

Hitched 691

Chapter 691

Blossom waved at him before sliding into the backseat of the car, "What's so urgent that you had to see me this late?" Tarquin had just texted her, asking to meet downstairs. Without answering her question, Tarquin asked, "Is Elysia asleep?"

"I left her tucking in the kids. Told her I'd be staying at my parents' tonight. I followed your advice and didn't mention you wanted to see me. She didn't suspect a thing."

"Solid! Are you in a hurry to get back? If not, how about I treat you to a drink?"

Blossom declined without hesitation, "It's not really appropriate for just the two of us. Maybe next time with Elysia. Plus, I'm really in a rush. My cousin's waiting for me at my folks'. Can you just tell me what's up?"

After a brief silence, Tarquin cracked a smile, "Elysia and I are dating."

Blossom was taken aback, "What?!"

A grin that Tarquin couldn't hide spread across his face, "She agreed to be my girlfriend."

Blossom's eyes widened, "For real?!"

"Yeah, but she insisted we keep it under wraps for now, can't let the kids know yet."

Blossom paused before responding, "No wonder Elysia seemed so guilty when she saw me. So, you two have been sneaking around, huh? Haha, you guys are truly meant to be. It's like fate tied you together - destined to be!"

Tarquin loved hearing that, "Keep the compliments coming."

Blossom immediately switched to 'blessing mode', showering them with well-wishes.

Tarquin, still smiling, had his suspicions about Blossom's possible connection to some mystery person, but he knew she had Elysia's best interests at heart.

"Thanks. I'll treat you to a celebratory drink when she's ready to make it official."

"Deal! So, this is what you wanted to talk about?"

Tarquin got to the point, "Who do you think is better for her? Me or her husband?"

"Her husband?"

"Yeah, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's father."

Blossom was shocked, "Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's father is...?"

Tarquin fixed his gaze on her, "Is what?"

Blossom swallowed nervously, "How did Elysia describe the father of the triplets to you?"

"She didn't get into details. Mentioned he was dead, but today she said he's alive but they haven't divorced yet."

Blossom quickly asked, "Did Elysia tell you she's married to the father of Elliot, Evan, and Emmett?"

"Isn't she?"

Blossom was silent. She wasn't the brightest, but she wasn't foolish either. She could tell Elysia hadn't revealed the whole truth.

She could understand Elysia's position. Elysia cared deeply for her children and wouldn't expose them unless absolutely necessary, not even for a romantic relationship.

Clearing her throat, Blossom steered away from the topic of the triplets' father, focusing on Elysia's husband, "Honestly, I think you and Elysia are a much better match. Her husband is a real piece of work - the epitome of a scumbag who doesn't deserve her!"

You could argue that what happened between Tarquin and Elysia in the past was a mistake, but Elysia's husband? There's no excuse for his actions! Elysia was victimized, how could that be considered infidelity? If he wanted a divorce, just go through with it. Why tarnish her reputation?

And the worst part? After dragging her name through the mud, he still refuses to let her go, keeping her in limbo. That's seriously messed up!

Tarquin, understanding why Blossom felt this way, pressed on, "Do you know who her husband is?"

After hearing Elysia's story, he had someone look into it, but they came up empty.

Chapter 692

Was it Elliot pulling strings behind the scenes, or was that guy just too good at covering his tracks? No clue!

So, he figured he'd hit up Blossom for a chat.

Blossom was Elysia's bestie, she had to know.

But when he asked, Blossom just shook her head, "I'm in the dark too."

Tarquin was taken aback, "You don't know?"

"Yeah, totally clueless. Elysia and her hubby eloped, didn't even invite us to the wedding. We've got no idea who her man is. She clams up every time we ask."

Tarquin frowned, "Why the secrecy?"

"No idea, but I get the vibe there's not much love there. They're still hitched, but it's pretty much loveless!"

Tarquin puzzled, even in a secret marriage, a bestie should be in the loop. Why wouldn't Elysia tell even Blossom? "Just so you know, since Elysia did spill the beans, I hope you won't hold the not-divorced-yet thing against her." Tarquin snapped back to reality, "Don't worry, I won't."

Seeing he wasn't getting anywhere with Blossom, Tarquin said,

"I've got some personal stuff to sort out. I'll get someone to drop you at your folks'."

Blossom immediately declined, "No need, I can drive myself, I..."

But when she saw Axel appear by the car window, her surprise quickly turned into agreement,

"You're right, it's late, and it's not safe for a girl to drive home alone. Thanks, handsome, what's your name?"

Axel gave her a cold glance and didn't respond, signaling her to get off. He headed to his car.

Blossom wasn't offended and followed him, still curious she asked Tarquin,

"What's his name?"

"Axel."

"Axel? Sounds familiar. Oh yeah, Elysia mentioned him. Is he the blind date you were setting me up with?" Tarquin: "..."

Axel heard that, turned his head to glare at Tarquin, who just coughed awkwardly and looked away.

Blossom ran towards Axel with a dreamy look, greeting, "Lowell."

Axel, with a stone face, shut her down, "Don't talk to me!"

Blossom: "..."

After Axel and Blossom left, Tarquin lit up a cigarette.

He couldn't dig up info on 'Elysia's husband' on his own, and Blossom was a dead end. Looks like Elliot was his next stop.

But it was too late for that now. It would have to wait till tomorrow.

So, Tarquin called Keaton to set up a night out.

Half an hour later, Tarquin showed up at the bar.

The noisy private room silenced as he entered, everyone greeting him, "Tarquin."

Tarquin was in high spirits, announcing, "Party's on me tonight."

Elysia's husband and Keith were weighing on his mind, but overall, he was feeling good. Sleepless night anyway, might as well gather the crew.

It was more about showing off than hanging out!

After all, he was newly off the market, had a girlfriend, and was feeling pretty great!

His good mood was written all over his face, and the crowd was curious,

"Keaton said you'd be in a great mood today, spill the beans! What's the good news? Let us in on the joy."

Tarquin settled into the center seat, lighting a cigarette and leaning back.

With a casual air and a hint of cockiness, yet somehow not making a big deal of it, he boasted,

"Nothing major, just started dating."

Chapter 693

Everyone was in shock. "Who is it?! Is that Ms. Thorne?"

Tarquin, squinting his handsome eyes, flipped out a photo to show them, "My girlfriend, Elysia."

The photo was a selfie of him and Elysia, where she was sleeping with her eyes closed, looking completely at peace. He had sneaked up to her side and taken the photo with his phone.

It was obviously a candid shot.

Someone tried to grab the phone for a closer look, but Tarquin slapped his hand away.

"Just look, don't touch!"

He was being overly protective, clearly a bit of a jealous type.

The group didn't fuss over it, instead, they stared intently at his phone screen. Someone commented, "Your lady is quite the stunner!"

Tarquin beamed with pride, "An angel among us."

Another added, "She looks so kind and gentle, the epitome of warmth!"

Tarquin, with a touch of haughtiness, replied, "The perfect wife material."

Someone else observed, "She seems like she's deeply loyal in love."

Tarquin boasted, "She only has eyes for me."

Then someone mentioned, "But with her looks, she must have a lot of men chasing after her!"

Tarquin's smile turned into a chuckle of confidence, "In her eyes and heart, there's only me. No other man stands a chance. I'm her one and only." Keaton, aware of the whole situation, couldn't help but tease him, "Man, you're thirty and still get this excited over a relationship. That's kinda sad!" Tarquin shot him a cold look and scoffed, "Some people hop from one to another and still don't know what true love is. That's even sadder."

Just as Keaton was about to retort, Tarquin cut in, "I have true love, and a kid!"

Keaton was left speechless, his lips pursed. He really couldn't compete with that.

His own love life was all about flings, devoid of real love, let alone having a child. He couldn't hold a candle to Tarquin.

Not just him, no one in the room could.

Finding someone you love who loves you back just as much is harder than reaching the stars!

Tarquin glanced at Keaton with disdain, then turned to the others, practically radiating arrogance.

His face might as well have been engraved with the words: I'm the happiest man alive, come at me if you dare!

From then on, whatever the topic of conversation, he found a way to bring it back to Elysia. To sum up his message:

I'm in love with Elysia, jealous much?

My girlfriend is Elysia, I'm the luckiest guy in the world!

In three words: Just showing off.

In four words: Purely boasting.

In five words: Absolutely flaunting it!

And while flaunting, he didn't forget to issue a warning:

"My girlfriend is just an ordinary girl, who loves her comforts and is a bit timid. If you or your ladies ever run into her, keep it low-key. Don't you dare upset or scare her, or you'll have me to answer to!"

Keaton mocked, "Look at him, got a girlfriend and forgot all about his buddies. Classic case of bros before... well, you know."

Tarquin, ever so magnanimous, declared, "Bros can be replaced, but a girlfriend like mine, once gone, is gone for good!"

The bros: "... " Never knew our very own President Bradford was such a hopeless romantic!

Meanwhile, Elysia was blissfully unaware that she had become the talk of the town among the elite bachelors!

She continued her calm and collected life, finishing her nightly routine before checking on her children.

Having not seen them for a whole day and night, she missed them terribly.

It's often said that kids around four or five can't be away from their mother, but truth is, it's the mothers who can't stand being away from their kids!

She gently touched each of their faces, giving them a goodnight kiss, before heading back to her bedroom.

Chapter 694

As soon as Elysia entered her apartment, the phone on her nightstand buzzed with a new message.

She walked over to her bed and picked up the phone. [Elysia, are you asleep?]

At first, she thought it was Blossom messaging her, but upon closer inspection, it was him!

Her heart immediately started to race!

Even though she was no spring chicken anymore, well into her twenties and even had kids, this was her first dive into the dating pool. His flirty glances and endearments were enough to make her cheeks burn and her heart pound.

Elysia opened up WhatsApp to reply and realized he had already sent several messages.

[Elysia, what are you up to? Missing you.]

[Elysia, I'm missing you.]

[Babe, your boyfriend's thinking of you.]

[Miss you so much.]

Leaning against her headboard with flushed cheeks, Elysia texted back, "Just went to check on the kids, just saw your message."

The next second, Tarquin's call came through. Elysia answered, her heart thumping wildly, "Hey."

"Elysia, I miss you like crazy!"

Her cheeks were on fire. "Why are you still up?"

"I can't sleep. Missing you. And when you didn't reply, I thought you didn't want me anymore."

Elysia was speechless. How could he be so sensitive? Not replying meant she didn't want him?

"I agreed to be your girlfriend, didn't I? Stop overthinking and go to sleep."

Tarquin chuckled, "Then say you like me."

Elysia hesitated.

"Come on, just once? I want to hear it."

"Have you been drinking?" Elysia asked, noticing a hint of drunkenness in his voice.

"Yeah, had a bit to celebrate today."

"Are you drunk?"

"Not at all! How could I be? I'm perfectly clear-headed."

Elysia knew right then he was anything but sober. No wonder he was so bold!

"Where are you? Who are you with?"

"I'm at home, on the bed we slept in yesterday. But it feels so empty without you. You've stolen my heart."

Elysia's heart raced even faster.

"Just go to sleep if you're drunk. I'll call Lowell to look after you."

The next second, Lowell's voice came through, "Ms. Thorne, I'm here."

Elysia was shocked.

He said all those flirty things with Lowell listening?!

This man had no shame! Well, she still had hers!

"Don't worry about Tarquin. He's just a bit too happy today and had a few too many. I've just got him home and sent someone to get some hangover soup."

"...Okay, thanks for that. I'm going to sleep now. Bye."

Elysia quickly hung up, muttering under her breath about dog men!

At 2 a.m., just as Elysia had drifted off, her phone rang again. It was Tarquin.

He immediately asked, "Elysia, are you asleep?"

With her eyes barely open, Elysia mumbled, "Yeah, asleep."

"Oh, did I wake you up then?"

"What do you think? Talk tomorrow, go to sleep!" Elysia hung up and tried to go back to sleep.

But soon after, he called again.

"Elysia, I'll bring you breakfast tomorrow. What do you want? I'll prepare it!"

"I don't want anything right now. I just want to sleep."

"I mean for tomorrow morning."

"Then we'll talk in the morning." Elysia hung up again.

But just as she did, he called back, still sounding tipsy, "It'll be too late if I start preparing in the morning. Just tell me now, and I'll get started."

Chapter 695

Repeatedly woken up, Elysia was fuming. Glancing at the clock, it wasn't even 3 AM yet. Angrily, she confronted the caller,

"What on earth are you doing at this hour?! I'm warning you, if you don't get some sleep right now, you're really going to make me mad! Go to bed, and don't you dare call me again!"

After hanging up, he didn't call back.

Just as she was about to put her phone back on the nightstand, he sent a voice message,

"Elysia, are you mad at me? Please, don't scare me. I get scared easily. Please, don't be mad."

"Elysia, look how obedient I am. You said not to call, so I'm not calling. I'm listening, so you're not mad, right?"

Elysia was speechless, not even managing to internally complain before he sent another couple of voice messages,

"Elysia, why is it still dark outside? Do we really have to wait for daylight to meet?"

"Elysia, why do we have to wait for the sun to be up to meet?"

Elysia: "...". She wasn't mad at him anymore; she was mad at the alcohol!

Who let him drink so much?!

There's no reasoning with a drunk, so Elysia decided to call him back proactively,

"Are you having insomnia?"

"Yeah, I miss you. Where have you gone? Why aren't you in my arms?"

"...If you really can't sleep, then go ahead and talk. I'm listening, so don't ask if I heard you. I definitely can."

Elysia put her phone aside, put on her headphones, and tried to sleep.

Suddenly, a melodious voice filled her ears,

"The rain becomes quiet as the wind gently blows, through the ancient temple colored in green. As I cross the bridge over the stream, a visitor appears, your galloping hooves remember to report on time..."

Elysia was wide awake!

This was the first time she heard him sing, and her ears were utterly captivated. His voice... not pursuing a career in music would be a waste! After Tarquin finished singing, without waiting for him to ask, she said, "Beautiful."

Tarquin was pleased, "You like?"

"Yeah."

"Shall I sing another?"

"Please."

"What would you like to hear?"

"Anything."

After a moment of silence, Tarquin spoke again, his voice still enchanting,

"Wandering by candlelight at night, the midnight stars like companions on the run, loving every scar and wound on you, turning into aged, strong liquor..."

Elysia fell asleep to his singing, his voice echoing even in her dreams...

The next morning.

Elysia woke up yawning, immediately checking the time, only to find her phone had turned off!

Rubbing her eyes, she sat up, charged her phone, then went to check on the kids.

All the little ones were already awake. Elliot was busy with a tablet, while Evan, Emmett, and Elijah were building with Legos.

Seeing her, they all exclaimed in surprise, "Mommy!"

Elysia smiled, entering the children's room, "Why are you all up so early?"

Evan said, "It's not early, it's already 7:30."

Emmett put down his Lego, "Mommy's awake, I'll go make breakfast for Mommy and my brothers."

He hadn't gone earlier to avoid waking Mommy.

Elysia, adoringly lifting Emmett, was just about to say she'd make breakfast when Elijah said,

"No need, Daddy texted me, he said he'll come over with breakfast soon."

That's when Elysia remembered last night's conversation.

She asked Elijah, "My phone turned off by itself, did he say anything else?"

"He asked if you were up half an hour ago, I said no."

"...Alright, you guys keep playing, I'm going to freshen up."

Leaving the children's room, Elysia headed to the bathroom. By the time she came back to the bedroom after freshening up, her phone had just turned on.

Chapter 696

The continuous 'ping, ping, ping' of her phone was relentless, a barrage of notifications flooding in! Grabbing her phone, Elysia was greeted by 68 missed calls and over 99 unread messages.

All from him!

She was stunned. Did this guy not sleep at all last night?

While she was still marveling at the thought, another call came through, and of course, it was him again.

Elysia answered, "My phone was off, just turned it on and saw your messages."

"I know, I'm already on my way, bringing you breakfast."

"Uh, you... didn't sleep last night?"

"Couldn't. You were all I could think about."

Elysia's cheeks flushed, at a loss for words, only managing to say, "Just, uh, be careful driving."

"Will do!"

After hanging up, Elysia found herself rifling through her wardrobe, trying on outfit after outfit until she settled on a vintage-style cotton-linen maxi dress adorned with tiny floral prints.

She accessorized with a pair of sunflower earrings and a vintage necklace.

Her hair was braided into a fishtail, secured at the end with a ribbon, giving off a vibrant, pastoral vibe, fresh and uniquely beautiful.

Just as she finished getting ready, the doorbell rang, and she hurried to open the door.

There stood Tarquin, dressed in a crisp, tailor-made suit, tie, and wristwatch, exuding the aura of a polished professional.

His gaze upon seeing her was filled with passion and eagerness, his anticipation to see her palpable.

Their eyes met, a flurry of emotions swirling between them, sparks flying instantly.

Just as Tarquin was about to express his yearning with more than just words, he caught sight of the children standing behind Elysia.

Four little ones, each with a different expression.

Evan Thorne's was particularly fierce!

Tarquin swallowed hard, remembering Elysia's warning to keep things low-key around the kids for now.

Forcing himself to calm down, Tarquin tenderly said to Elysia,

"I made you breakfast."

Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red as she fought to maintain her composure, "Come in."

As Tarquin stepped in with the insulated food container, little Elijah called out, "Daddy."

Tarquin smiled and nodded at his son, his attention quickly returning to Elysia, his eyes shimmering with affection.

Elysia's heart raced from the moment she laid eyes on him. To hide her turmoil, she coolly called out to the children, "Time to wash up for breakfast."

The kids hurried into the kitchen to wash their hands and then gathered around the dining table, stomachs growling in anticipation.

When Tarquin opened the container to reveal the breakfast he had prepared, all with Elysia's favorites, she couldn't help but tease, "Is this all?" Tarquin chuckled, "Isn't it enough?"

Elysia, eyes wide, asked, "What about the kids?"

Tarquin turned to face the little ones, who were all staring at him expectantly, like hungry chicks.

Realizing his mistake, Tarquin's expression fell. In his focus on Elysia, he had completely forgotten to prepare something for the children! Embarrassed, he quickly pulled out his phone to place an order, "I made too little. I'll have Lowell pick up some more from the diner. It'll be quick, don't worry."

The kids exchanged glances, their silence speaking volumes. Really, dad? Forgetting your own kids in the throes of new love?

Chapter 697

Elysia massaged her temples, feeling a secondhand embarrassment for him.

Luckily, his efficiency saved the day. The delivery arrived swiftly, brimming with bite-sized delights: mini quiches, shrimp dumplings, mini donuts, along with burgers and sandwiches, not to forget the soy milk and a variety of hearty oatmeals.

A feast to cater to the varied tastes of the little ones.

Elysia called out for the kids to wash up for breakfast, and the little rascals bolted from the playroom. They scurried to the dining table, eyes scanning for their breakfast before racing off to wash their hands.

Tarquin set aside the delivery, placing his homemade dishes in front of Elysia. "Eat this," he suggested.

"Why's that?"

"It's made by me, not some other guy," Tarquin said, knowing well that the chefs at Jinpeach Restaurant were all men.

Elysia rolled her eyes. Was this really the time for a competition?

Before she could retort, the children dashed back, settling into their seats.

"Mommy, I want the burger!"

"Mommy, can I have the dumplings?"

"Mommy, I want the shrimp dumplings!"

"Mommy, I want to drink the oatmeal."

The four of them chirped like little birds eager for feeding, turning into tiny tigers once the food was served, devouring their meal with gusto. Thanks to their super dad, they were famished.

"Take it easy, don't rush your food, Evan. Chew properly before swallowing."

Evan, the athlete of the family, always ate as if there was no tomorrow, especially when he was starving.

After ensuring the kids were fine, Elysia finally sat down to her meal.

She was flanked by Emmett to her left and Evan to her right, with Elijah and Elliot nearby, leaving Tarquin at a distance.

He eyed the kids, feeling a tad resentful for the first time.

It seemed to him that these four were hindering his romance with Elysia!

He wished he could bundle them off to school already!

But, school was still out...

After a moment, Tarquin texted Lowell, plotting.

Post-breakfast, Tarquin suggested, "Let's hit the mall today, then catch a movie. Consider it my way of making up for the morning mishap."

The promise of an outing excited the kids, and Elysia agreed.

After getting ready, the family of six headed out.

Downstairs, Evan spotted a small hedgehog in the bushes, thrilling the kids to no end as they gathered around it.

Elysia reminded them that hedgehogs were protected and to look but not touch, then she and Tarquin, carrying a bag full of essentials - wet wipes, a portable first-aid kit, and spare clothes for the kids - headed to the car.

Juggling motherhood meant always being prepared.

As Elysia was about to call the kids over, the car abruptly sped off!

It was gone!!!!

Elysia's eyes went wide with shock. "Hey! The kids aren't in the car yet!"

"I know, my car can't fit everyone. They'll go with Lowell's," Tarquin explained.

Elysia was flabbergasted.

The kids, still fixated on the hedgehog, noticed Tarquin's car leaving and were instantly bewildered.

Evan was shocked. "We're not in the car yet, why'd he leave?"

Emmett added, "And he left so quickly, as if he was running away from us."

Elliot and Elijah just exchanged looks.

Then came Lowell, as enthusiastic as a kid in a candy store, "Elliot, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, how about I take you guys out for the day? We can hit the amusement park, visit the zoo to see the big tigers, and then catch a movie and grab some delicious eats..."

Tarquin, unable to ditch the kids at school, decided to hand them over to Lowell instead!

The kids instantly knew this had to be their stepdad's arrangement!

Chapter 698

It was crystal clear what he was up to - Tarquin was scheming to have a romantic day alone with Elysia, shoohing the kids off with a clever distraction!

How could anyone say he was a devoted dad? Even a stand-in dad would do a better job!

Evan was having none of it, accusing Tarquin of high robbery, of whisking his beloved mom away right under his nose!

And he demanded Tarquin to bring his mom back, stat!

Lowell, ever the strategist, whipped out his phone with a grin, showing off a video,

"Check this out, guys. I'm taking you to this place today. It's wild, it's thrilling - Evan, you're gonna love it!"

Evan's eyes lit up at the sight of an intense boxing match,

"Can I join in too?"

"Absolutely," Lowell encouraged with a wink, "The champ from last year's tournament is here today. If you wanna get in on the action, go for it. Don't worry about Ms. Thorne finding out. Mum's the word!"

A tailor-made adventure for Evan - he was bound to be all in!

Evan nodded vigorously, "Mr. Lowell, you're the best!"

Lowell chuckled, then turned to Emmett, "Besides, there's a food festival and a cutting-edge design exhibit. Totally your scene, Emmett." Then, glancing at Elliot and Elijah,

"There's also an auction happening today. Heard it's got some rare jewels that a lot of girls go crazy for. If you're interested, might be nice to grab something for Ms. Thorne."

Before long, Lowell had all four young gentlemen hopping into the car, all buzzing with excitement.

Lowell couldn't help feeling a bit smug, convinced he had a natural talent for handling kids.

Meanwhile, Elysia got wind of Lowell's day out with the kids and immediately saw through Tarquin's ploy, expressing her displeasure,

"Playing these games might backfire, Tarquin. If the kids end up disliking you, don't expect me to stand by you. I'm warning you now - if they don't approve, our relationship is off the table. Being in a relationship is between you and me, but a lasting commitment needs their blessing. If they're not on board, we're through."

Tarquin glanced at her, then suddenly swerved the car into a secluded lane, pulling over.

As Elysia began to question his actions, he leaned in for a kiss that was fierce and full of a punishing passion.

Caught off guard, Elysia panicked, "Hey, wait...!"

Even though the lane was quiet, they weren't invisible to the outside world!

Feeling as if they were kissing in full public view, Elysia's heart raced. Just as she thought to bite him in protest, he released her, his voice laced with annoyance,

"So, are we breaking up or what?"

Pinned under him, Elysia's breaths came fast, her cheeks flushed,

"I didn't really mean it. It was just a figure of speech."

"I don't care. I don't want to hear it," he retorted.

Elysia muttered, "Well, you better start making a good impression in front of the kids, then!"

Tarquin thought to himself: Win the queen, and the game is yours. If Elysia is happy, those kids won't dare to complain.

Sure, winning over the kids was essential, but Elysia was his main focus now. He had to prioritize.

With that strategy in mind, Tarquin claimed,

"I asked Lowell to take them somewhere they'd enjoy more. Today's our second day as a couple, and I wanted it to be just us."

He didn't even want to think about Keith or Elysia's ex- all he wanted was to be close to Elysia.

Being new to the whole romance game was both thrilling and nerve-wracking.

Elysia occupied his thoughts every moment, longing for cuddles and kisses, yearning for their time alone together.

Chapter 699

Elysia was sailing in uncharted waters with her first relationship, and every emotion Tarquin felt, she experienced too. But, unlike Tarquin with his newfound confidence, Elysia was shy, her cheeks easily flushing a bright red at the slightest provocation.

"Look, I've said my piece. How you deal with them is up to you!"

"Don't worry, I got this. They're all younger than me combined. If I can't handle them, I might as well be a ghost!"

Elysia immediately covered his mouth with her hand, "Shush, don't even joke about that!"

Tarquin just chuckled in response.

"I really hate that word. Don't you dare say it in front of me again," Elysia scolded, her tone more serious now.

In a move that shocked Elysia, Tarquin cheekily licked her palm, causing her to retract her hand quickly, her face burning even more.

"You...you've got some nerve!"

"All I want is a girlfriend. Pride? I can take it or leave it."

Elysia was stunned. "Have you changed? Since when did you stop caring so much about your image?"

"How about this? You never mention breaking up, and I'll never mention...you know, the 'D' word. Deal?" Tarquin proposed softly.

Before she could respond, he buried his head in her shoulder, his voice carrying a whiny tone, "Just the thought of you saying we're through hurts more than anything. I can't bear it."

This new, childlike side of Tarquin took Elysia by surprise. Is this what love does to a man?

Feeling her heart soften, she soothed him like one would a child, "Alright, alright, I won't say it. Now, come on, let's hit the road. We were going to check out the shops, remember?"

Tarquin looked up, smiling like a kid who'd just been given candy, but in the next moment, he shifted gears, capturing her lips in a kiss that was both gentler and more intoxicating than before. His tongue explored her mouth, leaving Elysia trembling with a mixture of shock and desire.

Lost in their passionate embrace, they completely forgot they were still in the car until a knock on the window snapped them back to reality. Elysia, mortified, pushed Tarquin away and saw a police officer standing outside. Tarquin, trying to catch his breath, rolled down the window. "What's the problem?"

The officer, slightly taken aback by Tarquin's commanding presence, replied in a surprisingly gentle tone, "You can't park here. You'll get a ticket. Better move along if you've got no urgent business."

"Got it, thanks," Tarquin responded, buckling up and starting the car. As they were about to leave, he couldn't resist asking, "You in a relationship?" The officer, caught off guard, managed, "Not yet."

"Ah, single, huh? Tough break! Well, I'm taken. This is my girl."

With that, Tarquin drove off, leaving the officer dumbfounded. "What does your love life have to do with me?" he thought, baffled by Tarquin's boast. As the officer's figure disappeared from the rearview mirror, Elysia finally dared to speak, turning to Tarquin with a glare, "What was that all about?" Seeing Tarquin still smiling, Elysia's irritation grew. She pinched him hard, eliciting a yelp of pain from him.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I won't kiss you on this street anymore," Tarquin conceded.

Elysia was exasperated. "So, what? You'll just choose a different location? Listen here, no more public displays of affection, or we're done!"

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She released him, huffing as she turned to glare ahead.

At the red light, Tarquin brought the car to a halt, turning to soothe her with a charm that was hard to resist, "Whatever you say, hon. Please, don't be mad."

Reaching for Elysia's hand, he was met with a slap on the back of his hand.

Far from being deterred, he clasped Elysia's hand even tighter within his own.

Just as Elysia was about to snap at him, he gave her a pitiful look and said, "I think I'm coming down with something."

Elysia paused, her anger subsiding into concern, "What's wrong? Where does it hurt?"

"It's everywhere. I only feel better when I'm close to you, the closer the better."

Rolling her eyes, Elysia smacked his hand again, "Focus on driving!"

With a goofy grin, Tarquin hit the gas as the light turned green, driving off with the joy of a peacock in full display.

He couldn't even stop himself from humming love songs...

On the second day of their love affair, they walked hand in hand through the streets, grabbed a bite to eat, and caught a movie, sneaking kisses in the street, the mall, the cinema...

By the third day, the kids were back to school, and Keith had lost his job.

Tarquin had put pressure on the preschool to fire Keith, and since Keith was badly injured and confined to his home, Elysia didn't feel guilty about the kids being at school.

But Tarquin turned into a whole new problem.

Insisting on taking the kids to school himself, he risked exposing them-after all, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett didn't wear makeup to school!

With no other choice, Elysia, along with Blossom, had to drop the kids off at school half an hour early.

This left Tarquin fuming. He sent Elijah to stay at a villa for a day and 'imprisoned' Elysia in their Sunshine Community apartment, where he playfully tormented her all day long.

They explored new places to kiss kitchen, bathroom, balcony...

Yet, the final boundary remained uncrossed, as Elysia set her limits, which Tarquin dared not overstep.

However, when passion overwhelmed him, he couldn't hold back, pouring out his affection for Elysia twice.

Elysia, though embarrassed, didn't blame him, understanding his feelings.

As days passed, their love soared like a rocket entering its peak phase.

Not just Tarquin, Elysia too wanted to stick by his side every moment. Despite the temptation, she moved into apartment 1803 alone, leaving the kids at Blossom's.

She held keys to both places, staying with Blossom during spats with Tarquin, and with Tarquin during their sweeter moments.

Even in the throes of love, she never allowed Tarquin to move in with her.

Yet, every night, Tarquin lingered until well past midnight before leaving.

Then came March, bringing spring and the promise of renewal.

Just when everything seemed to be going right, disaster struck out of the blue.

One day, Tarquin's Volkswagen spontaneously combusted in the parking lot!

They were kissing under a nearby tree when the car exploded, bursting into flames.

Elysia screamed, haunted by nightmares for days after.

Tarquin later investigated but found no signs of foul play, attributing the fire to spontaneous combustion. The insurance company would handle it.

Then, not long after, just when Elysia had begun to move past the incident, another, far more severe tragedy struck.