

Once Cast 391

Chapter 391 Her Refusal

Aella forced her thoughts into order and stared Tyrone down. "I'm not marrying you," she said, "Our parents can deal with it themselves. I'll pay back every dollar my family owes you."

She turned to walk away, but Tyrone's hand shot out, locking around her wrist.

The sudden pull made her heel slip off the curb. Her balance vanished.

She reached out instinctively, and he caught her, holding her tight against his chest.

Her heart thudded hard enough to hurt. She tried to shove him away, but his arms stayed firm, his chest pressing against hers.

His voice came out low and rough. "You promised me, Aella. You picked the date. You can't back out now."

Her breath came quick, her hands trembling against his chest.

"Let me go first," she said through clenched teeth. "Then I'll tell you the truth."

He loosened his grip just enough but didn't let her go completely.

Aella took a deep breath.

"Tyrone, I canceled the wedding because I realized what I feel for you isn't love."

His face hardened bit by bit. "Then what is it?"

They locked eyes.

A pause followed. Then, Aella's voice dropped. "I grew up clinging to you, following you around. I thought that meant I loved you, but I didn't even understand what love was. I only said I wanted to marry you out of ignorance."

Her tone turned sharp. "When my family lost everything, everyone disappeared. You stayed, and I clung to you like a lifeline. That's what you were to me. A lifeline."

"That's not true! That's not what you think!" Tyrone's voice broke, cutting through her words.

Aella yanked her wrist free and stepped back onto the curb.

"I mixed up love with family," she said, her voice rising. "You're like a brother to me, Tyrone. I swear you are."

Before she could take another breath, Tyrone grabbed her again. His hand slid behind her

neck, and his mouth crashed against hers.

The kiss hit like fire.

He kissed her with a hunger that felt like desperation, and the more she resisted, the harder he pressed in.

Her back hit a tree trunk. His strength pinned her there. His lips claimed hers until her knees nearly gave out.

When he finally stopped, Aella was panting, her chest heaving. Her eyes were wet, her cheeks burning.

She looked up, and what she saw in his eyes made her blood freeze. His pupils were blown wide, red from the rush of anger and desire.

Her hand flew up before she could think. The slap cracked through the night air. The sound echoed, sharp and final. They both froze.

Aella stared at him, her hand stinging, her pulse racing out of control.

But her heart composed itself.

He wasn't the same Tyrone who'd once destroyed her, not yet. He had no memories of their past lives.

But that darkness was still there, just waiting to surface. No one had embarrassed him like she just did.

She braced for the storm.

But instead, he reached out and caught her hand again. He lifted it gently and kissed the reddened skin where she had hit him.

His voice was low. "Does it hurt?"

Aella blinked. For a second, she couldn't even breathe. He's deranged, she thought.

Tyrone's gaze dropped to her lips. His fingers brushed them lightly, tracing the spot he had bruised with his kiss. His eyes burned darker, full of a hunger that made her skin crawl.

His voice turned soft and smooth, like velvet hiding a blade. "You kissed me. You told me you loved me. You begged to marry me. And now you're saying I was like a brother?"

Aella's chest tightened. She forced a shaky smile. "It was a habit, Tyrone. I grew up with you. It didn't mean anything. When I kissed you, I didn't feel a thing."

She was bluffing. Anything to put space between them. In this life, she'd rather be his sister than his lover.

That unnerving side of his was probably something that came out after she said he was like a brother to her.

He was still the same. Polished on the outside, poisoned underneath.

He'd always worn that perfect mask—suit, tie, and charm. But when the doors closed, he turned into something else. Rough. Possessive. Overwhelming.

If she hadn't lived through it before, she would've still fallen for the act.

Their eyes met again, and danger flashed like lightning in his gaze.

Before she could move, his hand was at her waist. He pulled her behind the tree, out of sight.

Her back hit the rough bark. His palm slid along her thigh, lifting one of her legs to his hip.

The closeness sent her head spinning. Her breath came short and fast. His hand moved lower, and panic ripped through her chest.

Her voice shook. "Tyrone, stop! I mean it!"

Her trembling made him freeze. He pressed his forehead against her shoulder, breathing hard, fighting himself.

His voice rasped. "You feel nothing? Not even now?"

Aella shoved him back with all the strength she had. Her heart raced as she fixed her clothes. She stumbled out to the sidewalk, keeping her distance.

If she stayed, she knew she wouldn't get away next time.

Her glare cut like glass. "You're insane, Tyrone. I said you're like family, and you try to prove me wrong like that? Try it again, and I'll post everything online. Everyone will see."

Her voice cracked like a whip, raw and furious. And for once, Tyrone couldn't find a single word to say.

Chapter 392 The Real Her

This was the real her.

Wild. Sharp. Fearless. The kind of girl who did what she wanted and never thought twice about it.

But if he didn't act soon, if he didn't give her something real, this wedding would go up in smoke.

Aella lifted her hand and started counting off. "Let's be honest. Every man in your family's a disaster. Your grandpa's a greedy fossil who only cares about money. Your dad's arrogant and never thought we were worth his time."

Tyrone said nothing.

Aella's eyes narrowed. "And me? I chased you since we were kids. You always looked like you were being punished every time I showed up."

He stayed silent, his jaw tight.

She crossed her arms. "You've never told me you loved me. You didn't even bother to propose. If that doesn't scream that you don't actually want this, I don't know what does."

Tyrone's voice was low. "Aella, I—"

She cut him off before he could finish. "No. I get it. I won't make this harder for either of us. You want a wife? Go find someone else. If you can't, I'll help you find one myself."

Her tone hit like a slap.

Zera's kid was already two years old. If she had to, she'd fly across the ocean and drag his precious first love back herself.

Tyrone's face darkened, his jaw locking tight.

He stared at her, his voice deep and steady. "I don't want anyone else. I only want you."

Aella threw up her hands. "That's not happening, Tyrone. I've already made up my mind. I'll talk to everyone and clear this mess myself. Go home, tell your parents thanks but no thanks. When they're done grieving the daughter-in-law they lost, let me know."

She didn't give him time to answer. She shoved him aside and ran, her shoes slapping against the pavement.

Tyrone stood frozen, watching her disappear into the shadows. The fire in his

eyes dimmed

“Wait, something’s wrong. Usually, it’s your brother storming off in a huff, while the witless admirer of his will follow him around. So why’s it different today?”

“Did you see that? He didn’t even move. She just roasted him. Did he cheat on her or something?”

Tyrone turned slowly, his expression dark as thunder. He knew those voices.

The two froze instantly.

He pointed at the black car parked nearby. “Get in the car.”

Raine peeked from behind Brad. “You guys handle this. I’m staying out of it.”

Brad chuckled. “Adults are talking, kid. Go play your game.”

He guided Raine to the car, slipped her headphones on, and let her dive into her game before walking back.

The night breeze stirred, carrying the silence between the two men.

Brad folded his arms. “Man, Aella used to worship you. What did you do? She’s talking about canceling the wedding.”

Tyrone shoved his hands into his pockets and stared at the tree where Aella had stood. “She’s mad I didn’t propose. Says my family’s full of jerks. Says my dad and grandpa are trash.”

He paused for a beat. “She’s mad at me too.”

Brad let out a small laugh. "Well, can you blame her? Women want romance, not ice statues. You keep giving her that ice-cold treatment, and she'll lose it eventually."

Tyrone didn't respond. His eyes stayed on the dark road, his expression impossible to read.

He would fix this. He would love her right this time. He would fight for her.

He would do it this time around.

No matter what it took.

He turned to Brad. "I'm going to propose. You've been to plenty of these things. Give me some pointers.

Brad grinned wide. "Easy. No girl ever says no to a romantic setup."

He snapped his fingers. "You've got that luxury yacht, right? Decorate it. Lights, music, candles. Perfect scene."

Tyrone's face went still. Oh, that

.

Not the jackpot, huh? Brad frowned and tried again. "Fine. Then rent out the waterfront. It's stunning at night. She'll love it."

But Tyrone's gaze drifted, the color draining from his face. Pain twisted deep in his chest.

The words yacht and waterfront tore through him like a knife.

Okay, two strikes.

Brad sighed. "Okay, then do something simple. Get a cake, some roses, make it sweet. Post it on Instagram after she says yes. Show her and everyone else that you're serious."

Tyrone's thoughts buzzed, his chest tightening with every breath.

A cake. Roses. A yacht. The sea. A smiling photo.

All of it were pieces of the past he could never take back.

All of it were wounds she would never let heal.

Now the guy looks positively devastated.

Brad's voice softened. "Don't stress over it, man. Aella's just dramatic. She likes attention. Remember when she faked being sick just to make you stay home? Same thing. Let me throw a small get-together in a few days. I'll invite her. You can smooth things out then."

The ache in Tyrone's chest eased a little.

Brad was right.

That was Aella—wild, demanding, impossible to tame.

And this time, he'd play along. Whatever it took, he wasn't letting her go again.

Chapter 393 His Move

She was probably just playing him again. The same old game she'd always played. She wanted him to chase her, to confess, to prove that he still cared.

He'd been too impatient. That was on him.

He should've given her the kind of proposal women dream about. Flowers, candles, something beautiful.

He should've made her believe she was the only one.

Two nights later, Aella treated Daniel to dinner as a thank you. He'd helped her with the auction house and even landed her an internship at Hill Hospital.

get in touch

It was almost nine when they stepped out of the restaurant. The night air was cool and quiet. Just as Aella was about to say goodbye, Brad's car pulled up, and he jumped out in a rush.

"Daniel, hey," he said quickly before turning to Aella. "I need to talk to you. It's important."

Daniel gave a polite nod. "I'll let you two handle it." Then he walked away.

Aella just wanted to go home.

But Brad insisted Raine was waiting for her in one of the private rooms at the Regal Club. Before she could say a word, he was already leading her inside.

The moment she stepped in, the heavy smell of alcohol hit her.

Raine jumped up from the couch, waving. "Aella! Thank God you're here. We were just hanging

but Tyrone's had too much to drink."

out,

Aella's eyes narrowed. Tyrone was lying on the couch, completely still.

Brad and Raine exchanged a glance. Raine grabbed her bag and hurried out.

Brad rubbed his neck awkwardly. "Sorry about this. He's been calling your name nonstop. His suite's upstairs. You two are almost married anyway, so ... maybe just stay with him tonight?"

Before Aella could reply, he slipped out and shut the door behind him.

Aella let out a slow breath and sat down beside Tyrone.

She knew exactly how much he could drink. No one ever got him drunk.

And he never went to places like this.

Drunk?

Calling her name?

Not a chance.

She flexed her fingers and gave his shoulder a hard shove.

No reaction. Her gaze sharpened. She reached lower, grabbed a handful of skin near his thigh, and twisted.

His brows twitched, and a faint grunt escaped him.

Aella stood up, her face calm and cold.

In an instant, his hand shot up, catching her wrist.

She stared down at him and flung his hand away. "Done faking?"

Tyrone's eyes met hers, dark and unreadable.

He pushed himself up slowly, voice low and husky. "I really did drink too much."

Her expression didn't change. "Whose idea was this?"

He hesitated, then muttered, "Brad's."

He sold his friend out without a second thought.

Aella couldn't help but laugh softly.

So he'd left his brains behind somewhere.

She patted his shoulder. "Stay here. I'm going to the restroom. I'll take you home after."

Tyrone blinked, unsure. She wasn't yelling? Not even mad?

But before he could say a word, she was already gone.

She didn't go to the restroom. She walked straight out of the club, caught a cab, and left.

On her way home, she stopped to grab late night snacks for her parents and brother.

By Monday, she'd start her internship at the Hills' private hospital on the west side of the city.

This time, she wouldn't let things fall apart again. Not for her. Not for him.

She wanted both of them to live freely.

She wanted to be happy, make money, love herself, and love her family.

That old life where she had to suffer was gone.

That was her new beginning.

But the Winters didn't see it that way.

As the wedding date crept closer and no marriage license appeared, the tension inside their mansion thickened. The elders, especially, were running low on patience.

Early one morning, Virginia spotted Tyrone coming down the stairs and blocked his path. "When are you planning to get that marriage license with Aella?"

He lowered his gaze, his face blank. "There's no rush."

Her eyes narrowed.

She looked him up and down, then leaned close enough to catch the faint trace of cologne on him.

Her tone turned sharp. “Don’t tell me that woman came back.”

The moment she said it, Tyrone’s expression darkened.

He glared at her. “Mom, I’m marrying Aella. Stop bringing up that woman’s name.”

Virginia pointed at him. “You think I like talking about her? Look at you! Aella’s done everything for you. If you didn’t still have feelings for that woman, you wouldn’t be treating her like this.”

Tyrone’s voice was weary. “Mom, you’re wrong. There’s nothing going on.”

Virginia’s eyes flashed. “You probably did something to push Aella away so you can pretend to be the victim. Then when she walks, you’ll have an excuse to go crawling back to Zera.”

Tyrone snapped, his voice sharp. “If I ever get married, the only woman I’ll marry is Aella!”

He didn’t give her a chance to reply. He brushed past her and walked out the door.

Virginia stood at the top of the stairs, watching her son disappear. Her lips pressed together, but

eyes softened with worry.

her

She knew exactly how much that girl loved him—and how much she had already lost because

of it.

Chapter 394 Worried Mother

Virginia knew her son better than anyone. She could see exactly what he felt for Aella, even when he tried to hide it.

When he first said he wanted to marry her, she had been shocked.

But Aella backing out now, right before the marriage license? That stunned her even more.

After thinking it over, Virginia told the butler to pack up a few gifts. She decided to visit the Reids herself.

She arrived a little after nine in the morning.

Aella's parents greeted her warmly and invited her into the living room.

Virginia didn't bother with small talk.

"I just want to know if something happened between Aella and Tyrone. The wedding is almost here, but they still haven't gotten the marriage license."

Aella's parents exchanged a look. Miriam quietly got up to summon Aella.

Warren gave a careful smile. "Aella just graduated college. Taking a couple of years to focus on work before marriage isn't such a bad thing."

Virginia frowned. "Warren, we've known each other half our lives. Working and getting married aren't the same thing. If she wants to work, I'll support her. But that doesn't explain backing out all of a sudden."

She leaned forward. "Did Tyrone do something? Did he upset you or Aella?"

At that moment, Aella walked into the room with her mother and sat beside Virginia.

Her voice was steady. "Virginia, this is my fault."

She carried the weight of another lifetime in her heart, but no one else knew that.

Aella spoke clearly. "I spoke out of ignorance. Out of a lack of experience in life. I didn't understand myself. I thought about it before we went to get the license. All these years, I've seen Tyrone as family, not as a man I could love. I care about him, but not in that way. I can't marry him."

She reached out and held Virginia's hand. "I'm sorry, Virginia. Tyrone is like a brother to me. I know it's late to say this, but it's better now than after the wedding."

Aella smiled softly. "You've always treated me like your own daughter. So why not make it official? Let me be your goddaughter. Raine and I will both take care of you when you're older."

Virginia froze. If it were about money, she could have fixed that. If it were about reputation, she could have handled it.

But this? What could she possibly say when Aella said she saw Tyrone as her brother?

There was nothing to argue. She couldn't turn down that sweet offer of love, but she couldn't push a marriage either.

When she left the Reids' house, she called Tyrone. Her voice was calm but firm. "Come home tonight. We need to talk."

That evening, Tyrone had barely stepped through the door when his father's furious voice filled the hall.

"She thinks she can just walk away? Who does that girl think she is?"

“If that wedding doesn’t happen, I’ll make sure the Reids regret ever meeting us!”

Tyrone walked in with no change in expression.

He looked straight at his father. “Dad, whether I marry or not is my business. Stop threatening them over every little thing.”

Aella hated threats. He’d learned that once already.

This time, he wouldn’t let anyone, not even himself, do it again.

Virginia’s voice was sharp. “Just tell us the truth, Tyrone. Is the wedding happening or not?”

He lowered his gaze and sat on the couch across from them.

After a long silence, he said quietly, “I’ll talk to her.”

The man seated at the head of the room finally spoke.

Edwin’s tone was like ice. “The Winters aren’t just any family. You’re the CEO of Winter Group. Everyone knows the heir is supposed to marry at the end of the month. The media’s already watching.

“The wedding will happen. If Aella doesn’t show up, you’ll be engaged to the Guinevere family’s daughter instead.”

A lifetime had passed, and they were still the same—unyielding, ruthless, and cold.

His voice stayed firm. “Even if the wedding doesn’t happen, I’ll never get engaged to Vivienne.”

Edwin's eyes flashed. "You don't get to decide."

Tyrone's jaw tightened. "Grandpa, I'm your grandson, not a pawn. You can't just pick some woman and call that my future. Is my happiness worth nothing to you?"

Ralph pointed a finger at him, furious. "We're doing this for your own good!"

The words hit him like an echo from his past. This again.

He drew in a deep breath, trying to hold back his anger.

Ralph barked again. "Think about how much money you've poured into the Reids! You're a businessman, not a charity!"

He jabbed his finger harder. "Without a powerful family backing you, without status or control, how do you expect people to respect you? How do you plan to have a good life?"

Tyrone's eyes darkened, but his voice stayed calm. "Even with power, even with endless wealth, none of that can buy love. And it sure can't build a home."

Chapter 395 Authoritarian

Edwin's face went pale, then red, the veins in his neck standing out as he rose from his chair.

His hand shook as he pointed at Tyrone. "All these years I raised you, and this is how you repay me? You want me in a coffin?"

Tyrone stayed calm. "Grandpa, power and wealth matter, but they don't mean anything if I lose myself or destroy a marriage."

Edwin's voice sliced through the air like a blade. "Everything you have come from this family. You owe the Winters your loyalty. The wedding's ten days away. Either you marry that Reid girl or you get engaged to Ms. Guinevere. Pick one."

Seeing his grandfather's rage, Tyrone lowered his tone. "I hear you, Grandpa. You should rest."

He didn't wait for a reply. He turned and walked straight out of the room.

At the door, he stopped. His grandfather was gasping for breath on the couch. His father was barking at the servants. His mother stood there, rubbing her temples, helpless and tired. Tyrone looked at them, his eyes dark and unreadable. Then he walked out.

Outside, he leaned against his car and lit a cigarette. The smoke curled up like the thoughts choking him.

Fighting them was useless.

Ten days until the wedding. He didn't know how it would end, but he wasn't giving up yet.

The next few days, though, were a nightmare.

He went to see Aella, but she locked her door.

When he waited outside her building, she nearly took his knee out with a kick.

She ignored his calls and never replied to his texts.

The snacks he sent went untouched. The gifts he bought ended up in the trash.

Every time he opened his mouth, she made him call her "sister."

Every time he mentioned the wedding or tried to get close, she turned cold as ice.

He was running out of options.

If this kept up, they'd end up just like before—two people who couldn't stand the sight of each

Five days before the wedding, Tyrone sat in his car outside her apartment and called Brad.

“I need your help.”

That afternoon, when Aella went out to look for a place to rent, Brad showed up her at the gate.

He opened his car door. “Get in. We need to talk.”

Aella didn't budge.

and blocked

She rested her foot on the door and crossed her arms. “Last time you said Tyrone was drunk. What is it this time, Brad? You gonna tell me he's dead?”

Brad winced. “Damn, you're mean.”

Her expression hardened. “You're the one who lied first.”

Caught off guard, Brad stopped pretending.

“You chased Tyrone for years. You were obsessed with him. And now you're walking away? What changed?”

Aella's tone was steady. "I figured it out. What I feel for Tyrone is family, not love."

Brad laughed under his breath. "Right. Sure. You expect me to believe that? Everyone knows how you looked at him."

Aella gave a small shrug. "I was a fool. Now I'm not. Simple as that."

They stared at each other,

Her expression didn't waver.

Brad's smirk faded. He realized she meant it.

When he left, Aella went back to apartment hunting.

Her mother's emerald jewelry had already been valued and listed for auction.

Once it sold, she'd finally have enough money to pay Tyrone back.

Before the end of the month, she wanted everything clean—her debts gone, her family out of his house.

By early evening, she found a small three-bedroom near a West District hospital.

She was about to pay the deposit when her phone buzzed. It was her little brother, Clyde.

His voice shook. "I broke something. The guy's making me pay. I'll text you the address." Then he hung up.

She opened the message. It was the Winters' private airfield.

Her stomach dropped. She called back right away, but no one answered.

Clyde was only fourteen. He worshiped Tyrone. He always did whatever he said.

A sick feeling hit her. Tyrone was cold, calculated, and ruthless.

What if he'd lured Clyde there? What if he'd tricked him into breaking something expensive- something that would trap them again in debt?

Maybe something like a helicopter part.

It sounded just like him. He was good at manipulation.

If that was what he'd done, the Reids would be right back under his thumb, deep in debt.

She couldn't let that happen.

She ran to the curb, flagged a cab, and told the driver to go fast.

At the same time, at the Winters' private airfield, Brad handed Clyde over to Raine. "Take him home."

Once their car drove off, a sleek black sedan pulled up.

Tyrone stepped out, tall and calm, every line of his suit sharp and perfect.

Even from a distance, it was clear—he had dressed up for this.

Chapter 396 Helping Him Out

Tyrone's eyes followed the glow of Brad's car as it sped off into the dark. "What was Clyde doing here?"

Brad threw him an impatient look. "You think he just showed up? He came to help you, genius."

Tyrone frowned. "Help me? With what?"

Brad pushed him toward the helicopter. "Quit asking and get in. Aella's almost here. You'll thank me later."

If he hadn't roped Clyde into this, Aella would've never stepped foot near the Winters' airfield.

Minutes later, a taxi screeched to a stop by the gate.

Aella jumped out, her heart pounding, and ran straight inside. Her eyes darted around, desperate to find her brother—but all she saw was Brad.

She rushed over, breathless. "Brad, where's my brother? I've been calling him, and he's not answering."

Brad sighed, putting on a serious face as he pointed toward the helicopter.

Aella's voice dropped. "Why would Clyde be inside Tyrone's helicopter?"

Brad held his hands up. "I just got here. Why don't you go see for yourself?"

As the helicopter lifted off, Brad finally let out a long breath. “That’s it, buddy. You’re on your own now. This is as far as I can take you.”

He’d sweet-talked Clyde into helping, then tricked Aella into boarding.

Knowing that woman’s temper, Tyrone was in for the fight of his life. She’d slap him, at the very least. The proposal would be even harder.

By ten that night, the helicopter hovered over a private island before descending.

A group of bodyguards ran out to greet them. Leading them was Noel, Tyrone’s assistant.

He stood straight, hands clasped, ready to welcome his boss and the soon-to-be bride of Tyrone.

But the second he saw them step out, he froze.

He rubbed his eyes like he didn’t trust what he was seeing.

That morning, Tyrone had looked perfect—every inch the polished CEO.

Now his tie was crooked, his hair was a mess, his jacket was missing, and two buttons on his shirt were gone.

He looked like he’d barely survived a wrestling match with a bear.

Noel’s mouth twitched before he quickly bowed his head to hide the smile creeping up.

Aella caught sight of him and hesitated.

Noel had been Tyrone’s assistant for more than a year. Reliable, steady, loyal to a fault.

His only flaw was that he obeyed Tyrone blindly.

Her gaze moved around the island.

This place. Tyrone's private island.

It was where they'd spent their honeymoon in her last life. It was also where he'd sworn never to bother her again.

Even at night, the island glowed under thousands of roses.

Aella turned in place. Everywhere she looked, there were flowers—white, lavender, champagne.

Not a single red one.

The roses and strings of warm lights formed a glowing heart on the lawn.

She didn't need to guess what came next.

Her eyes slid to Tyrone, who looked like he'd lost a fight he never wanted.

Her tone was dry. "What is all this supposed to be?"

Tyrone took a small step forward and reached for her hand. She smacked it away without hesitation.

He froze, staring at her, then dropped to one knee. A diamond ring shimmered in his hand.

His voice was low and full of emotion. "Aella, we've known each other our whole lives. We've been through everything together. We've grown together."

Her lips lifted slightly. Growth. Sure.

Tyrone looked up at her, his eyes red at the corners. "You're my home, my future. I'll you. I'll stand by you no matter what happens."

Inside, Aella almost laughed.

He went on, his voice trembling.

protect

"Let this island and this sea be my witness. I swear I'll love you, protect you, and never hurt you again."

Her fingers clenched against her skirt.

So this was it. Her refusal had thrown him off balance so badly that he had no choice but to pull this desperate stunt.

He held out the ring. "Aella, will you marry me?"

The island fell silent.

The lights twinkled softly across the sea of roses.

Aella stood motionless, watching him.

The pink diamond sparkled between them. His hair was messy, his shirt ripped, his hands shaking slightly.

They both looked wrecked—two people who'd been through too many storms.

Her eyes dropped to the ring. The pink diamond was huge, flawless, worth a fortune.

He had gone all out—for his pride, for his family, maybe even for another woman.

He does go all out for Zera.

Aella took a slow step forward.

Tyrone's eyes lit up with hope. "Aella, marry me."

To him, she was salvation. The one thing he thought he could fix. She was the one person he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Aella looked him straight in the eyes and shook her head.

His smile faltered.

Chapter 397 Another Refusal

Tyrone stayed kneeling, clutching the ring like it was his last lifeline.

Aella's tone didn't waver. "Tyrone, I meant what I said. What I feel for you isn't love. I can't marry you."

If she hadn't lived a whole other life, she would've never understood it. All those wealthy girls fought to marry him, to tie their names to the Winters, and he'd chosen her.

She only saw the truth after dying once.

He hadn't chosen her because he loved her. He'd chosen her because she'd loved him too much. Because when the Reids went broke, she became someone he could control, someone too weak to fight back.

He didn't move. He just knelt there, frozen.

Aella turned away, her tone final. "It's over."

The sound of her voice breaking away from him felt like his chest splitting open.

He stood abruptly, eyes red. "You've fallen for someone else. Haven't you?"

That had to be it. It was the only thing that made sense.

Aella took a slow breath. Then another.

In her past life, she'd stood before his grave and told herself it was . Every debt, every wound, every ounce of pain ended with him.

She wasn't trapped in that past anymore.

And she sure wasn't about to relive it.

She turned back toward him and nodded once.

"Yes, there's someone I like."

Tyrone grabbed her shoulders hard. “Who?”

Aella met his eyes calmly. “It’s just me. He doesn’t know. And I’m not ready to say who it is.”

His grip tightened until it hurt.

She frowned but didn’t flinch. “He’s a good man. We get along well. When the time feels right,

I’ll tell him.”

Tyrone went still. His face lost all color.

Aella tilted her head, her voice softer.

“So what do I call you now, Tyrone?”

“Should I step back and call you Mr. Winters?”

“Or should I stay the same and call you Tyrone like before?”

“Or maybe you can ask your parents to make me your god-sister. Then I’ll call

Tyrone broke. He pulled her into his arms, voice cracking. “I don’t want to be want to marry you!”

She struggled until he finally let go,

his breath uneven.

He was forcing himself to stay cool. Stay

calm. I have to. Come on, cool down. Breathe.

He stood there, fists clenched, the ring pressing deep into his palm until his skin stung.

He forced himself not to reach for her again. Not to kiss her again.

His voice came out rough but gentle. "Aella, no matter what happens, I'll always love you."

He stepped back, accepting the distance she'd drawn. Accepting that they were nothing more than childhood friends.

If she liked someone else, he'd fight fair.

He'd show her what his heart was worth.

Even if it cost him everything, he'd win her back.

Aella blinked, a little shocked.

She hadn't expected him to back off so easily.

But if he wanted to stop fighting, she wasn't going to stop him.

Letting go of him meant she could finally breathe again.

For the first time, she felt free.

She smiled faintly. "Tyrone, how are you going to explain the canceled wedding to everyone?"

He frowned, his tone low. "What did you just call me?"

Aella froze, then smacked herself lightly on the mouth. "Sorry. My bad."

He stared at her, and when he saw that small playful smile on her face, something in him softened.

His voice turned warm. "If you're happy, that's enough for me. I'll handle the rest."

Aella blinked. This gentle version of him threw her off.

But since everything was finally said and done, all she wanted was to go home.

She was about to speak when he cut her off. "I know you can't sleep unless it's your own bed. Let me shower and change, then I'll take you back."

Aella blinked again.

The man actually sounded human.

That was rare.

They walked side by side toward the helicopter.

Not far away, Noel stood frozen in disbelief.

His boss had spent days setting up that proposal himself.

And she still turned him down.

The almighty Tyrone Winter, CEO of Winter Group and heir to the richest family in the state, had just failed his own proposal.

The next morning, the helicopter landed at the Winters' private airfield.

When the door opened, Tyrone and Aella stepped out together.

Brad and Raine were waiting with a crowd of friends, each holding a confetti popper, cheering as they surrounded them.

Brad looked Tyrone up and down, noticing the clean clothes. He grinned. "Well, well, someone had one hell of a night."

Chapter 398 No Cigar

The crowd roared like a storm. "Congrats to the newlyweds!"

Confetti burst in the air, spraying color over Aella and Tyrone. Glitter swirled down like falling stars.

Aella met Tyrone's eyes for a split second.

Then she turned, threw Brad a glare sharp enough to slice through steel, greeted everyone with a quick nod, and walked off.

The cheers died on the spot.

The warmth in the air vanished.

Everyone turned toward Tyrone.

He didn't look away. His eyes stayed locked on Aella's fading figure like he couldn't let go.

Brad stepped closer, uneasy. He knew something was off. "Tyrone, what's going on?"

Tyrone drew in a breath, forcing his expression back to calm.

He looked around at the group and said evenly, "She just graduated college. Marriage feels a bit early for her."

Raine blurted out, "Wait, are you saying Aella turned you down?"

The words hit like a spark in dry grass.

Someone gasped. "No way. Everyone knows she's been crazy about him!"

"Yeah, she's chased him forever, and now she's backing out?"

"Maybe her family's trying to raise their price. The Winters already announced the wedding."

"That sounds about right. The Reids are broke. Maybe they want more money before the deal's done. Without Tyrone, Aella's poorer than a regular citizen."

Another scoffed. "I still don't get it. Tyrone could have anyone. Why her? Why the struggling girl?"

"She's broke, she's proud, and she's got an attitude. What's he thinking? She's vastly beneath him."

“Come on. All she’s got is a pretty face and a body that turns heads. Girls like that don’t last long in high society.”

Snickers spread through the group, sharp and ugly.

A few girls exchanged smug looks, whispering behind their hands. They had half the mind to celebrate.

Tyrone’s face darkened. His stare swept through them like a stormfront.

When the noise finally faded, his voice came out low and cutting. “Aella is my future wife. You think it’s smart to insult her while I’m standing here?”

The laughter stopped. Silence hit like a slap.

Someone stammered, “Sorry, Tyrone. We didn’t mean it.”

“Yeah, just fooling around. Don’t take it seriously.”

“We’ll watch what we say next time.”

Tyrone’s gaze flicked across each of them, sharp and cold. “Good.”

But his tone promised something else.

They’d remember this.

He turned and walked straight to his car. The engine roared to life, and he drove off without another word.

The second he was gone, Brad clapped his hands. “Alright, everyone. Drinks tonight. My treat.”

The tension broke, and the group cheered again. After the crowd left, Brad pulled Raine toward his car.

Raine crossed her arms. "What's the rush, Brad? You trying to catch a flight to heaven?"

Brad drove with one hand and grabbed her neck with the other. "Watch it. If you don't apologize, I'm tossing you out on the highway."

Raine reached into her purse, pulled out an eyebrow razor, and held it steady. Brad froze and let go.

She caught his wrist, pressing the blade close. "Tell me where we're going, or I'll open you up right here."

Brad sighed. "I'm too young to die. Just bury me in the Winters' family grave when you're done."

He looked completely defeated.

Raine tucked the blade away. "No thanks. You'd ruin our family's good luck."

Brad groaned. "You're impossible."

After a pause, he muttered, "Fine. I'm taking you home. And we'll stop by to see how Tyrone handles his old man."

The wedding was almost here. Everything had been perfectly set. Then Aella and Tyrone slammed the brakes.

Brad had to see the chaos for himself.

Over an hour later, the Winters' estate loomed ahead.

Tyrone sat in his car for a long moment.

Then he sent Noel a message. "Go through everyone on this list. If their families have projects tied to us, cancel them. If not, send their work to our competitors."

Noel nodded from outside. "Understood, Mr. Winters. What reason should I give them?"

Tyrone's eyes stayed cold. "None."

Noel blinked. "Sir?"

Tyrone's tone dropped lower. "When they ask, remind them about this. If they want back in, they'll surrender five percent of their profit. Call it a warning. A lesson."

Pain was the only teacher that worked.

Noel opened the door. "Sir, is Ms. Reid not with you?"

Tyrone paused before stepping out. "I told her to go home and get some rest."

Inside the house, his grandfather and parents were already waiting.

Before Tyrone could sit, Ralph spoke first. "So? What did you two decide?"

Chapter 399 Fighting His Elders

Ralph's voice shook the whole room. "The wedding's in three days! Are you marrying Aella, or getting engaged to Ms. Guinevere?"

Tyrone stood in the middle of the living room, his expression unreadable, the exhaustion in his eyes impossible to hide.

He went quiet for a moment, then said flatly, "The wedding's off. And there won't be any engagement."

His voice wasn't loud, but it carried the weight of finality.

Virginia stepped forward, her tone trembling. "Tyrone, this is your wedding. Everything's ready. You can't just cancel it. Tell us why."

Ralph's voice cracked like a whip. "Three days left, and you're backing out now? Did the Reids demand more money?"

Tyrone's brow furrowed. "No. They didn't ask for anything. It's my

Virginia's lips parted, but she swallowed her words.

Ralph's temper exploded.

choice."

He pointed at Tyrone, his face burning red. "You say you'll marry, and we move mountains for you. Then you change your mind, and we're supposed to just nod? Do you have any sense of duty?"

His voice grew sharper. "You're the family's heir. You don't get to think about yourself first!"

Tyrone's tone turned cold. "So 'thinking of the family' means I should throw away my own life for business?"

Ralph's face twisted with anger.

Their voices clashed, each word cutting deeper than the last.

Then Edwin finally spoke, his tone sharp and commanding.

"There's no going back. The venue's ready. The guests have their invitations. You'll go through with it."

His eyes hardened. "If you don't, then I'll take the stage that day myself and announce your engagement to Ms. Guinevere. Even if it will be a political marriage, so be it!"

When he finally spoke, his voice was low but sure. "Even if you do that, I won't acknowledge it."

Ralph's anger boiled over. "How dare you talk back to us like that?" He turned toward the butler. "Bring The Punishment!"

He would not accept it. He could not understand, that his brilliant son was now something... foreign. Something he didn't know.

The butler led the maids away to get The Punishment.

Ralph roared, "Now stand up straight, boy!"

Tyrone didn't argue. He didn't even flinch. He just slipped off his jacket and stood with his back straight as an arrow.

He was the one who had proposed the wedding.

Now he was the one calling it off. The mess was his to clean up.

Even if it meant he had to face his elders' rage head on.

Virginia rushed forward. "Stop it! Can't we talk like normal people? You're his father, not some tyrant!"

Ralph glared at her. "This is exactly why he's soft! You've babied him his whole life!"

He turned back to Tyrone. "He needs to learn what it means to be an heir."

The butler raised the whip. The sharp crack tore through the silence.

The strikes came fast. The sound echoed through the room as the white fabric of Tyrone's shirt turned red in streaks.

Ralph lifted his hand. "Enough."

He stared down coldly. "I'll ask you one more time. Are you getting married or engaged?"

Tyrone raised his head. "Neither."

He still stood tall.

His eyes moved from his father to his grandfather.

“There’s more than one heir in this family,” he said. “If you think I’m not fit, replace me.”

The room went dead silent. Every face went pale.

Ralph stormed forward and slapped him so hard the sound cracked through the air.

“How dare you! Say that again if you dare!”

Tyrone’s head snapped to the side. Blood welled at the corner of his mouth.

He wiped it off, his expression calm.

“I’ll say it a hundred times. It’s still true.”

His voice grew deeper. He faced his enraged father. Slowly, he said, “If you keep pushing me, if you drag the Reids into this, I’ll step down. I’ll walk away from all of it. I’m not the only son you

have.”

He grabbed his jacket and left the mansion without another word.

Edwin clutched his chest and sank onto the couch, gasping for air.

Ralph’s face twisted with fury. “That ungrateful boy!”

Virginia stayed quiet, her expression soft but her worry clear.

Ralph paced the floor. "Three days before the wedding, and now he refuses to marry or get engaged! What are we supposed to do?"

Virginia finally spoke. "Tyrone's handled worse. You trusted him with the company. Then trust him to fix this too. Don't interfere with his affairs."

She had waited years for the Winter empire to belong solely to her children. She had suffered too much in this political marriage.

And she would never let anyone else take that from them.

Edwin finally caught his breath. His voice was low and cold.

"Find out everything about that Caldwell girl. If she crosses the line, you know what to do."

Chapter 400 Cancellation

Edwin's eyes turned cold as ice when he cut his gaze toward the butler.

The butler bowed his head and rushed out without saying a word.

Edwin turned to Ralph, his tone sharp. "She's a fallen heiress. She was never worthy of Tyrone. Him canceling that wedding is a blessing in disguise. Tell PR to prepare a speech. The ceremony is off."

Virginia stayed silent and turned her back to him.

In Edwin's world, only the Winters name mattered. Only money and power.

The only reason he tolerated Tyrone's defiance was because no one else could take his place.

She let out a quiet, bitter laugh and walked out of the room.

The next morning, Aella sat at the breakfast table with her family.

They were chatting about buying a house when the TV caught everyone's attention. Tyrone's face appeared on-screen, surrounded by flashing cameras and reporters shouting his name.

He spoke calmly into the microphones. "Because of our tight schedule on the Southeast Astoria project, the wedding is being postponed."

When reporters pushed for details about his fiancée, he smiled faintly. "I love her very much. We're doing just fine."

He added, "Her identity will stay private until after the ceremony."

Aella grabbed the remote and switched off the TV.

Her family sat in silence for a moment, then let out a collective sigh of relief.

Miriam glanced at her daughter. "That boy is something else. I'll never understand you."

Warren set his cup down with a firm tap. "You're lucky he handled the mess without pointing fingers. Next time, think before you act. Don't stir things up again."

Aella nodded obediently.

She knew Tyrone had been reading a statement written by his PR team.

He wasn't protecting her. He was protecting the Winters' reputation.

But it still worked in her favor. His arrogant father and power–crazy grandfather had never wanted her identity revealed before the wedding. They said a bankrupt family didn't fit their image.

That decision ended up saving her a lot of trouble.

Her phone rang from the living room.

She answered Daniel's call, exchanged a few quick words, then rushed out the door.

By ten that morning, she and Daniel walked out of the auction house together.

Aella's steps were light, her face glowing with relief.

Daniel smiled at her grin. "See you Monday."

She watched his car pull away and clutched her purse close.

Her mother's jewelry had sold for one and a half billion and then some. Enough to pay back Tyrone, with plenty left to spare.

She had two more days before starting her internship at Hill Hospital. Tomorrow, she would move her family out of Tyrone's house.

The next morning, they woke early and started packing.

The house was spotless, already cleaned by Tyrone's staff.

They only needed to take their personal things.

Aella hired movers, and by noon, it was done.

Before leaving, she called a cleaner to give the house one final polish.

At their rental, the family unpacked until their bodies gave out.

By evening, they were wiped out.

Around seven, they headed out for dinner. They ordered beer and barbecue shrimp, laughing as they ate like there was no tomorrow.

Not far away, a black Bentley came to a smooth stop by the curb.

The tinted window rolled down. Tyrone sat inside, watching Aella. She wore plastic gloves, her hair loose, her cheeks glowing as she laughed and lifted her beer.

His chest tightened. So this was what made her smile—a street meal, some cheap beer, a moment of peace.

Maybe happiness wasn't complicated after all.

He adjusted his jacket and stepped out of the car.

“Over here, Tyrone!”

Clyde jumped up, grinning ear to ear, and offered his seat without hesitation.

Warren waved for more utensils.

Tyrone glanced at the low stool and tugged at his pant legs before sitting beside Aella.

Her eyes widened. The shrimp slipped from her hand and landed in her plate with a wet thud. “What are you doing here?”

Tyrone’s eyes flicked to the bit of red oil on her lip. He grabbed a napkin and reached over to wipe it off.

Aella leaned back fast, avoiding his touch.

He pulled his hand back and asked evenly, “What brings you to the West District?”

Clyde opened his mouth, but Aella jumped in. “Clyde said this place was amazing, so we came here.”

She shot her brother a glare that screamed shut up or else.

Tyrone still didn’t know they had already moved out of his house.

She’d tell him tomorrow—after she paid him back and returned every gift.

Tyrone looked at her, his eyes filled with questions, but he didn’t push.

She had always been unpredictable.

Warren lifted his beer and offered it across the table. “Drink with us, Tyrone?”

Tyrone nodded. “Sure.”

Aella pressed her lips together.

He was too refined for places like this. The smoke, the noise, the greasy food—it wasn't his world. And this place was open-air.

He clanged glasses with Warren, but he didn't touch anything. She grabbed a shrimp, dripping with spicy sauce, and held it in front of him. "Best thing here. Try it."

Tyrone's gaze locked onto her face.

She sighed, then flicked the shrimp tail into his mouth with perfect aim.