

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 251

Vance was stunned.

“Look. A woman’s heart is the softest, kindest thing there is. Treat her right and mean it, and she’ll feel it. Just get home, apologize, and own the whole mess, whether you’re right or wrong. Quit reaching for the bottle every time things get rough. Drinking only makes her madder, right? Call her the second you get home. Ask where she is and if she has enough money. Pick her up when she lands and live happily ever after. Sound good?” the driver said, grinning.

He paused, then continued, “Don’t mind me running my mouth. I can tell you’re a decent guy who usually treats his wife right. Rich or broke, taking care of her is what matters. I drive for a living and make peanuts compared to you, but I keep my wife right here in the palm of my hand, making her happy every day. Just call your wife, say good morning, and tell her you’ve been thinking about her all night. Make it sweet.”

Vance smiled faintly but didn’t move.

“What, shy?” the driver teased.

Vance held up his phone. “The battery’s almost dead.”

“Uh, just remember my words,” the driver said.

Vance stared at the screen. The phone hadn’t buzzed all night and now showed only a sliver of power.

It was 7 a.m., and he automatically calculated the time difference before the screen went black for good.

Arriving at the destination, the driver reminded him one last time, “Go on and apologize to her properly, okay? Don’t take offense. I’m just looking out for you.”

Vance waved goodbye with a smile and headed inside.

The first thing he did was plug in his phone, then he stripped for a shower. As he pulled off his shirt, he spotted a fresh fingernail scratch across his chest.

He frowned, finished washing quickly, and grabbed his phone to call Catherine.

“I’m sorry, Cathy. Yesterday, I...” he started. 2

“No worries,” she cut in brightly. “It’s only right for you to visit Rebecca’s grandmother. I’m not an unreasonable person. I was just worried something might happen to you when you were drunk like that. Thankfully, everything is fine.”

“I was afraid I might have done something inappropriate,” he said, carefully choosing his words.

“No way. I just didn’t have my slippers on right. It wasn’t you pushing me. Don’t worry about it,” she explained.

He let out a quiet breath of relief.

Thankfully, nothing had happened between them. Maybe it was only a branch scratch from the countryside.

“How are you feeling? Any sickness?” she asked with concern.

“I’m fine. I’ll head to the office soon,” he answered, lying down.

She chatted about nothing important for a while before hanging up. Only then did he notice the driver hadn’t accepted the money.

He had sent it through the app, but it bounced back. The guy’s name was Mike Peterson.

Vance texted: [Mike, accept the payment.]

Mike sent a voice note: “It’s fine, man.”

Vance insisted, “Come on, Mike. Your advice today was gold. Consider it tuition.”

Mike laughed. “Nah, regular folks don’t charge for that. We just crossed paths; that’s fate. Oh, and happy birthday.”

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Mike never accepted the payment.

Vance stayed in bed instead of going to the office. He lazily scrolled through Mike’s posts, finding they were all simple slices of real life: what his wife cooked, the kids’ latest mischief, the dog tearing up the house, or quiet days off when he showed off his home cooking.

The plain, warm snapshots hit Vance harder than he expected. Every photo was full of genuine smiles that lit up their faces.

He couldn't help commenting on the latest cooking picture: [Looks amazing, man. Bet it tastes even better.]

He went on to browse other posts until a notification popped up.

Mike replied: [Swing by when you're free.]

Vance chuckled and shook his head. No chance. How could he just show up at a random Uber driver's place?

Still in his pajamas, he slid lower against the headboard until he was half-reclined, then fully lazy. For the first time in years, he had zero urge to move.

On the wall hung their wedding photo, taken by the wedding photographer. It reminded him that Rebecca had begged for a proper wedding portrait session. She had mentioned it several times, but he had always brushed her off.

Eventually, she stopped asking at all, and he forgot all about it. She had simply picked one of the wedding shots, enlarged it, and hung it there.

She had waited eagerly for him to come home, pulled him over, and asked if the spot and the picture looked good. He had given a couple of half-hearted replies and headed straight into the shower.

Even seeing the light fade from her eyes didn't make him stop.

His head grew heavier. He set the phone down, realizing he had never truly relaxed in his life.

From childhood on, he had always been tense and busy, never just lying there doing nothing. Now on vacation, he decided to give himself one full day off, then drifted into a deep sleep.

He woke hours later to total darkness, disoriented and freezing. For a moment, he didn't know where he was or what time it was.

His head throbbed, and his body felt locked in ice.

But it was summer. Something wasn't right.

He fumbled for the blanket, his throat burning. When he tried to sit up to get some water, dizziness and splitting pain slammed him back down.

He dimly realized he was sick. His mind was foggy and slow.

Instinctively, he reached for his still-charging phone, unplugged it, and called Rebecca.

An automated voice answered: “The number you have dialed is powered off.”

His anger flared, but then he remembered she was abroad and he didn’t have her foreign number. He switched to a WhatsApp voice call.

Rebecca saw the call just as she was heading to lunch with Lauren. She ignored it, but he kept calling, over and over.

When Lauren noticed, Rebecca said, “Excuse me, I have to take this. You head over first.”

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Lauren nodded and walked away.

Rebecca turned around and answered the call. “What the hell do you want?”

Vance’s voice came through hoarse and thick. “Rebecca... Rebecca...”

“If you have something to say, say it.”

“I feel awful. I’m miserable...” he murmured, his voice unclear.

“If there’s nothing else, I’m hanging up. Your misery has nothing to do with me.”

“Don’t. I’m really sick.”

She almost laughed. “You’re sick, and you’re calling me instead of a doctor? Are you serious?”

“I want water. My head is killing me. I can’t get up.”

It was like talking to a brick wall. Nothing she said registered, but one thing was clear: he was delirious and suddenly remembered he had a wife.

“You want someone to take care of you, right?”

“I feel terrible...”

“Then call Cathy. She knows the house code. Let her play nurse.”

“Cathy? No, I can’t bother her.”

Rebecca hung up, irritated.

Even from across the ocean, he managed to piss her off. In his mind, Cathy was the untouchable princess, and she was just the live-in help? Screw that.

“Rebecca.” Desmond came up, noticing her expression. “Anything wrong?”

“Nothing,” she replied, shaking her head. “Let’s go eat.”

“Eating is everything,” Desmond grinned.

Rebecca chuckled, her mood lightened by his subtle encouragement. He was right-before food, everything could wait.

She was far away in the open world. No way was she letting old garbage drag her down.

Vance kept talking until the line went dead. He closed his eyes, phone still in hand, and slipped back into sleep.

The doorbell woke him. He pulled the covers over his head and ignored it. When it finally stopped, he tried to sleep again, but Nancy came up the stairs.

Nancy had been discharged but was limping due to her sprained ankle. Her arm was in a cast and slung across her chest. Her daughter, Cecilia Blanchard, had come along.

After leaving the countryside, Nancy had changed Cecilia’s last name to hers, hoping the girl would always live in sunshine.

She had come to pack her things. With Rebecca gone, the household no longer needed her.

She rang the bell, but no one was answering. Figuring the house was empty, she decided to go in and pack, then let Vance know through a call or a note.

The moment she stepped inside, though, she sensed someone was home.

“Mr. Bradford?” she called out.

A muffled response came from the bedroom. Surprised, she told Cecilia to sit quietly on the sofa, then limped over.

“Sir, I just came to grab a few things, and then I’ll be on my way,” she started, carefully choosing her words. “Thank you and Mrs. Bradford for your kindness these past five years.”

Vance didn't answer, which was definitely not normal. Usually, he would come out and talk to her.

"Sir, are you all right?" she probed.

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A hoarse voice finally answered. "Not really,"

Nancy frowned, wondering if Vance was sick.

"May I come in?"

"Mmm..."

Inside, she was surprised to find him still in bed.

"Sir, are you unwell?"

"Water..."

He hadn't had any water since he came back. Now his throat was burning like fire.

"Okay, hold on."

She had Cecilia get some water, took the glass, and reminded Cecilia not to touch anything before limping back into the bedroom.

Vance struggled to get up. The water went down his sore throat, causing him immense pain.

Nancy noticed his flushed face and knew from experience it was a fever. She grabbed the thermometer, and it showed 103.1 degrees.

After he lay back down, she spoke gently. "Sir, that's a high fever. You should go to the hospital."

He shook his head, refusing every suggestion-even a clinic visit.

Worried, Nancy dug through the medicine cabinet. She had raised Cecilia and cared for Rebecca for five years, so she knew the basics and found the right pills.

Through the haze, Vance managed, "Have Rebecca sleep in the guest room tonight so she doesn't catch it."

Nancy said nothing, feeling little sympathy.

Even though it was Vance who hired her, Nancy had stayed by Rebecca's side for five years and understood her pain.

Still, Vance had always been fair to her, and right now, she was still the housekeeper. She couldn't walk away and leave him behind just like that.

She started tidying the room with one hand, limping around. His clothes were streaked with mud. She had no idea how he had gotten so filthy or how long the stains had been there. By now, they had dried into a stiff, stubborn crust,

She remembered the heavy rain two nights ago and figured he had been caught in it. But where would he have gone to get that filthy?

The clothes clearly needed professional cleaning, and she put them in a bag. Noticing the fridge was empty, she headed to the store with Cecilia for groceries and dropped off the clothes at a laundromat.

40 minutes later, they returned to the apartment. Nancy cooked something light while Cecilia helped cheerfully.

When the food was ready, she checked on him again. Vance's bloodshot eyes were clearer now; the fever had subsided.

"Sir, the meal is ready," she whispered.

He had no appetite; even swallowing hurt. Sobering up a little, he asked in a hoarse voice, "Why are you here?"

She explained she had come to pack.

He blinked. "Pack? Where are you going?"

"I-I'm looking for another job."

He frowned. "Aren't you taking care of Rebecca anymore? Is the pay too low? Want a raise?"

"No, not like that," she replied, quickly shaking her head.

She couldn't bring herself to say the real reason: Rebecca wasn't coming back.

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Nancy couldn't reveal the truth.

"Then stay on," Vance said firmly. "Ask for whatever you need. You've done a wonderful job and deserve a raise."

"But..."

"She's only gone for a month."

He had checked the troupe's European tour and confirmed the duration. Nancy stayed quiet, knowing better.

"Shall I bring the food in, or would you rather come to the table?" she asked, deciding to stay another month until the divorce was final.

She couldn't spill the beans now and risk ruining Rebecca's plans.

Vance couldn't eat in bed. Though he wasn't hungry, he wasn't the kind of man to indulge his whims.

"I'll eat in the dining room," he said.

"Understood," she replied, heading out to the dining room, where Cecilia had already set the table.

Vance came out and noticed the extra person.

Nancy pulled Cecilia close to her and urged, "Say hello to Mr. Bradford."

"Hello, Mr. Bradford," Cecilia said shyly, knowing her spot at the elite school was thanks to him.

"I'm sorry for the trouble," Nancy said. "I planned to pack and leave today, so I brought Cecilia to help."

Vance brushed it off, sitting down.

"It's summer break, right?"

"Yes."

“You don’t have anywhere to stay?”

“We do.”

The truth was, for the past five years, Cecilia had been in school boarding during every winter and summer break.

Now Nancy had decided to stop boarding and rent a place instead. She figured that if she was going to move out of this place, she might as well rent somewhere decent and spend some quality time with her daughter.

Cecilia had just come back from a summer camp, and Nancy planned to rent a place in the next few days.

“Where?” Vance asked. “Renting? The rent near her school is insane. Your whole paycheck would disappear.”

She started to explain it was not her aim, but he continued, “Just let her stay here and sleep with you. It won’t bother us. She boards during the school year anyway, and summer renting is a hassle for nothing.”

“You’re right, sir. Thank you,” she agreed.

It made sense, and she didn’t want to leave Cecilia alone.

Vance only ate a little, struggling with the discomfort of swallowing. It hurt too much to eat properly.

After he set down his fork and knife, he was still too tired to do anything. He simply returned to the bedroom to rest.

The illness had taken a toll on him. He had never been so sick before.

Grabbing his phone from the bedside table, he glanced at the numerous missed calls from the office, clients, and Catherine.

The WhatsApp notifications were nearly overflowing. As he went through them, one conversation caught his eye. He opened it and saw a list of missed voice calls.

One had a duration, meaning she had answered at some point, but he couldn’t remember what he had said to her.

There was also a draft he had been editing-something he had typed out in a foggy, feverish state. He stared at the words on the screen for a long time before finally deleting them one by one.

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The illness came crashing down like a mountain.

Vance thought the medicine had fixed him, but the moment he lay down, the fever roared back that evening. It rose and fell for three straight days. Only on the fourth day did it finally stay down.

He had lost a lot of weight and looked hollowed out, with zero energy. The office was out of the question.

Catherine, Aiden, and the others kept messaging in the group or private chat, asking where he had gone. He didn't want them to worry, so he simply said he was resting at home and handling a few things.

On the fifth day, he received a call from the couture studio.

"Mr. Bradford? The custom autumn collection Mrs. Bradford ordered months ago is ready. When would it be convenient for delivery or shipping? We just need to check if any alterations are required."

Vance's wardrobe had always been Rebecca's domain. He knew the clothes came mostly from private couture plus some ready-to-wear lines, but he had never handled the details. He just paid.

The staff member added, "Mrs. Bradford's phone has been unreachable, and we couldn't get her on WhatsApp. She left your number on file, so we had to call. Sorry to bother you."

"Men's or women's?"

"Both. She ordered them at the start of the year, they just finished."

He checked the time, knowing it was night in Europe. Rebecca was supposed to be asleep.

After lying in bed for four days, he was eager to stretch his muscles.

"I'll come by now."

"Great. I'll text the address."

"Okay."

40 minutes later, he walked into the studio. The staff member laid out seven or eight sets-all for him. Rebecca had ordered only one piece for herself.

“Mrs. Bradford always orders mostly for you,” the staff member explained. “She rarely gets anything for herself.”

Vance nodded and tried the garments on,

“Why didn’t you have me try them before?”

“Mrs. Bradford said you were always busy, so we delivered everything to the house. She would have your try them at home and let us know what needed fixing. This time we couldn’t reach her, so we didn’t want to drop them off unannounced.”

The staff member helped him into the jacket.

“It fits perfectly. Actually, Mrs. Bradford never needed alterations. She knows your measurements so well that it comes out right the first time.”

Vance froze, remembering the handful of times a year Rebecca had asked him to try on clothes. He had never once done it, always saying that they were fine and that he was busy.

He couldn’t admit to the staff member that he had never tried anything on. Yet somehow, every piece had fit perfectly anyway.

“Anything not to your liking, sir?” the staff member asked.

He turned left and right. “No, it’s great.”

“There are a few more sets,” the staff member said, ready to show him the rest.

“Just pack them up. I’ll take them home.” He slipped off the jacket, but the sleeve caught on his cufflink.

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“Let me help,” the staff member said quickly.

Once the jacket was off, Vance noticed the sapphire cufflinks. They were flawless and beautifully cut.

“These are quite something,” he said.

The staff member smiled. “Mrs. Bradford has wonderful taste. We actually wanted to license her cufflink designs, but she turned us down.”

Vance blinked. “What? Her designs?”

“Yes. Every pair you own was designed by Mrs. Bradford,” the staff member confirmed. “The sapphires match this shirt. There are two more sets with pink-purple and yellow diamonds. A customer once tried to buy the yellow pair; no chance. They were made for you. Mrs. Bradford named this set Magnolia Star River.”

Vance studied it and suddenly understood the name.

Most of his cufflinks were crafted from platinum, adorned with gemstones and diamonds, but this one was different. It featured a yellow diamond set in gold.

He recognized the craftsmanship. It was called filigree, a technique he had become familiar with recently when Catherine developed an obsession with ancient gold jewelry.

The intricate filigree work shaped the gold into a delicate five-petaled flower, encasing the golden diamond with exquisite precision. Even the back of the cufflink was adorned with a small string of tiny osmanthus flowers, adding to its charm and artistry.

“By the way,” the staff member added, “Mrs. Bradford’s cocktail dress was designed to match. Take a look.”

The single dress she had ordered was magnolia yellow, covered in hand-stitched blossoms, each center a tiny diamond. It sparkled beautifully.

“This cocktail dress is perfect for Halloween.”

“Pack everything.”

“Sure.”

An odd discomfort settled in his chest. Once the bags were ready, the studio owner walked in.

Derek Sinclair was also a designer. Without looking around, he asked, “Is Rebecca here?”

Spotting Vance, he asked, “Who is this gentleman?”

The staff member explained quickly, “This is Mr. Bradford, here to collect the clothes.”

Derek nodded and disappeared into the back room.

Vance found the man rude and arrogant. His clothes were clothes, and his hair was wild. Vance couldn't understand why Rebecca chose to work with a man like that.

The staff member smiled apologetically. "Mr. Sinclair gets lost in his designs. When inspiration strikes, he dives straight in so he doesn't lose the idea."

Vance scoffed, dissatisfied with the explanation. Without another word, he grabbed the bags and walked out, swearing never to come again or order anything from them.

He tossed the bags into the car and headed home.

Cecilia was alone in the apartment. This was her fifth day there. She had gone from nervous to quietly comfortable, always polite and staying out of the way. Except for helping with meals or cleaning, she kept to Nancy's room, doing homework or reading.

At that moment, she was absorbed in her book when she heard the front door open.

Assuming it was Nancy, who had returned from picking up the cleaned clothes, Cecilia walked out to greet her.

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Instead, Cecilia faced a woman she had never seen before.

Catherine swept in, calling out sweetly, "Vance? Are you home?"

It had been days since they last met, and he had turned down their repeated invitations. That prompted her to show up unannounced.

But instead of Vance, she found a skinny girl.

"Who are you?" Catherine asked, surprised. She didn't remember any kids around Vance, assuming it was one of Rebecca's relatives.

"I'm Cecilia," the girl answered politely, though her first instinct was dislike. "May I ask who you are?"

"Cecilia? What are you to Vance?" Catherine dropped onto the sofa.

"I'm the housekeeper's daughter," Cecilia replied. "Are you here to see Mr. Bradford?"

"The housekeeper?" Catherine muttered. "Nancy?"

“Yes.” Cecilia nodded.

Catherine remembered how the housekeeper had cursed her out before. Nancy and Rebecca were two of a kind.

“The housekeeper’s kid living in the master’s place?” she sneered. “Have you no shame?”

Cecilia’s face burned. “Mr. Bradford said I could stay.”

Catherine snorted, ordering, “Get me a glass of water.”

Cecilia hesitated, then obediently poured a glass and offered it with both hands.

Catherine clicked her tongue. “No manners at all. Plain water for a guest? You’re embarrassing the host.”

“There is tea.” Cecilia quickly switched, but Catherine slapped the cup away.

Boiling water splashed across Cecilia’s thin summer shirt, scalding her chest. She bit her lip hard, fighting back tears.

“Oops, my bad,” Catherine said with a fake smile. “But you didn’t hold the cup steady. Do you know how much this tea costs per pound?”

She leaned in close and whispered, “Didn’t your mom tell you everything in this place is worth more than your life? One cup of that six-figure tea equals her whole monthly paycheck.”

Tears welled up in Cecilia’s eyes, and panic rose in her. She stood frozen, unsure of what to do.

“Forget it. I’ll put in a good word for you.” Catherine sat back on the sofa, laughing. “But how are you going to thank me? Come give me a foot massage.” 4

She propped a foot on the coffee table. Cecilia stared, still unsure who this woman was or why she seemed to hate her.

“Not coming?” Catherine sneered. “Think about it. How do you think I got in without a key?”

Cecilia knew it had to be the code or fingerprint. Only household members had those. Up until now, she didn’t know the password. Nancy had never told her or registered her fingerprint.

“Figured it out yet?” Catherine pressed on. “You see, just one word from me, and you and your mother will be gone.”

Cecilia hesitated, a mix of fear and hurt knotting inside her. Meanwhile, the burn on her chest throbbed unbearably.

“Still not coming over?” Catherine stood up, yanking the girl by the hair and dragging her close. &

She forced Cecilia’s head down toward her feet, hissing, “Feel honored to serve me. Do it! Or I’ll have both you and your mother thrown out. And you won’t attend that fancy school again. Do you really deserve it? Know your distance. You people belong in the dirt back in the countryside.”

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Terror finally hit Cecilia full force.

She couldn’t go back to the countryside; her father would kill them both. She wanted to study, get a good job, and take care of her mother.

She knelt and began massaging Catherine’s feet. But she had never done it before, nor did she know how.

The ache in her chest pulsed painfully, and fear overcame her. She clenched her jaw in a desperate attempt to stop crying, yet the tears kept spilling, some falling onto Catherine’s feet.

Without warning, Catherine kicked her hard-right on the burned skin.

Cecilia cried out in pain.

“Your filthy tears got on my foot!” Catherine shrieked. “You little hussy! You and your mom are both worthless!”

Cecilia curled on the floor, clutching her chest, too afraid to make another sound.

“Stop pretending and get back over here!” Catherine shouted.

Just as Cecilia tried to stand, the front door opened. Nancy had returned, and the scene in the room struck her dumb.

Afraid her mother would worry, Cecilia quickly got up and forced a smile. “Mom.”

“What happened, Cecilia?” Nancy asked with concern.

She had never thought highly of Catherine, but with Rebecca gone, she couldn’t overstep the mark and confront that woman.

Cecilia caught Catherine’s glare and shivered. “I’m fine. I just tripped.”

“Tripped?” Nancy had already noticed the wet shirt and red skin around Cecilia’s collarbone. “What happened here?”

“Nothing, Mom.” Cecilia backed away, covering her chest.

Catherine burst out laughing. “Why don’t you tell her the truth? Go on.”

Nancy instantly caught on that Catherine had hurt her daughter. Her heart ached with worry and anger. ” What’s going on? Tell me!”

Cecilia shed tears, momentarily lost for words,

Catherine casually rested his feet on the coffee table. “She was getting me water and spilled it. How useless! She ended up burning herself. That’s all.”

Nancy checked Cecilia’s injury, her heart breaking at the sight. The skin on Cecilia’s chest was raw and peeling.

She gathered Cecilia in her arms and hurried to apply ointment. “I’m sorry I’m late. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

She picked up the girl and headed toward the door.

Catherine taunted, “You call yourself a servant? A proper one would greet the guests. A guard dog is better than you.”

Nancy shot Catherine a glare but said nothing. Just as she reached for the doorknob, the door swung open from the outside.

Vance had come back.

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As soon as Nancy saw Vance, her tears began to flow uncontrollably,

Vance looked around the room, unsure of what was happening. “Cathy? What are you doing here?”

Catherine quickly pulled her feet back from the coffee table, then called out with a sweet, whiny voice, “It’s been so many days since I last saw you. I’ve missed you so much. Everyone’s been missing you. You’ve been ignoring me, so I had to come see you myself.”

She flung her arms wide and rushed toward him like a bird.

Vance watched her with a gentle smile. “Didn’t I tell you? I’ve been busy with certain things lately.”

“You’ve just forgotten about us!” She pouted and acted playfully, then noticed the large bags of clothes he was holding. “Wow, so many clothes!”

Vance nodded, walking into the room and setting the bags down. Nancy quietly slipped out, and the sound made him pause.

He called out, “Nancy?”

Catherine pulled him back. “It’s just a servant. She can leave if she wants. That’s just rude. Remember, you’re the master here.”

Vance shook his head. “It’s not like the old times. Nancy is just someone I hired.”

“Well, you pay her to serve you, so she’s a servant,” she said, rummaging through the clothes.

Vance dialed Nancy’s number.

“Sir,” Nancy answered, on her way to the hospital.

“Nancy, where are you going? Why did you leave without a word?” he asked.

Catherine paused, perking up her ears.

Nancy’s voice cracked. “Sir, I had planned to tell you tomorrow, but since you’re asking... Your health has improved, so Cecilia and I are leaving today. Thank you and Mrs. Bradford for everything these past five years.”

Vance was confused. “But we agreed you’d continue working. Why are you leaving so suddenly?”

Nancy couldn’t hold back her tears. “I’ve saved a little money. After much thought, I’ve decided not to continue as a housekeeper. I want to open a small shop and do a little business of my own.”

“I see.” Vance nodded. “It’s just sudden.”

People had their own aspirations, and he wasn’t the type to force anyone. If Nancy had a better plan for her life, he’d support her decision.

“Actually, I had planned to leave earlier, Sir. I just waited until you were better. I didn’t want to leave you without help while you were unwell.”

“Well, alright then,” Vance sighed. “If you ever need any help with your business, don’t hesitate to reach out.”

“Thank you, sir,” Nancy replied. “But I’ll be running a small business. It won’t compare to yours.”

She glanced at Cecilia, who was clinging to her, clearly full of questions. Afraid that she couldn’t stifle a cry, she quickly ended the call.

Cecilia looked at her with confusion. “Mom, why didn’t you tell him that woman burned me?”

Nancy hesitated, wanting to explain but holding back. Even Rebecca couldn’t stand up to Catherine, let alone the two of them. At most, Vance would settle it by giving them some money. ¹

But she didn’t want to burden Cecilia with such a harsh truth. She just pressed a gentle kiss to Cecilia’s forehead. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

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That was the weakest excuse Nancy could have given.

Bonus

As Vance pocketed his phone, Catherine asked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Nancy just quit,” Vance replied.

Catherine heaved a sigh of relief. But even if Nancy had spilled everything, so what?

Since she dared to do that, Catherine wasn’t afraid of the consequences. Even Rebecca couldn’t compete with her, let alone Nancy.

She had nearly gotten Rebecca killed, and Vance had still taken her side. The thought made her beam as she yanked the dress out of the garment bag.

“Wow, this dress is gorgeous! Is it for me?” she gasped.

Vance glanced over. “That is Rebecca’s.”

“Rebecca?” Catherine’s eyes swiveled. “Perfect. I’ve got a charity gala coming up. Aiden and Lucas are taking me. I don’t have anything to wear. Can I borrow this one?”

Vance hesitated. “It’s Rebecca’s size. You might not even fit. I’ll take you shopping instead. This is just a local designer’s studio. Why not grab something from Dior or Chanel?”

“No way.” Catherine held the dress up against herself, turning this way and that. “You have no idea how popular Derek Sinclair is right now. He studied in the U.K., worked for all those big companies, then came home and opened his own couture studio. It’s blowing up overseas. Tons of celebrities wear his stuff on the red carpet, and even they can’t always get an appointment.”

“Really?” Vance hadn’t paid attention to fashion since Rebecca took over his wardrobe five years ago.

“Yes. Please, let me just try it on. If it fits, let me have it, okay?” she said.

Before he could answer, she snatched the dress and disappeared into the guest bathroom.

But when he came out, she wasn’t happy. The dress was too small for her. The side zipper still had two inches left to go.

“What do I do?” she whined. “I really want a dress designed by Derek Sinclair.”

“Then let’s have one made for you,” he said.

Her eyes lit up. “Right now?”

Vance sensed the eagerness in her voice and smiled. “Right now.”

He called the studio staff member, and the latter answered, “Mr. Bradford, hello. Is there a problem with the clothes?”

“No. I’d like to order another dress.”

“Sure.”

“Can I come in right now for measurements?”

“Absolutely. Bring Mrs. Bradford with you.”

Vance didn’t think much of it. He grabbed Catherine and headed over.

But the moment they walked into the studio, the staff member hesitated. “Isn’t this for Mrs. Bradford?”

“No, it’s for my friend. She loves Mr. Sinclair’s work and wants to order something too,” Vance explained.

The staff member gave him a polite yet forced smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Bradford, but we only take orders from established clients.”

Vance’s brow furrowed. “Aren’t I an established client? I just picked up a whole collection. I’m literally wearing one of your pieces right now.”

The staff member maintained her professional smile. “I’m sorry, but our established client is Mrs.

Bradford.”

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“Rebecca? Are you kidding me?” Catherine exploded. “What money does she have to buy your clothes? Do you even know who’s behind her? It’s Mr. Bradford. Without him, she’s nothing!”

The staff member was unfazed. “Of course, we know she is Mr. Bradford’s wife.”

Catherine held her chin high. “Then why won’t you let him order? Do you know who he is? The youngest and most successful CEO of a publicly listed company in Soliaridge. If he wanted, he could buy this entire studio.”

The staff member nodded politely. “We know.”

“Then why are you acting like this? You don’t want the business?” Catherine’s voice grew louder and more arrogant.

The staff member glanced between the pair. “We know exactly who Mr. Bradford is, and we also know Mrs. Bradford is his wife. But may I know who you are?”

“I...” Catherine’s smug smile froze. Her voice dropped. “I’m his friend.”

The staff member gave a small smile, saying nothing more. The message was clear: no dress for her.

“You said you only do established clients,” Catherine protested. “I’m Mr. Bradford’s friend. That makes me an established client by association, right?”

“Sorry, Miss,” the staff member said firmly. “But we define ‘established client’.”

“You’re just tailors. What’s so great about that?” Catherine barked. “Look, everything in this whole store isn’t even worth...”

Vance intervened, stepping in front of her. “Cathy, let me handle this.”

He turned to the staff member. “Every established client starts as a new one. If an established client brings a friend, that friend becomes established too, doesn’t it?”

“We do accept referrals from established clients,” the staff member replied.

Vance smiled. “Then...”

“I’m sorry,” the staff member said gently but firmly. “If Mrs. Bradford brought a friend, we would accept. But I’m afraid we cannot accept a friend of yours, Mr. Bradford.”

“What the hell?” Catherine ranted. “His reputation doesn’t count as much as hers? Go ask anyone on the street in Soliaridge. They’ve never even heard of Rebecca. You people have it completely backward. She’s just an unemployed housewife. What influence does she have? You’re all blind!”

Just then, a lazy voice drifted down from the spiral staircase. “What’s all the noise about?”

A man dressed in eccentric but obviously high-fashion clothes came down, a stud earring glinting in one ear. His expression was one of pure arrogance.

“That’s Derek Sinclair,” Catherine whispered to Vance. “The studio and the brand are both named after him.”

The staff member quickly explained what had happened.

“Mr. Bradford?” Derek glanced over and nodded. “I remember. You were just here.”

Vance extended his hand. “Mr. Sinclair, nice to meet you.”

Derek barely glanced at it, heading straight to the coffee machine.

Catherine lost it again. “What kind of attitude is that?”

Vance quickly stopped her from rambling on. He tried to explain, “Mr. Sinclair, we...”

“Mr. Bradford,” Derek cut in, “my attitude is not the problem. If you think it is, that’s your problem. You shouldn’t have walked in here.”

Vance had enjoyed smooth sailing for years and had never been treated like that. Anger flared inside him, but on second thought, Catherine wanted a dress from the store badly.

Swallowing it, he forced a polite smile. “The young lady is a bit impulsive and speaks her mind. Please don’t take it to heart. We’ve long admired your work and sincerely hoped you might design a gown for her.

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“Young lady? Impulsive?” Derek snorted.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Is there a problem with my age?” Catherine seized on what she thought was a mistake and raised her voice.

Derek’s smile was contemptuous. “Age is a plus in my eyes. Beauty that comes with time is every bit as powerful as youthful freshness. I can make a 90-year-old look elegantly stunning.”

He paused and added, “Mr. Bradford, why don’t you take your ‘young lady’ home? Before I start to get rude.” 1

His tone was already quite impolite, his attitude seriously bruising Vance’s pride.

Catherine tugged at Vance’s sleeve, and he forced himself to keep calm. “Perhaps I phrased it poorly. But whether someone is an established client or new, everyone has a first time, right? Rebecca started as a new client, too.”

“That’s true.” Derek nodded. “We do take new clients, but there is a threshold.”

“What kind?” Undaunted, Catherine stepped out from behind Vance, her chin held high.

She believed money talked in every scenario. And money was the one thing Vance never ran out of.

Derek’s eyes curved with mocking amusement. “Our threshold is very simple: whether we like the look of you.”

He picked up his coffee and laughed all the way back upstairs.

Catherine yelled after him, “What do you mean by that?”

The staff member blocked the spiral staircase. “Dear guests, Mr. Sinclair means every word he said. We don’t like the look of you.”

“What the hell?” Catherine screamed, itching to smash the store.

Vance grabbed her arm and dragged her out.

“Vance!” she protested, then noticed his tight expression. Her voice softened, and she looked pained. ” I’m sorry for dragging you into this. I never should have asked for that dress.”

He shook his head. “It’s not your fault.”

“I should have ripped into him,” she said tearfully. “I shouldn’t have let you shield me from everything. I should be the one fighting for you.”

His face softened. “You were fierce enough.”

She paused, unsure whether that was a compliment or an insult. She quickly added, “I should have been fiercer. No one is allowed to disrespect you like that.”

“It’s fine. Let’s go. I’ll take you home,” he said, getting into the car.

Catherine didn’t dare push it, unsure how he really felt about the event. On the way home, she kept quiet.

Vance drove her home and had lunch with her before heading back.

When he got home, it was already two in the afternoon. The clothes were still lying on the sofa.

He calculated the time difference. It was morning in Europe, but he had no idea if Rebecca was awake yet. After much thought, he took photos of the clothes and sent them to her.

Vance: [These need to be signed for. They called me to confirm the revisions. How should I reply?]

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Chapter 264

Rebecca woke up early every day.

When Vance's message arrived, she was already up and on her way to rehabilitation.

This matter was serious. No matter what was happening between them, she wouldn't let the studio suffer.

She assumed the clothes had been delivered for her to try on and approve, so she replied: [I'll take care of it.]

Scrolling down, she noticed the staff member had messaged her earlier, but the chat had been buried at the bottom of her list. She had been too busy to check.

She quickly typed back: [Sorry, I've been out of the country and missed your messages. The clothes are fine. I'll sign for them. Just charge the account.]

The studio used a membership system, and she had prepaid a large amount.

Then she saw the typing indicator appear. The staff member seemed to be editing a long message. Maybe the balance was low, or they had new designs to discuss.

After a long wait, all she got was one word: [Okay.]

Another message followed: [Mrs. Bradford, may I ask if you're on vacation abroad?]

Rebecca hesitated, then told the truth: [I'm on tour with my former teacher.]

The staff member: [Really? That's wonderful!]

Rebecca remembered she had also ordered winter pieces for Vance that were no longer necessary. She asked if the winter collection had started and, if not, whether she could cancel.

The staff member: [Not started yet. Cancellation is no problem.]

Then the typing indicator appeared again and stayed.

Rebecca: [Is something wrong? If it goes against studio policy, then forget it.]

She could send off the pieces as gifts. The staff members had always been kind, but Derek wasn't an easy person to deal with. She didn't want to cause trouble for them.

The reply came fast: [No, no problem at all. By the way, do you remember the cufflinks you designed? We still have a few pairs left. A customer is very interested and would love to buy them. Are you sure you don't want to sell?]

Rebecca realized what was going on. She typed back without hesitation: [Yes, you can sell them. Handle it however you like.]

For five years, she had lived for Vance. Because of her limp, she had always felt like a burden, so she poured every ounce of herself into the marriage through the only things she could control-the details of daily life and emotional support.

She had lowered herself to the dust just to be worthy. The cufflinks had been part of that love.

She had wanted every piece he wore to be one of a kind, so designing cufflinks had become her hobby. She didn't know if they were any good, but people at the studio kept asking if they were for sale.

She had always refused outright. They were her gifts to Vance and unique symbols of her love. And now that the love was gone, there was no point keeping them.

The staff member read the reply and suddenly understood everything that had happened with Vance and that lady. Her heart ached a little.

Rebecca was about to put her phone away and head to rehearsal when another message popped up.

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Chapter 265

It was Vance sending the photo of a jacket. The message read: [The shoulders on this one are a little tight. I need it altered.]

Rebecca felt a flicker of irritation, typing back: [I'll talk to the studio when I have time.]

He sent another photo, requesting: [This one, too. The sleeves are short.]

Rebecca: [That's impossible. They've made you over 100 pieces. You never complained when I brought them home. Now every single one needs fixing?]

Vance: [Yes, they do. And this one. Check it out.]

He sent a picture of himself wearing it, but everything looked fine.

Rebecca: [It looks fine to me.]

Vance: [I don't like the style. Too dull. Alter it.]

Rebecca found him impossible.

In the past, he had always stressed, “I’m a CEO. My public image needs to be mature and steady. Nothing too trendy.”

Rebecca: [Are you deliberately finding faults today?]

Vance: [Think whatever you want. They still need altering.]

Rebecca: [Take them to the studio. Derek will fix them.]

Vance: [You talk to him. I’m busy. Just forward whatever they say.]

Rebecca: [I’m busy, too. If none of these fit you, give them away. If you can’t even do that, just donate them.]

Vance: [I’m keeping them. A few alterations, and they’ll be fine.]

Rebecca: [Whatever. If you want them altered, take them in. If not, forget about it. Don’t drag me into it. Unless it’s about divorce terms, stop messaging me.]

As he was typing a reply, she quickly added: [I’ll unblock you in a week. Hopefully by then, you’ll have no objections to the divorce terms.]

His text read: [Stop using divorce to threaten me into cutting ties with Cathy.]

He hit send, but it bounced back with a red exclamation mark.

Rebecca slipped her phone into her pocket and headed straight to the rehearsal hall.

Desmond was already there, practicing hard. Sweat glistened on his forehead, and his face lit up. Rebecca!”

She had been training nonstop for days and could already feel the difference. Her flexibility was returning, her basics slowly rebuilding. The biggest hurdle was still her foot.

The dancers looked light and graceful, but every ounce of that lightness rested on raw strength. Without her foot healed, she would never have power.

“I video-chatted with the expert again last night, and he sent a new rehab routine. Let’s try it today,” Desmond exclaimed, stopping his own practice to help her.

“Great!” She nodded, knowing recovery would be brutal, but she would not back down.

Their time in Germany was almost up; they were about to move to the next city. A rental-car issue meant they couldn’t leave the next day, so Lauren gave everyone a free day to explore.

Since they never performed the day they arrived, the extra rest day wouldn't affect the schedule.

The next morning, Rebecca and the troupe wandered the city, hitting all the famous landmarks and snapping photos. Several members posted on social media.

Jenny sent their group shot to Rebecca with a message: [Girl, you look so much healthier than last time I saw you!]

Rebecca looked at the picture. Lauren was on her left, and Desmond was on her right.

The smile on her face was undeniably radiant.

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Chapter 266

The next morning, the car issue was resolved.

Rebecca and the troupe climbed aboard and headed to the next stop: Venice, the famous city of water, home of those little angel dolls sold everywhere.

The moment Rebecca saw the dolls in almost every shop window, she thought of the row of them back home-each one supposedly there so she wouldn't feel lonely.

She had once naively believed they were meant for her. In reality, they were for Catherine.

Desmond noticed her gaze, asking, "Want to pick one?"

She shook her head. The dolls weren't bad; they just carried unhappy memories.

Her phone rang with an unfamiliar international number. It turned out to be a receptionist at the hotel they had checked out that morning.

"Ma'am, you left a key in your room," the caller explained. "Would you like us to mail it to your current address?"

Rebecca paused, asking, "Does it have a keychain with a photo of a young couple?"

"Yes, the lady in the picture is you. We remember your face."

"Just throw it away. I don't need it anymore."

"Are you sure?"

“Yes, I am. Just toss it. Thank you.”

“Understood.”

Rebecca knew exactly what key it was.

Their home used a keypad, but Vance had insisted on keeping physical keys when they first married, just in case the lock died, the fingerprint didn’t read, or she forgot the code.

She had attached the key to a custom keychain made from one of their few photos together and tucked it in the inner pocket of her bag.

Five years later, she still used the same bag and had forgotten about the key until it turned up now. It had to be a sign. She and Vance were finished, and the key should go, too.

“Come on, let’s get gelato. I heard they’re legendary,” she said, spotting an ice-cream shop.

At the German hotel, the receptionist stopped a cleaning lady. “The guest said to throw this away.”

A man heading toward the front desk paused, looking over. “What are they throwing away? Let me see.”

“Oh, it belonged to the previous guest,” the receptionist explained.

jPe :

The man lunged forward, trying to snatch it. “Let me see!”

“Sir, this isn’t yours. We can’t show it to you,” the cleaning lady refused.

“It is mine. Look at the photo. That’s me!” Vance nearly lost his mind.

She looked at him, then at the keychain, feeling lost.

“Isn’t it me?” he yelled. “Look closely. That’s my home key. The lady in the photo is my wife!”

“It might be. I’m not sure.” She shook her head.

“You’re being ridiculous! The man in the photo is me!” He reached for it again. “Why won’t you give it back?”

The receptionist stepped in. “Sir, are you trying to rob us? We’ll call the police.”

“What?” Vance snapped. “You’re throwing away a guest’s property, then threatening me here? Go ahead and call them. If you don’t, I will.”

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The commotion finally brought the hotel manager down. Both sides explained what had happened.

Vance pulled out his passport and showed the manager the marriage-certificate photo on his phone, proving he was Rebecca’s husband and the key was his.

“Throwing away a guest’s belongings is irresponsible,” he said brusquely. “If this key fell into the wrong hands, they could walk right into our home.”

The receptionist reasoned, “We called the guest. She told us to throw it away.”

“Impossible!” Vance shot to his feet. “That’s the key to our home. Why would she ever say that? And it has our picture on it.”

He refused to believe Rebecca would discard their home key. It was something so important, with their photo attached. She would never hand it over to strangers in a foreign country and tell them to toss it.

It had to be the hotel’s fault.

“If you don’t believe me, I’ll call her again right now so you can hear for yourself,” the receptionist retorted.

Vance caught the crucial detail. The receptionist had Rebecca’s new phone number.

“Give me her number. I’ll call her,” he requested.

The receptionist refused instantly. “Absolutely not. We cannot release guest information.”

“I’m her husband!” he shouted.

The receptionist suddenly realized something, pointing at him. “You’re her husband, and you don’t have her number? You’re a fraud! I’m calling the police!”

“I…” He lost his tongue.

In the end, the police were called. They confirmed Vance was Rebecca’s husband, but they refused to give him the key. “Who knows if you two are divorced?”

He had no comeback, finally giving up on the key but pleading to have the keychain.

“After she checked out, which city did she go to?” he asked, clutching the keychain.

The receptionist rolled her eyes. “You’re her husband, and you don’t know where she went?”

Vance knew he would get nothing more out of her.

That evening in Venice, the city glowed with lights. Pigeons wheeled over St. Mark’s Square while a blonde woman in a red gown sang opera, accompanied by a violin.

Rebecca, Desmond, Helia, and a girl from the troupe had just finished a gondola ride and were stepping ashore.

Desmond jumped out first, then turned back to help Rebecca. The gondola rocked suddenly, and she swayed.

He quickly lifted her straight onto the dock. From certain angles, it looked like she had thrown herself into his arms.

The moment she steadied herself, she saw someone standing in the shadows. Vance had somehow come to Europe. Vance’s brows were locked tight as he walked toward her.

Helia and the other girl looked at him curiously. Desmond turned, sensing the tension.

A fist was flying at his face. In the nick of time, Rebecca shoved him aside. The punch missed him and nearly clipped her instead.

Not done, Vance lunged again.

Desmond’s temper flared. He twisted his wrist, ready. “I’ve wanted to punch you for a long time! Come on!

Vance’s face was thunderous as he swung again.

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Chapter 268

Rebecca was frantic, worried about Desmond.

If he got hurt, even in the face, he couldn’t finish the performance tour.

But Vance had gone feral; nothing she shouted reached him.

The two men were seconds from a full-blown brawl. In her desperation, she wedged herself between them and told Desmond, "Go back to the hotel."

He didn't move, refusing to leave her alone.

"Desmond, calm down!" she said sharply. "You can't get hurt; even a scratch won't do."

He still had shows to perform in the next few days. Any injuries were unacceptable.

Her stance was steadfast, just like the old times. Desmond calmed a little, breathing hard and glaring at

Vance.

"Go," she urged.

Desmond didn't leave, but he stepped back. "I'll stand right over there. Call me if you need help."

Rebecca signaled Helia to pull him away, then released Vance's arm.

Vance gave a cold laugh. "What? Afraid he'll misunderstand us?"

"Not everyone is as filthy-minded as you!" she shot back.

"Filthy-minded?" he scoffed. "I flew halfway around the world for you, and all I get is 'filthy'? You're terrified he'll get one little scratch, but when I..."

He almost said she never asked a thing when he was seriously sick. He bit it back, pointing at Desmond, too furious to speak.

"If you flew all the way to Europe just because I blocked you and your nonsense, you can turn around and go home," Rebecca said evenly,

"I didn't come to argue with you." His eyes burned. "I came to take you home. Come home with me."

He reached for her arm, but she stood still. "I'm not going back."

She sounded distant, as if they had never known, never loved, and ever hated each other.

1

His pupils dilated with shock, and then rage surged. "Do you even hear yourself? You think I flew here so you can keep throwing tantrums? No wonder my friends always say I spoiled you rotten. You just don't know when to stop!"

If requesting a divorce counted as a tantrum, then fine-call it one.

“Say whatever you want,” she said. “These past few days, I’ve been happier than any day in the last 20-

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plus years. Please, let me go. And let yourself go too.”

He should just leave and be together with his beloved Cathy.

Vance’s face flushed with shame. “Happier? You’ve known this pretty boy for what-a few days? And that’s already better than those five years with me?”

He pointed at Desmond, his voice shaking with fury. “Where did you put my money? Without it, could you even be this happy? And what about Josette? Does she mean nothing to you now?”

She remained composed. “Not everything in life is about sex, and Josette is fine. You’re just an outsider. Stay out of my family business.”

He was incredulous. “Outsider? Me?”

She countered, “Aren’t you? Your last name isn’t Perry.”

Share get it

The heated argument came to a sudden halt.

Vance paused, then murmured, “The Perrys never treated you half as well as I did.”

Rebecca’s eyes stung, and she gave a bitter laugh.

He was right. The Perry name had never given her any leverage, not even in an argument with him.

“But how can you miss something you never really had?” she said quietly.

She had never truly had him either. But at least, she had once been full of hope.

“I’ve said it so many times. I’m not throwing a tantrum or threatening you,” she sighed, not wanting to drag it out. “I really want a different life. For the rest of my days, I want to be happy. And I want you to be happy, too.”

The evening breeze off the Mediterranean carried the damp, heavy scent of inland water, making the air thick and suffocating.

He stared blankly, as if he no longer recognized the woman in front of him. His eyes churned with emotions he was fighting to keep down.

“Go back and read the divorce terms carefully. We’ll discuss them properly. Just stop following me,” she concluded, turning to leave.

Desmond and Helia hurried over, flanking her as they walked away.

The next day, they had to throw themselves fully into the performance, so tonight they took the free time to wander Venice’s winding streets and alleys.

Helia wanted a mask, so the four of them browsed shop after shop, comparing designs. In the end, Rebecca chose a Queen of Hearts, and Desmond picked a Night Knight.

They stepped outside and put the masks on, ready to take group photos. Rebecca suddenly noticed two extra figures reflected in Helia’s phone screen.

They were entering the angel-doll shop next door. Her smile froze while a familiar voice drifted out of the shop. “I don’t like any of these dolls. They’re not as pretty as the ones you gave me.”

Of course, they weren’t. The ones Vance had collected for her were all limited-edition handmade pieces, each one expensive.

Desmond heard the voice, too. Behind his mask, his eyes narrowed. “Let’s go.”

It was too late. Vance and Catherine walked out of the doll shop and ran straight into them.

Despite the mask, Vance recognized Rebecca instantly.

Rebecca almost laughed, realizing he had just brought Catherine on a romantic European vacation. How

IL nice! They had done the islands and now Europe.

What had last night’s little scene at the gondola dock even been about?

“Excuse us,” Desmond said in a low voice.

The alleys in Venice were narrow and packed with tourists. Vance stood motionless in the middle of the path, blocking everyone.

His eyes remained fixed on Rebecca. Catherine looked at him, then at the person opposite them.

“Wow, it’s Rebecca!” she exclaimed. “I almost didn’t recognize you. Only spotted you because of that limp:”

Desmond’s hand flew before anyone could react, slapping Catherine across the face.

She fell into Vance’s arms, a bright red handprint blooming on her cheek. She screamed, “You get your hands on a woman? Have you no shame?”

Vance immediately shielded her, glaring at Desmond. “Are you rabid?”

“Does it matter?” Desmond countered. “As far as I know, you and Rebecca are still legally married. So, what’s the situation now? Are you and your little side piece teaming up to bully your own wife?” 2

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“You’re the side piece!” Catherine shrieked from behind Vance.

Desmond stared her down. “You think hiding behind that scumbag means I can’t reach you? I’ll slap any filthy mouth I see-man or woman.”

Vance’s eyes burned. “You want to pick a fight, huh?”

“You bet!” Desmond stepped forward, shielding the three women. “And you think you’re any cleaner? I slapped her for her dirty mouth. For a man who reeks as if he fell in a sewer, I’ll do a lot worse.”

Catherine finally understood why Desmond had slapped her. It was for calling Rebecca a cripple.

Vance looked beyond Desmond at Rebecca. “You’re really going to side with the man and insult me?”

Rebecca looked at the way he was protecting Catherine and couldn’t help laughing. “Insulting? Which part? The facts?”

Vance’s face darkened further. “Do you even hear yourself?”

“I do,” she answered, her eyes stinging. “Aren’t you filthy? Desmond, let’s go. No point dirtying our hands on garbage.”

Vance turned livid. “Rebecca!”

All Rebecca wanted at that moment was to leave that place as soon as possible. The sight of them alone made her sick, and she didn’t want Desmond to get hurt. That would foil their performance schedules.

Yet he refused to leave, demanding an apology. She shook her head, indicating that it was pointless. She no longer cared what people said about her, but she was worried about his safety.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he said. “You’re worried I’ll get hurt and ruin the show. But there are some things a man has to do. Even if I get marked up today, the troupe has an understudy. No matter what, she has to apologize.”

Rebecca knew better. Vance would never allow that.

Sure enough, the tension skyrocketed again.

“We’ve talked about throwing hands for a long time. Let’s settle it today,” Vance declared, turning to Rebecca. “Once I knock him down, you’re coming home with me.”

“For that sentence, you’ve just earned extra punches,” Desmond said, cracking his knuckles. “Let me make one thing clear. This is purely personal. It has nothing to do with Rebecca. She is not a trophy but a whole, independent person. She will not go with anyone. Show your respect.”

A crowd had gathered, mostly tourists. After listening for a while, they understood what was happening. When they heard Desmond’s words, they broke into applause.

Vance’s jaw tightened. “Enough talk!”

“And stop blocking the sidewalk!” Desmond headed toward the open square.

Clearly, it was going to be a brutal fight. Rebecca and Helia hurried after them but couldn’t catch up.

In the square, the two men started swinging.

Desmond moved fast. He leaped into the air and kicked Vance square in the chest, sending him crashing to the ground.

The blow, enhanced by his dancing skills, was powerful, but Vance was no weakling, religiously working out at the company’s gym.

In seconds, he rolled and pinned Desmond beneath him.

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The crowd rushed over to watch the spectacle. Some even started live-streaming the fight. One of them held up his phone and narrated the brawl like a ringside commentator.

By the time Rebecca arrived, the two men were already rolling on the ground in a chaotic tangle.

“Stop fighting! You’re making a spectacle!” she shouted, trying to separate them. “Do you want this all over the internet?”

Desmond gained the upper hand, pinning Vance down. “I don’t care!”

Vance took the chance to grip Desmond’s throat until his face turned purple.

“You don’t care either?” Rebecca locked her arm around Vance’s neck from behind and yanked backward with all her strength.

She tried to pull them apart but ended up choking him. Desmond broke free and drove a vicious kick into his ribs, ready to hit again.

Vance growled, “Rebecca, you’re pulling for him!”

His words came out in strangled gasps, but she kept her jaw clenched and her arm locked tight. “No more fighting!”

“You’re choking me!” he wheezed between violent coughs. “What the hell are you doing?”

Catherine rushed up and desperately threw herself between the two men. “Don’t hit him! It was my fault.

Hit me instead. Let him go.”

The imprint of Desmond’s slap still burned bright on her cheek. Vance looked up at her, then turned to Rebecca with difficulty. “You always say I favor Cathy. Now you see why.”

Rebecca stared at him in disbelief. “Are you that stupid? Please keep your mind straight until the divorce is final. I don’t want to walk away with nothing but debt.”

How could he not see through such obvious manipulation?

His voice turned ice-cold. “All you care about is money! You’d choke me for an outsider. You were never like this before. I’m so disappointed.”

“Cathy!” he called out.

Catherine fluttered over like a butterfly, tears spilling. “I’m sorry for running my mouth and dragging you into this. Rebecca, I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to her.” He cut her off, pointing at the red marks on his own neck. “Let go. I’ll apologize to you.”

Hing? And to whom exactly?”

Chapter

Desmond echoed, “As the boyfriend of Miss Foul Mouth here? Apologizing to your wife?”

The onlookers whispered among themselves.

“Wait, what? She is the wife? Then who’s the crying one? The mistress?”

“Looks like it. What a phony bitch!”

“Exactly. How can this guy not see it? Is he stupid?”

Catherine whirled on the crowd and snapped, “You’re the mistress! We’re just friends who understand each other perfectly. Are you all blind? His wife colluded with her lover to beat him up.”

Desmond cracked his knuckles. “Oh, really? Let’s find out who the real home-wrecker is. We’ve got a live audience and people streaming. Why don’t you show everyone those Instagram posts you made?”

She backed down, panicking, but he pressed on with a cunning smile. “Including the one you posted and deleted five seconds later. Plenty of people saved screenshots.”

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Catherine was dumbfounded.

On a whim, she had posted a photo of herself in a sheer nightgown, cuddling a shirtless, drunk Vance. It had been up for five seconds before she deleted it, but apparently not fast enough.

“What’s wrong? Cat got your tongue?” Desmond pressed.

“No need to ask her.” Vance pulled Catherine behind him protectively. “Anything she posted was approved by me. If she did something wrong, I’ll apologize.”

He stepped in front of Rebecca, but he couldn’t bring himself to say the word “cripple”.

“Regarding the inappropriate appellation...” he rephrased it. “I sincerely apologize on her behalf. I hope you can be a bigger person and forgive her.”

Rebecca found it ironic. This was the first time he had ever apologized because someone in his circle had mocked her leg.

Aiden and Lucas had done it countless times in the past five years. He had never once stopped them, and today, she had finally received an apology, though he was delivering it on behalf of Catherine.

How ridiculous! His mistress had insulted his wife, and he was apologizing on the mistress’s behalf? This matter was so complicated that people needed to twist and turn just to understand it.

Rebecca was about to turn it down when Vance pulled out his phone. “For the emotional damage, I’ll compensate you.”

She paused, accepting it for the sake of money. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out and saw that 500,000 dollars had just been transferred.

“Can’t wait to check the money, huh?” he sneered. “You’ve changed, acting like a completely different person.”

Rebecca clasped her hands together in mock gratitude. “Exactly what I wanted. My greatest wish in life is to become a stranger to you. Enjoy your trip.”

With that, she left with Desmond and the others.

Vance and Catherine remained standing in the square, pointed at and whispered about by the crowd. The comments were brutal.

Catherine spun in circles, arguing and defending herself against every remark. Vance couldn’t stand it anymore and pulled her back.

“I can’t stand your reputation being ruined like this,” she explained desperately. “We’re innocent. You’re such a good man. I won’t let them talk about you that way.”

“It doesn’t matter. People talk. Let them,” he murmured, staring blankly in the direction Rebecca had

LII disappeared.

Catherine fumed, noticing his gaze, but she kept her voice sweet. “She doesn’t really want to leave you. She’s just upset that I’m back and that you brought me on this trip. I shouldn’t have come.”

Vance’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

“Vance!” She raised her voice. “Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” he whispered. “Josette didn’t come with her. I’ll bring Josette home, and she will definitely come back.”

“Vance...” Catherine stared at him in horror. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

“Yeah.” He finally looked at her. “Come on. Weren’t you going to buy more dolls? This has nothing to do with you. She’s only mad at me.”

“But everyone thinks we’re together. It’s probably all over the internet. Someone was live-streaming just now.”

“It’s fine. A clear conscience needs no accusing.”

“But they’ll call me a home-wrecker.

“Their opinions don’t matter. I know you’re the best.” 1

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Chapter 273

Catherine’s lips curved into a pleased little smile. But when she lifted her eyes to his face, the satisfaction faltered.

Vance’s gaze was still locked somewhere far down the street, distant and unfocused. He clearly hadn’t been listening to her at all.

“Vance,” she tried again, “can we leave tomorrow?”

Silence stretched between them.

“Vance, did you hear me?” she called out.

Only then did he drag his attention back. “Yeah, I heard you.”

By that point, Rebecca had already disappeared with her companions. Desmond hadn’t spoken a single word the entire walk back.

The Venetian streets were still thick with tourists, yet an odd heaviness had settled over the four of them.

When they reached the hotel, Desmond held the elevator door open until all three women had stepped inside. Then he flashed a grin. “You guys head up. I forgot to grab something.”

“What kind of something?” Helia asked curiously.

“Just guy stuff,” he replied.

The doors slid shut before anyone could press him further.

Helia’s roommate blinked. “Guy stuff? Like what? It’s not like they have periods.”

Helia chuckled, and the brittle tension in the small space finally cracked. She thought for a moment and spoke. “Actually, I need to pick up a couple of things, too. I’ll go down. You guys go on ahead.”

When the doors opened again, Rebecca stepped out with the other girl, while Helia went down back to the lobby.

Rebecca’s room was down the hallway that overlooked the hotel’s inner courtyard garden. Looking down, she spotted Desmond sitting down there alone in a chair, a glass in his hand.

He hadn’t gone shopping at all, and he was staring blankly at nothing. The event affected his mood after all, and he was supposed to perform tomorrow.

She didn’t want her personal mess to drag down the whole troupe’s focus. After a moment of thought, she decided to go downstairs and convince him to rest early for tomorrow’s show and not drink.

The hotel corridors twisted and turned, but finally, she reached the garden on the first floor.

Desmond was sitting on a bench at the edge, but he wasn’t alone. Helia was there with him; she hadn’t been shopping either.

Rebecca smiled, deciding to leave them alone. She was about to turn and leave when she heard them mention her name.

“That bastard!” Desmond cursed. “How could he treat Rebecca like that? What right does he have?”

His voice cracked with frustration and pain.

Helia tried to calm him. “Desmond, come on. If Rebecca finds out, she’ll be hurt, too.”

“That’s why I came here alone,” he sighed. “Do you know what makes me the angriest?”

“That man failed Rebecca?” Helia guessed.

“That’s part of it.” Desmond choked on his words. “But what really infuriates me is that trash lets others mock Rebecca’s leg issue. She ended up like that because of him. Otherwise, she would have been shining on every stage of every tour. Yet he laughed at her with that cheap woman. If she hadn’t stopped me today, I swear, I would’ve broken his leg.”

“Desmond, stay calm and don’t lose control,” Helia urged again.

“Lose control? I hate myself for not losing control. Why am I so rational? If only I had lost control back then...” He trailed off, gulping down the drink in his glass.

His voice went sticky and heavy. “I thought she’d be happy. She saved his life. How could he not give her happiness?”

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Chapter 274

Rebecca’s chest ached with bitterness.

Everyone believed Vance could make her happy-everyone except himself and the people around him.

But love couldn’t be forced. It had taken her five years to learn that.

Back then, she could even accept that Vance didn’t love her. Saving him had been pure instinct. At that critical moment, she hadn’t had time to think of anything else.

How could she possibly have been scheming to trap him into marriage, as he believed? The fact that he thought so little of her still cut deep.

If he didn’t love her, he should have told her at the beginning. She would have walked away wanting nothing, healed from her injuries, and faced her future on her own.

He could have done so any day during those five years. She would have respected his honesty, and they could have parted peacefully. At least, they had both tried.

But instead, they had reached this point.

Desmond fell silent, but Helia kept talking, trying to persuade him.

Rebecca felt something cold on her cheek. She touched it and found her palm wet with tears. Wiping them away, she left without disturbing them.

Desmond tried to compose himself, but anger kept surging. “I went to her wedding, watched from afar, and saw her sweet smile. When he put the ring on her finger, I had this overwhelming impulse to rush up, stop it, and take her away.”

Helia was stunned, though she was aware of his feelings for Rebecca. She just hadn’t expected it to start so early and hadn’t imagined such agonizing internal turmoil,

“I regret it so much now,” he continued, his voice raw with pain. “I should have rushed onto that stage and taken her away.”

Helia hesitated, then finally couldn’t resist saying, “But back then, she didn’t even know who you were. People would have thought you were crazy and kicked you out.”

Her words earned a glare from him. She blinked innocently, as if saying, “What? I’m just being honest.”

He surrendered. “You’re right. That’s why I didn’t even dare to approach her to offer my congratulations. I was a coward.”

“It’s all in the past.”

“You see, no one forced him to marry her. Why would he repay her kindness with cruelty? If he doesn’t love her, plenty of people will. She is so wonderful.”

“What’s done is done, but it’s not too late now. If you like her, then chase her. Confess your feelings to her, or she’d never know.” <_T_

“I will tell her, but not now. She hasn’t finalized her divorce yet. I don’t want to burden her with more stress.”

“Well then, stop sitting here drowning your sorrows. If Lauren catches you, she’ll have plenty to say.”

“I’m not drinking.” He showed her his glass. “The bar has special mocktails. They’re not bad. Want one?”

He didn’t drink alcohol, knowing Rebecca was injured just because Vance was drunk. That had forever altered the trajectory of her life. 1.

He would never be like that irresponsible man.

“I thought you were drowning your sorrows,” Helia chuckled. “I came all this way to comfort you. Alright, let’s go back and rest. We have to accompany Rebecca to her rehabilitation session tomorrow. Just leave the past behind. We’ll be there for her and create a bright future together.” 1”

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Chapter 275

The next morning, Rebecca got up early as usual for her rehabilitation session. Last night’s events hadn’t left much of a shadow in her heart.

Desmond and Helia came along to practice with her.

“Starting over” might sound grand, but putting it into action was a different story. It was far harder than she had imagined.

Rebecca had been on this European trip for nearly ten days, and she had stuck to her rehabilitation exercises. She thought she was making progress, but in truth, her body’s flexibility barely improved.

Her injured leg still refused to respond, and each session brought excruciating pain. Despite eating generously at every meal and without restriction, she had lost nearly ten pounds.

She had always been slender, but now, dressed in her black practice outfit, she looked as thin as a sheet of paper. It wasn’t just the training that was taking a toll; the pain was too.

It hurt both during and after practice. At night, she would secretly massage her leg under the covers for an hour at a time, unable to sleep despite exhaustion.

Yet even so, she refused to give up.

Thinking back on the wasted five years, she asked herself, “What’s the purpose of life? Is it to do what I like and live the life I desire? If so, what do I truly want?”

Of course, she wanted to dance. Even if she were like a crippled swallow, unable to fly again, she could still sweat and dance for herself.

Once she had decided this, every day felt joyful. Even in pain, her heart was happy, and that was enough.

She warmed up for 15 minutes, and pain brought sweat that drenched her practice clothes.

Desmond and Helia were used to this by now. They knew how much she suffered and how hard it was, but as dancers themselves, they understood how much dance meant to her.

So, they never tried to stop her. They only tried harder to help.

Half an hour later, Rebecca's strength reached its limit. Her injured leg couldn't bear her weight, and she collapsed with a heavy thud.

"Rebecca! Are you okay? I'm sorry I didn't catch you." Desmond rushed over, guilt written across his face.

Rebecca shook her head, sweat streaming down. Gritting her teeth, she said, "It's not your fault, Desmond. I can't always rely on you to protect me. I have to do this myself."

Before she could finish, a shadow suddenly lunged forward, shoving Desmond aside and lifting her from the ground.

"Rebecca, are you alright? I'm taking you to the hospital!" Vance said worriedly.

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His arrival was unexpected, and she had no idea how he had managed to find her.

"Why is it you again? Put me down!" she protested, irritated.

"What do you mean by 'again'?" He frowned. "Even if you died here, no one else would care."

Another figure stepped into the rehearsal room. "Exactly. Vance cares about you. Don't always listen to what others say and take it out on him. He's the person closest to you."

Rebecca, already frustrated about her progress, felt her irritation deepen at the sight of them. She struggled hard to free herself from Vance's arms. "Closest to me? Why is my closest person staying with you?"

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Chapter 276

Catherine bowed her head, looking hurt and vulnerable.

Vance stood beside her, his jaw tight. "What are you talking about? Is she wrong? She means well. How can you mock her like this?"

Catherine tugged at his sleeve, looking timid. "Vance, don't talk like that. She's just in a bad mood. You need to understand her."

Vance fell silent, looking daggers at Rebecca.

Catherine chattered on, "Vance, come on. She spends every day with those dancers, but she can't dance like before. It definitely makes her sad."

Turning to Rebecca, she continued, "Don't push yourself too hard. Even if you can't dance again, Vance won't mind. But if you got hurt, he'd be worried."

Her words were sweet, but her face gleamed with smugness. Especially when she said Rebecca couldn't dance again, her eyes lingered on Rebecca's leg with unconcealed malice.

Yet Vance, the insufferable fool, would surely think she was simply looking out for Rebecca.

Sure enough, he launched into his familiar lament. "If only you were half as sensible as Cathy, I wouldn't have had to drop everything at the company and come here."

"Oh? So, is it inconvenient for you now?" Rebecca retorted. "When you once flew here just for a handmade doll, you didn't call it inconvenient, did you?"

Memories she wanted to forget resurfaced. She had been trying to avoid them, but they just wouldn't let her go.

"I gave the dolls to you, didn't I?"

"Did you? I don't need to verify who it was really for, but I never liked dolls."

Vance was rendered speechless.

"Do you even know what she likes?" Desmond chimed in, striking a nerve.

Vance shot back, "What has it got to do with you?"

"I know," Catherine cut in. "I know Rebecca loves dancing."

That was true. Among all her passions, dance was the one Rebecca cherished most.

Catherine continued, "But you don't have to torment yourself like this. I know my sudden return pressures you, making you worry I'll take Vance away. After all, in terms of looks, education, and personality, I am better. And you only know how to dance. But now, even that..."

She sighed, “You want to reclaim the one thing you’re good at, hoping Vance won’t despise you. It’s not norite “li necessary. He’s known from the start that you have nothing else.”

Her implication was clear: “Vance, can’t you see? Rebecca is worthless. I’m better than her in every way.”

Desmond interrupted, “What did you just say? You’re better than Rebecca at everything? What a joke! The only thing you’re better at is playing fake. Vance, is your mind too muddled to see the truth?”

Vance scowled, ready to fight him. Rebecca and Helia quickly separated them.

Finally, Vance’s gaze fell on Rebecca, who looked much thinner. His brow furrowed. “I’ve seen your dance. It’s time to come home with me.”

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Chapter 277

Rebecca stared at Vance, feeling a wave of deep exhaustion. It was so intense that she could barely remember what he looked like at 16.

“Vance, just leave,” she said tiredly.

“Come home with me,” he said. “No matter how angry you are, you can’t degrade yourself like this. I know you want to dance, but you can’t anymore.”

Her gaze turned cold, locked firmly on his face.

“Am I wrong?” Vance continued. “The doctor already told you. Desmond is just feeding you false hope. He’s not well-intentioned. Look at how thin you’ve gotten. What if you get hurt again? Don’t push yourself beyond your limits. As I said, you don’t have to do anything. You’ll always be Mrs. Bradford.”

“Shut up!” Desmond yelled.

Vance glanced at him and grabbed Rebecca’s arm. “Alright, no more arguing. You left without a word, and I flew across the world to find you and show my sincerity. That should have eased your anger.” ↑

She stared at the veins bulging from his hand, not struggling. His words were suffocating.

“Vance,” she said evenly, as if speaking to a stranger, “I’ll be honest with you. The ten days I’ve spent away from you have been the happiest time of the last five years.”

His eyes widened, as though something inside them had shattered. She understood that look; he didn't believe her.

He could never imagine that the woman who had loved him so humbly and had given up everything for him, would refuse him now.

She was supposed to beg him to take her back. Without him, how could she survive? But things had changed.

His grip tightened, and she added, "If only you had a shred of conscience left and were grateful about my rescue, let me go. Whether you want to repay me or take revenge, please, just let me be."

His hand finally loosened. He stepped back and gaped at her, unable to believe his ears.

Rebecca turned to Desmond and said, "Let's go."

Helia had been holding him back the whole time. If he were determined to punch Vance, no one could stop him. However, as Helia had advised, he was to handle it discreetly and not make things harder for Rebecca there.

They quickly flanked her and left without looking back.

Vance remained rooted to the spot. Catherine called out to him, finally bringing him back to reality.

"What is it?" he muttered, starting to head out.

She hesitated. "There's something I'm not sure if I should say."

"Go ahead," he replied, his tone indifferent.

"Actually, I understand your feelings," she sighed. "You've always felt guilty toward Rebecca, blaming yourself for her inability to dance. But no matter how much you owe her, you've already paid enough. You've given her the best five years of your life, along with all the money and houses. Without you, she couldn't have just come abroad as she liked."

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Chapter 278

Catherine continued, "You've already given more than enough. You've paid it all off. Go check if you don't believe me. Even if you were that driver, the price you paid would've settled it ages ago. No one else would compensate for this much."

“Have I?” Vance murmured in a daze.

“Yes, you’ve cleared the debt.” Catherine grabbed his clothes and shook him. “Just stop this. She indeed saved your life, but nobody should devote their entire life to repaying a debt. Wake up! You’re exceptional. If Rebecca hadn’t saved you back then, she wouldn’t even have been worthy of you. You’ve done more than enough. You can’t spend your whole life trapped in guilt. You have to live for yourself.”

“Live for myself?” he echoed, his eyes growing glazed with each word.

“Exactly. Break free from the chains of debt and guilt,” she encouraged. “Live the rest of your life for yourself. Stop torturing yourself. You don’t love her, yet you force yourself to live with her. Haven’t you suffered enough?”

He remained silent, staring in the direction Rebecca had left. By then, she had gone out of sight.

Rebecca was swamped, having no time to think about Vance or Catherine.

After washing up at the hotel and grabbing breakfast, she headed to the theater to help the crew set up props. She stayed busy until the afternoon, preparing costumes and makeup as the performers began to arrive.

Their performance in Venice was only a single-day event. Tonight wasn’t a full ballet but a medley, each group performing a scene. With so many performers, the sets and props were complex, and makeup even more demanding.

Rebecca and the entire backstage team barely had time to eat. In the afternoon, Lauren insisted everyone grab a bite.

Rebecca finally planned to sneak away to the restroom. She had been holding it in for a while, but Catherine showed up on her way out.

The woman had been deliberately waiting for her, and Vance wasn’t there. She tried to ignore Catherine, heading straight for the backstage area, but the latter blocked her path.

“Are you too scared to face me?” Catherine sneered. “Don’t think you can outrun me like that.”

“What do you want?” Rebecca clenched her fists, holding back the impulse to slap her.

Catherine’s eyes scanned her from head to toe. “I checked. You don’t have your phone, and there’s no surveillance here.”

“So what?” Rebecca frowned, wondering if Catherine intended to do something to her.

But just because her leg was injured didn't mean she couldn't handle Catherine.

"I'm not afraid of you recording this. Be realistic." Catherine's voice lost all its previous coyness, her expression fierce. "You're not worthy of Vance."

Rebecca blinked, expecting more than such a taunt. Once, it might have hurt her. Now she just looked Catherine squarely in the eye. "Then go home and convince Vance to finalize the divorce."

"You think he doesn't want it?" Catherine sputtered. "He didn't even want to marry you in the first place. Isn't it your constant fussing about your leg that keeps him tied down?"

Just like those other jerks, she mocked Rebecca's limp. And that wasn't even counting the morning-this was already the second time that day she'd brought it up.

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Chapter 279

"What a shame!" Rebecca said.

"What?" Catherine demanded.

Rebecca's grin widened. "Shame that you're begging a cripple now."

"Don't make me laugh. I was Vance's first love. I was gone for five years, and he still kept me in his heart," Catherine countered. "The password to your apartment is my birthday. Did you forget that? Why would I ever beg you?"

Rebecca remained calm, her smile never faltering. "Is that so? Then why are you here pushing me to get a divorce?"

"I..." Catherine faltered, then burst out, "Vance doesn't love you! A marriage without love is immoral."

"Is it?" Rebecca scoffed. "Well, that's better than being a home-wrecker."

"You're the home-wrecker!" Catherine snapped. "Vance and I were first loves. I went abroad, and you swooped in. You're the other woman!"

"I have a marriage certificate." Rebecca shrugged. "Our marriage is legitimate."

Catherine's voice cracked. "But you already proposed a divorce."

“About that.” Rebecca tapped her chin. “I just changed my mind. I think I’ll keep the marriage after all.”

“I knew it!” Catherine shrieked. “You’re playing hard-to-get. You never wanted a divorce at all. You’re just using it to pull him away from me.”

Rebecca remained composed. “So what? What are you going to do about it?”

Catherine stamped her foot. “You are despicable!”

“And?” Rebecca smirked.

Catherine pointed at her. “I-I’m going to tell him!”

“So what?”

“Can you say something else?”

“Fine. Let’s talk about something else, then. Careful there, Cathy. You might want to tone down that spending on your trip. Remember? I could always reclaim every penny.”

“You are shameless!”

“You spend my husband’s money. Who is the real shameless one? Forget the marriage certificate? His money is our joint property.”

“Keep hugging that for the rest of your life!”

“Works for me. You can keep being his precious one. I don’t care.”

Rebecca stepped past her and headed back toward the theater.

“Come back here!” Catherine lunged at her.

Rebecca realized then that her rehabilitation hadn’t been for nothing. Her legs were far more stable now, and her arms had real strength behind them.

She spun around and shoved hard. Catherine went sprawling to the ground, while she only wobbled slightly before catching her balance.

Her confidence surging, Rebecca strode toward the theater and left Catherine behind. Divorcing Vance would still go as planned, but she didn’t mind putting that woman in her place now.

Once inside the theater, she threw herself into work, too busy to think about those trashy people.

At 9:30 that evening, the performance finally ended. She exhaled, gathering her things.

The performers were still taking their bows on stage. She waited in the wings, deeply touched.

Desmond and Helia hadn't performed a scene from a ballet. It was Butterfly Lovers that she used to perform.

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Chapter 280

The finale ended, but the strains refused to fade..

The audience cheered, showing how much they loved the dance. Applause erupted again as Desmond and Helia came out to take their bows.

They had perfectly recreated a few of the classic solo and duet moves from Butterfly Lovers, which earned great admiration from the audience.

Normally, the curtain call would have ended there. The audience was already moving toward the stage with flowers, but the music went on.

And then, new images appeared on the LCD screens flanking the stage. Rebecca froze, seeing her own performance of Butterfly Lovers from years ago.

The announcer's microphone ended up in Desmond's hands. He declared the show officially over, thanked the audience for their support, and said that a small ceremony would follow for those who wished to stay.

Rebecca blinked, wondering what he and Helia were up to.

"This dance we performed tonight is called Butterfly Lovers," Desmond continued, briefly introducing the choreography and the music. "Thank you all for enjoying it. The choreographer and original performer of this piece is here tonight, and I'd like to invite her to the stage."

As the music swelled, he stood in the spotlight and extended a hand toward her.

Rebecca had no idea what was happening. All she could see was his encouraging smile and the image of her younger self on the screen.

Lauren's voice carried a hint of worry as she steadied Rebecca. "If you feel uncomfortable, you don't have to go."

Rebecca shook her head, indicating it was fine. She only felt grateful for all the days Desmond and Helia had spent helping her recover and retrain.

“I’m going up,” she said firmly, her eyes glittering.

Lauren teared up, clamping a hand over her mouth and nodding vigorously.

Rebecca wasn’t walking toward the rehearsal room or the rehab studio. This was a real stage-the one she had been torn away from five years ago.

She was limping, and Helia reached out to help. She only waved it off, moving straight toward the center of the stage.

The other performers cleared a path, letting her stand in the very middle. Desmond took her hand and announced, “This is Rebecca, a young dancer. The video playing now shows her original performance, which is now part of our academy’s teaching materials. Many of us have studied it since, but five years

Tvpap: 740 ago, she had an accident and could no longer dance.”

A hush of sympathy swept through the audience.

“Today is her birthday.” Desmond’s eyes were bright and earnest. “And if possible, I’d like to invite her to dance this piece once more. I believe she can return to the stage.” (1

Cheers erupted. Some guests paused from leaving and started clapping for what was unfolding on stage. In the audience, one person sat motionless, staring intently at the screen as the footage played.

A voice whispered, “Have you ever seen her dance before?”

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Chapter 281

The strains of Butterfly Lovers flowed through the theater. The melody carved so deeply into Rebecca’s soul that every cell in her body started to wake up and dance.

In her practice clothes for convenience, she took Desmond’s extended hand and kicked off her shoes. The instant her bare feet hit the stage boards, some kind of power surged from the soles, igniting all the blood in her body.

When he lifted her high into the air, she transformed into a butterfly, dancing in perfect sync with the version of herself from five years ago on the giant screen.

The audience erupted in thunderous applause, their warm tolerance enveloping her. (1

Her dancing wasn't the same blistering perfection she'd owned five years ago, but these were people who lived and breathed art.

They offered warm encouragement instead of the sharp, cutting words she'd heard too many times: "You can't dance anymore. I've seen it. You're done."

The second she and Desmond nailed their final, dazzling pose, the music melted into the bright, bouncy notes of Happy Birthday. The whole crowd sang along, clapping in rhythm like one giant, joyful family.

Helia pushed out a huge three-layer cake from backstage. Right on cue, everyone waited for Rebecca to make a wish.

Surrounded by candlelight and smiling faces, she closed her eyes and wished with everything she had: for Josette to stay healthy and live forever; for every teacher and dancer in the troupe to have nothing but smooth sailing; and for herself to soar high again.

When she opened her eyes again, the cheers exploded even louder.

She beamed and sliced into the giant cake. The whole troupe pitched in, carving it into bite-sized pieces and distributing them to every performer and staff member of the touring troupe, as well as audience members.

Some audience members said this was the most special performance they had ever seen, and Rebecca thought it was hands-down the most unforgettable birthday of her entire life.

A handful of the younger backup dancers grabbed trays and headed down into the seats to share the cake.

"Sir, thank you so much for coming tonight," one of them said cheerfully to a man in the front row.

He stared at the slice for a long beat, silent.

"What's wrong, sir? Do you have allergies?" asked the dancer.

"No, no," Vance said quickly, snapping out of it. "Thank you."

He took the cake, then passed the dancer a sleek gift bag. “Would you mind giving this to the birthday girl onstage? Tell her happy birthday and that I hope every single wish she just made comes true.”

The dancer blinked. “Sir, why not give it to her yourself? She’s right up there.”

Vance gave a small smile, looking at the woman glowing under the lights. “Too crowded right now. I don’t want to steal her moment. Just hand it over, please. She’ll know who it’s from.”

The dancer nodded and gave the bag a little shake. “There’s a card in here, right?”

“Yes.” Vance picked up his cake and stood up. “And thank you all for this stunning show tonight.”

He slipped out of his seat and left the theater. A woman in a red dress trailed behind him, not even bothering to grab any cake.

The cake vanished in minutes. The dancer bounced back onstage and pressed the bag into Rebecca’s hands. “It was from a gentleman. He said you’d know him the second you opened it.”

Rebecca took the bag, already having a guess.

The dancer added, “Oh, and he said happy birthday, hoping every wish you make tonight comes true.”

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Chapter 282

Rebecca opened the bag and found a square box. Finally, the man who’d once flooded her with watches stopped doing that.

She lifted the lid to reveal a breathtaking necklace. Sparkling diamonds circled a big emerald pendant at the center, screaming money.

The girls nearby gasped, excitedly guessing who the mystery giver might be.

“No card?” the dancer asked, dismayed. “That guy swore there was one; you’d know him the second you saw it. I’ll go back there and look around.”

“No need.” Rebecca stopped her. “There’s no card. That’s just the way it is.”

“So, do you know who sent it?” the dancer asked, still anxious.

“I do. Thank you.” Rebecca tucked the box away.

So, the same man who once belittled dance had shown up.

Back in high school, when they were filling out college forms, Vance had asked where she was applying. Her teenage crush hadn’t been strong enough to make her throw away her dreams and follow him, so she’d picked the top dance academy in the country without hesitation.

He’d looked disappointed, nodded once, and muttered something like, “Well, arts students don’t exactly have a ton of real options, do you?”

Most people back then figured arts students only went that route because they couldn’t hack regular academics. It wasn’t the case with Rebecca; she loved dancing with every fiber of her being.

At 18, she already had more than a decade of training. Most of her life had been spent in studios and on stages.

She was used to sitting at the bottom of the academic pecking order. His comment had stung, but it hadn’t surprised her. They were heading in different directions anyway, and her youthful infatuation was merely a page in her memory.

Later, after the injury that stole her dancing, he’d expressed the same idea: “It’s just dancing. You can’t do it anymore, but you’ve still got me. I’ll take care of you for the rest of our lives.”

Dancing was never considered a proper career in his eyes. He even felt ashamed about it.

During the early days of their marriage, when she was fighting through rehab, he had to drive her and thus missed parties with his friends.

Once, she had overheard Aiden on the phone: “Just let her sit home and chill. Why bother with all this rehab crap? Being Vance Bradford’s wife is bad enough with her limping around. Worse still, she’s some dancer who performs for entertainment. What kind of classy life is that?”

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Vance hadn’t pushed back, and that was when she realized his real thoughts matched Aiden’s word for word.

He thought she hadn’t heard it. But the car was quiet, and Aiden was loud. She’d caught almost every humiliating syllable.

Later, she could walk again, but dancing was impossible. Some said that medicine progressed in five- year increments, with someone always exploring and moving forward.

She wasn't sure if Edwin and his mentor's experimental protocol would work, but she was determined to give it her all.

Because they were leaving Venice the next day, the troupe members packed until late.

That night, Rebecca checked her phone and saw Josette's message: [Happy birthday, sweetheart.]

She calculated the time difference before slipping outside with earbuds in and calling Josette.

Josette's face lit up as soon as the line went through. "What did you eat on your big day?"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 283

Rebecca vividly described how the troupe had celebrated her birthday in the theater.

Josette's eyes went wide. "Wow, a three-layer cake? You are a fortunate child, surrounded by so much love!"

"That's right," Rebecca said, her smile glowing from the inside out. "I really am incredibly happy right now."

She went on to ask Josette about various aspects of her life, and Josette seemed to be doing well. They chatted for quite some time, sharing stories and laughter.

Eventually, Josette considerately reminded her to sleep. Sharp as ever, she had calculated the time difference, knowing it was late where Rebecca was.

"Okay. Sweet dreams, Grandma," Rebecca said, ending the call.

Just like that, her birthday had gone out with fireworks. It had been such a magical night that she was still buzzing with excitement, unable to fall asleep.

She had danced on a real stage in front of a real crowd. The scene kept playing in her mind.

The troupe had snapped photos of the birthday moment, sending them over to her back in the hotel. She scrolled through the pictures, grinning so hard her face hurt.

Jenny's text popped up right then, packed with exclamation points: [Rebecca, you've recovered? You can dance again!]

She attached a clip of Rebecca's solo, without Desmond in the frame.

Rebecca: [Where did you get this?]

Jenny sent a mischievous emoji and a screenshot of Vance's post. It was a photo of her dancing, captioned simply: [Happy birthday to someone special.]

The post was barely minutes old, but the comments from their old high-school classmates were already exploding.

[Whoa! Rare for Vance to post something romantic.]

A whole row of identical jokes followed: [Rare for Vance to post something romantic.]

One classmate broke the pattern: [Happy birthday to Mrs. Bradford!]

Then another row piled on: [Happy birthday to Mrs. Bradford!]

They were all playful teasing, but one comment cut through the jokes.

Obadiah: [Doesn't she have a name? Who is someone? Who is Mrs. Bradford? Can't we just say happy birthday to Rebecca?]

Jenny's and Vance's common friends were their classmates, so she could only see their comments.

Jenny: [Did Vance track you down?]

Rebecca: [Yeah. No idea how.]

Jenny sent a "sighing" emoji: [I still don't get what happened between you two. You guys seemed solid in high school. Long-term relationships aren't easy. But I'm on your team all the way.]

Rebecca fired back a string of question marks: [Solid? Where did that come from?]

They'd barely spoken five words to each other in high school. How had anyone thought they were close?

Jenny: [Weren't you? Everyone whispered about your secret love.]

Rebecca: [Huh? We weren't dating.]

She admitted to having a crush on Vance, but he was always cold. So, where did this rumor even come from?

Back in high school, if any boy and girl showed signs of being in a relationship, their classmates would immediately start teasing them.

Sometimes, if the teacher happened to mention their names together, the whole class would erupt in laughter. But she and Vance had never experienced anything like that.

Anyway, it was ancient history. She didn't care what Vance thought anymore.

Just as she tried to shut the topic down, Jenny texted again: [Is this the only post he has ever made in his entire life?]

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 284

Jenny sent a screenshot of Vance's entire feed. There was no timestamp, and it was clean, except for one single post.

Actually, there had been more. He had just deleted everything else.

But none of it was anything to be proud of, so Rebecca brushed it off with a vague reply. Jenny sensed her reluctance to talk about Vance and dropped it gracefully.

Jenny: [Just be happy. Everything else should go away.]

Rebecca smiled, sending a thank-you and a big virtual hug. She slept like a baby that night.

The next morning, the troupe bustled onto the boat to leave Venice.

Everyone was hauling gear on the dock. Rebecca couldn't manage heavy loads, but she always pitched in with lighter props and made sure her own suitcase wasn't anyone else's problem.

As she pushed her rolling bag toward the gangway, a hand took it from her grip.

Her first instinct was robbery. She almost yelled, then saw Vance's face.

He didn't say a word, just carried the suitcase to the designated luggage area. Feeling a tug on her sleeve, Rebecca turned to see the same dancer who'd delivered the gift bag the night before.

The girl pointed at Vance and whispered, “That’s him! The guy who asked me to give you the present.”

Rebecca smiled softly. “I know. Thank you.”

The girl grinned. “No big deal. I’m boarding now.”

She skipped onto the boat and waved at Vance coming back down. He helped her with her suitcase, and

Rebecca reached the deck.

The summer morning in Venice was already scorching, without even a breath of wind. He stood by the water’s edge, perfectly still—nothing like the furious man from their last few run-ins.

She tried to walk past him onto the boat, but he caught her hand gently. “So desperate to avoid me? Can’t even spare one word?”

His voice was quiet, almost lost in the morning haze.

She pulled her hand free. “We’re on a tight schedule. Can’t keep everyone waiting.”

Vance nodded slowly, “Is this really the life you want?”

“Huh?”

“I mean, it looks exhausting. Running around like this, with no one even helping with your suitcase, let alone the heavy stuff. Wouldn’t it be easier if you let me take care of you?”

So, that was what he meant.

“Yes, this is what I want,” she answered honestly. “These past weeks have been the happiest time of my life. I’m not saying it to spite you. I’m genuinely happy.”

Vance smiled, something lighter flickering in his eyes. “I can see that. So…”

He paused, his gaze drifting to the horizon. “So, I’m heading back now.”

“Okay.” She nodded, remembering the gift. “Hold on. Let me get the necklace back to you.”

“No,” he said quietly. “What’s given is given.”

“If you don’t take it back, I’ll sell it at a resale shop.”

“Then sell it. At least, it will do somebody some good.”

“You...”

He pulled her into a quick, gentle hug—just a brush of warmth before he let go.

“Take good care of yourself. Bye.”

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Chapter 285

It felt like a soft breeze whispering past her ear. By the time Rebecca finally reacted, Vance was already melting into the busy crowd.

“Rebecca!” Desmond called out from the deck.

“Coming!” she answered, relieved.

It seemed Vance had finally gotten it, which meant he wouldn’t keep pushing to take care of her forever.

She boarded with the troupe, and they set sail for the next city.

She didn’t know that Vance hadn’t gone far. He appeared on the third-floor balcony of a waterside hotel, watching her boat gradually drift away.

Catherine stepped up behind him and followed his stare. She murmured, “She’s gone.”

Vance stayed silent.

“You still have us.” She moved closer and stood beside him. “I’m never leaving again. None of us will ever leave you.”

Boats crisscrossed the harbor every minute. In seconds, the ship mingled with the dozens of identical ones.

He bowed, giving a bitter chuckle. “Yeah. I should be happy. She finally found her life’s purpose. Isn’t that what I always wanted?”

“Exactly,” she said. “You couldn’t spend the rest of your life with someone you don’t love, could you?”

“The rest of my life?” His eyes drifted far out over the water.

Her gaze darkened for a split second, then she sighed theatrically, “Honestly, Rebecca doesn’t know what is good for her. Any other girl would have been over the moon to have a husband like you-money, luxury, and everything else handed to her. She would have treated you like royalty.” 2

He smiled bitterly, saying nothing.

She frowned for a moment. “Anyway, let her go. You deserve someone who truly loves and cherishes you.”

He turned to look at her, and she smiled up at him.

“Let’s head back,” he said. “I’ve been away from the company for too long. It doesn’t feel right.”

“Oh, sure.” She paused. “I miss Aiden and Lucas anyway.”

He pulled out his phone to book the tickets. “Where are you flying?”

She froze. “Back to Soliaridge with you, of course.”

He checked the flight information. “I’m stopping in Arelmoor first.”

“W-What for?”

“Rebecca started the tour from Arelmoor with the troupe. Josette’s probably still there. I’m going to bring her home.” He selected a flight and looked up. “You heading straight to Soliaridge?”

She fought to keep her expression neutral. “Sure, we’ll wait for you there.”

He confirmed their flights and paid. “You go first so you don’t feel bored. My flight is two hours after yours. We should leave for the airport now.”

“Okay.” Her voice trembled with frustration as her plan was wrecked by Josette once again.

To reach the airport, they had to leave Venice and take a train for an hour and a half to another city.

“I’ll take Josette home, and Rebecca will come running back.” These words kept echoing in Catherine’s ears the whole ride.

She lost count of how many times he had mentioned Josette and could not remember when he had said this sentence. But it was burned into her brain.

After thinking for a moment, she unlocked her phone and began sending messages.

[Go to Arelmoor. Find Rebecca's grandmother. And do these people look familiar?]

II don't know where she is. You have ten hours to find her.]

Ten minutes later, the reply came: [Ticket booked. Arriving in three hours.]

She heaved a sigh of relief.

Now it was three hours versus ten hours. Who would win?

Rebecca's journey felt lighter than air, like she'd finally snapped free of invisible chains. And in the next city, she'd meet Kaitlyn.

The tour schedule didn't actually pass through Kaitlyn's city, but Rebecca had stayed in touch and arranged a quick get-together.

Rebecca stepped into the hotel lobby and spotted Kaitlyn. Even though they'd only met a handful of times, she recognized Kaitlyn instantly because the latter looked so much like Josette.

Kaitlyn glanced up from her coffee and picked Rebecca out of the group just as fast.

"Becky!" Kaitlyn pulled her into a firm hug. "Look at you-all grown up!"

The last time they met, Rebecca was still a little girl.

They had no show the first night, so everyone rested while the niece and aunt slipped out.

Kaitlyn had long known about Rebecca's injury, her heart aching even more at Rebecca's limping.

Rebecca comforted her; she could tell real concern from fake pity a mile away. Kaitlyn's worry was the real thing.

They were the two people Josette loved most, so the first thing they did was video-call her to show that they were together.

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Chapter 286

Josette appeared on the screen, her face lighting up with pure joy. "Oh Lord, you two are together?"

“Yes, Aunt Kaitlyn came all the way to see me,” Rebecca replied happily, feeling like a kid again in front of them.

“Kaitlyn, take a look,” Josette urged. “How is Becky doing there? Has she lost weight? She keeps telling me she’s fine, but I think she’s fibbing.”

Kaitlyn had already studied her. Even with the leg issue and thinner frame, Rebecca radiated energy.

“Don’t worry,” Kaitlyn reassured her mother. “The kid is doing great. If you think she’s too skinny, wait till she comes to school in a month. By then, you’ll join me, and we’ll fatten her up.”

“That will do,” Josette laughed. “Once I’m there, I’ll probably end up raising two little pigs!”

Kaitlyn laughed along. “Mom, I’m in my fifties, and you’re still calling me a pig.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Josette smiled. “No matter how old you get, you’re still my baby.”

“Exactly,” Rebecca chimed in. “Even when you’re 80, you’ll still be her baby.”

Josette cracked up. “Then the pressure is on me. I’d better live to 120.”

“You will,” Rebecca and Kaitlyn said in perfect unison, making Josette laugh until she had to wipe her eyes.

The three of them talked, dreaming about their future. In a month, Rebecca would bring Josette to Kaitlyn’s city, and they’d reunite as a family.

Josette had been nervous about moving across the country at her age, but now she was buzzing with excitement.

The troupe had three days of shows in this city. Rebecca stayed four days total, and Kaitlyn never left her side.

On the last night, they were about to part. Rebecca was heading to the next stop, and Kaitlyn was going home.

Rebecca asked Lauren for permission to stay in Kaitlyn’s room, never expecting to meet a man there.

It was Kaitlyn’s son, Gabriel Perry. He was nothing like Emmett.

Rebecca had always known she had a cousin, but since they'd never met, she'd never let herself hope for much.

Sibling bonds had never meant a lot in her family. Her relationship with Emmett was distant at best; Soren and Kaitlyn barely got along.

Even her parents weren't so close to her, so what could she expect from a cousin she had never met before?

Yet Gabriel wasn't like anyone else. He wore gold-rimmed glasses and business suits even in the summer heat. His voice was soft, and his eyes were gentle.

Despite his young age, he carried a gentle, almost gracious aura.

She suddenly felt shy, like a kid meeting an elder; she was more nervous than she'd been with Kaitlyn.

Kaitlyn reminded him. "Son, put away that seriousness. You're freaking her out."

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well, I've never had a sibling, so I kind of don't know how to act."

"Just be yourself." She patted his shoulder. "You act older than me, giving me goosebumps."

He turned to Rebecca. "She told me to meet my cousin. For our first meeting, I brought a gift, though I didn't know what you'd like. I hope you'll like it. And from now on, I've got you covered. If anyone ever gives you trouble, tell me. I'll take care of it."

She was at a loss. In the past 20-plus years, no one had ever said anything like that to her. It felt like something straight out of a movie.

Being an adult now, she had learned to protect herself and the people she cared about. Still, she thanked him warmly.

Here to take his mother home, he stayed in another room at the same hotel, while the two women shared a room and a king-sized bed.

Lying side by side on the pillows, they talked about family, about why Josette had been staying temporarily in Arelmoor. When her parents and Emmett were mentioned, Rebecca couldn't help but feel sad.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Kaitlyn soothed, pulling her close. "When are you heading back? I'm sending Gabriel with you. He can handle Josette's visa and help bring her over. It's too much for you to handle alone. You've got me now. No more carrying everything by yourself." 2

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 287

Kaitlyn smelled faintly of a soft perfume that made Rebecca feel safe. Being held like that made her want to cry even harder.

This was the motherly hug she'd dreamed about as a little girl but had never once gotten from her own mom. But now, on the cusp of adulthood, she felt it with her aunt.

After only a few days, she already hated saying goodbye, but they'd see each other again in just over a month. Gabriel thoughtfully handed out gifts to the entire troupe, introducing himself as Rebecca's cousin and thanking them for looking after her.

Helia sidled up and whispered, "Wow, your cousin is generous! The gifts he gave each of us weren't cheap, and he bought for the whole troupe."

Rebecca still had no idea what Gabriel did for a living. They'd only met the night before and hadn't conversed much.

Kaitlyn had brought him home once years ago, before Rebecca was even born, and it hadn't gone well. After that, she kept him away.

"Becky, we are heading out," Gabriel said, climbing into the car for the airport. "I'll meet you at the very last stop."

"Okay. Bye, Gabriel. Bye, Aunt Kaitlyn." Rebecca waved until they disappeared, then climbed into the van and headed to the next city.

Without realizing it, the tour was already halfway done. The troupe traveled through three more countries in a blur.

During that stretch, Rebecca's days fell into a steady rhythm: rehabilitation, helping with troupe logistics, and calling Josette.

Seeing Josette's smiling face was the only thing that let her breathe easy. But after a week, she started noticing something wrong.

"Grandma, you've lost weight," she said, her heart squeezing.

Josette just laughed it off. "Have I? I'm fine, sweetheart. I've been square dancing with the ladies downstairs every day. Moving around feels good."

"Oh..." Rebecca was still worried.

“People need to stay active. If I just sit inside all day, I get bored to tears. Don’t worry. I’m doing great,” Josette reassured her. “Everyone says it’s a blessing to be thin when you’re old. As long as I’m healthy, it’s fine.”

Rebecca acknowledged that it was good for Josette to get out, make friends, and exercise. Still, being far away made her overthink.

So, she asked Desmond if he could send his sister to check on Josette. Desmond made the call immediately, and Denise went over the same day following the address given by him.

Denise reported: [Josette is fine at home. I’ll stop by every few days.]

Only then did Rebecca feel a little lighter.

The following week, she still called Josette every day. Denise visited twice more and said the only issue was that Josette didn’t have much appetite because of the heat.

Rebecca’s stomach stayed in knots as the tour was winding down. At the last stop, she texted Josette to say she’d be home soon and gave her the arrival time in Arelmoor.

Now she felt more certain than ever that her decision was right. She had to bring Josette with her, or the worry would eat her alive.

On the final day, Gabriel arrived and waited for the show to end so they could fly to Arelmoor together.

They checked in side by side, and his seat was next to hers.

Helia quietly whispered to Desmond, “Man, the appearance of her cousin just cranked the difficulty level way up.”

Rebecca didn’t hear the whisper. For some reason, her anxiety kept climbing the closer they got to takeoff.

Gabriel noticed, saying, “Relax. We’ll see Josette soon.”

“It’s not nerves,” she replied, “I just have this awful feeling that something’s about to go wrong.”

“You called her today, right?” he reminded her. “We’ll see her in just a few hours.”

She nodded, but those few hours felt so long.

Unlike the flight out, she couldn’t sleep a wink. The second the wheels touched down, the panic in her chest hit a fever pitch.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 288

Rebecca hailed a cab with Gabriel and raced straight to Josette's apartment complex.

Concerned, Desmond and Lauren went with them.

"Don't worry, Rebecca," Lauren said softly. "We're almost there."

Desmond echoed, "Yeah, Denise visited her just yesterday."

Denise had dropped by yesterday, and she had called Josette that morning. Everything seemed to be fine, yet the dread wouldn't loosen its grip.

An hour later, they reached the complex.

Rebecca sprinted upstairs, unlocked the door, and froze in place.

Josette was gone, the apartment trashed.

The others were equally shocked. They split up immediately.

Lauren ran to property management for security footage. Gabriel and Rebecca searched the neighborhood on foot. Desmond headed straight to the police station and started a group chat so they could share updates in real time.

Rebecca turned on her local phone before a flood of missed calls and frantic texts poured in. Ignoring them, she kept calling Josette or sending video requests.

But Josette's phone was off.

Half an hour later, Lauren returned with the security footage. Gabriel and Rebecca had found nothing.

The video showed Josette leaving the complex with Soren, Adeline, and Emmett.

"Those beasts!" Rebecca clutched the phone, shaking with rage and bursting into tears.

"Let's head to the police station now," Lauren said, steadying Rebecca.

They raced to the station.

It was technically a family matter. Josette had left with her own son, daughter-in-law, and grandson, but Rebecca begged and poured out the ugly history.

Finally, she asked them to check whether any of the four had bought plane or train tickets and where they had gone.

The search showed they had all flown back to Soliaridge and already landed. Rebecca kept dialing Josette's number, but her phone was off. Video requests also went unanswered.

She tried Soren's number, but he rejected it. Adeline and Emmett did the same thing.

She called everyone she could think of, even Elton. He said no one had been at the house for over a month except the time Vance had stopped by.

"We're going back to Soliaridge!" Rebecca trembled, automatically ignoring the part about Vance.

Her whole mind was on her grandmother. She didn't know how they had even found Josette or how Soren had gotten out of jail, especially since the kidnapping case wasn't even closed yet.

On the flight back, many questions swirled in her mind. She didn't hear a single word Gabriel or Desmond said.

Gabriel could only watch over her. When she refused to eat, he opened a yogurt and held it out. "If you don't eat, I'll have to feed you like a toddler."

Rebecca's mind was in turmoil. She drank the whole thing in one go, already planning her next move the second they landed.

"Maybe I can visit the jail?" she muttered, seeing an entry point.

It was her right to visit her father in prison. 2

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 289

The moment they landed, they went straight to the prison. Rebecca revealed her identity as Soren's daughter and asked to see him.

As expected, Soren had already been released on bail.

"I just got back from overseas," she said frantically. "May I ask who arranged the bail for my dad?"

The officer told her it had been done through a lawyer. Soren's family hired one and paid the bail.

It didn't make sense. If they were willing to spend the money, Soren would have been out long ago. They hadn't done so or sought a lawyer because they didn't have the funds.

It all pointed to one fact. Someone else had footed the bill.

"I know who it was," she muttered soullessly, sinking on the curb outside.

"Vance?" Desmond guessed quietly.

Rebecca pulled out her phone, stared at the long string of missed calls, and dialed back.

Vance answered almost instantly, his voice bright with surprise and joy. "Rebecca, you're back? Why didn't you tell me beforehand? I'd have picked you up. Where are you right now? I'll be right there."

"Where is Josette?" She demanded, not interested in his topic.

"Josette?" He blinked. "You hid her from me. Why ask me now?"

"Tell me where Josette is!" she yelled.

He paused, turning serious. "What are you talking about? What happened? Is she okay?"

"She went missing! Where did you take her? Tell me!" she cried out, her heart twisted in knots.

She had been holding herself together the whole trip, telling herself to stay calm and think straight. Now all the emotions had crashed down. If Vance had been standing in front of her, she probably would have lost it completely,

"Missing? Rebecca, don't cry. Tell me what happened," he soothed her, sounding clueless.

That made everything even scarier, causing a chill to run down her spine. She wiped her tears, pulled herself together, and gritted her teeth.

"Be honest with me. Did you hire a lawyer to get my dad bailed out?"

"No, I didn't. You told me to stay out of it."

Rebecca's grip loosened, and the phone clattered to the pavement.

Vance was a lot of things, but he didn't lie. If he said he hadn't done it, he hadn't.

The situation was even darker now. Josette might be in danger.

"Rebecca." Desmond and Gabriel spoke at the same time. "We need to call the police."

She nodded, knowing it was the only option left.

“Let’s go,” Gabriel said, helping her up.

He took her hands, turned around, and lifted her onto his back.

She squirmed. “Gabriel...”

“I know you’re hurting right now,” he said, carrying her outside. “Cry on my shoulder and let it all out. Then we’ll find Josette together.”

The impulse to cry that she had barely suppressed burst forth again, but she didn’t make a sound. Her face rested on his shoulder, and tears streamed down, soaking his clothes.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 290

Desmond watched their interaction, envious that Gabriel could openly comfort her.

It wasn’t right to feel that way, but he couldn’t help it.

Rebecca had never let herself cry freely in front of another person before.

She couldn’t cry in front of her parents because they didn’t love her. She couldn’t cry in front of Josette, fearing it would worry her.

She couldn’t cry in front of Vance, afraid of making him unhappy or adding emotional burdens to him. She had only ever tried to please him.

By the time they reached the police station, her emotions were back under control. She told the officers everything, confirming Josette had returned to Soliaridge with her parents.

She was worried that Josette leaving with her son, daughter-in-law, and grandson might not qualify as a missing-person case, so she stressed that none of the three could be reached.

The police checked the flight records and confirmed all four had arrived in Soliaridge. Rebecca gave them every phone number, and they tried without success.

The police accepted the report in the end. They told her to go home and wait, promising to contact her the second they had any news.

She thanked them, feeling a little reassured. While the police did their part, she decided to keep searching with the group.

Outside the station, she tried hailing a cab, but a car was already waiting at the curb.

A middle-aged man stepped out. “Mr. Rossi, your car is here.”

Rebecca blinked, wondering who he was referring to. Gabriel nodded to the man, then told her, “It’s a long story. I’ll explain everything later. I’m Rossi, though I prefer just Gabriel. And this is my friend, Hugo.”

He paused, seeking her opinion. “We’ll grab something to eat first, then drop Desmond off to rest. How does that sound? As for us... I was planning to stay at Josette’s place, but with everything that’s happened, it’s smarter to stay downtown. A hotel?”

Rebecca nodded, though she had zero appetite. Gabriel served her food and insisted she eat.

She picked at it without really seeing it.

“Becky, you need energy to find Josette,” he sighed, turning to Desmond. “Don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Desmond said quickly. “When we find her, she’ll be upset to see you withering away.”

“I know you guys mean well, but I...” She hesitated. “Okay, I’ll eat.”

Once the meal was over, they followed Gabriel’s plan to drop Desmond off first. He couldn’t join them at the hotel, feeling regretful about that. At the same time, he was worried about Josette.

“If there is any news, be sure to tell me,” he said. “I’ll keep looking too.”

He felt guilty, too, since Denise had visited Josette recently, yet Josette had still disappeared right under their noses.

“I’m sorry,” he added quietly.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 291

Rebecca drifted through the entire day in a numb haze. Only then did she regain some clarity.

“It’s not your fault,” she reassured him. “You’ve helped a lot. We couldn’t thank you enough.”

Desmond gave a bitter smile, praying for Josette’s safety.

Gabriel clapped a hand on his shoulder. “We owe you and your family a big one. Really. Thank you for watching out for Rebecca all this month.”

Desmond swallowed the lump in his throat. How could he admit out loud that he hadn’t done it well?

That would make them feel bad.

“We’re going to find Josette together,” he said firmly.

He had called his dad, and the whole Schroeder network was lighting up.

Gabriel nodded. “She is gonna be fine. Now go get some rest.”

After Desmond headed off, Hugo drove Gabriel and Rebecca to the hotel they had reserved.

The rooms were two presidential suites on the top floor of Soliaridge’s most exclusive hotel. By then,

Rebecca was still in a trance.

She trailed Gabriel out of the elevator and followed him straight into the first suite without realizing it. He turned, saw her walking with her head down and nearly bumping into his back, and shook his head.

He glanced at Hugo. “Bring her luggage up too.”

With Rebecca this shaken, he wasn’t about to let her stay alone. He scanned the suite layout, the long sectional sofa would work perfectly for him.

She snapped back to reality. “Our luggage is back?”

She remembered bolting off the plane the second the wheels touched down, forgetting baggage claim entirely. On any normal day, losing luggage would have been a crisis; today, Josette was missing, and her whole world had been ripped out from under her.

“They’re here,” Gabriel said calmly. “Hugo handled it.”

Rebecca turned to the man and forced a shaky smile. “Thank you, Hugo.”

Hugo bowed respectfully. “My pleasure. Please get some rest. I’ll leave now.”

She sank onto the deep velvet sofa, her mind racing in endless circles. Where was Josette? What had they done to her?

“Becky.” Gabriel crouched in front of her, noticing the dried tear tracks streaking her cheeks like pale salt lines. “Go take a bath and get your strength back. I’ll figure out a way to bring Josette back.”

She lifted her head numbly and met his eyes.

He gently ruffled her hair. “Go on.”

She nodded, pulled fresh clothes from her suitcase, and glanced at her phone. Still nothing.

Watching her shuffle away in dejection, Gabriel slipped into the adjoining room and made a call.

“Hugo, it’s me.” He looked down at the skyline. “There are some tasks for you.”

The conversation lasted about five minutes. When he finished and walked back into the living room, Rebecca’s phone rang on the sofa.

The screen flashed with Vance’s name.

Gabriel thought for a moment, then answered the call. “Hello? Who’s this?”

Silence stretched on the other end. Then a furious bark burst through the line, “Who the hell are you?”

Gabriel remained composed. “Looking for Becky?”

Vance roared with rage. “Becky? Who are you to call her that?”

“She can’t take the call right now. Do you have any news about Josette?”

“I don’t! And why can’t she...”

Gabriel hung up before he could finish. No real information? No point dragging it out. 7

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Chapter 292

Vance kept calling him, refusing to give up. Of course, Gabriel didn't pick up again.

When Rebecca finally emerged from the shower, her phone rang again. She checked out the caller ID and hesitated.

"I already picked up once," Gabriel said quietly. "You don't mind, do you? He doesn't know anything. He was just..."

That was exactly what was holding Rebecca back. No news about Josette meant no reason to talk. She had zero emotional bandwidth left.

So, the calls went unanswered.

Vance sat alone in his office, with a line of executives fidgeting in the waiting area outside.

"What's going on? We're supposed to be in a meeting. Is Mr. Bradford still buried in something?" Aiden asked.

The secretary answered awkwardly, "I've reminded him several times, but he hasn't come out."

"I'll handle it." Aiden knocked and pushed the door open. "Vance, you done? The whole team's waiting."

"Coming." Vance pocketed his phone and stood up.

In the conference room, every senior and mid-level executive sat at attention, all eyes on the head of the table.

"Sorry for the delay. Let's dive in." Vance took his seat, but his mind was miles away.

Aiden jumped in smoothly. "Alright, we're cutting straight to the main subject-Rossi Enterprises, the biggest player in our industry worldwide. You all know them. Word is that Mr. Rossi Sr. has passed. His only son, Gabriel Rossi, has taken the reins."

He paused and added, "Mr. Rossi Jr. is planning to shift major operations stateside and has already sent CEO Hugo Ballard to set up a company right here in Soliaridge. Rumor has it Gabriel himself will be arriving soon. They're seeking local partners, and landing that deal is our top priority this year." ¹

Aiden glanced at Vance, who pulled himself back to the present. "Exactly. Even though Rossi hasn't made any official announcement yet, the industry buzz is loud. We..."

He paused, thinking about the situation. The company was in rough shape now after screwing over two major deals in a row. One was with Pascal Lemke, and the other was with the Muellers.

But he couldn't say that out loud. Instead, he let it pass and continued, "We have to land this deal. In other words, we'll do everything to win over Gabriel Rossi."

The meeting dragged on all morning as they made strategies and plans. When it finally wrapped, the worry lines etched across Vance's face hadn't eased at all.

Aiden walked out with him, noticing his expression. "Don't worry, man. This one's going to work. I've already made contact with Hugo."

Vance nodded, but his mind wasn't on Rossi Enterprises at all.

"To be frank," Aiden continued as they stepped into the office, "we've been stalled this year mainly by those two failed deals."

Vance sat down and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Which is exactly why this one cannot fail."

"Do you believe in superstitions?" Aiden leaned in closer. "Both deals fell through for the same reason."

Vance blinked.

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Chapter 293

"It was because of Rebecca." Aiden laid it bare. "She's out of the picture now, so it'll go through."

"That's nonsense." Vance frowned.

"I'm serious," Aiden insisted. "Sometimes in business, you have to believe in metaphysical stuff. Rebecca is your bane. Ever since you married her, when has anything truly good happened?"

Vance brushed it off. "Come on. When did the company go public? Right after the wedding."

"That's different; you have to look at the timing. When things were flowing your way, you could overpower her negative energy," Aiden quibbled. "But luck shifts. Once she started

draining yours, all that was left was bad luck. I even consulted a psychic. That's why everything's gone sideways this year."

When Vance remained skeptical, he continued, "As the saying goes, a virtuous wife is a crown to her husband. When she wasn't fighting you, everything was fine. The second she started pushing back, your luck tanked. A harmonious home makes everything thrive. That's ancient wisdom."

"That's enough. Keep an eye here. I have to step out." Vance stood, ignoring whatever Aiden said next, and strode out while dialing his driver. "Did you check Syliaview? Is Josette back home? What about Soren's place?"

Aiden, who had followed him out, caught every word. The second Vance disappeared, Aiden ducked back into the office and called Catherine.

"Vance seems to find out Rebecca's Josette is missing. Watch what you say. Don't slip up."

"I know. Rebecca's back, but it's fine. I used a separate burner phone to handle everything, and I already ditched the SIM. We're completely disconnected now."

"Good. I was worried you'd accidentally say too much. Anyway, we know nothing. The key is making sure those people keep their mouths shut."

"No problem, right? We're doing a good deed here. The old lady was all alone in that unfamiliar place. We're kind enough to tell her family to pick her up."

"That's true, but Vance is probably out looking for her by now. We just got ahead of him. Now that everyone's in Soliaridge, it probably won't be too hard for him to find her. We need to make sure the three idiots don't rat them out. There is no need for you to get involved. I'll handle it."

"Aiden..." Catherine softened.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

Her voice trembled as if she might cry. "Thank you. In this whole world, you're the only one who helps me with your whole heart-no strings, no expectations, nothing hidden."

Aiden was touched. "Vance helps too."

"Vance... He is wonderful, but Rebecca is constantly there between us. He doesn't love her, but his sense of duty is too strong. He feels responsible for her and for her grandmother. Carrying that much weight, he can't give me his whole heart."

"He can't help it..."

“I know. That’s part of why I love him. If he were the kind of man who walked away from responsibility, I wouldn’t fall for him. But loving him is hard. You’re the one who makes me feel truly seen.”

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Chapter 294

“Come on,” Aiden said gently. “We’re buddies. You free tonight? Let’s grab drinks.”

“Sure,” Catherine agreed readily.

The first thing Vance had done after returning from Europe was look for Josette. He landed in Arelmoor but found zero trace of her—no phone records, no rental history, and no hotel bookings.

Then Aiden called, urging him to come back for some emergencies at the company.

Vance had to fly back, assuming Josette was somewhere in Soliaridge, but it was strange. He had checked every place she might go and come up empty.

He hadn’t thought much, since it was Rebecca who had hidden her. Rebecca cared for her deeply, even while abroad, Rebecca kept frequent contact with her.

If anything had happened, Rebecca would have informed him immediately. After all, he was her only support there; her own family wouldn’t care.

The company was in bad shape, so he had shifted most of his focus there and only asked the driver to check Josette’s house every few days.

He never imagined Josette would go missing. Rebecca wouldn’t answer his calls, so he had no idea what was happening.

He could only guess: Sick? Collapsed somewhere? Connected to whom?

If Josette were sick, hospitals would have records. He sent this driver on the task.

If she had collapsed or been hurt, someone would have found her, and Rebecca would have reported it to the police.

The last clue was the Perry family. He hadn’t forgotten how greedily they had eyed that house, and now they had vanished, too.

That was suspicious.

Just like Rebecca, he went straight to the jail and was told Soren had been bailed out.

Who had posted bail? He followed the trail and confirmed Josette had been taken by the Perrys. The biggest question mark was who had paid for Soren's release.

He decided to go to the police station to find out. By the time he arrived, it was already dark.

By pure coincidence, there was the woman who had refused to answer his calls, standing beside a man. She was there because the police had pinged Josette's and the other three's phones. They had thought it was a breakthrough, but it wasn't.

Josette's phone had been found tossed in some bushes in a park. The Perrys had ditched it so no one could track them.

Rebecca held the evidence bag and cried silently. This was the exact phone Josette had used to communicate with her every day.

"The other three phones are pinging from an apartment complex," the officer told her. "We checked, and they weren't there."

"Don't worry. We'll keep looking," Gabriel said, pulling her against his shoulder so she could lean on him.

Vance entered the room and bumped right into the scene.

"Rebecca!" He stormed forward and yanked her out of Gabriel's arms.

Her wrist throbbed where he grabbed it, and she snapped, "What are you doing? This is not the time to lose it. I'm not in the mood to deal with you right now."

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Chapter 295

Rebecca's whole mind was on Josette. She didn't want to hear anything irrelevant.

"Who is he?" Vance's glare drilled into Gabriel.

Before she could answer, Gabriel stepped in front of her protectively.

"Rebecca, let's go," he said, barely glancing at Vance.

"Stop!" Vance blocked their path, glaring at Gabriel but speaking to Rebecca. "Any news on Josette?"

“This doesn’t concern you, sir,” Gabriel said calmly.

The night wind lifted his black coat as he shielded Rebecca behind him, his presence suddenly commanding.

Vance laughed coldly. “Doesn’t concern me? Where did you crawl out from? Ask her who I am to her. Ask her if it concerns me. Do you even know who I am?”

“I do,” Gabriel answered indifferently. “Vance Bradford, who is about to become her ex-husband, right?”

Vance fumed. “What the hell? That’s not happening. Rebecca, come here.”

The command rolled off his tongue automatically. In the past, she had listened to his every word. Even now, angry as she was, he was certain that on something this important, she would make the right choice.

But she didn’t move, tired of this whole entanglement. Josette was still missing, and nothing else mattered now.

“Let’s go,” she said, slipping her arm through Gabriel’s.

“Rebecca!” Vance’s eyes locked on her arm. “Where are you going?”

Neither of them answered, but their cold shoulders said it all: “None of your business.”

“You sure you don’t want to come home with me?” He caught up again and grabbed her hand.

“Josette is missing, and I’m losing my mind. Can you stop this?” she sulked.

“I understand.” His tone softened. “I know you’re terrified. I am too, That’s why we should be working together to find her instead of fighting here.”

But there was nothing left to say. She struggled. “Let go. I’m leaving.”

He held on, shaking his head. “You’ve been away for a whole month. Don’t you miss home? Nancy quit, and I’ve been cleaning the house myself. It looks exactly the way you left it. Come home, okay?”

“Don’t you get it?” Her patience snapped. “Do you really think that place is my home? The passcode is Catherine’s birthday. The whole décor is everything she loves. You call that my home? I hate it!”

He was stunned.

“Mr. Bradford, let go and keep this dignified.” Gabriel pried Vance’s fingers off one by one, then led Rebecca away.

“Rebecca!” Vance watched her climb into the car, standing frozen in place until a police officer called out.

He snapped back, remembering his mission. Finding Josette was the top priority now.

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Chapter 296

Gabriel started the car, having brought neither the driver nor Hugo.

Just then, Hugo called.

Gabriel glanced at Rebecca in the passenger seat and didn’t drive off. He answered with a simple hum, letting Hugo speak.

The latter briefed Gabriel about the situation, saying that he had obtained the required things and would send them over.

Soon, several files came onto his phone. Gabriel hung up and opened them one by one.

Hugo’s efficiency was impressive, having compiled dozens of pages, photos, and maps in minutes.

Gabriel scanned everything and got a rough picture.

“Did Hugo need something?” Rebecca asked, noticing his serious expression.

Gabriel shook his head and set the phone down. “Tell me your plan. What are your thoughts about you and Vance?”

Truthfully, she and Gabriel hadn’t known each other for long. They weren’t that close yet, so she had barely mentioned her marriage since they were in Europe.

She certainly hadn’t expected him to ask now. Given his tone, he must have picked up some information from Kaitlyn.

So, she answered honestly, “I’ve thought it through. I’m not going back; I came home to file for divorce. But right now, finding Josette is the only thing that matters. Once she’s safe, I’ll handle the paperwork.”

Gabriel nodded, filing the information away. He looked at her gently. “This is on me. I knew I had a cousin in Soliaridge, but I never realized how hard things had been for you.”

He reached over and stroked her hair. “Divorce is no big deal. You have Kaitlyn and me now. The future is going to be good. Leave this to me. Go back to the hotel and rest. If she comes back seeing you haggard, she’ll blame me for not taking good care of you.”

An inexplicable feeling washed over her. It was warm and soothing, like she finally had a solid wall behind her. There was no more fear or wandering alone,

For 20-plus years, she had walked on thin ice. Her parents didn’t love her; the only person who ever spoiled her was Josette.

She had grown up trying to protect Josette, but no one had ever spoken to her like this. Not even Vance.

Vance had said similar things, like he’d take care of her or be responsible for her forever, but those words always carried conditions.

Gabriel’s promise was pure, with no strings attached. It was purely family love.

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In fact, she didn’t need a protector anymore. She was a grown-up now and could protect herself. Even so, hearing it still touched something deep inside.

“What’s wrong?” Gabriel ruffled her hair. “Let’s go. Back to the hotel so you can rest.”

Arriving at the hotel, Rebecca felt clearer. Sleeping in his suite and on his bed suddenly felt wrong. So, she went to her own room.

“Call me if you need anything,” Gabriel said, not insisting.

He would probably be going out later anyway. Separate rooms made it more convenient. He didn’t want to disturb her sleep.

“Okay. Sleep tight.” She watched him leave, closed the door, and immediately contacted Vivian.

They had communicated that afternoon, and Vivian had promised to give her an update that night.

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Chapter 297

Vivian's update wasn't positive. She only found that Catherine and Aiden had been spending a lot of time together lately, but they were always close.

"I told Wade to keep digging. We'll wait for his update?" Vivian said.

"Okay. Thank you," Rebecca replied. "Oh, and I brought you a gift from the tour. We'll meet up in a couple of days, and I'll give it to you."

Now she had no choice but to wait for Vivian's lead and the police's update. Gabriel had told her to sleep, but how could she?

She lay in the dark with the lights off, trying to follow his advice and think of nothing. Still, her mind roared.

Exhausted, she closed her eyes, hoping to keep her strength up, but the second she started to drift, Josette would enter her mind and call for help.

She would jolt awake, her heart thumping wildly.

In the dream, Josette looked almost skeletal in a blue sweater. Hunched over, she whispered for help.

She had never dreamed of anyone so clearly. Every wrinkle on the face and every strand of white hair was perfectly visible. It was so vivid that even in the dream, her heart ached.

She pressed her hand to her chest and cried silently in the dark. "Grandma, where are you?"

The night dragged on like that, tossing between sleeplessness and the same nightmare. She even started to believe Josette was living the exact horror.

Then, in the early morning, a message finally came. An unknown account requested to add her on WhatsApp with the note: [Want to know where Josette is?]

Her exhausted body surged with adrenaline. She accepted instantly and fired off: [Where is she? Who are you?]

They only sent over a video. The second Rebecca opened it, she nearly broke down.

Josette lay curled on a filthy bed in some dim, rundown room, her body twisted like a dead branch. In just days, the few silver strands in her hair had turned completely white.

Rebecca had video-called her right before the flight. There hadn't been this much white then. If the camera hadn't been zoomed in on her face, Rebecca wouldn't have believed it was her.

Josette was almost unrecognizable, mirroring that in Rebecca's dream. Her features were distorted, her eye sockets hollowed out. Her skin was dry, dark, and rough, with wrinkles deepening like the cracks in old tree bark.

Tears poured down Rebecca's face. Her fingers shook so badly she could barely type.

Furious, she demanded: [Who are you? Where did you hide her? What do you want?]

The reply came: [Seen enough? It's your grandma, right?]

Rebecca: [Cut the crap!]

The answer: [\$30 million.]

Rebecca: [Account!]

If she had the account, she could trace them..

But they were careful: [No account.]

Rebecca: [Then how? \$30 million in cash? You want me to load it in a truck?]

The kidnapper: [That's your problem. Figure it out, and be quick. I don't know how many more days she can last.]

Every word stabbed her heart. She typed more, but they went silent.

She clenched her jaw, knowing this was not the time to cry. She forwarded the video to Vivian and asked Wade to analyze it. Maybe the brief glimpse of the window could reveal the location.

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Chapter 298

Rebecca ran next door and knocked while sending the video.

"Gabriel, it's me," she called out. "Open up! I have news."

Gabriel wasn't in his room, but his call came almost immediately.

“Where did this video come from?”

“Someone sent it to me and demanded \$30 million. Where are you? You’re not in your room? I’m going to call the police.”

“I’m out handling something. I’ve received the video and will deal with it. You can go to the police station. Hugo is already on his way to pick you up; he’ll be there soon. Stay in your room and wait.” Gabriel laid everything out clearly and calmly. “I will bring Josette home. Trust me.”

“Okay,” she agreed, staying to wait for Hugo.

The man arrived fast. Following Gabriel’s instructions, he took her straight to the police station.

The second she handed over the video, the officers’ expressions changed. They immediately escalated and started moving.

The last bit of her strength drained away.

More waiting? Waiting for the police to trace the IP and the registered owner. Waiting for Wade to pinpoint the building.

Every minute stretched into eternity; she quickly learned that waiting wasn’t the worst part. The most painful thing was seeing hope, then falling back into the abyss of disappointment.

The police traced the IP to an address, identified the WhatsApp account, and gave a name she had never heard of.

They went straight to the door. Opening it was a man in his fifties.

He claimed someone had borrowed his phone. “He connected it to his laptop and messed around for a minute.”

His eyes darted, and under pressure, he admitted he had been paid 10,000 dollars in cash. When they asked him about the person, he said it was a decent-looking young man in his early twenties.

Every lead pointed to Emmett.

The police issued a warning and continued their investigation.

Now, neither Gabriel, Hugo, nor the officers thought Rebecca should stay at the station. It served no purpose.

With disappointment and anxiety, she returned to the hotel.

Gabriel still wasn't back by the afternoon. She had no idea what he was doing, but every second felt like an hour.

Finally, Vivian's message came with the coordinates: [Found it.]

Rebecca was relieved and impressed by Wade's skills. She immediately forwarded it to Gabriel, then called the police station and reported the address.

His call came right after.

"I'm almost there. You don't need to come."

"You already know where she is? Have you seen her? How is she?"

"Not yet, but I'm close. Stay at the hotel."

"Who took her? Did you see them? Is it..."

She couldn't bring herself to say the names. She didn't want to believe her own family could be that monstrous.

He paused, getting her implication. "Yes."

She gave a bitter laugh, her blood running cold.

It was undeniable that her parents and Emmett had taken Josette, but she had still clung to the hope that it was only greed. At best, they'd use Josette to squeeze cash out of her.

She had never imagined they would torture Josette. She couldn't picture how much Josette had suffered at the hands of those three animals.

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Chapter 299

Every moral wall Rebecca had ever built collapsed in an instant.

"I want to go. I need to go," she insisted, terrified that Josette couldn't make it.

In that case, she would make sure those three monsters were dealt with.

Gabriel hesitated for only a second. "All right. Tell Hugo to bring you."

On the outskirts of Soliaridge, there was an abandoned warehouse-a place uninhabited for a very long time, full of old wood and old materials everywhere.

Thick dust accumulated, and a foul stench permeated the air. A makeshift bed of old planks held a filthy mattress and blanket that hadn't been washed for so long that they were black with mold.

The floor was covered in urine stains and dried waste. Rats scurried openly from corner to corner. On that bed lay a skeletal figure with her eyes closed, barely breathing.

The door opened, and in came two people-Soren and Adeline, who immediately covered their noses in disgust.

Adeline carried a lunchbox. Soren pinched his nose and shouted, "Mom, time to eat!"

The figure on the bed didn't even have the strength to roll over. Even opening her eyes seemed impossible. Her mind drifted in and out.

Josette vaguely heard Soren's voice, realizing that her time was almost up and that she couldn't see Rebecca again.

Maybe that was better. Seeing her like that would definitely break Rebecca's heart.

"If you don't eat, I'll have to feed you. See? I am being filial!" Soren took the lunchbox from Adeline.

Inside was thin oatmeal laced with laxatives.

"Adeline made this for you, with extra ingredients added," Soren laughed wildly. "See how good we are to you."

He pried open Josette's mouth and poured. Having eaten the same mixture for three days, she had no strength left to fight.

Days ago, they had broken into her apartment, tied her up, and kept her alive with half a bowl of oatmeal a day.

During the video calls with Rebecca, she had looked thinner. How could she not? She could barely walk; speaking alone had taken everything she had.

The last day in Arelmoor, they had started adding the laxative. By nightfall, she knew she was failing.

Back in Soliaridge, they had dumped her here, feeding her the same poisoned oatmeal. Now she couldn't

SHIP 200 even crawl off the bed anymore.

The laxative left her lying in her own mess. Now she didn't want to live anymore. She knew she could not.

She had been able to swallow a little yesterday. Today, even swallowing was impossible. The liquid ran out from the corners of her mouth.

"Still won't eat?" Soren slapped her across the face.

Josette still didn't move. The monster in front of her was only a blur now, but Rebecca's face came into sharp focus.

She saw Rebecca as a toddler learning to speak, dancing joyfully as a little girl, the heartbreaking moment of the car accident, and Rebecca's promise at the airport to pick her up.

A tear slipped down her cheek. She murmured silently, "Becky, I can't make it to that day. Promise me to live happily. In the next life, don't be my granddaughter. I can't give you a good father."

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Chapter 300

"Hey, don't play dead." Soren shoved her head roughly.

Josette was unresponsive. Her mouth was half-open, and her eyes were glazing over.

"Come on, you're killing her." Adeline fretted, grabbing his arm.

Soren stared at his mother on the bed. For half a second, something like hesitation flickered in his eyes, then it hardened again.

"Mom, don't blame me," he muttered. "If you had just signed the house over nice and easy, none of this would have happened."

"We already have the will. Maybe we should just..." Adeline said tentatively.

"Shut up!" Soren snapped. "A will only works when someone's dead. While she's alive, there's still a risk."

"But..." Adeline looked at the fading woman, suddenly remembering the days after she gave birth.

Josette had cared for her, bringing chicken soup to her bedside.

“What? She died on her own,” Soren scowled. “It had nothing to do with us. We were even kind enough to bring her food.”

Adeline trembled all over, unable to convince herself.

Soren scorned at the mess covering Josette. “If you want to blame anyone, blame Rebecca. We could have taken you home and let you rest in peace. But she is searching for you everywhere. What if she manages to save you?”

Fresh tears streamed down Josette’s face, but she couldn’t utter a sound.

Soren thought for a moment and told Adeline, “She’ll be gone in a day or two. We can’t leave her here alone. They might find her and trace back to us. Stay here and watch her die, then take her back and clean her up. We’ll announce her death from a disease.”

“I-I can’t stay here,” she stammered. “W-Why don’t you stay here?”

He raised his fist. “Are you saying no? Useless!”

She ducked and ran for the door. “No, I’m not staying. She is your mother, not mine.”

Soren cursed, chasing after her, until they reached the door. The second she yanked it open, he grabbed her by the hair,

Then their faces went pale at the same time. A group of big men stood outside; among them were foreigners. The leader was someone they had never seen before.

“W-Who are you?” Soren let go of Adeline’s hair and trembled, thinking they were debt collectors.

He stammered, “I’ll pay you back. Every penny of it. I...”

Before he could finish, a car roared up and slammed to a stop. Rebecca jumped out and limped toward them fast, screaming, “Grandma...”

Clueless, Soren pointed at her. “That’s my daughter! Her husband is rich. Grab her, and you’ll get...”

The leader drove a fist straight into his jaw, cutting him short. Soren flew backward and crashed onto the ground.

Blood flooded his mouth. He spat, and two teeth came out with it.

Pure terror made him shake. “W-Who are you people?”

Gabriel didn't even glance at him. At the same time, Rebecca rushed inside straight toward the broken bed.

The scene was worse than anything Gabriel had ever imagined. Josette lay there like a dried stick, motionless, oatmeal splattered across her face and body.

The moldy blanket and mattress were soaked with waste.

"Beat them up!" Gabriel barked, rage blazing in his eyes.

Animals like this deserved to die ten times over.

Hugo kept his head, reminding the men, "Keep them alive-just barely."

He was 50 years old and had never seen such heartless cruelty. Even as an outsider, he couldn't bear the sight.

Rebecca's heart broke at Josette's miserable state. Biting back her pain, she tried to lift Josette." Grandma, I'm so sorry. I came too late."

Josette was barely conscious, clinging to the last thread of life. At the voice, her eyes cleared just a fraction.

When she felt herself being moved, she realized that Rebecca had come. But she was filthy. How could she let Rebecca touch her?

A sudden burst of strength came from nowhere. She muttered, "No, stay away. I'm dirty."

Rebecca broke down. "No, you're not. Not at all."

"I've got her." Gabriel bent down and gently lifted Josette into his arms.

Josette panicked. "Who is this? Put me down. I'm dirty."

If she had any strength left, she would have fought and jumped down. But at that point, all that remained was fear. "Vance? Is that you? Put me down."

Gabriel ignored her protest and strode toward the door. Rebecca followed, heart sinking. "Grandma, it's..."

She tried to explain it was Kaitlyn's son, Gabriel, when another voice cut through the air.

"Grandma, it's me. I'm here!"