got my full support!"

With that settled, Elysia asked about Keith.

"Oh, right! Keith asked me to tell Elijah's dad thanks for covering the expenses. And he told me to tell you it's all water under the bridge, no hard feelings."

Elysia frowned, feeling even guiltier.

"And the caregivers?"

"Keith kept one, sent the others away. Said he didn't need them all, it'd be a waste."

After a bit more chatting, Blossom went to grab a package, and Elysia headed to the kitchen to make lunch.

While cooking, Elysia psyched herself up: No need to be nervous. We're adults. Time to be straightforward and ask. No backing down.

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Not long after, Tarquin and the four little rascals returned.

Under Tarquin's lead, they sneaked into the house, quietly opening the door and tiptoeing inside. Their eyes, all five pairs of them, were glued towards the direction of Elysia's bedroom, terrified of being caught by her.

But then-

Elysia's voice emerged from behind them, "Freeze!"

Startled, the group stopped dead in their tracks! Then, they simultaneously turned around to face her.

Elysia, apron tied around her waist and a kitchen knife in her hand, stood at the kitchen doorway, her brows furrowed in a mix of confusion and irritation, "What have you been up to? Why are you coming from outside?!"

She had thought the little rascals were playing in the playroom all this time!

Caught red-handed, the kids blinked rapidly, one after another, before unanimously turning their gaze towards Tarquin, waiting for him to save the day.

Tarquin glanced at the shiny kitchen knife in Elysia's hand, cleared his throat, and repeated the story they had agreed upon earlier, "We were just bored, so I took the kids out for a little stroll downstairs. Didn't want to worry you, so we came back after a short while."

Elysia interrogated, "A stroll downstairs? When did you sneak out? And why didn't you tell me?!"

Tarquin replied, "You were in the bedroom; thought you were resting. Didn't want to disturb you, so I didn't mention it."

Elysia, half-believing, stared at him for a few seconds, then her gaze shifted towards the four little ones. With just one look from her, the kids spilled the beans, "Mommy, he took us downstairs for ice cream." "It was his idea." "We didn't want to go, but he tempted us with delicious ice cream!" "He even said if you got mad, he'd take the blame for us."

Tarquin: "???"

Ah? So much for the "ship of friendship." When they were downstairs, they had agreed that if Elysia found out, they would all stick to the story of just going for a walk. Whoever mentioned ice cream was the traitor! Looks like he was the only one who took that seriously? These little traitors! Had he known, he would've been better off telling Elysia the truth from the start!

As Tarquin was inwardly lamenting their betrayal, Elysia, visibly upset, said, "You four, back to your room! You, come with me!"

Elysia, still holding the kitchen knife, headed towards the study. The kids scampered off to the playroom quicker than you could say "ice cream," closing the door behind them.

Tarquin: "... " The ship of friendship had completely capsized!

Reaching the door of the study and noticing Tarquin hadn't moved, Elysia snapped, "Come here!"

Tarquin grimaced awkwardly, managing a strained smile, "Let's just talk. No need to get physical, especially not with a knife."

Only then did Elysia realize she was still holding the kitchen knife she had been using to chop vegetables. Hearing the commotion, she had instinctively grabbed it before coming out.

Too lazy to return to the kitchen, she carried it with her into the study. Tarquin swallowed hard and followed.

Once inside, Elysia sat on the couch while Tarquin, not daring to sit, stood and explained, "There's a new ice cream parlor that just opened downstairs. I figured kids love ice cream, and since we had some time, I thought why not treat them."

Elysia fumed, "Did the kids lie?"

"No."

"So, it was indeed your idea to take them for ice cream?"

"Yeah."

"You..." Elysia, livid, "Do you have air for brains?! It's the middle of winter. Feeding kids something that cold is terrible for their health! Other parents go out of their way to keep their kids away from ice cream, and here you are, inviting them to have some! You..."

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Elysia was going on and on, venting her frustration, while Tarquin listened quietly, without showing any sign of annoyance. "Whatever you say is right!"

After she finished, Tarquin took the initiative to apologize. "I wasn't thinking clearly, I've reflected on it, and I'm sorry."

His tone was so earnest that Elysia couldn't stay mad at him. She muttered, "Kids love ice cream. You only give it to them when they're so desperate they can't be calmed down otherwise. You should never be the one to suggest it! Too much and they'll end up with a stomachache! And from now on, you can't just take the kids out without telling me. You have to let me know in advance."

"Got it! I'll remember!"

"Do you really remember?"

"Yeah, I've taken your words to heart."

Elysia's heart skipped a beat, her lips quivered, recalling Blossom's words, her heartbeat involuntarily quickening. "That thing..."

"What thing?"

"You know..."

Tarquin was puzzled.

Elysia, whose palms were now sweaty with nervousness, had lost her earlier bravado at the sight of him. After a considerable internal struggle, she finally asked, "Did you fight with Keith today because he provoked you?"

"He provoked me?"

"Yeah, Keith said he deliberately warned you to stay away from me or else he wouldn't be nice, and then you hit him."

Tarquin rolled his eyes in disdain, "You believed that?"

Elysia didn't directly respond, only saying, "I'm asking you."

"What if I said he was lying? Would you believe me?"

Elysia was surprised, "He lied?"

"Yes."

"Why would he lie to me about that?"

It was clear she believed him. Tarquin was in a good mood, this silly girl might be a bit naive, but at least she wasn't foolish and knew whose side to take. He leaned against the desk, hands in his pockets, watching Elysia. "I'm not a toddler, and neither is Keith. If all he said was 'I won't be nice', I wouldn't have been provoked to hit him."

"What did he say, then?"

Tarquin remained silent.

Elysia didn't press him further, instead asking, "Was it about me?"

"Yeah."

"So... you fought with him because of me?"

"Yeah."

Elysia's heart raced again, "Then you... you..."

Before Elysia could finish, Tarquin's cell phone rang. He took it out, glanced at the screen, and his expression visibly changed! But instead of answering the call, he looked up at her, "Is there anything urgent you wanted to say?"

Elysia could tell he was in a hurry and didn't want to hold him back. "I... I don't have anything urgent. You go ahead if you need to."

"Alright, I'll come back to you guys as soon as I'm done," Tarquin said gently, patting her head before turning to leave.

His gesture was so affectionate it sent Elysia's heart into a flutter. After leaving the study, Tarquin also made a quick visit to the kids' room to say goodbye, asking them to take care of themselves and Elysia, before he left the apartment.

Once outside, he immediately called Axel back. "Any news?"

Axel had been investigating the whereabouts of a daughter Tarquin wasn't even sure existed. But with both a mysterious informant and Gideon mentioning her, there was a chance she was real. So, despite having no evidence to prove he had a daughter out there, he still had Axel looking into it discreetly.

Axel's response was blunt, "No news at all."

Tarquin's heart skipped a beat!

Just after getting into the car, he frowned and asked, "No leads on a little girl resembling Elijah?"

"Yeah, I've gone through all the girls Elijah's age in Jindale City, not a single suspicious one!"

Axel then added, "Could the info about the daughter be a red herring by the mystery person to throw you off?"

Tarquin lit a cigarette, taking a deep drag. The tension around him was palpable; even the air in the car seemed to drop.

Lowell was sitting in the driver's seat, glancing at Tarquin through the rearview mirror, not daring to make a sound.

After a brief silence, Tarquin spoke again, "Keep looking. If she's not in Jindale City, then expand the search nationwide!"

He wasn't sure if this daughter actually existed. But what if she did? What if he really had a daughter out there? He couldn't give up on finding her!

After hanging up, Tarquin lit another cigarette. The only small comfort he had was that if this daughter did exist and was indeed with the mystery person, she was probably not in danger for now. The mystery person seemed to care about this daughter.

Lowell, unaware of this development, had been focusing on the company lately. Turning his head, he cautiously suggested, "Tarquin, maybe you should head to the office. It's chaos over there; the executives are losing their minds."

After the holiday, there was a backlog of work and many projects needed Tarquin's approval to proceed. But Tarquin had been staying at the hospital with Elijah and Elysia since the holiday, and hadn't been to the office, driving the executives to the brink of madness!

Feeling down, Tarquin didn't want to impose his mood on Elysia and the kids. Flicking off the ash, he said, "I'll check it out."

Upstairs, Keith stood by the window, watching Tarquin's car leave the neighborhood. His gaze was intense, his fingers tapping the windowsill rhythmically, his expression unreadable.

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At noon, as Elysia was just finishing up lunch, the doorbell rang. Blossom egged her on to answer the door, "It's gotta be Elijah's dad. Go and talk to him. If you chicken out now, don't bother coming back!"

Blushing, Elysia lightly hit her, handed her the ladle to serve the soup, and went to wash her hands before opening the door. Taking a deep breath to muster her courage, she swung the door open and blurted out, "Be honest, do you like me?!"

Silence stretched on, and he didn't reply. Elysia's heart sank as she looked down, her cheeks burning with embarrassment. No answer meant no affection, right?

Irritated and looking for a way out, she said, "Just kidding. Don't take it seriously. Better if you don't like me because, guess what, I don't like you either!"

As she turned to walk back inside, her eyes began to sting with a mix of shame, anger, and an indescribable surge of emotions.

"Ms. Thorne," suddenly came Keith's voice from behind her. Stunned, Elysia quickly turned around to see Keith standing at the door, looking utterly baffled.

Elysia: "????!!!"

Keith, one arm in a cast and holding a cake in his other hand, sheepishly asked, "Were you talking to me just now?"

Only then did Elysia realize her mistake. She had been so nervous she hadn't even properly looked at who she was talking to, afraid of backing out again. And now...

Elysia wished she could dig a hole big enough to hide a whole apartment in with her toes. She quickly stammered, "No, no, I... I got the wrong person."

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Keith's eyes twinkled with mischief before he broke into a grin and asked, "So, you've mistaken me for Elijah's dad, huh?"

Elysia felt her cheeks burn with embarrassment.

Keith's laughter softened the awkward moment. "Seems like Ms. Thorne has fallen for him. That's great. He is the kids' father, after all. If you two got together, it would be like a family reunion. Best wishes to you both."

Elysia's eyes widened in shock at Keith's words, nearly forgetting that he knew her secret! It was a reminder that she couldn't afford to get too close or offend him easily.

"Our family situation is a bit... complicated," Elysia managed to say.

"I know, Elliot filled me in. Don't worry, your secret is safe with me. I won't gossip or spill anything. I'll help you keep it under wraps," Keith reassured her.

Elysia thanked him politely, then asked why he had come over.

Keith had brought over a cake, apologizing for dampening the mood when he first moved in and wanting to make amends.

Elysia was looking for a way to decline the cake when Blossom suddenly appeared.

"Keith?"

She had planned to catch up on the latest gossip with Elysia and Tarquin, so Keith's presence took her by surprise.

After a brief exchange at the door, Blossom warmly invited Keith inside.

The kids, hearing Keith's voice, came to greet him. "Hey, brought you guys some cake," Keith announced cheerfully.

"Thanks, Keith! Come on in, let's chat for a bit," Elliot welcomed him eagerly.

Elysia felt uneasy, not fully trusting Keith despite not knowing what specifically was off about him. She remembered someone's warning and preferred the kids not to be alone with him.

"Uh, Elliot, whatever you need to say, we can talk in the living room," she intervened.

"Don't worry, Mommy, we'll be quick! We won't give Keith a hard time!" Elliot assured her, dragging Keith into the playroom and deliberately closing the door behind them.

Evan and Emmett greeted Keith enthusiastically, only Elijah remained aloof.

The kids had agreed on their approach toward Keith after returning from the ice cream parlor.

Elliot had his reasons. Firstly, Keith knew their secret, so they couldn't afford to alienate him. Secondly, after returning from the ice cream parlor, Elliot had done some digging but found nothing suspicious

about Keith, which meant they needed to keep him close to uncover anything. Lastly, they had liked Keith before, and a sudden change in attitude might tip him off.

Acting innocently, Elliot asked, "Keith, we wanted to know about the test results. Do you really like our mom?"

Without hesitation, Keith nodded, "Like her? I really, really do!"

The kids were taken aback by his candid admission.

Keith continued, "He punched me today because I disrespected your mom in my words. If a man doesn't love a woman enough, he wouldn't care what anyone says about her. So, you can rest assured, he truly likes your mom."

Evan frowned, "So, the disrespectful things you said about our mom, you did that on purpose?"

Keith feigned surprise, "You knew?"

The kids exchanged puzzled looks.

Keith sighed, explaining with a helpless smile, "Your dad must have told you. I turned off the bug because I didn't want you to get upset. Only he and I knew about it. Please explain to him for me. I did it on purpose, not to actually slander Ms. Thorne. I have a lot of respect for her."

Keith's open and straightforward demeanor didn't seem deceitful at all, leaving the kids with mixed feelings.