

Once Cast 281

Chapter 281 Not Hers to Choose

She covered her face and leaned into him, sobbing, “Brad, my dad slapped me twice.”

Brad pulled her close and gently patted her shoulder, whispering under his breath, “Hey, no more tears. When your dad gets old, give him ice cream in the winter and wool sweaters in the summer.”

Tyrone caught Brad’s muttered sarcasm and shot him a sideways glance.

Ralph’s temper had always been volatile.

He pointed at Raine and barked, “She’s 24! What’s wrong with us picking a good match for her? Look at her behavior!”

Brad forced a smile and said, “Mr. Ralph, daughters take after their fathers. With your good taste, I’m sure if you let Raine pick for herself, she wouldn’t choose badly.”

Ralph let out a furious huff. “It’s that damn Aella! She ruined her and filled her head with nonsense!”

Tyrone’s brows knit together. “Dad, can you please stick to the issue and leave other people out of it

?”

Virginia jumped in, “With the Winters’ status and power now, Raine doesn’t need to marry for business. She’s my daughter, and her marriage isn’t something you get to control like that!”

Ralph exploded again on the spot.

He jabbed a finger at Virginia. “This is your fault! You’re the one who insisted Tyrone should choose his own partner back then, and look how that turned out—he married some washed-up socialite who brought nothing to the family and only dragged Tyrone down at every turn!”

He snapped, "You stay out of Raine's marriage. That's final!"

Seeing the situation deteriorating fast, Brad quietly grabbed Raine's purse and phone off the couch. Then, smooth as ever, he slipped out of the house with Raine before anyone noticed.

After they were gone, Tyrone stepped in front of Ralph and Virginia.

His voice was low but firm. "Dad, don't speak to Mom like that."

Ralph hadn't expected Tyrone to speak to him like that.

He went on, "If she hadn't interfered back then, you would've already married into one of the Eight Great Families. You'd probably have a few kids by now! Would things have ever fallen apart like this?"

Tyrone's expression darkened.

He held himself back for a long moment before finally saying, "Dad, I married Aella because I insisted. No one forced me, and it had nothing to do with anyone else. Whatever happened between us, that's on me."

He added, "You weren't the only one who raised me and Raine. Mom has every right to have a say in who we marry."

Virginia hadn't expected Tyrone to ever take her side.

Tears welled in her eyes as she gently pulled Tyrone a few steps back with her.

She said, "Tyrone, since the three of you are all here, I'm going to be clear about one thing. Your sister's marriage will be her choice. None of you are allowed to force her."

Ralph was so furious he could barely breathe.

He pointed at Virginia and shouted, "What do you know? You're just a woman!"

Still fuming, he said, "As long as I'm alive, Raine will marry up. I won't let her throw herself away on some nobody. By the end of this year, she's choosing a husband from the Eight Great Families. End of discussion!"

Virginia had had enough. She turned to leave. "Justin! Pack my bags!"

Her daughter wasn't going to marry

down.

But more importantly, her daughter had the right to choose for herself.

Seeing her storm off, Ralph stepped forward, following behind. "What the hell are you doing? You can talk, why are you packing your bags?"

Ralph tried to grab Virginia's arm, but she shoved him off in disgust. "If I can't even make decisions about my own daughter's life, then why should I stay here at all?"

Furious, Virginia blurted out, "Divorce!"

Ralph panicked and stepped in front of her, blocking her path. "Come on, we've been married most of our lives, what the hell are you doing now?"

Tyrone watched his mother throw out the word divorce without hesitation and saw his father chasing after her out of the living room. He sat down, exhausted.

Edwin, who'd stayed quiet all this time, finally spoke.

“Tyrone, marrying the wrong woman can ruin three generations. Your mother and sister are the way they are because of that Aella woman’s influence.”

Tyrone frowned. “Grandpa, you’re trying to force Raine into a business marriage. Of course Mom and Raine are going to push back. What does that have to do with my wife?”

He and Edwin locked eyes. Frustrated, Tyrone stood up and walked off.

Later that evening, Tyrone returned to his house in Bluehaven. A few minutes later, Brad knocked and came in right behind him.

Tyrone tossed his suit jacket onto the couch, clearly drained. “Where’s Raine?”

Brad replied, “She went to see Aella.”

Tyrone paused, hand frozen mid-motion.

Brad flopped down next to him, rubbing his arm. “I swear, you Winters men are cursed. Why do you always have to push so hard on marriage stuff? I had to calm her down for hours, and my arm’s practically bruised from where she was squeezing it.”

Tyrone stayed quiet for a moment, then stood up.

Brad grabbed his wrist. “Oh, now you’ve finally got an excuse to show up at the Reid Residence, huh?”

He added, “Don’t get too excited, she’s still not gonna let you in.”

At the same time, over at the Reid Residence, Raine was curled up on the couch in Aella’s bedroom, her eyes red and puffy.

She said, "Aella, what if my grandpa and dad really do sell me off?"

Aella tried her best to comfort her. "Raine, the Winters are at the top of Vleka's elite. If you're going to get married, it makes sense they'd want someone with the right background."

Raine's whole face fell. "Aella, that's the problem, I haven't even met anyone I actually like. The guys Grandpa picked? I don't even know them. How could I possibly say yes?"

Aella carefully watched her reaction, then asked gently, testing the waters, "The Kellers are one of the Eight Great Families too. You and Brad grew up together, so you do know him. What do you think about Brad?"

At the mention of Brad, Raine completely deflated.

She held both hands out in front of her and said, "Aella, I'm closer to Brad than I am to my own brother. If I held hands with him, it'd feel like my left hand holding my right. He's been carrying me around since we were kids, I've never once thought about being with him like that."

Aella wasn't sure what to say.

Just then, her phone buzzed with a WhatsApp message from Tyrone. She glanced at it and then slipped the phone back into her pocket.

She looked at Raine and said, "Your brother's outside. He came to pick you up. Do you want to

go

with him?"

Raine hesitated, looking a little nervous, then slowly got up from the couch.

Aella grabbed her coat and walked Raine to the door.

Tyrone gave Raine a look. "Go wait in the car. I need to talk to Aella for a second."

Raine nodded and quietly got into the car.

Tyrone walked up to Aella and handed her a sealed envelope filled with cash.

He said, "Jeremy's wedding is the day after tomorrow. I won't be able to make it, can you give

him this for me?"

Aella hesitated and didn't take it. "If you're not going, just wire it to him."

Chapter 282 A Gift to Remember

Tyrone stared intently at Aella, his gaze heavy, his voice low and filled with something hard to

define.

He said, "Aella, do you really have to treat me like I'm a stranger?"

Just then, the front door opened and Miriam stepped out. "Aella, time to come in."

Aella turned and responded, "Coming."

Tyrone couldn't help himself, he reached out and gently grabbed her arm.

Aella hesitated for a second, then took the envelope from his hand. "I'll give it to him for you," she said.

With that, she turned and jogged back inside the yard.

Tyrone stood frozen at the gate for a long moment, unable to make himself leave.

Raine called out to him several times from the car before he finally reacted and got

in.

Once he was seated, Raine couldn't help but ask, "Tyrone, do you regret divorcing Aella?"

Tyrone glanced over at her.

Even though he still had worries and couldn't let go of her, he didn't regret agreeing to the divorce.

He just wanted a fresh start with Aella.

He was going to work for it, to rebuild what they had, and win her back on her own terms.

The next morning, Aella had breakfast with her parents.

Ever since the divorce, she'd come to treasure every moment with them.

She loved the peace of her current life, simple, free, and fully her own.

Miriam looked at her with concern and asked, "Is Tyrone still bothering you? He hasn't let it go, has he?"

Aella set down her spoon and gently reassured them. "Dad, Mom, don't worry. He just came by last night to pick up Raine and asked me for a small favor while he was here."

Miriam let out a relieved breath.

Warren added, "Well, we watched that boy grow up. He's always been polite and well-mannered, very presentable. Aella left the marriage with nothing so he could be with that other

Zera had caused the death of Tyrone's half-brother. There was no way Tyrone would let her off

like that.

After breakfast, Aella cleared the table and headed to work at the hospital.

Just as she parked and stepped out of the car, she spotted Zera walking toward her.

Aella felt a wave of exhaustion hit her. "Zera, if you're trying to piss me off this early in the morning, don't blame me if I slap you."

Zera smirked, her smile full of challenge. "I left my coat in the office yesterday, just came to grab it. Dr. Reid, why so cranky this morning?"

Aella snapped, "So you're picking it up by walking straight into my face?"

Zera gave another

another smug

smile.

She cleared her throat, voice dropping slightly. "You saw it for yourself yesterday. Tyrone still has feelings for me. He told me himself that he divorced you for me."

She added with fake sympathy, "I get it. You're jealous. You're bitter. But it is what it is."

Aella nodded. "He doesn't just have feelings for you. He loves you. He's your little lapdog."

Zera's smirk deepened. "Tomorrow's my birthday. Tyrone said he's getting me a gift I'll never forget. So I won't be coming in for treatment."

When Aella didn't respond, Zera leaned in, her tone baiting. "Dr. Reid, you've known Tyrone for years, you probably know him better than anyone. What kind of extravagant gift do you think he'll give me?"

Aella let out a sharp laugh. "Zera, let me give you a piece of advice."

She raised a brow. "If it's about how jealous you are, don't bother, I already know."

Chapter 283 Moment Before It Breaks

Aella said, "Only stray dogs bark before a storm. You might want to dial it back."

With that, she turned and walked away.

Zera watched Aella's bold, confident figure fade into the distance, her gaze sharpening like knives.

If looks could kill, Aella would've dropped on the spot.

Zera's fists clenched tightly, eyes bloodshot, jealousy and hatred boiling over inside her.

Once she was officially with Tyrone, she'd make sure to put Aella in her place and take down that old hag Virginia while she was at it.

On the morning of Zera's birthday, after dropping Orson off at school, she went straight to Julian and Daphne's house.

“Julian, Daphne, it’s my birthday today. I need a little help, spot me a few grand just to tide me over,” Zera said.

Daphne rolled her eyes. “After everything you’ve dragged us into, where the hell do you think we’d get that kind of money?”

Zera straightened up, her tone turning sharp.

She said proudly, “Tyrone already promised me, he said he’s giving me a once-in-a-lifetime gift today. If you won’t lend me a few grand now, don’t come begging for favors once we’re officially together.”

Julian and Daphne exchanged a look.

Julian turned to ask Shirley, “Mom, is that true?”

Shirley nodded quickly, clearly excited. “Mr. Winter divorced his wife for Zera. He treats her like gold, even in front of his ex. If you ask me, it looks like he’s about to go public with the relationship.”

Daphne perked right up. “Did Mr. Winter say what the gift is? Could it be a house? A luxury car?”

Julian chimed in, “The Winters are Vleka’s top family, he’s gotta at least be giving her a check worth a few million.”

The couple kept going, getting more hyped by the second.

Zera grinned and said, “Think big, what if Tyrone’s planning to propose to me tonight?”

The group burst into laughter, thrilled at the idea.

Shirley held Zera's hand tightly. "When our daughter becomes the future Mrs. Winter, Julian, Daphne, and I are going to ride that wave—live in a villa, hire staff, buy whatever we want."

Daphne quickly transferred 30,000 to Zera. "Zera, our whole family's counting on you now.

them Once you marry Mr. Winter, you have to help your two nephews, send them abroad, get into elite schools, and eventually marry rich girls. That's how you really make it."

Zera beamed. "Mom, Julian, Daphne, just wait. I'll bring you good news soon."

With the money in hand, Zera walked out of their place full of pride.

By 8 p.m., she had used the 30,000 to transform herself from head to toe, new clothes, new accessories, full glam.

After carefully getting ready, she arrived at Regal Club, heading to the private suite on the second floor, just like Tyrone had told her.

When she opened the door, she saw Tyrone sitting there alone. No cake. No decorations. She couldn't help but ask, "Tyrone, I thought you said we'd celebrate my birthday. Why'd you pick this place?"

Then it hit her—he must be planning a surprise. This was all part of the setup.

Tyrone calmly set his glass down. "The rooms here are soundproof. Makes it easier to get things done."

Hearing that, Zera blushed instantly.

She hadn't expected him to be this direct.

He'd just finalized the divorce, and already he couldn't wait to sleep with her. If he wanted her that badly, she was ready to give him exactly what he wanted.

She scooted closer to him on the couch, her tone soft and flirtatious, but with a hint of pouty complaint.

"You've been ignoring me for weeks. Now, on my birthday, there's not even a cake? If you didn't bring me a gift tonight, then don't even think about touching me," she said.

Tyrone turned his head and looked at her. A frown crept across his face.

He stood up, stepping away from Zera's wandering hands. "I've waited a long time for this day. There's no way I wouldn't prepare a special gift for you," he said.

Zera couldn't hide her excitement.

Her cheeks flushed as she slowly slipped off her coat, deliberately revealing her enhanced

curves.

"Tyrone, I brought a gift for you, too," she said with a flirty smile.

His expression didn't change as he watched her walk toward him, undressing piece by piece. He casually reached down and placed a pen-shaped voice recorder on the coffee table.

Just as the recorder hit the table, Noel knocked and entered in a hurry.

Startled, Zera scrambled to grab her clothes from the floor, quickly throwing them back on.

Since the recorder looked like an ordinary pen, she barely glanced at it, she assumed it was just a luxury writing instrument and didn't think twice. Her focus was entirely on getting dressed.

Noel kept his eyes straight ahead and walked up to Tyrone. "Mr. Winter, Mr. Poole from Farwell Holdings is outside. He saw you come into this suite and asked if you'd stop by his room for a drink with a few of the other execs," he said.

Tyrone frowned slightly.

Winter Group had long-standing ties with Farwell Holdings. If he didn't at least show his face, it would come off as disrespectful.

He glanced at Zera.

Zera quickly put on a sweet smile. "Tyrone, go ahead and take care of business. I'll wait for you here."

Without a word, Tyrone reached down and picked up the recorder from the table.

He looked at her and said, "I promised you a birthday you'd never forget, and I'll keep that promise. Just hang tight a little longer."

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Chapter 284 Inviting His Ex-Wife

Zera's eyes lit up as she said, "Tyrone, that's exactly what I've been wanting to hear from you. I'll wait, no matter how late it gets."

Tyrone gave a quick nod and rushed out of the private room with Noel.

When the door clicked shut, Zera was left alone, pacing the floor restlessly.

From the way Tyrone was acting tonight, it was pretty clear he was hoping something would happen between them.

He had divorced that scheming woman, Aella.

There was no way Zera was going to let this moment slip away.

She wanted everyone to see Tyrone at her birthday party, making it clear to the world that they were back together for real.

That would shut down any other woman dreaming about being with him.

With that thought, Zera snatched up her phone and dialed Jenny.

“Hey, Jenny, Tyrone’s throwing me a birthday party tonight, and we’re back together. Can you help me book a banquet hall and invite all our friends?” she asked.

Jenny sounded irritated on the other end. “Zera, you still haven’t paid back the half a million you owe me, and now you’re calling to ask for another favor?”

She answered coolly, “Jenny, after tonight, I’ll be with Tyrone for real. Once I marry him, I’ll be the lady of the house. You honestly think I won’t pay you back?”

Then she added, “Alright, if you’re not gonna help, I’ll ask someone else. I’ll return your money with interest tomorrow, and I guess that’ll be the end of our friendship.”

Zera let out a quiet scoff.

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Once she married Tyrone for real, someone like Jenny a rich guy's secret daughter — wouldn't even be in her league.

On the other end, Jenny fell silent for a moment.

“Zera, we've been friends forever. I'm not gonna trip over a little money. Just don't forget who's had your back when you and Tyrone finally tie the knot.”

Jenny added, “Don't worry, I'll take care of it. I'll book the banquet hall and invite everyone.”

Zera made sure to remind her, “And make sure to invite Virginia and Raine, too. The more people, the better.”

After ending the call, Zera couldn't help but grin, a smug sense of victory creeping across her face.

Tyrone had told her straight up—he'd be there to celebrate her birthday tonight.

Zera was dying to see the look on that old hag's face when she caught sight of her precious son with her.

A few minutes later, Zera picked up her phone again and called Shirley.

“Mom, Tyrone and I are getting back together tonight. Can you help me ask Dr. Reid to come?” she said.

On the other end, Shirley replied, “You're reconciling with Tyrone—why would you want to invite his ex-wife?”

Zera lifted her glass with a graceful smile and took a slow sip.

“Mom, you have to go there with Julian and Daphne,” she said. “Do whatever it takes—just make sure that witch shows up to my birthday party.”

She wanted Aella to see Tyrone celebrating her birthday, showering her with gifts, and getting back together with her.

She could already picture Aella's jealous, bitter face and couldn't wait to see it in person.

About half an hour later, outside the Reid Estate.

Shirley said to Aella, "Dr. Reid, Mr. Winter's throwing my daughter a birthday party tonight— they're getting back together. Zera mentioned you've been helping her with her insomnia, so she wanted to invite you to come celebrate."

Miriam shot them an angry look. "It's the middle of the night, and you're pounding on our door, waking up the whole block. Leave now or I'm calling the police!"

Daphne stepped up with her hands on her hips. "Dr. Reid, are you seriously still hoping to get back with Mr. Winter?"

Warren jabbed a finger at the trio, his expression hard. "My daughter's divorced from him. Who he chooses is none of our concern. Get off our property — or you'll regret it!"

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Julian stepped in and said, "Zera wanted us to invite Dr. Reid. We're honestly just trying to be friends."

Shirley pointed straight at Aella. "You keep coming up with excuses not to go, so what are you hiding? Still hung up on the Winters' money? Hoping to get back with Mr. Winter? You can't handle seeing him with my daughter, that's why you're too scared to show up!"

Aella glanced at the three troublemakers, then gently guided her parents back toward the house.

"Dad, Mom, go get some sleep. I'll go with them," she said.

Letting these three continue to cause trouble would not only keep her family from resting but also disturb the neighbors.

Meanwhile, over at the Regal Club ...

Tyrone had just wrapped up his meeting and headed back to the private room. Zera quickly stood and tried to convince him to go to her birthday party.

“Tyrone, Jenny found out it’s my birthday and planned a whole party for me. She went through all that effort—can you come with me?” Zera asked.

Tyrone lowered his gaze, keeping his expression unreadable.

After a brief pause, he gave a small nod. “Since you want to make this official, then let’s go.”

Zera blinked in surprise at how easily he agreed. “Tyrone, I knew you cared about me.”

Once people saw her walk into the birthday party with Tyrone on her arm, all eyes would be on her.

Chapter 285 Mr Winter’s First Love

Zera couldn’t wait to see if that witch Aella could still keep that fake smile on her face.

Noel, who’d been standing by the door, silently trailed after Tyrone.

He’d met plenty of clueless people before—but never anyone this clueless.

She was practically digging her own grave while rushing toward disaster.

No surprise Dr. Reid couldn't care less about her—didn't even see her as a rival, much less an enemy.

What a joke.

He still couldn't understand what his boss saw in Zera in the first place.

At nine that night, the birthday party Jenny threw for Zera was in full swing.

Virginia, Raine, and Brad had all been personally invited by Jenny.

In the world of high society, it never takes long to draw a crowd—one call, and the place is packed.

Plus, since Jenny bought into Zera's story and dropped Tyrone's name when sending invites, nobody was gonna turn her down.

Being the Townsends' secret daughter, Jenny never really got any respect.

If Zera really ended up as the next Mrs. Winter, she'd be the best connection Jenny could ever have.

Brad let out a laugh. "Ms. Townsend, since when did you and Zera get so close?"

Jenny gestured toward Tyrone and Zera, walking in together. "Mr. Keller, it was Mr. Winter's idea to make Zera's birthday one to remember. I just gave him a hand, that's all."

After that, Jenny and her friends walked over to say hi to Tyrone and Zera.

Brad, Raine, and Virginia traded looks, each clearly thinking their own thing.

Tyrone glanced around at the decorations, then shot Noel a quick look.

Catching the hint, Noel quietly slipped out.

Soon, people began crowding around, tossing compliments at Tyrone and Zera.

Tyrone's gaze shifted toward his mom and sister.

Following his eyes, Zera spotted Virginia—the old hag—and a smug smile crept onto her face.

“Tyrone, don't be upset,” Zera said sweetly. “They're your family. I just wanted to get on better terms with them, maybe ease the tension a bit, so I had Jenny send them an invite.”

Before she could say anything else, Shirley came rushing in with a forced smile. “Zera, Zera, I brought—”

Noticing Zera's warning glance, Shirley quickly switched up her story. “Julian, Daphne, and Orson were free, so I figured I'd bring them along to enjoy the party.”

When Zera spotted Aella and Sayer walking in through the door, she looked pleased and motioned for her mom to step aside. “Mom, take Julian, Daphne, and Orson to grab something to eat.”

Shirley nodded right away and hurried off, pulling her son, daughter-in-law, and Orson along with her.

Tyrone's brows drew together the moment he saw Aella walk in.

Their eyes met across the room, and before he knew it, he started moving toward her.

But Zera stepped in fast, cutting him off.

In front of everyone, she confidently slipped her hand through his arm and said, “Tyrone, I didn’t expect Dr. Reid to actually come. Let’s go say hi.”

Tyrone shrugged her off, his expression going icy.

“No need,” he said.

Sayer leaned in and murmured to Aella, “Did that ugly girl drag you out here just to show off with Mr. Winter?”

Aella tugged Sayer toward Virginia. “Show off all she wants—she’ll be dead soon.”

She didn’t care what happened to Zera.

But since Zera had already dragged Shirley, Julian, and Daphne over to stir things up at the Reid Estate, Aella figured she might as well go along with it.

Aella walked up to Virginia, who looked furious. “What’s Zera trying to pull, dragging us all out here?” Virginia snapped.

Brad chuckled and said, “Come on, Virginia, we’re here now—might as well sit back and enjoy

the show.”

Sayer leaned over and asked Brad, “Do you know something we don’t?”

Brad pushed his head away with a scowl.

That sneaky bastard.

Looks like he doesn't have a clue, but he's got a sharp eye for everything.

The group stood at a distance, watching Zera put on a show.

Standing next to Tyrone, Zera cleared her throat and lifted her chin slightly. "Thanks, everyone, for taking time out of your busy schedules to come to my birthday dinner," she said.

She paused, turned her head toward him, and couldn't stop the smile that crept across her face.

Her gaze shifted to Aella and the rest. "Tyrone wanted to celebrate my birthday in private, saying he'd make it a night to remember. But I thought, why not share this moment with everyone?"

Aella stood with the group, expression steady, eyes cold.

Guests around them began to whisper.

"Mr. Winter just split from his ex, and now he's already flaunting this woman. Guess the rumors were true."

"What's so special about being the other woman? Kinda pathetic."

"For real—she even invited the ex-wife? That's just too arrogant."

"Zera's got nothing on Aella. Mr. Winter really has some questionable taste."

Zera's mom, Shirley, noticed the whispers and started shouting like crazy, "If you don't know the facts, keep your mouths shut! Zera was Mr. Winter's first love!"

Daphne said, “Yeah, Zera graduated from an art school. She was a dance major—total star vibes.”

Everyone went quiet after hearing that.

Noticing the awkward silence, Jenny quickly said, “Mr. Winter, we’re all dying to see what kind of special gift you prepared for Zera. How about showing us?”

People immediately joined in, cheering him on.

Zera glanced at Tyrone, who stood beside her looking calm, like nothing was happening.

Her eyes drifted toward Aella.

Putting on her sweetest tone, she said, “Tyrone, didn’t you promise me a birthday gift I’d never forget? Since everyone’s curious, why don’t you show them?”

Brad smirked. “Tyrone, Ms. Caldwell can’t wait any longer. Stop teasing us and let everyone see what you got for her!”

With his striking mixed features and deep brown eyes, Sayer scanned the room.

He tugged Aella’s arm and whispered, “Aella, I think Mr. Winter is planning something shady.”

Aella patted his arm lightly, signaling him to let go. “Just watch. Don’t say anything dumb.”

Sayer nodded obediently and kept quiet.

At that moment, Noel pushed through the crowd and walked up to Tyrone.

They exchanged a quick look before Noel stepped aside.

Tyrone then pulled out a small voice recorder and set it on the long table beside the cake and champagne tower.

He said calmly, "This is my gift. Everything is inside here. Why don't you play it and find out?"

Zera stared at the recorder, her smile fading away.

Her heart thumped wildly as she stepped closer.

It wasn't a pen—it was a recorder.

A wave of dread washed over her.

She carefully studied Tyrone's face and asked, "Tyrone, isn't this supposed to be my gift? Why do you want me to play this?"

He kept his cool. "You'll understand once you play it."

Zera picked up the recorder and hesitated, not wanting to hit play.

Sayer, clearly losing patience, ran a hand through his short hair. "Come on, ugly! We're all waiting. Just do it!"

Brad chimed in, "Zera, Tyrone said everything you're looking for is on that recorder. What's the holdup?"

Daphne squeezed her way to the front, standing right across from Zera. “What’s there to be scared of? Everyone wants to hear it, so just press play.”

Raine chimed in, “Your family is telling you to do it, Zera. Come on! Maybe Tyrone is about to propose or something.”

Jenny stepped closer, encouraging Zera, “Yeah, Ms. Winter is right. Maybe Mr. Winter’s got some creative plan—like a proposal with a twist. Just play it so we can all be jealous.”

Zera’s nervousness slowly shifted into excitement.

She couldn’t come up with any reason Tyrone would hand her a recorder at her birthday party -unless it was a proposal or something.

She threw Aella a defiant look and hit the play button.

The scene went oddly silent.

Then, Aella’s and Zera’s voices came through loudly and clearly.

Aella asked, “Zera, was it true that you got robbed right after taking Edwin’s check six years ago?”

Zera replied, “Robbed? Please. I’d never seen that much money before. No way I’d let anyone grab it.”

“Who’s Orson’s dad?”

“Don’t even bring up Leonardo. He’s a jerk. If I’d known his family was going broke, I wouldn’t have wasted my efforts sleeping with him.”

“Zera, Ivan never hurt you. Why’d you kill him?”

“Blame Edwin. He threatened Tyrone. He said if Tyrone stayed with me, he’d leave everything to that bastard kid. Why should he get it?”

“So you killed Ivan?”

“I didn’t kill him. I just paid William 500,000 to move the warning signs at the ski resort. That way, that brat would ‘accidentally’ die there.”

The recorder kept going, spilling every word of their talk. Then chaos broke out.

Shirley dragged Julian and Daphne out of the crowd, whispering about something.

Sayer muttered, “Man, I didn’t expect that ugly girl to be this twisted. Creepy.”

Brad gave Raine a hint.

Raine immediately comforted Virginia softly.

Across the crowd, Tyrone and Aella met eyes, then quickly looked away.

Zera’s mind went blank, like something inside her just exploded. She couldn’t even move.

Chapter 287 You Don’t Even Qualify

No way!

Zera had zero memory of ever saying anything like that to Aella.

Where on earth does this recording come from?

Once she figured out what was happening, she lunged for the recorder.

But Noel was faster. He snatched it, slipped into the crowd, and bumped the volume up, looping the recording.

Zera stared in disbelief, her gaze flicking between Tyrone and Aella.

She suddenly pointed at Aella and rushed forward. "You bitch! You set me up!"

Before Tyrone could reach Aella, Brad and Sayer stepped in to shield her.

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Brad said, "Zera, you know exactly who you are. Everyone is sick of your drama. Cut it out."

Zera shouted, "Nonsense! Aella framed me! That recording is fake!"

Sayer cracked his knuckles and ankle, then aimed a warning at Zera, "I don't hit women, but I do hit beasts. Keep mouthing off, and I'll slap you."

Aella eased Brad and Sayer aside and walked over to Zera. "Karma is real, Zera. You've done terrible things. You won't get away with them."

That day, after she hypnotized Zera, Tyrone was supposed to be the one to get her to talk.

But after trying a few times, Zera's subconscious kept resisting. She wouldn't say a word.

With no other choice, Aella stepped in to guide her, and Zera finally confessed.

Losing control, Zera tried to lunge at Aella, but two bodyguards held her back.

Seeing that, she turned and threw herself at Tyrone instead.

She jabbed a finger at Aella, emotions all over the place. "Tyrone, it has to be your ex-wife! She hates me and faked this to ruin us. Don't believe it!"

Shirley jumped in, frantically nodding. "Mr. Winter, my daughter is kind. She wouldn't hurt an animal, let alone kill someone. This has to be a mistake!"

Zera pointed at Aella again. "The recording must be fake! Your ex did this! I never said that. If you don't believe me, I'll swear!"

Tyrone answered expressionlessly, "No need to swear. I recorded it myself."

Zera's mind went totally blank.

The Caldwells hung their heads, shrinking back behind her.

Everyone turned on Zera.

"I thought she was just a side chick, but she actually dared to kill someone."

"She looks so mean and nasty. Really vicious."

"She still wants to marry into wealth? Dream on!"

“Jenny, is this the next Mrs. Winter you were talking about?”

Aella, Virginia, and a few others watched from the back as it all played out.

Raine glanced at her mother, worried. “Mom, are you okay?”

Virginia sighed. “Don’t worry. If I’m upset, it’s only with your father for cheating. Ivan was just a kid. He didn’t do anything wrong.”

Raine whispered, “Mom, aren’t you mad that Tyrone hid the investigation about Ivan’s death from you?”

Virginia shook her head. “Ivan is gone. What good would being angry do now?”

She patted Raine’s hand and then stepped toward Zera.

Virginia said, “Zera, you think you can marry into the Winters? You don’t even qualify. It’s too late to deny anything now. Be ready to face the law.”

Zera stumbled back, almost losing her balance. She shook her head, gripping the table to keep herself steady.

When her eyes met Tyrone’s cold stare, panic flooded her mind.

She quickly looked away, pointed at Aella, and snapped, “I knew you were scheming! If you want Tyrone back, just say it. Why do you have to destroy me?”

She glanced at Tyrone, then told Zera, “You confessed right in front of me, and Mr. Winter recorded it himself. He knows whether I set you up or not.”

She couldn't let anyone find out that she had helped Tyrone hypnotize Zera.

Jenny's face turned red with fury.

She stormed over and slapped Zera across the face. "You lying witch! I can't believe you also tricked me. Give me my money back!"

The slap nearly sent Zera crashing to the ground.

She crawled toward Tyrone, crying and pleading. "Tyrone, please believe me! That recording is fake. I didn't do any of this!"

He glared down at her and pulled his leg away. "You never learn until it's too late."

Right after he said that, two bodyguards dragged a man over and shoved him in front of Zera.

When she saw William, she turned pale.

He pointed at her and shouted, "You bitch! Tell them to let me go, or I'll spill everything about you!"

Zera waved her hands wildly. "Tyrone, I swear I don't even know him!"

Chapter 288 The Truth

William lost it right there. "You liar! You said we'd take out Ivan, and after you hooked up with that rich guy back home, you'd send me 500,000! You never paid, and now you're acting like you don't even know me? No way I'm letting this slide!"

Zera crawled toward Tyrone, shaking all over. "Tyrone, I swear I don't know him! Please, just make him leave."

Tyrone gave a small signal, and another man entered.

He looked at Zera coldly. "You say you don't know William. What about this man? Don't tell me don't recognize him either."

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"Leonardo?!"

Zera froze, terrified at the sight of him.

Leonardo Hansen looked sharp in a tailored suit, glasses glinting under the light.

His glare was full of disgust. "You disgusting woman. After all these years, you still haven't changed."

Tyrone turned to Noel, who pulled out a DNA report. Two guards brought Orson forward, placing him in front of Zera.

Tyrone said, "Leonardo, this boy is yours and Zera's, right?"

Leonardo glanced at Orson with disdain.

Then, he pointed at Zera, his voice full of anger. "Mr. Winter, six years ago in Tuspuyria, Zera knew I was engaged, but she still drugged me and tried to trap me into marriage. When I refused, she left a pregnancy report for my fiancée and ran off. It almost ruined my wedding.

“Three years later, she showed up with the kid, trying to make me divorce and give them both a title. I said no, so she started asking for drugs. When I refused again, she made my life miserable until I paid her 30 million to stop.”

Leonardo jabbed his finger toward Zera. “Mr. Winter, her ex-husband died from an overdose. I’m sure she killed him on purpose!”

Zera snapped back, “Leonardo, you jerk! You forced yourself on me and left me pregnant before marriage. I had no choice but to marry someone else. Now you’re accusing me of murder with no proof? Do you even have a conscience?!”

She kept denying everything, but Tyrone had had enough.

He revealed everything she’d been hiding right in front of everyone.

Tyrone said, “Zera, six years ago, you secretly took 60 million from Grandpa and pretended you were robbed. Then you tried to trap Leonardo into marriage. But when that didn’t work, you hid away pregnant. You wanted to come back later, but Grandpa found out and made you get married instead.”

Zera shook her head hard, her voice cracking. “That’s not true! I’m being set up!”

He kept going. “You used that kid to get money from Leonardo for child support. Your husband kept beating you because he wanted the child to go to his real father. But you held on, waiting for the right time to cash in from the Hansens once the kid grew up. Am I wrong?”

Tyrone walked closer.

Shaking all over, Zera backed away, trying to keep her distance.

He said, “After getting that 30 million from the Hansens, you wanted to come back, but your husband refused to let you go. To shake him and his family off, you got him addicted to drugs, then gave him an overdose and killed him while he was high. Isn’t that right?”

Zera's face went pale. "That's a lie! I didn't kill anyone!"

Tyrone continued, "All because of what Grandpa said, you paid William to kill Ivan—he was just 18. Afterward, you panicked and hid overseas for two years before coming up with some

excuse to return.

"You had everything figured out before stepping back here. Zera, you've been plotting this for years. What a performance!"

Zera staggered up, completely losing control. She yelled at Tyrone, "I didn't do it!"

"I've already given all the proof to the police. You can't deny it now!"

When she realized he had called the police, something in her snapped.

She threw herself at him like a madwoman. "Tyrone, I did all of this for you! How could you treat me like this?"

Two bodyguards stepped in, stopping her before she could reach him.

Tyrone said calmly, "Zera, I tolerated you and took care of you because you once saved my life. But you've gone too far. No one can save you now."

Zera pointed at Aella, shouting, "Is it because of her?!"

Her voice cracked as she screamed, "You want to get back with that bitch, so you're throwing me in prison?!"

When Tyrone said nothing, Zera suddenly broke down crying.

She sobbed. "Tyrone, you went against your whole family for me. You even divorced your wife. You were going to marry me—you loved me, didn't you?"

He looked at Aella.

Seeing her cold expression made his chest tighten.

In front of everyone, he finally said to Zera, "Yeah, we were together. I did think about marrying you. After being apart for six years, I felt sorry to see you so broken down. I felt guilty."

Chapter 289 You're Living in a Fantasy

He said, "I hid it from my wife so I could look after you, spoiled you even, but I never once planned to leave her for you."

Zera suddenly laughed like she'd lost it. "It doesn't matter if you didn't plan to. You still ended up divorced, didn't you?"

Tyrone's face darkened. "I agreed to the divorce because I wanted a new start with my wife. You had nothing to do with it."

His words hit Zera hard, cutting straight through her like knives.

Her smile dropped, and her face twisted into something cold and cruel.

Grinding her teeth, she yelled, "So all this time, you were just playing me, waiting for this day?!"

Tyrone didn't answer. That silence broke her.

She looked around, eyes wild, then screamed, "Yeah, I killed that bastard kid!"

Pointing straight at Tyrone, she shouted, “Why did you have to be so perfect, so out of reach? Why did your family have to be so rich? The moment I saw you, I couldn’t stop myself!

“I set up that whole thing so I could play the hero, so you’d see me as someone special, someone to trust. I planned it all!

“I took that 60 million and planned to marry into another rich family, but that bastard Leonardo still refused to marry me even after I got pregnant! So I kept the baby to bleed him for child support.

“Ivan was just an illegitimate kid. I helped you get rid of him so no one would challenge you for the inheritance. That way, when we got back together, no one could use him against you.

“Tyrone, you were born with everything. You’ve never been broke, so you’ll never understand how desperate life can get.

“I killed Ivan and had Leonardo’s baby just to keep my options open—find someone rich, live easy, never be poor again!”

Zera screamed like she’d gone crazy, “Why, Tyrone?! Why does no man ever choose me? Why won’t anyone leave their wife for me?!”

She turned on the crowd, voice shrill and breaking. “Why do all of you look down on me?!”

Then, she glared at Aella, her eyes burning with hate. “You’re just a fallen heiress, a regular

Aella stood there coldly, barely blinking. Her face didn’t move, not even when Zera lost it completely.

She didn’t bother to say a word.

The reason Zera ended up like that was simple—she was too greedy.

If she'd just taken the 60 million and stopped, things might've been fine.

Or if she'd taken the Hansens' 30 million and disappeared.

Or if she'd accepted Tyrone's payout, used his card, and walked away.

If she did those, she wouldn't be this pathetic now.

Seeing Zera's rage aimed at Aella, Raine snapped, "Zera, you've read way too many cheesy romance stories about rich guys falling for poor girls. You're living in a fantasy. What made think Tyrone would ever marry you just because he divorced Aella?"

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Zera's eyes turned red as she screamed back, "What makes you so special? If you weren't born lucky, you'd be worse than me!"

Virginia quickly grabbed the angry Raine.

Then, she said, "Zera, after you took Edwin's 60 million, he found out you were still chasing Tyrone. That's why he sent you overseas and forced you to marry someone else. He just wanted you gone from our family. You're the one who kept plotting, dreaming of marrying rich. You brought all this on yourself. No one else is to blame."

Shirley's face went pale. She immediately turned against her daughter, pointing at her. "We didn't know what this fool was doing out there! She dragged our family down with her. Do whatever you want with her. Just leave my son and grandson out of this."

Julian and Daphne quickly nodded in agreement.

Zera stared at them, eyes wide in disbelief.

Her

eyes reddened as she clenched her teeth. “Mom, Julian, Daphne, I did everything for you, and now you’re all abandoning me?”

None of them looked at her. They turned away guiltily.

Sirens suddenly blared outside.

Everyone started whispering again.

Zera tried to run toward Tyrone, but the bodyguards held her back.

She looked completely broken, tears and laughter mixing as she glared around the room. Then her eyes found Tyrone’s.

She screamed, “You think throwing me in prison means you get a clean slate with Aella?!”

Pointing at him, she shouted, “You hid Orson’s identity for me, lied to Aella, and stayed with us in the hospital for a month! You even faked a DNA report to help me! Every good thing you did for me and my son came from Aella’s pain! Even without me, you’ll never get her back!”

Chapter 290 I Hate You All

Tyrone instinctively moved forward, standing right in front of Aella.

His eyes were red, his lips trembling like he wanted to say something, but nothing came out.

Aella gave

him a calm glance, then turned to Sayer. "This is getting boring. Let's get out."

Everything Zera had said couldn't be undone.

Even if Tyrone handled Zera himself, Aella would never go back to him.

Whatever happened between them was his choice and had nothing to do with others.

Seeing Aella about to leave so calmly drove Zera insane with jealousy. She couldn't accept

it.

In a flash, she snatched a fruit knife from a waiter's cart and charged straight at Aella.

If she was going down, she was taking Aella with her!

"Aella!"

Everyone gasped at once.

Before Zera could reach her, Tyrone and Sayer kicked her away at the same time.

They didn't hold back. Zera flew several feet and crashed into a table, sending glasses and cake flying everywhere.

She coughed up blood, unable to move.

Tyrone and Sayer both turned toward Aella. "Are you okay?"

She gently pushed Tyrone's hand away and shook her head. "I'm fine."

Looking at Zera writhing on the floor, Aella felt nothing—no pity, no satisfaction.

She thought about how she'd once quit her dream major, given up her job, and depended entirely on Tyrone,

Three years of being a housewife had cost her her marriage, her family, and her sense of self.

Thankfully, she'd woken up in time to rebuild her own life.

But Zera? She'd been scheming from the start.

That was what happened to women who never worked on themselves and only tried to climb up by clinging to men.

As the police stormed in and took Zera and William away, Aella grabbed Sayer's hand and left.

Tyrone just stood there, staring blankly as she walked away. He didn't even try to stop her.

Two officers pinned Zera to the ground.

Seeing Tyrone helplessly watching Aella leave, she started laughing like she'd lost her mind.

Pointing at him, she screamed, "Tyrone, I gave up everything for you, and this is how you treat me?! I hope you spend your life loving someone you can never have!"

Meanwhile, Shirley, Julian, and Daphne tried to quietly slip out of the hall.

Zera was dragged away by the police, still shouting and cursing at everyone.

She'd spent years plotting to marry rich.

Overseas, she got her way easily and did whatever she pleased.

But when she came back and met Tyrone again, his cold attitude scared her and made her hesitate.

She began to doubt everything, and that was what caused her downfall.

If she'd just taken Tyrone's money and disappeared, she could've lived comfortably.

Watching her family turn their backs on her filled Zera with rage and despair.

When she had money, she was their beloved daughter, sister, and aunt,

Now that she was broke, she was nothing. They all walked away,

Zera completely snapped.

She screamed and thrashed, "I hate you all! I hate every single one of you!"

Still screaming, she was dragged out by the police. The Winters' bodyguards began clearing out the guests.

Tyrone looked drained as he faced Virginia. "Mom, I'm sorry. I just couldn't let him die not knowing the truth."

Virginia sighed. "About Ivan—you did the right thing. Zera broke the law, and she'll pay for it. But you shouldn't have kept this from me, or from Aella."

He'd tried to explain everything to Aella, but she didn't care anymore. She didn't even want to hear it.

Virginia said, "Zera is getting what she deserves. You and Aella are done now. Let it go."

He lowered his eyes, his face unreadable.

Let it go? Not a chance.

He was going to win Aella back and make her go home with him obediently.

A few days later, inside the CEO's office at Winter Group.

Noel reported, "Mr. Winter, Zera confessed everything on her first night in prison. She got a life sentence. She's been demanding to see you, even smashed her head and bit a guard. She's clearly unstable."

Tyrone asked, "What about the others?"

Noel replied, "Leonardo refused to take Orson. After talking with the Caldwells, he gave them ten million for child support and left for Tuspuyria this morning. The Caldwells took the money and are moving to Lysoria with Orson."

When Noel, Tyrone didn't say a word, so Noel quietly left the office.

Tyrone just sat there quietly, staring into space.