

Once Cast 211

Chapter 211 Virginia Applies Pressure

Tyrone said into the phone, “Mr. Locke, if you ever visit Capital City, let me play host and return the courtesy.”

The moment he hung up, Noel’s phone buzzed.

One glance at the caller ID, and his face fell.

He walked over to Tyrone, hesitant. “Mr. Winter, Ms. Caldwell’s been calling again. Do you want to handle it yourself?”

Tyrone’s gaze dropped to the glass of red wine in his hand.

He said quietly, “You deal with it. Just make sure she and her son can live comfortably here in Vleka.”

Noel’s mouth twitched, but he bit back what he wanted to say.

Ever since the boss told him to “handle” Zera’s affairs, his nights had been pure hell.

If she didn’t call by midnight, it meant she was saving up for the next round.

Now, she’d stopped distinguishing day from night.

He couldn’t sleep, his wife yelled at him, and twice he’d been kicked off the bed—nearly threw out his back.

If this kept up, the boss wouldn’t be the one filing for divorce—he would.

Just then, Virginia knocked and came in. Noel poured tea for her before slipping out quickly.

As the door closed, Tyrone led his mother to the lounge.

She didn't bother circling. "You've heard about Zera, haven't you?"

He leaned forward, elbows braced on his knees, eyes lowered, and nodded once.

Zera's tone was firm. "Aella's getting more and more out of line. While you were away, she sent your grandfather to the hospital, and she still hasn't gone to see him."

Tyrone's eyes dropped again, hiding the storm behind them.

Aella treated him like a stranger now-his family didn't stand a chance.

When he didn't respond, his mother pressed on. "Everyone knows about you and Zera. If Aella

keeps acting up, it only makes things worse. Your father, grandfather, and I have discussed it-if you don't want to remarry, we won't force you. But you need to end things with Aella and settle Zera and the boy. After all, that child is your blood."

Tyrone's expression hardened. "Mom, I'll handle my own life. I don't want anyone interfering."

She set her teacup down, her voice sharpening. "Tyrone, I didn't come to negotiate. That boy carries the Winter bloodline. With Zera in trouble, his life's directly affected. You will take care of this."

He stood abruptly, pacing a tight circle, frustration in every movement.

He muttered, "I never say I wouldn't. I've got a meeting soon. I'll deal with it after."

She picked up her bag and rose.

She said heavily, "Tyrone, if you can't control Aella-if she won't behave-you need to seriously consider divorce. Our family isn't small-town gossip fodder. We can't afford that kind of disgrace."

His face changed instantly.

He'd promised Aella he'd respect her, believe in her, never force or threaten her again.

Whether she was obedient or not, he couldn't cross that line anymore.

Virginia's tone softened, but her words cut deep. "She's been spending too much time around Mr. Vic lately, and she's reckless. Honestly, I think Zera might be a better match for you."

Tyrone's face went cold.

He said flatly, "Mom, stop. I'm not replacing my wife."

She

gave him a long, unreadable look before walking out.

Her son had everything-discipline, success-but in love, he was a disaster.

Wanting both sides of the fence, keeping his wife at home while the mistress hung on outside— it was pathetic.

She remembered her humiliation—her husband's betrayal, her in-laws' contempt-and how she'd made sure that woman and her child didn't survive under her roof.

Her son would learn the same lesson-one way or another.

Tyrone worked late but couldn't shake the restless irritation in his chest.

Instead of going home, he met with Brad and a few others at the club, drinking until past ten.

When he finally returned, his eyes caught on the boxes of cold medicine by the minibar.

The haze of alcohol vanished instantly.

In the bathroom, Aella had just showering. She was "prepping" her sanitary pads when the door burst open.

She jumped. "Can you not knock?"

His gaze dropped to the pad in her hand-stained red.

He froze, eyes dark and unreadable. "Sorry. I didn't know anyone was in here."

Then, he turned, quietly closed the door behind him, and walked away.

Aella locked it fast and exhaled, her heart pounding.

It was a good thing she'd been prepared.

If she hadn't been, she'd never survive his constant "check-ins."

She'd have to stay alert until the end of the month-until the trip to Vofgan, when she could end the pregnancy for good.

By the time she came out, composed again, Tyrone was gone from the bedroom.

Chapter 212 Meddling

Aella didn't care whether Tyrone came home or not-she went straight to bed.

The next morning, in the hospital corridor, she ran into Zera.

It was April-mild weather-but Zera was wrapped from head to toe in oversized sunglasses, a hat, and a mask.

When she saw Aella standing there in her white coat-calm, confident, and beautiful-her eyes burned with jealousy.

Their gazes met briefly. Aella turned to leave.

Zera quickened her steps and blocked her way. "Can I take a few minutes of your time?"

Aella gave a small nod and led her into an empty consultation room.

Zera pulled off her mask. Her face was haggard, her makeup patchy.

Aella looked her over-aside from the designer clothes, there was nothing worth noticing.

Average looks, background, mind, and temperament.

And yet, this was the woman Tyrone had risked everything for.

Aella thought coldly, Maybe love really did make men blind.

Zera caught the faint contempt in her eyes, and her fingers clenched around the paper bag she carried.

She hated that look on Aella-the same superior, untouchable arrogance Virginia had.

Zera bit out, "Aella, you don't need to look at me like that. No matter what you think of me, I'm still the mother of Tyrone's son."

Aella's lips curved slightly.

She said evenly, "Zera, high society has no mercy. Keeping the child and discarding the mother is nothing new. If you don't start pushing harder, even if Tyrone and I divorce, you'll still never make it past the Winter family gates."

The smugness drained right off Zera's face.

Her expression twisted, her surgically refined features distorting with anger.

Just then, Zera's phone rang.

One glance at the caller ID, and her fury vanished.

She thrust the phone toward Aella, smug again.

"See that? I don't even have to try. The Winters are already waiting to welcome me in."

Aella's tone stayed calm, almost gentle. "Then, I wish

you

luck.”

She turned and walked away, not once looking back. Zera’s nails dug into her palm, her face contorting. You bitch. Just wait.

Soon enough, Tyrone would come crawling back to her.

Their relationship would be just like it was when he first returned home.

Following the address Virginia had texted her, Zera arrived at a quiet coffee shop.

She sat across from Virginia, glancing at the steaming cup in front of her.

Virginia began, “I wasn’t sure what you liked, but since you and Tyrone get along so well, I figured your tastes must be similar. I took the liberty of ordering for you.”

She hated black coffee. The bitterness clung to her tongue.

If she wanted to fit in with the wealthy, she couldn’t let anyone see how out of place she was. She ordered a hand-brewed coffee almost every day, telling herself she knew a thing or two

about it.

She said carefully, “Thank you, Mrs. Winter. Tyrone and I both like coffee.”

Trying to look classy, she lifted the cup, took a sip, and nearly winced.

The bitterness spread like poison, but she swallowed it down anyway.

Of course, the old woman hadn’t added sugar.

Figures-she wasn't being kind.

Virginia watched her. "Can you tell what kind it is? Blue Mountain or Yauco Selecto?"

Zera looked down, embarrassed.

She usually ordered cheap takeaway coffee-fifty, maybe a hundred bucks a cup, loaded with milk and sugar. How was she supposed to tell the difference between beans with names she couldn't even pronounce?

The older woman was clearly testing her.

Virginia stirred her own coffee slowly, her voice calm. "I'm not asking to mock you."

Zera's eyes shot up, startled-the older woman had seen right through her.

Virginia continued smoothly, "I'm just reminding you about how wide the gap between you and Tyrone really is. If you want to stand next to him, you'll have to work harder. Quietly."

Zera's brows drew together, uncertain.

She tested the waters. "Mrs. Winter ... do you really mean that?"

Virginia smiled faintly. "If I didn't, you wouldn't be sitting across from me right now."

Zera hated hearing the truth.

She was pissed, frustrated, but held it in.

But those words dissolved the last bit of her suspicion.

She said, softening her tone, "Mrs. Winter, I know the Winters don't think much of me. But Orson is still Tyrone's child. For the boy's sake, please ... help me convince Mrs. Winter-Aella -to let Tyrone visit us."

Virginia stirred her coffee again, the silver spoon clinking gently against porcelain.

She finally said, "For my grandson's sake, I'm willing to help. But I have to protect my position. Tyrone isn't divorced yet, and if anyone catches me meddling, I won't be able to clean it up later-or protect you again."

Zera's face tightened. Virginia added slowly, "Everyone already knows about you and Tyrone. If you want to see him, you don't need anyone's permission. Take your child and go to him-at his office, his house. You'll have my complete support."

Chapter 213 The Deal with Virginia

Zera lowered her head, clenching her hands tightly by her sides.

Her son wasn't Tyrone's child at all. What right did she have to make a scene with him?

She stayed silent for a long time, then put on an emotional act.

"Mrs. Winter," she put up an act and said, "I can't just fight with Tyrone and ignore his feelings. I truly love him. I'm willing to endure any hardship for his sake. I only worry about my son-he's growing up without a family, without a father's recognition. I don't want him to grow up being called a kid without a dad."

She watched Zera's performance calmly, not saying a word until Zera crying. "No matter what, Orson is still my grandson. We won't turn our backs on you two."

Zera's heart fluttered with excitement at that promise.

Virginia went on, "I'll talk to Tyrone and make sure he ends the marriage properly. You and your son will get the respect you deserve. But you need to do your part too and do what I told you."

Zera nodded eagerly. "Mrs. Winter, you can trust me. As long as you mean well for me and my son, I'll listen to you."

Virginia gave her a long look. She calmly reached into her bag, pulled out a document, and slid it across the table.

Zera cautiously opened it-it was a house rental contract.

Confusion and caution flashed in her eyes. "Mrs. Winter, what is this for?"

Virginia spoke with her usual grace and composure.

"This is one of my private properties downtown. Not even my son knows about it," she said.

"You've been blacklisted online for selling fake goods. It's unsafe for you to stay where you are. Pack up and move downtown with Orson."

Zera's eyes flickered.

That old hag kept claiming Orson was her grandson. She also knew they had nowhere else to go. Then why not just give her the house? Why make her rent it?

Virginia rested her folded hands on the edge of the table. She said lightly, "Don't doubt my intentions. I'm doing this for your own good."

Zera hid her irritation behind a polite tone. "Mrs. Winter, I still don't understand what you really mean."

Virginia raised an eyebrow. "Zera, you come from an ordinary family. You don't have an impressive job or education. Even though you gave birth to the heir of our family, the truth is, your background is far below my son's."

Zera bit her lip hard.

That old hag was still looking down on her after everything that happened.

Virginia went on, "Tyrone always tells us you're pure, kind, independent, and not materialistic. I don't want to destroy that perfect image he has of you. I also want Edwin to see your better qualities."

She went on. "I had pondered about this for a long time before deciding. The lease is ready for you to sign. The rent will be paid annually at market rate."

Virginia added quickly, "But don't worry. I'm only doing this for appearances. I won't take your money. You and your son can live there comfortably and with dignity. No one, except me, will know that the house isn't really rented by you."

She smiled softly. "You've been struggling, yet you still refused our help. When Tyrone finds out, he'll only feel more sympathy for you and admire you even more. He'll see how strong and independent you are. I'll also put in a good word for you with Edwin."

Zera lowered her eyes, trying to hide her excitement.

So that's what this was.

Good thing she had held back earlier and didn't lose her temper with this old hag.

Virginia was right.

She couldn't let those dinosaurs from the Winters think she was after their power or money.

Even though the high rental fees on the contract made her worried, Zera still gathered her courage, signed her name, and pressed her fingerprint.

After all, Virginia had already said she wouldn't really take the money,

Once she moved downtown, she'd be one step closer to Tyrone.

Virginia took the signed contract and prepared to leave.

Zera quickly asked, "Mrs. Winter, if we move in, what about Orson's schooling?"

Virginia stood, picking up her bag. Her smile was gentle and harmless.

"My grandson deserves the best education," she said. "I'll have Tyrone enroll him in a private school. You don't need to worry about the cost."

Zera stood there, watching Virginia walk away.

She couldn't hide her joy. Zera wanted to scream with excitement.

Virginia not only gave them a home downtown but also promised to send her son to a private school.

People always said grandparents spoiled their grandkids.

This old hag was just like any doting grandparent. She was crazy about her grandson.

With Virginia's help, it was only a matter of time before she and Tyrone became a real couple.

After leaving Zera, Virginia returned to the company.

Tyrone walked out of the meeting room, surrounded by a group of people. He wore a dark business suit, his tall frame and powerful presence making him stand out among the

executives.

His expression was cold, his strides long and confident. Those people behind him had to half-jog to keep up.

When they saw Virginia, everyone stopped and respectfully greeted, "Mrs. Winter."

Tyrone's face darkened when he saw his mother show up at his workplace.

Chapter 214 Caught in the Rain

After everyone left, Tyrone turned to Virginia. "Mom, what are you doing here?"

Virginia didn't bother with small talk. "Zera and her son can't stay in their old house anymore. I had them rent a place downtown so it'll be easier for you to take care of them."

The mention of Zera made Tyrone's face darken.

"If you have something to say, let's

go to my office."

Virginia pointed toward the meeting room. "It's fine. This will only take a minute."

Tyrone gave Noel a look and followed her inside.

Noel closed the door and stood guard outside.

Tyrone poured her a glass of water and said, "Mom, how many times do I have to tell you? Please stay out of

stay out of my business."

Virginia slammed the cup onto the table. "You cheated, and the entire family gets dragged through the mud. You think this is just your problem?"

He fell silent-it was the same argument again.

Virginia pressed on, showing no mercy. "Since you've already accepted that woman and her son, you need to take responsibility. They're going through a hard time. Go stay with them for a few days. Be there for them."

Tyrone's patience wore thin. He couldn't explain himself; all he could do was endure this.

"Mom, will you only be happy once I divorce Aella?"

Virginia scoffed coldly. "You know better than anyone whether Aella still wants to be with you."

Tyrone braced both hands on the edge of the meeting table. His shoulders sank.

He was silent for a long moment.

After a long pause, he said quietly, "Mom, I know you've watched Aella grow up. You hate to see her suffer. But I'm your son. I already told you, I don't want a divorce, I'm trying to fix things with her. Can you please stop pushing me?"

Virginia folded her arms. "Orson is your son too, Tyrone. He's a Winters by blood. You need to take responsibility for them both."

Her tone hardened. "You'll go stay with them tonight. If you don't, tomorrow I'll bring that child home myself. He'll be officially recognized-without his mother."

Virginia stormed out with that threat hanging in the air.

When she left, Tyrone slumped into his chair, exhausted.

He'd only acknowledged Orson as his son to stop his grandfather from giving Zera a hard time.

The boy wasn't his. If his mother brought that child home, claiming him as one of their own, there would be no turning back.

Tyrone stayed silent for several long minutes.

He took a deep breath, then called Aella.

Tyrone lied and told Aella he had a business dinner that night and would be home late. Aella simply said "okay" and hung up.

After work, a few of Aella's coworkers dragged her to a trendy new restaurant downtown.

By the time they left, it was past eight. A light drizzle began to fall.

After waving goodbye to her coworkers, Aella pulled her coat tighter. She walked alone down the sidewalk.

Then, in the soft glow of the streetlights, she caught sight of a familiar figure up ahead.

She stopped.

There stood Tyrone, dressed sharply in a suit, and Zera in pajamas and slippers. She was crying as she threw herself into his arms.

The night was hazy with drizzle, the golden glow of the streetlights blurring against the mist. Under that dim light, Tyrone and Zera stood in an embrace that looked almost romantic, like something out of a movie.

When Aella saw Tyrone push Zera away, an ironic smile curved on her lips.

That man had tricked her into an accidental pregnancy.

Lately, she'd been wondering how to test his loyalty.

Well, fate had just handed her the perfect opportunity.

She straightened her coat, her steps calm and deliberate as she walked toward them.

Zera noticed her first. Guilt flickered across her face as she quickly let go of Tyrone's arm.

Tyrone followed Zera's gaze. The moment his eyes met Aella's, he instinctively shoved Zera aside.

"Aella," he said, stepping toward her, reaching out to hold her hand.

Aella took a step back. "Don't touch me. You're filthy."

Tyrone froze. His movements stiffening all at once.

Zera knew Aella had misunderstood about them. She couldn't hide the triumph in her eyes.

Putting on a fake look of embarrassment, she stepped forward and apologized, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Winter. Please don't get the wrong idea. I just tripped. Tyrone was only helping me up."

Aella looked at Tyrone coldly, meeting his deep, conflicted gaze. She questioned, "This is what you meant by a business dinner?"

Tyrone couldn't explain himself.

His mother had forced him to meet with Zera and her son that night.

He'd only lied to Aella about having a business meeting because he didn't want her to worry or overthink things.

But it backfired; Aella caught him red-handed.

When he still didn't answer, Aella asked quietly, "Have I ever stopped you from being with her?"

A strange panic rose in his chest. He took a step closer.

"Don't," Aella warned coldly. "You smell like another woman. I can't stand it."

Tyrone's chest tightened painfully.

Right in front of her, he stripped off his suit jacket and threw it aside.

Chapter 215 Torn Between Love and Lies

Zera froze when she saw what Tyrone did. Jealousy and humiliation burned inside her, but she bit her tongue and said nothing.

Tyrone was already on edge. He stormed toward Aella and grabbed her arm.

“Aella,” he said sharply, “I came to talk to her and solve a problem, not to meet her for a date.”

Before Aella could respond, Tyrone added, “The driver’s in the car. I called her down to talk here, just so you wouldn’t misunderstand. I kept it from you because I didn’t want you to overthink.”

Aella yanked her arm free, stepped back, and pulled out a pack of wet wipes from her bag.

She scrubbed the spot where Tyrone had touched her.

Tyrone’s face turned stormy at her reaction.

Aella threw the used wipe to the ground.

She met his eyes and said coldly, “I don’t believe your words. I believe what I see.”

Aella forced tears into her eyes and spoke in a trembling voice, pretending to be heartbroken. “Tyrone, we’ve known each other since we were kids. Over 20 years. We’ve been married for three. Yet for the woman you love, you keep betraying me and lying to me again and again. What am I to you? What do I mean to you at all?”

Her tears made Tyrone panic.

Tyrone took a cautious step closer. “Aella, it’s not what you think,” he said gently. “Let’s go home. I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

But when he moved toward her, Aella turned and bolted toward the street in tears.

Just then, a flashy sports car rolled to a stop beside her.

Sixer took off his sunglasses and greeted her.

Aella jumped into his car, her face still wet with tears.

“Mr. Locke, please-just drive. Get me out of here.”

Sixer glanced at Tyrone and Zera.

“Aella!” Tyrone shouted, trying to pull her out of the passenger seat.

Sixer put his sunglasses back on and hit the gas. The tires screeched, and the car sped away.

By the time Tyrone regained his balance, the sports car had already vanished down the road.

He started after them, but Zera stepped in his way.

“Tyrone,” she said carefully, “Mrs. Winter and Mr. Locke are close friends. They’ll be fine. Let her cool off for a while.”

Tyrone shook her off, irritated.

“Zera,” he warned sharply, “stop your little games. Don’t ever let this happen again.”

Zera’s eyes filled with tears. “What are you talking about? I accidentally tripped just now. That’s why I accidentally fell into your arms!”

But Tyrone didn't even look at her. His gaze stayed locked on the direction Aella had gone. Zera's voice cracked. "Even if I do have feelings for you, what's wrong with that?"

Tyrone finally turned to look at her. His eyes were cold and dangerous.

Zera swallowed hard but forced herself to speak. "We used to be together. I was your first love. You even told Aella you were going to marry me. It's been six years, but you never loved your wife. When I came back, you were so kind to me. I don't believe you feel nothing at all."

Tyrone let out a cold, mocking laugh.

A chill ran down Zera's spine. Fear crawled up her spine as she stumbled back a few steps.

Tyrone's eyes swept over Zera from head to toe. He said evenly, "We dated before I married Aella. I even thought about marrying you."

Zera's heart jumped at his words. Excitement flashed through her eyes.

"Then if you still have feelings for me," she asked softly, "why are you treating me like this?"

Her voice trembled as she said, "Tyrone, I'm back now. Let's get back together. Let's go back to how things were six years ago, okay?"

But Tyrone's gaze turned cold. Disgust flickered in his eyes.

"Zera," he said, his voice flat and sharp, "six years ago you were pure and untouched, and even then, I didn't sleep with you. What makes you think I'd want you now-after you've been married and had a child?"

His words hit her like a blow.

Zera stumbled back, staring at him in disbelief as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Those sharp words triggered something in her.

Her voice rose into a furious scream. "I ended up like this because of you!"

She shouted through her tears, "If your grandfather hadn't threatened me and forced me out of the country and into that marriage, do you think I would've suffered six long years?"

Sobbing, she complained, "And now you tell me you don't want me because I've been married and had a child? Then what was all my sacrifice for?"

Tyrone's expression didn't change. "I've never forgotten your sacrifices. To make sure your son and you could live without trouble and stop my grandfather from making things harder for you, I told everyone your child is mine. That's the best compensation you'll ever get from me."

Zera's legs gave out. She collapsed under the streetlight, looking up at him through her tears.

"So you really don't love me at all anymore?"

Tyrone's reply was calm but sharp. "I don't have any feelings for you," he said coldly. "And I have no interest in your body, either."

Each word pierced her heart. Zera clutched her chest and cried so hard it tore through the quiet night.

Tyrone looked down at her from above, his tone flat.

"Next week, I'll transfer Orson to a private school. I'll cover the costs. If you need help, contact

my assistant. But don't ever show up in front of me or my wife again."

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Chapter 216 Your Only Way Out

Tyrone looked at Zera and said coldly, "Zera, you couldn't fit into my life six years ago. You definitely can't now. Take Orson and live your life. That's the only way out for you."

When he , he got in his car and drove away.

At the same time, downtown Vleka's night market was buzzing.

Sixer jogged over with a cup of bubble tea and held it out to Aella.

He crouched beside the car door, loyal and concerned, and asked, "Aella, are you okay? Want me to beat him up for you?"

Aella wiped the tears from her face, stuck a straw in the drink, and took a big sip.

"Don't," she said quietly. "I'm fine."

No one knew Tyrone's strength better than she did.

Brad-who'd won both kickboxing and taekwondo championships at an elite MMA club- couldn't even last a round against Tyrone.

Sixer was barely in his twenties, just a kid. No matter how tough he thought he was, he wasn't a match for Tyrone.

"Mr. Locke," Aella said calmly, "please take me to Webster Manor."

Late that night, at Webster Manor.

The butler led Sixer and Aella into the living room.

Aella politely greeted Leland.

Leland glanced at the antique quartz clock on the wall. "Dr. Reid," he said, "what brings you and Mr. Locke to my place at such a late hour?"

Aella spoke directly. "Mr. Webster, I had a fight with my husband tonight. I'd like to stay for a couple of days."

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Tyrone was having an affair. Although their discussions about divorce may not have been public, it was no secret among Vleka's upper circles. She saw no point in pretending.

Leland rejected flatly, "Married couples fight, but they always make up. If you don't want to go home, I can arrange a hotel or a resort for you."

Before he speaking, a familiar voice came from the second floor. "Grandpa, she's my guest. I'll take care of it."

Aella looked up and saw Victor by the railing.

She gave Sixer a look. He understood and left. Aella climbed the stairs, her heels clicking against the marble.

Victor's sharp gaze swept over her tear-stained eyes. "Did he upset you again?" he asked dryly.

Aella squatted beside his wheelchair with a hurtful expression and nodded seriously.

“Victor,” she said, “Tyrone lied to me. He said he had a business dinner, but he was actually with his lover. And I caught them red-handed.”

Victor’s lips twitched into a faint smile.

After spending time with Aella, he’d learned her moods well.

When she treated his injuries, she was the boss.

When they hung out, she called him Mr. Vic.

But whenever she needed something, she suddenly switched to the sweet Victor.

He raised an eyebrow and asked, “So, how long are you planning to hide here?”

Aella thought for a moment. “A week,” she said.

Tyrone had been suspicious for days. He didn’t believe Aella’s claim that she’d been sick with a cold. He thought her nausea might be pregnancy symptoms.

To throw him off, Aella used a little trick and told him she was on her period.

But Tyrone had tested her twice since then. His eyes said it all; he didn’t buy it.

So tonight’s drama was the perfect cover. She could use it as an excuse to hide at Webster Manor for a week and avoid Tyrone’s test.

Victor fell deep in his thought and didn’t give an answer. Aella quickly added, “Victor, if I’m too upset, it might slow down your recovery. If it really bothers you, I’ll just stay five days-only five.”

Victor gave her a sideways glance. "With your fragile nerves, if you were in a business negotiation, you'd lose your whole family fortune in ten minutes."

Aella didn't argue. He was right.

She was usually sharp, but when it came to dealing with people like Brad and Victor, she always seemed stupid compared with them.

She couldn't outplay them at poker or in mind games.

Victor sighed. "As long as I'm here, you can stay here as long as you want."

Aella patted her chest, relieved. "Thank you."

"Need me to send someone to grab your stuff?" Victor asked.

Aella shook her head. "No need, Mr. Vic. I'll handle it myself."

She planned to wait until tomorrow, when Tyrone went to work and the house was empty. Aella would sneak back to pack a few clothes.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. One glance at the screen, and she hung up immediately.

Late night, Bluehaven.

Tyrone came home and found the house empty. Aella was nowhere to be seen.

He called her. She hung up.

Tyrone texted her. She didn't reply.

Frustrated, Tyrone lit a cigarette.

After a few minutes, he headed to the eleventh floor.

Sixer opened the door, wearing a white bathrobe and slippers, his hair still damp from the shower.

Tyrone walked straight in. Not seeing Aella, he demanded, "Where's Aella?"

Sixer said, "She got out halfway."

"Where'd she go?" Tyrone asked.

"How should I know?" Sixer shrugged.

The two men stared at each other for a few tense seconds before Tyrone walked away.

She had cried so hard earlier; she must have been deeply hurt.

He needed to find her and explain himself.

That night, Tyrone searched everywhere-the Reid residence, the Keller residence, the Winter estate, and Raine's apartment.

He looked for her everywhere he could think of, but Aella was gone.

Chapter 217 I Don't Know

It was one in the morning when Tyrone arrived at Webster Manor.

At the front gate, Norman stood behind Victor's wheelchair.

Tyrone stood outside the iron fence.

A locked gate stood between them. They stared at each other for a few seconds in silence.

Tyrone finally asked, "Is she asleep?"

Victor sat in his wheelchair, wearing a deep-V robe with a thin blanket over his legs.

He played idly with the rosary in his hand, nodded once, but said nothing.

Tyrone drew his brows tightly.

He stood there for a long time before he said quietly, "Sorry to bother you."

After that, Tyrone walked back to his car.

Victor lifted his hand, signaling Norman to turn the wheelchair around.

Norman, puzzled, asked, "Mr. Vic, it's late. Mr. Tyrone must've searched for her a while before coming. Why didn't he insist on taking her away?"

Victor let out a cold snort.

Aella hadn't been herself tonight. She had work tomorrow. Tyrone not waking her was the first wise move he'd made in a while.

Around three in the morning, Tyrone stumbled out of his car, drunk and unsteady. He swayed into the elevator just as the doors were closing.

Brad slipped in at the last second.

He was shocked to see his best friend. "Whoa, man. What are you doing coming home this late?"

Tyrone's stomach burned from the alcohol. Leaning against the wall, he glanced at Brad but didn't reply.

When the elevator opened, Tyrone walked out.

Brad hesitated briefly before following him.

They entered the house one after another. Tyrone collapsed onto the couch.

Brad stood in front of him, looking down.

"You know," Brad said, "out of all of us, you're the first to get married, and your kid's the oldest. You should be the happiest one here."

Tyrone kept his eyes closed, his chest rising and falling unevenly. "You already know that kid

isn't mine."

Brad shrugged. "Doesn't matter. If you accept him, then he's yours."

Tyrone stayed silent, the air around him heavy.

Brad sighed. "You couldn't help yourself and hugged Zera on the street tonight, didn't you? Come on, just admit it—you still love her."

With his eyes still shut, Tyrone muttered in a low voice, "I didn't hug her. Aella misunderstood."

Brad sat on the edge of the coffee table, counting on his fingers as he spoke. "Tonight, Aella caught you with Zera, and you said it was a misunderstanding. So when you sneaked out at midnight to pick her up from the airport, was that also a misunderstanding?"

He didn't stop there. "You lied to Aella for a month, didn't go home, and spent every night with Zera, you call that a misunderstanding? You got Zera a luxury house and hired her a driver and maids-another misunderstanding? You accepted her son as your own-still a

misunderstanding? Every time you ran to her, Aella always ended up hurt. Was all that just a misunderstanding too?"

Brad's tone grew heavier. "After stacking up that many so-called misunderstandings, did you ever stop for Aella? Did someone threaten your life to make you do all this?"

He stood, his voice cutting sharp. "This isn't a misunderstanding. It's the choice you wanted to make."

Then he added, quieter but firm, "Whether you admit it or not, you gave up the woman who loved you most for Zera."

Brad looked at him-hollow-eyed, slumped on the couch. He knew Tyrone wouldn't sleep tonight.

"Don't push her anymore," Brad said, heading for the door. "You two grew up together. Don't give her a reason to hate you."

When the door closed, silence filled the house.

Tyrone lay still on the couch, staring blankly at the ceiling. His eyes reddened, his lashes trembling hard as he fought to hold back his tears.

The next morning, outside the hospital's main building.

Aella stepped out of the car. She froze when she saw Tyrone waiting by the curb.

He held a paper bag with breakfast inside. Dressed in a sharp gray suit, he looked every bit the polished businessman-except for the exhaustion shadowing his eyes.

When he walked toward her, Aella stopped.

His eyes were careful, almost pleading.

“I got your favorite pie.”

He handed her the bag.

Aella glanced at Tyrone. She took the breakfast from his hand and tossed it straight into the

trash.

Tyrone's face darkened. He held himself back, saying nothing.

Aella's tone was calm but cold. “Anything else?”

Tyrone checked his watch, trying to stay composed. “Aella, please believe me. I only went to see her to settle some things. I didn't hug her first-”

Aella cut him off before he could finish. Her face was cold. “Tyrone, she already had your son. Do you really think your excuses matter?”

They stared at each other in silence.

Tyrone suddenly felt weak, like something inside him had drained away. Every word he'd prepared vanished from his mind.

"The child was born six years ago," he said slowly. "We weren't married yet. When I married you, I didn't even know he existed. Are you really going to end our marriage over that?"

He wasn't telling the full truth-he couldn't. To calm Aella down and protect the secret of the boy's real background, that was the only explanation he could give.

But Aella didn't soften. Her voice stayed cold and steady. "So the kid came before we married. You didn't know back then. What about now?"

Once Cast-Off Wife, Now Untouchable Queen

Lucia Morh

Lucia Morh is a passionate storyteller who brings emotions to life through her words. When she's not writing, she finds peace nurturing her garden.

Chapter 218 Five Days Apart

Aella looked straight at him. "Ever since Zera came back with the kid, have you two ever stopped stirring drama?"

Her expression was cold, her tone becoming sharper with each word. "We've known each other for over 20 years. Tell me what did I ever do to deserve this torment from you?"

Tyrone shook his head vigorously, his jaw tight as he forced out the words, "I didn't. I never wanted to hurt you."

All he wanted was to hold their marriage together.

Aella's eyes locked on his. Her tone turned even firmer. "The only reason I've tolerated this is because you promised not to interfere with my work. But if I can't even do my job anymore, then I've got nothing left to hold me back."

She pushed him to the side and walked off.

Once she was treating Victor, she planned to make him owe her enough to protect her family in return.

As long as her family was no longer her weak spot, she'd have no fear of going to war with Tyrone—even if it meant destroying both of them.

At 9 a.m., inside the meeting room.

Noel noticed his boss zoning out again. He quickly stepped forward and reminded, "Mr. Winter?"

Tyrone blinked, finally pulling his mind back to the meeting.

Normally, he was strict and focused at work, but today, he'd drifted off several times.

It was the first time the senior staffs had ever seen Tyrone get distracted like this. They looked at one another in silence, wide-eyed and uneasy—no one dared to question him.

Tyrone rubbed his temples wearily. "Mr. Tingey, take over this project," he said, then stood up and left the room.

As soon as the door closed, the meeting room burst into whispers.

A middle-aged manager turned to Noel. "Mr. Frost, what's wrong with him today?"

Noel didn't dare to say a word.

Chapter 219 The Rift

Aella said what she wanted and quickly walked away.

Tyrone caught her wrist.

He hesitated briefly and said, "I'll take you there."

To ease the tension between them, Tyrone personally drove Aella there.

Friday night, Tyrone returned to the estate on his own.

His aunt, Lara Winter, saw him and warmly grabbed his hand. "Tyrone, where's Aella?" she asked.

Before Tyrone could answer, Virginia cut in, "Aella's fighting with Tyrone about divorce. She's not coming."

Tyrone's face darkened at this.

Lara's expression became worried.

Ralph pulled a long face and snapped, "Her elders just came back to the country, and she doesn't even show up? Has she forgotten all her manners?"

Lara quickly stepped in and calmed him down. "Ralph, don't be so harsh on her. We're family- why bother with all those useless rules?"

She turned to Tyrone and said, "Tyrone, I brought Aella some gifts. I'll stop by your place later tonight to speak with her."

Virginia interrupted again before Tyrone could reply. "Don't bother, Lara. Aella and Tyrone are already living apart. Aella's staying at Webster Manor."

Tyrone froze, glaring at his mother.

"Webster Manor?"

Ralph and Edwin's faces instantly changed.

Ralph slammed his teacup to the floor and shattered it into pieces.

He stood, his face dark with anger. "The daughter-in-law of the Winters is moving out to live with her relative." He thundered, "If this gets out, how humiliating will this be?"

Edwin's face hardened as he barked, "Tyrone, go to the manor and bring her here!"

Facing his father and grandfather's fury, Tyrone said, "Grandpa, I was the one who sent Aella there. I'll bring her home in a few days-but not today."

He had promised Aella, and he intended to keep it.

Besides, she was still angry. Even if he went now, she wouldn't return with him.

Edwin raised his cane and struck Tyrone across the shoulder. "You bastard!"

Tyrone winced in pain but didn't dodge.

Lara quickly stepped in to calm everyone down. "If Tyrone and Aella agreed on this, let's not meddle in their married life," she said gently.

"I came home after a long time. Don't start another fight. Let me enjoy a few peaceful days here."

Her words finally made Edwin sigh and back down.

After dinner, Lara took Tyrone for a walk in the garden.

"Tyrone," she said softly, "your parents already told me everything about you and Aella."

She hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Don't be mad at me for saying this, but I think you should divorce Aella."

Tyrone stared at Lara, disbelief written all over his face.

"Aunt Lara, you've always liked Aella. Why would you tell us to get a divorce?"

Lara sighed softly. "It's because I do like her that I'm telling you to get divorced."

She looked him straight in the eye. "You already have a child with that woman. That mess will never end for a lifetime. Aella loves you deeply, but holding on to a marriage this broken-how much more pain do you expect her to take before she finally breaks?"

Tyrone felt a sharp ache in his chest.

He said quietly, "Don't worry. I won't let her suffer anymore."

Lara crossed her arms, her expression firm. "Easy to say. How do you plan to do that? Can you turn back time and erase that child from coming to this world? Or make sure that woman and her kid never return to the country? Or wipe away all the hurt you've caused Aella through the years?"

Tyrone stood frozen, unable to answer. His chest felt heavy, his mind blank.

Lara patted his shoulder and said, "You're the one who betrayed her, Tyrone. You lost the right to refuse divorce. The only mistake Aella ever made was loving you and marrying you. If you still feel any guilt toward her, then let her go."

When Lara left, Tyrone stayed in the garden for a long time, lost in thought.

Yes, he felt guilty. But he couldn't let her go.

His parents had gone through something similar. They stuck it out and made it through together.

Besides, he hadn't actually cheated. That child wasn't even his.

Once he and Aella had a child of their own, she'd come around. She'd stop talking about divorce, and they could start over.

The next morning, Lara went to the hospital to visit Aella.

Aella lit up when she saw her. She gave Lara a warm hug. "Lara, I'm sorry I didn't visit you yesterday."

Lara's heart ached for her. She patted Aella's shoulder gently. "I know everything, sweetheart.

of it." And I don't blame

you for any

Then she smiled and said, "I brought gifts for you, your parents, and your little brother. Take them home when you can. Tell your mom I said hi."

The two chatted for a while before Lara left. Aella walked her out of the hospital. Just as they reached the front doors, she saw Zera walking in, holding her son's hand. She was probably here to pick up medicine.

Chapter 220 The Woman No One Dares to Cross

Six years ago, when Zera was dating Tyrone, she secretly hired someone to dig into his family background.

She already knew who Lara was, but Lara didn't know her.

Zera bent down and whispered something to her son. The little boy ran straight toward Aella and Lara.

He called out, "Hi, Aella!"

Then, smiling sweetly, he added, "Hi, Great Aunt Lara!"

Lara froze for a second. She looked at the boy and shifted toward Aella in confusion.

Aella gave a calm introduction. "Lara, this is Tyrone's son."

Zera quickly stepped forward and greeted, "Nice to meet you, Lara."

But Lara's smile vanished instantly. She understood everything in a heartbeat. "You know me?" she asked.

Zera forced a nervous smile and explained, "I've heard Tyrone mention you a lot. I've seen your photo on his phone. You're easy to recognize with your elegant and distinguished look."

Lara's expression turned solemn. She said, "Ms. Caldwell, it's better not to claim family ties where there aren't any. You may know me, but I certainly don't know you."

She said a few quiet words to Aella and walked away.

Zera's hands clenched at her sides. Embarrassment flushed her cheeks.

She glared at Aella and hissed, "You told her something about me, didn't you?"

Aella just gave her a glance and walked away.

Lara had been a legend among the socialites in her youth.

Years ago, to escape an arranged marriage, she dumped her cheating fiancé and secretly got pregnant by another man.

On the day of her wedding, she showed up holding her baby and exposed her fiancé's affairs. Lara played videos of him making love with other women right there at the ceremony. The wedding turned into a mess.

She called off the marriage on the spot. Her child's father, a powerful man, spent six years winning her favor before she finally agreed to marry him.

After they got married, she gave birth to four children in three years. She had four children in total and had her husband's family completely under her thumb.

A woman that bold and strong wasn't someone you wanted to cross. Anyone who tried to play games in front of Lara only ended up humiliating themselves.

That night, Aella went back to her parents' house.

She brought the gifts Lara had sent for her family and decided to stay the night.

Tyrone, knowing he'd pushed her too far, didn't bother her again.

Five days passed in a flash.

After work, Aella walked out of the hospital and saw Tyrone waiting by her car.

He walked up slowly, trying to read her expression.

"I came here to pick you up," he said.

Aella hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

The five days apart had helped her avoid his tests.

If she could just hold on until the end of the month-get the abortion done-everything would be fine.

They drove home in silence.

The house looked spotless. Every room was perfectly arranged. Roses of all colors filled the dining table, the bar, the living room-even the bathroom counter.

The bedspread was her favorite color. On the nightstand sat a new framed photo of her and Tyrone smiling together.

Aella ignored the little romantic setup Tyrone had prepared and went straight into the bathroom.

She dragged it out as long as she could. After nearly half an hour, she finally came out. Tyrone was on the phone in the bedroom.

The moment he saw her, he quickly ended the call.

Aella noticed the hesitation in his eyes-the guilt, the flicker of uncertainty. She didn't need to

She lowered her eyes to mask her disappointment. Aella sat at her vanity and began applying her skincare.

Tyrone walked up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

Leaning down, he met her eyes through the mirror. "Noel called," he said. "Orson got into a fight at school and hurt another kid. The other family refuses to settle."

Aella didn't respond. "I'll go take care of it," Tyrone added softly. "I'll be back soon."

Aella pumped some essential oil into her palm and rubbed it between her hands. "Is that a notice," she said flatly, "or are you asking for my opinion?"

Tyrone's hands tensed on her shoulders.

He said, "If you don't want me to go, I'll stay."

She gave a dry laugh. "That's your flesh and blood, Tyrone. If I stopped you from going, I'd probably get struck by lightning."

She stood and brushed his hands away, ready for bed.

Tyrone hesitated; he walked up to her and pulled her into his arms.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'll be right back," he murmured.

As soon as he left, Aella locked the bedroom door behind him.

She hoped he wouldn't come back tonight; maybe then she could finally sleep.

The next morning, Aella woke up in Tyrone's arms.

She pondered the whole thing and was confident that she had locked the door last night.

After a moment of silence, she slipped out of bed and got ready for work.

Before eight, she came out readily dressed for work.

Tyrone walked out from the kitchen holding a tray. "I made breakfast for you. Eat first. I'll drive you to work."

Aella frowned instantly.

"Tyrone, the more effort you put into making it, the less I can eat."

His face darkened bit by bit.

"I'm telling the truth; it was Noel who called last night," he said. "He couldn't handle the situation, so 1-"

Aella cut him off sharply. "Whether you went out or not has nothing to do with it. I just don't want to eat anything made by you."