

Once Cast 371

Chapter 371 We Can't Survive Without You

Whatever they once had was long over. She never owed him anything.

Even so, that night, no one could sleep.

Two days later, near sunset, Brad came to Aella's office.

She poured him a glass of water and said flatly, "Brad, if you're here to talk me into something, don't bother."

Brad sat on the couch, slowly turning the glass in his hand.

His sharp eyes studied her face for a long time before he finally spoke.

"If Raine hadn't caught him, we'd all still be fooled," Brad said helplessly. "He never really let go."

Brad spoke in a careful, testing tone. "Aella, maybe for Virginia and Raine's sake, could you talk to him? Just help him hang on a little longer."

Aella sat across from him, her expression complicated.

"Funny," she said quietly. "Weren't you the one who supported my divorce in the first place?"

Brad set down his glass, walked around the coffee table, and sat beside her.

His face turned serious. "I did. But that doesn't mean I don't want you both to be okay."

He continued gently, "Tyrone's flying back tonight. I know you don't want to meet him alone. I'll

go

with you. I'll do most of the talking; you just fill in when you need to. How about that?"

Aella lowered her head and stayed silent. Brad sighed, stood up, and said, "Alright, fine. If you don't want to, I won't force it."

She walked him to the door.

As he reached the door, he suddenly flicked his fingers against her forehead.

"Ouch!" Aella yelped, covering the spot and glaring at him.

Brad crossed his arms, and his face turned stern. "You and Tyrone are just the same. Makes me want to knock some sense into both of you."

Aella stood in the doorway, watching him leave, her heart a mess of mixed feelings.

Daniel walked up beside Aella and followed her gaze. "This city's small," he said. "You don't have

to do it for him—just do it for the people who care. Sometimes it's okay to step in, as long as you know where you stand."

Aella shook her head. "Daniel, no one knows him better than I do.

"He's a smart businessman—cold, calculated, always weighing what's worth it. He puts profit above everything. Even if he's not feeling well, it's never as bad as everyone makes it sound."

She paused, her tone firm. "Someone as selfish and detached as Tyrone, even if he lost the whole world, that man would be doing just fine."

That same night, Tyrone arrived back in Vleka.

The moment he stepped off the plane, his parents took him straight home.

Edwin ordered him to hand over his work and go abroad for treatment. Tyrone refused right away.

With a calm face, he told his family he was fine and that they didn't need to worry.

Raine finally broke her silence. "Tyrone, please—just listen to Grandpa," she pleaded.

But Tyrone shot her a sharp look.

"It's just a stomach issue," he said evenly. "It'll take time to heal, that's all. Don't worry about me. I know my own body."

Tyrone sat there in silence, his chest aching. Sleep long gone from his nights, but he said nothing.

Virginia looked gaunt, her voice trembling as she pointed at him. "If you keep this up, I'll make your father go back to work. You're going straight to the hospital for treatment."

Her tone broke as she went on, "Have you thought about what would happen if something went wrong with you? What would we do? How would this family survive?"

Tyrone paused for a moment before answering quietly, “Mom, you really don’t need to worry. But if it makes you feel better, let Raine keep an eye on me. She can make sure I eat, take my meds, and go to my checkups on time. Will that be enough?”

Edwin slammed his cane against the floor, the sound echoing through the room.

He said coldly, “Tyrone, listen to me—if anything happens to you, I swear I’ll make the Aella and her family pay with their lives!”

“Grandpa!” Raine’s eyes widened in shock. “Are you out of your mind? What does this have to do with them?”

Virginia finally snapped. She turned on Edwin and Ralph, shouting through tears, “Tyrone’s condition is because of both of you! After everything that’s happened, you still can’t admit your mistakes? Do you really want to drive him to his death?”

Tyrone’s face darkened.

He forced out each word slowly, his voice icy. “Grandpa, you’ll regret saying that.”

A sharp pain shot through his chest. He pressed a hand over his heart and turned away, heading quickly toward the bathroom.

After he left, Edwin muttered, “If I don’t push him, he’ll never listen.”

Virginia glared at him. “Edwin, can’t you tell? Tyrone still hasn’t let go of Aella!”

The living room was heavy with tension.

After a few minutes, Raine was the first to notice something was wrong. “Why isn’t Tyrone back yet?”

Everyone exchanged nervous looks before rushing toward the bathroom.

Ralph pushed the door open. Tyrone was standing at the sink, splashing water on his face.

When he saw them all staring at him from the doorway, he simply grabbed a paper towel, dried his face, and walked out, closing the door behind him without a word.

Chapter 372 Strange Arrangement

Tyrone's face was pale, almost colorless, yet he forced a calm smile and told everyone he was fine. No one believed him.

After Tyrone left, Raine couldn't shake the worry off. She went into the bathroom to check.

Sure enough, she found several blood-stained tissues hidden in the trash.

Virginia almost fainted when she saw them.

Ralph stood frozen, barely able to keep himself upright from the discoveries.

Edwin said nothing. He turned around and went back to his room in silence.

The next morning, Aella had just arrived at the hospital when Daniel called her.

"Come to my office," he said. When she got there, Daniel was waiting by the door, looking apologetic. "Mr. Edwin's inside," he told her quietly.

Aella nodded and stepped into the office.

If he had come all the way to the hospital, she was willing to meet him.

In the reception area, Aella sat across from Edwin.

A coffee table separated them.

She simply looked at him and said nothing.

Edwin lifted his hand. Justin hurriedly stepped forward, placing a folder in front of her.

Aella looked down. It was a share transfer agreement.

Edwin said, "This is fifteen percent of Winter Group's stock. That's five percent more than what Raine got as her wedding gift. If you can convince Tyrone to stay in the hospital for treatment, or better yet, if you'll return to him, these shares will be yours."

Aella pushed the document back toward him, her expression calm but firm.

"Everyone's time is valuable, Mr. Edwin," she said evenly "If that's all, I'll be leaving now."

She stood up and was ready to leave.

Edwin's voice deepened. "So Tyrone's life means nothing to you?"

"Mr. Edwin," she said coldly, "besides your son and grandson, have you ever cared about anyone else's life?"

His eyes narrowed sharply.

Aella went on. “Your grandson turned out exactly the way you raised him—calculating, cold, and selfish. You and your son taught him well. For a man like him, who values profit over people, do you really think he’d ever let himself die?”

Edwin’s face darkened. “You’ve worked so hard for your career. Isn’t it all for fame and fortune? With these shares, your family could become one of Vleka’s most powerful families. Think it over.”

Aella gave a sneer. “Yes, I want success, and I want comfort. But there are still things I refuse to do for them.”

Aella looked straight at Edwin, leaned forward slightly, and said every word clearly. “As long as it has anything to do with the Winters, I’ll stay far away.”

Edwin stood up, his legs weak.

He almost stumbled, but Justin quickly caught him.

He spoke in a trembling voice, “Forcing Tyrone to divorce you was the biggest mistake of my life.”

Aella didn’t reply. She just stood there, watching him leave with a calm face.

Right or wrong—it didn’t matter anymore.

At the same time, outside Tyrone’s office, Noel was pulled aside by two coworkers. “Mr. Frost,” one whispered, “the company’s been going through so many personnel changes lately. Is something going on?”

Noel played dumb, shaking his head.

But deep down, he couldn’t ignore the feeling that his boss looked like a man who’d already

written his will.

He knocked on the door and stepped into the office. Inside, Raine was asking Tyrone. "Mr. Tingey's got at least ten more years before retirement. Why are you promoting a new deputy to compete with him?"

Tyrone explained patiently, "If we don't bring in new talent once in a while, the old employees will get too comfortable. Without pressure, there's no drive to grow, and that's bad for the company."

Noel handed two project files to Raine.

She flipped one open and frowned. Raine found a new problem. "I remember you telling Dad that Project Khento required huge upfront costs and slow returns. You told him that you wouldn't move forward with it for now."

Tyrone lowered his gaze to hide the emotions in his eyes. "I made some adjustments. The project will guarantee steady income for the next ten years and add extra profit streams. You can take the folder with you and read it through."

Raine didn't like the sound of that. Something felt wrong.

She circled his desk and asked softly, "Tell me the truth. Is this about Aella?"

Before she could finish, Tyrone cut her off coldly. "I want you to meet someone. Go to the elevator and bring her up."

Raine bit her tongue and left the office.

A few minutes later, she returned with a woman in her early thirties.

Noel immediately recognized her and stepped forward with surprise. "Iris," he greeted.

Iris Horton smiled and said, “Mr. Frost, long time no see.”

Her look was sharp and professional—short hair, a white three-quarter-sleeve blouse, a black pencil skirt, and heels at least three inches high.

Chapter 373 The Burden of Care

Iris’s makeup was neat. She kept a polite, professional smile at all times. Other than a luxury watch on her wrist, there wasn’t a single piece of extra jewelry on her.

Tyrone walked up to her at once. “Ms. Horton, welcome back.”

Iris smiled politely. “Thank you, Mr. Winter. I appreciate your trust.”

Tyrone turned to Raine. “From now on, Iris and Noel will be your two assistants. They each have their own strengths and will work with you as a team.”

Raine’s smile faded; her face turned serious. “Tyrone, are you planning to resign?”

Tyrone said calmly, “Once your promotion to deputy executive vice president takes effect, I’ll be taking some time off.”

Raine didn’t think much of it.

His health had been getting worse lately; he did need a break.

Half an hour later, Raine and Iris walked out of Tyrone’s office together.

Raine couldn’t help and asked softly, “Ms. Horton, did Tyrone tell you how long he plans to rest?”

Iris replied politely, “Ms. Winter, you can just call me Iris.”

She glanced around at the nearby coworkers and, using the excuse of wanting to see Raine’s office, slipped away from the curious stares.

Inside Raine’s office, Iris took a look around and frowned.

“Ms. Winter, does anyone help you to clean your office?”

Raine flushed. “I don’t like people touching my things. I’ll clean it myself later.”

Iris adjusted her expression and said, “To be honest, Mr. Winter came to my house three times to ask me to come back.”

Raine froze, her expression changing several times.

Iris went on, “I don’t know his reasons, but I agreed. I’ve signed a five-year contract with Winter Group to be your assistant.”

After Iris left, Raine sat alone for a long time.

Why did Tyrone personally go to Iris’s home to bring her back? Why a five-year contract?

Could it be... he’s for the worst because of his illness

?

The thought made her uneasy.

She quickly threw herself into work, not wanting her thoughts to spiral.

Around noon, Brad showed up with lunch.

When he entered the office, Raine had fallen asleep at her desk.

Brad quietly set the food down. He lifted her into his arms and laid her on the couch.

The movement woke her up.

Seeing Brad, Raine leaned against him with her eyes still half-closed. "Brad, let me sleep for a few minutes. Don't go yet."

Brad pulled her gently into his arms, heart aching. "Tyrone's unbelievable," he muttered. "Look what he's done to you—working you to exhaustion like this."

Brad muttered a few complaints, then looked down and saw Raine fast asleep in his arms.

The way he looked at her—there was nothing but tenderness. He glanced at the office door to make sure no one was watching, then bent down and kissed her lightly on the forehead.

"My little girl's all grown up," he said softly, voice full of mock jealousy. "Still clueless and got a lot to learn though."

He gently laid her down on the couch, slipped off her heels, and covered her with his jacket.

Then he rolled up his sleeves and started cleaning the office, which looked like a tornado had hit it.

After tidying up, he saw Raine was still asleep. He quietly silenced her phone, then went to see Tyrone.

Tyrone was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, lost in thought.

Tall, sharp, and polished in a white dress shirt and black slacks, the armband on his sleeve gave him that cold executive look. But even from behind, there was something weary and lonely

about him.

Brad walked over and took the ashtray from his hand. "Seriously, is Winter Group that short on talent? You've got this poor girl working herself into an early grave just to prove a point?"

Chanter 373 The Burden of care

Tyrone gave him a sideways look. "If you care so much, why don't you help her?"

Brad chuckled. "You want the heir of Keller Group to work for you? Are you delusional?"

Tyrone said calmly, "With your brother around, there's no room for you to show your talent. Join my company; I'll give you a real challenge."

Brad rolled his eyes, then grew serious. "Raine's twenty-four. You've got her buried in work with zero time for a love life. What happens if she ends up alone for life?"

Tyrone was standing by the floor-to-ceiling window, looking down at the skyline. His tone was cool but sharp when he said, "If you're too useless to marry her, then stay out of the way."

Tyrone's words hit Brad right where it hurt. Brad fired back instantly, "Yeah, you got married- but couldn't even keep her."

Tyrone's jaw tightened. Brad pressed on, unable to stop himself. "If you're so capable, then stop throwing up blood, stop hurting, stop crying. Go on-make Aella forgive you."

The change on Tyrone's face was instant and obvious. Brad quickly held back, realizing he'd gone too far. "Hey-hey, man, I was just kidding. Don't take it to heart."

God, what a mess!

I really need to start watching what I say.

One more wrong word and this guy would drop dead in front of me.

Brad sighed, trying to smooth things over. "Look, the holiday season is coming up. Family being happy and healthy—that's all that really matters."

Tyrone didn't say a word. He just nodded, a strange mix of emotions crossing his face.

Chapter 374 The Man from the Past

Tyrone thought he didn't deserve to live.

But for his family, he decided to hold on.

After Brad left, Tyrone's headache got worse. He poured a few sleeping pills into his hand, just as Virginia walked in and caught him.

She rushed over, grabbed the bottle, her eyes red. "This is what you call taking your medicine properly? This is what you mean by getting better?"

Her emotions boiled over. She pried the pills from his palm one by one. "Five at once! This is your idea of no big deal?"

Tyrone's lips twitched stiffly. He took the bottle back, twisted the cap shut, and put it in his drawer.

"I didn't mean to take that many. I just poured out too many by accident. Don't worry, Mom."

Virginia didn't believe him. Standing right there at his desk, she called Aella.

When the call connected, she hit speaker. "Aella, what happens if someone takes too many sleeping pills?"

There was a short pause before Aella's calm voice came through. "It can cause serious side effects. Dizziness, drowsiness, stomach pain, headaches, trouble breathing, memory loss, and drug dependence. Stopping suddenly can even cause withdrawal symptoms."

Virginia cut her off, desperate. "If Tyrone came to you, would you treat him?"

Aella paused a little and said, "I'm a doctor. If he books an appointment through the hospital like everyone else, of course I'll treat him."

The call ended, and Virginia forced Tyrone to go find Aella.

Mother and son sat face-to-face on the couch in the office lounge.

Virginia turned to her son. "You heard her. Just go make an appointment. She'll treat you."

Tyrone lowered his head. His voice was calm. "Mom, I already have a doctor. I don't need her."

He had promised Aella he wouldn't bother her again.

And deep down, he knew—even if he died right now, she wouldn't shed a single tear for him.

Virginia suddenly stood up, her voice rising. "Tyrone, this isn't up for discussion!

"I begged you to cherish her," she said, voice trembling. "You didn't listen, and now it ended in divorce."

She pointed at him, her heart breaking. "Son, not every mistake gets a second chance!"

Tyrone's eyes turned red. He nodded hard. "I know, Mom."

Virginia's tears shimmered in her eyes.

"I know

you can't let her go. You feel guilty, you regret everything, and you want to make it right, but you can't.

"You've already hurt her enough. The least you can do now is let her go and wish her happiness."

Tyrone nodded hard, his face twisting in pain. "Yes," he said quietly.

He knew it clearly. He had lost all of his chances in this lifetime.

Tyrone also knew what he needed to do—let her go.

He forced himself not to call her, not to see her again.

But his heart refused to listen.

He missed her. He missed their youth, their marriage, and the lives they might've had.

The memories tore at him until he could barely breathe.

His heart hurt so much, it felt like it had a will of its own—wild and uncontrollable.

Virginia tried to reason with him. "I know Raine is exceptional, but if something happens to you, she can't hold this family together. If you fall, the entire family falls with you."

Tyrone kept his head down, refusing to meet her eyes.

He comforted her softly, "Mom, it's just a minor problem. It's not as bad as you think."

Virginia shook her head, tears gathering. "Not serious? I have eyes, Tyrone. I can see what's happening."

Her voice cracked as her tears finally spilled.

"Son, I carried you for nine months and raised you through every hardship. For you two, I had endured this household for over thirty years. My whole life has been compromise and

endurance. So I'm begging you, please pull yourself together. Let go of Aella. Let her go, and let yourself go too."

She wiped her face and said firmly, "Tomorrow morning, I'll go with you to the hospital. We'll get an appointment with Aella."

Tyrone leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped tight together. He stayed silent for a long moment, then slowly lifted his head.

When he saw his mother's tear-streaked face, his eyes turned red again.

"Okay. I'll do what you say."

That same night, at Regal Club.

Aella came by the bar to pick up Sayer. She ran into the last person she ever wanted to see.

Zach Townsend.

One of the heirs of the Leadverse Group and the fourth grandson in the Townsends, Jenny's half-brother.

Back in college, he had pursued Aella obsessively.

When she rejected him, he bribed one of her classmates to spike her drink.

At the critical moment, Tyrone showed up and saved her.

That night, Tyrone beat Zach half to death, so badly that Zach lost the use of his arm.

Doctors later had to amputate it to save his life.

After the incident, Beatrice was furious and ashamed. She sent Zach overseas to stay out of her sight.

Chapter 375 I Want Him Dead

It had been years since she last saw him. Aella never thought Zach would return to the country.

He still looked handsome and stylish, the kind of spoiled rich boy who'd never worked a day in his life.

In the narrow hallway of the club, Aella spotted him walking toward her. Her heart sank, and she immediately turned to leave.

Zach let out a sharp, teasing whistle. His group of rowdy friends stepped forward and blocked her path.

A waiter nearby wanted to step in, but the manager stopped him. "Do you even know who that is? You got a death wish?"

Aella had nowhere left to run. She stared straight at Zach and said coldly, "Don't forget how you lost that arm."

Her words wiped the smirk right off his face.

His jaw tightened as he lifted his left arm, showing the fake limb beneath his sleeve. His eyes burned with hate. "Tyrone broke my arm because of you. But now you're divorced. Let's see who's dumb enough to stand up for a divorcee like you."

Right in front of everyone, Zach yanked Aella out of the bar.

Vivienne had just come down the stairs and froze when she saw it. After a second's hesitation, she turned and ran back upstairs.

Across the street, Zach shoved Aella into the backseat of a luxury car. He pinned her down, clawing at her clothes like a man gone insane. "I lost my arm because of you!" he yelled. "So tonight, I'm collecting what you owe me!"

Aella fought back with all her strength.

Zach slapped her twice across the face. The blows made her head spin; her lip split open.

Just as she thought all was lost, a loud crash exploded outside. The car window shattered into pieces.

A bleeding hand reached in through the broken glass and unlocked the door. The next second, Zach was dragged out of the car.

"Aella!" Tyrone rushed to the backseat.

He removed his suit and wrapped it around her.

“I want him dead!”

Aella’s voice shook with rage and fear when Tyrone carried her out.

“Then, we’ll kill him,” Tyrone said through clenched teeth.

His arms tightened around her trembling body as his chest heaved with fury.

Zach, panicking, broke free from the men holding him and bolted across the street.

A deafening bang was heard! A black Mercedes G-Class slammed straight into him. His body flew into the air before crashing onto the pavement. His fake arm rolled several feet away.

The car slowly came to a stop. The door opened, and Victor stepped out, cigarette between his lips, calm as ever.

“Mr. Vic!” Aella gasped.

She pushed away from Tyrone and ran toward Victor.

As she ran, Tyrone’s coat slipped off her shoulders and landed in the middle of the road.

Tyrone just stood there, frozen, watching her run into another man’s arms. His eyes slowly turned red.

Victor threw away his freshly lit cigarette and looked straight at Tyrone. “I’m taking her with me. You clean up the mess.”

Tyrone clenched his fists, forcing himself to stay calm as Victor led Aella away.

Across the street, Vivienne's friend nudged her. "Mr. Winter's alone now. Aren't you going to check on him?"

Vivienne shook her head. "I didn't warn him to win his heart. I did it so he'd owe me a favor, something I can use later for my family. I'm not after the man; I'm after leverage."

More than an hour later, at the Reid Residence.

Sayer rushed over after hearing what happened.

The moment he saw the slap mark on Aella's face, he smacked himself hard. "This is all my fault."

Aella had calmed down by then. "Mr. Locke, I'm fine. Just shaken up by that jerk, that's all."

A knock came at the door. Miriam stepped in. "Mr. Fulford is here."

Aella adjusted her clothes. "Mom, let him in."

Miriam tugged at Sayer's sleeve as she left. When he refused to budge, she dragged him out by force.

Mason entered the room. Aella gestured toward the nearby chair. "It's late. Why did you come all the way here?"

But Mason didn't sit. He walked straight to her bedside, bent down, and looked closely at the red mark on her cheek.

He met her eyes and said quietly, "Zach's dead."

The glass slipped from Aella's hand and shattered on the floor.

“I want him dead!”

“Then we’ll kill him.”

For a moment, her mind went blank. She remembered how, in her rage earlier, she’d said those words, and Tyrone seemed to promise to grant her wishes.

A chill ran down her spine. Her mind was in a turmoil.

She carefully looked at Mason and asked, “How did he die?”

Mason crouched beside her. “Zach was taken to the hospital,” he said slowly. “Not long after, Mr. Winter and Mr. Vic both went to visit him. They left together. About half an hour later, the hospital announced Zach’s death. Cardiac failure. Fail resuscitation.”

Aella lowered her eyes, hiding the panic and fear flickering beneath them.

She had made up her mind to never go back, but that didn’t mean she wanted something bad to happen to Tyrone.

Mason’s voice was soft and reassuring. “Even if your suspicions are right, I’ll handle it. You don’t need to worry too much. I got your back.”

Chapter 376 The Button

Aella stared at Mason, lost for words.

After he left, she immediately called Victor. The sound of clattering poker chips and laughter came through the line.

Victor told her not to worry. His car had full insurance, and the crash wasn't his fault.

He said Zach had a weak heart, that he was sick. It was bad luck. "His time was up," Victor said. "It's nobody's fault."

After the call, Aella kept telling herself everything was fine. But she couldn't calm down.

Even past midnight, she was still pacing around her room with her phone in hand.

At the same time, tension filled Edwin's study.

Edwin and Ralph stood by the desk, both wearing grim faces.

Ralph pointed at Tyrone, his voice sharp with anger. "You're the heir of this family! You carry the future of Winter Group on your shoulders. You risk everything for a woman and pull a stunt like this! What were you thinking?"

Tyrone's face was expressionless. "If you really believe I killed him," he said coldly, "then take me to the police."

Edwin trembled with fury, but he couldn't get a single word out.

Meanwhile, chaos erupted at the Townsend Residence.

Jenny snapped, "Zach was family! Tyrone broke his arm once, and we let that go because we didn't want trouble with his family. But now? Zach just got back home. Victor almost ran him over. He ends up dead after Tyrone and Victor show up together? They're clearly spitting in our faces!"

Before Jenny could finish, Beatrice barked, "That's enough! You have no right to speak here."

Zach's mother sobbed, her voice breaking. "Tyrone went to my son's room in the middle of the night! Don't tell me that was innocent. I'll make him pay with his life!"

The whole family was present in the living room; no one dared to speak.

Beatrice finally said, "I've seen the footage. If your son hadn't tried to violate Mr. Winter's ex-wife, if he hadn't run out into the street like a fool, this wouldn't have happened."

Zach's oldest brother shot back, "Grandma, how can you take their side? Maybe the crash was an accident, but what about Tyrone sneaking into Zach's hospital room at night?"

Beatrice replied, "Mr. Vic just called. He and Mr. Winter went to discuss compensation, nothing more."

No one in the Townsend family believed a word of that.

Then Zach's father, Matthew, who had been silent all along, slowly stood up.

He looked around the room, his voice flat and cold. "That fool brought this on himself. He couldn't blame anyone for this. Sign the papers tomorrow and have him cremated. Don't bother inviting anyone."

Zach's mother collapsed on the floor, crying in agony. "My son is gone—just like that! I can't accept it!"

All three brothers of Zach were furious. "Victor and Tyrone bullied Zach! That means they bullied all of us! We can't just let this go!"

Their father shot them a warning glare. "And what exactly are you going to do about it?"

Matthew leaned forward, his voice cold and steady. "Don't forget—there's Mason behind that woman. And when it comes to scheming, not one of you can outsmart Tyrone. He plays dirtier than anyone. And Victor? Do you all forget where he came from?"

Zach's father spoke again, this time heavier. "You want to go through the courts? With Mason standing on her side, do you really think you can win?"

Silence filled the room. Not one of the Townsends has an answer for that.

Finally, Beatrice made the decision. "We'll tell everyone Zach had a hidden illness. He died from a sudden attack; the rescue failed. Tomorrow morning, we'll sign the papers, cremate the body, and send his ashes straight to the cemetery. From now on, no one mentions this again."

Beatrice and Matthew were the only sensible ones in the family.

They knew better. Forget Victor and Mason; just Tyrone alone wasn't someone their family could cross.

If they refused to let this go, they'd end up destroying themselves.

And so, a life vanished quietly from Vleka. No news, no storm—just silence.

The next morning, Aella took the day off and drove straight to Webster Manor.

Victor told her the Townsends had already gone to the hospital to sign the papers and agreed to

cremate the body without pressing charges.

Aella finally breathed out in relief.

Before she left, Victor handed her a button from a man's shirt. His sharp eyes watched her reaction. "I found this on Zach's hospital bed," he said casually.

Ten minutes later, Aella's car rolled out of Webster Manor.

She pulled over by the side of the road and opened her hand. The button sat in her palm.

Her heart sank. She recognized it instantly. It was from Tyrone's shirt, the one she had bought for him herself.

Aella stared at that button for a long time, her thoughts spinning.

When her mind finally cleared, she picked up her phone and called Virginia.

They agreed on an appointment at 2 p.m.; she'd meet Tyrone in her office.

That afternoon, Aella waited for them in her clinic.

Miriam, worried about her daughter, stopped by the hospital to check on her.

Chapter 377 The Same Old Tyrone

Miriam looked worried. "Last night, your father and I accidentally overheard your talk with Mr. Fulford."

Aella comforted her. "Mom, everything's been handled. Don't worry too much."

Miriam hesitated, studying her daughter. "If he really did all that for you, would you ever forgive him?"

Aella shook her head almost instantly.

She could fall for anyone, but not him.

Miriam sighed over and over. "I understand. You don't have to go back to him. But for Virginia's sake, maybe you could at least talk to him. Try to persuade him."

Mother and daughter locked eyes. Aella's eyes turned red.

She said softly, "Mom, I grew up with him. We've known each other for over twenty years and lived as husband and wife for three. No one but me knows how much I loved him and how much I depended on him."

Her voice trembled. "But what I got in return was lies, betrayal, manipulation, coldness, and cruelty. I couldn't leave, couldn't break free. Those years were like living in hell."

She went on, tears falling. "I once held a blade to my wrist. I ran through the red lights, climbed rooftops, and stood on bridges. Did Tyrone ever look back at me for once?"

Miriam's heart aching for hers, tears rolling down.

Aella said bitterly, "The old me died in his hands, along with the child I never got to meet. Tyrone owes me two lives. He can never repay that debt."

Outside the doctor's office, Tyrone quietly dropped his appointment slip from his hand.

His eyes were rimmed with red, and his trembling fingers hung by his side.

When the appointment time passed, Aella still hadn't seen him.

As she walked out, she noticed a piece of paper by the door and bent to pick it up. His name was printed on it.

Her face filled with a complicated expression. She stood there for a long moment, scanning the empty hallway. No sign of Tyrone. Then she turned back into the room, silent.

Aella didn't call Virginia. Tyrone never came back to see her again.

Two days later, Zach's body was cremated and buried. The Townsends didn't inform anyone.

Later, Tyrone and Victor went to their house, offered compensation, and made sure everything looked proper on the surface.

On Thanksgiving, Aella went out to dinner with her family and Sayer—five people in total.

As they arrived at the restaurant and stood outside their private dining room, they unexpectedly ran into the Winters.

In the hallway, the two families faced each other, just a few steps apart.

Aella, graceful and composed, took the initiative. She greeted Virginia politely, then turned to lead her family into the room.

Raine watched Tyrone nervously. His eyes were fixed on Aella, lost in thought.

She leaned closer and whispered, "Tyrone, our room's ready."

He blinked, pulling himself back to reality, then quietly pushed open the door to their private booth.

Once everyone was inside, Raine stayed by the door.

Coincidentally, their room was right next to Aella's.

While they waited for food to be served, Sayer leaned toward Aella with a grin. "Hey, your birthday's coming up soon. Tell me what you want—I'll get it ready early."

Aella glanced at his handsome mixed-race face and teased, "Bring your wife to me at my birthday."

Sayer turned to Miriam. "Miriam, how about you set me up with someone?"

Miriam waved her hands quickly. "Oh no, all the girls I know are from regular families. None of them match your background."

Clyde patted his chest proudly. "Don't worry, Sixer. I'll find you someone when I'm back at school."

Sayer scoffed. "You idiot! What do you think this is, a toy shop? You can't gift a girlfriend!"

His joke sent the whole table into laughter.

But on the other side of the wall, the mood couldn't have been more different.

Tyrone sat in silence, the heavy air pressing down on everyone. He knew it was because of him.

After a moment, he stood up. "I'm stepping out for a smoke."

At the end of the hallway, he found the smoking area. Aella was there, standing by the window, talking on the phone. He took out the cigarette between his lips.

When Aella hung up and turned around, she unexpectedly met Tyrone's steady gaze.

She froze for a moment, then lowered her eyes and started to walk past him.

Tyrone watched her walk away. “Aella,” he said softly, “Happy Thanksgiving.”

Her steps slowed.

She turned back, looking at him from a few feet away.

“If you’re not feeling well,” she said softly, “you should see a doctor.”

Tyrone dropped his unlit cigarette into the trash. He took a few steps toward her—but not too close.

Looking straight into her eyes, he asked quietly, “Will you only see me if I make an appointment?”

They locked eyes.

“Yes,” Aella said firmly.

Tyrone felt a sting in his chest. He turned toward the window, pretending to watch the night outside.

“It’s okay,” he said quietly. “I’m fine.”

Aella frowned, her expression tightening.

Her tone turned firm as she said, “You haven’t changed at all, Tyrone. You’re still the same selfish, calculating man. Even if the whole world fell apart, someone like you would be just fine.”

Chapter 378 Rotten

Tyrone ignored the dull ache in his chest.

He turned to Aella. "You're right about everything. I'm exactly that kind of trash. You've known that since day one."

Aella stepped up to him, furious. "Yeah, you are! You're the worst, Tyrone!"

Her voice shook as she shouted, "Your sister almost stopped talking to me because of you! Your mom looked half-dead begging me to forgive you! Your dad swallowed his pride asking me to talk sense into you! And your grandpa tried to bribe me with fifteen percent of Winter Group just to make me come back to you!"

Her eyes burned with anger. "You used

"You used your sickness to make everyone pressure me! You lied to all of them! You're disgusting!"

Tyrone's fists tightened at his sides.

He stared at her cold, angry eyes. His chest felt like it was breaking apart.

He swallowed hard and said slowly, "Yeah, I used them. I lied. I'm not sick. The medicine, the fainting, the blood—it was all fake."

Aella froze. Then she turned to the few people behind him. Her voice went cold. "You all heard him. He's a liar. The blood, the fainting—it was all an act. He's fine."

She turned and walked away without a glance.

The sound of a slap broke the silence.

Ralph's palm struck Tyrone's face so hard that his head jerked to the side.

Ralph pointed at him, his hand shaking. "You bastard! We worried ourselves sick! You made us look like fools! And this whole time you were lying?"

Tyrone wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

His face went cold. "Did I not make myself clear enough? Why did find her?"

Ralph gritted his teeth. "We did it for you!"

Tyrone gave a short, bitter laugh.

you

all go behind my back to

He said, "Well, now you know I'm fine. So stop humiliating yourselves. Leave her alone, alright?"

From now on, do whatever you want. I don't care anymore."

Ralph turned and stormed off, his anger shaking the room.

Virginia hesitated. "Guess dinner's off. Let's go."

After their parents left, Raine stayed behind, worried. "Tyrone, did you really fake all that?"

Tyrone didn't move. "Just let me be for a while."

Raine lingered, then finally walked away.

The moment she was gone, Tyrone doubled over and coughed up blood that splattered across the floor.

Clyde saw it happen. He went over, saw Tyrone bent with one hand on the wall, pale and shaking, and handed him a tissue.

Tyrone looked

up. His eyes went red when he saw who it was—Aella's brother.

His voice trembled. "Clyde, don't tell your sister."

Clyde shoved his hands into his pockets. "You and my sister are done. You're not part of us anymore. I don't owe you anything."

As Clyde walked past him, Tyrone said weakly, "Clyde ... I'm sorry."

Clyde's steps faltered for a moment, but he didn't look back.

A waiter walked up. "Sir, do you need help?"

Tyrone shook his head.

He didn't even remember how he got home.

He fell onto the couch, pale and weak. Everywhere he looked, he saw Aella's face.

He took out the crystal pendant he always carried. Pain twisted deep in his chest.

He didn't deserve love.

He didn't deserve trust.

He didn't deserve to be alive.

He owed Aella twice now, and even his death wouldn't be enough to repay her.

In the empty room, his quiet sobs filled the air.

He whispered, "Aella, don't worry. I won't bother you again."

He meant it.

And he kept his word.

From that day on, he never showed up in front of her again.

They went their separate ways, like two lines that would never meet.

Soon, November eighth came—Aella's birthday.

That morning, she got up to wash her face. As she bent over the sink, something slid down from her collarbone.

She reached for her necklace, but the chain snapped.

It slipped through her fingers and vanished down the drain.

The diamond necklace Tyrone had put on her was gone.

She stared into the mirror, a strange fear rising in her chest.

That necklace—Tyrone had put it on her the day they divorced.

She had only taken it off once.

It had driven him into a rage. He dragged her home from the hospital and forced it back around her neck himself.

After that, she never dared take it off again.

And now it had broken, slipping away just like that.

Aella turned off the faucet. She stood frozen, staring at the sink, her thoughts spinning.

At the same time, Tyrone stood in front of his own bathroom mirror in the same posture.

He had just showering, a dark robe wrapped around him. Drops of water slid down his

hair onto his face.

Chapter 379 Shave

Tyrone shaved with focus, each stroke careful and neat. His hair was combed perfectly to one side, clean and sharp.

He had gotten a trim the day before. The sides were faded close, his look tidy and fresh, like he was trying to pull himself together.

He walked into the dressing room. The long table was covered in fancy gift boxes wrapped in ribbons.

It was Aella's birthday. He wasn't invited. He knew he didn't deserve to be. Still, he wanted to look decent.

Aella used to tease him, saying his suits looked too stiff, too businesslike.

After their wedding, she had gone out herself and bought him a few that felt more relaxed.

He picked one of those now and changed into it.

In front of the mirror, he buttoned his cufflinks, tightened his tie, slipped on his watch, and tucked her crystal pendant into his pocket.

As he turned, his elbow hit one of the boxes on the table.

He bent to grab it, forgetting he was holding the pendant. It slipped from his hand and fell to the floor.

He stepped forward—and felt something crack under his shoe.

The faint sound sliced through the quiet room.

He froze. His body went rigid. Then he lifted his foot fast.

The glass around the small baby photo inside the pendant had shattered.

He just stood there, staring down at it. The pieces scattered across the floor like broken ice. His chest ached as if something inside him had split the same way.

Pain twisted through him, sharp and deep.

He hunched over, gripping the edge of the table for balance.

The taste of iron filled his mouth. Then blood spilled past his lips. His whole body shook, more blood following until it streaked down his chin.

His vision blurred. His knees hit the floor hard as all his strength left him.

He couldn't even tell what part of him hurt anymore.

His hands trembled as he picked up the shattered pieces. His eyes turned red as he tried to fit them back together.

The more he tried, the worse it got. His breathing quickened, his hands shaking harder. His chest burned with helpless anger.

He kept going, desperate, frantic. But the pieces refused to fit. The pendant would never look the same again.

He slid down to the floor, his back against the table leg.

He leaned his head back, eyes glistening. Tears rolled down silently, soaking his shirt collar.

It felt like even heaven had decided he'd suffered enough—and still wasn't done punishing him. Aella's last gift was gone too.

His stare turned empty. The light in his eyes faded to nothing.

He reached for his phone.

He called his sister first. Told her he wasn't coming into work. Told her to handle things without him.

Then he called his mom. Told her not to worry, that he just needed rest.

Last, he called Brad.

"Take a photo of Aella at the party," he said softly. "Send it to me."

It was her birthday. She'd wear a dress. She'd look beautiful. He wanted to see her one last time.

By seven that night, the birthday dinner had begun.

Sayer had organized the whole event himself.

Aella couldn't focus all day. No matter what she tried to do, her mind kept wandering.

For the party, she had pulled a V-neck mesh dress from her closet. The black fitted top faded into a smoky gray tulle skirt. It was simple, yet graceful, soft, and a little romantic.

Her makeup was light, her hair loose with soft waves curling around her face.

She looked quiet, calm, understated.

Sayer, though, looked like he walked out of a magazine. Stylish and confident, he stood beside her, naturally catching eyes.

He glanced at her outfit. "Aella, you're really going for subtle tonight, huh?"

Aella gave him a tired look. "Guess I just haven't slept well lately. My head feels foggy."

Mason, nearby, said gently, "It's all over now. Nothing else will happen. Try to relax."

She nodded, lowering her gaze.

"You handle things here. I'll take my kid to the restroom," Mason said.

until the guests arrived.

He had shown up early with his son, keeping her company until the

When they did, he excused himself to give her space.

More people poured in with smiles and gifts. Aella straightened her back and forced herself to greet them.

What she didn't expect was Vivienne's arrival.

Vivienne looked sharp as ever in her fitted blazer. She handed Aella a gift and smiled. "Ms. Reid, I hope you don't mind me dropping by uninvited."

Aella accepted it with a small smile. "I'm flattered, really."

They shared a polite look and both smiled faintly.

Vivienne said, “Dr. Reid, you’re one of the most remarkable women I’ve ever met.”

Aella smiled again but knew the truth. Vivienne was sharper, savvier, and never lost control. She had much to learn from Vivienne.

Vivienne didn’t linger. She turned and walked toward another

group.

Then Victor walked in. Aella immediately stepped forward. “Mr. Vic.”

Victor was tall and striking. He wore a black blazer over a deep red shirt with a low V-neck. Every step revealed the faint line of muscle under the fabric.

Chapter 380 The Party

His hands were buried in his pockets. He tilted his head slightly toward the gift box tucked under his arm.

Aella had grown used to Victor’s reckless taste in clothes. She reached out and grabbed the box from under his arm. “Thanks, Mr. Vic.”

Sayer let out a low whistle. “You’re seriously touching that thing? Don’t you smell how strong it is?”

Victor’s eyes narrowed, the look he gave could have cut steel. “Man, please. I smell like heaven. Even my leg hair smells better than your cologne.”

Aella blinked at him, completely lost for words.

Just then, Beatrice walked in. “Aella.”

The sight of the Townsends made Victor's face twist like he'd bitten something sour. Without another word, he turned on his heel and headed straight for Mason.

Aella hadn't expected Beatrice to show up, not after the mess with Zach. She hurried forward to greet her, forcing a polite smile.

What caught her off guard even more was the crowd that followed behind. Half of them were complete strangers.

She tugged on Sayer's sleeve and whispered, "Did you invite all these people?"

Sayer shook his head. "No way. They probably came crawling on their own. They're trying to get close to your new circle."

Aella didn't bother arguing.

Everyone in this social scene understood one rule—follow power. Friendship here had a price tag, and loyalty only lasted as long as someone was useful.

They weren't here to celebrate her birthday. They were here to be seen by Victor and Mason, hoping for a chance to latch onto their success.

And if she ever fell from grace, they'd crush her like dirt under their heels.

By the time the clock crept toward eight, her parents came over, smiling gently. "Aella, everyone's here now. It's time to cut the cake."

Aella's eyes drifted toward the spinning glass doors. "Let's wait just a little longer, Mom."

Right then, the doors turned, and Brad and Raine stepped through.

Aella's gaze landed on Raine's fitted gray suit, and she instantly knew the girl had come straight from work without stopping.

Brad handed the gift to Raine and gave her a small nod, telling her to go

ahead.

Raine didn't hesitate. She walked over to Aella, her voice soft but sincere. "Happy birthday, Aella."

Aella's eyes burned, her throat tight. She pulled Raine into a hug. "I knew you'd show up."

Clyde came over, glancing around. "Aella, is anyone else still missing?"

Aella took one last look at the crowd, then shook her head. "Everyone's here. Let's begin."

Raine and Brad exchanged a quiet look.

Raine lowered her head, sadness darkening her eyes.

In Aella's heart, her brother had already become someone she couldn't see anymore.

Brad squeezed Raine's shoulder gently, trying to comfort her.

Before the cake cutting, Mason's calm voice broke through the chatter. "Dr. Reid, maybe say a few words before we start."

Aella turned toward him, surprised. She hadn't expected the composed lawyer to make a request like that.

As the crowd began to cheer, she smiled faintly and cleared her throat.

Brad and Raine stayed near the back, standing close to the wall.

Brad hesitated, then pulled out his phone and tapped on Tyrone's name.

The video call connected almost instantly.

"Hey," Brad said, frowning. "Where are you, man?"

Tyrone's voice came through, low and tired. He said he was changing and couldn't turn on the camera.

With all the noise around him, Brad didn't press it. He just kept the call open.

Aella stood at the center of the room, her voice gentle yet firm. "Thank you all for being here

The crowd quieted as her words filled the air. "I'm twenty-seven today. And this year ... feels like the start of a new life."

Her tone softened, but her presence filled the space.

"I'm happy tonight because everyone I love, and everyone who loves me, is here. That's all I could ever ask for.

"From this moment on, I'm starting over. I'm leaving the past behind. From now on, I'll love myself the way I should have all along.

“I hope each of you finds your own light. May your mornings be warm, and your nights be filled with stars.”

Everything that once tore her apart had turned into the strength that kept her standing.

In the back, Raine clutched her phone tightly. The image on the screen trembled as she whispered, “Tyrone, wait for me. I’ll buy you a cake. We’ll celebrate when I get home.”

Her brother’s birthday was October twenty–eighth. Aella’s was November eighth. Their birthdays had always been less than two weeks apart.

He used to delay his own celebration just so they could share it together.

Last month, she and their mom had cooked a full meal and ordered a cake. But that night, he had disappeared.

He didn’t come back until the next morning, silent and pale.

Brad saw Tyrone’s screen still blank, his silence dragging on. He sighed and ended the call.

He didn’t want to kill the mood. Without saying a word to Aella, he took Raine’s hand and led her out.

When he noticed her red eyes, he pulled her close. “Come on. Let’s go get that cake. We’ll celebrate your brother’s birthday properly.”

At that same moment, inside the dark house Tyrone once shared with Aella, the air was painfully still.

The whole place was swallowed in shadow. Only one faint light glowed from the dressing room, flickering weakly like a dying star.