

## Once Cast 241

### Chapter 241 Desperate Pleas

Daphne nodded quickly. "If Tyrone could buy you a house to settle down, he can do the same for us. He's the richest man in Vleka. Just a bit of his pocket money could get us a villa! If he won't pay, we'll show up at his company and make him."

Zera tried to brush her off and said hurriedly, "Daphne, don't you dare go near Tyrone. If you upset him, none of us will live a good life."

She pulled out her phone and transferred money to her family. "Take this for now. Go home before Tyrone sees you. I'll figure out a way to get more money for your house."

After finally convincing them to leave, Zera went back home, too restless to sit still.

She was desperate for money, but Tyrone still hadn't given her any.

If she had known things would turn out this bad, she never would've listened to that old witch about being an independent woman and refusing Tyrone's help.

Now her child's secret was out. Those old farts looked down on her even more.

Tyrone's attitude toward her was unclear, and the 60 million dollars she almost had was gone.

Worst of all, Tyrone still hadn't divorced that bitch.

She called him last night, but he never called back. What was he doing? Why was he ignoring

her?

The more she thought about it, the more panicked she felt.

She couldn't just sit there and wait. Zera decided she had to see him in person.

At 11 in the morning, inside the CEO's office.

Noel knocked on the door and stepped in. He lowered his voice and reported, "Ms. Caldwell is here. She's in the lobby downstairs."

Tyrone was reading some documents. He paused for a second before replying, "Send her up."

Noel nodded and soon brought Zera into the office.

The moment he left, Zera blurted, "Tyrone, can you lend me some money?"

Tyrone gave her a judgmental look. "Running short on cash?"

Zera walked around the desk toward him, her voice trembling, tears building up in her eyes.

"You know what happened. My livestream got shut down, and I lost my job. Your mom tricked me into signing a contract full of traps. Now, she's asking for 30 million in damages. I can't pay her. She even went after my family. They have no one to help them except me."

She took a shaky breath and went on, "I can barely take care of myself right now. How am I supposed to help them or repay your mom? I don't have anyone else to turn to, Tyrone. You're the only one who can help me."

When she , Zera began to cry softly.

Tyrone walked over to the liquor cabinet, his back turned to Zera so she couldn't see the look on his face.

“The company just started a new project,” he said evenly. “Cash flow’s tight right now. I can’t pull out any funds yet. You’ll have to wait.”

Zera tried again. “Could you lend me some money personally, just for now?”

Tyrone didn’t turn around. “After my wife’s abortion, my grandfather froze all my personal accounts. I don’t have any cash on hand.”

Company short on money

?

Personal accounts frozen?

Zera’s tears stopped instantly. Her face turned pale, almost lifeless.

She didn’t believe a word of it.

Tyrone spoke again, calm and distant. “Go home first. When things ease up, I’ll send you the money.”

Zera lingered, unwilling to leave, her eyes flickering with unease.

She tried again, her tone cautious. “Tyrone, Orson’s birthday is coming up next week. It’s the long weekend. Maybe you could take a little time to go somewhere with us?”

Tyrone glanced toward the office door.

Noel, standing outside, caught his boss’s signal and quickly knocked before entering.

“I’ve got something else to handle,” Tyrone said. “We’ll talk later.”

With Noel in the room, Zera couldn't say more. Her face fell as she turned to leave, disappointment written all over her.

When the door shut, Noel turned back and said, "Mr. Winter, the DNA report is here. Ms. Caldwell's child isn't related to her late ex-husband's siblings. That means the boy isn't his. The years of domestic abuse she suffered were probably because of that."

Tyrone's eyes darkened. He commanded, "Keep an eye on her."

It doesn't matter to

me who the child's father is.

But if Zera have anything to do with Ivan's death-

If she crossed the legal line, he would make sure she ended up behind bars himself.

That evening, Aella left the hospital through the staff exit with little Henry by her side. The moment she stepped outside, she saw Tyrone waiting.

His gaze lingered briefly on the boy before he straightened his tie and walked toward her.

"Next week's the holiday weekend," he said. "Got any plans?"

Aella's voice was cold. "Work."

Tyrone paused, watching her detached expression. He stepped a little closer and lowered his voice.

"You've only just recovered," he said softly. "Don't push yourself too hard. I'm free next week. If you want to go somewhere, I'll go with you."

## Chapter 242 Angry Father

Aella's tone cut through the air like ice. "There are plenty of people who want to go places with me, Mr. Winter. You're not even close to the top of that list."

She turned away without another word, walking off with the child.

Tyrone stood frozen, watching her leave. He didn't chase after her. Not this time.

When the holidays arrived, Tyrone returned alone to the family estate.

Virginia had been so furious she refused to see anyone, locking herself in her room for three straight days.

Edwin's health had worsened. The family doctor stayed by his bedside around the clock.

When Tyrone came out of the old man's room, his father was waiting for him in the hall. Ralph's expression was cold enough to chill the air. "You worthless fool," he spat. "You made your grandfather sick over some woman, and you have the nerve to show your face here?"

Tyrone lowered his gaze, silent, and walked away without defending himself.

As he passed the living room, he caught Raine's voice. "You went to Euravia?" she said casually into her phone.

He stopped in his tracks. "Who went to Euravia?" he asked.

Raine blinked and waved the phone in her hand. "Aella did. I just got off the phone with her."

Tyrone frowned, his jaw tightening.

So she had lied about working on the weekend—only to run off to Euravia. To find Sayer.

Aella spent the next two days laughing and running wild with Sayer.

On the third afternoon, they went to the racing club.

Sayer's friends cheered wildly as Aella climbed into a car. She flashed a fearless grin and showed off her drifting skills with absolute confidence.

When the helmet snapped shut around her head, the world fell silent except for her heartbeat.

She loved the rush of power when she took control of the car.

She loved the feeling of speed, the wind against her body, the thrill of every turn.

And when she drifted through the curve, her body sliding to one side, the weightless rush made her forget everything—her stress, her anger, her pain.

The sun dipped low, casting golden light across the track. Aella stood beside her car in a fitted racing suit, her ponytail high, her helmet tucked under one arm. Her smile was fierce and bright.

At that moment, she looked every bit the queen of the raceway.

That night, after a long round of drinks with Sayer's friends at a noisy bar, she returned to the hotel.

As she walked down the quiet hall, she noticed one of the suite doors standing slightly open.

She paused and leaned closer. "Tyrone?" she murmured.

Then she frowned and leaned in again. “Noel?”

Aella had had a bit too much to drink. The alcohol made her head spin. She stepped closer, curiosity winning out, and peeked through the door. Noel was bent over the bed, wrapping Zera in a tablecloth like a blanket. Tyrone stood by the counter, cleaning the glasses. When Noel came back, he picked up Zera’s phone and started tapping at it, trying to unlock it.

The two men whispered to each other, their movements quick and nervous.

Aella crouched low and tiptoed closer, grinning mischievously. Then she suddenly shouted, “Boo!”

The sound crashed through the silence. Tyrone jumped and dropped the glass in his hand. It hit the floor and shattered. Noel froze, the phone slipping from his fingers.

Both men turned around, staring at her in disbelief.

Aella swayed a little, her smile teasing. “What are you two doing here?”

Tyrone’s eyes narrowed as he took in her flushed face. “You didn’t close the door?” he snapped at Noel.

Noel clutched his chest, stammering, “I—I thought I did. I was nervous, 1—

Before he could finish, Tyrone turned—and realized Aella was already gone.

She had walked straight into the bedroom.

“Wait—” he started, but he was too late.

A sharp crack rang out. The sound of a slap echoed through the suite. Aella’s hand had struck

Noel's eyes went wide. Tyrone had spent the entire night helping his boss knock Zera out just to search her phone, and now everything had gone up in smoke with one slap.

His employer was darker than thunder, and Noel didn't realize he was already holding his breath in.

Zera's eyes fluttered open. She blinked in confusion, then froze when she saw Aella standing there.

"You? What are you doing here?"

Aella pointed at Tyrone and Noel. "Wake up, sweetheart. You're being—"

Before she could finish saying "set up," Tyrone grabbed her and lifted her off the ground.

Zera froze, listening to Aella's muffled shouts fade into the hallway. A chill ran through her as realization struck.

She rushed to the table and tore open her bag. Her hidden phone was still there. Relief flooded her chest.

She turned to Noel. "What happened? Why was I asleep?"

Noel hesitated, his throat dry, then forced out a shaky lie. "I'm sorry, Ms. Caldwell. I must've left the door open. You drank too much, and Mr. Winter helped you to bed. Then Mrs. Winter came in and started arguing with him. She didn't mean to hit you. It was an accident."

Zera's face twisted with fury.

So that was what happened. If not for that meddling woman, she and Tyrone would've already been in bed together.

Her hands clenched at her sides. But then she realized something was wrong.

Tyrone had promised to bring her to Euravia for a break, yet somehow Aella had ended up the same hotel.

Of course. He hadn't come for her at all. He had come for Aella.

Zera turned away, her teeth grinding in rage.

At that same moment, inside Aella's suite-

Tyrone lay pinned beneath her. Aella straddled him, tugging at his collar and squeezing his cheeks, laughing under her breath. When she finally stopped, she gave his chest a playful

Her words slurred slightly as she smirked. "If I didn't think you were probably crawling with something. I'd buy you for a night just to see what you've got."

Tyrone's face darkened, his breath heavy. In one motion, he flipped her beneath him and crushed his lips against hers.

He wanted her. He had always wanted her. The hunger had been there all along, sharp and consuming.

The sheets twisted beneath them. Aella tried to push him away, but his kiss only deepened until she could hardly breathe. Finally, he pulled back, chest heaving, his eyes burning with

everything he'd buried for too long.

Tyrone pressed his face against Aella's neck, his breath hot and ragged. "If your body weren't still recovering," he muttered, voice low and rough, "you wouldn't be getting out of bed for three days."

He finally exhaled, long and heavy, before getting off the bed. With quiet care, he removed her jacket, her shoes, and her socks, then pulled the blanket over her shoulders. His movements were gentle, deliberate, almost reverent.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, he stared at her. Her breathing was soft, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks faintly pink from the alcohol still in her system. He couldn't help himself. He leaned down and kissed her once. Then he kissed her again.

After a while, he stood and walked out of the room. When he reached his own suite, Zera was waiting at the door.

She stood there in a sheer silk nightgown, the strap sliding off one shoulder.

Tyrone's brow furrowed at once.

Zera stepped forward, her tone soft and honeyed. "Tyrone," she whispered, her gaze shimmering with false tenderness, "I've been waiting for you. Can I come in for a minute? I just want to talk. Just us."

Her intention was obvious.

Tyrone's voice was cold. "There's an urgent matter back home," he said. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Zera's eyes

flicked upward. That was when she saw them—the faint red marks on his neck. Her breath caught. Her hands balled into fists before she even realized it.

She didn't move. She just stood there, staring blankly as her heart sank,

He came from Aella's room.

The smear of lipstick on his mouth. The scratches on his skin. She didn't need anyone to spell it out. She already knew what he had done with her.

Even though Tyrone's marriage to Aella had been strained for months, there was still something between them. They were still bound by that intimacy.

On the other hand, since she'd returned to the country, Tyrone had never once touched her. No matter how much she hinted, no matter how close she got, he remained cold and unmoved.

In front of her, he was like a man carved from stone. Controlled. Disciplined. Untouchable.

He protected her. He helped her. He even sided with her when others didn't. But that wasn't love. That was pity. That was guilt.

Real love was uncontrollable.

It burned. It devoured. It made you ache to touch, to hold, to claim.

Desire never lied. Not like words.

And now she knew the truth. Tyrone loved Aella.

She had once secretly gone to a psychologist to understand him.

He had grown up under the iron rule of his father and grandfather, caged by expectations and family duty.

His life was built on structure and order. Everything about him was neat, restrained, predictable.

When she entered his life as the woman who saved him, he saw her through the soft light of gratitude.

When he chose to date her, his grandfather stepped in to stop them. Tyrone's rebellion then had looked like passion. It looked like he'd done it for her.

But it wasn't. It was defiance.

It was his way of fighting back against years of control. He was trying to tell his elders that he disapproved of their actions.

She hadn't believed it back then.

Now she did.

She needed to make him leave Aella.

Even if the Winters never accepted her, she would stay by Tyrone's side. Title or not, she would still have wealth, status, and everything that came with his name.

The next morning, a scream tore through Aella's suite. It came from the bathroom.

Aella stood in front of the mirror, staring at the reflection of her own body. Her neck, her shoulders, and her collarbone were all covered in deep red marks.

Chapter 243 Desire

Her eyes went wide. "What kind of lunatic did this?" she gasped, horror spreading across her face.

She shook her head, trying to remember. Nothing came back.

The last thing she recalled was Sayer walking her to the elevator. He had taken a call right before she got in, and she'd waved him off, insisting she could find her own way back.

After that—everything went dark.

Her stomach twisted.

Did I hire a sex worker?

The thought made her break out in a cold sweat. People these days were wild. What if he'd been sick? What if she'd caught something?

She couldn't risk it. She had to leave. She had to get home and run every test possible.

She rushed through her shower, got dressed, and headed down to check out.

At the elevator, she ran straight into Tyrone and Noel.

Tyrone's eyes locked on her neck. His expression hardened. Aella squared her shoulders and glared at him. "What are you staring at? You can cheat and keep a woman on the side, but I can't have some fun too?"

His gaze sharpened, his lips pressing into a thin line.

Noel caught the tension instantly. He stepped into the elevator first, pretending not to see a thing.

Aella strode over, grabbed Noel by the arm, and yanked him back out before stepping inside.

Her

eyes flicked to Tyrone's neck. She noticed the scratch marks and turned away, disgusted.

Noel hesitated. "Mr. Winter, should I—"

Tyrone didn't answer. His hands slid into his pockets as he stood silently, watching the elevator doors close.

That night, at eight, Sayer waited by the hotel entrance to take Aella to the airport.

As they stood by the curb, he clung to her arm like a child. "Aella, please," he said, his voice soft and pleading. "Stay a few more days. Just a couple."

She shook her head firmly. "Your grandfather already said that once your brother's wedding is

do what you want. Stop faking sick, Sayer. Grow up."

He pouted, tugging at her sleeve. "Then at least let me go upstairs and punch him once."

Aella sighed, her tone calm but firm. "Sayer, I'm telling you the truth. Don't get upset. You're no

match for him."

Sayer's face twisted with annoyance. His brows drew together, and his words came out sharp. "We're in Euravia, Aella. This is Locke territory. Maybe I can't beat him one-on-one, but I can sure as hell call my people and have them jump him."

Aella gave him a quick hug. "Forget him. When you're back in Vleka, I'll take you out for barbecue."

Sayer held her tight like a spoiled kid, his voice muffled against her shoulder. "Aella, I want to go with you."

Across the street, inside a sleek black car, Zera spotted them through the window. Her voice was smooth, but her words cut like glass. "Tyrone, why is your wife hugging another man out there?"

She knew exactly who Sayer was, but she pretended she didn't.

Tyrone's eyes darkened. He stared straight at the two figures clinging to each other on the sidewalk.

His voice was calm and controlled. "Stop the car."

The driver eased the car to the curb. Just as Tyrone stepped out, Aella climbed into Sayer's sports car.

Zera's voice sharpened, full of fake innocence. "Tyrone, your wife didn't come to Euravia just to meet Mr. Locke, did she?"

Tyrone looked at her once. His face stayed expressionless. He didn't answer.

When they got back to the hotel, he and Zera went their separate ways.

Inside her room, Zera paced in circles, her heart racing.

Earlier that night, she and Tyrone had attended a high-profile international auction. Tyrone had spent over a hundred million dollars to win a top-grade imperial emerald pendant.

The more she thought about it, the more she convinced herself it was for her son's birthday. He must have remembered. That had to be why he bought it.

But later that night, when Tyrone knocked on Aella's door holding the jewelry box, he learned she had already checked out and flown home,

Chapter 244 Refusal

Tyrone pulled out his phone. "Noel, get the plane ready. We're leaving tonight."

By the time Aella landed back in Vleka, the May holiday still hadn't ended. A light drizzle fell from the gray sky.

The first thing she did was head straight to the hospital for a full checkup.

After work, she spent some time chatting with Daniel in the office. When she stepped outside, the sky had already darkened.

Through the rain, she saw Tyrone walking toward her with an umbrella.

She froze in place. She had just returned the night before. When had he come back?

“The rain’s coming down harder,” Tyrone said softly. “Let me walk you to the parking lot.”

Aella hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

She was still recovering from her abortion. Catching a cold now would be the last thing she needed.

They walked quietly side by side. Tyrone tilted the umbrella toward her, his own shoulder and sleeve quickly soaking through.

When they reached her car, he handed her a small jewelry box. “You took Mr. Fulford’s son as your godson,” he said. “As his godmother, you should give him something special. I bought this pendant in Euravia. It’s perfect for him.”

Aella didn’t take it.

Tyrone opened the box himself. “A pendant like this is almost impossible to find,” he said quietly.

Aella glanced at it. She could tell it was expensive, maybe priceless.

But she still shook her head. “He’s my godson. I’ll buy him a gift myself.”

Tyrone frowned, his voice tightening. "Aella, we're husband and wife. Do you really need to draw such strict lines between us?"

Aella nodded without hesitation. "Of course I do. Otherwise, when we divorce, you'll come after me for every cent."

Tyrone's expression darkened. "Did I ever ask you for anything?"

Aella's eyes flashed. "You didn't ask for money. You sent me to jail instead. You almost got me killed."

Tyrone exhaled sharply, then opened her car door and set the jewelry box inside.

He caught her hand before she could move away. "I sent you there to scare you," he said quietly. "I only wanted to make you stay with me. I never wanted to hurt you."

He looked straight at her. "You're my wife. I'd never truly let you get hurt."

Aella met his gaze head-on. Her voice was low and steady. "You've hurt me enough since Zera and her son came back."

The silence between them grew heavy. The sound of rain filled the space where words couldn't. Pain filled Tyrone's face.

Finally, Aella turned away and climbed into her car.

The window rolled down. She tossed the jewelry box out onto the wet pavement, then started the engine and drove away.

Tyrone stood there watching her taillights disappear into the storm.

He bent down, picked up the box, and held it tightly. The umbrella slipped from his grip, caught by the wind, tumbling down the street.

He didn't move. Rain soaked through his hair and clothes, dripping down his face as he stood there, clutching the pendant.

A few yards away, Zera stood under a tree, her umbrella trembling in her hand. Her eyes burned with jealousy and rage.

So that was it. The pendant wasn't for her son.

Tyrone had bought it for Aella. He had spent all that money just to please that woman.

Her jaw tightened. She bit down hard and turned to leave, her heels splashing through the puddles.

Around eight that night, the doorbell rang at Aella's parents' house.

She was sitting in the living room with her parents and younger brother, chatting while the TV played in the background. The sharp chime made everyone pause.

Aella stood and walked to the door. When she opened it, her face hardened instantly. Zera stood there in the rain, hair damp, eyes blazing with fury. Aella's tone turned cold. "Zera, what

the hell are you doing here?"

Consumed by jealousy and anger, Zera shoved her aside and stormed straight into the living

room.

Chapter 245 Crazy Woman

Zera stumbled into the living room, still off balance. Clyde snatched up a vase, fury blazing across his face. "I swear, I'll kill you!" he shouted.

Zera froze. She hadn't expected Clyde to be home. Her breath caught, and she bolting toward the door.

spun around,

At the entrance, she turned back and shouted, "Aella! I'll be waiting for you downstairs!"

Aella watched as Zera ran into the elevator and vanished behind the closing doors. Then she stepped forward, stopping Clyde before he could give chase.

Clyde's anger hadn't cooled. "That woman's out of control! She barged into our house like it's hers!"

Miriam grabbed the vase from her son's hands. "Don't waste your breath," she snapped. "That kind of woman has no shame. She'll do anything. Ignore her."

Warren sat on the couch, his face dark and tight. He said nothing.

Aella hesitated, then spoke softly. "Dad, Mom, I'll deal with her. I'll be right back."

She went to her room, changed her clothes, grabbed an umbrella, and walked out the door.

Her parents' home was her last refuge.

Her family was the line in the sand.

And she would never let Zera cross it.

A drizzle graced the night.

The streetlights glowed faintly through the mist.

At the edge of the neighborhood, near the hedge, Zera stood in the downpour. Her umbrella was still upstairs, forgotten. Rain clung to her hair and clothes, plastering them to her skin.

When she saw Aella walking toward her, calm and unhurried, the anger boiling inside her snapped loose.

She lunged forward and shouted, "Aella, you miserable woman! You keep saying you want a divorce, yet you dragged Tyrone all the way to Euravia to sleep with you! You claim you want nothing, and now you're even stealing the birthday gift he bought for my son!"

Aella closed her umbrella and set it down beside her.

She stepped forward, grabbed Zera by the hair, and pulled hard.

A sharp sound cracked through the rain.

Then another.

And another.

And another.

Aella's hand struck fast, each slap louder than the last.

Zera staggered backward, helpless against the blows.

Blood trickled from her nose and lips.

One final strike sent her crashing into a muddy puddle, water splashing high around her.

Aella lifted her hand, shaking off the sting, then stopped.

She bent to pick up her umbrella and looked down at Zera from above.

Her voice was ice-cold. "If you ever show up here again to bother my family, I'll slap you every time I see you."

Zera struggled to her feet. Her high heels sank into the mud, her movements clumsy and slow.

Her eyes burned with hatred.

"Aella," she hissed, "I can't stand that fake, self-righteous face of yours.

"You blacklisted me in the hospital system so I can't book appointments with you. You're jealous because you lost your baby. You hate me because Tyrone cares about my son. You're bitter, and you're taking it out on me! You're dragging this divorce out!

"Tyrone has always known my son isn't his, yet he still protects us. He chose me. He chose my child. He chose to hurt you! And even now, you still won't divorce him?"

Aella stood quietly, her gaze calm.

She said evenly, "Zera, it's true you had a part in what happened between Tyrone and me. But no matter what went wrong between us, I never targeted you."

Pain and betrayal didn't excuse his actions.

Every scar came from Tyrone alone.

It was his choice. No one else's.

Her words stayed sharp. "Zera, as a woman, I'll give you one piece of advice. Don't pin your future on a man. Marriage isn't a woman's salvation. You're better off relying on yourself."

Zera laughed, her voice trembling with disbelief. "You're ridiculous, Aella. When your family went bankrupt, if Tyrone hadn't married you, do you really think you'd be standing here right now?"

Aella didn't respond.

For a moment, she thought of her past self—the girl who believed Tyrone was her savior, the one she could depend on forever.

Thank God she had woken up.

Zera pointed at her, her words laced with venom. "Stop pretending you're some saint. You can't let go of him. You're clinging to your place in the Winter family. You love the power. You love the name."

Rain poured harder. Zera's eyes reddened, her voice cracking. "If you really wanted to end things, you'd have left the country for good! But you didn't. You're just keeping him close, waiting for him to regret it and crawl back to you!"

Aella stood under her umbrella, silent and steady.

When Zera finally ran out of rage, Aella spoke, her tone calm and measured. "I grew up in Vleka. My family's here. My friends are here. My career is here. I still go to the breakfast place I loved as a kid. I still eat at the old barbecue shop. This city carries over 20 years of my life. It's my home."

Her eyes were clear and unwavering. "Why would I give that up for a man who betrayed me? Why would I throw away everything I've built because of him?"

Zera's voice quivered. "Aella, you studied psychology. You know that when a woman truly wants to leave, she walks away. She gives everything up. If you really wanted to go, you would've gone."

Aella smiled faintly. "I'm not like other women."

Her gaze locked on Zera. "Leaving everything behind because of a man isn't strength. It's an excuse. It's running away and punishing yourself for his mistake."

#### Chapter 246 Retort

She looked at the soaked and broken Zera before her. Her eyes were calm. She turned away without hesitation.

Where you fall, you stand back up.

She would live bright. She would live free.

Even if the people who hurt her stood within reach, she would never let them near her again.

Across the street, a black car sat in the rain. The tinted window slid down slowly.

Tyrone's gaze followed Aella's figure until it disappeared into the dark.

Brad, sitting beside him, pointed at Zera, who was kneeling in the rain. "I know you feel bad for her," he said. "Aella's gone. You might as well get out and comfort your poor girl."

Tyrone lit a cigarette, his tone flat. "You don't have to be sarcastic. I kept Zera for a reason."

Brad tilted his head, studying him. "You've changed. I didn't expect you to think that far ahead."

Tyrone held the cigarette between his fingers, watching Zera through the smoke and rain.

"Aella and I are living apart," he said quietly. "Don't stir things up."

Brad smirked. "If Zera causes real trouble, will you turn her in yourself?"

Tyrone turned his head.

"The law draws a line. Nobody crosses it. Not her. Not anyone."

Brad chuckled. "You can talk about justice all you want, but it won't change the truth. The day Aella ended that pregnancy behind your back, she cut you out of her heart."

Tyrone's eyes dimmed. Pain flickered deep inside them.

"People make mistakes," he said softly. "We're still young. I believe Aella and I will make it right."

Brad pressed his lips together, unsure what to say.

Across the street, Zera climbed into a taxi, phone pressed to her ear. Brad pointed. "Where's she heading this late?"

Tyrone dropped his half-burned cigarette and stepped on it. "We'll follow her."

They trailed her through the empty streets, from the station to the apartment Tyrone had once arranged for her.

Zera got out of the car with a man beside her. They hurried through the gate together. Brad leaned back, whistling. "Your lover's bringing another man home. You're not going up to see for yourself?"

Tyrone shot him a cold glance and called Noel. "Pull the footage," he said.

Brad gave a lazy shrug and followed him back to the complex.

When the elevator doors opened on the ninth floor, they saw Raine leaning on the doorway, her eyes half-closed, her body swaying. The men exchanged a look.

Tyrone reached forward to catch her. "Why are you standing here in the middle of the night?"

Raine lifted her head. Brad noticed the red mark across her cheek right away. "Who did that?" he asked sharply. "Tell me, and I'll take care of it."

Raine whispered, "My dad."

Brad's hands relaxed. "Forget I said anything."

Tyrone opened the door, and the three of them went inside.

Raine spoke as soon as they entered. "Mom and Dad fought again. Dad smashed one of Mom's wedding bracelets. She was so upset that she didn't eat all day. I stood up for her, and he slapped me."

Brad fetched an ice pack and handed it to her. "Next time they fight, stay out of the way," he said.

Then he turned to Tyrone. "Your sister got slapped, and you're just sitting there? Say something!"

Tyrone looked up. "And what do you want me to do? Go home and hit him back?"

Brad folded his arms. "If you can do it, I won't stop you."

Tyrone's tone went dry. "Why don't you go then?"

Brad let out a sigh and pulled Raine to her feet. "Come on. Let's go. He's useless."

When they left, silence filled the apartment.

Tyrone sat still for a long time. Then he reached into his pocket and took out a crystal pendant. He held it in his palm, staring at the faint glimmer it caught from the city lights.

The next day came, but the rain still hadn't stopped.

Tyrone knocked on the door of Aella's office and stepped inside.

She was resting, a thin blanket over her legs. He set a lunch box on her desk.

Aella sat up and looked at him. "What do you want?"

Tyrone crouched in front of her.

"Aella," he said quietly, "my mother's sick. Will you come home with me to see her?"

Aella hesitated for a moment, then nodded.

The tension in Tyrone's face eased. "I'll pick you up after work," he said.

Aella shook her head. "You go first. I'll come by myself."

His eyes lingered on her face.

He stayed quiet for a while before saying, "Then get some rest. I'll wait for you at the Winter Estate."

He straightened the blanket on her knees, his movements slow and gentle, then stood and left.

That evening, Tyrone returned to the Winter Estate.

He told the chefs to prepare all of Aella's favorite dishes, then paced in front of the tall window, watching the rain hit the glass.

When the butler saw Aella's car entering the gate, Tyrone took an umbrella and went out to meet her. The old butler watched him walk into the storm and let out a long, quiet sigh.

#### Chapter 247 Winter Estate

Tyrone held the umbrella high as he led Aella into the grand but cold living room.

The moment Ralph saw her, his face twisted with rage. His voice exploded across the room. "You ungrateful child! You made my father so furious he almost collapsed, and you still have the nerve to come back here?"

Aella didn't flinch. Her tone was calm but cutting. "That's not my fault. If anything, it's his. I mean, not everyone can raise a grandson as fine as Tyrone."

The words hit Ralph like a slap. His face turned dark red, his chest heaving with anger.

Tyrone immediately stepped in, placing himself between them. He guided Aella toward Virginia's room, keeping a steady grip on her arm.

Virginia sat on the couch, her face pale and weary. When she saw Aella enter, she forced herself to sit straighter, trying to pull together what little energy she had left.

Aella looked at Tyrone. "Leave us," she said.

Tyrone pointed to himself, confused. "Me?"

Virginia's eyes narrowed. "You heard her. Out."

Tyrone's jaw tightened, but he turned around and left, his face unreadable.

He had barely taken two steps when Aella's voice came from behind the closed door.

"Virginia, let's get a double divorce."

Tyrone froze. He spun around instantly, stunned by what he heard.

Before he could take a single step back, the door slammed shut.

More than 30 minutes passed before the door opened again. Aella and Virginia stepped out. Both looked calm, their faces unreadable. Tyrone studied them, searching for any hint of emotion.

Virginia spoke softly. "I know you're not staying for dinner. Go home, get some rest, and take care of yourself."

Tyrone nodded, saying nothing. He held the umbrella over Aella as he walked her out. "The rain's coming down harder," he said quietly. "I'll drive you home."

Aella didn't respond. She headed toward her car without a word. Tyrone followed her, still

When she reached for the door handle, he caught her wrist.

“Aella,” he said, his voice low, “we need to talk.”

She stopped and looked at him. “Sure. We can do it right here.”

The two faced each other in the rain. Tyrone frowned, frustration flickering in his eyes.

“What kind of daughter-in-law tells her mother-in-law to get divorced?” he said. “Do you even hear how that sounds?”

Aella’s eyes flashed cold. “Your father treats your mother like trash,” she said sharply. “So what if I told her to leave him? It’s not like I told her to cheat on him.”

Tyrone’s tone hardened. “They’ve been fighting their whole lives. That’s just how they are. They’ll never divorce.”

Aella shoved him back, her voice rising, her face stern.

“Tyrone, you know exactly why she stayed. When she was younger, she stayed for you and Raine. She endured everything your father and grandfather did to her just to keep a home for you two.”

Her voice continued. “Now you’re both adults. Even Raine can see how much your mom suffers, and she stands up for her. You’re her son. What have you ever done for her? You don’t get to lecture me about what’s right or wrong.”

Tyrone saw her anger and tried to calm her. “Alright. Don’t get worked up. Let’s drop it.”

Aella took a breath and looked away. The rage inside her began to fade, leaving behind only exhaustion.

She knew it was useless. Tyrone had grown up in a house ruled by Edwin’s control and endless shouting. He had learned to survive through silence. That silence had shaped him.

It was in his blood. It was the way he coped.

And it followed him into their marriage. Every time they fought, he stayed quiet. He shut down. He walked away.

That kind of numbness couldn't be changed.

Her

anger couldn't do anything.

Tyrone cleared his throat. "I haven't been sleeping well," he said softly. "Do you still have the

medicine you made for me?"

Aella glanced at him. His eyes were tired, shadowed.

She hesitated. "If you're not feeling well, go to the hospital," she said. "See a doctor."

She opened her car door, but Tyrone grabbed her wrist again. "Sayer gets sick in the middle of the night, and you take him medicine," he said bitterly. "But I've been your husband for three years, and I don't deserve the same?"

Aella's face turned cold. "You're right," she said. "You don't."

She pulled her hand away, got into the car, and started the engine. The car rolled forward, leaving him standing in the rain.

Virginia stood by the doorway, watching Aella's car disappear through the gates. Then she turned her gaze toward her son, standing motionless in the downpour, soaked through, staring at nothing.

Her heart sank. If only he had understood sooner.

"Call him inside," she said softly to the butler. "I need to talk to him."

The tea room's air smelled faintly of jasmine. Virginia poured tea into a delicate cup and pushed it toward Tyrone.

cup

and

He set his phone down on the table. "Mom," he said, "don't take what Aella said too seriously."

Virginia shook her head slowly. There was disappointment in her voice. "Tyrone, you know this family better than anyone. The Winters look perfect from the outside, but the truth is, it only holds together because I've been holding it.

"People are replaceable. Just because someone leaves you doesn't mean you'll die. Don't ever forget that. Even me. I'm your mother, but don't take my sacrifices as something you're entitled

to."

Tyrone's eyes flickered with guilt.

He pressed his lips together, trying to smile. "So you really did take Aella's words to heart."

Virginia paused for a moment. Then she nodded. "I did. And you should take mine to heart,

too.

“You have everything, Tyrone. You’re handsome. You’re intelligent. You’re successful. You’re polite to strangers and loyal to Zera. You think of yourself as decent. But have you ever stopped

...

“You’ve drained the love right out of Aella. You’ve given her something far worse than divorce. You’ve made her live every day in quiet pain and hopelessness.”

#### Chapter 248 A Mother’s Words

“Aella loved you. That’s why you were always the one in control. You silenced her, pushed her down, and left her too scared to even keep her own child.

“You always had the upper hand. You made every decision alone. Even taking in that kid who isn’t yours, you didn’t talk to her about it. You just did it, thinking she’d accept it. You think you control everything, even her.

“Tyrone, from the very beginning, what you had with Aella was never equal. No matter how long you hold on, you’ll never build a real marriage like that.

“Listen to me. Divorce her. Make it right. Give her what she deserves.

“If you manage to win her back, that’s your blessing. If not, that’s your payback.”

...

Her words cut deep, replaying over and over like a wound that wouldn’t close.

Tyrone drove through the night, his mind heavy with her voice.

He would make it up to Aella. He owed her that much. But he wouldn't let her go. Not ever.

A few nights later, Brad came back into town and gathered everyone for drinks.

In the hallway outside the restroom, Tyrone stopped Aella.

"Zera said she can't get an appointment with you," he said.

Aella looked calm. "She's not someone I trust. I won't treat her. I'm not giving her a chance to twist things around."

Tyrone said nothing. Aella tilted her head. "If you feel sorry for her, I'll help. But there's a condition."

Tyrone's jaw tightened. "Say it."

Aella's tone was steady. "You divorce me. You give me that, and I'll cure her."

Tyrone's face went cold. "Forget it."

He stormed off a few steps, then turned around again.

He met her eyes. "Aella, what if I told you there's a reason I kept Zera around? Would you believe me?"

Aella let out a short, sharp laugh. "I'd sooner believe that there are such things as ghosts."

They stared at each other, neither moving. Tyrone's hands clenched at his sides. He turned away again.

But after two steps, he came back.

He pulled a small box from his pocket and shoved it into her hand. "That pendant I got in Euravia. Take it. If you don't want it, throw it out."

He didn't wait for an answer. He just walked away.

Aella stood there, her fingers pressing against the box. Her nails tapped the edge again and again.

Then she took out her phone, sent Brad a message, and dropped the pendant into the trash before leaving.

Later, Brad came down the hall, saw the box, and picked it up.

That night, back in the private parlor, Aella smiled across the table at Brad. "I'm moving this weekend," she said. "You and Raine should come by. We'll open a bottle."

Brad grinned. "Make it poker night. I'll bring a few friends."

Poker. The word made Aella think of Victor.

The next afternoon, in the garden at Webster Manor, Aella stood by Victor's side.

He gripped the handles of his chair and slowly pushed himself to his feet. His arms trembled. She clapped quietly, her eyes full of encouragement.

Two rounds of therapy had worked wonders. He could now stand for over a minute. It wasn't long, but it was enough to make her proud.

His temper had softened, too.

When he sat back down, she said with a smile, "Mr. Vic, I'm moving next week. Come play poker."

Victor glanced at her with a smirk. "Still bad at it. Still thinks it's fun, though."

Aella rubbed her palms together awkwardly, chuckling under her breath.

By the weekend, she had everything ready. She knew how picky her guests could be, so she hired a private chef to handle the dinner.

Brad and Raine came early to help. Aella was arranging fruits in the living room when Mason arrived, his little boy's hand in his.

The boy spotted her and broke free, running straight into her arms. "Mom!" he shouted.

The room fell silent.

Brad and Raine froze.

Clyde's eyes went wide. The apple in his hand slipped and hit the floor. "Where'd that come from? I had no idea you had a kid, Aella!"

Aella's parents were stunned. Their daughter had just lost a baby.

She wasn't divorced yet. And now, there was a child calling her "Mom"?

Mason saw the confusion and quickly straightened his jacket. "I'm sorry, sir, ma'am. My son calls Dr. Reid his godmother."

"Oh."

Everyone exhaled in relief at once.

Mason crouched beside his son. “Henry, say hello to your grandparents.”

The boy nodded politely.

“Hello, Grandma. Hello, Grandpa.”

Mason whispered another name, and Henry continued. “Hello, Uncle.

“Hi, mister. Hi, lady.”

Aella watched him in surprise. “Mr. Fulford, I can’t believe this. Henry’s actually talking to strangers.”

Mason smiled, warmth in his eyes. “It’s all thanks to you, Dr. Reid. He’s come a long way.”

Raine leaned in and pinched Henry’s cheek. “He’s adorable. And his dad’s way too good- looking. Talk about perfect genes.”

Laughter filled the air—until the front door opened again. Victor entered.

Even sitting in his wheelchair, the crisp white shirt clung to him, outlining the sharp strength that never left his posture.

Aella’s parents exchanged a glance.

They looked between Mason and Victor—both handsome, composed, and radiating quiet This text is hosted at

power.

The couple slipped into the kitchen, whispering in low voices for a long time before finally coming out again.

ne were filled. Aella's parents sat side by side, with Clyde next to them. Brad and Raine were there too, along with Mason and his son Henry, and finally Victor, seated at the far end.

With Brad around, silence never stood a chance. His easy charm carried the conversation, turning strangers into friends within minutes.

Clyde chuckled as he looked around the table. "Perfect dinner. Just one person missing."

Aella reached for her phone and opened a video call.

When Sayer appeared on-screen and saw the lively table, his eyes without me? I hope you all regret it tomorrow!"

widened. "You guys

started

Aella laughed and set the phone on its stand. "We'll eat. You can talk."

The meal carried on in good spirits, glasses clinking and laughter spilling across the table.

Then Sayer spoke again. His tone shifted, sharp and blunt. "Aella, Tyrone's already on a honeymoon with that woman. You still haven't divorced him? What, planning to keep him around for the holidays?"

The table went quiet.

Aella froze, her hand hovering above her plate. Her parents' smiles faded.

Everyone else went still.

Aella slowly put her fork down. "It's not me holding on. Tyrone refuses to let go."

No one spoke. Even Sayer on the screen went silent.

The air grew heavy with awkwardness.

Aella forced herself to smile. "Whoever helps me finalize the divorce gets the main seat at the celebration dinner."

No one laughed. The joke landed flat, swallowed by the quiet.

Her parents exchanged glances full of helpless worry.

Clyde's jaw tensed. His eyes burned with anger. If Tyrone had been there, he might've swung at him.

Chapter 249 Gathering

Raine, caught between blood and loyalty, stayed silent, her head low.

Mason calmly helped Henry eat, his expression unreadable.

Victor swirled the wine in his glass, his eyes thoughtful as they flicked toward Mason for a

moment.

Brad finally sighed, grabbed the phone, and hung up on Sayer. "You always pick the worst moments, man."

The tension broke just enough for everyone to breathe again.

Aella gestured for Clyde to refill the glasses. Her tone was light.

She didn't hide her truth. Everyone at that table already knew.

Dinner carried on, followed by several hands of poker.

By the time the butler from Webster Manor came to collect Victor, the night had mellowed.

Aella escorted everyone to the door. Henry clung to her leg, his small arms wrapped tight around her.

Mason picked him up gently. "Dr. Reid, I'm heading out of town next week. Can I ask you to look after Henry for a couple of days?"

Aella nodded with a warm smile. "Of course. Don't worry about a thing."

Victor gave her a side glance, one that clearly said she was out of her mind.

gotten mixed

...

Raine, watching from behind, sighed quietly. "If my brother hadn't

if Aella hadn't lost that baby ... things would've turned out so differently."

up

with Zera

Brad nudged her elbow. "Stop daydreaming."

Raine frowned. "Brad, you knew Zera's kid wasn't my brother's. Why didn't you say something earlier?"

Brad stood beside the car, his light suit catching the glow of the streetlights. Raine's bright pink purse hung carelessly over his shoulder.

He said, "When your brother lied about picking up Zera from the airport and stayed gone for a month, it was already too late. His heart had left Aella.

"She, however, still clung on to a last sliver of hope. If Aella knew that the child wasn't his, she would've still believed in him. She was in a disadvantaged state. She would've kept hoping. She would've kept getting hurt if that relationship were to keep spiraling down between the three of

Raine exhaled slowly. "Marriage sounds awful. Dating's better. If one doesn't work, you find another."

Brad stared at her. Then he reached out, pinched the back of her neck, and pushed her toward the car. "Get in."

After everyone left, Aella stayed behind to help her parents and brother clean up.

When the dishes were done, Miriam pulled Aella down beside her. "Honey, I know Brad and Raine are like family, so I'm not worried about them. But those two guests today—their gifts were too expensive. How do you plan to return them?"

Clyde waved a hand. "Don't worry, Mom. Aella only hangs around good people. They're generous, not shady."

Warren's voice grew firm. "Generous or not, there's a line you don't cross. Know the difference between gratitude and debt."

Aella smiled softly. "Dad, Mom, don't worry. Mr. Vic and Mr. Fulford might have money, but they're human. They have their flaws.

power

and

"They're my friends because I bring something to the table, too. They're successful, but I'm not weak."

She understood it now. Adulthood was about balance and exchange.

If her marriage ended, if she no longer fit Tyrone's world, she would build her own.

She would rise higher in her career. She would create a circle that matched her worth.

At nine that night, Brad and Raine crossed paths with Tyrone at the entrance of Aella's neighborhood.

Chapter 250 The Last to Know

Brad deliberately asked Tyrone, "Your father-in-law's moving today. How come you're not helping out?"

Tyrone's face slowly turned cold. "Moving?"

Raine carefully added, "Brad and I just came from Aella's new place. Mr. Vic and Mr. Fulford were there too."

Tyrone glanced between Brad and Raine for a few seconds, then turned around and got in his car.

He drove straight to the neighborhood where Aella's parents used to live.

When he opened the door and walked in, the big house was spotless—every piece of furniture was covered with dust sheets.

The place was so clean it didn't even look like anyone had lived there.

Aella had quietly moved out of the property he owned with her parents without saying a word to him.

Standing in the middle of the living room, Tyrone closed his eyes, exhausted.

Back then, even when Aella wanted to buy a tea set, she'd ask for his opinion and what he liked.

But now...

She'd moved out with her parents and hadn't said a word about it.

He only found out from someone else and he was the last to know.

Tyrone felt terrible.

Late that night, using the address Noel had sent him, he drove to Aella's new place.

He rolled down the car window but didn't get out.

The house wasn't a standalone villa, but at least it was on the corner.

The yard was neat, flowers blooming.

Tyrone lit a cigarette.

The next morning, as soon as Aella arrived at the hospital, Elvira reminded her that Tyrone was waiting in her office.

When Aella walked in, Tyrone was standing by the window, talking on the phone.

Dressed in a sharp black suit, he looked so serious that her office suddenly felt too small for him.

Tyrone turned around, and their eyes met.

Aella glanced at the breakfast on her desk and asked, "What are you doing here so early?"

Tyrone ended his call and walked over to her.

"Why didn't you tell me you were moving?" he asked.

Aella's expression stayed calm. "It's my business. Why should I tell you?"

"We're married," Tyrone reminded her.

She corrected him, "But we're living apart now. I want a divorce!"

The room went silent. The air between them felt tense.

After a while, Tyrone spoke again, his voice softer this time. "Aella, I didn't come here to fight."

Before leaving, he said quietly, "Even if we're separated, we're still married."

At 10 a.m., Winter Group CEO Office.

Noel knocked and stepped in. "Mr. Winter, we checked both of Ms. Caldwell's phones and didn't find any suspicious contacts."

Tyrone frustratingly unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down. "Speed it up."

Noel continued, "We also identified the guy she met. He was her top supporter back when she was a streamer. He tipped her a total of over four million in her livestreams. He promised Ms. Caldwell a 30-million-dollar wedding gift, said he'd take her overseas to get married and settle down, and wanted her to have his son."

Tyrone shot Noel a look that said, "She can't go anywhere until the truth comes out."

Zera waited for two days.

The news she got was bad—her top supporter not only canceled the 30-million wedding gift promise but also demanded she pay back the four million he'd tipped her.

Out of options, Zera went to see her mother, Shirley.

They met in a quiet corner of the park. Zera wore a mask and sunglasses.

Shirley quickly asked, "Didn't you say that guy agreed to give you 30 million? Why'd he back out?"

Zera was pacing frantically, totally stressed. "How should I know? The second I called, he started asking me for money! What was I supposed to do?"

Shirley tried to calm her down. "You have to find a way to get money from Tyrone. He's the son of Vleka's richest man. He's got money, that's for sure."

Zera lowered her mask, letting Shirley see her bruised face.

"Mom, look! Tyrone's wife hit me! That bitch refuses to divorce him!" she said through gritted teeth.

"Tyrone gave me a place to live and pays Orson's tuition, but that's it. He doesn't give me a cent. I even mentioned wanting to buy a bag, and he just ignored me. I think he's--"

Zera looked at Shirley, and the rest of the sentence got stuck.

Shirley took Zera's hand and said, "It wasn't easy raising you and your brother. Your brother is a lost cause, so our family is counting on you.

"I know you feel wronged, but your sister-in-law's been fighting with your brother every day and talking about divorce. Your two nephews are still so young. Do you really want to see that family fall apart?"

"I believe you can make big money, Zera. When your nephews grow up, I'll make sure they take good care of you. For now, just think of a way to help your brother and his wife buy a house and settle down."