

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 201

Rebecca ended the call, cool with Vance crashing at Catherine's place. She set the phone down and went back to sleep.

Half an hour later, the front door creaked open. Vance had come home,

She stirred, lying there for a moment, then forced herself up as he banged into everything in the entryway. In his state, he might ruin that notarized waiver.

She stepped into the living room and found him standing there in a daze.

"Rebecca, come here," he murmured, recognizing her.

She walked over. "You didn't mix me up with someone else?"

"Would I mistake my own wife?" he grumbled, slinging an arm around her shoulders.

Rebecca was hit by a wall of alcohol fumes and tried to shove him off. His grip only tightened, and his voice had an edge of excitement. "Push me again, and I'll fall. You won't have a husband anymore."

There was no reasoning with a drunk person. Once they reached the living room, he collapsed onto the sofa, fished a folder from his bag, and thrust it at her. "Here you go."

She opened it, confirming everything was in order.

He leaned back against the cushions and snorted, "Still checking? Don't you trust me? Have I ever failed at anything you asked me to handle?"

That was true. There was almost nothing he couldn't do, but hearing him brag so loudly today was new. He really was hammered.

Rebecca grabbed the papers and started back to her room. He caught her wrist and yanked hard. Her weak legs gave way under the pull, and she tumbled into his arms.

He locked her in, and she struggled.

"Sober up! Don't throw a tantrum, okay?" she snapped.

She was leaving in two days and wanted nothing more than to keep everything quiet. She didn't want any more trouble,

But Vance kept his arms clamped around her waist, breathing booze right in her face. “You know I’m drunk. Why wouldn’t you help me inside, get me water, and change my clothes? Is this how you repay me for running around for you all day?”

Rebecca started to answer, but he pinched her nose. “That’s mistake number one today. There’s a second one.”

“Enough. I’m tired and don’t have time for this.” She braced her hands against his chest and tried to get

“Look at you. So boring.” He pulled her closer. “You were like this in high school, all clueless.”

Rebecca felt a sharp, burning pain, like claws had raked across her heart. So, that was how he had seen her passionate high-school crush: boring.

People tended to tell the truth when they were drunk, and this was straight from his heart.

“Then who is interesting?” she asked with a cold laugh.

“Cathy, obviously,” he answered without missing a beat. “Look how interesting she is, planning that whole charity donation and pushing me out front to take all the credit while she stayed in the background doing everything. You know, when she winked at me in the crowd, it was really, really cute.”

In love, he sounded cute.

Rebecca stayed stone-faced. She quietly unlocked the tablet she had left on the sofa and started recording.

“Cathy...” He kept his eyes half-closed, smiling. “She washed the seniors’ feet at the center. Shocking. She said it was nothing. She did all that when she volunteered at the hospital.”

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Rebecca stayed quiet, recording whatever Vance said.

When the truth about the volunteer work finally came out, she would play this clip and watch his face burn.

“My grandma always praised a thin volunteer girl, who wiped her down, fed her medicine, and helped her out of bed for check-ups. Such a sweet, kind-hearted girl. After all these years, she hasn’t changed a bit.”

He suddenly opened his eyes and stared at her. “And you? I wash your feet all the time.”

Yes, he had done that after she was injured in the accident. It felt like a lifetime ago—so long ago that she didn’t want to dig through the painful memories anymore.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” His hand slid up and cupped her face. “Mrs. Bradford?”

She thought for a second. “You could always ask Catherine to wash yours. She’s good at it.”

Catherine could do that for him every day, but Rebecca wouldn’t be around to see it.

He pinched her nose. “Do you even have a conscience? Getting jealous like this?”

There he came again, thinking she was being jealous. He never seemed to understand that when a wife said something like that, it wasn’t jealousy, but indifference.

“Let go. I can’t breathe.” She opened her mouth wide, swatting his hand.

He finally released her and tipped his head back against the sofa. He sighed, “Cathy and I aren’t what you think. We...”

He paused. “Never mind. You wouldn’t get it.”

“I don’t,” she said. “Because other people don’t repeat their mistakes. She dumped you like a dirty sock, yet when she is back, you’re still running after her like a puppy.”

He glared. “Dirty sock? Me?”

Rebecca snorted. What else?

“You don’t understand. She’s...”

“Yeah, I don’t understand. I hope you two last forever. Because...” She felt his arms loosen a little and slipped free. “People don’t make the same mistakes.”

“Wait!” He tried to grab her. “I haven’t told you the second mistake yet.”

She dodged, ready this time. “It’s me standing here listening to your nonsense.”

A call came right then. He forgot about their conversation and reached for the phone that had fallen on the floor during their struggle. He leaned over to pick it up and accidentally hit the speaker.

It was Aiden checking if Vance had made it home. Vance was too drunk to notice his loud voice.

“Yeah, I’m home. Don’t worry. Rebecca is with me.”

“That’s exactly why we’re worried. Your housekeeper’s still in the hospital. You could have just stayed at Cathy’s place. She will look after you.”

“That’s fine. I can look after myself.”

“Oh, and Cathy’s AC might be acting up again.”

They kept talking about Catherine until Vance started fading. The phone slipped onto the sofa.

Aiden was still talking. “By the way, about my salary bump of one million dollars and that multi-million bonus at Q2... Keep that quiet, okay? If my wife finds out, that money’s really mine. Does Lucas get anything, or is it just me? Don’t want to slip up.”

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Rebecca picked up the phone and held it back to Vance’s ear.

Aiden called out, “Vance? You still there?”

“Mmm...” Vance murmured. “Take care of Cathy.”

“Why are you so hard on yourself? Take care of her yourself,” Aiden sighed.

Rebecca wasn’t sure if she imagined it, but a tear seemed to slide from the corner of Vance’s eye. His voice cracked, confirming her suspicion.

“I can’t,” he sobbed. “Not in this lifetime. Have to take responsibility for Rebecca. I really can’t. Cathy...”

“Okay, get some rest. Catch you later,” Aiden exhaled deeply, ending the call.

Rebecca set the phone beside Vance, feeling nothing. Actually, he didn’t need to worry. She’d grant his wish.

Thanks to the alcohol, her puzzle was solved. Before, she had wondered how Vance had bought Catherine a new house and all that luxury without breaking her three rules.

Turned out, it had been through Aiden. As a reward, Aiden got a huge raise and millions for bonus.

Vance was clever. Technically, he hadn't violated anything, but didn't his conscience sting? It made sense, though. His heart had always tilted toward Catherine. P

The countdown to leaving was now on day three. When Rebecca woke up the next morning, she only had two days left before she flew to Arelmoor to meet everyone.

She would take Josette with her and move straight into the apartment Lauren had rented. Then she'd catch the evening flight out with the team.

A month later, when she returned to the country, she wouldn't come back to Soliaridge. Rather, she'd stay in Arelmoor with Josette to get the visa sorted. Then it would be almost time for school.

The plan was perfect. She just needed it all to go smoothly.

To avoid any more trouble, she decided to stay at home and refrained from calling Josette. She couldn't risk it, not when Vance was home.

He was still in the shower. The sound of running water had woken her this morning, reminding her of the night of their fifth anniversary.

The same sound had shattered the last of her hopes for their marriage. It felt like yesterday, yet her heart had gone through endless turmoil.

When the water shut off, she was watching a funny variety show on her phone.

Vance stepped out of the bathroom, drying his hair. She just pretended she didn't see him.

Unable to hold back, he asked, "Was I totally wasted last night?"

"Yes," she replied, laughing because one of the actors on the show had just done something hilarious.

Her head was propped against the headboard. Her butt was on fluffy pillows, and her body was wrapped in a soft comforter. The temperature was perfect, and she looked quite comfortable.

He tossed the towel and lay down beside her, propping himself on one elbow. "Cozy, huh? And you left me on the sofa all night?"

He suddenly leaned in, and water from his hair dripped onto her pillow.

She instinctively scooted away, frowning. "Move over. Your hair's dripping!"

"What's that look on your face? Grossed out by me? So what if my hair is wet?" He leaned in further, and water was dripping all over her face.

She planted a hand on his cheek and shoved with all her might.

"Alright, I'll stop." He caught her hand, his eyes flickering. "When I got home last night, did I talk to Aiden on the phone for half an hour?"

"Yeah." She grimaced, uncomfortable with water on her hands.

"Don't make that face. I'm not dirty." He grabbed a tissue and wiped her hands.

She didn't want to arouse any suspicion. Or else, she would have argued. With only two days remaining, she swallowed it for a smoother sail.

"By the way, what did Aiden and I talk about for so long?" he asked casually, avoiding her eyes.

That was clearly a guilty look.

Rebecca sneered inwardly but kept her voice light. "Oh, you were just gushing about Cathy Babe!"

"Don't be sarcastic," he protested.

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"Am I wrong?" she countered. "That's literally how you have her saved on your phone-Cathy Babe."

"Uh..." He paused. "That was from a long time ago. I never changed it."

"Oh, you can change it now," she pushed.

"Why do you have to..."

"It's fine. Keep it as it is. I don't care."

She held up her phone again, ready to watch the rest of the show. Some actors were born for comedy. Their faces alone could make her laugh.

While she was cracking up, Vance suddenly blocked the screen with his hand. “What exactly did I say last night?”

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“Well...” Rebecca was still smiling from the joke, “You asked Aiden to take good care of Catherine, saying you love her so much, but you have to take responsibility for me.”

“That’s it?” Vance stared.

She held his gaze. “What else? Are you hiding something?”

His eyes flickered. “No, nothing.”

“Then move your hand. You’re blocking my show.” She pushed his hand away.

He observed her expression. “You’re not mad?”

“Why would I? This show is hilarious.” She burst out laughing again.

But she didn’t get to keep watching, because he suddenly pulled her into his arms, pressing her head against his shoulder. “Rebecca, when is Grandma coming back?”

Alarm bells went off in her head. “Why?”

“The day after tomorrow, okay? I’ve got a few free days starting then. We can take her on that trip we talked about.”

“Uh, we’ll see. I’m not sure when she’s coming back.”

She and Josette did have a trip planned, just without him.

“Where did Josette go with her friends? Why did it take so many days?” he grumbled.

“That’s my grandma. What are you sighing about?”

“She’s my grandma, too. Alright, enough joking around. I’m heading out to an important meeting.”

He sat up. The show aroused Rebecca’s laughter again.

“I don’t have time to make breakfast. Just order something.” He got out of bed, threw on clothes, and left in a rush.

The second he was gone, Rebecca video-called Josette, Josette had just come back from the hotel restaurant, looking great.

Rebecca felt relieved, deciding to eat something, but the fridge was empty, with Nancy still in the hospital. There weren’t even snacks except a package of chips.

Excluding that day, she only had two days left. If she wasn’t leaving the house, she needed supplies. She opened the grocery delivery app and ordered enough food for three days, then got up to wash her face and change.

Half an hour later, her phone buzzed. The delivery guy had arrived.

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She granted him access, and soon the doorbell rang. Through the surveillance, she saw the guy in a yellow uniform.

“Please leave it outside. I’ll grab it in a minute,” she said, wearing a face mask.

“Okay,” the guy answered before leaving.

After removing the mask, she creaked open the door when a figure rushed at her.

She caught a flash of yellow, then everything went black as something was yanked over her head.

She felt herself being stuffed into a big box, carried down in the elevator, and then hoisted onto someone’s shoulder. At the same time, a wad of cloth was shoved into her mouth, and ropes tightened around her body.

Outside, she heard the security say, “Moving stuff?”

“Yeah, the client needs it repaired,” answered the man carrying her.

She recognized that voice. It belonged to that delivery guy, but she couldn’t scream or move.

They loaded her into a vehicle and drove somewhere. When they finally stopped, someone carried the box out and dumped it on the ground.

The lid opened, and she was pulled out of the sack. The whole ride, she had been trying to figure out who would kidnap her. She had been so careful and hadn’t even planned to leave the apartment for the last two days.

But disaster still fell upon her. She had lived in that place for five years without any trouble, coming and going casually.

When they pulled the sack off, she found herself inside an unfinished building. Two men pinned her down and tied her limbs with rope.

One of them was none other than that delivery guy, still wearing that yellow shirt.

He tossed her into a corner. "Stay there!"

It would have been a lie to say she wasn't scared, but fear wouldn't help. Shakily, she started surveying the surroundings.

From the height, they had to be at least ten floors up. The windows had no glass, and jumping off was purely suicidal.

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Rebecca wasn't going to sit there and wait. At least, she needed to figure out who had taken her.

"What do you want?" she asked, forcing herself to stay calm.

The two men didn't answer. They just stood guard, never leaving her side.

She could only wait, not daring to ask if they wanted money. Greed might kick in if they realized how much she was worth.

Half an hour later, footsteps came. Another group arrived, dragging two people she knew: Soren and Catherine, both blindfolded.

They had been hauled up the stairs that had no railings. It looked like all three of them had been kidnapped.

Something clicked in her head: this had to be connected to Soren, and they wanted to ask Vance for ransom.

Vance would definitely come. Even if she wasn't worth it, he'd come for Catherine.

Soren and Catherine were thrown on the floor beside her.

“Let me go! Whatever you want, name the price!” Catherine screamed.

“Sounds like they are rich. Should we double it?” The man who had brought Catherine laughed wildly.

His partner, Elliott, frowned. “Who is she? Why did you grab her?”

“Vance Bradford’s wife,” replied Malcolm.

“Wait, that’s Vance’s wife?” Elliott pointed at Rebecca. “Then who is this?”

“How would I know?” Malcolm scratched his head. “Where did you pick this one up?”

“From Vance’s place. Has to be his wife.”

“The woman we grabbed is always with him in public. The retirement center news showed her with him, too.”

“Always be with him... Has to be his lover. Rich guys aren’t limited to one woman.”

“Just ask them.” Elliott pointed at the two women. “Which one of you is Vance Bradford’s wife?”

“She is!” Catherine pointed instantly

“This is your daughter?” Elliott asked Soren. “Vance’s wife?”

“Yes, she is. Vance has tons of money, Believe me.” Soren’s clothes were torn, and his face was bruised.

Rebecca stared coldly. This was her father, selling her out for money.

“Did you make the call?” Elliott asked.

“Yeah. Vance is on his way.” Malcolm kicked Catherine. “Who are you to Vance?”

“Don’t complicate things,” Elliott warned.

“I just got played by this woman, Now that I think about it, she’s valuable, too. When I called Vance, she screamed into the phone for help. He freaked out, promising to pay whatever for her safety.”

Elliott gave a cold laugh. “We just want money. Stay out of the rest.”

Malcolm pressed his lips together. “I’m just thinking about which one of them will make Vance pay more.

“Shush! He’s here!” Elliott caught noises from downstairs.

A car pulled up at the building, and Vance stepped out with two large suitcases.

“Damn, the kid really shows up alone. She has got guts.” Elliott smacked his lips.

“I’m here!” Vance shouted from below. “Send someone down to talk!”

“11th floor!” Malcolm shouted back.

Vance picked up the cases and started running up, yelling as he climbed, “Cathy, don’t be scared! I’m coming!”

Elliott asked Rebecca, “Cathy?”

“No,” she answered evenly.

“She is my daughter. She is Vance’s real wife,” Soren explained.

She gave him a contemptuous look, disgusted by his eagerness to push her forward and make sure they got the ransom.

“This is getting fun,” Malcolm laughed.

“Cathy!” Vance’s voice grew clearer as he climbed up. “Cathy, are you okay? Can you hear me? Let her say something!”

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“Vance, I’m here! Save me!” Catherine screamed.

“Cathy, it’s okay! Don’t be afraid! I’m here!” Vance’s voice turned frantic.

Moments later, he appeared at the top of the stairs on the 11th floor. Sweat had soaked through his shirt, and his usually kempt hair stuck to his forehead.

The first thing he did was stare at Catherine. “Cathy, are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

She just cried and shook her head. Vance relaxed, turning to Malcolm, “You’d better not have touched a single hair of her!”

“Interesting,” Malcolm laughed.

“We’re only after money. Cash first, then we talk,” Elliott said.

Malcolm yanked Catherine to her feet and pressed a knife to her throat.

“What are you doing?” Vance yelled. “Let her go!”

Malcolm sneered, “Throw the money over first, then we’ll talk about releasing anyone.”

“Release her first!” Vance demanded.

“Well then, let’s play a fun little game.” Malcolm exchanged a look with Elliott, and the latter dragged

Rebecca out of the corner.

Vance’s expression shifted. “Why are you here?”

Still with the gag in her mouth, she couldn’t answer. But seriously? He had been upstairs for this long and only just noticed her? Even though she was in the corner behind several kidnappers, his focus on Catherine had been that complete?

“Mr. CEO, which one of them is your wife?” Malcolm smirked.

Vance understood instantly, especially since Soren was there too. Clearly, the old man had sold him out and pointed them to kidnap Rebecca.

But something had gone wrong. They ended up taking both women.

“What do you want?” Vance frowned.

“Pick one. Who do you want to save?” Both men pressed knives to the women’s throats and stepped closer together.

“Let me go!” Rebecca struggled, breaking free.

She rushed toward the open window frame that had no glass. Elliott grabbed her. “Are you crazy, trying to kill yourself? Go ahead! Jump!”

He dragged her to the edge so she could see the height. Jumping from there was sure death.

“Don’t mess around. She’s the real wife,” Malcolm warned.

Killing her meant no money.

Elliott yanked Rebecca back and pressed the knife to her face. Malcolm did the same to Catherine and grinned at Vance. “Take a pick, Mr. Bradford.”

Vance’s gaze flicked between the two women.

Catherine started crying again. “Pick Rebecca. Don’t worry about me. Pick her!”

Rebecca didn’t even bother speaking. She already knew the answer. Of course, he would pick Catherine.

Vance’s eyes were stormy. “I’ll pay you double for both of them.”

Malcolm roared with laughter. “No tricks here. I’m just collecting a debt. If I take double, I’ll be committing a crime.”

“Pick one. We’ll keep the other until we’re safe.” Elliott pressed the blade tighter against Rebecca’s cheek.

“Wait!” Vance said urgently. “Let them go and take me.”

“You think this is a movie?” Elliott scoffed. “Why would we trade two women for one big guy like you?”

“You said it yourself-collecting a debt. Take the cash and leave. Why complicate it?” Vance said coldly. “If you really need someone to go with you, take him.”

He pointed at Soren, who had been playing dead for a while.

“No, don’t. I don’t want to go with them. Save me!” he pleaded, scrambling up, only to be kicked back down by the other men.

“Enough games,” Elliott said, “Mr. Bradford, just throw the money over.”

Vance looked at the ten-plus men facing him. Fighting was pointless; paying was the cleanest solution. But if they double-crossed him...

“Don’t trust us?” Malcolm smirked. “Here is an idea. You’ve got two suitcases. Toss one over, and we release one person. Who do you want to be freed first?”

“Rebecca first, Vance!” Catherine shouted.

“Shut your mouth!” Malcolm tightened his grip on her neck and pressed the knife against her cheek. “Scream again, and I’ll ruin that pretty face!”

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The blade glinted in the sunlight.

“Stop!” Vance yelled.

“Made up your mind yet?” Malcolm grinned viciously. “You’re picking your lover?”

Vance looked at Rebecca with pure agony. She stayed calm, watching the sunlit floor below. The light was getting stronger, turning the concrete golden.

“Let’s make it even more fun and help you decide,” Malcolm chuckled. “Whoever we release second, we might not be able to control our hands.”

“What do you mean?” Vance frowned.

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“It means...” Malcolm laughed wildly, “by the time we get to that person, we might be tired. It’s hard to say if we won’t end up slashing her face.”

Both men pressed the flat of their blades against the women’s cheeks.

“Wait!” Vance was torn, his eyes darting between them.

Catherine was too scared to say another word.

“Hurry up!” Elliott urged, running out of patience. “We don’t have all day. Are you stalling so the police can get here?”

“I’ll count to three. If you haven’t chosen by then, both faces get cut.” Malcolm started counting fast. “One, two, three!”

“Release Cathy!” Vance roared, his voice raw and broken. 1

The whole floor went silent. Then Malcolm burst into laughter, joined by the other kidnappers.

They were laughing because they thought it was hilarious. Soren was laughing bitterly because his son-in-law had picked another woman. Vance was panting, looking completely shattered.

Vance panted, looking shattered, while Rebecca stayed calm, knowing the answer all along.

She just didn't understand Vance's pain. He made that choice himself, so why was he falling apart?

"Rebecca..." Vance was in agony, as if someone were choking him.

He couldn't get any more words out. She had no expression, not even fear. She just looked at him, then at the sunlit floor ahead.

"We keep our word. Catch!" Malcolm shoved Catherine forward.

Rebecca felt Elliott's grip loosen slightly. A shadow of a hand appeared on the sunlit floor, making a quick gesture.

She gave Vance a small smile, muttering inwardly, "Vance, goodbye. This is it for us."

Vance saw that smile and tried to process it. She suddenly leaned backward out the open window.

"Rebecca!" He caught Catherine as she stumbled toward him and screamed like his soul was being ripped out.

Everyone's attention was on Vance. No one had expected her to jump.

Elliott instinctively reached out, but a pair of arms shot in from outside the window, locking onto

Rebecca's.

She swung, did a flip, and disappeared. It happened in a blink. One second she was there, and the next she was gone.

Elliott and Malcolm rushed to the window. There was Rebecca, clinging to the back of a man who was hanging from a rope.

A safety net was outside the tenth floor. The man bounced on it, slid down fast, and vanished.

"I'm sorry I'm late!" Desmond sprinted.

"Perfect timing. Thank you," Rebecca replied.

There was no time for small talk. They had to run. Desmond poured on speed, rounded the side of the next building, and stopped beside a waiting car.

He helped her into the passenger seat, jumped in, started the engine, and floored it. Rebecca didn't ask where they were going. Anywhere was safer than that place.

Finally, the car pulled up in front of a hotel, “Want to get a room and wash up? I’ll go buy you some new clothes.”

Rebecca was still suffering from the aftershock. When the knife had been pressed to her face, she had felt more despair than fear.

She was still shaking, afraid not for herself, but for what would happen to Josette if anything went wrong.

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Now that Rebecca was safe, fear started to creep in.

She nodded to Desmond’s question, her hands trembling. Her wrists, which had been grabbed by him during the rescue, were red and stinging.

“How did you even find me?” she asked.

It was the cherry season in the neighboring state, and Joyce loved cherries.

With modern delivery and her money, she could have had any fruit she wanted, but this was Desmond’s way of showing love.

Every year, he went to the orchard himself, picked the freshest cherries, and delivered them in person.

Last night, he had driven to the orchard, picked through the night, and arrived back in Soliaridge this morning. Having a noon flight to Arelmoor, he decided to swing by and drop off two boxes for Rebecca to try.

When he got to the complex and called, she didn’t answer.

From the elevator, two men carried a huge box out. He shouldered the cherries and went in, knowing roughly which floor she lived on.

It would have been rude to go straight up, but the cherries didn’t keep long. Even if she wasn’t home, he could leave them with the housekeeper.

But the elevator wouldn’t let him up. Luckily, a kid who lived two floors below came in and used his key card. Desmond rode partway, then took the stairs up.

He kept calling her the whole time, but she never picked up. He could even hear her phone ringing inside. Then he noticed her front door was wide open and her phone was ringing on the floor.

He called out to her, but there was no answer. He was puzzled until he saw the untouched delivery bags outside.

The earlier scene in the elevator flashed across his mind. Carrying the big box, one of the two guys was wearing a delivery uniform.

He raced downstairs and chased them, but they were already gone.

He asked the shop owners outside the complex. One of them remembered a guy in a delivery shirt loading a big box into a van, and it should have been captured by the security cameras of the shop.

He paid the owner to pull the plate and direction. It turned out the van had left only minutes earlier, probably slowed down by the weight of the box.

“So, I followed them,” Desmond explained. “They didn’t get far. I caught up after two blocks and tailed them there. I was too late. They had already gone upstairs. After calling the police, I found some old rope and a safety net on the construction site, set everything up, and went up to signal you.”

That signal was their private code.

She had actually seen him when Elliott dragged her up. He had been hanging outside the 12th floor for a split second.

That was why she had run for the window, even when Elliott threatened her.

She understood the gesture: Lift One. It was something they had made up, not taught in class. Anyone who had ever partnered with her in “Butterfly Lovers” knew it.

Before their recent reunion, she had forgotten Desmond, but she had never forgotten the moves.

So, she had gestured behind her back, signaling that she understood. Then it had been the exchange between Vance and the kidnappers.

When Catherine was pushed toward Vance and the grip on her loosened, Desmond gave the signal again. Rebecca leaned back and spread her arms.

Hanging upside down, he caught her perfectly. With the momentum, she flipped and landed smoothly on his back.

It was muscle memory, etched in her soul. The movement was messy, but it worked. And he had been thoughtful enough to rig a safety net on the tenth floor just in case. Even if she had fallen, she would have only hit the net.

“Come on, I’ll get you to the room first, then go buy stuff,” Desmond said.

“Weren’t you supposed to fly back to Arelmoor?” Rebecca asked.

If it had been a noon flight, he had definitely missed it.

“It’s fine. Already missed it. I’ll catch an evening one.” He grinned, his white teeth glowing in the sunlight.

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Rebecca showered and changed into the clothes Desmond had bought.

When she was done, he knocked. “It’s me. I brought food.”

She opened the door and saw him standing there with two big bags-restaurant meals and fresh fruit.

“Here, you must be starving.” He set everything on the table. “I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I grabbed a little of everything.”

She was stunned by the varieties. Her eyes lit up because among them was her favorite steamed sea bass. She loved them, but Vance had always preferred spicy food.

After that ordeal, they were both starving. They polished off the whole fish, soup, and the dishes.

“We don’t eat like dancers at all,” Desmond chuckled.

Rebecca laughed along. “I gave up dancing years ago.”

But old habits die hard. She kept her diet most of the time.

“Passion lives in the heart. The rest is just details.” He pressed a hand to his chest, his eyes earnest.

She nodded, and he added, “Get some rest. I’ll be next door. Call me if you need anything.”

He quickly cleaned up, giving her space and time to process. “Oh, and I called the police. They should have everything under control by now.”

What had happened that day was a huge blow. Vance had made a choice that cut deep.

But once things were handled, he would definitely come looking for her. She needed time to decide how to face him.

She was exhausted. After Desmond left, she locked the door and lay down in bed.

The second she relaxed, every bone ached. She didn’t replay that day like Desmond thought she would. Instead, she decided to sleep on it.

The hotel pillow was soft. The moment her head hit it, she felt drowsy and knew that she would get to sleep in for once.

No one would disturb her because her phone had been left behind. But her sleep didn’t last long. The police arrived.

They spoke to Desmond first to get his statement, then came to Rebecca, the victim. She helplessly shook her head, having dealt with the police too much recently.

She recounted the whole story in detail, while Desmond waited anxiously beside her,

When she finished, he jumped in, “Sir, she has been through a lot today, Can she just stay here and rest

Chaptem ong instead of going to the station?”

The officers nodded, explaining they were only gathering information. They took notes on everything and left.

But Rebecca still couldn’t relax because Vance showed up right after.

Ready to head to the airport, Desmond came to say goodbye and left her some cash. After all, she had nothing on her, not even her phone.

When Vance arrived, Desmond was opening the door. He looked inside and saw Rebecca sitting on the bed in a robe, a stack of cash on the nightstand.

“What are you doing here?” His eyes narrowed with hostility toward Desmond.

“Where else would I be?” Desmond scoffed. “Standing next to another woman and telling her I chose her?”

Vance paused, looking at Rebecca, who stared back blankly.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 210

“Desmond Schroeder!” Vance growled through clenched teeth. “Let’s get one thing straight. Wherever you are doesn’t matter. Rebecca is my wife, and you have no business being near her!”

“Really?” Desmond refused to back down. “If I hadn’t shown up today, she would have either jumped or had her face sliced open. Is that what you wanted?”

Vance grabbed him by the collar. “Kid, I don’t care how powerful your family is. Stay away from my woman!”

Desmond gripped his fist. “Get this straight. She is herself and a dancer. She is not anyone’s woman or accessory!”

Vance swung and punched him square in the jaw. “Ask her! Who is she? Ask her if she is my woman!”

Rebecca rushed forward and stepped between them. “Vance, get out! Out of my room!”

His eyes widened. “What did you just say? Say it again.”

“I said get out of my room!” she repeated, planting herself firmly in front of Desmond.

“You want me to get out of this room?” Vance pointed at himself, incredulous. “Do you even hear yourself? Without me, would you even be in this hotel right now?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Bradford,” Desmond chimed in. “First of all, she could stand on her own feet. Without you, she would be a world-famous dancer surrounded by flowers and applause. She could afford any hotel she wanted!”

That hit Vance in the exact place that hurt most. If not for saving him, Rebecca would never have been crippled. It was a debt he would carry forever.

“Second, even if we pretend that’s true, it’s the bare minimum for you to take care of her, not something to hold over her head,” Desmond continued. “Third, I’m the one who paid for this room.”

“You bastard!” Vance cursed and lunged, trying to yank Desmond over.

Rebecca kept Desmond shielded, blocking Vance’s advance.

He lost it and jabbed a finger at her. “What the hell is this? You’re protecting him?”

She was unblinking. “Yes. Because he protected me when I was in danger.”

He looked into her eyes and saw nothing-no warmth, no ripples, just icy coldness.

He took a deep breath. “I know you’re angry. Come home and talk. Don’t make a scene here in public.”

“A scene?” she muttered. “Isn’t what happened today already a scene?”

He froze, and she continued, “Besides, I’m not angry.”

It was the truth. She hadn’t felt a single spark of rage about his choice. She was just done.

“Was it him? Did this kid talk trash about me?” He pointed at Desmond. “You coward, come out and face me! Don’t hide behind a woman!”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 211

It was a classic goad, but Desmond didn’t bite.

From behind Rebecca, he taunted, “A real man’s job is to protect the woman he loves most, not throw her under the bus the second things get dangerous.”

Rebecca laughed, sharp and mocking. “You’re wrong. Mr. Bradford is a real man. Today, he protected the person he loves most.”

She wasn’t Vance’s anything or had ever received his love. If she had once tried to save face and pretend, that time was over. She had nothing left to hide.

Vance squeezed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, they were full of pain. “That’s not true. I didn’t have a choice.”

“Oh, right. No choice but to sneak around with another woman. No choice but to parade her in public so kidnappers couldn’t even tell who your wife was. No choice but to pick the other woman when your wife was right there,” Desmond scoffed. “Where do all these scenarios come from?” (1)

“Say one more word, and I’ll kill you.” Vance lunged forward again.

“Enough!” Rebecca snapped. “You have the nerve to come here and throw a fit? You have the nerve to attack the man who saved my life?”

“H-He has ulterior motives.” He jabbed a finger at Desmond.

“Yeah, and your heart is pure gold,” she countered, rendering him speechless.

She was grateful to Desmond, who had risked his life to save her and missed his flight. She couldn’t let him miss the evening one, too, or the fruit would spoil.

She turned to him. “I can’t thank you enough for your help today.”

“What else does he want?” Vance roared. “Name the price. I’ll pay it!”

Ignoring him, she continued, “Go. Your cherries can’t wait. I’ll see you around.”

“How are you going to thank him? Say it! I’ll do it for you,” Vance said, finally remembering his duty as a husband.

But neither of them paid him any attention.

Seeing Desmond’s worried expression, she mouthed, “See you in Arelmoor.”

Mad about their silent exchange, Vance rushed forward and yanked her into his arms. “What was that? A secret signal?”

Still, no one answered him.

Rebecca gave Desmond a reassuring look. “Go. I’m fine.”

He finally nodded. “All right. Call me if anything happens.”

That set Vance off again. “Call him for what?”

Desmond ignored his outburst and waved. “Bye, Rebecca. See you.”

“Bye.” She waved back.

Vance was oblivious to their plan to meet again in two days. He scowled. “All that ‘bye’ and ‘see you’... You two really can’t stand to be apart, huh?”

He slammed the door shut and turned to face her.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 212

Vance pulled Rebecca into his arms, holding her without a word.

She didn’t resist. It was not worth her energy.

After a while, she spoke. "Are you done yet? My legs are strained."

"It's my fault." He scooped her up, carried her to the bed, and set her down. "Tired? Want to rest a while?"

She didn't answer, and his expression grew heavy. "I know what happened today hurt you, but in that situation, I didn't have an easy choice."

"Choice?" she laughed with disgust.

He sighed, "Cathy really cares about her face..."

"And I don't?" she shot back.

"No. It's just that she works in the public eye," he faltered. "A scarred face would ruin her career. Plus, she's not married yet. Her looks matter a lot to her future."

She understood perfectly. "So, because I'm already married and stay home, my image doesn't matter. Got it."

"Of course, it does," he corrected. "But in an extreme situation like that, her face is more important. You already have..."

Vance glanced at her leg and stopped mid-sentence.

She smiled bitterly and knowingly. "I get it. Since I'm already disabled, another scar on my face doesn't make any difference, right?"

"You have me," he explained desperately. "I'll take care of you for the rest of my life. It doesn't matter what you look like. You'll always be my wife."

"That's enough," She laughed coldly. "Is that title so amazing that I have to trade one leg and my face for it?"

"You're twisting my words. I..."

"I'm not twisting anything. I get it."

She was done with his excuses, but he remained skeptical. "You really do?"

"Absolutely," she confirmed, understanding it too well to feel anything.

"Then, let's go home?" He reached for her.

"Sure," she agreed without hesitation.

Of course, she needed to go home. Her passport and all her credentials were still there.

Charter

Relieved, he moved to get her up, but she pushed him away, calm as if she hadn't just walked away from death.

"I need to change."

"Are you really not angry?"

Her composure felt unreal to him.

"Nope. You made it clear enough. Cathy has to work and get married. Her face can't be ruined."

"Exactly. Do you really understand?" 1

"I do."

He chose to save his beloved woman. What was there not to understand? But understanding didn't change anything.

It was the same as understanding why Soren had offered her to the kidnappers to pay his gambling debts. Yet understanding the fact didn't mean she didn't hate him or hadn't mentally crossed him out in red.

She understood Vance's actions. Yes. But she had banished him from her heart.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 213

Rebecca stayed calm the whole time. There was no yelling, no cold shoulder, and no drama.

She simply packed her things, checked out of the hotel, and rode home with Vance. She was quiet, as if nothing had happened, acting as detached as a stranger.

Vance glanced at her every time they stopped at a light, stunned by how she was reacting. He had prepared for hours of explanations and apologies, yet none came into use.

When the kidnappers had taken her, the front door had been left wide open, and the delivery bags were still outside. Now everything was neat, the groceries were put away, and the two boxes of cherries sat on the counter.

Rebecca knew they were Desmond's gift.

Without a word, she changed her shoes, washed up, and put on loungewear. She washed a plate of cherries and stored the rest in the fridge. Then she sat on the sofa, scrolling on her phone and eating the cherries.

"You like cherries? I never knew that before." Vance sat beside her, popping one in his mouth. "Sweet."

She glanced at him. "Desmond brought them."

Vance paused, eager to spit it out and say it wasn't sweet at all. Instead, he asked, "Why did he bring you cherries?"

Earlier, he had seen the delivery bags and assumed the cherries were her purchase, too. If he had known they were from Desmond, he would have thrown them out.

She looked puzzled. "Just a gift. Does there have to be a reason?"

"He's a guy," he explained. "I know how men think better than you do. No man does something nice for a woman for no reason."

She fixed her gaze on him. He cringed, clearing his throat. "Ahem, I'm different. I give Cathy things because..."

She answered for him, "Because there's always an angle?"

"No." He straightened his face. "Cathy and I have known each other since college."

"Desmond and I were college classmates, too."

"You're married and have a family."

She tilted her head. "The person I married is you, right? Don't you have a family?"

He fell silent, and she set her eyes back on her phone. "Go ahead with whatever you need to do. You're acting a bit off, though. If you walk into a contract meeting like this, you'll lose your shirt."

Whapter 20

He couldn't read her mind, but she genuinely didn't look angry.

"You're really not mad?" he probed again.

"Why do you keep needing me to be mad? I'm not," she sighed.

She didn't know how many times she had to say it. This topic had gone on and on too much lately.

"You're not mad that I chose Cathy?" He sounded unsure.

She shook her head. "I'm really not."

People only cared when they loved someone. But when they stopped loving, none of it mattered anymore. Just like Vance had never cared about her.

"Why?" He felt like none of this made sense.

Given how much she loved him, how could she not care that he had abandoned her in a life-or-death moment?

Because she didn't love him anymore. She had told him the answer long ago. He had never believed her, always thinking she was just throwing a tantrum.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 214

Rebecca didn't feel like repeating it. Only two days remained now. She couldn't risk anything that might derail her plans.

Thinking for a moment, she simply said, "People look forward. You can't keep staring at the past, or how do you keep living?"

Vance let out a relieved breath. He smiled at her, then reached over to stroke her hair with rare tenderness. "I'm glad you think that way. No matter what, we're in this for life. The most important thing is to stay happy and open-minded."

She nodded in agreement only to the latter part, but she wasn't interested in spending a lifetime with him.

"I'll get back to work then," he said, pulling out his phone. "Once I wrap this up, I'll be free. We'll pick up Josette and go on that trip."

Right then, Rebecca's phone pinged with a notification of him transferring her a million dollars. He kept throwing money around lately, but she liked it.

"We'll have about ten days," he continued. "Look at where you want to go and plan something nice. Don't worry about the cost. International might be too last-minute, but a beach island or wherever you and Josette want is fine. You two decide."

She nodded, delighted that their travel budget had grown again. Yet instead of leaving, he sat there strangely staring at her, as if he had never known her before.

Before Catherine came back, he had always been gentle, but that gentleness had always been mixed with distance. Being kind to her seemed to be just part of his job-something he didn't want to do but had to.

Now his gentle eyes held something new: eagerness and satisfaction, like the king feeling pleased with the queen for accepting the concubine and maintaining the harem's harmony. ¹

Disgusted, she said bluntly, "Why aren't you leaving?"

He suddenly cupped her face with both hands, and she had a bad feeling. Sure enough, he leaned in fast to kiss her. She quickly lifted the cherry in her hand to her mouth, and his lips landed on it.

He pulled back instantly, disgusted. "Don't let me see those cherries again. They're revolting!"

He stood up and headed for the door.

She looked at the cherry; half of it had touched his mouth. She tossed it straight into the trash, feeling disgusted. ¹

"What would you like for dinner?" He glanced back. "I'll have my assistant book a restaurant, and I'll pick you up myself."

"Anything is fine." She lay down on the sofa, more comfortable with just herself.

Pick her up? Should she thank him?

"I'll decide then." He grabbed the car keys and left.

Rebecca started thinking about how to handle the divorce. Should she bring it up in the next two days, go to the courthouse, and get it done before she leaves? ¹

Or should she just leave a letter, state her decision, and handle the paperwork when she came back in a month?

She honestly didn't know. She had mentioned divorce plenty of times, but he had never agreed.

Couldn't Catherine step it up already and get him to marry her? If Catherine got pregnant, he'd probably propose on the spot. (1

Rebecca felt a headache coming on.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 215

Rebecca decided not to rush it.

If she brought up divorce now and met Vance's refusal, she might not be able to leave.

She would write a heartfelt divorce letter, leave it for him the day she flew out, and give him a month to think it over. When she came back, they could finalize everything. She could get the divorce papers right before school started.

That evening, she was boiling water when Vance came home.

He leaned against the door frame of the kitchen. "Thought I'd stepped back in time. You look exactly like you did in high school."

His eyes seemed to be smiling. The setting sun poured through the window and lit his face in a hazy golden glow. She couldn't quite see his expression.

She turned back to rinse some green onions. Suddenly, his arms wrapped around her waist from behind.

"Look at the sunset outside. So beautiful. Doesn't it remind you of that day we went on the picnic, right when the sun was going down?" He rested his chin on her shoulder.

"Everyone was lined up for photos, but you were still packing up, all serious. You were wearing a white T-shirt, and your school jacket was off on the side. Your hair was tied in a ponytail, and you were facing the sunset."

She couldn't bear to think about it. If, at any moment in these past five years, he had shown this warmth, she would have been touched deeply.

Now it was too late. But it wasn't a bad thing.

"That sunset was just as beautiful as today's," he whispered, tightening his arms.

"It isn't the same," she said.

"How so?" He tilted his head, half-teasing. "You're not about to say we're older now, are you?"

That thought had never crossed her mind.

“I’m the one who got older. You haven’t changed at all,” he added,

Actually, she had been lost in the past. Back then, when she was packing up alone, everyone called her over to take a photo. She didn’t know if it was because his drumstick gave her extra strength or if it was the shouting that made her anxious.

Either way, she ended up doing several backflips across the grass to join them. They had all clapped.

Could she still do that now?

Today’s escape worked because Desmond had done most of the work. She didn’t mention any of it, and Vance probably had forgotten. It was good that he had.

She kept watching the setting sun. “I’ve changed, too.”

“No.” He brushed the stray hair from her cheek. “In my heart, you’ll always be the same.”

It turned out he knew how to say sweet things, but she didn’t understand his sudden sentiment.

“You’re not feeling guilty, are you?” she teased, looking back.

He was clearly trying to make up for what he had done that day.

“No, of course not,” he stammered.

She sneered at his denial. “Don’t be. There are plenty of other times you should have felt it. You don’t have that much time to hang around me, and I don’t have time to deal with you.”

He snapped back to normal, releasing her and straightening up. “You know, you could try being romantic once in a while instead of being so serious every day.” (2

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 216

Romantic? Did she not want to be romantic? Who hadn’t been a dreamy girl in front of the person she loved?

How many times had she tried to build a romantic life and a sweet home with him, only to be shut down by his coldness every time? And now, he called her unromantic.

“Maybe my idea of romantic is different from yours.” She opened the cupboard and took out some pasta. “Have you eaten?”

He snatched it from her hand. “I told you I was taking you out tonight. I already booked the restaurant.”

Right. She had forgotten.

“You forgot?” he frowned. “Didn’t you listen? What are you thinking all day?”

She naturally would not tell him the truth: how to divorce him.

“Are you mad?” He misread her look and turned off the stove. “Come on, change your clothes. We’re going out.”

She nodded, considering it their last supper.

Vance had booked a Japanese restaurant. It was surprising since he preferred heavy flavors and never ate raw fish. She rarely ate sashimi either.

“New restaurant. Let’s try it.” He led her into a large private room.

The waiter brought menus and started explaining the grand-opening special set.

“We’ll find out,” Vance said.

“Of course. Ring the bell if you need anything,” the waiter replied, leaving.

Vance told Rebecca, “Order whatever you like. Don’t worry about the set. There’s always something in those you don’t want.”

She was fine with anything, but sets usually meant too much food. She ordered grilled wagyu, tempura, a soup, and two plates of sushi.

“That’s all?” he asked.

She had no idea what he ordered. When he finally finished, he asked, “You didn’t order any dessert. Want some ice cream?”

“Let me see.” She checked it out, shocked to see over 30 items in the order.

There were dozens of types of sashimi-each a full portion. Some were ordered multiple times.

Her jaw dropped. “Can we even eat all this?”

Chute 216.

The price was one thing, but the two of them couldn't possibly finish so much food.

She added, "Neither of us really eats raw stuff."

"We can finish it. Want to add anything else?" he said.

She shook her head, believing it was already too much. She didn't even want dessert anymore, but then a thought hit her.

"Did you invite other people?" she asked.

"It was supposed to be just us, but on the way over, I remembered Cathy loves Japanese food, so I invited everyone," he replied with a sheepish smile.

Her eyes narrowed. "What do you mean by that? Neither of us loves Japanese food."

From the beginning, only Catherine liked it. Yet he pretended to remember it on the way over.

"What we eat doesn't matter, right? It's about everyone getting together." Vance reached across the table and took her hand. "Don't be mad, okay? I should have told you earlier, but you wouldn't have come." 1

"When have I ever stopped you from eating with Catherine?" she retorted. "Do it as you like. Why drag me into it?"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 217

"They're my best friends, and you're my wife. It's hard for me if you guys don't get along," Vance explained. "They all want to make peace with you, and Cathy feels terrible about what happened this morning. She wants to have a nice talk. Do it for me, okay? Eat with everyone and accept their goodwill."

Rebecca laughed at the absurdity of it. "Your friends talked trash about me and called me a cripple behind my back. That's their goodwill? If I don't accept it, then it's my fault?"

His brow wrinkled. "They already apologized. Why do you keep bringing it up?"

She laughed, feeling utterly incredulous. So, in his mind, an apology fixed everything.

“And Catherine sleeping naked with you... Was that goodwill too? I’m just not generous enough?”

He slammed his palm on the table. “What the hell are you talking about?”

She sneered, having just poked a sore spot.

After the outburst, he seemed to remember the purpose of the meal. He sighed, “You always have to push my buttons. Fine. I was wrong to raise my voice just now, but you can’t keep being so petty.”

What a big nerve! He slept with another woman and called her petty.

She had slipped up that day while knowing how he would react. She had promised herself she wouldn’t waste any more emotion on him or his circle, yet she had still let it out.

She stood up, but he pressed her back down.

“Where are you going? They’ll be here any minute.”

“Bathroom.”

He relaxed and pointed behind her. “There’s one in the room.”

She almost laughed at how relieved he sounded. It wasn’t like she was planning anything dramatic.

For the next two days, she had decided that whatever happened, she would endure it. Small concessions to avoid bigger problems. ¹

While she was still in the bathroom, she heard voices outside.

Catherine and the others had arrived. As soon as Catherine walked in, she immediately asked for the menu. Vance told her the dishes had been ordered.

“You didn’t order the set meal, did you? They always sneak in those cheap things I don’t like,” she grumbled, her voice as loud as ever.

“No, of course not,” Vance replied. “Everything’s to your liking. See if you want anything else.”

Rebecca almost laughed while washing her hands in front of the mirror. So, that line belonged to

Catherine.

Catherine must have looked at the order because she sounded delighted. “Wonderful! Everything is what I like. You’re the best, Vance. No one understands me better than you do.”

Vance laughed heartily.

That was true. No one in the world knew Catherine better than him, while he knew nothing about Rebecca’s preferences.

Rebecca chose to stay put. Eavesdropping could be entertaining.

She heard Catherine ask, “You’re taking time off the day after tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah. The first vacation I’ve given myself in years.” Vance sounded happy.

“Let’s go to the islands! Remember? You promised to take me years ago, but you guys were always working. Every summer I spent waiting while you worked overtime,” Catherine whined.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 218

Vance had promised to take Rebecca and Josette on a trip. Now Rebecca was curious about how he would answer.

Vance hesitated for a split second, then readily agreed, “Sure, let’s go to the islands.”

“Man!” Aiden groaned theatrically. “You’re dumping all the work on us so you two can go play lovebirds?”

“That’s not fair. We want double pay,” Lucas protested playfully.

“No problem, I’ll cover it,” Vance chuckled.

“I want gifts, too!” Aiden chimed in.

“You’ll have them,” Vance agreed with a smile.

“By the way, you said Rebecca was coming to dinner. Where is she?” Catherine asked.

Aiden jumped in, “She never liked us anyway. You’re the only one who keeps trying to be nice to her, and she keeps giving you the cold shoulder. You never learn.”

“Come on,” Catherine protested playfully. “It’s for Vance. If I were him, I’d want my wife to get along with my friends so I would not be stuck in the middle. Plus, with what happened this morning, his choice must have hurt her. I should make it up to her.”

“Vance, Vance, Vance... Makes us jealous,” Aiden teased.

“So what? He spoils me the most. And you?” she said.

“What about me?” Aiden protested. “But with you putting in all this effort for Vance, it’s no wonder he chose you today. You earned it.”

“Don’t say that. Rebecca loves him very much,” Catherine said righteously. “Vance choosing me today must have crushed her. I’ll explain everything. Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s fine,” Vance responded. “Rebecca is reasonable. She doesn’t mind at all.”

“Yeah,” Aiden said, “She is disabled, to begin with. A mark on her face won’t make Vance detest her. He’s stuck supporting her for life anyway.”

Rebecca looked at herself in the mirror. If her head weren’t quite clear right now, she might have started doubting whether she was the problem.

Why did they talk like this? Sure enough, birds of a feather flock together.

“Don’t say that stuff where she can hear,” Catherine cautioned. “Girls care about their looks. If Rebecca heard you, she’d be upset.”

“It’s fine. I already explained it to her, and she accepted it. She is quite understanding. You guys don’t need to worry,” Vance reassured them.

It was rare for him to praise Rebecca like that. That was quite something.

“You think so? Women always say the opposite of what they mean. She might say it’s fine, but inside, she’s already sentenced you to death,” Lucas chimed in.

Rebecca was surprised that he had spoken her mind. She didn’t mind the teasing, but the line about sentencing Vance to death resonated with her.

“No way.” Vance shook his head. “If you don’t believe me, ask her. Rebecca, are you done there? Everyone’s here.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 219

“Rebecca is already here?” Catherine exclaimed.

Rebecca dried her hands, stepped out of the bathroom, and smiled brightly. “Yep. Just fixing my hair. Even though I’m crippled, I still like to look nice.”

Aiden cleared his throat with embarrassment.

Rebecca continued, “What’s wrong, Aiden? Should I not care about my appearance? Or since I’m already a cripple, it doesn’t matter if I’m pretty or not?”

“No... That’s not what I meant,” he stammered.

Rebecca realized that when she let loose and acted recklessly, everyone else suddenly lost their nerve.

“We were just talking with Vance about going to the islands. Want to join us?” Catherine quickly changed the subject.

Rebecca looked at Vance with a half-smile. He shifted uncomfortably. Of course, he was uncomfortable; he had just promised her they would take Josette on a trip.

“It would be nice if we went to the islands together, right?” Vance winked, signaling her not to spoil the fun.

“I’m not going,” she refused. “I’m a cripple who can’t swim. What would I do on an island?”

“Rebecca...” Vance frowned, holding back his annoyance. “You don’t have to swim to enjoy yourself.”

“Yes, you do,” she replied. “What if both Cathy and I fell into the sea? You’d save her, and I’d drown.” 3

Vance was speechless.

Catherine immediately put on a pitiful expression. “I know you’re upset about what happened this morning, and I came here to apologize. Vance said you understood, but I know you don’t. I’m sorry. If you need to blame someone, blame me.”

“It’s fine. I’m not angry at all. I’m already disabled; one more mark doesn’t matter.” Rebecca waved her hand dismissively.

Aiden’s expression shifted, which was noticed by Vance. He couldn’t help but intervene. “Rebecca...”

“What? Am I not telling the truth? Isn’t that what you all said?” Rebecca smiled. “I mean, it’s not my fault my leg is like this. Right, Vance?”

For five years and nearly 2,000 days, she had carefully guarded Vance’s conscience, afraid he would feel guilty and bear too heavy a burden because of her disability.

She never brought it up, but everyone else did. They used her crippled leg as a weapon against her. But when she wielded the defect herself, it became a weapon against them.

“Everyone’s here. Can you be a bit more considerate?” he said, worried she would say something even more extreme.

“I’ve always been considerate,” she chuckled. “But I’ve noticed that when I am, others aren’t. And when I’m not considerate, everyone suddenly is. So, it seems better for me to just stop being considerate.”

Right then, the waiter knocked on the door. Lucus quickly said, “Alright, the dishes are here.”

Rebecca realized she had been wrong before. Why had she ever avoided eating with these people? She should have come and enjoyed herself. ¹

As each dish arrived, she reached for it first, while the others hesitated.

“This one is for Cathy,” Vance murmured when the tuna was placed on the table.

“Oh? I can’t eat it?” Rebecca turned to Catherine. “Am I not allowed to have this?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 220

Catherine paused. “You can, of course. Just enjoy yourself. There’s so much food.”

She pointed to other plates, realizing Rebecca had already made the first move on each dish. None of them looked appetizing anymore.

“Why aren’t you guys eating?” Rebecca asked innocently.

“Uh, we are,” Catherine chuckled awkwardly.

But when the next dish arrived, Rebecca once again took the first bite. Aiden tried to serve Catherine her favorite sea urchin, but Rebecca pulled the whole plate toward herself.

“This is my favorite,” she mumbled. “You guys aren’t going to fight me for it, right?”

Vance rubbed his forehead and whispered to Aiden, "Just order another one."

The waiter came back, telling them that the sea urchins were sold out. Their business was indeed crazy. 1

Rebecca obviously couldn't eat everything. After a few bites, she slid the plate to Vance. "I'm full. You finish it."

When he paused, she urged, "Don't waste it. It's rationed."

Vance stared at the remaining sea urchin. There was nothing left to serve anyone else because Rebecca had carefully eaten the sweetest center out of every single piece. 1

"It's not watermelon; the middle isn't the sweetest part. Why did you eat the center of each one?" he asked.

"I wanted to." She shrugged, ready for his anger.

He stayed quiet, and she never got to use her prepared comeback. She didn't know how the others felt about the meal, but she had enjoyed herself thoroughly.

When it was time to leave, Vance went to pay and said goodbye to his friends at the door, apologizing nonstop and promising to make it up next time.

Rebecca almost felt bad for him. Why apologize? He always paid anyway.

Once his friends were all gone, he couldn't hold it in any longer.

"You went too far today,"

"You mean I ate all the dishes?"

"Don't you have basic table manners?"

"You never let me come out to eat with you. How would I know your group's table manners? Or maybe Catherine can teach me? You take her out all the time."

"You..."

He swallowed the anger rising in his throat. Maybe it was because he thought of the trip and felt guilty, "Fine. I promised to take you and Josette on a trip. We can go together. Why did you have to be so sarcastic?"

She maintained her smile. It had nothing to do with the trip. She had never planned to go with him in the first place.

“Let’s go.” He took her hand and led her out of the restaurant.

The restaurant wasn’t far from home. Vance stayed silent the whole drive.

Once they got back, Rebecca went to shower. While she was in the bathroom, Vance was on the phone.

She had no idea who he was talking to, but frankly, she didn’t care. After a while, she came out of the bathroom and comfortably lay in bed, ready to sleep.

Vance finished his shower and came over, leaning against the headboard.

“Where were you originally planning to take Josette?”

“Definitely not to the islands.”

“Just tell me. We need to book tickets now. I’ve talked to Cathy, and she is fine with wherever we decide.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 221

Rebecca couldn’t wrap her head around what Vance was thinking. How on earth did he think she and Catherine could go on a trip together?

“I’ve got a question for you,” Rebecca said. “If the four of us head out on this trip, how exactly are we splitting the rooms?”

The query caught Vance off guard, leaving him momentarily stunned.

“Would it be me sharing with Josette, and you bunking with Catherine?” she pressed on.

His face darkened. “What kind of nonsense is that? You think we’re so strapped for cash we can’t spring for three separate rooms?”

Rebecca’s smirk lingered. “Hey, it’s not like you haven’t pulled something similar before. Remember that time in Arelmoor? I ended up alone in my room while you vanished with Catherine.”

“That was...” Vance stammered, searching for words but coming up empty.

“What?” Rebecca chuckled. “Did you agree to her request not to sleep with me?”

He laughed mirthlessly. “I knew it. You’re still holding onto that grudge.”

In a swift motion, he rolled over and pinned her beneath him. “Isn’t this what you’ve been craving all along?”

She didn’t resist or squirm away. She simply held his gaze, feeling as though he were dangling this intimacy like some reluctant handout.

“I’m on my period,” she stated flatly.

She could have fought, screamed, or bitten him bloody again, but she was done-too exhausted to even pretend.

Vance remained hovering there, his eyes locked on hers in a prolonged, wordless stare. Finally, he conceded, “If that’s the case, hitting the islands right now might not be ideal.”

“No,” she corrected him, “it’s not about the islands being inconvenient for me. I just don’t want to travel with you two.” 2

Her plans with Josette had never included him.

She continued, “I figure neither Josette nor I would enjoy the sight of you together.”

They were on the brink of new beginnings. Vance was an old, festering scar etched into her soul, one that demanded to be torn away so new skin could form over the wound.

Josette would stand firmly by her side in this decision.

Yet Vance misinterpreted her words entirely, assuming she meant Josette’s traditional values couldn’t stomach seeing him with another woman.

Through the blanket, he lowered his full weight onto her, wrapping her in an unexpected embrace, his face nestling into the curve of her shoulder. “About this trip...”

A playful mischief stirred within Rebecca. She allowed the hug instead of pushing him away or freezing

“Mr. Bradford, honey...” she teased.

In five years of marriage, she had rarely called him that. Vance’s body gave a tiny involuntary shiver.

“What is it?” he murmured, tightening his hold.

“So, who are you actually choosing for this getaway? I’ll give you a chance. Pick one,” she said, though deep down, she found the whole exercise futile.

After all, in a moment of life-or-death stakes, he'd already chosen Catherine. What difference would a vacation preference make now?

"I'll go with you," he chuckled.

She blinked in genuine astonishment.

"You..." He let out a resigned sigh, reaching over to pinch her cheek affectionately. "Always stewing over these petty things. I've told you before; I'm yours for the long haul. What's the use in bickering over this? But hey, I get it; it's one of those womanly quirks. Consider this your win. Happy now?"

He shifted off her, settling comfortably back against his pillow. "You haven't even clued me in on the destination or snagged me a ticket. How am I supposed to tag along? Where are we headed, anyway?"

"How about Colorado?" she suggested casually-anything to steer him as far from Soliaridge as possible.

"Sounds good," he agreed without hesitation. "You take care of the hotel bookings and tickets, then."

Propped up on the pillow, he picked up his phone and added, "Oh, and about Soren... It's more complicated than it looks. We're still unsure if he's tangled up in it. If push comes to shove, do we need to post bail or vouch for him?"

"No," Rebecca replied swiftly. With her departure looming, Soren's fate was his own to handle. "As I said, since he did that, he should face the consequences."

Vance fell silent, absorbed in his phone, seemingly chatting with someone.

At this point, Rebecca no longer cared who occupied his attention. She turned away and prepared to sleep.

But just as drowsiness claimed her, he nudged her awake. "All good. I broke the news to Cathy that I'm joining you and Josette instead."

Rebecca's eyes fluttered open briefly before she closed them again. He truly believed he was some irresistible prize, didn't he?

When morning arrived, it marked the penultimate day of her countdown to freedom. The following day, she and Josette would set off on their new path.

As was her routine, she video-chatted with Josette first thing, followed by a quick catch-up with Vivian. With Vance's vacation starting tomorrow, she needed to handle the clothes today, otherwise, he would bother her with endless questions.

Rather than auctioning them on eBay, she opted for a secondhand clothing recycling service from an online marketplace, bagging everything up and arranging for a courier to collect it all.

Then she sat down to map out her next steps. Vance would be staying home tomorrow, but her flight to Arelmoor wasn't until the day after.

It seemed wiser if she switched to an early morning departure tomorrow. She could head to Josette's hotel tonight under the pretense of picking her up, only to claim she'd been invited to stay over with Josette's old friends.

They'd agree to rendezvous at the airport, leaving him to arrive and find them gone.

With the plan solidified, she purchased a ticket for Vance, rescheduled her own flight, and coordinated with Vivian to adjust Josette's as well.

No sooner had she finished it than Vance's call came through.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 222

Rebecca answered the call, noting the background chatter that suggested Vance was stepping out of a meeting.

"I saw the ticket. Tomorrow afternoon to Denver, right?" he said.

"Yeah," she confirmed, weaving in details to make it sound seamless. "We'll stay overnight in Denver, then rent a car for a self-drive adventure through the state."

"Cool," he replied easily. "Oh, and pull me off your blacklist. It's a pain not being able to send you anything properly."

"Alright." She nodded, realizing he'd been limited to calls and texts.

In the background, someone teased him as they passed. "Whoa, who has the guts to block our great CEO?"

Vance's laughter filtered through the line. "Mr. Osborne, you've got me there. I accidentally ticked off the wife."

That name was unfamiliar to Rebecca.

Russell Osborne let out a hearty guffaw. "Makes sense. Only Mrs. Bradford can knock you down a peg."

“Alright, Rebecca. We’ll hash out the details when I’m home,” Vance said, wrapping up. “The client’s waiting.”

Rebecca turned her thoughts to packing. This time, she aimed for minimalism; fewer items meant less chance of raising suspicions.

A simple carry-on bag would suffice. She could restock once in Arelmoor.

Her next task was drafting the divorce agreement and a farewell note for Vance. The agreement proved straightforward; with eight figures in her savings, she had no intention of demanding more from him.

Among the assets, five properties in Soliaridge bore her name, including their current home. She decided to claim four, leaving him the one they shared.

Its security code matched Catherine’s birthday, and the decor echoed her preferences entirely. Despite living there for five years, it held no appeal for Rebecca anymore.

She also held company shares but wanted no ongoing ties to his business. A clean severance meant cashing them out and moving on without entanglement.

That covered everything. The note to him, however, required careful consideration. Should she pour out resentment, cataloging his betrayals in exhaustive detail?

Ultimately, she chose restraint. Dwelling on grievances would only reopen her wounds, stirring emotions she’d rather leave behind.

While an amicable parting felt almost too gracious after all she’d endured, she viewed it as an act of kindness toward herself.

Her words were brief and measured: [After five years of marriage, love and hate have both run dry. Look over the divorce agreement. If anything doesn’t sit right, message me, though I believe I’ve been more than fair. Let’s not drag this out. I wish you smooth sailing, blooming success, and a life full of light.] +

As she penned the final line, memories flooded back: that teenage boy in his school uniform beneath the blooming osmanthus tree, petals shimmering like a galaxy of stars.

A pang of sorrow stung her nose. This was goodbye. Perhaps she’d only ever loved the magic of those osmanthus and that moonlit night.

She placed the pen down, slipping both the agreement and note into the left drawer of his desk. If he discovered them independently, fine. Otherwise, she’d notify him once safely en route to Europe.

With those matters settled, she grabbed lunch. As afternoon visiting hours approached, she headed to the hospital to see Nancy, who remained admitted for her serious injury.

It would take a few more days for her to heal. In fact, Nancy had intuited some of Rebecca's intentions, but Rebecca felt compelled to offer a genuine farewell.

Initially, she'd envisioned hiring Nancy to care for Josette post-discharge, but with plans evolving to include Josette's relocation, that option had vanished.

Nancy's face brightened at the sight of her, though guilt quickly followed for imposing on Rebecca. After all, Rebecca's mobility was limited.

"Madam, you don't need to come by. I'm managing just fine here," she said, gesturing to the caregiver attending her.

Rebecca smiled warmly. "This is actually my final visit."

"Does that mean... you're not returning?" Nancy asked, her suspicions confirmed.

Rebecca paused, choosing her words. "I'm uncertain about the future, but even if I ever come back, it'll likely be brief, just for loose ends, I doubt I'll settle here long-term. I'm sorry, Nancy. I'd planned to line up steady work for you, but circumstances changed. Any ideas on what you'll do next?"

"Don't fret over me. I'll land on my feet with another job," Nancy assured her with a gentle smile. "You've been incredibly kind these years."

Rebecca proceeded to settle Nancy's outstanding wages, tacking on an additional six months' worth.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 223

"Madam, that's way too generous," Nancy declined.

"It's the least I owe you," Rebecca said firmly. "With your injury sidelining you for two or three months, consider it compensation for lost income. And if anything arises later, reach out. I'll help where I can, even from afar."

Before long, Vance called, asking about her whereabouts.

"I'm at the hospital, visiting Nancy," she replied. "Are you home already?"

A flicker of concern arose. He might have seen the divorce agreement.

“Just got back, and you weren’t home,” he replied. “How much longer? I’ll come get you.”

“Oh, I’m nearly finished,” she said, relieved.

“I’m heading over now. Won’t be long,” he insisted.

“Alright,” Rebecca agreed.

She’d intended to leave anyway, but why had he clocked out so early?

“Was that Mr. Bradford?” Nancy asked.

Rebecca nodded. “Yes. And honestly, if you need assistance down the line, he’s a good bet too. He’s generally helpful, most of the time.”

To be fair, Vance wasn’t a bad person. As long as Catherine wasn’t involved, he was usually willing to help—especially since Nancy still had that unresolved threat from her rural family that might resurface and bother her and her daughter.

Nancy understood and nodded appreciatively. “Thank you, Madam. I truly hope happiness finds you moving forward.”

“It will,” Rebecca affirmed with conviction.

Her departure from Soliaridge and Vance was precisely to secure her future joy. The hospital’s proximity to home meant Vance arrived in just 15 minutes, striding directly into the room to check on Nancy himself.

With visiting hours dwindling, Nancy encouraged them to leave.

“We’ll head out now,” Vance said. “If you need anything, just call us.”

He took Rebecca’s hand, leading her out of the room. Instead of heading straight out, Rebecca veered toward the billing counter.

“Let me take care of it,” he offered, pulling up his payment app. “Running low on the medical tab?”

“I want to add extra funds,” she explained. “We might not be around for her discharge. Better to overpay so she can settle without worry.”

“Sensible,” he agreed, transferring a substantial amount. “Any surplus can serve as additional compensation for her.”

He then suggested dining out that evening. “Just the two of us tonight, I swear.”

“Okay,” she consented.

Tomorrow marked her escape: an early flight to Arelmoor, while he’d board a midday one to Colorado.

Tonight, she’d fabricate a story about fetching Josette and staying over, proposing an airport meetup he’d miss entirely. Whatever unfolded after his realization would be irrelevant to her.

One final meal felt fitting. It would be a private ritual of closure on her terms.

“What are you craving?” Vance asked, considerate for once.

“Local cuisine,” she decided.

It might be her last taste of hometown flavors for quite some time.

“Perfect,” he said, dialing a local spot to reserve. After confirming availability, he turned to her. “They’ve got a private room open. Let’s go.”

The restaurant exuded refined elegance. Its understated opulence was evident in every detail as they were escorted to their private room.

The waiter presented menus, and Vance handed hers over first, encouraging her to choose.

Local dishes weren’t his preference, but Rebecca pushed that aside, scanning the options with determination. “Since you’re treating, I’m splurging. No holding back.”

Observing her expression, he smiled. “Around me, forget the rules.”

It highlighted his duality once more.

She selected grilled salmon with polenta, sautéed eel in garlic oil, stuffed duck, and crab risotto as staples. Spotting sliders among the appetizers, she added those, along with garlic pasta.

As she passed the menu back, she couldn’t resist tacking on braised beef.

“You’re a fan of braised beef?” he chuckled.

“Absolutely,” she admitted, though she rarely indulged.

“I always thought dancers were strict about diets-avoiding heavy stuff like that,” he remarked, surveying her picks. “Crab risotto, sliders, garlic pasta... This is a carb convention. Can we finish it all?”

“The risotto’s a must for me, and braised beef pairs perfectly with the sauce,” she explained.

Sliders were selected out of nostalgia. She wouldn’t be able to have them for a while.

“Why not opt for king crab instead?”

“I’m good. I hate dealing with shells.”

This meal was hers to savor exactly as she wished.

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 224

“I’ve got you,” Vance said. “Or the staff can shell the crabs for us.”

“I want the crab risotto,” Rebecca said, a rare flash of defiance after years of accommodating his tastes. if king crab is what you’re after, order it yourself.”

He paused, surprised by her uncharacteristic edge. She had always been so yielding.

“What do you feel like?”

“Sure, sounds good.”

“I’m flexible.”

Still, he managed a smile. “It’s just risotto. We’re not exactly pinching pennies. No need to get so fired up.

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He snapped the menu shut and addressed the waiter. “We’ll go with that lineup, plus a seasonal vegetable. Dealer’s choice.”

Rebecca couldn’t shake the sense that his attentiveness carried an ulterior motive. His solo invitation and deference to her menu picks screamed “buttering up”, hinting at some revelation he’d drop.

She hoped he’d hold off until after the meal. She didn’t want to lose her appetite.

Fortunately, he obliged.

Her appetite was great, aided by the restaurant's petite portions. The braised beef, for instance, offered just four pieces. She and Vance split them evenly before she dipped hers in the sauce.

She could have ordered more, but the crab risotto awaited.

Vance acted weirdly, glancing at her from time to time. She pretended not to notice, maintaining her focus until she'd savored every bite.

Only then did she set down her utensils. "Whatever's brewing in that head of yours, just say it."

His hand froze mid-reach for his fork. "What's with the snippy tone?"

She shrugged. "Why else would you keep glancing at me?"

He'd intended to broach the subject over dinner, but the moment felt wrong.

It was unusual to see her so voraciously engaged with her food; her enthusiasm even spurred him to consume more than usual.

The servings were modest, but they had ordered a lot. Clearing every plate was still a feat.

"Finished? Time to head home," he said, rising and extending a hand to help her up.

She paused, memories stirring of their early marriage days when such gestures were common. He'd hover, supporting her every move as if she were fragile.

She'd known then that guilt fueled his actions, yet she'd been content to just have him around like that.

But time, that relentless arbiter, had revealed the truth. His tenderness eroded gradually over the years, proving that without true passion, no one sustained such efforts indefinitely.

With a subtle twist, Rebecca evaded his grasp, standing on her own and shouldering her bag as she strode toward the exit.

She didn't glance back at his expression. There was no point in looking over her shoulder anymore.

On the way home, her mind rehearsed how to broach the topic of picking up Josette.

Just as she formulated her words, Vance emerged from the kitchen with washed fruit, placing it before her. "Did you polish off those two crates of cherries already?"

His voluntary mention surprised her; she shot him an odd look.

He flashed a sheepish smile. "I'm not that petty. If they're your thing, go for it. Just figured they spoil fast.

"I turned them into wine," she replied, aware of their short shelf life.

During lunch that day, she'd soaked them accordingly. Whoever would enjoy the batch later was not her concern.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 225

Rebecca gestured toward the dining area, where a lineup of glass jars gleamed with vibrant cherry- infused wine.

"Then try some grapes," Vance suggested, shifting gears. "By the way, Josette has been away for a while now. When are we fetching her?"

The question aligned perfectly with her impending announcement.

"She is planning to go straight to the airport tomorrow," she began. "So..."

"Rebecca..." Vance interjected abruptly.

She turned to him, bemused by the interruption. He settled beside her on the couch, steeling himself for the conversation he'd postponed during dinner.

"Well," he started hesitantly, "could we adjust the travel plans a bit?"

"Adjust?" She gave him a sidelong look.

"Yeah." He flashed a tentative smile. "What if we pushed it back a week? I'm taking two full weeks off. We could head to Colorado after that."

"And what about the intervening week?" she probed, guessing that he would spend time with Catherine on the islands.

Her hunch proved spot on.

"You know..." he explained, "back in college, I promised Cathy that once we'd made our fortune, we'd celebrate with an island getaway. She was right there with us through the startup trenches, enduring all the hardships. I've never followed through on that, so I thought I'd take her first. When I come back, we can do Colorado. Sound fair?"

“When are you going?” she asked, her mind racing with opportunistic delight.

This twist couldn’t be more ideal. She and Josette could slip away to Arelmoor without a hitch.

“Tonight, actually, catching a red-eye flight,” he revealed.

The urgency explained his earlier solicitude, and she feigned dismay. “But our tickets and arrangements are locked in. Cancellations won’t be free at this stage.”

“I’ll reimburse you,” he assured her promptly. “Just tally the costs, and I’ll cover them.”

Excitement bubbled within her, though she masked it carefully. His imminent departure created the perfect window. By the time she and Josette boarded for Arelmoor tomorrow morning, he might still be mid-flight.

But on the surface, she adopted a sullen expression, playing the part of the slighted wife.

“Come on, don’t sulk,” he coaxed, leaning in for a hug. “It’s merely a postponement, not a cancellation. Just tell Josette work cropped up unexpectedly.”

She shrugged him off, irritated by the contrived affection. The money was welcome, but spare the theatrics.

She couldn’t resist a jab. “So, you do realize your escapades with Catherine aren’t for public consumption? I thought shame wasn’t in your vocabulary.”

“Here we go,” he groaned. “Cathy and I share a bond forged in adversity. We...” 1

Before he could finish, she rose and retreated to the bedroom. Moments later, her phone alerted her to a bank transfer of 500,000 dollars.

His generosity was undeniable. An extra windfall before her exit was nice.

Already unblocked on messaging, he texted: [Got it? Still upset?]

She ignored it, her thoughts fixed on his red-eye schedule. Surely, he’d need to prepare and leave soon.

Another text arrived: [Any souvenir requests?]

Gifts held no allure; his swift exit would be the greatest present of all.

She left the bedroom door unlocked deliberately since he still needed to pack. Better to let him proceed uninterrupted.

Soon, he pushed open the door and came in. “Mrs. Bradford, care to lend a hand with packing?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 226

Rebecca snorted inwardly, “Dream on.”

But Vance’s request was rhetorical; he didn’t truly expect assistance.

He simply showered, then methodically packed his things. Once done, he lingered instead of leaving.

Rebecca itched to call Josette, his presence an unwelcome obstacle. She urged, “Aren’t you leaving yet?”

“Couldn’t you soften that a touch?” he replied, moving behind her.

Seated at the vanity, Rebecca was untying her hair. He assisted, removing the band before leaning down to hug her.

Their reflections met in the mirror, his cheek pressed to hers.

Proximity to him now repulsed Rebecca. It evoked traces of Catherine’s scent, churning her stomach. She shifted uncomfortably, but his embrace tightened.

“I’m about to hit the road. Won’t you wish me safe travels?” he whispered into her ear.

Rebecca regretted her lingering softness. A harder heart might have entertained darker fantasies, like the perks of inheritance.

Glaring at his mirrored image, she retorted, “Aren’t you worried I’ll hex you instead? You’ve got quite the fortune at stake.”

“You wouldn’t. You’re far too compassionate,” he chuckled.

The compliment made her pause, and he continued, “The same girl who once offered me five bucks a day? Curse me? Unlikely.”

Discomfort rippled through her, compounded by confusion. What was he playing at, dredging up events from 12 years ago? He’d always despised her teenage infatuation.

He breathed deeply, his hold intensifying. “I can’t explain it, but this trip has me on edge. It’s like something ominous is looming.”

She stiffened. Indeed, something was going to happen, but her departure couldn't register as a catastrophe in any sense.

"Are you afraid of flying? You've crisscrossed the skies before. Scared of dying now?"

"I am."

She fell silent, processing his words.

He continued, "If something happened to me, how would you manage? Who would look after you?"

The words struck her as absurdly hypocritical, coming from the man who'd abandoned her during a kidnapping.

"Indulge me and wish for my safe return," he murmured.

The request tipped her over the edge into genuine, tearful laughter. Her husband, off to frolic on islands with another woman, expecting well-wishes?

The audacity was comical. How could he utter it without shame?

"Unwilling? You don't want me to return safely?" he pressed. "\$500,000 for the phrase."

"Well..." She straightened her face. "Money or not, I sincerely hope you make it back unscathed. Safe journey, Mr. Bradford."

"Shortchanging me there," he teased, straightening up and promptly transferring the funds.

Some simple words for money? Not a bad deal.

"I'm heading out now. Stay put and wait for my return," he said, bending down to peck her cheek.

She wrinkled her nose but let it slide for money's sake.

The door clicked shut behind him, followed by his call to the driver. As the elevator descended, Rebecca finally relaxed and called Josette, opting to delay her visit until the next morning.

By midnight, she'd wrapped up every loose end and collapsed into bed.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 227

Vance's message arrived, announcing his boarding.

Rebecca didn't reply; his whereabouts no longer sparked curiosity. Her thoughts swirled entirely around her own impending flight tomorrow.

She'd set an alarm for 4 a.m. By then, she'd pick up Josette before heading to the airport. Sleep was essential now.

Yet Vance persisted, initiating a video call. Reluctant but cautious, she accepted.

The feed revealed him in the VIP lounge, flashing a smile.

"Were you asleep? Did I wake you?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing urgent. Just wanted a glimpse of what you're up to. Go back to sleep. I'm going to board."

Catherine's face intruded into the frame, and she waved cheerfully. "Rebecca, I'm so sorry about this. My availability dries up later, so I pulled Vance along now. Please don't hold it against me."

"She won't mind. Time to go," Vance interjected, ending the call.

Rebecca discarded her phone and resumed her sleep. She was restless, frequently waking up to check the clock.

Exhilaration and anxiety mixed in her heart. By 3:30, she surrendered and rose early.

She readied herself, and soon, it was time to leave.

Vance had urged her to stay at home and wait for his return. Would the barren closets signal her permanent exit from him? If not, the notes and papers would clarify.

She cast one final glance over the home she'd inhabited for five years. In her notebook, she inscribed a closing entry: [Countdown to leaving Vance: 0 days. Farewell. I'm soaring high.]

She closed the notebook, turned off the lights, and affixed a paper crane to the door. It would stand sentinel in her stead, perhaps whispering the truth upon his return.

Though dawn hadn't broken, her spirit felt illuminated. An inner blaze rendered her vibrant and unburdened.

She summoned a ride to Josette's hotel. En route, she texted: [Ready? I'm arriving soon.]

Josette: [Prepping to check out.]

They converged in the lobby, where Vivian accompanied Josette.

She hugged Vivian tightly. The preceding weeks had felt both fleeting and eternal, with Vivian's support invaluable.

"Thank you, Vivian," she whispered gratefully.

"No worries. Hurry along. We might cross paths again someday," Vivian replied, her relief palpable at fulfilling the entrusted duty.

"We will," Rebecca affirmed, releasing her with a firm hand squeeze.

Hailing a cab, they hastened to the airport. Check-in and security proceeded without issue.

In the lounge, Rebecca arranged a simple breakfast for Josette. "Make do with this for now, Grandma. We'll grab something better after we land."

"No trouble at all; this is plenty," Josette replied, though her advanced years made this impulsive adventure a source of visible tension. It was her first taste of such defiance.

As Rebecca delivered the toasted bread to their table, her phone rang. Dread accompanied the sound now, especially when it was from Vance.

She paused, wondering what he wanted this time. 1

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 228

Thankfully, the lounge was quiet.

"Hello?" Rebecca answered.

"Why the whisper? What are you up to?" Vance asked.

"I'm having breakfast. The place is quiet; I can't talk loudly," she replied, muffling her voice further. "Why all these calls?"

It grated on her nerves.

He sounded affronted. “What, am I bothering you now?”

Far beyond that. She rolled her eyes. “Not exactly. Just irritating.”

“But taking the money wasn’t irritating, was it?” he snorted.

She took a deep breath, trying to make it quick and avoid arousing suspicion. “Got a point?”

“Can’t I just call you?” he countered.

Rebecca stifled her exasperation. His behavior was getting more and more baffling.

“Of course,” she conceded with feigned patience. “So, may I hear your instructions?”

“Cheeky.” He softened his tone. “I’m on a layover, not boarding yet. Just checking if you’re awake.”

That was pure idleness.

“Anything you want to tell me?” he prompted.

Munching a grape, she mumbled an indistinct “oh”.

“Rebecca?” His voice sharpened, hinting at annoyance. “Is your snack more pressing than my well-being?”

Rebecca swallowed. “You run into trouble? Like a mugging?”

A prolonged sigh echoed from his end. “Never mind. Enjoy your meal. Just wanted to hear your voice. I’m about to board.”

The call ended, beeps coming through the line. Rebecca stared at her phone, bemused. a

Josette leaned in discreetly. “Vance?”

“Yeah,” Rebecca nodded. “From here on, it’s you and me against the world. Sounds good?”

Josette’s heart ached. She’d hoped the couple would reconcile, but Rebecca’s determination spoke of profound pain. Having suffered a lifetime of compromises, she didn’t want Rebecca to endure the same.

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“Absolutely,” she agreed with a warm smile, patting Rebecca’s hand.

Vance put away his phone. Catherine glanced at him several times from the side.

“Vance...”

“Hm? Let’s go. It’s time to board.”

“You seem really concerned about Rebecca. You’ve made so many calls.”

Vance frowned a little, not noticing her strange expression. “I don’t know, but something about this trip feels off. Like something is about to happen.” ¹

“Are you worried that something might happen to Rebecca? Why not have Aiden and Lucas check on her? ” she probed.

“They are like oil and water,” he sighed. “I have no idea how it got this bad.”

“What can we do then?” she muttered, her face etched with concern. “Maybe I shouldn’t have dragged you out here?”

“It’s fine,” he reassured her. “I just heard her voice, and she sounded okay. That put my mind at ease.”

“You actually care a lot about Rebecca, don’t you?” she asked with a smile, though an undercurrent of sorrow welled up in her eyes.

He paused. “She couldn’t survive without me; she is my responsibility. So...” ¹

“I understand,” she said sweetly. “Don’t forget. I’m the one person in the world who truly gets you.”

“Yeah. Since we’re out here, let’s just have fun,” he smiled.

Those exact words were what Rebecca said to Josette.

Almost simultaneously, the boarding announcement echoed through the lounge for the flight. She took Josette’s hand. “Let’s go, Grandma. We’re off to have some real fun!”

Two hours later, they arrived in Arelmoor, not expecting Lauren and Desmond to come pick them up. Arm in arm with Josette, she was shocked to see Desmond waving at the arrivals gate.

Lauren lit up. “We’ve been waiting for you! This must be your grandmother, right? Come on, let’s head straight to the apartment, then grab some food together.”

The place Lauren had found for Josette was in a relatively new neighborhood with a great environment.

There were parks for strolls and a large mall nearby, making shopping and errands convenient, and the complex itself was well-maintained.

Considering secrecy, Josette didn't plan to hire any help during her short stay, so the rental was modestly sized with two bedrooms, Rebecca could stay when visiting.

The layout was efficient, and everything was equipped. It was quite ideal.

Lauren had covered the rent upfront. Rebecca was deeply grateful and immediately transferred the funds back to her.

They had arrived in Arelmoor a day ahead of schedule, which was not bad. It gave her ample time to purchase necessities and settle Josette in, allowing her to leave with ease.

That afternoon, Lauren and Desmond accompanied her to buy clothes, household essentials, and groceries.

She picked up a new suitcase for herself, packing for Europe right there in Arelmoor.

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Chapter 229

That evening, they stayed in the freshly cleaned apartment, where a subtle fresh scent lingered everywhere.

To Rebecca, the air in this world felt unprecedentedly crisp and invigorating.

She powered off her phone, stayed with her most cherished person, and slept a full 12 hours without worry.

When she woke up, she felt refreshed and utterly at ease. She reached for her phone and turned it on, discovering several missed calls from Vance, along with messages and a string of question marks: [What are you doing? Why is your phone off?]

She didn't reply.

The AC was set to a comfortable temperature, and the blackout curtains remained drawn. Lying in bed, she recalled that they had already planned breakfast the day before, so she wasn't in a rush to get up, intending to lounge a bit longer.

But then, Vance intruded again with a video call.

She rejected it, and he messaged: [Why reject my call?]

She replied: [Just woke up. Haven't freshened up yet.]

He sent another video invite, and she glanced around the room. The bedding here mirrored the style and colors from home.

So, she accepted, holding the phone close to her face. She adjusted the angle so her features filled the screen.

Thanks to the solid sleep, her cheeks held a soft pink glow.

"We've shared a bed for five years," he said. "I know exactly what you look like when you've just woken up and haven't washed your face."

She kept her eyes half-closed, staying silent.

"Why did you turn off your phone?" he asked.

She rolled her eyes. "To avoid you bothering me."

He paused. "Rise and shine, piggy."

It came out of nowhere. Rebecca knew couples often had quirky nicknames. "Piggy" might be one, but such terms had never been part of her dynamic with Vance.

So, it felt jarringly abrupt, giving her goosebumps.

"I want to sleep more. Hanging up," she muttered, eager to end the call.

"I was hoping to show you the ocean view," he sighed. "Never mind. Go back to sleep. I'm having breakfast."

She promptly ended the call, and he set down his phone.

A voice came from behind him. "So, that's what you usually call Rebecca? Piggy?"

Catherine carried two coffees over, placing one in front of him.

Vance paused. "Nah. She is sleeping in."

"I caught a glimpse over your shoulder. She is so lucky," Catherine said, lowering her gaze. "I'd love to sleep in until I wake up naturally, knowing there's always someone to get me covered. Unfortunately..."

"Cathy?" Vance noticed.

She shook her head. “Sorry for being a downer. It’s just that recalling my days abroad makes me envious of Rebecca.”

“Remember what I said? We’ll share the joys, and I’ll handle the hardships. I’m serious. Now is the time for us all to enjoy the good life.” He used tongs to add several sugar cubes to her coffee. “No more black coffee from now on. Life will always be sweet going forward.” 1

“Yes!” She looked up, her eyes sparkling with tears, yet she forced a smile—a valiant effort that tugged at the heartstrings. “I saw your video chat with Rebecca. You’ve taken such good care of her, her skin is flawless, unlike mine.”

She touched her face with a bitter smile.

“Cathy!” Vance said. “You’re the most beautiful, no matter the circumstances.”

“Don’t try to flatter me.” She laughed it off. “Anyway, she seemed a bit distant. Is she upset? About me dragging you on this trip?”

“It’s not about you,” he replied. “She is just grumpy from being woken up. My fault for disturbing her sleep.”

“Oh, is that it?” She took a sip of her coffee. “I thought it might be me. I truly don’t want to be the reason you two argue.”

“It won’t come to that.” He sipped his own coffee. “Rebecca is reasonable at heart. She throws the occasional little fit, but it’s because of me. A bit of coaxing back home will sort it out.”

“Really? Even after that day when you had the kidnappers release me first, she wasn’t angry?” She brought up the incident again.

Vance’s mind flashed back to that moment, his hand trembling slightly on the coffee cup.

He steadied himself quickly. “We resolved it once we got home. We even had dinner together yesterday. She must have turned her frustration into appetite, finishing three burgers.”

II

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 230

“That relieves me,” Catherine said, her probing gaze lingering on him. “With you always placing me ahead, I feared she’d be heartbroken.”

“She understands the history,” Vance mused. “We, as a group, endured the toughest phases together, paving the way for her comfortable life now. She gets it and will remain steadfast.”

Vance’s interruption earlier had derailed Rebecca’s desire to linger in bed.

Josette had already breakfasted on store-bought bread from their prior outing, with a fridge stocked full of milk cartons and a fried egg on the side. Noticing Rebecca’s rise, she cheerfully prepared another egg.

“Grandma, let me handle it,” Rebecca offered.

Josette waved it off. “At my age, staying active is the best workout.”

Rebecca shook her head, amused by Josette’s persistent excuses for caring for her.

For lunch, they cooked together. After the meal, they tidied up, and Rebecca prepared to set off.

With Josette set to navigate Arelmoor alone, she unleashed a torrent of advice, covering everything from household routines to safe outings.

“You’re turning into quite the worrier,” Josette chuckled. “I’m not helpless yet, or forgetful.”

Rebecca laughed along, pulling Josette into a tight embrace. She knew Josette was capable, yet the concern persisted.

“Prioritize safety above all,” she reiterated.

“You have my word,” Josette promised, patting her back while tucking a bank card into her bag.

Unaware, Rebecca packed her freshly laundered and dried clothes into the suitcase, confirming nothing had been overlooked.

Soon, Desmond arrived to pick her up.

“Go on. I’ve got this handled alone,” Josette encouraged.

“But tonight...” Rebecca hesitated.

“I’ve already planned the menu and will start cooking shortly. Everything’s under control,” Josette interjected, gently ushering her toward the door.

Torn between reluctance and amusement, Rebecca said, “Your new phone number is private, known by the few of us. Ignore unfamiliar calls. My phone will disable roaming after takeoff. I’ll send my new number upon arrival.”

“Understood. Off you go. Take good care of yourself,” Josette urged.

Rebecca hugged Josette again and stepped out.

Desmond’s family driver drove them to the airport. An hour later, they arrived as dusk encroached.

Lauren awaited, with troupe members arriving in waves. After a headcount, the group processed baggage and security.

In the lounge, the window offered views of a blazing sunset.

“Look at that sunset. Doesn’t it resemble a phoenix rising from the ashes?” Desmond pointed.

“Exactly.” Rebecca nodded.

The clouds, painted in vivid gold and crimson, ignited a powerful urge within her—a vision of dancing like that mythical bird, ascending in flames. In her imagination, a young woman whirled and leaped.

It sparked fresh choreographic inspiration, though she’d never complete it herself. That was fine. The troupe brimmed with talent; they could bring her vision to life.

As the sunset’s final hues yielded to night, they began boarding the plane. Since she was checking in with Desmond, their seats were together.

Once situated, she texted Josette: [Takeoff imminent. Talk in about a dozen hours.]

Josette replied: [Safe travels, dear.]

Comforted, Rebecca activated flight mode.

The plane taxied, poised for liftoff amid enveloping darkness. Concurrently, Vance and Catherine returned to their hotel after dinner.

He had been dialing persistently, continuing through to the lobby, his brow furrowing deeper with each failed attempt.

“This is odd. Why can’t I connect?” he muttered.

“Rebecca?” Catherine asked.

“Yeah. What could she be doing? Josette’s phone is off, too.” He switched to another contact, and it came through. “Nancy? Has Rebecca stopped by today?”

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Chapter 231

Still in the hospital, Nancy told Vance that Rebecca hadn’t visited.

Although she didn’t know the details, she understood that Rebecca had left him permanently.

It was much like her own situation. She never wanted to be found by her former husband, and Rebecca undoubtedly felt the same way about Vance.

Therefore, Nancy just said she knew nothing.

Vance ended the call with a sense of regret. He tried dialing Rebecca’s number once more, but it remained unreachable.

Opening the app for the home security cameras, he was met with nothing but darkness. The lights in the living room were off.

He wondered if she was asleep in the bedroom. His brows furrowed as a growing restlessness took hold.

“Vance?” Catherine tightened her fists, though her expression conveyed only worry. “Maybe send Aiden and Lucas to check on her?”

“It’s alright,” Vance replied as they made their way through the hotel lobby toward the rooms. “She is probably just fed up with me and turned her phone off.”

He wondered if she had blocked him again. If so, when he got back, he’d start by giving her a serious lecture.

Catherine forced a smile. “She is fed up with you? How so?”

“She has done it more times than I can count,” he replied with a bitter smile.

At least in recent months, she had kept doing that.

Catherine's smile faded, and Vance seemed to lose interest in conversation. They walked in silence to the seaside villa they had booked.

In his room, Vance sat down and began tinkering with his phone.

"Vance?" Catherine called out.

"Yeah, take a rest," he hummed.

"Are you still trying to message Rebecca?"

"No, just handling a couple of work emails."

Catherine relaxed, going to take a shower. Vance wrapped up his responses and returned to his chat thread with Rebecca.

He had sent a long string of messages, yet there was no sign that she had read or replied to any of them.

"That ungrateful little thing," he murmured to himself, checking the time.

If she had powered off her phone, it seemed unlikely she would turn it back on tonight. She was probably already asleep.

"Does she rest so peacefully without me around?" he murmured again. 1

That familiar sense of unease resurfaced, striking him intermittently over the past few days.

"Vance..." Catherine's voice rang out again from behind him, sweet and coaxing.

He turned to find her wearing a nearly transparent slip nightgown, her hands lifted as she gathered her damp hair.

"Could you help blow-dry my hair? I don't want to risk catching a cold," she murmured, her tone growing even more coy.

Droplets from her hair trickled down, soaking the front of the gown and rendering the fabric even more sheer, clinging to her skin and highlighting every curve with striking clarity.

Getting up, he retrieved a bathrobe from the closet and draped it over her shoulders. "The air conditioning is running a bit low. Dress warmer to avoid getting sick."

She paused to process it. He just guided her to sit at the vanity, then picked up the hairdryer and began to dry her hair with practiced ease.

His fingers threaded through her strands like a comb, gentle and skilled enough to avoid any painful tugs.

Her voice quivered. “Do you often do this for Rebecca at home?”

He paused, recalling the past. Yes, he had.

Five years ago, right after the accident, simple tasks like bathing or washing hair had been challenging for Rebecca.

He had taken care of her attentively, washing her feet, changing her bandages, shampooing, and drying her hair.

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Chapter 232

Later, those responsibilities had gradually shifted to Josette, then to Nancy.

Since then, Vance had assisted Rebecca sporadically.

Deep in reflection, he finished drying Catherine’s hair and placed the dryer back in its spot. “There you go. Time to rest.”

He turned away, heading to the living room to collect his suitcase before going upstairs to prepare for his own shower.

Catherine’s hair now felt warm and fluffy against the cool air from the AC, draping comfortably over her shoulders.

So, this was the tenderness Rebecca got every day. Jealousy clawed through her. She let the bathrobe slip off and climbed the stairs with one strap already falling from her shoulder.

She paused at the bathroom door, hearing running water. Vance was showering.

The bathroom was made of frosted glass, obscuring fine details but revealing a vague outline. He appeared to have his back turned.

After a pause, Catherine pushed the door open and drawled, “Vance...”

She was poised to advance, only to see that he had already put on his bathrobe at some point. “Van...”

Her fervent anticipation froze in an instant, but she refused to retreat. “Are you finished? Let me assist you.”

“I’m done,” he replied, stepping out.

She spun around, then hurried forward and embraced him from behind. “Vance...”

He gave no reaction, and she whispered, “I don’t care about any titles. I just want to be with you.”

Her hands reached beneath his robe, but he grasped her wrist.

“Cathy, you mean a great deal to me, but this wouldn’t be right for you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“But I do.”

She held on tightly. “I’m scared. I can’t sleep by myself.”

“Go ahead and rest,” he said. “I’ll stay nearby, just like last time.”

Rebecca’s flight experience, in contrast, was filled with joy. She witnessed a breathtaking sunset, dozed, dined, and watched movies.

Perhaps it was her liberated state of mind, but the long journey felt surprisingly brief. She even caught a stunning sunrise from her window seat, the rays dazzling.

It was truly magnificent.

As the sky brightened further, the plane prepared for landing. Announcements rotated in different languages.

“We’re almost there, Rebecca. How are you feeling?” Desmond showed her a photo on his phone, one he had captured of her admiring the sunrise.

The sunlight illuminated her face, giving her an almost luminous quality.

“It’s stunning,” he remarked. “Can I include this in my post?”

Rebecca saw no reason why not; it was an excellent shot. “Sure.”

“I’ll forward it to you once we land,” he said, flipping through the other images of her against the dawn sky.

She considered posting her own series and titling it “New Horizons”.

The plane touched down, and passengers prepared to disembark. Rebecca carried only a backpack, while some troupe members had brought instruments and specialized equipment.

Determined not to become a liability due to her leg, she sought to contribute wherever possible. She steered clear of delicate items like the instruments but assisted with luggage.

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Chapter 233

Helia, Desmond's dance partner, felt uneasy about letting Rebecca help her.

"Rebecca was like this back at school, taking great care of us underclassmen," Desmond chuckled, winking at her. "Don't worry about it. Let's go, or we'll end up blocking the aisle."

Half-understanding, Helia proceeded without another word. But on the path to baggage claim, she asked him for clarification.

"Rebecca wants to lend a hand. She is concerned about not being useful to the troupe. If she offers to do something, just let her," he explained.

She nodded in realization, then regarded him with a playful smile.

"What's so funny?" He rolled his eyes before quickening his pace to catch up with Rebecca.

Rebecca had just turned on her phone and activated the local SIM card. It connected without issue, and a flood of messages poured in, including a couple from Josette asking if she had arrived safely. 3

She replied: [We've landed without any problems.]

Then she checked out the other messages.

Nancy: [Mr. Bradford is searching for you, Madam. He came to ask me.]

Rebecca: [Just tell him you don't know.]

The rest of the messages were mostly from Vance.

[Where are you?]

[Why can't I reach you?]

[Are you at home?]

[Don't tell me you haven't returned since yesterday!]

[Where on earth are you? The security footage shows no trace.]

[Your last appearance on camera was around four in the morning. What were you doing up so early?]

The rest centered around the topic. Numerous missed video calls had been automatically canceled due to no answers.

Before she could finish scrolling, her phone vibrated with a video request from Vance,

There was no chance she would accept it now. She just let it ring until it timed out. He was still at the island resort; he would discover the truth soon enough upon his return.

Spotting Josette's latest message, Rebecca shifted to a cheerful voice note exchange with her.

On the first day, the group's primary focus was checking into the hotel, with rooms assigned two to a space. Rebecca shared hers with Lauren.

As the troupe leader, Lauren efficiently organized everyone and recommended a full day of downtime: to acclimate to the time difference and, if desired, to go out for some light exploration.

"Tired?" Lauren asked upon returning to the room, where Rebecca was sorting through her belongings.

"Not at all. I've got plenty of energy left," Rebecca replied joyfully.

If the car accident five years ago hadn't occurred, she would have participated in the troupe's fall tour that year.

She recalled Lauren's inspiring words vividly: "Bring our dance traditions to stages around the world, introducing the essence of our heritage to global audiences."

Tragically, with her visa already secured, a simple summer trip home had shattered those plans. Now, being here felt like realizing her dream.

Lauren smiled at her enthusiasm. "Get some rest. I'll go check on the others."

“Sure. If there’s anything you need me to handle, just let me know.” Rebecca was eager to immerse herself in the work.

“Rest assured, we don’t tolerate idleness in this troupe,” Lauren teased. “Just recharge first.”

But as soon as she lay down, Rebecca received a message from Jenny: [Rebecca, is this you? It has to be!]

Attached was a screenshot of Desmond’s post. He had posted a nine-photo grid, captioned: [More beautiful than the sunrise.]

The photos included the meal on the plane, the scenery after arrival, and Rebecca’s profile as she watched the sunrise on the plane.

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Chapter 234

Jenny sent over a large version of that picture.

Rebecca: [Yes, it’s me.]

Jenny: [Oh my gosh! Where have you gone? Who posted this? Who are you traveling with?]

Rebecca: [It’s our dance academy’s touring troupe. They’re performing across Europe, and I’ve joined them to experience it firsthand.]

Jenny: [This is bad. Vance is going to lose it. Actually, he already has.]

Rebecca checked their group chat, but there was nothing unusual. No one was discussing it.

Jenny: [Stuff like this wouldn’t be in the main group. The guys have their own side chat. They’ve come to me with questions.]

Rebecca: [How did you come across this post?]

Jenny: [Ever heard of six degrees of separation? A friend of a friend of a friend... Eventually, there’s always a connection. Anyway, didn’t you tell Vance about this? He seemed furious when he called the guy who shared the photo in their chat.]

Rebecca: [No, I didn’t mention it.]

Jenny: [What if he asks me? How do I reply?]

Rebecca: [Just tell him you don't know.]

No sooner had she sent the message than Vance contacted her, forwarding the screenshot of Desmond's post.

Vance: [Explain what this is all about.]

She chose not to respond, but more poured in.

Vance: [No response? Turned off your phone? Have I indulged you too much?]

Vance: [You have no qualms about accepting my money, but then you sneak off abroad with another man?]

Vance: [How long have you two been scheming this? Visas don't process overnight! How long have you been carrying on behind my back?]

Vance: [Fine, ignore my calls and messages. You'd better stay gone forever!] →

Rebecca placed her phone aside, intending to nap before assisting Lauren with organizing dinner.

In the oceanfront villa on the island, Vance paced the living room with a dark expression. Eventually, he seized his phone and began searching for flight options.

"Vance..." Catherine called out cautiously, sensing his anger.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "You can stay here and enjoy a few more days. I'll book a ticket back home now."

"But rushing back won't help," she reasoned. "She is not at home, not even in Soliaridge."

He took a deep breath. "You're right. I've lost my perspective."

"Take it easy," Catherine consoled him. "She might just be feeling cooped up at home and decided to get out for a bit of adventure."

"Adventure? With her leg in that condition? And ran off with another man without telling me? I already promised to go with her in a few days." Vance unleashed a torrent of frustration. 1

Then he noticed Catherine's wounded expression and realized he had misdirected his outburst.

“I’m sorry. It’s not aimed at you. I’m just...” he faltered.

At last, he understood the source of his persistent anxiety over the past few days. The pieces had fallen into place.

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Chapter 235

Catherine shook her head. “I know. I understand you completely. No need to apologize.”

But Vance remained sullen.

She pressed her lips together. “How about we book tickets? We can return together.”

“There’s no need,” he said, managing a small smile. “Go get some sleep.”

She shook her head. “If you’re unhappy, I can’t enjoy myself. There will be plenty of opportunities for trips. Let’s head home.”

He rubbed his temples and leaned back against the sofa, regarding her thoughtfully. “But that would be unfair to you, wouldn’t it?”

She offered a graceful smile. “Not at all. You know me better than that. I only want you to be happy and for things to go smoothly.”

He let out a deep sigh. “Go ahead and sleep. We can discuss it tomorrow.”

“Alright,” she agreed, yet she remained standing there.

“Go on. I’m okay. Don’t worry,” he encouraged.

She nodded. “When you speak to Rebecca, try to stay calm. Losing your temper will only push her further away.”

Bringing it up only intensified his scowl.

She quickly added, “Don’t worry too much. You’ve pampered her like royalty these past few years, so she’d inevitably develop some entitlement. When a woman is catered to without limits, she might start taking it for granted and throw occasional fits. But rest assured, she won’t stray too far.”

But the shadows on his face remained.

“She’ll definitely return,” she said, trying to soothe him. “She was a dancer, but her career options are limited outside of that world. She has no real skills and couldn’t even handle basic tasks. She has been given nothing but the finest. Without you, she couldn’t earn enough to afford even one of her handbags. How could she sustain herself? This is merely a temporary escapade. She’ll come back once she runs out of money.”

Her words provided some measure of reassurance. Indeed, Rebecca possessed few practical life skills; her daily routines had long depended on domestic help.

Venturing out on her own would prove challenging, and the hardships would teach her the consequences of such impulsiveness.

Observing the subtle shift in his demeanor, she pressed on. “Whatever you do, don’t let jealousy take over just because she’s traveling with a man. She’s been so sheltered by you; she doesn’t understand how dangerous people can be. If anything did happen, she was tricked. She’s the victim here.”

Through her seemingly supportive rhetoric, she succeeded in reigniting his indignation.

“Vance?” she called out deliberately, noting his prolonged silence.

His face softened slightly. “I understand. Go get some rest. I need a moment to compose myself.”

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it,” she said with an understanding smile.

She had stirred the pot sufficiently. Knowing when to stop was key, lest it arouse suspicion. Now one final nudge was still needed.

Lying in bed, she edited a long message and sent it to Aiden.

Staring at the chat with Rebecca, Vance suddenly received a message.

Aiden: [Still up? Is Rebecca causing trouble again?]

Aiden and Rebecca had never gotten along, so Vance had no intention of involving the group in her matters.

Vance: [How did you find out?]

Aiden: [Cathy mentioned it. She is worried about you.]

Vance glanced at the woman lying in bed.

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Chapter 236

Aiden: [This is major. Why didn't you tell us? Don't blame Cathy. She is panicking, unsure how to help, and asked us to lift your spirits. She begged me not to let on that she told me, worried you'd be upset.]

Vance: [I appreciate the concern. I won't blame her.]

Aiden sent a hug emoji, one of Catherine's favorites: [You know we'll harp on this again. You've indulged Rebecca for five years, turning her into someone without boundaries. If she had even half of Cathy's maturity, you wouldn't have been suffering like this. My advice: cut off her cards and see how far she gets. She'd come crawling back in no time.]

Vance didn't reply, knowing that he couldn't cut Rebecca off completely.

She had her own accounts where he had transferred funds directly. She wasn't solely dependent on his supplementary cards.

Aiden: [Don't tell me you've given her enough to achieve financial independence. All in her control?]

Still, Vance didn't respond.

Aiden understood and sent an "idiot" emoji: [Are you crazy? It wouldn't surprise me if Rebecca drained your assets and disappeared. You really are...]

Meeting Vance's silence, he changed his approach, typing: [Forget it. Whoever you choose to marry is your business. She is like a curse in your life. Whether she is out living it up alone or running off with some guy, fate is what it is. We'll always have your back. Even if the sky comes crashing down, we'll hold it up for you.]

It was followed by a "hug" emoji. 1

Vance was touched. They were true friends, proven through years of loyalty. 2

He sent a "smiling" emoji: [You've stolen all of Cathy's emojis.]

Aiden: [She is like a little sun. Ever since she rejoined our group, she has been spreading warmth and positivity every day. Don't you think so?] [?]

Vance glanced at Catherine, typing: [Absolutely.]

That very evening, two different people had conveyed the same sentiment. He had spoiled Rebecca excessively, which had inevitably led to her becoming unruly and defiant.

Rebecca had intended to rest in the hotel in the afternoon, but sleep eluded her. With Lauren still absent, she decided to get up and see if there was any way she could assist.

Stepping out, she discovered that the troupe hadn't stayed put but had gathered in the rehearsal hall, already deep into practice sessions.

She spent the entire afternoon there, observing the teachers and younger members as they danced, while handling various support tasks.

Witnessing their execution of complex, high-difficulty techniques evoked memories of the phoenix-like sunset clouds she had seen before boarding the plane.

It ignited a revival within her, as if her own inner phoenix were stirring to life, desperate to break free, twirl, and soar.

She yearned to dance, but something held her back. Surrounded by such exceptional talent, she felt inadequate. She was no longer the agile swallow of her youth.

The group continued rehearsing until eight o'clock, when Lauren repeatedly insisted it was time for dinner, finally prompting them to disband.

Rebecca empathized deeply with their commitment and rigor. The adage held true: one minute on stage demanded ten years of hard training. Daily practice was essential; skills eroded without consistency.

It was no mere saying. In her prime, she had adhered to the same relentless schedule, never allowing a single day of slack.

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Chapter 237

Carrying that same aspiration, while the others went off to eat, Rebecca lingered in the rehearsal hall, searching for echoes of her former self.

It felt like standing in Josette's practice room once again, but this time, she danced freely, guided by instinct, channeling the essence of that reborn phoenix through her body's expressions.

Many moves she envisioned proved unattainable, but she persisted until the final pose. When she collapsed on the floor, sweat had already soaked her clothes.

Sparse but thunderous applause broke out in the expansive hall. She turned to see Desmond and Helia approaching, clapping enthusiastically.

“That was incredible! Were you dancing a piece about renewal?” Helia exclaimed, her eyes shining.

Rebecca got up and smiled shyly. “Yes. Seeing you guys rehearse sparked something in me.”

“It was truly remarkable!” Helia said with true admiration.

Even though most steps weren’t fully there yet, even though the hardest lifts and turns were impossible for Rebecca now, who wouldn’t be moved by a wounded phoenix fighting to take flight again?

Desmond’s eyes sparkled with equal enthusiasm, but his words were concise. “We’ll join you.”

For the next three hours, they danced together.

As they moved, Rebecca shared her concepts aloud. In turn, Helia executed the steps Rebecca couldn’t manage, and together with Desmond, they constructed the framework of her ideas.

Though it was only a short segment, a torrent of inspiration surged through her. There was so much more she wanted to convey.

“If we developed this into a full dance production, it would be impactful. Will you continue choreographing it?” Helia asked, sweating profusely.

Rebecca felt uncertain, unsure if she possessed that capability.

Desmond noticed the flicker of doubt in her eyes. “It’s getting late. Let’s call it a day. We’ve danced to our hearts’ content.”

She nodded and flashed a radiant smile. Indeed, the evening had been one of pure, unbridled fulfillment.

“Rebecca, I sent you a photo,” Helia said cheerfully as they were heading to their rooms. “It’s stunning!”

The image depicted a lift: Desmond supporting Rebecca elegantly, her form graceful, with her uninjured foot arched to perfection. It evoked the image of a phoenix in mid-ascent.

“Hey, you snuck a shot of me,” Desmond teased.

Outside the elevator, Helia looked back and chuckled, “Who was shooting you? It was Rebecca.”

Desmond looked down at Rebecca. “Look at your technique in that photo. Impeccable. That’s muscle memory ingrained in your very being.”

Rebecca smiled, seeing that Helia had captured the pinnacle of her performance. That was the most striking lift in the entire sequence.

“Remember your own words?” he added. “We dance out of love and for no other reason. If the passion is there, we pursue it without hesitation.”

She nodded, knowing he was encouraging her.

As the elevator reached her floor, she said earnestly, “I understand what you and Helia are getting at. I’ll give it serious thought.”

The doors opened, and she added, “Thank you both for joining me tonight. Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams.” He waved with a smile.

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 238

Moving quietly back into the room, Rebecca was surprised to find Lauren still awake, diligently scribbling in a notebook.

“Lauren, you’re still working?” Rebecca asked, still sweating.

Lauren looked up. “Oh dear, hurry and shower before you catch a cold. How long did you guys keep at it?”

“You knew I went dancing?” Rebecca felt a wave of embarrassment.

She used to be one of Lauren’s favorite students, but now she couldn’t even dance normally.

“Of course, I did,” Lauren replied with a knowing grin. “I stopped by to watch. The three of you were creating something entirely new.”

Rebecca’s anxiety heightened. “The way I dance now...”

“Excellent!” Lauren interjected firmly. “Dance is technique, sure, but it’s also raw emotion, the romantic urge to simply move, and the sheer courage to stand up after falling countless times. I’m thrilled to have you back with us.”

“Lauren...” Rebecca felt an urge to embrace Lauren but hesitated due to her perspiration. “I’ll shower first.

“Go ahead. I’ll finish up here shortly.” Lauren nodded, resuming her task.

By the time Rebecca stepped out of the bathroom, Lauren was almost done. They exchanged a few words and reminded each other to rest early.

Yet sleep evaded Rebecca. The day’s events had left her too exhilarated to settle.

She examined the photo Helia had sent. That version of herself felt both familiar and distant, but it was undeniably the one she cherished most.

The encouragement from Lauren, Helia, and Desmond echoed in her mind repeatedly. Finally, she reached a firm resolution and posted the photo online with a simple caption: [I’ve decided.]

She had made up her mind. No matter whether she could still dance or not, she was determined to bring this grand dance drama to life.

The post quickly garnered a surge of likes and comments. Checking them, she saw that in mere minutes, the reactions had filled an entire page.

The comments were overwhelmingly positive. Desmond’s quip was among them: [Understood.]

He was still awake. It brought a smile to her face.

Comments from her high school classmates appeared as well, including one from Obadiah: [You’re always our goddess.]

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As she considered how to reply, a new response popped up: [Wipe the drool from your mouth!]

It was from Vance.

The comment section immediately buzzed with activity. Vance and Obadiah began arguing right there.

Obadiah: [My intentions are pure-nothing but admiration for our goddess. You, on the other hand, should clean up your own mess!]

Vance: [You'd better hope your backbone matches that big nerve.]

Obadiah: [Come at me then! Let's see if my fists are harder than your words!]

Vance: [Be ready. I've just landed!]

Rebecca found the exchange utterly juvenile and promptly deleted the entire thread.

Right after, Vance messaged her, attaching a screenshot of her post. He demanded: [Explain this! What have you decided? What have you and that Schroeder kid agreed upon?]

If deciding on divorce qualified as a decision, he would learn soon enough upon returning home.

More messages flooded in at an unprecedented rate and intensity over their five years together.

Vance: [I'm back in Soliaridge now. You have two days to come home, or don't blame me for what follows.]

Vance: [You're ignoring me, fine. But be clear that you live on my dime. Without me, you'd have no means to survive. Keep this up, and you'll be begging me to take you back!]

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Rebecca's thoughts were consumed by the dance concept that had sparked in her mind earlier.

If she wanted to expand into a full production as Helia had suggested, how would she structure it? Ideas collided like a storm, overwhelming her to the point where Vance's messages barely registered as minor ripples, easily swept away by the vast waves of her creativity and vanishing without a trace.

She didn't even consider blocking him; they caused her no real disturbance. After a glance, she dove back into envisioning her dance.

The inspiration had begun with the theme of a phoenix's rebirth, but her imagination expanded rapidly to cycles of endless renewal, to legacies that endured through time, and to grander scales.

She envisioned drawing from mythic folklore as her foundation, crafting an epic dance drama. The more she reflected, the more exhilarated she became, other emotions fading away.

Even her dreams were filled with sweeping landscapes, flowing rivers, and mythical creatures.

Vance couldn't wait for dawn; with only an hour until the last flight, he purchased tickets without hesitation, packed his things, and rushed to the airport.

He had initially planned to go alone, but Catherine insisted on accompanying him back. Given the time constraints, he didn't argue.

Upon arriving in Soliaridge, he headed straight home, with Catherine following closely.

He wasn't entirely sure why he felt such urgency to return. The house was empty, after all, but an inexplicable compulsion drove him there.

When Catherine expressed concern and refused to let him go alone, he lacked the energy to persuade her otherwise.

Catherine stepped out of the elevator first and immediately spotted the paper crane affixed to the door. Her face drained of color as she quickly tore it down, then knocked on the door.

"Isn't your housekeeper home?" she asked.

Vance followed right behind, using his fingerprint to unlock the door. The interior appeared unchanged from when he had left, except for the absence of one person.

Having tucked away the crane, Catherine swiftly scanned the space for any other potential clues that might give things away.

Fortunately, there seemed to be nothing else. It appeared the paper crane was the only item.

After setting down his suitcase, Vance habitually made his way to the bedroom, with Catherine trailing him.

He pulled open her closet doors, only to be confronted by emptiness. The thought of Rebecca selling secondhand clothes on eBay struck him.

She had claimed her wardrobe was overflowing and she wanted to clear space for new items. So, she had been preparing for this all along, and he had been completely in the dark.

“Not a single piece of clothing left,” Catherine murmured. “Is she planning not to return?”

“That’s impossible,” Vance declared resolutely. “How could she not come back? She is just throwing a fit.

Rebecca loved him so deeply, having done so since high school, and even sacrificed a leg to save him. How could she just leave for good?

“I know this must be painful for you,” Catherine began sympathetically. “Perhaps you should check if she left anything behind. Messages, emails, or notes?”

Her suggestion sparked a realization, and he began searching every room. Catherine shadowed him closely, anxious that Rebecca might have left something incriminating.

In the end, Vance discovered the divorce agreement and the accompanying note in his desk drawer.

The note was concise, just a few lines that he absorbed in a single glance. The word “divorce” stood out most prominently among them.

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Vance didn’t bother reading the full agreement. The short note alone elicited a cold laugh from him as he flung the papers onto the desk.

Catherine reached for the stack. Seeing no objection from him, she picked it up and scanned it before reading more carefully.

She felt a sense of relief upon realizing that Rebecca had kept quiet about the volunteer experience from years ago. But her relief quickly turned to shock as she discovered the numerous properties registered under Rebecca’s name, along with the company shares.

Even if Rebecca forfeited additional assets, divorcing would still grant her financial independence.

“Rebecca is seeking a divorce?” Catherine murmured. “Don’t let this devastate you.”

She had intended to add that he still had their support, but he cut her off, asserting, “She won’t go through with it. This is just another tantrum. She has done it before, threatening me with a divorce whenever she is upset.”

He pulled out his phone and began searching online, soon locating a relevant news article: Arelmoor Dance Academy, in collaboration with several troupes, embarked on a month-long European tour.

A sense of relief washed over him. “It’s only for a month. When she returns, I’ll teach her a proper lesson.

She has become far too willful.”

Disappointment clouded Catherine’s face. “This is all my fault. If I hadn’t insisted you join me on the islands, she wouldn’t have left. I’m so sorry.”

“It has nothing to do with you,” he reassured her. “You must be exhausted from all the rushing around. Why don’t you go home and get some rest?”

“I’m not tired.” She shook her head. “I can’t leave you alone at a time like this. I’ll stay here with you.”

Rebecca went to bed late but woke up early the next morning, brimming with inexhaustible energy.

That evening, the troupe was scheduled for a full-dress rehearsal, so the day promised to be hectic. There was the stage design to assemble, costumes to prepare, and a multitude of logistical details to manage.

After calculating the time difference and video chatting with Josette to update her on the busy schedule, Rebecca threw herself fully into the tasks.

She assisted Lauren with overall coordination, lent a hand to the stage crew during downtime, and helped the wardrobe team organize the outfits.

There wasn’t a single idle moment, and she quickly became familiar with nearly every member of the troupe. Many already recognized her by her old nickname-Swallow.

Observing her dedication and positivity despite her leg injury, everyone was genuinely moved and grew

Chamber Mun fond of her.

During the evening rehearsal, Desmond took the male lead role, with Helia as the female lead,

Rebecca sat in the audience and watched intently, applauding so vigorously that her palms turned red.

By the time the rehearsal concluded, it was already ten o'clock. The group packed up and returned to their accommodations.

After her shower, Rebecca had settled in for the night when Desmond messaged her, inviting her for a late-night snack.

She was puzzled. Where could they possibly find food at this hour? The streets emptied after dark, leaving only pubs open, but alcohol was off-limits for them.

Both Desmond and Helia urged her to meet in the lobby promptly. Intrigued, Rebecca invited Lauren to join.

"I'll sit this one out. They already asked me, but I don't like eating late," Lauren explained. "You young folks go ahead and enjoy yourselves."

Rebecca took the elevator down to the lobby, where Helia was waiting. Upon seeing her, Helia linked arms with her and led the way. "Come on. They're all gathered in Desmond's room."

Arriving there, Rebecca discovered a room full of people. On the table lay pasta, fresh fruit, and beef stew.

"Wow, you're indulging in secret treats!" she joked.

"Lauren knows," Helia grinned, still holding her hand. "This is totally legitimate."

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Rebecca burst into laughter.

In truth, she had gone through similar experiences during her younger days. Dance training demanded immense physical energy, and with constant dieting, it was hard to maintain stamina.

Even though her responsibilities that day had focused on logistics and support, they had still been demanding, leaving her genuinely famished by now.

In this foreign setting, as the evening wore on, the group huddled around the table, inhaling the savory aroma from the stew. It created a sense of genuine contentment and ease.

Just then, Rebecca's phone buzzed with an incoming video call from Vance. She recalled one of his earlier messages mentioning that he had returned to Soliaridge.

He must have discovered the divorce agreement and was now reaching out to discuss it. She quietly took her phone and slipped into the bathroom to answer the call.

But to her surprise, it was Catherine who appeared on the screen.

"Rebecca," Catherine called out, then began moving about.

Rebecca could see that Catherine was in the apartment where she and Vance had called home for five years. The latter paced from the living room into the kitchen, where Vance was cooking.

Clearly, Catherine was showing off their cozy cohabitation.

"Vance..." she sounded anxious, "come over and talk to Rebecca."

Vance glanced at the camera for half a second, then went back to cooking. Yet Catherine kept pushing, "Come on, Vance. We need to explain to her."

He ignored her request, and she turned back to the phone. "Rebecca, I'm truly sorry for dragging Vance on the trip. He agreed with my insistence. Please don't hold it against him. It's my fault."

What an interesting way to apologize! On the surface, it portrayed Vance as having been reluctantly coerced, but in essence, it was a subtle boast about their bond.

After all, not just anybody can pester someone else's husband like that. But whether this was sincere remorse or a veiled taunt, it held no power over Rebecca anymore. She wasn't even interested.

The joy of dancing was intoxicating, and the world was brimming with wonders. Why squabble over one man?

"It's alright," Rebecca replied calmly. "You don't have to apologize. From here on, whatever plans you make with him are none of my concerns. And Mr. Bradford back there, if you have no problems with the divorce agreement, don't contact me again."

"Things are not what you think," Catherine hastily explained. "He hasn't done anything wrong. This is my fault. He wanted to go with you; I held him back. If you need to blame someone, blame me."

"Say no more, Cathy," Vance interrupted, forking a morsel of meat into her mouth. "Give this a taste. Should I add more salt?"

“No, it’s perfect. Wow, this is good! Your cooking is amazing.” She angled the phone toward Rebecca. See this? The dishes Vance prepared-they’re a feast for the eyes and nose. Come home. You’re so fortunate to have a man like him.”

Rebecca almost laughed out loud. So, this was the point of the video call-to shove their domestic bliss in her face. Vance was indeed capable, but he had never fully demonstrated his versatility for her benefit.

“Alright. Put the phone down and stop chattering. It’s time to eat,” Vance said.

“Alright.” Catherine set the phone aside without ending the call.

From Rebecca’s perspective, the screen now displayed the kitchen ceiling, yet Catherine’s voice continued to transmit clearly.

“Vance, ah, don’t...”

“I’m just carrying you out.”

“Hey, put me down.”

“Ah, easy.”

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Rebecca pressed a hand to her chest, expecting the old pain, or at least a wave of nausea. But even that was absent.

The people on the other end of the phone were like utter strangers speaking in a foreign language. After leaving that suffocating environment and Vance, she felt like a butterfly finally breaking free of its cocoon -light, unburdened, and truly free.

“Rebecca, come join us! We’re starting to eat,” Desmond called from outside.

“Coming!” she responded cheerfully.

“Rebecca?” Desmond’s voice echoed again.

Although the door stood open, he knocked politely. “Rebecca, are you alright in there? We’re holding off for you!”

“All good. I’m coming right out!” Rebecca emerged with her phone, intending to terminate the video, but Vance’s sullen face suddenly filled the screen.

Unbothered, Rebecca ended the call just as he began to shout out. Regardless of how persistently he tried to reconnect, she steadfastly ignored him.

A meal's enjoyment hinged on the vibe.

These modest, budget-friendly choices seldom appeared on a formal dining table. Yet, when they were shared among kindred spirits with passion, the atmosphere alone transformed the gathering into something exhilarating.

To Rebecca, this impromptu late-night meal ranked among the most gratifying "feasts" she had savored in the past five years. It was more flavorful than any extravagant dinner she had shared with Vance at upscale venues.

The boisterous session concluded around midnight. No matter how engaging the company was, it was time to disperse.

When Rebecca returned to her room, Lauren was ready for bed, smelling the lingering aroma clinging to Rebecca's clothes,

"I caught a glimpse of your posts," she chuckled. "Had a good time?"

"Yeah!" Rebecca grinned. "It was incredibly fun. Thank you so much."

She was grateful that Lauren had brought her on this trip and reunited her with the community. This was where she belonged. Only in the company of her peers did she discover a profound sense of alignment in life.

As the night deepened, Rebecca switched off the lights and went to bed. Yet the surge of excitement within her refused to ebb away.

She delved into social media, discovering a plethora of updates about Day 2 of the tour, ranging from daytime rehearsals to the night's assembly.

The posts exuded vibrancy and optimism. This was the essence of living.

Looking back, she had been confined within the suffocating bounds of marriage, each day a monotonous drudgery. Now it felt like emerging from a hazy dream and experiencing a vivid rebirth.

Vance's messages persisted unabated throughout the night, but she never replied.

While she browsed the feeds, another message came through. It was a photo of her and Desmond, obtained from some unknown source—likely another instance of Jenny's six degrees of separation.

It showed her standing next to Desmond, lifting a beverage in a group toast. She hadn't even realized how radiantly she had been smiling.

Vance's text brimmed with indignation: [Take a good look at yourself! Do you even recall that you're a wife? What sort of conduct is this? Have you abandoned all moral restraints?]

She found the hypocrisy profoundly amusing. So, he was familiar with concepts like "moral restraints" and "appropriate conduct".

She had simply been captured in a photo during a communal meal, and that rendered her immoral?

Yet he, as a married man, had embarked on an island getaway with another woman and shared accommodations. Where did his sense of propriety and ethics fit into that?

Strangely, although his words struck her as ridiculous, she felt no compulsion to counter them. The chat window now resembled an immense swamp; exchanging even one more word would only pull her back into the mire.

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Rebecca had taken pains to escape that mire.

Scrolling upward revealed more messages, all sent that night, but she wasn't interested in reading them.

Rebecca: [I've made my point clear enough. Unless it's to confirm the divorce, please stop contacting me. I won't be checking them.]

Vance's reply came right away: [Threatening me with divorce? You really think I'll be intimidated?]

She really wasn't threatening him; she just had just grown tired of saying this phrase over and over.

Rebecca: [I've left the divorce agreement at home. You must have seen it. If divorce doesn't faze you, then let's proceed. We'll finalize it upon my return.]

Vance: [Fine.]

With his confirmation, she exhaled in relief. That was what she needed.

However, he soon forwarded two photographs. One depicted him and Catherine at the seaside villa, and another showed them seated at the dining table in the apartment where she and Vance had resided for five years.

Apparently, the spread was what Vance had just cooked.

Vance: [You see, I'm not lacking in appeal. Others would value me.]

Rebecca sent a “nodding” emoji: [Wish you happiness.]

She ignored him and resumed browsing social media.

Once, she was insecure and sensitive, keeping herself in a small circle. She rarely checked her social media feed. Now she found joy in browsing through it and reading posts about other people's daily lives.

She enjoyed seeing their meals, the setting sun, the rising dawn... These simple, yet vibrant glimpses of life warmed her heart.

But then, she came across Vance's post.

She had known him for 12 years and had witnessed him post only twice. The first was the image of intertwined hands, one wearing an extravagant diamond and the other a simple silver ring.

This time, it was a collage of nine photos featuring Catherine, captioned: [Fate decrees that someone will accompany me through life. Grateful for your return to my side.]

She almost reminded him, “If you marry Catherine, you'll end up broke.”

In the end, she held back because engaging in disputes with trash wasn't worth it. She simply scrolled past the post, much like how their lives had briefly overlapped and then gone their separate ways.

Vance's ostentatious update didn't generate significant buzz, and no one sent her a screenshot. That was predictable since their overlapping contacts consisted primarily of high school classmates and Aiden's circle.

She had already blocked Aiden and his associates, rendering their reactions invisible to her. As for their high school classmates...

Since the images didn't feature her, no one would be so indelicate as to comment: [Vance, why did you change your wife?]

Nor would anyone send screenshots to her. That would probably just spark whispers in various private chats.

In any case, the ridicule wasn't directed at her. Whatever the gossip, it held no relevance to her life.

The following day brought the formal performance. She dedicated the day to managing venue operations and backstage support.

As the production concluded and the cast emerged for curtain calls amid waves of applause, she experienced a deep-seated pride as an integral part of this ensemble.

She yearned to reclaim her place on that stage, and it prompted her to think of the rehabilitation program. So, after the group dispersed, she went to the rehearsal hall alone.

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However, the rehearsal hall was designed solely for dance training, not therapeutic recovery. The primary issue lay in the absence of appropriate equipment.

Rebecca analyzed the rehabilitation videos, devising modifications for each exercise to suit her present circumstances and surroundings.

At the clinic, nurses had aided her. Now, operating solo, she tumbled repeatedly. Within moments, she was sweating profusely, her body throbbing with discomfort.

"Rebecca!"

Following another fall, a compassionate voice came from behind her, paired with supportive hands lifting her, just as in the old days at the dance academy.

"Lauren." She felt somewhat apprehensive, then nodded at Desmond, who had come together with

Lauren.

She wanted to pursue rehabilitation, but she didn't want anyone to know, afraid of failed recovery and dashed expectations.

Lauren shook her head in disapproval. Rebecca mistook it for skepticism about her recovery and felt a pang of disappointment.

That was fine. She hadn't harbored grand illusions anyway. She mustered a smile, though the situation felt somewhat uncomfortable.

“You foolish girl, how can you attempt this without safeguards? Are you aiming to turn yourself into a bandaged mess?” Lauren sighed. “With the entire touring troupe at your disposal, including several support personnel, why not seek assistance? If you’re hesitant to ask others, why not me? We share accommodations, after all.”

“Me too. My performance wrapped up today. I’ll train with you tomorrow,” Desmond said.

Rebecca blinked, finally understanding the situation. Lauren wasn’t denying her efforts or thinking they were pointless. 4

Tears welled up in her eyes. “Lauren, Desmond, I...”

Lauren advanced, enveloping her in a hug. “Learn to seek help. Don’t shoulder everything on your own.”

Rebecca stiffened, recalling the timid version of herself who had lived warily in Vance’s shadow, silently processed everything on her own, and never dared to seek his help for fear of troubling him or losing his love.

“Alright, that’s sufficient for today. I was wondering if you’d lost your way.” Lauren grasped her hand. “Let’s go back and rest. We can continue tomorrow.”

“Rebecca, were you referencing a video for those routines?” Desmond asked as they walked. “May I take a look?”

“Sure, it’s from the clinic.” Rebecca shared it with him.

When Desmond found her the next day, he had pronounced dark circles under his eyes. It turned out he had worked overnight to refine the rehabilitation program.

“Due to the time limits, I only managed to adjust a handful of movements.” He demonstrated the revisions and forwarded the video to her. “I consulted an expert last night and asked him to optimize it based on your condition. It was streamlined and adapted, but the efficacy is the same.”

Rebecca was astonished. “Thank you and that expert so much.”

“No worries. He’s on good terms with my family and is eager to see the results.” In a way, you’re serving as a guinea pig,” he joked.

She laughed, entirely amenable to being that experimental subject.

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Once certain pursuits were initiated, they demanded absolute commitment.

If Rebecca's earlier approach to rehabilitation had been somewhat casual, now she pursued it with the resolute aim of returning to the stage.

It was no longer a question of accepting any outcome that might arise. Rather, she was firmly determined to reclaim her rightful place.

With her objective crystallized, her overall state elevated to a pinnacle of tenacity and resolve.

Her daily life revolved around video calls with Josette, supporting the troupe's logistical needs, and seizing every available moment for her rehab exercises.

This full, busy life let her completely tune out everything back in Soliaridge.

That day signified the troupe's conclusion of performances in France and their transition to Germany.

Rebecca rose quietly at five in the morning. This had become her established routine—awakening one or two hours before the others, which allowed her to complete her rehab session early.

During the day, she needed to take care of the wardrobe, makeup, and set preparations.

At six o'clock, Desmond arrived to see her already immersed in her exercises. He chuckled, "You're starting earlier each day. Makes me feel like I'm constantly oversleeping."

"Not at all. Since we're relocating to a new hotel today, everyone is likely to rise early, so I began even sooner," she explained.

He volunteered every day to serve as her spotter during rehab, claiming it doubled as his own training time, but she knew his presence was intentional, aimed at providing her with necessary support.

Desmond, Lauren, and Helia rotated shifts to accompany her each morning and evening without fail.

At seven-thirty, after two hours of practice, they returned to their rooms, packed their belongings, and joined the convoy departing for Germany.

On the bus, she put on her headphones and took out her phone, intending to listen to music, when the photo app unexpectedly displayed an "On This Day" notification from the previous year.

In the photo, Vance wore a birthday hat with a cake before him. That was when she realized it was his birthday.

The app automatically played a slideshow of Vance sitting with Josette, Rebecca leaning against Vance's shoulder with a forced smile, as well as Vance blowing out candles and making a wish.

For five years, his birthdays had invariably been celebrated at Josette's house, without a single exception. He had never missed one, and on those occasions, he would be particularly affectionate.

Even though it was his birthday, he would distribute generous gifts to them.

On that same date five years ago, the doctors declared she would never dance on stage again after the car accident.

They had been in the honeymoon phase then, and she had clung to the faintest hope, pushing through rehabilitation to stand once more. But on that very day, she learned she could never perform professionally again.

Vance had arrived to pick her up, his eyes brimming with guilt. It turned out he had known all along that she couldn't dance anymore, but he hadn't dared to tell her.

She couldn't recall how she had summoned the strength to prevent her world from collapsing and reassure him that even without dancing, she still had countless other avenues. Then she had proceeded to celebrate his birthday with cheer.

That was probably why he gave gifts to Josette and her on his birthday.

He felt forever indebted to her, but he couldn't repay her with love because he didn't love her. He could only do it with money—lots of it.

Scrolling through the album, she sighed under her breath. Over these five years, her photo collection had been dominated by him.

There were photos of Vance's, Rebecca's, and Josette's birthdays as well as various holidays and anniversaries. There was also Vance asleep or at work, taken from the front, the side, and the back.

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Apart from holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays, the everyday snapshots had mostly been captured by Rebecca covertly.

She had documented five years of him through her camera-a testament to her overflowing affection.

Only when deeply in love with someone would one desire to preserve every aspect of them, never growing weary of photographing or admiring.

That was five years-nearly two thousand days. Even at one photo per day, that would amount to over a thousand, and in reality, she had taken far more than one each day.

She hesitated no longer. Her finger slid across the screen to select them all, then tapped Delete.

Five years-more than two thousand days were erased with just a few gestures. One final sweep cleared the recently deleted folder, and every trace of him vanished from her album.

Her phone suddenly felt vacant, and a portion of her heart echoed that emptiness. Yet it brought no grief.

It resembled those popular online decluttering videos. Discarding clutter left the space refreshed and bathed in sunlight.

Outside, the sky was a profound blue, with sunlight gilding the world in radiant gold. It was mesmerizing.

It was evening in Soliaridge.

Vance returned to his office. As he pushed open the door, he was greeted by a cascade of flower petals from above.

Surveying the room, he noticed it had been adorned with balloons and bouquets.

“Happy birthday!” Catherine’s voice, soft yet vibrant, rang out as she, Aiden, and Lucas emerged from their hiding spots.

That was when he remembered it was his birthday. For the past five years, he had always forgotten his birthday. It had always been Rebecca reminding him.

The thought of that name caused him to frown, and he swiftly pushed it out of his mind.

Catherine's smiling face loomed large before him, and he chuckled, "How did you guys know it's my birthday? And going to such elaborate lengths?"

"I might not have remembered, but Cathy certainly did," Aiden replied.

"Without her, we wouldn't have thought of something this sentimental," Lucas said, winking at Catherine.

"I've already reserved a restaurant. Just waiting for you to get out of work," Catherine said playfully. "Allow me to treat you to a birthday dinner?"

"No way," Vance laughed. "It's my treat."

Catherine's eyes crinkled with delight. "Then let's go."

"Let me just put this away." Vance placed his bag in the cabinet. "Ready."

The other three left in high spirits, with Vance following. He glanced down at his phone, but there were no messages.

"Vance! Hurry up! What are you doing back there?" Catherine called from ahead.

"Coming." He pocketed the phone and strode to catch up.

The restaurant was located near Catherine's current residence.

"This place is ideal. If we end up drinking too much, we can just head straight to my place to crash," she explained.

"That makes perfect sense," Aiden agreed with a smile. "Whatever you suggest is spot on."

Catherine gave him a sidelong glance and told the waiter about her reservation information.

"Right this way." The waiter escorted them to the private room.

As the door swung open, music filled the air. Flowers and balloons were everywhere. The large LCD screen on the opposite wall was playing a video, displaying photos of him with Catherine, Aiden, and Lucas from their university days.

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The three-minute video played to the old song-Friends, which encapsulated their youthful years.

In the latter segment, Catherine took the lead in singing, “Friends walk through life together. Those days are gone forever. One word, a lifetime, one sentiment, one toast...”

Aiden and Lucas sang along with tears glistening in their eyes.

“Vance, happy birthday! May our friendship last forever!” Catherine exclaimed, wheeling out a cake.

The inscription read: [To our dearest Vance-Happy Birthday! From your ride-or-die friends!]

The rims of Vance’s eyes reddened. “Thank you... Thank you all.”

“Thank Cathy. It was all her idea. And she baked the cake herself.” Aiden pushed Catherine forward. ” Now it’s evident who truly cares and who doesn’t.”

“I hope that even when we’re old and gray, our bond remains as strong as ever.” Catherine’s outfit that day mirrored the one in the video.

“Yes!” Vance nodded emphatically. “It absolutely will. Thank you, Cathy.”

“Come on, let’s all sit. Time to eat,” Catherine urged. “I’ve been starving all day in anticipation of this feast. Don’t judge me if I indulge a bit too much.”

“No way.” Vance shook his head. “It’s my birthday. Wish me prosperity. Am I so impoverished that I can’t afford a proper meal?”

The group erupted in laughter. Vance glanced at his phone once more. It was 6:20, and still no messages.

“What’s wrong, Vance?” Lucas noticed. “You seem distracted?”

“Oh, nothing. I just need to make a quick call.” Vance excused himself to the restroom, where he dialed

Josette’s number.

In previous years, she had always been the first to remember, calling the day before to ask if he was available. Then she’d invite both Rebecca and him over for a meal.

The two women had always treated his birthday as a major occasion, but now, the line couldn't get through. Only a mechanical voice prompted: "The number you have dialed is powered off."

His mind buzzed with confusion. "What is going on? Why is Josette gone, too?"

"Vance?" Catherine's voice called from outside.

He stowed his phone and hurried back out..

"Check out the dishes we've ordered. Anything you'd like to add?" she asked, handing over the menu.

He waved his hand. "That's fine. It's perfect."

Wine had already been poured, with a glass set before each person.

"Precisely," Aiden chimed in. "We've shared countless meals and drinks. No need for formalities."

"But..." Catherine smiled. "Vance is a CEO now. A rising star and no longer the naïve kid from before."

Vance lifted his glass and drained it in one go. "No matter my status, I'll always be that naïve kid to you guys."

Aiden and Lucas exchanged a glance and chuckled. "To Cathy, maybe, not to us."

Catherine refilled Vance's glass. "Here's to you."

He clinked glasses with her and downed it again.

The rounds went on and on until the three men were all drunk. Vance was the most intoxicated, but

Catherine remained fully lucid.

She attempted to support him. "Vance, let's head home."

Her eyes lingered on the open collar of his shirt, catching a glimpse of his collarbone.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 248

Catherine struggled to lift Vance, who seemed to gain inexplicable weight when he was drunk.

She had barely managed to prop him up when he went limp again, collapsing back down.

“Let me help...” Aiden, mildly inebriated, draped Vance’s arm over his neck and managed to escort him out of the restaurant.

The restaurant was not far from Catherine’s home, so he delivered Vance straight there.

“Vance is in your hands now.” Aiden winked. “Take good care of him. I won’t intrude on your time together.”

“That’s nonsense. Get going.” Catherine shot him a coquettish glare, closing the door.

Vance lay sprawled on the sofa, his shirt now further unbuttoned from the journey. The lean contours of his muscles were revealed.

“Vance?” Catherine called out, approaching.

He furrowed his brows, appearing to rouse slightly.

“We’re home now. How about a shower before bed?” she whispered, moving to undo the remaining buttons on his shirt.

He stirred awake, croaking, “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Catherine,” she replied. “Today is your birthday, remember? We just celebrated it together, singing songs and reminiscing about our old times.”

He opened his eyes, straining to focus on the figure before him. “Cathy?”

“Yes. You’re drunk, and we...”

“Drunk? Birthday?” He shook his head.

“Yes, it’s your birthday,” she replied, finally unfastening all the buttons on his shirt.

Her hand reached toward his belt, just grazing it. He suddenly stood up, swaying unsteadily as he headed out.

“Vance, where are you going?” Catherine hurried after him, clutching his arm.

He shook her off. “Birthday... Josette’s house... dinner...”

Catherine's expression darkened with rage. "Rebecca has already discarded you, and you're still hung up on that woman?"

As if he hadn't registered her words, he kept muttering to himself, "Josette is waiting. Waiting for us."

Swaying precariously, he managed to open the door and stumble out.

Chipte: Sap

"Vance!" Catherine chased after him, attempting another grab, but he shook her off again..

In her slippers, she nearly tumbled to the ground. As he entered the elevator, she clenched her teeth. That damn old hag! Why won't she just drop dead already? Infuriating!"

Her eyes swiveled as an idea struck her. Meanwhile, Vance propped himself against the elevator wall and pressed the button for the first floor.

IN

The doors opened, and a resident entered, noticing the drunk man leaning motionless. "Sir, which floor are you heading to? We're on the first floor now."

Vance jolted awake, thanked him, and stepped out.

The security guard recognized him. He had accompanied Catherine to purchase the property and had visited more than once.

Seeing him emerge in such a drunken state, the guard asked. "Sir, are you heading home?"

"Home..." Vance paused, his mind foggy, before retrieving his phone from his pocket. "Could you call a ride for me?"

He entered the destination: Syliaview. Once done, he told the guard, "I'm going to Grandma's for dinner."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 249

"Oh..." The guard was perplexed.

Why was this man chatting with him? Did intoxication make people more loquacious?

Indeed, Vance seemed unusually talkative at that moment. While waiting for the ride, he confided, "Grandma made a lot of dishes just for me."

"Oh, that's wonderful," the guard responded politely.

"Yes, she loves me the most. I have to get there. Can't keep her waiting."

"Absolutely. It's important to spend time with the elderly."

"When I have some free time, I'm going to take her on a trip-to see the ocean."

"You're very devoted, sir."

"Devoted?" Tears shimmered in Vance's eyes. "Not at all. I'm terrible."

The guard was lost for words. Fortunately, the car arrived just then.

"Sir, your ride is here." He hastened to assist Vance into the vehicle, breathing a sigh of relief.

"Goodbye, and thank you," Vance said from inside the car.

"You're welcome, sir." The guard saluted.

The car departed toward Syliaview. As the night progressed, it eventually halted at Josette's house.

The gate was locked, and he knocked. "Grandma, it's me, Vance! Please open the door. Are you home?"

There was no response, and he pounded harder. "Grandma, it's my birthday. Aren't you preparing a meal for me? Grandma, where have you gone? Are you abandoning me, too?"

Unable to hold himself up any longer, he leaned against the gate and slowly slid to the ground, his eyes closing.

In the enveloping darkness, it seemed as though the sky were filled with twinkling stars. His own grandmother, who had held his hand and raised him with love, smiled amid the starlight.

"Vance, live your life well. Take care of yourself and find true happiness," she whispered. "I'm not truly gone; I've simply moved to a different place. I'll become a star watching over you. Don't cry, silly child."

"Grandma..." he murmured, a tear tracing down his cheek. "Everyone has left me. You're all gone. I understand."

The village chief passed by the house at six in the morning. After a night of rain, the ground was saturated and muddy.

He saw someone leaning against the gate, drenched and seated in a puddle. Initially assuming it was

Soren causing trouble again, he stepped closer and recognized the face.

Vance was asleep, and from the looks of it, he had been there overnight.

The village chief patted him on the shoulder. “Mr. Bradford, wake up.”

Vance roused groggily, his head pounding heavily. The sight of Elton Wilcox’s looming close startled him.

“Mr. Wilcox? I...” He blinked, wondering what was going on.

Elton was bewildered. “Mr. Bradford, why were you sleeping here? Did you forget your keys?”

Vance took in his surroundings, gradually piecing together the events. It was his birthday yesterday, Catherine and the guys had organized a celebration.

He must have overindulged, leading to a blackout, and somehow ended up at Josette’s place.

But he couldn’t admit to being so drunk that he had lost all recollection. “Yes. I thought I’d come by to tidy up her house.”

Elton regarded him skeptically. “But Josette has been away for quite some time now.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 250

“Well...” Vance fidgeted. “T-There is something at the company. I need to head out.”

Any further explanation would only compound the excuses and heighten the embarrassment.

Midway through his departure, he turned back. “Mr. Wilcox.”

Elton smiled politely. “Anything I can help you with?”

“Do you happen to know...” Vance found it difficult to ask about Josette’s whereabouts from an outsider.

But if he didn’t ask, he’d never find out. So, after a moment of hesitation, he went on, “Do you know where she went?”

Elton shook his head regretfully. “I’m afraid not. It’s been a while now. I have no idea where she is, and you...”

He caught him because, apparently, Vance had no idea, too.

“Thank you anyway.” Vance forced a smile, but the unspoken question lingered in his mind.

Rebecca had gone abroad, and Josette had vanished. He didn’t even know where they were and had to ask strangers. How absurd was that?

Following his blackout, he had no clue where his car was, nor could he linger and wait for his driver to pick him up. He was far too unkempt.

He called a ride instead. His previous order had originated from Catherine’s complex to Josette’s house. Judging by the timestamp, he had spent the entire night at that gate.

He rubbed his temples, unable to remember the details.

The restaurant was near Catherine’s residence, so starting the ride from there made sense. Perhaps they had escorted her home.

He felt terrible. His clothes carried the damp residue of evaporated rain. His pants clung soggily and were muddied. He needed to get home for a shower and a change of attire.

The ride arrived. As he opened the door to enter, the driver shot him a disdainful stare.

Vance looked down at his mud-encrusted pants. They were understandably off-putting.

“Sorry about that. I’ll compensate you for the cleaning,” he said, eager to head home as soon as possible.

“Get in,” grumbled the driver at last.

“Thank you.” Vance checked his phone, finding that the battery was low. “I’ll pay you now. My phone is dying.”

“That’ll be \$50,” the driver stated, “for the interior cleaning.”

Vance let out a wry chuckle. At that moment, money seemed to feel insignificant.

Vance transferred 10,000 dollars, which spooked the driver. “Buddy, are you alright? Going through some rough patch?”

His suspicion was reasonable, given the strong smell of alcohol and the dirty clothes. He seriously wondered if Vance had injured his head from a fall and couldn’t think straight.

Vance apologized, “Sorry for the trouble.”

The driver freaked out. “It’s fine, man, and you don’t need to give so much. You’re scaring me, man.”

Vance looked out the window as familiar scenery flashed by. He had traveled this road dozens of times over the past five years.

A bitter smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Yesterday was my birthday. I wanted to hear best wishes. Can you do it for me?”

The driver froze. “Happy birthday, man!”

A simple best wish in exchange for 10,000 dollars? That was crazy.

He probed, “Your girlfriend didn’t break up with you, did she?”

Vance shook his head. “No. My wife is just sulking and out having some fun. But she’ll come back.”

“Buddy, when your wife is mad, it’s automatically your fault. End of story.” The driver nodded in understanding. “Even if you’re right. Don’t you think so? You married her to bring her joy, not frustration. If she is upset, you must have screwed up somewhere.” 43