

Hitched 1201

Chapter 1201

Winona Newsom cut in sharply. "I can feel it-what a scumbag! He actually thinks he deserves your love? Please. He should just drop dead."

She had given her heart, her trust, everything to Zane Livingston. And all along, Zane had just been playing her for a fool. She'd once imagined a fairytale-high school sweethearts all the way to a white wedding. Turns out, the whole thing was just a scam from day one.

Pathetic. Infuriating.

But after more than a year locked away, after everything she'd been through, Winona saw Zane exactly for what he was. So honestly? She didn't even feel sad about it anymore.

Now, it just seemed ridiculous-Zane, still dreaming of winning over Elysia. As if.

It was like some ugly toad thinking he could just waltz up and marry the homecoming queen. Dream on.

Still Winona's eyes drifted to Tarquin. She hesitated, curiosity written all over her face. How on earth had Elysia and Tarquin ended up together? But with everyone squeezed into the car, she'd have to wait till they were alone to ask.

Seeing Winona bounce back from Zane's betrayal, Elysia relaxed a bit.

"So, what's your next move? Any plans for dealing with Zane?" Elysia asked.

Winona's brows drew together, her eyes flashing with cold determination. "I want him gone. For good."

From the back seat, Keaton Huber arched an eyebrow, a slow, impressed grin spreading across his face. That's the Winona the internet raved about-no nonsense, straight to the point. She wanted revenge, and she wasn't shy about it.

Elysia frowned. "Tarquin says Zane isn't just after you and the Newsom family. He's tangled up with some shady people overseas, selling out anyone he can for a quick buck. If you want, we could have him locked up right now."

"I don't want that," Winona shot back. "Whatever hell I went through, he needs to feel every bit of it himself."

Some pain, she thought, you can only understand if you live through it. Zane needed to know exactly what it meant to be hopeless, to wish you could just disappear.

Tarquin spoke calmly. "If there's anything you need, just say the word. Don't stand on ceremony with us—especially Keaton. He's single and bored out of his mind. He's basically waiting for someone to give him orders."

Keaton groaned. "What am I, your errand boy now?"

Winona glanced at the two of them, warmth filling her eyes.

Elysia, though, suddenly remembered Keaton's fiancée—Beatrix. How could he be single? Did he and Beatrix call it off? She was curious but decided not to ask.

When they rolled up to Number One Mansion, Caroline and Blossom Blythe were waiting at the door. As soon as Winona stepped inside, she dropped the act, collapsing into Caroline's arms and sobbing her heart out.

It was a sad scene, but everyone felt a deep sense of relief. From the moment Winona was back at Number One Mansion, she was safe. The nightmare was

over.

Now, it was time to settle scores.

At dinner, Ridley Newsom arrived. For the first time in forever, he could finally hug his daughter without fearing for her safety. Ridley broke down in front of everyone, crying like a little boy. He and Clayton Hawkins-both the kind of dads who would do anything for their daughters.

Seeing Winona hurt had nearly killed him.

He hugged her tightly, voice shaking. "I let you down, sweetheart. I should've protected you better. I'm so sorry, Winona."

Winona shook her head, still in his arms. "It wasn't your fault, Dad. It was Zane, that bastard."

At Zane's name, Ridley wiped his tears away, anger replacing grief. "Before I came here, Zane actually showed up to see me. He got down on his knees, swearing he hadn't cheated, begging me to believe someone set him up."

Winona's jaw clenched. "Sure, someone set him up today, but the cheating? That's all on him. And it wasn't just once-he's a serial cheater. Disgusting."

"I know," Ridley replied. "Mr. Bradford filled me in. Zane wanted to hurt you and our whole family."

Winona looked at him expectantly. "So what did you say to him?"

"I did exactly what you taught me, honey. I told him I'd try to talk you into forgiving him, and that once he'd 'uncovered the truth,' I'd bring him over to take you home."

Winona grinned, finally feeling a sense of control. The storm had passed. Now, the real battle could begin.

Chapter 1202

"Did he suspect anything?"

"Judging by how he acted, I don't think he caught on. If he knew you were faking it, he sure wouldn't have kept up the show in front of me. All he knows is that someone set him up today, but he hasn't figured out who. He's not even thinking about Mr. Bradford or Mr. Huber."

Ridley frowned a little as she spoke.

"But when I asked him for that stone, he seemed reluctant. Said he'd give it to you instead."

Winona snorted. "He just wants to keep it for himself!"

Talking about the stone, both Winona and Ridley shot another grateful look at Keaton.

After all, something so precious-most folks would never part with it.

"Mr. Huber, please don't worry. I'll find a way to get it back for you! If there's any loss, I'll make it right, no matter what."

Winona's brows were drawn together, her voice firm.

Maybe the Newsom family can't afford to pay you back, but I'll do whatever it takes to make up for it, she thought.

Keaton winced at the idea, but he just waved it off. "It's alright, really. It was never that important to me anyway."

He couldn't bring himself to haggle over compensation with a woman who looked so lost and worn out. Honestly, he almost wanted to donate something to her instead.

He always had a soft spot for a damsel in distress.

But if Zane so much as scratched that stone, Keaton was going to wring his neck.

Ridley brought up the whole "illegitimate daughter" situation again, worried that Zane might get reckless and cause trouble for her.

Tarquin immediately jumped in. "You don't need to worry about her. If Zane tries anything, he'll end up crying for his momma."

The so-called illegitimate daughter was actually Baby's bodyguard in disguise- Axel's own protégé.

Just like Axel, she was all action, no talk.

If Zane could even last one round with her, well, that'd be newsworthy.

...

The group spent the evening with a big family-style dinner at Number One Mansion—lots of laughter and comfort food, roast turkey, mashed potatoes, the

works.

After dinner, Ridley and Keaton said their goodbyes and headed home for the night.

Upstairs, Elysia and Blossom huddled together with Winona, catching up for hours.

Three best friends reunited-there was just too much to say. They talked about everything: Winona's ordeal, Elysia and Tarquin's crazy love story, and Winona's plans for the future.

It was well past two in the morning before they finally called it quits-not because they'd run out of things to say, but because they wanted Winona to get some real rest for the first time in days.

Elysia knew Winona hadn't slept a single peaceful night since the Thorne family kidnapped her.

"Sleep in tomorrow, okay? Just relax. You're safe here," Elysia insisted.

"Yeah. See you in the morning," Winona replied.

Blossom retreated to the guest room, while Winona slipped into Caroline's room- she wanted to spend the night with her mother.

Elysia checked on the kids, peeked in on Pamela Patel, then tiptoed back to her own bedroom.

Only the bedside lamp was on; the ceiling light was off, casting the room in a gentle glow. Tarquin lay quietly on the bed, eyes closed, looking as if he was already asleep.

Elysia crept over, unable to resist bending down to press a kiss to his handsome face before heading to the bathroom for a shower.

So much had happened lately; the whole Emmett ordeal had drained her, and just

as she was trying to recover, the news about Winona hit.

Since the day Winona went missing, Elysia had been wound tight as a drum.

Even after they pulled Winona back from the brink, she couldn't relax.

Not until today—when Winona was finally discharged from the hospital-did Elysia feel the tension in her chest ease.

She let the stress melt away in a hot shower, dried her hair, and slipped into a silky-soft nightgown.

Quietly, she approached the bed, lifted the comforter, and froze.

Her eyes went wide as dinner plates. She stared at the person hiding under the covers, completely dumbstruck.

Chapter 1203

In an instant, Elysia felt her whole body flush, blood rushing straight to her cheeks.

Her porcelain skin turned a shade of red that could rival a boiled lobster.

There he was—someone was lying stark naked in bed, not a stitch on!

The sight was... well, honestly, it was way more than Elysia could handle.

Without thinking, she grabbed the edge of the comforter and tried to cover him up again.

But before she could tuck him in, Tarquin's long arm shot out, pulling her right into the bed with him.

He rolled over, caging her beneath him, trapping her in his embrace.

His voice, low and a little hoarse, sounded right in her ear—deliciously restrained:

"Done with your work?"

His breath was warm and tickled her ear, the air between them thick with anticipation.

Elysia's heart beat so fast she thought it might burst, her face burning.

"You... why aren't you asleep yet?" she stammered.

"Waiting for you."

"Waiting for what?"

The words were barely out of her mouth before she realized how dumb that sounded. He wasn't even wearing boxers. It was pretty obvious what he wanted.

Tarquin's handsome eyes narrowed, a mysterious gleam flickering in their depths.

"Take a guess."

His hands were already starting to wander.

Elysia could feel the pounding of his heart, the heat of his palms—and, well,

certain other unmistakable signs.

"Elysia-," he murmured.

"Yeah?" she answered, voice trembling.

"Elysia."

"Mm-hmm."

"Elysia..."

He kept saying her name, over and over, each time like a feather trailing across her heart-soft, teasing, impossible to resist.

Her breathing grew heavier, her eyes fluttering shut, waiting for him to show her just how much he wanted her.

But instead, he just kept repeating her name, as if he was under a spell, making no further move.

Elysia waited, then finally cracked an eye open.

Tarquin was looking down at her, grinning that lazy, devil-may-care grin that made him so infuriatingly attractive.

"Getting desperate, huh?" he teased.

Elysia sucked in a breath, mortified and furious all at once. She pushed at his chest, trying to shove him off.

"No way! I'm done playing!"

Tarquin noticed she was really about to lose her cool, and quickly changed tactics.

"Okay, okay, it's me! I'm the one who can't take it! If you keep holding out on me, your poor husband's gonna die of frustration! And then what? No more husband for you!"

Before she could protest, he caught her hands, pinned them above her head, and kissed her deeply.

The room grew hot, rippling with something electric.

Somewhere else, though, not everyone was having such a good night.

At that moment, Zane was drinking alone, downing whiskey like water-all because of Elysia.

She'd blocked him. On WhatsApp, on his phone-everywhere. Total radio silence.

Zane looked like the poster boy for heartbreak, slouched in his chair, glass in hand.

The doorbell suddenly rang, breaking the silence.

Zane frowned. "Who the hell...?"

No answer. He got up and checked the peephole.

No one there.

It was late-way past midnight-so he didn't open the door. Instead, he went into

his office to check the security cameras.

Nothing. Not a soul outside.

He shrugged it off. Maybe he was just imagining things.

But as soon as he left the office, the doorbell rang again.

This time, Zane was sure he wasn't hallucinating.

He grabbed a fruit knife from the kitchen-just in case-and crept to the door, swinging it open fast.

Nothing. Just the night wind howling down the empty porch.

He stood there, scowling, then shut the door.

The moment the lock clicked, he heard crying outside-soft, broken, not quite male or female, just a low, eerie wailing.

Zane's hair stood on end. Gritting his teeth, he yanked the door open again. Silence. The crying stopped dead.

"Who's messing around? Show yourself!" he yelled into the night.

Only the wind answered.

Frustrated, he slammed the door and headed to the bathroom, turning on the

shower, desperate for a cold splash to clear his head.

Suddenly, boiling water blasted from the faucet, scalding his skin.

"Shit!" Zane yelped, jumping back.

He wiped water from his eyes and stared at the water heater's display-212°F (100°C)!

What the ?

The heater was always set at 104°F (40°C). How did it get this high?

Before he could figure it out, the temperature dropped right back to 104°F.

He tried the shower again. The water was back to normal.

Shaken, Zane decided to play it safe and turned off the heater completely, settling for a cold shower instead.

Afterwards, he stepped out, still feeling uneasy, like someone was watching him.

He picked up a heavy vase-just in case-and checked every room.

Finally, he circled back to his office and checked the security cameras again.

Nothing. Not a single person had come in. He was alone.

Maybe he was just losing it-too much stress, too little sleep.

He rubbed his temples, trying to relax, then headed to the bedroom.

But as soon as he walked in, he saw a shape reflected in the mirror-it was his

father, Arthur Livingston, who'd died years ago.

Zane froze, eyes wide in terror.

Arthur grinned at him, a wide, unsettling smile. "Hey there, kiddo."

Zane's knees gave out and he collapsed onto the floor, clutching his head and screaming.

The next morning, Zane woke up sprawled on the floor, heart hammering. Everything from last night came flooding back.

He glanced around the room suspiciously, but everything seemed normal.

His phone rang, vibrating insistently. Zane grabbed it and answered, "Yeah?"

"The evidence is in your inbox. It proves you're innocent."

Finally, some good news.

Zane checked the files, relief washing over him. Now Elysia would know he hadn't done anything wrong—and she'd have no reason to keep him from taking

Winona.

Before leaving, Zane remembered the weirdness from the night before.

He called the smart home tech company, asking for someone to check out his system.

Maybe it was just a glitch. Maybe.

As he stepped outside, his shoe crunched on something-gray ash, like the kind people burn in old rituals for the dead.

Zane's skin crawled.

He had no idea last night's nightmare was just the beginning. He hesitated, brow furrowed, then got in his car and drove away.

Chapter 1204

Number One Mansion.

Elysia was still dozing in Tarquin's arms when she heard that Zane and Ridley were coming over.

Last night, Tarquin had been relentless, keeping her up until almost sunrise before finally letting her get some sleep.

She'd really hoped to catch up on her rest this morning!

Well, that plan was shot to hell now.

Especially after hearing that Zane had found proof of his innocence. That made her even more anxious.

"Zane's definitely here to take Winona back. I can't let him take her!" she blurted, wide-eyed.

Tarquin pressed a kiss to her forehead. "If you don't want him to take Winona, then he won't."

"But he's got evidence he didn't cheat. He's not going to give up easily," she fretted.

"I'll handle it, babe. You get some more sleep-I'll go downstairs and wait for them."

Elysia frowned, unconvinced. "You sure you've got a plan?"

Tarquin grinned, pinching her cheek affectionately. "Of course. If I can't handle this, what kind of husband would I be? With me here, you can relax."

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A little after nine, Zane showed up at Number One Mansion with Ridley in tow. He'd brought Ridley along specifically to avoid getting the door slammed in his face.

With Ridley here, Tarquin couldn't exactly leave them standing outside.

It was only Zane's second time stepping foot in Number One Mansion.

The first time, he'd been eaten up with jealousy, vowing to one day build an even grander house for himself and Elysia.

But this time, something had changed. He wasn't planning to take Elysia anywhere anymore. If she liked it here, then here's where they'd stay.

He'd become the man of this house, make it his own. Once he got rid of Tarquin- he had a whole scheme in mind, trading ten men for Tarquin's life—he'd quietly move in and take over.

With jealousy out of the picture, Zane felt surprisingly at ease, looking at every piece of furniture as though it already belonged to him.

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In the living room, Tarquin had no idea someone was plotting to steal his home.

He was lounging on the couch, phone in hand, talking to Keaton.

He was dressed in crisp navy loungewear, looking effortlessly elegant and impossibly handsome.

"Less talk, more action. Go," he said curtly, hanging up just as the housekeeper led Zane and Ridley inside.

Tarquin put his phone away and stood, greeting Ridley politely. "Ridley, good morning."

"Hey, sorry to barge in so early," Ridley said with a sheepish smile. "Winona's not up yet, is she?"

"She should be awake by now. Elysia went to get her when she heard you two were coming."

Tarquin gestured for Ridley to take a seat, completely ignoring Zane.

Zane scowled but sat down beside Ridley anyway.

A moment later, the housekeeper brought in a tray with coffee and pastries.

Ridley took a sip of the coffee, then stared at the cup in shock. "Is this... Jamaican Blue Mountain? The real deal?"

Tarquin raised an eyebrow. "You know your coffee, Ridley?"

Ridley set the cup down carefully, as if afraid he might drop it. "I dabble, yeah."

Blue Mountain's the king of coffee beans. It's almost impossible to find the genuine stuff these days."

Tarquin nodded. "We've had these beans for a few years. If you like, take a couple bags with you when you leave."

Ridley looked both thrilled and awkward, torn between gratitude and disbelief. "That's... wow, thank you, Mr. Bradford. I mean it."

"No need to thank me. I'm not a coffee connoisseur. These things aren't that precious to me."

Ridley grinned, still a little starstruck. For anyone who loved coffee, true Blue Mountain beans were a treasure you couldn't put a price on.

Chapter 1205

Zane's face soured the moment he heard that.

Ridley had always been into the art of tea-well, back in college, it was more like an obsession. To impress her, Zane had thrown himself into learning every blend and brew he could get his hands on.

There was this legendary Mount Fidelis tea-think of it like the rarest, most expensive single malt scotch you could imagine, the kind that's locked away in vaults and never even hits the market. It used to cost a small fortune per ounce, but after the government banned its harvest, it became priceless-literally impossible to get.

Zane had pulled every string, called in every favor, and still, the best he'd ever managed was a couple of tins of authentic Houkui tea. As for the Mount Fidelis stuff? That was on another level. He never even dared to dream.

Now here was Tarquin, acting like it was no big deal-not only did his family have some, but he brought it out to serve his guests, and was even talking about giving some away. That kind of effortless, deep-rooted wealth and confidence made Zane's skin crawl.

Standing next to Tarquin, Zane felt like a cheap magician trying to pull quarters from behind people's ears.

"Mr. Bradford, what happened to your neck?" Ridley suddenly asked, concern in her voice.

Zane glanced over instinctively.

Tarquin, smug as ever, tugged at the neckline of his hoodie so Zane could get a good look.

"Oh, this? Elysia got a little playful last night. Left her mark, I guess."

Ridley blinked, looking flustered. She awkwardly took a sip of her tea, clearly uncomfortable-she was old enough to be their mother, after all, and this was not the kind of conversation she wanted to be having.

Zane, on the other hand, frowned so hard his brows nearly touched. His eyes locked on the red mark just above Tarquin's collarbone.

Elysia did that? She bit him?

They were all adults. No one needed an explanation.

Images flashed through Zane's mind-flushed skin, tangled sheets, the kind of intimacy he hadn't shared with Elysia in what felt like forever. Jealousy burned in his chest, making his breath go ragged.

He clenched his fists under the table, forcing himself to stay calm. Losing it here would only make things worse.

Tarquin shot him a lazy, sidelong glance, eyes full of disdain. He looked like he was barely holding back a smirk.

Honestly, Zane was lucky Winona hadn't come down yet-if she were here, Tarquin might not be so restrained.

A few minutes later, Elysia finally came downstairs.

Winona wasn't with her just Elysia, looking effortlessly stunning in a matching beige loungewear set, her hair loose and unstyled, face free of makeup. She was wearing the same kind of couple's slippers as Tarquin.

Zane's eyes softened the second he saw her, but then he noticed the silk scarf wrapped around her neck—odd, considering it was the middle of August and blazing hot outside.

He couldn't help but connect the dots: Tarquin's hickey, the scarf, Tarquin's smug remark. He bit down hard on the inside of his cheek, jealousy clawing at his insides.

Elysia waved at Ridley and sat beside Tarquin, their matching outfits twisting the knife a little deeper in Zane's chest. He forced a smile, pretending not to care.

"Elysia, where's Winona?" he asked, keeping his tone casual.

"She's still getting ready. She'll be down in a bit."

Zane jumped at the chance to explain himself. "I found proof that I didn't do anything wrong. Look—yesterday, that woman? I don't even know her."

He handed Elysia his phone so she could see the evidence for herself.

"We've known each other for years. You know I'm not that kind of guy," Zane said, his voice pleading.

Elysia just looked at him, trying not to roll her eyes. "Uh-huh."

Zane pressed on. "I tried to call you as soon as I had proof, but you blocked me. Can you please—"

Before he could finish, Tarquin jumped in, voice smooth as butter.

"Oh, that? I blocked you from her phone. Elysia can't stand cheaters, and I didn't want her to get grossed out every time your name popped up."

He said it so casually, like it was nothing at all.

Like he was just taking out the trash-no big deal.

Chapter 1206

Zane clenched his jaw, frustration flashing across his face. "Even if you're married, it's not right to block your wife's friends without asking. Don't you think Mr. Bradford's crossed the line?"

Elysia immediately jumped to Tarquin's defense.

"He was just looking out for me. That's not crossing the line. If you were actually a jerk, I'd be disgusted. Honestly, if he hadn't blocked you, I would've done it myself."

Zane was fuming inside, but all he could do was swallow his anger.

He tried to keep his voice calm and gentle.

"Elysia, come on, just take me off your block list. It's really inconvenient if I can't reach you when something comes up."

Before Elysia could say anything, Tarquin whipped out his phone and flashed a QR code at him.

"Add me. If you need anything, reach out to me."

Zane's jaw dropped. He looked between Tarquin and Elysia, eyebrows furrowed. Elysia shrugged, a little embarrassed but unapologetic.

"Sorry you had to see this. My husband's a little possessive. He doesn't like me talking to other guys. Just add him—if you need to reach me, go through him. He'll pass on the message."

Zane's temper flared so hot he thought his lungs might burst.

"Elysia, he's interfering with your personal life."

She just sighed, resigned.

"That's just how he is. And honestly, I don't want to upset him. He's my husband; I spoil him a little. Just add him, okay?"

Tarquin, meanwhile, was grinning like he'd just won the lottery.

Elysia nudged him under the table, trying to get him to cool it.

Tarquin finally turned to Zane, still grinning.

"What's wrong? Don't want to add me?"

Ridley jumped in, acting like he was genuinely worried for Zane.

"Dude, what are you waiting for? Add him already! This is Mr. Bradford's private account you should be honored!"

With no way out, Zane gritted his teeth and added Tarquin's contact.

As soon as it went through, he ignored Tarquin and turned back to Elysia.

"Now that's sorted, I'd like to take Winona with me. She's just been through hell, and she needs me right now."

Elysia looked a little anxious and glanced at Tarquin, hoping for guidance.

Tarquin gave her a reassuring look.

"Why don't you go upstairs and see what Winona wants?"

Elysia had no idea what Tarquin's plan was, but she nodded.

She handed her phone to Zane.

"These messages prove you're innocent, but I can't say for sure if Winona wants to leave with you. Let me go ask her."

"Great!" Zane replied, confident. He was sure he'd be taking Winona home today.

He wasn't some loser-he was a good husband and Winona loved him. There was no reason Elysia would keep them apart.

Not even Tarquin, with all his influence, could stop him.

At least, he shouldn't.

But reality is rarely that simple.

Just as Elysia was about to head upstairs, a furious shout echoed from the entryway.

"Cheater!"

Elysia froze, confused.

"What?!"

Zane's eyes widened in horror. When he saw Sarah standing at the door, he looked like he'd seen a ghost. He coughed.

He leapt off the hood.

"Sarah? What are you doing here?"

"Liar! Cheater!" Sarah burst into noisy tears at the living room threshold.

Then Keaton strode in, looking sharp in a burgundy suit that screamed designer label.

"I was just coming to see Tarquin," Keaton said with a careless shrug. "Ran into her at the security gate she said she's Winona and Zane's cousin, so I brought her in. Hope that's okay?"

Elysia glanced at Tarquin, who was watching the whole scene

with a glint in his eye, like he

settling in for a great show

Chapter 1207

Elysia blinked in disbelief. Seriously? That was his brilliant idea?

The moment Zane spotted Keaton, his brows knitted together.

Keaton never brought anything but trouble.

He'd always thought Keaton was a spoiled rich kid—just another trust fund baby who knew how to party but had zero ambition. If the Huber family hadn't had old money, Keaton would be a nobody.

"Most handsome guy in town, my ass," Zane thought with a sneer. "He's just a man-child who got lucky with the gene pool."

But lately, it wasn't just disdain. Keaton was getting on his nerves.

Two days ago, Keaton had barged into Lyra's place and whisked Winona away. Yesterday, he'd carried Winona right out of the hospital, practically under Zane's nose. And today? He showed up with Sarah in tow.

Zane shot Keaton a death glare and stormed over to Sarah.

Sarah rushed at him, her voice shrill, "Liar! You liar! You told me I was the only one! Why are you with another woman? You said you loved me, and only me! You liar, you absolute jerk—"

Only her? Was she really about to air their dirty laundry in front of everyone?

Zane's face drained of color. He hissed, "What the hell are you talking about?!"

Sarah shoved her phone at his chest, shoving a bunch of images in his face. "Look at this! Who is this tramp? When did you start seeing her? You promised you'd never love anyone but me—so why are you kissing her? You lied to me! You liar!"

She was losing it. Sarah lunged at him, scratching and clawing, her nails leaving red marks on his arms. Zane couldn't exactly hit her back in front of everyone, so he grabbed her wrists, trying to keep his cool.

"Sarah, get a grip! Look at me—do you even know who I am?"

"You're a cheater!"

"I'm- I'm your cousin!"

"Well, you're my cousin and a cheater! I gave you everything, and you went behind my back with some other woman. You bastard!"

Zane's breath came fast and shallow. "You've lost your mind. I'm your cousin! Why would I ever be in love with you?"

Before Sarah could answer, he cut her off. "Those pictures online are fake! I've already posted proof- didn't you see?"

Sarah blinked, confused. "Fake?"

"Yes!" Zane snapped, desperate to calm her down. If she chilled out, maybe she'd stop making a scene.

But just as Sarah started to quiet down, Winona appeared at the top of the stairs, calling out, "Honey."

Clearly, she'd heard the commotion and had come out on purpose.

Sarah's eyes darted to Winona, and she lost it all over again. "Why is she here? Why is this slut here? She should be locked in the basement! Who let her out? Was it you? You said you didn't love her-so why did you save her? You liar!"

Sarah's meltdown restarted, and

to hitting Zane. He just

e'

stood breathing hard, frozen,

letting her pummel him.

Winona stood on the landing, glaring down at them, her lips pressed tight and her eyes burning with hate.

A few years ago, Zane had told her Sarah was his cousin, and Winona had believed him-had even treated Sarah like a sister. She'd let Sarah move in, paid for everything, covered all her bills.

All those years, Sarah had happily spent her money.

And in return, while Winona treated Sarah like family, Sarah had treated her like a rival.

What a joke.

Cousins, my foot. They were nothing but a pair of lying snakes.

Chapter 1208

Think back to every little thing that's happened-all those memories, the drama,

the pain.

Now, picture the Thorne family's basement, and remember how Sarah tormented her there.

Winona clenched her jaw, let out a scream, and yelled,

"You stay away from my husband, you witch!"

She barreled down the stairs three at a time, stormed right over to Sarah, and, without a second thought, tackled her to the floor.

Before everyone's eyes, she straddled Sarah and started slapping her, hard-just like she'd done to Priscilla before. Winona didn't hold back. She was in full rage- mode, no mercy.

Within minutes, Sarah was wailing like a banshee.

Afraid Sarah's shrieks would disturb Pamela and the baby, Winona grabbed a fistful of Sarah's hair and started dragging her out toward the backyard, ready to give her a real beating—finally letting out all that pent-up anger.

Sarah howled in pain, "Help! Cousin, help me please!"

Ridley, worried his daughter was getting roughed up, hurried after them.

Blossom and Caroline, hearing the commotion, rushed downstairs too, followed closely by Elliot, Evan, and Elijah.

The whole crew shot Zane a dirty look, then dashed out to the yard in a panic.

The three little kids stared wide-eyed at the scene-Winona pummeling Sarah- and cheered,

"That mean lady's hitting our Winona! Get her, Winona!"

Even Blossom joined in, shouting,

"So you're Zane's cousin, huh? Turns out you're just a homewrecker coming to

stir up trouble. Get lost-you deserve what's coming!"

The backyard was utter chaos: shouting, crying, pleas for help echoing everywhere...

Zane's head throbbed with anxiety.

He wanted to run out and break up the fight-he was terrified Sarah would lose it and start spilling even more secrets that could ruin him.

But Keaton blocked his way, saying,

"Let them go at it. Neither's in their right mind anyway. Let them fight it out-they'll tire themselves out soon enough."

Zane gritted his teeth. Was this what they called a fair fight? It was more like a gang-up one person getting clobbered by a whole crowd.

Sarah didn't even have a chance to fight back.

Still, Zane tried to push forward, but Elysia dashed over, blocking him, her voice sharp and demanding,

"What exactly is going on between you and Sarah?"

"Why did Sarah freak out when she saw those photos of you kissing another woman?"

"Why does she call you a liar? Why does she say you don't love Winona? Why'd she say you promised you'd only ever love her? What's the truth, Zane?!"

Zane was panicked and frazzled, scrambling for answers.

"She's got a broken heart, she's not all there! She must think I'm her old college boyfriend or something

She's confused-she's got the wrong guy!"

Keaton raised an eyebrow,

"If she's so confused, how come she still knows to call you cousin?"

Zane clenched his fists. He was ready to punch Keaton-what did any of this have to do with him? Why was he always sticking his nose in?

Trying to keep his cool, Zane insisted,

"She's a lot like Winona-sometimes she's lucid, sometimes she's not. She's not making any sense right now. You can't trust a word she says."

Keaton shot back,

"Funny, in her confusion she only ever calls you a jerk-never me or Tarquin. How do you explain that?"

Zane was speechless.

Elysia pressed on,

"And how did she even know Winona

was the basement? Why

locked

would suspect you helped her

escape? Zane, did you know all

along what happened to Winona?"

Elysia and Keaton kept hammering him with questions, leaving Zane totally rattled.

His head was pounding—he was about to lose it. After last night's weirdness in the house and no sleep

at all he couldn't think straight if his life depended on it.

Chapter 1209

His lips moved a couple times before he finally squeezed out a sentence.

"I didn't know anything happened to Winona. I swear, I had no idea!"

"Call the police."

Tarquin spoke up suddenly, his voice calm and steady.

Those three words nearly gave Zane a heart attack. "Sarah can't have anything to do with Winona! There's no need to call the cops!"

Keaton raised an eyebrow.

"And how can you be so sure? If she's not involved, then what was all that yelling about? Besides, calling the cops isn't going to hurt her. Why are you so rattled?" Zane: "..."

Keaton went on, "Call the police. If Sarah really has nothing to do with Winona's disappearance, the police will figure that out. If she does, maybe she's the key to finding out who's behind all this!"

The mastermind?

Zane: "!"

Before he could protest, Elysia had already dialed 911.

"Hello? I need to report something. We..."

Zane's chest tightened, his breathing grew ragged. Panic flooded him.

This was spiraling so far out of his control he could barely think.

The police arrived fast, separating Winona and Sarah, who'd both been fighting like cats in an alley.

Sarah was a mess-her face swollen, lips split, bruises everywhere. She couldn't even cry properly; every sob made her cut mouth bleed.

But Winona, she was wailing, loud and desperate.

"She's evil! Arrest her! She hit my husband, and she beat me too! She locked me in the cellar and whipped me! She cut me with a pocketknife, just look!"

Winona rolled up her sleeves and pulled up her jeans, showing the cops her scars -raw, angry marks crisscrossing her skin.

Zane caught sight of those wounds and thought about the cellar. He was so scared he could barely breathe, let alone say a word in Sarah's defense.

The police turned to Winona, "Are you certain she was the one who tortured you in the cellar?"

Winona nodded fiercely. "Yes! Absolutely!"

Given that both Sarah and Winona were in shock and barely coherent, the police took Sarah away-to the ER first, then to the station for questioning.

Zane watched the police lead Sarah off, fear and regret twisting his stomach into knots.

Winona snuck a glance at Zane and snorted coldly.

Scared already? This is just the beginning.

Then she changed her tune, hurrying to Zane's side, fake tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Honey, are you alright? She's a horrible woman, look what she did to you! Does it hurt? Oh baby..."

Zane took comfort in Winona's concern. If she still cared, she couldn't possibly suspect him.

His nerves settled a little.

He told himself: Just get Winona home. That's all that matters. Get her home, no matter what.

But just as he opened his mouth, Elysia and Blossom whisked Winona away. "Come on, Winona. Let's get you inside."

"Winona!" Zane called after her.

Caroline stepped in front of him, her face thunderous. She slapped him, hard.

"You need to explain everything that's going on with you and your cousin. And you'd better bring some proof, something that'll convince us!"

"If you can't explain yourself, don't even think about taking Winona home!"

"And don't forget-Winona wouldn't accuse Sarah for no reason. You're the one who brought Sarah into our family. If she's involved in Winona's disappearance, you're just a@guilty! You'll have to answer for it!"

With that, Caroline stormed inside.

Zane made to follow, but Ridley grabbed his arm.

"Don't. Your mom's furious right now. Give her space. I believe you, son."

Classic good cop, bad cop-Ridley playing the understanding dad, Caroline the furious mom.

Meanwhile, Tarquin and Keaton

leaned against the wall, hands

their pockets, watching the whole show go down like they had front row seats at a Broadway drama.

Chapter 1210

After Ridley led Zane away, Keaton snorted.

"Why are you even wasting your time with that clown? If it were me, I'd just squash him like a bug."

To Keaton, Zane and Tarquin were leagues apart.

With Tarquin's brains and resources, getting rid of Zane would be child's play.

Tarquin narrowed his sharp eyes in the direction Zane had gone, a hint of cold amusement in his gaze.

"It's not me playing games with him. Winona wants to blow off some steam, and when she's done, we'll finish him for good. Besides, you're underestimating him. He's a lot more dangerous than he looks."

Keaton raised an eyebrow. "He's actually a big deal?"

Tarquin nodded. "Let's just say, most of the trouble the last few years in Burmalia involving Americans can be traced back to him."

Keaton's eyes widened. "He's mixed up with those Burmalia crime syndicates?" Tarquin gave a derisive snort.

"To put it nicely, they call it a 'strategic partnership.' Truth is, he's just their lapdog, paid handsomely to do their dirty work."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Tarquin replied, "Zane is their guy here in the States. He runs a bunch of criminal gangs for them. He's the middleman, smuggling people out-treats humans like product. Every head is just another paycheck."

Keaton's jaw tightened. The Burmalia gangs had ruined countless American lives over the years.

Some were lured over with lies, others kidnapped outright. Either way, once they landed in Burmalia, it was hell on earth.

If you were lucky, you'd get beaten, tortured, locked up, treated worse than livestock.

If you were unlucky, well... they'd harvest your organs and leave your body in a ditch.

Burmalia was infamous-a real hellhole.

Anyone who could work with those monsters had to be ruthless.

And smart-otherwise, you'd never climb to Zane's rank.

Keaton shook his head. "Guess I underestimated him. I forgot-he's not just street-smart, he's got the brains too. What's your plan?"

Kidnapping Winona wasn't enough to put Zane away for life.

But if they could dig up his Burmalia connections? He'd never see daylight again.

Still, bringing all that to light wouldn't be easy. Zane wasn't working alone—it was

a whole web of gangs and Burmalia's worst criminals.

Tarquin's eyes glinted, cold and merciless. He didn't hesitate.

"Leave no loose ends."

Anyone who'd even think about touching his wife deserved to disappear- permanently.

Meanwhile, inside the house, Elysia was patching up Winona's bruised knuckles with some ointment.

She scolded gently as she worked.

"Next time, don't be so reckless. Why

not just grab a baseball bat or-

something? You go around punching people with your bare hands-doesn't it hurt?"

Winona winced as the ointment stung, but she grinned.

"Doing it myself is so much more satisfying. Swinging a bat just isn't the same!

Ugh. And you should've seen me when I ran into Sarah-I was furious."

"Every time I see her, I realize just how stupid I've been."

"I mean, I'm supposed to be the queen bee, right? Winona, the internet's favorite badass. And I got played by that sleazeball

couple almost ended up dead I.ne

because of them! God, it's

no

embarrassing. So freaking embarrassing!"

Elliot piped up, trying to comfort her.

"It's not that you're dumb, Blossom. It's just that Zane's a real piece of work. If he weren't a criminal, he'd probably be running a Fortune 500 by now."

Zane had seven PhDs under his belt, all from top universities, in everything from engineering to psychology.

And he wasn't even forty yet. The guy was terrifyingly accomplished-if only he'd chosen a different path.

Blossom rolled her eyes. "If he wasn't so impressive, you think Winona would've given him the time of day back in college?"