

## Once Cast 381

### Chapter 381 Bloody

Tyrone sent his last message, and his body gave out as if every ounce of life had drained away.

Blood pooled around him, dark and glossy in some spots, fresh and wet in others. Not far from him, a bottle of pills lay on its side, its contents scattered across the floor like bits of broken light.

His right hand stayed clenched tight. A sharp edge had pierced his palm, and blood dripped from it, slow and steady, forming tiny trails down his wrist.

His expression was calm, almost too calm, like he had finally found peace. But his eyes were lifeless, staring at the ceiling without focus.

His breathing came in shallow, uneven pulls, yet the tears wouldn't stop falling.

He kept his eyes open, and in his mind, there was only Aella.

He saw her as a child, soft and chubby, laughter spilling from her lips as she chased him through the yard.

When she couldn't catch him, she'd plop down on the floor, fake a cry, and wait for him to turn around and lift her

up.

As she grew older, she still followed him everywhere.

When she called his name, her voice sounded like honey melting in the sun.

When he ignored her, she'd pout and make a scene until he caved, every time.

Then one day, her gaze changed. Her eyes carried the spark of first love, innocent yet dangerous.

She stayed close, fearless, teasing him with quick touches or sudden kisses that left him frozen.

And when other girls came too close, she'd smirk and say, "Stay back. He's going to marry me when we grow up."

When he finally asked her to marry him, her world had stopped.

He could still see the disbelief in her eyes, the tears spilling as she kept asking, "Even now? Even though my family lost everything?"

After their wedding, she changed again. Her wild edges softened. She became gentle, thoughtful, a quiet warmth that filled every corner of his life. He did not notice that.

Her smile was like sunlight after a storm.

She'd always say, "I love you more than I love myself."

She had promised she'd never walk away, no matter what happened.

But in the end, she did.

She left without hesitation, without a single glance behind her.

He was the one who crushed that love, who erased her laughter, who tore her happiness apart piece by piece.

Now she was someone new. Confident. Beautiful. Untouchable.

She stood in her own light, surrounded by people who admired her. People stronger than him. People worthy of her. There was no longer a place for him in her life.

Tyrone shut his eyes. Tears slid down, soaking into the floor beneath him.

He had always thought love was fake, something people made up to fill the emptiness inside them.

But what Aella gave him had been real. It had burned bright enough to light his entire world.

Now he finally understood what love was. What happiness meant.

But it was too late.

Regret tore through him, raw and endless.

His lips moved, barely forming the words. "Aella, if I ever get another life, I'll keep myself clean. I won't ruin it again."

His voice broke. "Aella, I'm sorry. I love you."

Then, at last, the pain slipped away.

The tension in his body eased, like the weight of the world had lifted from his shoulders.

His hand opened slowly, revealing a bloody mess of flesh and crystal shards. The pendant's fragments were buried deep in his palm, tangled with skin and blood until they became one. There was no telling where he ended and the glass began.

...

That night, the house stayed still.

Brad and Raine came back carrying a birthday cake. They flicked on the living room light.

They set the cake on the table and followed the faint glow coming from the bedroom.

The moment they stepped into the dressing room, the smell of blood hit them hard.

“Tyrone!”

Raine’s scream shattered the silence as her knees gave out beneath her.

Brad froze for half a second, then grabbed his phone with shaking hands and called 911. His voice was steady but low, the kind of calm that came right before panic. Then he called the Winters’ estate.

Tyrone was rushed to the hospital.

By 8:30 a.m. the next morning, Aella arrived at her office.

Daniel came in right after her. His face looked grave, heavy with something unsaid.

Aella frowned. “Daniel, what’s going on?”

He took several deep breaths before speaking.

His voice was low. “Last night at 11:59 p.m., Mr. Winter went into cardiac arrest. They couldn’t save him.”

Aella's body went still.

She stared at him, her mind refusing to process the words,

Seconds crawled by like hours.

Then she let out a shaky laugh. "That's not possible."

Daniel's voice softened but stayed serious. "The Winters are still at the hospital. You can see him if you want. They're at the morgue."

Their eyes met. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Aella turned away.

She ran her hands through her hair, trying to steady herself. Her eyes swept around the office she had built her career in.

She picked up her purse, drew in a long breath, and said quietly, "Daniel, I need two days off."

Daniel nodded.

She walked out, her steps uneven. Her face was pale as paper.

Daniel followed her to the door, uneasy. "Let me drive you home. You need rest."

The car ride was silent. Neither of them said a word.

When they reached her house, she stepped out quickly and ran toward the gate, not even turning back.

She pushed open the door and entered the yard.

Her parents, Warren and Miriam, were out trimming flowers. Both looked up, startled.

Warren set the pot down. "I thought you had a meeting this morning. Why are you back so early?"

Aella clutched her purse tight, her hands trembling.

Miriam noticed the panic in her daughter's eyes. Her own smile faded as she removed her gloves. "Aella, what's wrong?"

Chapter 382 His Death

Miriam reached for Aella's hand, but the instant her fingers touched it, she froze. Aella's hand was cold and stiff, her knuckles white, her fingers trembling like a leaf barely holding on before the wind could take it.

Miriam's voice shook with fear. "Aella, talk to me. What happened?"

Aella stared at her parents. Her lips parted, but no words came. It was as if her throat had forgotten how to work.

Her parents exchanged anxious glances, panic starting to settle in.

Warren's tone sharpened. "Enough of this silence. Tell us what's going on, or I'm calling Daniel right now."

He reached into his pocket, already pulling out his phone.

Aella quickly caught his wrist. "Dad, please don't. I'm fine."

Her voice trembled as she forced the words out. "It's Tyrone. He's dead."

The words hung in the air like thunder before a storm.

Her

parents went still. They stared at her, both shaking their heads. "That's impossible."

Aella said, "He had a heart attack at home last night. They took him to the hospital, but... they couldn't bring him back."

Warren turned away sharply. His shoulders slumped as he let out a deep, hollow sigh that filled the room.

Miriam's eyes welled up

almost instantly.

Aella's chest ached as she looked at them.

Tyrone had hurt her more times than she could count, but he had grown up right under their roof. He had once been like family. Losing him broke them too.

But she could never keep that a secret from them.

She tried to comfort them, but her words came out quiet and shaky. When they didn't respond, she turned and locked herself in her room.

By noon, Sayer came by.

...

Miriam told him that Aella had been shut in her room all morning and hadn't spoken to

anyone.

Clyde hesitated, his voice small. "On Thanksgiving, I saw him cough up blood. It looked bad. He told me not to tell Aella. He said he was sorry."

Sayer dragged a hand down his face, his jaw tight. "Great. Just great. Now Aella's birthday and Tyrone's death will fall on the same day. What a damn gift he left her."

No one spoke after that. The room was heavy with silence and grief.

Aella's twenty-seventh birthday had become Tyrone's death day. No one could have seen it coming.

Inside her room, Aella stood in front of the mirror in a plain white dress.

She listened to their voices outside, her expression unreadable, but her eyes shimmered with quiet pain.

Tyrone had lied to her twice. The first time, he pretended he was on a business trip when he was actually taking care of Zera.

The second was on Thanksgiving, when he swore he wasn't sick.

She turned the handle and stepped out, her movements slow and composed.

Her tone was flat, almost emotionless. "It's too stuffy in here. I'm going out."

Everyone looked at her but said nothing. Their concern hung in the air, but no one dared stop her.

As soon as she left, Miriam whispered, "It's cold out. Clyde, grab a jacket and go sister."

with your

Sayer pulled a thin blanket off the couch and tossed it over his arm before tugging Clyde along.

Aella walked down the street outside the gate, her steps heavy and unhurried.

November in Vleka was quiet and gray. The cold air bit at her skin, sharp and merciless, filling her lungs with the taste of winter.

The whole city seemed wrapped in silence, the kind that pressed against the chest and made breathing feel heavier.

The chill seeped through her coat, dulling everything—her thoughts, her senses, her will.

She didn't know how long she'd been walking. When she finally looked up, she was standing in

front of the old Reid house.

Through the iron gate, she saw that the yard was still tidy. Someone had been taking care of it.

The swing in the corner looked freshly painted, the wood smooth and gleaming under the weak light.

Aella froze, her breath catching in her chest. The scene before her blurred as old memories clawed their way back.

She saw herself as a little girl, sitting on that swing, laughing so hard her cheeks hurt. Tyrone was behind her, wearing a white shirt, his sleeves rolled up as he pushed her higher and higher.

She could almost hear her younger voice echoing through the air. "Higher, Tyrone! Push me higher!"

He laughed behind her, his voice soft. One hand gripped the swing while the other hovered in the air, ready to catch her if she slipped.

Aella blinked away the tears gathering in her eyes. She turned and kept walking.

When her legs started to ache, she stopped for a moment, then moved again, one step after another.

By afternoon, the city around her was alive with noise. Cars rushed past, horns blaring, lights flashing, but she didn't notice any of it.

She stopped beside an old tree, resting her palm against the rough bark.

Years ago, this neighborhood had been filled with old houses and small gardens before the city tore it all down.

After her family lost everything, her parents had moved here with her and Clyde. They'd stayed for years.

Life back then had been cold and harsh. People looked at them with pity, some with disgust. Only a few had stood by them.

Beatrice, her grandmother's closest friend. Virginia.

And then Brad, Raine, and Tyrone—the ones who had grown up beside her, who had known her before the world turned cruel.

They were the ones who made those

years bearable.

She remembered those nights after their engagement was announced. Tyrone would come find her almost every night.

They'd hide behind this tree, whispering, holding each other like the world didn't exist beyond it. Sometimes, when he couldn't hold back, he'd pull her close and kiss her until she melted in

his arms.

Sometimes he'd carry her into his car, but most nights, he'd take her home after hours of quiet moments that felt like eternity.

He hadn't truly loved her, not the way she loved him. But back then, everyone thought they were perfect together. They looked like a dream, even if it was only an illusion.

By the time the sun set, the streets near her old school were covered in gold and brown leaves. Her shoes brushed through them with a faint sound as she walked.

She stopped to watch a young couple on the sidewalk, their voices rising as they argued, their faces flushed with love and anger. It was messy, human, alive.

Night crept over the city.

Aella wandered into the heart of downtown, where neon lights flickered and the smell of food filled the air.

She stopped at a small street stall that sold pasta and ordered a plate.

Chapter 383 The City at Night

Aella was halfway through her pasta when her chest tightened. The taste turned dry, heavy like paper on her tongue. She pushed the plate aside, stood up, and walked away in silence.

The night felt endless and hollow.

She stood by the crosswalk as the lights changed again and again. Green. Yellow. Red. Green. She didn't move.

"Give me a piggy-back ride, Tyrone."

Across the street, a teenage boy carried a laughing girl on his back. Her laughter was soft and wild, cutting through the quiet like sunlight through clouds. The boy groaned and said, "Hold on tighter, idiot, or you'll fall."

Aella watched them. Her heart twisted until it hurt.

Behind her, Sayer and Clyde trailed close enough to see her but far enough to give her space.

Clyde rubbed his palms together. His voice was tight. "Sixer, is my sister okay?"

Sayer had a blanket thrown over one arm. His hazel eyes stayed on Aella's back. "Let her walk. She'll come home when she's tired."

Clyde's throat bobbed. "You think she's still hung up on him?"

Sayer dragged his hand down his face. "He's dead. She doesn't have a choice now. But she's known him her whole life. You don't erase that in a night."

Then his phone started ringing.

He picked it up, and his expression went pale fast.

When the call ended, he grabbed Clyde's arm. "Come on. Move!"

Aella saw them running and frowned. "What are you doing here?"

Sayer rushed to her side and wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. "Brad's been calling you. Edwin took his own life. OD-ed. Mrs. Winter fainted again. It's the third time, and she still hasn't woken up. Brad wants you to come."

Aella froze like her body forgot how to breathe.

After a long silence, she spoke softly. "Mr. Locke, take me home. I need to change."

At home, she went to her room and came out dressed in black.

Clyde grabbed his jacket, his tone firm. "Aella, the Winters lost two people in two days. They're wrecked. You shouldn't go alone."

Aella shook her head. She took his jacket and placed it back on the couch.

Her face was calm but hard. "Don't worry about me. No matter how they feel, I have to go."

Her parents exchanged looks. They didn't stop her.

Sayer ended up driving her. He insisted.

When their car rolled through the open gates of Winter Estate, the dead of the night was creeping in slow.

The air was thick and cold, heavy with silence.

Aella stepped out of the car. Brad was waiting near the front steps.

He looked wrecked, eyes red and shadowed.

“All the main Winters and the McCarthys are already here. The rest will be here by morning. Mr. Ralph and Virginia are barely holding on. Raine’s falling apart. That’s why I called you.”

Aella nodded. She didn’t speak.

She followed him down the long, dim hallway.

The sky outside was dark, but above the estate, the darkness felt heavier, like grief had weight and shape.

The servants moved like ghosts, quiet and careful, their eyes fixed on the floor.

At the main hall, Aella saw Raine standing near the doorway. She was pale, swaying, held up by two people.

Aella stopped in front of her. “Raine, I’m sorry.”

She had promised herself she wouldn’t cry. She had sworn she’d stay strong.

But seeing Raine like this made her heart splinter.

Raine’s face was red and raw. Her eyes were empty. When she saw Aella, her tears came again.

Her voice shook. “My brother said I can’t hate you.”

Even dying, Tyrone had sent a message.

He told her to

take care of their parents. To protect the company.

He said Aella would always be his sister-in-law. He said she must never resent her.

Those were the last words he left behind. Raine had carried them like chains.

Aella's lashes trembled. She lowered her gaze and walked past Raine.

She had thought she was ready for this.

But hearing that Tyrone's final words were about her felt like a blade to the heart.

In the living room, Ralph was waiting.

The man who had once been sharp and proud now looked like his own shadow. Even walking was laborious. He needed help just to take a step.

His back was bent. His hair was gray. In just two days, grief had eaten him alive.

When he saw Aella, he stopped. His shaking hand brushed away the person holding him up.

He pointed at her, his whole body trembling.

Aella looked straight at him. "Mr. Winter, if you don't want me here, I'll leave."

Ralph's finger shifted toward the main bedroom. His voice cracked. "Thank you for coming."

Aella's chest tightened. She hadn't expected that.

He had lost his father and his son. For years, he had hated her.

But pain had stripped him bare, leaving only sorrow.

She said nothing and followed Brad toward the main bedroom.

Virginia had just woken up when Aella entered.

The second she saw her, she broke down, sobbing hard. The others stepped back, leaving them alone.

Aella sat beside her, eyes red. She pulled her close and whispered, "Virginia, I'm sorry. I really

am."

From the doorway, Sayer watched her finally cry. He let out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

Brad told him to stay with her, then went to find Raine.

In the quiet side hall, Brad patted her shoulder and said softly, "Come here." He let Raine rest her head on his shoulder as the silence stretched into morning.

#### Chapter 384 Grieving Family

Raine buried her face against Brad's chest, her whole body trembling as tears soaked through his shirt. "Brad, I'm terrified!"

In one night, her brother was gone. Her grandfather too. Her parents had nearly followed them out of heartbreak.

Now the entire Winter family had crumbled, and she was the only one left standing.

She tried to hold it together, but the weight on her shoulders felt like stone.

Every breath hurt. Every step forward felt like walking into a storm she couldn't escape.

Brad held her close, his voice low but steady. "You're not alone, Raine. I'll be here even if the world around us starts to collapse. After the funeral, I'm moving into the estate. I'll go to the office with you every morning. We'll take care of Mr. Ralph and Virginia together."

At three in the morning, Brad knocked on Aella's door.

"Tyrone and Mr. Edwin will be cremated at sunrise. We need to pick a suit for Tyrone. He deserves to look proper one last time."

An hour later, Aella followed Brad into the home she once shared with Tyrone.

The moment she stepped into the foyer, her eyes fell on the shoe rack. Two pairs of fuzzy pink slippers sat beside Tyrone's black leather ones, lined up side by side like nothing had changed.

Everything in the living room was still where she had left it.

Her glass sat on the same corner of the coffee table.

Aella stood in the center of the room, her eyes locked on the unopened cake sitting on the table like a ghost of yesterday.

Brad pointed at it, his voice heavy. "I called him last night. He refused to show his face on video. Raine and I got worried, so we left early, bought a cake, and came here. When we arrived, he was already gone."

Aella didn't speak. She stared at the cake, her expression blank, her heart a hollow echo.

Tyrone had been four years older.

She was twenty-seven. He had just turned thirty-one.

At her birthday party, she'd said twenty-seven would be her new beginning.

She never imagined it would also mark his end.

They stepped into the main bedroom.

Everything looked untouched, but the air carried a thick, metallic scent that burned her nose.

Aella froze. Brad stood near the doorway of the closet, his tone rough. "That's where it happened. No one's cleaned it since. It all happened so fast."

Aella walked inside, her heels clicking softly against the floor. When the light hit, the stains came into view—dark red and dry.

Near the marks lay a small bottle and a handful of scattered pills.

She bent down, picked it up, and read the label.

Oxycodone.

A strong painkiller.

Her fingers clenched around the bottle until her knuckles turned white. She looked at the floor again, but her mind had gone blank.

Brad called her name a few times before she finally heard him.

Her body shook.

As she turned, her elbow knocked against a box on the table. It hit the floor with a dull sound.

Brad stooped to pick it up, his voice soft but strained.

“He started buying you these months ago. I told him you wouldn’t want them, but he wouldn’t stop. He said he needed to do it anyway.”

He hesitated, then went on. “After the divorce, Tyrone tried to change. He really did. He wanted to live for his family. But guilt doesn’t let go. It eats you from the inside. In the end, it broke

him.”

Brad’s eyes dimmed. “When they found him, he was still holding the crystal pendant you gave him. It was shattered, but he never let go.”

Everyone had their own way of loving.

Edwin had been harsh, controlling, cruel even. He wanted Tyrone to be perfect, to bend under

his will.

But when Tyrone died, Edwin followed. Grief had taken him too.

Love could be a strange thing.

Tyrone had hurt Aella, but he had loved her in silence.

Even stillness could be a form of devotion.

He had broken her heart, yet his love had stayed—quiet, stubborn, unending.

Aella said nothing. She opened the wardrobe and picked out a dark suit, her movements careful and slow.

Her back was turned to Brad.

Yes, she knew her distance right now made her look heartless. Cruel, even.

But she wasn't always like this.

She and Tyrone were both Scorpios.

And both of them shared a fatal flaw.

Love and hatred always flowed deeply in their veins.

She brushed off the lint, adjusted the collar, and folded it neatly.

Brad spoke softly. "You don't have to forgive him. That's your right. No one gets to judge you for that. Don't carry any guilt."

Aella nodded once. Her eyes were flat, unreadable.

They returned to the estate. No one slept.

The house was wrapped in silence, waiting for morning. Waiting for the ceremony.

Brad broke it quietly. "When they take the body out, his face will look different. Virginia won't be able to stand it. Try to talk her out of going."

Aella's tone was even. "I won't go either. I'll stay with her. Call me after the cremation. I'll take her to the cemetery."

Chapter 385 The Farewell

Sayer stood by Virginia's door, zipping up his jacket. "Clyde's flight's at dawn. I'll drive him there myself."

Aella reached out and tugged the zipper to the top. "Mr. Locke, thank you."

Sayer gave her a look. "He's my brother too. Don't thank me. I'm leaving."

After he left, Aella headed for the kitchen.

She made a small pot of warm rejuvenating grits, soft and rich. She coaxed Virginia to eat a few bites, then scooped another bowl and carried it to Raine.

Downstairs, in the quiet side hall, Raine sat on the couch, her face pale and her eyes empty.

Aella hesitated, unsure how to speak.

After a moment, she said softly, "You still have a lot to handle tomorrow. Eat something. You need strength for what's ahead."

Raine didn't take the bowl. Her red eyes filled again. "Tomorrow's the funeral. Are you going to see Tyrone one last time?"

Their eyes met.

Aella shook her head.

Raine turned away without another word.

Aella set the bowl on the table and glanced at Brad before quietly walking out.

The dead were gone.

Whether she saw him again or not didn't matter anymore.

When Aella left, Raine broke down. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed. "If Tyrone's up there watching, she's the only one he'd want to see."

Brad guided her to sit, kneeling to slip off her wet shoes.

Raine clutched his arm, crying so hard her words came out in gasps.

"Brad, you know what he was like. My brother, my dad, my grandpa—they all had that same damn temper."

Her voice trembled. “Tyrone used to threaten me every time I messed up. He’d say he’d freeze my cards, stop my allowance, or ship me out of the country. But he never did it. He just wanted to scare me. That was how he showed love.”

Her sobs grew heavier. “He treated Aella the same way. Yeah, he hurt her. But deep down, all he wanted was to keep her close. He didn’t mean to destroy her.”

Her voice cracked again. “I get why she won’t forgive him. But he’s gone now. Why can’t she look at him one last time?”

Brad pulled her into his arms, his hand steady against her back.

He spoke quietly. “Raine, Aella and Tyrone were done long before this. She’s only here for you and Virginia. It’s not about him anymore.”

The words stung, but they were true.

Raine’s crying slowed. The pain stayed carved in her face. Deep down, she already knew Brad was right.

At dawn, the sky turned gray, and the first rain of winter began to fall.

The drizzle wasn’t heavy, but it soaked everything it touched.

By morning, the Winter estate was crowded with mourners.

Aella stayed upstairs with Virginia, never leaving her side.

Visitors came one after another. Their eyes said everything—some cold, some pitying, some sharp with blame, others soft with sympathy.

Aella kept her head down, her face calm, her expression steady.

When the last guest left, she stepped outside to breathe.

Virginia noticed she hadn't returned. She pushed herself out of bed, her hands shaking.

Aella stood under the veranda, the wind blowing rain onto her hair and shoulders.

Her face was wet, though it was impossible to tell if it was from tears or rain.

Virginia stopped at the doorway and saw her staring toward the southwest—the direction of the crematorium. Tears welled in her eyes again, and she turned back into the room.

Two hours later, Brad called. It was time for the burial. Time for us to go.

Aella helped Virginia into the car. The ride was silent.

Virginia didn't cry. Her eyes were empty, but grief hung in the air like thunder that never struck.

When they reached the base of the hill, Aella helped her out. Relatives who had been waiting stepped forward to guide Virginia up the slope.

Aella stood still, watching them go.

Then a black umbrella appeared over her head. She turned and saw Mason.

He was dressed in black, his face solemn. "Come on. I'll walk with you."

They climbed together, rain tapping softly against the umbrella.

Halfway up, Aella looked ahead and saw a sea of black suits. The crowd was massive.

Last night, the Winter Group had released its official statement. “Company president Tyrone Winter dies of sudden cardiac arrest. Mr. Edwin Winter passes soon after from grief.”

They had covered up Tyrone’s medical records and the truth about Edwin’s death.

The tragedy had shattered the family.

The Winters and the McCarthys had agreed to keep the funeral simple. The cremation happened the same day.

But the turnout was overwhelming. Business leaders, politicians, and even foreign royals had flown in overnight.

It was proof of how powerful the Winters were—and how far Tyrone’s influence had reached.

When Virginia’s cries echoed through the rain, Aella turned her face away.

Minutes passed.

Then Virginia’s body gave out. She collapsed beside her son’s grave.

Raine fell to her knees, clutching the cold headstone with shaking hands. She screamed Tyrone’s name again and again, her voice breaking until there was nothing left but silence and

rain.

Chapter 386 The Grave

“Tyrone, you promised me. You said we’d take that family trip before the year ended.

“We even pinky-swore. You looked me right in the eye and promised!

“You liar! Don’t you dare sleep through this! Wake up! Get up!”

Her cries tore through the silence like glass shattering.

In the end, Brad had to pull her away, his arms locking around her as she screamed and fought to stay.

By noon, the hill had emptied. The mourners were gone.

Mason walked up quietly, a white rose resting in his palm. “Here,” he murmured.

Aella reached out and took it.

She walked toward Tyrone’s grave, every step heavy.

Mason stayed behind, silent beneath the gray sky, the umbrella steady in his hand.

Aella knelt by the headstone and placed the rose down.

Her eyes lingered on his photo—young, proud, too serious for someone who had barely lived.

Her voice came out calm, though her throat burned. “Tyrone, whatever we had ends here.”

She rose slowly, staring down at his name carved in stone. “If there’s a next life, we’ll be strangers. I’ll make sure of that.”

When she turned, Mason stepped closer and held the umbrella over her.

They met eyes, both wordless, both heavy with thoughts they couldn't say.

They walked down the hill together, the sound of rain filling the silence between them.

At the bottom, Mason spoke softly. "Do you want me to drive you to the Winters?"

Aella shook her head. "No. I'm going home."

Some wounds could only heal from within. Virginia and Raine were surrounded by people now. They didn't need her. Even if she went, she couldn't do anything for them.

When she got home, it was almost three.

Clyde was at college. Sayer had gone to help Daniel.

Aella sat at the dining table, staring at the food she couldn't eat.

Her stomach felt hollow.

Across from her, her parents were just as silent.

The whole house was drowned in still air, thick and unmoving.

Finally, Aella forced a faint smile and told her parents not to worry, saying a few gentle words she didn't believe.

She stayed home one day, then went back to work.

When Daniel saw her at the hospital, his brows drew together. "You came back already? You should rest more."

Aella shook her head. "I should keep myself busy."

Daniel sighed but didn't argue.

Keeping herself busy was also keeping those thoughts at bay.

Aella threw herself into her work, losing track of time.

Since the day she'd heard Tyrone was gone, she hadn't cried once.

The tears were there, buried deep, but they refused to come.

She didn't know how to comfort others either.

All she could do was keep living.

People could say she was cold or heartless. They could think what they wanted.

She owed no one an apology.

As evening neared, her phone rang. It was Brad.

She met him outside the clinic parking lot. He stood beside his car, the glow of his cigarette bright in the rain.

“Brad.”

She jogged up to him. He flicked the cigarette away and opened the car door. “Get in. Let’s talk inside.

She climbed into the passenger seat.

He handed her a card and a folder.

Aella hesitated. She didn’t take them.

Brad leaned back. “Tyrone sent me an email a few hours before he died. I just saw it this morning.”

His voice softened. “He wanted you to have these. The card and the house deed.”

Aella stared at the items for a moment, then shook her head. “I don’t want them.”

Brad frowned. “This was his last wish. Don’t refuse it.”

She looked straight ahead, her tone flat. “I didn’t take anything from him when he was alive. I’m not starting now.”

Brad studied her, and for a moment, Tyrone’s stubborn face flashed before him.

Both of them too hard, too proud, too impossible.

And he had to deal with the mess.

He sighed in defeat.

“Just look through it before you

refuse.”

Aella opened the folder. Her name was printed on the deed.

Her breath hitched when she saw the address. It was the old Reid Residence.

She looked up, eyes wide.

“Check the date,” Brad said.

She looked again. The transaction was dated a week before her birthday.

Brad’s voice dropped lower. “When your family lost the house, Tyrone tried everything to buy it back. But the new owner loved it too much. No price could convince him.”

He paused. “Then recently, the man gave the house to his son as a wedding gift. That’s when Tyrone got it back.”

Aella’s hands trembled as she held the deed. Her lips parted, but no words came.

She remembered that night—their wedding night. She’d laughed and told Tyrone that the Reid house was the prettiest home she’d ever lived in.

He’d kissed her and whispered, “Then I’ll bring it back to you someday.”

Now, he had kept that promise in silence.

Aella finally accepted the deed. Brad sat in his car, watching her drive away.

He looked down at the card still in his hand and muttered, "You dumb bastard."

By seven that night, his car pulled into the Winter Estate. Raine was waiting near the garage, wearing only a thin shirt.

Chapter 387 Waiting

"What are you doing out here? You should be resting!"

Brad rushed forward, pulling off his jacket and wrapping it tight around Raine's shoulders.

Raine's eyes glistened with tears. "I called you so many times. You didn't pick up. I thought you weren't coming."

Brad's chest tightened. He drew her close, his voice low and gentle. "I must've hit silent by mistake," he said.

"But listen to me. Wherever you are, I'll be there. You couldn't get rid of me even if you tried."

Raine's voice came out soft and shaky. "Your mom dropped off your stuff today. She said you should stay here. She said your brother and his wife can handle the Kellers."

Brad blinked, speechless. "She really said that?"

That was his mom all right.

Throwing him out like last week's trash.

Inside, the air felt heavy.

Virginia was falling apart. Every time she woke up, she cried until her voice broke. No one could reach her.

Ralph wasn't doing any better. His freshly dyed hair looked forced, his suit too formal. He stood to greet guests, but his eyes were hollow, like a man made of smoke.

A week had gone by after Tyrone died.

Aella was at work when Tyrone's aunt called. She asked if Aella wanted to go with Raine to the cemetery for the memorial.

Aella refused.

She had work to do.

Patients in the morning. A science program to film that night.

And deep down, she didn't want to stand in front of that grave again.

By the time she left the TV station, it was past nine.

The roads were empty, quiet under the dim streetlights. She drove home, the car gliding through the night. As she neared her neighborhood gate, her hands froze on the steering wheel. Tyrone was standing by the roadside. He was holding a small child, waving at her.

Her pulse jumped. Before she could blink, he stepped into the street. The child was still in his

Her instincts kicked in. She yanked the wheel hard.

A deafening crash tore through the night. Metal screamed against metal. The impact threw her forward.

The car jolted to a stop. Her head hit the window. Her vision blurred. Darkness closed in.

Before she slipped away, flashes of her past life flickered through her mind like shattered glass.

“Relax! You two look like you’re posing for mugshots, not wedding photos!”

Aella blinked. Her heart hammered as she looked around. In front of her, a bright sign read “City Hall Wedding Photoshoot Booth.”

What?

Her mind went blank.

She looked down. A white blouse. Then turned her head.

Tyrone stood beside her. He wore the same shirt. Tyrone?

Her whole body froze. They exchanged a look. Aella’s eyes were filled with disbelief.

She grabbed his wrist, staring at his watch.

The world tilted. She was back.

Back on the day she and Tyrone had gotten married.

“Aella?”

His voice—familiar and calm—sent a jolt through her. She met his eyes. They were deep, steady, cautious.

The photographer groaned. “Are you two doing this or not? I’ve got other couples waiting.”

Optes SE Waiting

Before he , Aella shoved Tyrone away and ran.

She ran like she was running from a nightmare.

This marriage was not happening. Not again.

Behind her, Tyrone stood frozen. His eyes turned red as he watched her disappear through the door.

Aella burst into her parents’ home, her chest rising and falling so fast it hurt. The smell of cooking filled the air. Her parents were in the kitchen.

Everything was the same—warm, bright, alive.

Her heart pounded so hard it hurt. It wanted to jump out of her chest.

The wedding had been planned for the end of the month. Tyrone had bought this luxury apartment downtown for her family. A “gift,” he’d called it.

This place was right smack in the city center and was worth more than 11 million.

He’d given her parents a card too, ten thousand dollars every month for “living expenses.” He said her parents were his parents too.

And he'd paid off every last debt the Reids owed.

In the past, he had written down every cent, every favor, every payment—only to throw it all back at her when things crumbled.

Not this time. Her brother was still just a middle schooler. He hadn't been sent off to that private school Tyrone had chosen.

She still had time. She would return everything and cut all ties. She would not marry him again.

She would not make the same mistake again.

Her mother's voice snapped her back. "Aella, you're home already? Where's Tyrone?"

Her father turned around. "Did you get the marriage license? Let me see it."

Their faces were younger now—healthy, bright, full of life.

Aella's eyes stung.

Her mother's heart was still strong. Her father's hair still dark.

They were both okay. That alone made her want to cry.

This time, she would take care of them. This time, she wouldn't let love blind her. This time, she would give her their time.

She led her parents to the couch and stood in front of them.

Her tone turned firm.

“Dad, Mom,” she said quietly, “I’m not marrying Tyrone.”

Miriam and Warren froze, exchanging startled looks.

Miriam’s voice wavered. “Aella, did you two get into a fight?”

Chapter 388 Reborn

Warren spoke before she could open her mouth. “Arguing with Tyrone? Her? We know that man’s temper.”

Aella lowered her head, her fingers twisting in her lap as she tried to think of what to say.

Warren’s voice grew stern. “Aella, ever since our family lost everything, you’ve forgotten who you are. Stop acting like some pampered princess. You’re not one anymore.”

He continued, his words sharp but heavy. “Tyrone grew up under our roof. He’s educated, calm, and reliable. That boy carried our family when we were drowning. He’s been nothing but loyal to you. We should be thankful, not foolish.”

Miriam stepped in, her tone softer. “Aella, you’ve loved him since you were little. You used to say you’d never marry anyone but him. What changed, sweetheart?”

Aella looked up at them. Her heart twisted, but she couldn’t tell them the truth.

If she said she’d already lived this life once before—married Tyrone, been betrayed, and lost everything—they’d think she was insane.

So she took a breath and said gently, “Dad, Mom, I was young back then. I didn’t understand life. Now that I’ve graduated, I need to think for myself.”

She forced a small smile. "You said it yourself, Dad. The family went bankrupt. Marrying Tyrone now would just make us look desperate. Mr. Winter and Edwin only care about money and reputation. If I join that family, they'll tear me apart."

Her words were blunt, but her parents didn't interrupt.

Miriam sighed, her expression full of worry. "Aella, the Winters can be strict, but Tyrone's not like them. You grew up together. He knows your temper and your heart. He'll protect you."

Aella's lashes fluttered.

Not like them? No, he's exactly

like them.

Tyrone hadn't protected her. He'd broken her, piece by piece.

Warren frowned, his tone turning harsh again. "The Winters can be proud, but Mrs. Winter loves you like a daughter. Ms. Winter adores you. You'd have no family drama. Tyrone promised me you two would live on your own after the wedding. You won't even need to care for the elders. Stop imagining nonsense."

Aella sighed softly. She could feel her patience slipping away.

Framed

She crossed her arms and muttered, "I don't care. I don't even like him that much. I've always thought of him like a brother. What if we marry and regret it later?"

Her childish defiance left both her parents stunned.

They exchanged glances. They'd spoiled her too much to stay

angry.

Miriam finally said, "Just think about it again, honey. Don't rush into anything."

But Aella's thoughts had already drifted elsewhere.

She said carefully, "Dad, Mom, if you really love me, then give everything back to Tyrone. The house. The card. All of it."

Warren hesitated, then nodded. "We moved into that place for appearances' sake. We didn't want him embarrassed. But if you want to move out, we'll move out."

Miriam turned and left the room. When she came back, she was holding a card. She placed it in Aella's hand. "This is what Tyrone gave us. Your father and I haven't touched a cent. You can return it."

Aella held the card tightly. Her voice softened. "Mom, can you sell your emerald jewelry? We can use the money to pay him back."

Miriam and Warren froze, exchanging a surprised look.

Aella quickly added, "I'll earn it back one day and buy it for you again. I promise."

Her tone grew firm. "You both know the Winters look down on us because we're broke. If we keep taking Tyrone's money, I'll never be able to hold my head high. I want to pay back every penny before I even think about marrying him. That way, no one can look at me like I owe them anything."

It was the only way she could move forward.

She told them she'd think more about the wedding and convinced them to let her handle things first.

She had to sell the jewelry, clear her debt, and cut all ties with him.

When they finally handed her the jewelry box, her throat tightened.

She was touched.

No matter the lifetime, her parents were her strength.

With this jewelry, she could finally make a move.

She would ask Daniel to help her get it to an auction house. Once it sold, she could repay Tyrone and move her family out of his apartment for good.

Then she'd have Daniel connect her to the Hills' hospital. That was where she would start her new life.

Armed with everything she knew from her previous life, she was certain she could make a name for herself in sleep medicine.

This time, she would live differently. She wouldn't fall back into Tyrone's world. She wouldn't waste her heart on anyone who didn't deserve it.

Chapter 389 A New Beginning

She swore she'd rebuild the Reids with her own two hands. She would climb her way back up and make the family name shine again.

By the time night settled over the Winter Estate, the house was glowing with light.

Virginia had ordered the kitchen to prepare a grand dinner. The whole family sat waiting in the living room, excited to celebrate once Tyrone and Aella came back from getting their marriage license.

But when the door opened, only Tyrone walked in.

He said nothing. His expression was dark as he sat across from his parents.

Virginia frowned and stood up.

“Were there a lot of couples at the office today?”

Her voice tightened. “Why are you the only one here?”

“Where’s Aella?”

Tyrone’s gaze dropped to the fruit plate on the table. His voice was quiet and flat. “We didn’t get it.”

Virginia froze, her eyes narrowing. Her first thought was that they’d argued.

She stepped closer, her tone harsh. “Did you make her mad again? What did you do this time?”

Tyrone replied without emotion. “Nothing happened. We were just late.”

He had gone over every possible reason in his head. He couldn’t figure out why she’d suddenly refused.

In his previous life, he had failed her in every way.

He had never earned her forgiveness, not even at the end.

If she had also come back, she would’ve said it straight to his face. That was who she was. She would never walk away in silence.

Something else had to be behind it.

Ralph slammed his palm on the couch. "You begged for this wedding! You wanted that girl more than anything. The house is ready, the news is out, and now you're telling me this? You better not screw it up!"

Tyrone finally lifted his eyes. "I'm not using that house. After the wedding, we'll live at Bluchaven."

Whether she remembered the past or not, he would never go back there.

Zera and her son had once stayed in that house. Aella had called it dirty.

She hated anything unclean.

He would never let her face that disgust again.

Virginia rubbed her temples. "Then go find her. Pick another date and go get that license."

Before he could respond, Raine burst into the room, breathing hard.

"Mom! Dad!" she shouted, pointing at Tyrone. "He made Aella mad! She ran off crying!"

Tyrone's jaw clenched. "Raine, stop talking nonsense."

She ducked behind her mother, her voice dropping. "Brad saw it too. When they were taking photos at the office, Aella suddenly took off."

Virginia's face turned cold as she stared at her son.

Her tone was sharp as glass. "Tyrone, are you having second thoughts about marrying her?"

He lowered his head, silent. Then he shook it once.

Ralph's voice thundered through the room. "You begged for that engagement. You're not backing out now. You go to the Reids tonight, set a new date, and make it right."

Virginia's tone matched her husband's. "Don't think you can push her around because she loves you. You're going over there right now to apologize."

Tyrone rose to his feet and nodded.

He had been given a second chance at life, and he wouldn't waste it. He would marry her again.

He would stay clean. He would protect her, care for her, and love her in a way no one else ever could.

At the doorway, he turned back to look at his parents and sister.

He would protect them too this time. He would never repeat the same tragedy. He would be their bedrock.

The summer sky dimmed slowly, painting the city in soft gold before it finally turned dark.

By the time Tyrone reached Aella's building, it was just after eight. The streetlights had begun to glow, stretching long shadows across the pavement.

Clyde opened the door in shorts and a tank top, grinning. "Hey, Tyrone!" His hair was nothing longer than a buzzcut.

Tyrone's eyes landed on the bandage around the boy's ankle. He crouched down and pressed the spot gently.

Clyde laughed. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

Tyrone said calmly, "Don't rush it. Weak muscles can tear your ligaments again."

As they talked, Aella's parents appeared and invited him inside.

He stepped into the living room and glanced around. No Aella.

His feet moved on their own toward her bedroom. Clyde knocked on the door. "Aella, open up."

The door opened, and Aella stood there. When she saw Tyrone, she froze. Then she turned away, ready to go back in.

"Aella."

Tyrone reached out, his arm blocking the door.

Her

parents exchanged uneasy looks. The tension in the air was thick.

Miriam spoke gently. "Whatever happened, talk about it calmly. Don't keep it bottled up."

Aella stayed quiet.

Tyrone's voice softened. "It's still early. Let's take a walk."

Aella hesitated, then nodded.

She had been meaning to face him anyway.

They walked side by side, silent as they left the neighborhood.

The city lights shimmered above them, and their shadows stretched far behind under the lamps.

At the corner, Aella stopped beneath the glow of a streetlight.

She turned to him, her eyes steady and serious. Tyrone stood opposite her, tall and composed.

Since he turned eighteen, his father and grandfather had thrown him into the world of business.

His white shirt fit his broad shoulders perfectly. He hadn't styled his hair tonight, and it fell naturally across his forehead, softening his sharp aura. Still, his features were striking- handsome, defined, and far too mature for his age.

Chapter 390 A Talk With Him

Aella knew exactly what kind of man stood in front of her. Beneath that flawless face was a heart as cold as stone and a mind sharper than a blade.

While she stayed silent, Tyrone's eyes lingered on her.

She had just graduated. The simple summer dress hugged her waist and fell softly to her knees. Her hair, long and smooth like silk, was tied back into a ponytail.

Even without makeup, her skin was flawless, her features delicate, almost unreal—like a delicate doll someone was afraid to touch.

Tyrone stood on the street below her, the streetlight painting his figure in shades of gold and shadow.

He looked up at her and asked quietly, "We were supposed to get the license today. Why did you walk away?"

His tone was cautious, unsure, almost pleading.

Aella frowned, her brows knitting together.

If she told him the truth—that he'd destroyed her life once and didn't deserve another chance -he'd think she'd lost her mind. He'd probably call the asylum.

She steadied her voice. "Tyrone, we're not equals. Your family's full of men who think power makes them gods. If I married into that, I'd be chewed up and spit out."

Tyrone said quickly, "I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Aella gave a faint smile, cold as frost.

He was the one she feared most.

She crossed her arms. "We might be broke now, but I still deserve a proper proposal. Don't you think?"

Tyrone's expression darkened. His voice grew steady. "Then tell me what I did wrong. everything. I'll make it right."

He meant it. Every word. He would fix whatever it took to keep her.

Aella's heartbeat slowed. Something about him felt wrong tonight.

Tell me

He was usually proud, distant, too composed to beg. This wasn't the Tyrone she remembered.

Aella knew exactly what kind of man stood in front of her. Beneath that flawless face was a heart as cold as stone and a mind sharper than a blade.

While she stayed silent, Tyrone's eyes lingered on her.

She had just graduated. The simple summer dress hugged her waist and fell softly to her knees. Her hair, long and smooth like silk, was tied back into a ponytail.

Even without makeup, her skin was flawless, her features delicate, almost unreal—like a delicate doll someone was afraid to touch.

Tyrone stood on the street below her, the streetlight painting his figure in shades of gold and shadow.

He looked up at her and asked quietly, "We were supposed to get the license today. Why did you walk away?"

His tone was cautious, unsure, almost pleading.

Aella frowned, her brows knitting together.

If she told him the truth—that he'd destroyed her life once and didn't deserve another chance—he'd think she'd lost her mind. He'd probably call the asylum.

She steadied her voice. "Tyrone, we're not equals. Your family's full of men who think power makes them gods. If I married into that, I'd be chewed up and spit out."

Tyrone said quickly, "I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Aella gave a faint smile, cold as frost.

He was the one she feared most.

She crossed her arms. "We might be broke now, but I still deserve a proper proposal. Don't you think?"

Tyrone's expression darkened. His voice grew steady. "Then tell me what I did wrong. Tell me everything. I'll make it right."

He meant it. Every word. He would fix whatever it took to keep her.

Aella's heartbeat slowed. Something about him felt wrong tonight.

He was usually proud, distant, too composed to beg. This wasn't the Tyrone she remembered.

She studied him carefully, biting her lip.

Could he have come back too?

No. That is impossible.

If he had, he'd be on his knees, begging for forgiveness, not standing here pretending to be calm.

Aella's tone was firm. "I've decided. I'll pay back every cent I owe you. I'll move out of your house. The wedding's off."

The light between them flickered, stretching their shadows far apart.

Tyrone didn't move. His dark eyes stayed locked on hers.

He lifted a hand, slowly reaching for her, but she tucked her hair behind her ear, pretending not to notice.

His hand fell back to his side, and his chest tightened. Fear was spreading all across his body.

His voice came out softer. "You promised me, Aella. Why are you backing out now?"

He hesitated, his throat dry. "Did I hurt you somehow? Is it something I did?"

The night air pressed between them like a weight.

Aella stood on the curb, looking down at him. He looked up, his expression tense, eyes searching hers.

His voice trembled slightly, full of caution, and that alone made her defensive.

She asked evenly, "Have you done anything that should've hurt me?"

Their gazes locked. Neither of them blinked.

For a second, Tyrone's shoulders eased.

He was just imagining things.

If Aella had remembered the past, she wouldn't be here speaking to him.

She would've told him to stay the hell away and cut him out for good.

She wouldn't have just walked away in silence at the City Hall.

Tyrone's eyes flickered, a storm of thoughts behind them.

He couldn't let her know he remembered everything from his previous life.

If she found out, there'd be no way to explain himself.

If she knew what he'd done, she'd never give him another chance.

This secret would go to the grave with him.

He forced a calm tone. "At the photo shoot, you didn't say a word and just left. I thought I did something wrong. That's why I asked."

Aella looked him over.

His face was composed, his eyes downcast. She couldn't read him at all.

Maybe she was overthinking.

If Tyrone had really come back from the dead and relived his life, he'd be desperate, not steady.

She straightened her back. "I just graduated, Tyrone. I'm still figuring out my life. Your father and grandfather already think I'm beneath you. I'm not spending my days bowing to people who look down on me."

Tyrone's body loosened, his shoulders dropping with relief.

So that was it.

He met her gaze. "I know my grandfather and father said some ugly things to you last week. Forget about them. Their opinions don't matter. Once we're married, you'll still live the way you do now. You'll just be living with me,"

Aella stared at him, her eyes sharp. This isn't the guy I know.

He had never been this patient, this soft. He'd always been cold, always untouchable.

Tonight, he was someone else entirely. Maybe he just felt humiliated.

She'd walked out of City Hall in front of everyone, and now she was calling off the wedding. That had to have cut his pride deep.

She exhaled slowly, her eyes cooling. Yes. That was all it was.

He was just trying to keep his family's reputation up. His reputation, too. He needed the wedding to happen on time.