

Hitched 1211

Chapter 1211

Back in school, there were tons of girls who had a crush on Zane. He was the whole package: good grades, tall and handsome, smart, ambitious, and, to top it off, he actually had a decent personality. Basically, he was that guy who seemed to have it all together.

Elysia, though, wasn't buying it. She scrunched up her nose and muttered,

"Doesn't matter how perfect he looks on paper. He's rotten to the core. The guy's just filthy inside and out."

Just then, Keaton and Tarquin walked in. Keaton immediately jumped in with his two cents,

"Gotta agree with Elysia on this one. It's what's inside that counts! Look at me— my grades are awful, but at least I'm not a jerk, right Tarquin?"

Tarquin just rolled his eyes, didn't bother responding, and instead wandered over to stand closer to his wife.

Elysia nodded her approval.

"Exactly. Keaton might be a bit of a flirt, but at least he's a good guy. Compared to Zane, he's like, a thousand times better."

Winona, grateful for the support, chimed in with a big smile,

"If Zane's just a crow pretending to be a peacock, then you, Keaton, are the real deal. Like, the crowned king."

Keaton puffed up immediately, grinning,

"See? Ms. Newsom knows quality when she sees it!"

Elysia turned to Tarquin, "Did Zane and Ridley leave?"

"Yeah, they just left."

"Bet Zane's losing his mind right now. He didn't get to take Winona home, and now he's got a whole new mess with Sarah. She's his time bomb-looks like it finally blew up. I'm sure he's freaking out."

"You're not wrong. He looked like he'd swallowed a lemon on his way out."

"Serves him right!" Elysia snorted.

Honestly, the worse Zane felt, the better everyone else's mood seemed to get.

Elysia finished dabbing ointment on Winona's arm and started packing up the first aid kit.

Keaton sidled over, chuckling, "Hey, Elysia, could you do me a favor when you have a sec?"

She looked at him, a little surprised. "Uh... sure, what is it?"

"Well, you and my sister get along, right? Next time you see her, could you put in a good word for the whole 'no marriage, no kids' thing? Maybe talk to my parents, too, so they'll stop hounding me about settling down."

Elysia blinked, caught off guard.

"Wait a sec-last time I saw Jess, she said you were engaged. Your fiancée's name is Beatrix, right?"

Keaton pulled a face.

"We're not really engaged. It's just for show, to get our folks off our backs. Beatrix and I are both anti-marriage. The whole thing is just to keep the parents happy." Elysia raised an eyebrow.

"Just an act, huh? I dunno, Beatrix doesn't really seem the type..."

She hesitated a moment, then said,

"I'll talk to Jess next time I see her, but I can't promise anything."

Keaton looked hopeful.

"She listens to you. If you tell her, she'll talk to Mom and Dad, and she won't get chewed out for it. If I say anything, I'm dead meat."

Elysia just shook her head. She'd heard all about it-how Richard and Mrs. Huber were dying for a daughter-in-law, and how Keaton wanted absolutely nothing to

do with marriage. Rumor had it, the Hubers were so desperate, they even considered exhuming some long-gone ancestor, convinced their family curse was why they had a son who refused to get married.

Winona piped up, "Actually, I think I can help with this."

Everyone turned to look at her. Keaton's eyes went wide,

"Wait, seriously?"

"Seriously. You just want your parents off your back about marriage and kids, right?"

"Exactly! That's all I want."

"No problem. But are you in a rush? If you can wait until I deal with Zane, I'll help you out."

"I mean, it's kinda urgent, but I can wait. As long as it's handled before New Year's. My parents want me and Beatrix to announce the engagement at the end of the year, and I don't want to go through with it."

"Plenty of time, then. When Zane's sorted, come find me. I'll take care of it." Keaton looked like he'd just won the lottery. "Deal!"

Inside Number One Mansion, the mood was light and easy.

Meanwhile, somewhere else, Zane was on edge, feeling like he'd just eaten a whole plate of rotten Brussels sprouts-sour, bitter, and absolutely miserable.

Chapter 1212

He marched up to the house, evidence in hand and confidence rolling off him in waves. Today, Zane was sure he could finally redeem himself in Elysia's eyes. Maybe he'd even get to bring Winona home like he'd promised.

But then Sarah showed up out of nowhere-and smashed every hope to pieces.

Now things were officially spiraling.

After dropping Ridley off at the office (and suffering through yet another one of his drawn-out lectures), Zane didn't waste a second. He drove straight to the psychiatric facility.

He needed answers. Who let Sarah out? And, more importantly, who gave her those photos?

But the doctors and nurses there had no idea where Sarah got the pictures. The security footage showed nothing unusual either.

Hours slipped by. Zane ran in circles, getting nowhere.

Next, he headed to the hospital to confront Sarah herself-maybe warn her, make sure she stopped spreading her insane stories.

Sarah might be crazy, but that didn't mean her threats weren't real. Today, Elysia and the Newsom family already seemed to have him in their crosshairs.

But at the hospital, the police stopped him cold. No matter what he said, they refused to let him see Sarah.

By the time Zane finally dragged himself home, it was pitch dark outside. He was exhausted, pissed off, and empty-handed.

The moment he stepped inside-still in his shoes-a strange smell hit him hard. Like something was burning.

Zane frowned and followed the scent into the living room.

What he saw made his blood run cold.

Right in the middle of the spotless living room, a pile of burnt ash sat on the hardwood floor. It looked like someone had just finished burning paper-like some weird old ritual or a makeshift memorial, the kind you'd expect to see at a wake, not in his home.

Suddenly, a soft, unmistakable sound of crying drifted through the house. It was quiet, but clear.

Zane's heart pounded like a jackhammer. Goosebumps prickled down his arms. He forced himself to speak. "Who's there?!"

The crying stopped at once. Silence, thick and suffocating.

Swallowing his fear, Zane flicked on every light in the house and hurried to his office to check the security cameras. He scrolled through the footage, frame by frame.

Nothing. No one had come in or out since he left. And on the feed, the living room was immaculate—no sign of any burnt ash.

Was he losing his mind?

He could've sworn he saw it.

Scowling, Zane stomped back to the living room. Sure enough, the floor was spotless.

How was that possible?

He stood there frowning for a long moment, then called the smart home company. They assured him that everything was working perfectly.

He even asked about the doorbell ringing last night. They told him he probably just imagined it.

Zane hung up, rubbing his temples. Ever since Winona was rescued, he'd been running on nerves and adrenaline. Maybe he was just stressed out-seeing things that weren't there.

He tried to shake it off and headed to the kitchen for a bottle of water. But as soon as he twisted off the cap, the doorbell rang again.

Zane froze. "Hello? Who is it?!"

No answer-just like last night.

Jaw clenched, Zane stomped toward the front door. The bell stopped the second he got there.

He peered through the peephole, expecting nothing.

Instead, he saw the impossible: his father, long dead, standing on the porch.

"Ah-!"

Zane screamed, stumbling backward and falling hard on the floor.

A second later, Arthur-his father-appeared in the living room, swaying slightly

as he moved toward Zane.

That was it. Zane broke.

He fumbled for his phone, hands shaking, and called his mother.

"Mom, get over here! I just saw Dad! He's-he's here! Oh God-"

"What? Zane, honey, what are you talking about?!"

Half an hour later, Priscilla burst into the house, punching in the door code. The first thing she saw was Zane, still sitting on the floor, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

Chapter 1213

He was curled up in the corner, shivering so badly it looked like he might fall apart at any moment. Whatever had happened to him, it had clearly scared the life out of him.

Priscilla rushed over, her voice trembling. "Sweetie, what happened to you?!"

Zane finally looked up, his face ghostly pale. "I saw my dad. He was trying to strangle me!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" Priscilla gasped. "Your dad's been gone for years! There's no way you saw him. And even if you did, he would never hurt you—he's your father!"

Zane's panic only grew when he realized Priscilla didn't believe him. He started talking faster, more frantic.

"I swear I saw him! Last night, he was by the window. Today he was at the front door, then he came inside! He kept chasing me, reaching for my neck like he wanted to kill me!"

Priscilla's worry deepened. "Honey, are you sure you're not just under a lot of stress? Maybe you're having some kind of hallucination. Try to calm down, okay? Why don't we check the security cameras together?"

"They won't show anything!" Zane shot back.

Priscilla stared at him, speechless.

Zane was in such a bad state that Priscilla couldn't take any chances. She grabbed her phone and dialed 911, asking for a psychologist to come over immediately.

After a thorough examination, the doctor concluded that Zane was suffering from a serious mental breakdown—too much stress, not enough sleep, and now his nerves were shot, leading to hallucinations.

She wrote him a prescription for some meds and told him to get plenty of rest.

It was almost dawn before Zane finally calmed down.

Even after taking sleeping pills, his mind was racing-he couldn't shut off his thoughts.

The whole thing with Sarah today haunted him. The more he thought about it, the more unsettled he became.

How had Sarah escaped from the psychiatric hospital?

Who gave her those photos?

How on earth did she know he'd be at Number One Mansion today?

And what were the odds that Keaton just happened to run into Sarah and brought her over?

This had Tarquin written all over it.

If Tarquin could find Sarah, he definitely knew what had happened between them. Yeah, he had to know.

Zane bolted upright in bed. If Tarquin knew, did that mean Elysia knew too?

His breathing quickened. If Elysia knew, did that mean Winona also knew? Were they all in on it?

Zane sat there, thinking hard. Suddenly, something clicked. He threw off the covers, jumped out of bed, and hurried into the living room.

He stared at the security camera, jaw clenched, but ultimately did nothing. He just turned around and went back to bed.

Number One Mansion.

Elysia and Blossom were huddled together, whispering anxiously.

"Why'd he run out just to stare at the camera like that?"

Winona shrugged, completely unfazed. "He knows he's being watched."

"What?!"

Winona replied, "I've been around him long enough to know how he thinks. He's probably figured out all this weird stuff is me pulling strings behind the scenes. After all, I'm the only one who knows how much his dad terrifies him."

Winona didn't know what had gone down between Zane and Arthur, but she knew that Arthur was Zane's personal nightmare.

Not even Priscilla knew that.

But Winona knew, because Zane would often wake up in the middle of the night, screaming Arthur's name.

The past couple of days, Elliot and Elijah had helped her mess with the smart home system.

They could control the doorbell and appliances, and even project fake images at just the right moment.

So the Arthur Zane had seen wasn't a figment of his imagination—it was just a projection.

The doorbell and crying he'd heard? That was Elliot and Elijah too, pulling the strings.

Winona's goal was simple: she wanted Zane to feel that same powerless fear he'd made others feel.

Elysia and Blossom were visibly nervous.

"So... does Zane know you're messing with him?"

Chapter 1214

Winona was totally unfazed.

"Whatever. He's going to find out sooner or later anyway. What's the difference if it's today or tomorrow?"

Elysia and Blossom just exchanged a look. "...."

Later, back in the bedroom, Elysia recapped everything to Tarquin.

Tarquin took it all in stride, pulling her close. "You're still worried about Zane figuring it out? Winona's right-he's going to know eventually.

Winona's just playing dumb to make it easier to get back at them.

She's putting on a show so she can go after Priscilla and Sarah right out in the open.

But even if she wasn't pretending, she wouldn't let them off the hook. She'd just find another way to take her revenge. Nothing to lose sleep over."

Whether Winona was faking or not, whether Zane caught on or not it didn't affect Tarquin's plans at all.

To him, whatever was going on between Winona and Zane was just petty drama. Digging up the whole mess with Zane and Burmalia, now that was the real play.

That was Zane's Achilles' heel. Get leverage there, and you could take him down for good.

Elysia let out a breath.

"You're right. But Winona pretending to be clueless isn't just so she can slap someone around-it's also her way to sniff out proof that Zane's behind all this. If they really go at it openly, wouldn't it be harder to get evidence?"

Tarquin shook his head. "Nah. Even if things get ugly, she'll just find another way. There's always a way."

Elysia frowned. "But if they go head-to-head, won't it be more dangerous for Winona?"

Tarquin kissed her gently on the forehead, all warmth and reassurance.

"From the moment Winona showed up on our radar, she was safe. You don't need

to worry. Anyone you want to protect, I'll protect for you. Now relax and get some sleep, okay?"

Elysia felt a rush of warmth at his words and snuggled closer. "Okay."

Once she'd drifted off, Tarquin sent a quick text to Lowell:

[Heads up Tamsin: expect Zane to make his move tonight. Tell her to stay alert.]

Lowell replied instantly: [Got it.]

Around 1 AM, Tarquin's phone buzzed.

Elysia had been jumpy for days—at the first sound, she was wide awake.

"Who is it?"

Tarquin glanced at the screen. "Lowell."

He kept his arm around Elysia as he answered. "Yeah?"

"Tarquin, just like you said Zane made his move!

He sent people to kidnap the illegitimate daughter, and wanted to inject Ridley with something. We've caught all of his guys."

Tarquin's voice was calm. "Inject her with what?"

He'd expected Zane to go after Ridley's secret daughter-kidnapping her would give Zane leverage to force Ridley to hand over control of the Newsom family.

But the injection was new.

Lowell replied, "No idea. Zane's men didn't know either. All they said was he told them to inject her, but didn't say with what. I just sent you a photo."

Tarquin opened the image: a vial of clear liquid. Not much to go on.

Elysia peered over his shoulder. "Could be a virus or something."

Tarquin told Lowell, "Send it to Benjamin Lawson for analysis. Have Zane's guys

call him say the job's done. Tamsin will follow their lead."

"Understood."

When the call ended, Elysia was wide awake.

"Zane going after Ridley and the 'illegitimate daughter' out of nowhere does that mean he's completely figured out Winona's faking?"

Chapter 1215

"Looks like it," Elysia muttered, frowning. "So what's his game? He's trying to use Ridley to threaten Winona?"

Tarquin leaned back against the headboard and pulled her close.

"They're past pretending. Zane needs leverage to keep Winona in check, and Ridley's the perfect bargaining chip. He can use Ridley to shut Winona up, and maybe even get his hands on the Newsom family's company and assets. If Ridley doesn't play along, Zane can always dangle the whole 'illegitimate daughter' thing over her head."

Elysia pressed her cheek against Tarquin's chest, brows knit tight.

"Zane sure thinks he's clever, doesn't he?"

"Thinking doesn't mean he'll succeed," Tarquin replied, a hint of a smile in his voice.

Elysia looked up at him, her expression hopeful.

"So you already figured out Zane's plan? You had people watching over Ridley and the others from the start?"

He nodded. "That's why I kept telling you to relax. As long as your husband's here, you've got nothing to worry about."

With Caroline and Winona already under their roof, Ridley was the only one Zane could target. If things went south between Zane and Winona, Ridley would be his first move.

Elysia's eyes sparkled. "How did you get so smart?"

Tarquin grinned. "It's because I married Elysia. You inspire me."

Elysia snorted. "I'll just take that as a compliment."

"You should-it's meant to be one. And I'm pretty proud of it, too."

She laughed along with him, then asked, "So what's the plan now?"

"We see what Winona wants to do next."

Back and forth, the couple kept talking in low voices. Elysia was so worried about Ridley and Tamsin that she couldn't sleep, so Tarquin stayed up with her.

Later, Tarquin's phone buzzed-a message from Lowell instead of a call. [Tarquin, can you talk?]

Tarquin knew right away Lowell was being careful not to alert Elysia. She just happened to be in the bathroom, so he called Lowell back. "What's up?"

Lowell sounded grim.

"We got the test results. That vial? It's a virus. Not just any virus-the exact same strain as Verity Bradford's so-called son."

Tarquin's eyes widened in shock. "The virus Karl Town brought back?"

"Exactly."

Tarquin went silent.

Why the hell did Zane have something like this? Was he mixed up with that shadowy figure?

Lowell pressed, "So what do we do now?"

Tarquin thought for a moment.

"We play along. Have someone take Ridley to the hospital and keep her in isolation. Tell everyone she's infected."

"Got it."

When Elysia came back, Tarquin told her about the virus-but left out where it came from and the bit about the mysterious man. No sense making her worry

even more.

But Elysia didn't waste a second-she immediately filled in Winona and Caroline. The next morning, bright and early, Ridley was whisked off to the hospital.

Elysia and Winona, along with the rest of their crew, rushed over and put on a whole show-pretending Ridley was dangerously ill, acting devastated in front of everyone.

Once the hospital scene was over, Winona followed the plan she and Tarquin had cooked up-she marched straight home to confront Zane. No more pretending, no more subtlety-she was ready for a head-on battle.

It looked like she was going it alone, but in truth, the big boss with the scarred

face and White were both with her. Following Evan's orders, they were there to watch Winona's back—no matter what happened.

Chapter 1216

When Winona got home, it wasn't even seven yet.

She stood outside, suitcase in hand, staring at the familiar front door-her heart a tangled mess. After more than a year, she was back.

Back again. She, Winona, was back!

She took a deep breath, steadied her nerves, and reached for the door. The face ID scanner blinked red-access denied.

She tried her fingerprint. No luck.

She keyed in her six-digit passcode. Nope. Wrong again.

Winona stood there in five-inch heels, brows drawn tight. It was obvious: Zane had wiped her info, changed the code, locked her out.

He never thought she'd come back. Not even for a second.

Was she hurt? Of course she was. How could she not be?

Once upon a time, she'd loved him for real. He was her first love, her "once in a lifetime," her husband-on paper, at least.

This house? Her parents had paid for their little "American Dream" starter home as a wedding gift. She'd picked out every tile, every paint swatch, every last throw pillow. She'd obsessed over the kitchen backsplash, the hardwood floors, the farmhouse sink. She'd poured her heart, her hopes, her future into this place.

And now? She couldn't even get inside.

What did this marriage ever give her, really?

Just scars-body and soul, inside and out. No mercy, no escape.

Marriage, she thought, is a gamble. Draw a good man, you get happiness. Draw a bad one, you get a nightmare.

Winona inhaled, slow and deep. Time to end the nightmare. She wasn't going to rot in this graveyard of a marriage.

Bam, bam, bam! She pounded on the door.

Inside, Zane and his mom, Priscilla, were probably still asleep after last night's "haunted house" drama-she'd heard the rumors. Finally, Priscilla shuffled out of the guest room, yawning.

"Who the heck is it? You're gonna break the darn door down! If you bust it, you're paying for it-my son spent a fortune on that thing!"

The door swung open. Priscilla blinked-then froze.

Her face soured. She yelled, "What are you doing here, you little witch? My Zane's divorcing you, and the Livingston family is done with you! Get lost! The farther, the better!"

Before she could finish, Winona smacked her. Hard.

Priscilla staggered and fell, eyes wide in shock.

She knew she was no match for Winona, She started wailing. "Zane! That witch is back! She hit your mama again! Get out here and teach her a lesson! Boo hoo hoo."

Winona glared down at her. "You're the ones who need to leave. This house isn't Livingston property-it's Newsom property!"

Priscilla shrieked, "What are you

talking about? This is my son's house! Trying to steal it from us? Over my dead body! You witch! Get back here—you can't come in!"

She lunged for Winona's leg. Winona kicked her off, cold as ice. "Get lost."

All the commotion finally brought Zane out of the bedroom. He took one look at Winona-just her, no one else and relaxed, lips curling into a sneer.

He shut off the house security cameras and WiFi, then looked at his mother. "Mom, close the door. If she's back, she's not leaving again."

Priscilla didn't get it, but she always listened to her son. She scrambled up, grumbling, to slam the door shut.

Winona didn't care. She hadn't come back to leave again.

This was her home. Why should she be the one to go?

If anyone had to leave, it was this lovely mother-and-son duo.

She glared at Zane, emotions swirling in her eyes until all that was left was pure, seething hatred.

Hatred as deep as the ocean.

Zane lounged on the couch, looking her up and down. "So, you're done pretending, huh?"

Chapter 1217

Winona didn't say a word.

She glanced up at the living room wall, where the wedding portrait hung a big, cheesy photo of her and Zane in full wedding attire, smiling like they had the world at their feet. She let out a dry, bitter laugh.

Then, in one swift motion, her expression hardened. She grabbed the closest thing at hand—a decorative vase—and hurled it right at the picture.

CRASH!

Glass shards exploded everywhere. The photo landed face-down on the hardwood floor.

Winona didn't stop. She grabbed a golf club from the umbrella stand and stormed through the room, smashing every framed wedding photo she could find.

She didn't touch anything else. Only the wedding photos.

Priscilla shrieked from the hallway, her voice shrill and angry. "Zane! Are you just going to stand there and let her wreck our home? She's tearing this family apart!"

Zane stood stiffly, arms crossed. He said nothing, just watched Winona with an icy look.

As far as he was concerned, Winona was just throwing a tantrum because she had nowhere else to vent her frustration. She hated him, but there was nothing she could really do. Ridley was under his thumb. Winona didn't dare reach out to Tarquin or Elysia for help-she was on her own.

Zane figured he had her right where he wanted her. Let her smash the photos- he didn't care. He would've trashed them himself, anyway. Sooner or later, this whole place would be filled with wedding photos of him and Elysia instead.

When every last wedding photo lay in ruins, Winona finally stopped, breathing hard. She felt a strange sense of relief.

She headed to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water, took a few gulps, then came back and sat on the couch across from Zane.

"Alright," she said flatly, "let's talk. What do you want?"

Zane looked her straight in the eye. "I have the antidote. It'll cure your dad. If you do as I say and transfer all the Newsom family assets to me, I'll hand it over."

Winona frowned. "You pretended to fall for me, married into the Newsom family, then had me kidnapped last year-planning to ship me off to some hellhole in Burmalia. And now you're poisoning my dad and using him as leverage." s̄wnovel

She locked eyes with him, voice low. "You did all this just to get your hands on the family fortune?"

Zane narrowed his eyes. "The

kidnapping? That wasn't me. And as for your dad—who knows who poisoned him? All I know is, I have

the cure. Play nice, and your dad lives. Don't, and..." He trailed off with a cold shrug.

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Even now, with the security cameras he'd destroyed and the signal cut off, Zane was careful. He'd never admit to anything outright.

Winona gave a sharp, unimpressed laugh. "Still playing coy at this point?"

Zane just shrugged, all fake charm. "If you've got proof, show it. If not, quit making things up."

Her laugh turned colder. "My dad treated you like his own son. You have the cure and you're still holding out. Are you really that heartless?"

"Saving him is up to you. If you want to see him get better, you know what to do."

Winona stared at him for a long

moment, then asked, "How do I

know you even have the antidote? When I visited my dad at the hospital today, the doctors said it

was a new kind of virus—there's no cure for it anywhere."

This was what Tarquin was most worried about—it involved Karl Town and that mysterious figure. They'd even faked Ridley's infection just to get Zane to slip up.

Zane leaned back, confidence oozing. "There's no cure on the market—but I have it. Play ball, and I'll give it to you right now."

"I don't believe you," Winona shot back. "Not until my dad's better. There's no way I'm going along with your demands."

Zane was silent for a moment, then reached into his pocket. "Fine. I'll give you a sample. Try it on your dad. See for yourself."

He set a small bottle down on the coffee table. "That's the cure. But it's not

enough. You want a full recovery? You'll need way more."

Winona picked up the bottle, turning it slowly in her hand.

In her hidden earpiece, Elysia's voice crackled to life.

Chapter 1218

"Winona, Tarquin says to put the pill bottle away and just stick to the plan. Don't worry about Zane hurting you the place is crawling with security."

Winona did as instructed, slipping the tiny bottle into her jeans pocket. Her expression turned icy.

"Negotiations are over. You can all leave now!"

Zane's brows knitted together. "Excuse me, what did you just say?"

Winona shot him a look of pure disdain. "This is my house. After all this drama, you really think you get to stay here? Aren't you embarrassed? Because I sure am by you."

Priscilla nearly exploded, her voice shrill. "You're telling us to leave? You should be the one leaving! This is my son's house!"

Winona didn't even look her way. She strode over to the front door, yanked it open, and leaned against the frame, arms crossed.

"So, are you walking out on your own, or should I call the cops to help you out?"

Zane's jaw tightened, his face dark and stormy. He stomped over, about to yank Winona back inside for a "private chat"-but before he could touch her, a rock came whizzing out of nowhere and smacked his hand.

The stone was sharp. It sliced open his skin, and blood started dripping down his knuckles.

Zane hissed in pain, instantly on guard. "Who's out there?!"

He glanced around the porch, but the quiet suburban street was empty. The tension in the air was thick as a London fog.

Turning back to Winona, Zane's eyes narrowed in surprise. "You didn't come back alone. You brought someone with you?"

Winona shot him a sideways glance, refusing to elaborate. She let him think whatever he wanted.

Zane's breathing quickened. "You told Tarquin and Elysia everything? About us?"

"Yeah. So what?"

Zane's eyes went wide, almost popping out of his head. "I texted you, Winona! I warned you: if you want your dad to stay alive, you say nothing. You told them anyway-are you trying to get your father killed?!"

Winona ignored him. Right on cue, the moving truck she'd called pulled up outside. She waved the movers in.

"Everything in the walk-in

closet-clothes, shoes, the lot-toss it. Bedroom; guest room, blankets sheets, whatever you find. Oh, and clear out the kitchen and bathroom too want every last thing out of here."

The movers didn't hesitate. They started hauling out Zane and Priscilla's stuff by

the armful, dumping it onto the front lawn.

Priscilla shrieked, trying to block their way. "Stop! That's our personal property! You can't touch that!"

The movers ignored her. Her protest was drowned out by the sound of boxes thumping onto the porch.

When she realized she couldn't stop them, Priscilla collapsed onto the hardwood floor, sobbing so hard she nearly choked. "This is a crime! Lord, have mercy! She's throwing us out of our own house! How did I end up with such a vicious daughter-in-law? Oh, woe is me..."

Winona just rolled her eyes. Let her cry-she sounded like a broken record, and Winona half-expected her to start wailing into a violin for effect.

Zane was livid. "Winona, what the hell are you doing?!"

She'd completely thrown him for a loop. Last night, when he realized Winona had been faking it, he'd immediately sent his guys to grab his illegitimate daughter and infect Ridley with the virus. He'd texted Winona right after, threatening: If you want Ridley to live, don't tell anyone. Meet me alone.

He'd planned to get his hands on the Newsom family's fortune-he'd been scheming for years, and he wasn't about to walk away with nothing.

But Winona hadn't played by his rules.

"So you really don't care if your dad lives or dies?" Zane threatened, voice low and menacing.

Winona didn't even blink. She just looked at him coolly. "Maybe you should worry about yourself for a change. Congratulations, Zane. You're about to be famous." She waved her phone at him with a sly smile.

Chapter 1219

Zane felt something was off. His breath caught in his throat. "!"

He fumbled for his phone, heart pounding, and checked his notifications.

No way. Clips of his conversation with Winona-some pretty damning stuff-were already blowing up online!

Zane was in shock. He could've sworn he'd cut off the Wi-Fi. How the hell did Winona manage to upload the videos?

The internet was a wildfire of outrage:

#Oh my god, is he for real? This is a whole new level of trash!#

#This isn't just trash, this is straight-up evil!#

#World's Best Guy? More like World's Biggest Jerk! I'm gonna be sick!#

#He's reached the ultimate freeloader status wants the whole pie and the bakery too!#

#Thank God Winona's got nine lives, or she'd already be six feet under thanks to this scumbag! Die, loser!#

Even though Zane denied the whole kidnapping and poisoning thing in the videos, no one was buying it. The court of public opinion had already ruled: guilty as charged.

People were even digging up rumors about him and Sarah, the nurse, and Lyra.

Years of carefully crafted "good guy" image-gone in a puff of smoke.

Zane's breathing grew ragged, his chest heaving in panic.

"Winona, are you trying to get yourself killed?!"

Winona was still filming, steady as ever. "Take a breath, Zane. The whole country's watching right now."

He clenched his jaw so hard he thought his teeth might crack, eyes burning red.

He wanted nothing more than to wipe that smug look off Winona's face, but he knew there were bodyguards everywhere. He couldn't get near her.

"You're playing dirty. Fine-you win this round."

Without another word, Zane spun on his heel and stormed out.

With the internet in meltdown mode, he knew the press and paparazzi were probably swarming the building already. He needed to get away, find some quiet corner to figure out his next move.

As he was leaving, Winona called after him, "And by the way, that fancy penthouse Priscilla's been

livingin? It's mine. She's moving out

today."

Priscilla's face turned purple. "You bitch! Who do you think you are, taking my home? That's my place!"

Winona's tone was ice. "Actually, I paid for it. The deed's in my name."

"You said it was a gift! It's mine!"

"I gave it to you out of respect, but if you can't show any, don't expect me to,

either. You brought this on yourself."

"You-! I'll kill you!"

Priscilla lost it and lunged at Winona, but Zane yanked her back.

"Don't make a bigger fool of yourself. Let's go."

"My house, my house..." Priscilla sobbed as Zane dragged her away. Before disappearing down the hall, he shot Winona one last glare.

"You'll regret this."

Zane and Priscilla were gone, but the internet was just getting started.

#So mad right now, I swear I'd slap that old witch senseless! How dare she call Winona evil-she's the real monster!#

#No wonder Zane turned out the way he did, look at his mother! Like mother, like son.#

#If that woman lived in my house, she'd have caught a frying pan to the face already!#

Number One Mansion.

Elysia and Blossom scrolled through

satisfied. Zane might have squirmed out of admitting anything, but his reputation was officially toast.

Sax. comments, thoroughly

For Zane, this was game over.

Elysia and Blossom grabbed Caroline and headed out to meet up with Winona,

with Evan trailing behind as their self-appointed bodyguard.

Back at the house, Tarquin, Elliot, and Elijah huddled in the study for a private strategy session.

Chapter 1220

Elliot said, "Zane wants the Newsom family fortune. After Winona shut him down, I bet he's thinking of using the illegitimate daughter to threaten Mr. Newsom."

"Mr. Newsom's in complete isolation. Zane can't get to him," Tarquin replied.

"Then he'll switch tactics. He'll throw himself into building his own company, especially Central Pharmaceuticals."

Tarquin's voice went cold.

"If he tries to leverage Central Pharmaceuticals, we'll expose his connection to the company immediately. His reputation's already trashed-no one's going to invest in him now. When he's desperate for cash, you reach out to him as Alpha Thorne and sign a profit-sharing contract."

A profit-sharing contract at this stage? That'd be like pulling the rug out from under Zane-game over.

Elliot understood exactly what Tarquin meant.

"Leave it to me. I know how to handle it."

Tarquin nodded, then turned to Elijah. "Any progress on your end, Elijah?"

Elijah jumped right in,

"I checked out the sketches Mom drew. I found a few spots."

"Here, and here there are underground bases. People are actually living down there."

"And all these spots are close to the Myan District. I think Zane built them as transfer stations."

"He gathers people there, waits for a chance, and then ships them all to Burmalia."

Tarquin studied the areas Elijah had circled.

"Send me the general locations. I'll have our team dig deeper."

"Okay, Dad. But... aren't you going to ask Zane about the mystery man?"

"No rush," Tarquin said, his voice firm.

"He needs to be completely ruined first. Once Zane's desperate, talking about the mystery man will be easy. People only behave when they've lost everything."

Just as the three of them predicted, once Zane realized he couldn't get his

on the Newsom fortune,

he

his attention back

to his

own empire.

By lunchtime, Central Pharmaceuticals announced plans to go public. The news sent shockwaves through the business world.

Central Pharmaceuticals had been on a meteoric rise for the past two years. All the big players on Wall Street had their eyes on it.

The moment the company started raising funds, everyone would be lining up to buy shares.

Watching the financial news and all the hype about Central Pharmaceuticals, Zane finally felt a hint of satisfaction.

Central Pharmaceuticals was his creation-his proof that he was more than just a name.

Why did he look down on Keaton and Tarquin? Because they coasted on family money, while he built everything himself.

If they had swapped backgrounds, Zane was convinced he'd leave both Tarquin and Keaton in the dust.

He already had it all mapped out: after Central Pharmaceuticals went public, he'd land a massive deal. At the very least, he'd make a cool billion dollars.

Then he'd expand even more, rake in even more cash.

Once his empire was big enough, and Tarquin was out of the picture, he'd be strong enough to swallow all of Tarquin's assets.

He'd be at the top of the pyramid-the richest, most brilliant man in the country.

Only then would he go after Elysia again. He refused to believe she wouldn't fall for him then.

Zane was riding high on his dreams. But just as the news about the IPO went out, Tarquin hit him with a cold dose of reality.

A bombshell exploded online: Zane was outed as the secret owner of Central Pharmaceuticals.

Suddenly, the internet was ablaze.

If this had come out before, people

would've been shocked, maybe called him ambitious for building such a giant company behind the Newsom family's back.

But now? With Zane's reputation in the gutter, it was a whole different story.