

Hitched 1341

Chapter 1341

Tarquin said,

"You think everyone gets married for love? In high society, most marriages are just business deals."

"If Beatrix ends up with Keaton, whether she's happy or not, the Suttons will definitely cash in."

With that, Tarquin laced his fingers through Elysia's, a small smile on his lips.

He knew he was lucky to have found real love.

Elysia frowned.

"If the Suttons are playing games, is there any way to stop them?"

"There is, as long as Keaton is willing to tell the truth and stand up for himself," Tarquin replied. "But if he's already given up and insists he's guilty, no one can help him."

Elysia shook her head, confused.

"But why would he want to take the blame?"

"...Let's check on Beatrix first."

When they reached the living room, Beatrix was still holding a kitchen knife to her throat.

Her eyes were red as she yelled at her parents,

"Stop pushing me! Maybe you don't care about your reputation, but I do! Do you really think I have no other choice but him?"

"He doesn't like me, I don't like him. He doesn't want to marry me, I don't want to marry him. If you keep pushing me—if you keep pushing him—I swear I'll end it right here!"

Her mother, sobbing, pleaded,

"Sweetheart, just put the knife down. Please listen to me, anything happens to you, how am I supposed to go on?"

Sophus Sutton's face was stone-cold.

ey-put it down. If

"We're just trying to get you justice! Keaton hurt you shouldn't he be responsible?!"

Beatrix cried out,

"Keaton isn't like that! That night, it wasn't what you think—"

"No matter what happened, the fact is he hurt you! He should be held accountable!" Sophus snapped.

Tears streamed down Beatrix's face.

"I don't want him to take responsibility! He doesn't love me—I told you I won't be happy if I marry him! If you keep pushing this, I'll do something you'll regret!"

She turned to Richard and Janelle,

"Mr. Huber, Janelle, please don't blame him for this anymore. I'm not going to press charges. I'm not going to involve the police."

Sophus growled,

"Beatrix, don't-"

"Don't push me!" she screamed.

Her grip tightened-suddenly, the knife nicked her neck and blood started trickling down.

Screams filled the living room.

Tarquin was quick: he grabbed a heavy bookend from the mantel and knocked the knife from her hand.

Beatrix cried out in pain and dropped the knife, clutching her wrist.

"Beatrix!" her mother rushed to her side.

"Call a doctor! Someone, please!" Janelle shouted.

Elysia hurried over, checking the wound.

"Don't worry, it's not deep. Janelle, do you have a first aid kit?"

"Yes!" Janelle called, signaling the housekeeper.

Elysia quickly cleaned and bandaged Beatrix's neck, speaking softly,

"Ms. Sutton, let's talk this out, okay? Don't do anything drastic."

Tears still streaming, Beatrix nodded,

"Thank you, Ms. Thorne."

"You're welcome. Try not to get the bandage wet and take it easy for a bit, alright?"

"Okay."

Elysia

goped her to her feet. Beatrix

turned to Richard and Janelle and a deep, shaky bow, then ran

from the room.

Her mother hurried after her, calling,

"Beatrix!"

Sophus, out of options, let out a heavy sigh and shot Richard a furious glare before storming out.

The room fell silent. Richard and Janelle looked even more devastated.

Richard slumped into a chair,

"We owe her. The Hubers can't just let this go-we have to make it right."

Janelle buried her face in her hands, sobbing.

Even though Beatrix said she wouldn't pursue it, Janelle still felt awful-she knew this wasn't over. The Suttons hadn't given up, and that damning video was still out there.

It was a ticking time bomb.

Elysia comforted Janelle, while Winona stood quietly in the corner, her heels clicking on the hardwood as she watched Beatrix disappear down the hall, lost in thought...

Chapter 1342

For quite a while after that, Elysia kept trying to comfort Janelle and Richard.

Winona, on the other hand, didn't say a single word.

Elysia noticed something was off, and the moment they left the Huber family's place, she couldn't wait to ask,

"Winona, are you okay? You haven't said a word since Beatrix left. What's going on?"

Winona shot back, "What do you think about this Beatrix girl?"

Elysia thought for a second. "I don't really know her, so it's hard to say."

Winona said, "She's definitely into Keaton."

"Huh? What makes you say that?"

"It's not just that she wants to marry him. She wants Keaton to fall for her too. I mean, come on-if a woman wants both the ring and the guy's heart, what else could it be but love?"

Elysia looked completely dumbfounded, mulling it over for a while before she finally asked,

"You think she faked that suicide attempt today just to force her parents to back off? Like, she did it on purpose?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Obvious? How come I didn't notice?"

"Because, Elysia, you're such a lovable dummy!"

Winona grinned teasingly, then glanced at Tarquin, who was driving.

"Mr. Bradford, you saw through it, right?"

Tarquin kept his eyes on the road but didn't deny it. "I've already got someone digging into the Sutton family."

The drama the Suttons pulled today really did seem sketchy.

Tarquin glanced at Winona in the rearview mirror.

"If you've got some time, could you help look after Keaton for a bit? I've already let the Huber family's security know, so you can come and go as you like."

Winona looked confused. "Wait, what do you mean?"

Tarquin explained, "Keaton's stubborn as a mule. If Janelle or I bring him food, he won't touch it. But if you bring him something to eat, maybe keep an eye on him taking his meds too, just once a day or even every other day, at least he won't starve."

Winona raised her brows. "He'll eat if I bring it?"

"Yeah, he's helpless around a pretty face. If a beautiful lady delivers his meal, he can't say no."

Winona rolled her eyes. "...Seriously?"

Tarquin went on,

"Plus, you claim to be a relationship

expert, right? Maybe you can get

Keaton to open up and figure out

what's really going on with him-why he insists on confessing to something he didn't do."

Winona didn't have a good reason to say no, so she nodded. "Alright, count me

in."

Keaton had helped her out so many times; the least she could do was pay him back by sorting out one of his messes.

As soon as Winona finished speaking, her phone started ringing-Caroline was calling.

Winona answered, "Hey, Mom."

Caroline's voice was low and worried. "Winona, where are you right now?"

"I'm with Elysia. Why, what's up?"

"Just you two? Is it safe to talk?"

"Mr. Bradford's here too, but go ahead."

Caroline sounded tense.

"Priscilla showed up again with the police, saying you're holding Zane against his

will and demanding the cops search the house."

"But they didn't have a warrant, so they couldn't come in."

"The police told me to let you know-Priscilla is Zane's mother, so she has the right to see her son. If you keep blocking her, they'll take legal action."

Winona's eyes narrowed. "..."

Ever since Zane landed in her hands, his cronies had been egging Priscilla on to cause trouble.

Keaton had always been the one to shut things down.

That's the only reason Winona had been able to keep Zane out of sight for so long and finally get some payback.

"I got it, Mom. I'll handle it. Don't worry."

After she hung up, Elysia looked concerned. "Priscilla's stirring things up again?"

"Yeah, she's looking for her precious son."

"Wow, she actually had the guts to show up in person?"

Winona scoffed, "Only because

bet

Zane's right-hand men are backin

her

Otherwise, no way

dare

show her face at my place

"Priscilla may be arrogant, but she's not stupid. She knows I'm not someone to

mess with right now!"

Chapter 1343

Elysia frowned.

"I really underestimated that bastard Zane. Using the Bradford family name, he networked his way to the top-it's like he built his own little empire!"

"Tarquin told me he even owns Central Pharmaceuticals now," she added.

Winona's eyebrows knit together. Sure, she'd had some small wins lately, but when it came to business, the thought of it still made her blood boil.

The Bradford family was hollowed out now-her family's fortune, even the money she earned from acting, was all but gone. Zane had siphoned it off until there was barely anything left.

When they divorced, Zane walked away with nothing on paper, but it hadn't slowed him down one bit.

Tarquin jumped in,

"If Zane embezzled Bradford family money, we can help you get it back. And if you want to keep him locked up a bit longer, we can arrange that, too."

Winona was grateful. Zane had stolen her father's life's work-if she could get any of it back, it would be a miracle.

"Thanks, Mr. Bradford, but don't worry about it. Keeping him locked up forever isn't a real solution."

Tarquin warned,

"Zane's committed enough crimes that when he gets out, every agency in the country will be watching him. It's not safe for you to go after him personally."

Winona scoffed, "The sooner the state takes him down the better. Every day he's free, he's just a plague on everyone around him!"

Tarquin didn't say any more.

The reason they hadn't acted sooner was partly to help Winona vent her anger, and partly because they needed Central Pharmaceuticals as leverage against some mysterious adversary. But now, Winona had gotten her revenge, and the antidote was in hand. It was time to really deal with Zane.

He'd heard Zane was willing to trade the lives of a hundred thousand people for his own. Human life meant nothing to him. People like that didn't deserve to walk this earth.

And he was curious-who would take that job anyway?

Because of all the Zane drama, Winona didn't go back to the Bradford estate with the others. Instead, she headed home alone.

Tarquin and Elysia dropped her off

at her place. Elysia knew Tarquin

had arranged bodyguards for

Winona, but she still fussed over her,

insisting she call if anything

happened.

"I know, I know! Zane's in my hands now-he's the one in danger, not me. Relax, I'll call you later. Bye!"

Winona stood by her car, flashing a bright, carefree smile as she waved goodbye. Elysia's heart ached for her; she wanted to say more, but held back. Marriage, for

a woman, was always a gamble. And Winona had lost it all.

But heartbreak was a wound only time could heal.

"Well, I'm off then."

"Yeah, see you. Bye."

Once they left, Winona's whole demeanor changed. She licked her crimson lips-

a dangerous, seductive red rose in full bloom.

Inside, she didn't bother changing her shoes or clothes. She went straight to the wine cabinet, grabbed a bottle of vintage red from the top shelf, two crystal glasses, and still in her sky-high heels-headed down to the basement.

There, in a big iron cage she'd had built especially for Zane, he sat slumped in the corner, looking more like a beggar than the sharp O businessman he used to be.

The moment he saw her, his face twisted with rage.

"You bitch, I'm going to kill you! I'll-water...water....."

One second, pure hatred. The next, desperation.

He hadn't eaten or drunk anything in days. When he saw the wine in her hand, his

eyes went wild with hunger and thirst.

"Please, water...give me water..."

Winona's voice was cool and calm.

"This isn't water. It's wine. A very special, very meaningful bottle. Do you

remember it?"

Chapter 1344

Zane was gasping for breath, his throat dry as sandpaper. "Give me some!"

Winona lounged on the couch across from him, setting down a bottle of red wine and a pair of glasses on the coffee table.

"Do you even remember what this wine means?" she teased, swirling the bottle in her hand. "If you can answer that, I'll pour you a glass."

Zane frowned, his mouth opening and closing as he struggled to find the words. Nothing came out.

Winona shook her head and sighed. "Honestly, you forget everything. Even this?"

"This is the wine we saved from our wedding," she reminded him. "We agreed to keep it sealed until one of us was on our deathbed. Only then could we open it."

Before Zane could even process her words, Winona grabbed the corkscrew and popped the bottle open, not giving him a moment to react.

She poured herself a glass without letting it breathe, took a generous sip, and smacked her lips. "Mmm... That's good. Real good."

Zane's breathing quickened, panic flashing across his face. "Wait, are you are you planning to kill me? Don't forget, murder's a felony! Plenty of people know I'm here with you. If you kill me, you won't get away with it!"

For the past month, he'd tried everything-arguing, begging, bargaining. He'd realized by now that Winona was dead set on making him suffer. But he was sure she wouldn't dare kill him. After all, the whole world knew he was in her hands. If she killed him, she'd pay for it.

Winona laughed, tossing her hair back. "Kill you? Please. I'm not about to get my hands dirty for someone like you. Not worth it."

"Let's make a deal," she continued. "You cooperate, you get a glass. Simple as that. If you don't, well, you stay hungry and thirsty until you change your mind."

Zane eyed her warily. "What do you want?"

"That sapphire you took from my dad," she replied smoothly. "Hand it over, and I'll let you have a drink."

Zane's jaw clenched. That sapphire was worth a fortune-he'd planned to have it set into a ring for his proposal to Elysia. He definitely didn't want to give it to Winona.

But right now, he was dying of thirst. He hadn't had a drop of water in ages, and the torment was worse than any beating.

He glanced at the wine in her hand, then made his choice. "Fine! It's in my study. Bookshelf, third shelf down, far right—there's a hidden compartment. Inside's a safe. The code is... 251314."

The numbers were Elysia's birthday. Winona felt sick, picturing a slimy toad fawning over a swan-how dare he even think of Elysia.

She didn't bother responding, just headed upstairs to the study. She found the compartment, pulled out the safe, punched in the code, and retrieved the sapphire. It was even more stunning in person than in photos-deep blue, sparkling, flawless.

Winona had a lot of jewelry, being a celebrity, but this gem was on another level. She could only

imagine how dazzling it would look as a full set. Still, she tucked it away carefully-this belonged to her father, Keaton, and she needed to return it safely. She'd never forgive herself if it got damaged.

Back in her room, she hid the sapphire, planning to return it to Keaton when she brought him dinner later.

Then she headed back to the basement. True to her word, she poured Zane a glass of wine.

Zane gulped it down in seconds, then shoved his glass out through the bars, desperate. "More! Give me another!"

Winona sauntered over, bottle in hand. Zane's eyes followed every drop.

But she didn't pour it into his glass. Instead, she tipped the bottle and let the wine spill out onto the concrete floor.

Zane's eyes bulged. He thrust his hand through the bars, trying to catch the wine, but it was hopeless. He let out a furious, guttural yell.

"Winona! You bitch!"

Winona finished pouring out the last drop, tossed the empty bottle aside, and ignored his tantrum. When Zane smashed the glass and lunged at her, she stomped on his hand, grinding it down with her heel.

"Argh!" Zane screamed in pain.

Winona just smirked. "Does it hurt?"

Zane, sweating and shaking, could barely force out the words. "Winona, you—"

Chapter 1345

Winona's eyes were ice cold.

"To be honest with you, that year you kept me locked up? I was in pain every single day. Not just pain-despair."

She gave a bitter laugh. "Can you imagine? The guy I loved basically put me under house arrest, then paraded his side chicks around like it was nothing. My heart hurt, my pride hurt-it was humiliating."

"It wasn't just humiliation-it was complete hopelessness. I really thought I'd never escape you... It was hell, Zane. Pure hell."

As she spoke, Winona ground her heel down and snapped Zane's finger with a sharp crack.

She reached for the paring knife, unlocked the basement cage, and stepped inside.

Zane hadn't eaten in days. He could barely move, let alone fight her off.

He cradled his mangled hand, blood dripping everywhere, staring at Winona in terror.

"Wh-what are you doing? Y-you can't... You can't kill me. That's illegal..."

Winona murmured, almost to herself, "All you're feeling is a bit of fear. But you have no idea what real despair feels like."

"You know I won't actually kill you," she continued, her voice eerily calm. "And I can't keep you locked up as long as you did to me. So you'll never truly understand what I went through."

"But if you don't at least taste a little of that hopelessness, how can we ever be done?"

She smiled, but there was nothing friendly about it. "Zane, remember what I told you? If you don't love me, don't mess with me. Because I am Winona."

Her eyes dropped to Zane's most vulnerable spot.

"I'm not some pushover like Sarah. Not a chance."

Her smile turned wicked. Zane must've sensed what was coming his breath caught, total panic on his face.

"Winona, please don't do anything stupid. We were married! I know I did you wrong, but-ahh-!"

Winona kicked him hard between the legs. Zane doubled over, wheezing, almost passing out from the pain.

And then-

The knife flashed. One clean, brutal move. It was over.

Zane screamed—a single, ragged cry-then collapsed, unconscious.

A few minutes later, Winona was upstairs washing her hands with disinfectant. As she finished, the doorbell rang.

She opened the door to find the Newsom family's old family doctor on the porch. "Ma'am?"

"He's in the basement," Winona said coolly. "You can take him straight to the hospital. Oh, and do me a favor-call Priscilla and tell her not to bother begging me for her son. He's all hers now."

"And if she has any ideas about calling the cops? Well, let's see who ends up behind bars first-me, or her precious boy."

"If she wants a fight, she knows where to find me."

The doctor nodded, barely blinking, and hurried downstairs.

He took one look at Zane's injuries and his lips twitched in shock. But he didn't feel sorry for him-after all, Zane had almost ruined the entire Newsom family. Honestly, he was lucky to be alive.

Soon enough, Zane was taken away.

Winona sank onto the living room couch, wrapped her arms around a throw pillow, and just stared into space.

She'd loved once, really loved. Gave away the best years of her life.

From college sweethearts to wedding bells-the kind of love story people wrote movies about. And this was how it ended.

What a joke.

Keaton was right, she thought bitterly. Why get married at all? Wouldn't it be better to just stay single? Marriage is nothing but trouble.

Her mind drifted to Keaton. She glanced at the time—just past five in the afternoon.

She exhaled, dragged herself up, and took a long, hot shower.

Afterward dressed in her comfiest pajamas, she tried to make dinner. Her cooking was as bad as

els

ever she burned the oatmeal to a

black crust.

Whatever. She gave up and ordered takeout.

While waiting for her food, she did her makeup, bold and glamorous, and slipped

into a striking red dress.

She stood in front of the mirror, taking herself in.

Divorced, vengeance served, soul in tatters-but what else did she have to lose?

Nothing, really.

She and Zane were done. Over. For good.

Winona tossed her long curls and winked at her reflection.

Still sad? Hell no.

Love who? Please. This woman doesn't waste time on regret.

She'd survived the worst-she was still standing. She was still the queen.

Winona put on her sunglasses,

grabbed a lucky stone, tossed two bottles of expensive wine into her Hermes bag, and slipped on a pair of heels.

She hopped into her sports car and headed toward the Huber estate.

On the way, she picked up her pre-ordered takeout-pizza, wine, and a new beginning.

Chapter 1346

A flashy red sports car pulled up smoothly in front of the Huber family estate.

Winona, rocking a pair of sunglasses, was behind the wheel. She gave a quick tap on the horn.

The Huber family's security guard caught sight of her and was practically gawking.

No wonder she was a celebrity-she was ridiculously gorgeous! Almost unfairly

So.

The security guys hustled over, tripping over each other in their eagerness.

"Ms. Newsom, are you here to see our young master?"

"Mr. Bradford called ahead. Just drive forward, then swing around to the back entrance."

"That'll get you closest to the chapel, and it's out of sight from the old man. Someone's waiting for you at the back door to take you over."

Winona nodded. "Got it, thanks."

"No problem at all, ma'am!"

They all watched the sports car roll away, full of admiration and envy.

"I seriously don't get what's wrong with Zane," one of them muttered. "Marries a knockout like that and doesn't even appreciate her. Guy's got mashed potatoes for brains."

"Zane's mom isn't much better, always spreading rumors about Ms. Newsom online!"

"Do you know how lucky you gotta be to get a daughter-in-law like her? The Livingstons must've prayed for decades, and these two just threw it all away."

"If she were in my family, the old man and lady would spoil her rotten!"

"For sure! Our boss and his wife always say, as long as the daughter-in-law is breathing, she's good enough."

"But Ms. Newsom is drop-dead gorgeous! The old folks would be in tears of joy."

"Well, there's still Ms. Sutton. And she's never been married, while Ms. Newsom is divorced..."

"So what? Our young master has dated half the city-he's got a reputation. If Ms. Newsom isn't scared off, we should count our blessings!"

"Exactly! Between Ms. Sutton and Ms. Newsom? I'm team Newsom all the way. She's awesome!"

"Same here! I'm rooting for Ms. Newsom!"

"Let's hope, guys. If our young master ends up with Ms. Newsom, we'll finally have something to brag about!"

"No one could laugh at us anymore, saying the Huber family can't find a young mistress!"

"She's way more elegant than Mrs. Windham or Mrs. Murphy's daughters-in-law, that's for sure!"

"There's no comparison! They're princesses at best. Ms. Newsom is a queen!"

Meanwhile, Winona had no idea the Huber family gatekeepers had already decided she was one of their own.

She'd just come to drop off some lunch, and now she was basically part of the Huber clan!

Every guard was calling her 'our Ms. Newsom' like she already belonged.

With Richard and Janelle praying day and night for a daughter-in-law, everyone in the Huber household was getting desperate.

Even though Keaton had dated more women than anyone could count, he'd only ever brought Beatrix home.

Everyone had liked Beatrix at first, but ever since the whole Sutton debacle, the Huber house had been in chaos.

Richard was furious, Janelle was in tears, and their precious Baby had gotten beaten half to death again.

So, yeah, the entire staff was officially done with the Sutton family.

And then-just like that-Winona showed up.

All eyes shifted to her.

She was only the second woman, after Beatrix, to set foot in the Huber home Not only was she beautiful

and from a good family, but she was single now, too!

Looks, age, background-she and Keaton were a perfect match!

It was like fate itself was throwing the Huber family a bone.

No, not a bone-a lifeline!

If Winona became their daughter-in-law, the Huber family would finally have some real clout.

And hey, if all went well, maybe next

year there'd be a new little Hurthet

toddling around. They'd be the toast of the social scene!

Among Keaton's generation, there were at least twenty other eligible bachelors in the circle, but only Tarquin had a kid.

The rest were either still dating, newly engaged, or married but childless.

The old-money wives in the country club were green with envy whenever Tarquin's kid came up.

Chapter 1347

He's got none, and that family's got five!

In high society, money's never the problem-more kids means a bigger, stronger legacy. The more the merrier, right?

The Huber family had long given up hoping Keaton would ever settle down, let alone have kids. If he ever actually tied the knot, they'd be thanking their lucky stars. But what if... just what if...

What if Winona and Keaton actually got together? What if there was a baby by next year?

Lord, the entire Huber household would be grinning in their sleep every night.

Richard and Janelle would probably go door to door, passing out cigars and announcing to anyone who'd listen that they finally had their first grandchild! "Ms. Newsom, Ms. Newsom! You can leave the car right there!"

The security guard, waiting by the back door, had clearly been tipped off. The moment he saw Winona, he lit up like someone spotting their favorite daughter-in-law.

He rushed over, waving her into a parking spot.

Winona eased her sports car to a stop, killed the engine, and stepped out.

Suddenly, she was surrounded by Huber staff-security, housekeepers, even a gardener or two. One grabbed her purse, another took her takeout bag.

"Careful, ma'am, watch your step!" they chorused, fussing over her like she was royalty.

Winona was baffled. The Huber staff was treating her like she was already Mrs. Huber-scratch that, like she was a pregnant Mrs. Huber!

Winona just assumed they were this welcoming to everyone. She didn't overthink

it.

"Did you guys check on him? How's he doing now?" she asked.

At her words, the staff practically teared up.

"Ms. Newsom, you're so kind. Please, try and talk some sense into our young master. Mrs. Huber brought him dinner earlier, but he wouldn't touch a single bite."

"He hasn't eaten or drunk anything all day, we're really worried about him!"

"And his wounds-he won't let the doctor change his bandages either. Honestly, we don't even know who he's mad at!"

"Not even an hour ago, Mr. and Mrs. Huber had another shouting match. It got ugly!"

"If Mrs. Huber hadn't stepped in, Mr. Huber was ready to toss him out on his ear."

Winona's eyes widened. "Toss him out? Seriously?"

"Yep. Mr. Huber said he was done with him!"

Winona: "

11

A housekeeper led her to the family chapel-a stern, old building at the edge of the estate.

"Ms. Newsom, please go on in. We have to wait outside, but if you just cross the yard, you'll see the main doors-they're open. The young master's inside."

Winona nodded. "Let me know if anyone's coming, okay?"

She and Keaton were innocent, sure, but still-alone together this late at night, in a place like this... people talk.

The guard caught her meaning. "Don't worry, ma'am. We'll keep watch. If anyone heads this way, we'll let you know right away."

"Thanks, you guys. I appreciate it!"

Winona adjusted her Hermès bag, steadied herself in her heels, and carried the takeout into the chapel.

It was already dark outside; the yard was dimly lit by a few old-fashioned lanterns. The shadows made the chapel feel even more solemn.

Winona took a deep breath and marched up to the heavy doors.

They were open. She stepped inside.

The Huber family chapel was huge-just the first floor alone felt like it could fit a basketball court The

Hubers were one of Jindafe

City's oldest families, so their family tree had plenty of branches.

All along the walls were memorial plaques for the Huber ancestors, each one

neatly arranged with offerings and candles.

And there, in the flickering candlelight, was Keaton.

He was supposed to be kneeling in penance, but after the beating he'd taken, that

was impossible.

His back and legs were so bruised

up, he couldn't kneel or lie on his back so he was sprawled out on his stomach on a hard wooden cot, looking absolutely miserable.

When he saw Winona, he looked totally bewildered. "What are you doing here?"

Winona didn't answer. She slipped off her sunglasses, then politely bowed three times to the Huber ancestors.

Only then did she turn and walk toward Keaton.

There were no bright lights in the chapel, just the soft glow of candles. As she approached, she noticed a narrow, rickety little cot pushed up against the wall-maybe four feet wide at most.

Keaton was lying face down on it, a thin blanket draped over him, eyeing her suspiciously.

"I asked you a question—what are you doing here?"

Chapter 1348

Winona grinned, "Just came to check in on you."

Keaton scowled, clearly annoyed. "You could've at least given me a heads-up."

She laughed, "Oh, please. What, so you could get all dolled up for me?"

Keaton pursed his lips. He was used to looking cool, but right now, he looked like he'd just lost a wrestling match with a raccoon. The last person he wanted to see him like this was, well, anyone-especially a pretty girl.

Winona tilted her head, her bright eyes narrowing as she looked him over.

Keaton squirmed under her gaze, frowning. "What are you staring at?"

She gave her verdict, "Your hair looks like a bird's nest, your shirt's a mess, and man, is that dirt on your face? Mr. Huber, you look absolutely tragic."

She wasn't wrong. Next to her, all stylish and put-together, he looked like he'd just crawled out of a dumpster behind a dive bar.

Keaton glared, lips pressed tight in frustration.

She always knew exactly what to say to push his buttons.

He opened his mouth, searching for a comeback, and finally grumbled, "Getting smacked around by your old man isn't anything to be ashamed of. Who hasn't been spanked as a kid?"

Winona raised an eyebrow. "Maybe as a kid, sure. But you're thirty and still getting your butt kicked!"

Keaton rolled his eyes. "Yeah, well, I'm thirty and proud of it."

She laughed. "Oh? Let me take a picture, really capture this proud moment for you!"

A picture? Keaton's face darkened instantly.

"Don't you dare, Winona. If you snap a photo, I swear-don't think I won't cut you off, no matter how cute you are "

"Click, click, click."

Winona ignored his protests completely, snapping away with her phone.

Keaton was so mad he couldn't even get words out.

Winona just kept going, holding her phone up, "Wait, hold still, that's a good one.

Let me get a few more for a perfect photo grid."

She showed him the shots, grinning. "If I post this, you're totally going viral. Hashtag Hot Mess Express!"

His face was practically thundercloud-dark now. "If you post that, I swear, I'm done with you. Not even Tarquin or Elysia could talk me out of it!"

Winona shrugged. "Fine, I won't post them-if you'll have a drink with me. I just cut things off with that jerk Zane for good, and I need a drinking buddy."

Seeing her suddenly downcast, Keaton's heart softened, and his tone did too. "You really kicked him to the curb?"

"Yup."

"You feeling better?"

She nodded.

Winona pulled two bottles of merlot from her tote bag and wagged them at him. "So, you in?"

"Of course. But you have to delete those pictures first. And why'd you come to me anyway?"

She dodged the photo request and just said, "Who else would I come to? Elysia's got the kids tonight and Blossom's still at her preschool training. You're what I've got."

"Anyone else would just roast me," she

mighton, "I act all high and

then nearly got wrecked by a douchebag that I, stupidly, chose myself. So embarrassing."

"But you—well, you're a ladies' man, always know how to be sweet. You won't make fun of me, right?"

Keaton grinned. "You picked the right guy. I'd never laugh at you."

"Good. Then let's drink."

Winona started to open the merlot, but Keaton stopped her. "Nah, not red. That's too tame. Let's go for the hard stuff-really knock the night out."

Honestly, he was itching for a good drink too. It'd been a hell of a day.

Winona shrugged. "Didn't bring any whiskey."

Keaton pointed toward the family altar. "There's some at Grandpa's spot."

She balked, "You want to steal your grandpa's liquor?"

Keaton smirked. "It's not stealing. It's borrowing. Grandpa loved me more than anything. After the day I've had, he'd understand."

"Besides, I'm borrowing it for a good cause-cheering up a friend. Grandpa would totally approve."

"Don't worry. Grab a few bottles, there's a whole stash over there. When I'm back on my feet, I'll replace 'em."

His grandpa, Harold Huber, had been a bourbon man, so his memorial was always stocked with the good stuff.

Winona hesitated. "You sure he won't haunt us?"

Keaton grinned. "Trust me, I know my grandpa. Go on, it's the second shelf, middle spot. Grab some new glasses while you're at it."

Winona rolled her eyes, but headed off for the bottles anyway. Some nights, you just needed bourbon-and a friend who'd drink it with you, no matter how much of a mess you both were.

Chapter 1349

Winona hesitated for a few more seconds, but eventually, she got up and walked over.

She found Harold Huber's memorial and gave a quick bow.

"Harold, don't blame me, all right? Your grandson told me to grab these. I'm just the messenger here. If you're upset, go haunt him, not me, okay?"

She muttered a bit more to the photo before she dared to move.

She grabbed two bottles of liquor and, on a whim, snagged two fresh glasses as well. Only after sneaking back to Keaton did she bother to check what she'd actually taken.

One look and her hands literally shook.

"Holy crap-Pappy Van Winkle Reserve and a bottle of limited-edition Russian Standard Gold?!" she gasped.

Winona stared at the bottles, then at Keaton. "Are you sure you want to drink these?"

Just a quick Google would tell you-each bottle could buy you a house in the suburbs!

Keaton, totally unfazed, just grinned. "That's right. Tonight, we drink the good stuff. Open 'em up!"

Winona swallowed hard, set the bottles aside, and went to grab the takeout they'd ordered.

She hadn't forgotten their main goal tonight.

"Drinking on an empty stomach is a bad idea. Let's eat something first."

As she unpacked the food-burgers, fries, and a couple slices of pizza-she suddenly remembered the stone.

"Oh, right! Nearly forgot-official business!"

Winona carefully pulled out the jade stone. "Isn't this yours?"

Keaton looked it over and nodded. "Yeah, that's it. How'd you get it back from Zane?"

"He was starving and thirsty. I told him-no stone, no water. You might want to check it, though. If anything goes wrong with it later, don't blame me."

Keaton gave it the once-over and handed it back. "Looks fine. You keep it for now."

Winona tucked the stone away, gently, and left it on the edge of the bed. "I'll just leave this here for you, okay?"

"Works for me."

There was a makeshift little table beside Keaton's old creaky bed. Winona set the takeout on it.

Keaton lay on his stomach; she sat cross-legged. They dug in together.

This time, Keaton actually ate a lot.

After a whole day without food, his appetite was back with a vengeance.

Once they were full, they finally cracked open the drinks and started pouring, chatting as they sipped.

Winona wanted to talk about Beatrix, but Keaton insisted on gossiping about Zane.

That eventually led to Callum Leblanc.

"Callum's been worried sick about you. If you'd picked him back then,

you probably wouldn't have had it so rough," Keaton said, pouring another shot.

IMS

"Doesn't matter if you're a guy or girl-if there's no spark, just someone who's really into you way more solid than chasing after

someone you're crazy about."

"At least you'll be safe, if not exactly blissful."

Winona, already tipsy, laughed. "Callum and I are strictly friends. He's not my type. Where is he now, anyway?"

She only knew Callum had been helping to look for her-Elysia had told her that much.

But she and Elysia had no clue something had happened to him.

Keaton sighed. "No idea. Still searching. If I find him, I'll let you know. C'mon, drink up!"

They polished off two bottles of whiskey, and Keaton sent Winona to fetch a couple more.

Back and forth, glass after glass, neither of them held back. Even Keaton was getting sloshed.

"Told you, didn't I? Marriage is a trap! If you don't want your heart broken, just don't get married!"

"Look at Elysia and Tarquin. They're happy now, but before? It was a total disaster for both of them."

"And you—almost lost your life over it!"

"As for me, I'm never getting married. I don't care who tries to make me—never gonna happen!"

Winona, even drunker, slid down to the floor, leaning against the bed frame and slapping the wooden boards for emphasis.

"I'm with you! Who needs marriage? I'm done getting hitched. From on, I'm a proud member of the

now

singles club!" Contents age?

club!"

"I'm learning from you. I'm going full anti-marriage!"

Keaton was thrilled, like she'd just recruited a disciple. She raised her glass for a toast.

"Damn right! Live your life, have fun, don't let anyone tie you down! Here's to the single life-cheers!"

She waved the flag of singlehood with pride, giving Winona a passionate lecture on the joys of never getting married.

Digging themselves into a hole, one hilarious toast at a time.

Chapter 1350

No one could really tell if Keaton was trying to prove a point or just get a rise out of his dad and Beatrix.

Right there in front of everyone, Keaton grabbed his phone and updated his profile bio.

He added a new line to the end:

"Proudly anti-marriage. If I ever get hitched, may I eat my own words."

He showed it off to Winona, grinning like he'd just won the Super Bowl.

Winona, a little tipsy and squinting to read, finally burst out laughing and gave him a big thumbs up.
"You're nuts, dude. Love it!"

Keaton nudged her, "You gonna change yours too?"

Winona shook her head, still hanging on to some sense. "Can't, I'm a celebrity, remember? Gotta look out for my image. But no way am I getting married, ever! I've made up my mind."

Keaton snorted, "So, whichever of us gets married first is officially the world's biggest loser?"

"Deal!"

So there they were, the two of them holed up in the family chapel, munching on pizza and chips, gossiping and laughing like it was just another Saturday night.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Janelle was an absolute wreck.

Her son was battered and bruised, hadn't eaten all day, and now the sun was down and Richard still wouldn't let him out of the chapel. He'd said Keaton could stay in there until he'd "reflected enough" on his actions.

Janelle's heart ached for her boy. She was so upset she'd threatened Richard with divorce.

A few family friends-Mr. and Mrs. Windham, Mr. and Mrs. Murphy-had heard the commotion and came by to offer their two cents.

The women, Mrs. Windham and Mrs. Murphy, tried to comfort Janelle.

The men, on the other hand, seemed to be enjoying themselves a little too much.

"Listen," Mrs.

5. Windham said, "kids grow up and make their own

choices-especially when it comes to marriage. You can't rush these things My son Gale wouldn't even propose for five years, and now he's finally agreed."

Mrs. Murphy chimed in, "At least your son's stubborn. My Booker is easy-going, but if I so much as mention grandkids, he flips out. Every family's got their own O headaches."

But the dads...

Mr. Windham boasted, "If I tell Gale to get married, he gets married. End of story!

This year, too. I just told him, and he agreed."

Mr. Murphy laughed, "If Keaton's hopeless, just move on. Have another kid!

Plenty of folks start over these days. You never know-second time might be the charm!"

Richard's face went dark. He and Janelle were both pushing sixty, and already had grand-nephews. Starting over? It was ridiculous.

"So, Gale's really getting married?" Richard asked, forcing a smile.

Mr. Windham puffed out his chest. "Of course. They're picking a date for the winter. I'll send you an invite!"

Richard turned to Mr. Murphy. "Booker too?"

Mr. Murphy was all smiles. "You bet. He promised me a grandkid by next year!"

Richard could only stare. The Windhams were getting a daughter-in-law, the Murphys were about to be grandparents, and what about the Hubers?

They'd raised a son who didn't even want to get married-and now the whole internet was buzzing after Keaton's anti-marriage post.

Richard was so furious he nearly choked.

He shot up from his seat, ready to storm down to the chapel and give Keaton a piece of his mind.

Janelle saw the storm brewing and hurried after him, tears streaming, "Richard, if you lay a finger on him, I swear

I'll divorce you right now! I mean it! Not another day, I'm done-"

Mrs. Windham and Mrs. Murphy rushed after them, still trying to play peacemakers.

"Richard, don't do anything crazy! He's still your son, you'll regret it if something goes wrong!"