

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 301

Vance lunged forward, trying to take Josette from Gabriel's arms. "I've got her. I'll put her in my car."

Gabriel cradled the frail woman closer and strode right past Vance, breaking into a near-run toward his own vehicle.

"Rebecca..." Vance tried to reach her, but she paid him no attention.

The police cars arrived with sirens blaring.

Hugo stepped up to the officers, explaining, "The old lady is in critical condition. Let the kids get her to the hospital first. I've recorded a video of everything and will ride with you to the station. And that unfilial son is still in there."

Vance stood rooted at the warehouse entrance, torn in two directions at once. One second, he wanted to chase after Rebecca, but the next second, he spotted Soren and itched to beat the man senseless.

He spun in place, only to realize everyone else was moving with purpose. No one was paying him the slightest attention.

For the first time in his life, he felt like an irrelevant person.

The memory of Josette's feeble state stabbed straight through his chest. When he saw Rebecca and that stranger loading her into the car, he jumped into his own vehicle and floored it after them toward the hospital.

Rebecca and Gabriel burst through the ER doors. Every nurse and waiting patient froze in horror.

The old woman in Gabriel's arms looked like she had crawled out of a nightmare. They quickly rushed her into the resuscitation bay.

After days of nonstop terror and zero sleep, Rebecca collapsed onto the bench. Every ounce of strength had drained from her body.

Gabriel sat right beside her, gently pressing her head onto his shoulder. "It's over now. Everything will be fine."

They had pulled Josette out, but until the doctors came out, no one knew how bad the damage really was. Rebecca's heart stayed knotted tight,

Vance arrived just to see her leaning against Gabriel's shoulder. His face turned thunderous, but he forced the rage down and walked over.

"How is Grandma?" he started.

She didn't want to talk, while Gabriel ignored Vance completely, patting her back to provide comfort.

Vance sat down on her other side and gently took her hand, understanding the devastation in her bones. He had felt the same helpless dread when his own grandmother had been fighting for her life.

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Rebecca kept her eyes closed, knowing who had sat down and held her hand.

Five years ago, those same hands had led her into marriage. Back then, she had been full of hope, believing they would weather every storm together.

Now she felt only bone-deep numbness, not even having the energy to pull away. She just wanted to sit in silence and wait for Josette to come out.

The lights in the waiting room flickered on; night had fallen. Gabriel's people brought food, but Rebecca couldn't stomach a bite.

He sighed softly and lifted a spoon of broth toward her lips. The second the smell hit her, she flashed back to Soren pouring oatmeal all over Josette's face.

She shook her head violently, bolted to the trash can, and threw up everything she had left in her stomach.

"Rebecca!" Both men called out at once and rushed to her side, offering water and tissues.

"She hates soup. Didn't you know that?" Vance scolded, rubbing her back.

Gabriel let out a cold laugh. Vance had no clue what it meant, but he felt contempt and mocking.

They stared each other down when the ER room doors swung open. The doctor emerged with Josette on a gurney, unconscious and hooked to an IV.

Rebecca rushed forward, asking about the situation. The doctor's face flushed with raw anger. "This is beyond cruel. These people aren't human. Who the hell did this?"

She fell silent. Admitting it was her father felt too humiliating.

The doctor didn't press for names; he was simply venting. Then he answered the question, "Extreme weakness and on the verge of circulatory collapse. One day later, and she couldn't be saved."

How much had Josette suffered? The words "circulatory collapse" nearly knocked Rebecca off her feet.

Gabriel steadied her, and they followed Josette to the private ward. Once there, he lifted Josette and put her on the bed.

Josette felt weightless in his arms, like nothing more than a sheet of paper.

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Vance tried to help but never quite found a way in. Even at that point, he had no idea who the man beside Rebecca was, where he had come from, or how they shared such effortless, wordless teamwork.

Rebecca had spent five years at his side without any real outside contact, so how had she grown this close to someone in just one month?

Rebecca's mind was solely on Josette; she didn't even notice him hovering there, let alone knowing his thoughts. Once Gabriel had Josette settled, she sat down beside the bed and stroked Josette's thin, collapsed face.

Large drops of tears finally broke free.

"Reb..." Vance started toward her, desperate to pull her into his arms.

Gabriel beat him to it, slipping an arm around her shoulders and wiping her tears. "It's okay. It's all over."

She shook her head, her heart twisting with pain. "Josette went through so much."

"I know," he murmured. "It hurts me too. But look on the bright side. We got her back, right? We'll get her the best treatment, take her home, and nurse her back to health. She's going to be okay."

She nodded, sobbing quietly. "I know, but it hurts so much."

"You're not going anywhere to rest right now, are you?" he asked.

"No." She would not leave Josette's side for anything.

“Then pull yourself together. Eat something and rest, or else...”

“I know.” Her brows wrinkled. “She could wake up any minute. I won’t cry anymore, and I will eat. I can’t let her open her eyes and see me looking like this.”

“Tired of me nagging?” he chuckled.

“No,” she whispered. “I just feel like a kid again.”

She was afraid of burdening him. Even though she finally had a cousin to lean on, handling things alone had drilled into her bones.

He felt a fresh wave of guilt. It was his fault for not paying much attention to his relatives back home. If he had known monsters like this existed, he would have come after them long ago.

“You get to be a kid in front of me,” he said softly. “Stay as one for as long as you want.”

Vance couldn’t see her expression, but those words burned. If they hadn’t been in a hospital room with Josette lying right there, he would have dragged the man outside and demanded, “Who do you think you are to say that?”

Under Gabriel’s steady comfort, she slowly calmed down. Her chaotic mind cleared a little, and she asked, “How did you know where Josette was?”

When she forwarded the address to him, he was almost there. He didn’t bat an eyelid, just kept his smile. “I have my ways.”

Right then, his phone vibrated with a call from Hugo.

“I’ll take this,” he said, stepping out of the room.

Hugo reported that everything at the station was handled.

“Talk to a lawyer. Can we get Soren and his family charged? Does this qualify as elder abuse?” Gabriel wasn’t familiar with U.S. law.

Hugo gave a sarcastic laugh. “He actually wants us to pay him.”

“What?” Gabriel found it funny.

“Says we injured him and demands compensation.”

“Is that so? Well then, we’ll just take care of it. We’ll cover all medical expenses. Once he’s healed, give him another round and treat him again after that. Just keep him alive

instead of throwing him in prison. That would be too easy on him. Just beat him up, treat him, and keep that cycle going endlessly.”

“And the woman?”

Gabriel’s eyes narrowed slightly. This was the real answer to Rebecca’s earlier question—how he had known where Josette was.

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“Let her go,” Gabriel said flatly.

“What?” Hugo was surprised.

That wasn’t Gabriel’s usual style; he had expected something far more brutal.

“Yes, let her go,” Gabriel confirmed. “Dogs fighting makes excellent entertainment.”

“Sure,” Hugo agreed and hung up.

He had almost asked whether releasing that woman risked more trouble, but the thought was fleeting. With Gabriel watching, nothing could hurt Josette or Rebecca anymore.

Those people could stir up trouble as they liked. It didn’t matter.

Gabriel returned to the ward to keep watch over the two women.

In a pitch-black basement, Catherine huddled in a corner, shaking uncontrollably. She had been dragged there by some unknown people. She didn’t know where she was and had lost all track of time.

Her phone had been taken the moment they grabbed her. Then she was thrown into this darkness. She had no idea how many hours or days had passed, whether it was night or day outside.

There was no food, and she was starving, though fear was worse.

The man leading that group was fearsome. Even now, that image sent ice down her spine.

She had searched her memory and couldn’t place him. The horror of being thrown down the stairs replayed over and over.

She tumbled and rolled in pain. Maybe her bones had been broken. Then a dim bulb clicked on, and footsteps came down the stairs.

The leader appeared in sunglasses and a black shirt, but what was the point? No one could identify him in this darkness. She couldn't even see his face.

Wearing masks, the others followed him down.

"What do you want? I'll call the police!" she shouted.

The leader's voice was ice-cold. "Call the police? To tell them you helped Soren kidnap an old woman? Or to tell them what you did overseas, Katherine Ford?"

As her original name was pronounced, she froze in shock. "Who are you? How do you know..."

"Or maybe tell Mr. Ford where you are right now?" the man said slowly and deliberately. "Or would telling Vance Bradford be more convenient?"

"No!" she pleaded. "Please don't tell anyone. I'll do anything. Just name your price. Money? I'll give you as much as you want. Just keep my secrets."

The man gave a low, mocking laugh. A brief flash of light glinted off the watch on his wrist.

She couldn't make out the brand, but in that split second, she knew this man wasn't after money.

"What do you want? I've never done anything to you," she stammered, trembling all over.

She couldn't figure out who they were or why they had taken her.

"Where did Soren hide the old woman?" asked the man.

Catherine understood instantly. "You're sent by Rebecca, aren't you?"

"Correct." The man turned to his assistant. "We have a shipment leaving port in the next couple of days, right?"

"Yes, sir."

It sounded like a business talk, which left Catherine confused.

Turning back to her, the man sneered. "You've been back in the country a while now. Missing Mr. Ford? Why don't you sail back with our cargo? We'll make sure you arrive safely."

Her face instantly drained of color.

The message was crystal clear. They would send her back or dump her somewhere worse. She would rather die than go back.

The ocean was huge. Who knew what port they would drop her at or what waited there? Or maybe they would simply throw her overboard in the middle of nowhere and feed her to the sharks.

The man in front of her was vicious.

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Catherine had no choice but to spill everything: how she had wired the money to Adeline, arranged Soren's bail, and hinted they should go after Josette.

Eventually, she gave away where they were keeping Josette.

With the information, the man acted immediately. Just before leaving, he instructed his men, "Keep eyes on her. If even one word was a lie, feed her to the sharks in the sea or send her to a desolate, godforsaken place. Your choice."

The light clicked off, and the basement plunged back into darkness. She crawled around desperately, slapping every switch she could find, but nothing worked.

The power had been cut off, and the pitch-black silence was suffocating. If they never came back, she would lose her mind long before she starved.

Finally, footsteps came again. She didn't know how much time had passed or who it was.

All she could recall was the glint of a watch and the chilling aura that surrounded the man leading the group.

But she didn't have time to think about that now. She crawled over, desperate. "Let me out! Did you find her? I only told them where the old woman was. I just wanted them to take her away so Vance would stop obsessing over her. I never told them to hurt her, I swear. Anything that happens to her is on the Perrys. It has nothing to do with me."

She was terrified. If Josette died from torture, that man would surely make good on his threat and ship her off.

Once on that boat, being thrown to the sharks would be a mercy. Being sent to some godforsaken place was what really terrified her. It would be a nightmare, far worse than death.

She had never in her life prayed so hard for Josette to be okay.

“Please,” she begged, her voice cracking. “Did you find her? Is she all right? Just let me go. I never meant to hurt her. I just...”

“Take her!” Hugo ordered.

The bodyguards stuffed her into a burlap sack and carried her out of the basement.

At the hospital, Rebecca had finally eaten some food.

Vance sat nearby, peeling fruit. When she finished, he offered her the plate. “Some fruit?”

She turned her face away.

“Rebecca...” He started to say more, but his phone vibrated. He checked the caller ID, then relaxed a little.

“It’s Aiden. I’ll take this.”

He stepped to the window. “What’s up?”

“Cathy is missing!” Aiden sounded frantic.

Vance lowered his voice. “I’m at the hospital. Did you try her phone?”

“Straight to voicemail. Something is wrong. We should go look for her.”

“Could she be at the spa? Or getting a facial?”

“No. Trust me, my gut is screaming. We planned to meet today, but she never showed up. This has never happened before. What if someone is retaliating?” ¹

Vance glanced at Josette lying in the bed. “All right. I’m on my way.”

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After hanging up, Vance walked back to the bedside, hesitating. “I-I have to step out for a bit, but I promise I’ll be back.”

Rebecca remained silent. Gabriel, however, gave a mocking smile. “Someone’s missing? Your little friend?”

Vance’s face darkened. “You’re sticking your nose in places it doesn’t belong.”

Gabriel shrugged. “I have zero interest in your personal drama. Just thinking that any decent man wouldn’t run off to another woman while his wife’s grandmother is fighting for her life.”

“Shut up! You don’t know anything!” Vance snapped.

Turning back to Rebecca, he softened his voice. “Cathy’s missing, and I’m worried that similar things have happened to her.”

Gabriel let out another cold laugh. Vance really hated that attitude, like the man was looking down on him from some superior height.

“What’s so funny?” He gritted his teeth. “In the middle of all this, you can still laugh?”

Gabriel stayed perfectly calm. “Why not? The person I came to save is already safe. The people who matter most to me are right here. Everything is moving in the right direction. Why can’t I laugh?”

“The people who matter most to you?” Vance’s anger boiled over. “Who exactly? Where do you get the nerve to say that?”

Gabriel smiled, slipped an arm around Rebecca’s shoulders, and gently took Josette’s hand. “Right here. These are the people who matter most to me. What about you?”

Vance glared at him. “You’d better conduct yourself, or else—”

“Quiet!” Rebecca cut him off. “We’re in a hospital. Please just leave. Don’t disturb Josette here.”

It was the first time she had spoken to him all day. He turned to her quickly, but all he saw was her cold profile.

He hesitated, “I’ll be back as soon as I find Cathy.”

“Leave already. Nobody cares whether you come back,” Gabriel taunted.

Vance kept his eyes on Rebecca’s face. “You don’t care either? Tell him you don’t care.”

She frowned. “No, I don’t.”

His pupils dilated, and his eyelids twitched violently. He fought to stay calm. “So much has happened lately. Everything’s chaos. Just wait for me to sort it out, okay?”

Gabriel snorted. “In the middle of all this chaos, you somehow figured out that the most important thing is running after your little friend. Impressive.”

Vance clenched his fists and teeth. “I’m telling you...”

“Don’t bother.” Gabriel waved it off. “Just answer the question. In all this chaos, who matters most to you?”

Vance paused, looking at Rebecca with a pained expression. “You know...”

“She doesn’t know,” Gabriel interrupted again. “You don’t have to answer. The choice is right in front of you. You can walk out that door right now. But if you do that, never show your face in front of her again.”

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Rebecca realized Gabriel didn’t know Vance so well after all.

Vance had faced the same choice so many times. The most disheartening moment was when the blade was pointed at her face. He had chosen Catherine over her.

Now that she was safe and sound, he had all the less reason to choose her.

Sure enough, he muttered, “You know me. I’ve never changed my mind about spending my life with you. I just need to handle a few things first, and then I’ll come back.”

“Get out!” Gabriel said, done listening.

Vance wanted to say more, but with Gabriel there, nothing was getting through. Besides, Cathy really might be in danger.

“Wait for me,” he said, hurrying out of the room.

Gabriel stared at the closed door, his face darkening like a thundercloud. But when he turned to Rebecca, he softened immediately.

With a husband like that, how much pain must she have endured?

“Rebecca...” He tried to comfort her.

“I’m fine. Really.” She gave him a small smile, having seen this coming.

There was nothing left to feel sad about. In fact, she and Vance were only one signature away from divorce. The moment Josette was well enough, she would handle the process.

Nothing he did could hurt her anymore.

Gabriel believed her words, but at the same time, he could imagine how much pain and how many hardships it had taken for her to reach that point.

He nodded. “Good.”

These irrelevant people should just stay far away from her.

Just then, a call came from Hugo.

“I’ll take this,” Gabriel said, stepping outside.

“The woman has been released.”

“Good.”

“Are you sure about this? What if she causes more trouble?”

“It will just burn them first. We’ll wait and clean up. By the way, Vance Bradford just ran off to look for her. Have someone tail him.”

“Consider it done.”

Hugo felt funny that Vance had mentioned looking for Catherine right in front of Gabriel. Gabriel was the one who had her captured in the first place.

Hugo added, “And his company is trying to partner with us. Their vice president has reached out several times.”

“Has he?” Gabriel murmured, a slow smile spreading. “Interesting.”

“Truthfully, their qualifications are solid. Vance is capable and talented. It’s a shame...” Hugo sighed. “Sometimes, a man’s luck doesn’t match his ability.”

“Luck is something you build, don’t you think?” Gabriel said lightly. “I’ll probably be at the hospital for the next few days. Handle everything else for me.”

“I’ve got it.” Hugo nodded.

When Gabriel returned to the room, Rebecca was moistening Josette's lips with a cotton swab.

Seeing him return, she said, "Was it about work? I heard something about shifting focus to the U.S. market. If you have things to do, go ahead. I can handle this alone."

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"It's nothing urgent," Gabriel said, sitting beside her. "Just a progress update. Everything's running smoothly."

"Now that you're moving operations, will you and Aunt Kaitlyn eventually settle back here?" Rebecca asked, curious.

"Not right away," he replied thoughtfully. "I'll probably be flying back and forth a lot at first. Once things are stable here, we'll see if she wants to join. She has her own career and plans, not interested in becoming a full-time mom for me."

"She is amazing," Rebecca said sincerely.

Kaitlyn had worked for years as a designer at a major fashion house and had recently gone independent.

Rebecca meant every word. The world outside was so big, yet she had trapped herself for five long years.

"You're amazing, too," Gabriel said, warm and genuine.

She felt both flattered and touched by his unconditional support. No matter how rough life had been or what it had turned into, someone would always see the best in her.

This feeling was something she should have received from her parents over 20 years ago, something she had long since given up on. Yet, unexpectedly, at nearly 30, amid the chaos of her life, she found it from a cousin she had only just met.

"Gabriel..." She felt a lump in her throat, unable to finish her words.

He soothed her. "Don't worry. From now on, we'll be together forever."

"Yeah." She nodded, touched by their genuine care.

When Vance rushed out of the hospital, Catherine had managed to contact Aiden.

She had no money and no phone. Those men had taken everything, dumping her from the car in some remote, empty stretch of road.

By the time she crawled out of the burlap sack, the vehicle was long gone. There wasn't a single house in sight, let alone people.

Luckily, it wasn't a highway. Eventually, she stood in the middle of the road and flagged down a car, begging for a ride into the city.

The driver refused, and she tried to borrow a phone instead. Still no.

Without a choice, she gave them Aiden's number and asked them to dial. They put it on the speaker so she could talk.

Aiden was relieved. "I'm on my way. I'll notify Vance."

She panicked, "Don't call him. Just come alone."

Since those people had been looking for Josette, they must have ties to Rebecca. Worse still, they knew about her past and might have told Rebecca.

Accordingly, Vance might have learned about it, too.

She had been locked up for days with no idea what was happening outside. Until she understood the situation, she should avoid meeting him.

Aiden arrived in less than half an hour. She climbed into his car, still shaking.

Her state was terrible: messy hair, wrinkled, filthy clothes, and smudged makeup.

Aiden exploded. "What happened to you? Who did this? I'll kill them!"

Catherine didn't dare tell him the truth. She stammered, "I was robbed. They took my phone, my jewelry, and my watch."

Actually, only her phone was gone. She hadn't been wearing jewelry or a watch.

"Call the police!" he urged.

"No!" she stopped him. "Don't. Don't call them."

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Catherine naturally wouldn't involve the police. One investigation, and all her secrets would spill out.

Facing Aiden's confused stare, she fabricated a story. "It's fine. Forget it. Tarot already showed me this- losing money to ward off the disaster. I've come out of it now, and besides..."

She paused. "Rebecca is probably back. The old lady must have been rescued. Is she alive or dead? Do you have any news?"

Aiden blinked. "When?"

"This afternoon," she replied, observing his expression. "I'm not sure about the situation. Vance values her so much, and her suffering is tied to us. If he finds out..."

Aiden froze. "No, it couldn't be. W-We only gave Soren the address. She was living there all alone, and her son wanted to take care of her. We were just helping. What's wrong with that?"

"But they weren't trying to take care of her," Catherine reasoned, finding that Aiden wasn't thinking straight that day.

Who would believe that story? Vance certainly would not.

"But how were we supposed to know?" Aiden countered. "All we knew was a son looking for his mother. Nothing wrong with that."

Catherine blinked, then understood. "Right. How could we have known? That's a family matter. No one told us anything. We were just helping."

He nodded. "Exactly. Vance cares about you so much; he'll forgive you no matter what. There's nothing to be afraid of."

She fell silent, knowing it wasn't that simple. If that man in the black shirt ever told him about her past overseas, Vance's confidence might shatter.

Tightening her jaw, she grabbed Aiden's hand. "We need to lock Vance down further. Make sure he stays on our side forever."

He looked confused.

She placed her other hand on her stomach and leaned close to whisper in his ear.

His eyes widened. "You..."

She nodded. "I'm sure."

He fumbled for a cigarette, but she snatched it and tossed it away.

His hands shook as he reached for his phone. "I-I'll call him and see what's going on."

On the way to the company, Vance had arranged to meet Aiden there.

Chapter 208

His phone rang, and he answered. "Aiden? What's happening?"

Aiden glanced at Catherine and probed, "Anything unusual on your end?"

"No," Vance replied simply. "Cathy's phone is still off."

He didn't mention a word about Josette, and his voice carried no anger.

Aiden winked at Catherine, indicating things were fine. "I found her. She's not doing great. You should come immediately."

Vance felt a weight lifted from his chest. "Thankfully, she is safe. I'll go back now."

"Wait! She needs you now," Aiden insisted. "Someone robbed her. She is a mess and terrified, crying nonstop."

Catherine started sobbing on cue.

Vance paused. "Robbery? Call the police!"

"Just come first. I'm at her place." Aiden hung up, turning to Catherine. "Tonight, it's all on me."

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At Catherine's apartment, Vance woke up with a splitting headache.

He frowned and rolled over, then realized something far worse than the hangover. He lifted the blanket, looked down, and found himself naked.

It struck him so hard that the alcohol fog vanished instantly. The worst part? He was in Catherine's bedroom.

Turning his head slowly, he saw her lying beside him. The blanket only covered half of her body, the rest was bare.

His mind racing, he quickly pulled it up to cover her, then started to piece together what had happened last night.

Just then, Aiden's sleepy voice drifted in from outside. "Vance, where are you? Cathy? Where are you guys?"

In a panic, Vance jumped out of bed and accidentally knocked over a vase.

Aiden followed the sound straight into the room. "Van..."

His voice died the second he saw the scene.

Vance's face drained of color. "It's not like that. I don't know how..."

"Vance..." Catherine stirred, as if the noise had woken her.

Then she seemed to register the situation and let out a sharp scream, clutching the blanket tightly around herself.

Tears welled in her eyes. "Vance..."

His head roared as he recalled last night.

He had arrived late. Catherine had been terrified by the robbery and wouldn't stop crying. Aiden had ordered takeout and suggested a drink to help her calm down.

One drink turned into many. Vance had his own mountain of worries, so he had drunk far more than usual. He never expected his tolerance to be that bad; he had passed out fast. 1

The last clear memory he had was Catherine crawling into his arms, sobbing about how lonely and scared she was. He had patted her back to comfort her.

Everything after that was a complete blank.

Catherine clutched the blanket, her eyes swimming with tears. "Vance, I don't blame you. You were upset last night, too. I only wanted to hold you and comfort you, and then you..."

His brows knotted together. He did remember hugging her, but nothing beyond that.

Then a line from five years ago struck him. It was on the day of Rebecca's surgery. The first thing she said when she woke up was, "Please don't drink anymore, okay?"

A wave of bitterness crashed over him. He had kept that promise for five years-barely touched alcohol, even when everyone else drank.

He had stuck to soda or tea, but now, he had broken it.

Wrapped in the blanket, Catherine crawled to the edge of the bed and gently took his hand. “Don’t blame yourself. I won’t make you take responsibility. We can pretend nothing happened. Don’t worry a thing.”

“What’s done is done,” Aiden chimed in. “Cathy isn’t asking for anything. Why the long face? A successful man like you has many women on the side. Cathy isn’t trying to replace Rebecca. You can still keep your marriage and just take care of her quietly. If you ever fight with Rebecca, you’ll have somewhere to go. Cathy will always be your safe harbor.” 1

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“Exactly,” Catherine echoed. “I don’t want anything. We’ll pretend it never happened. But if you ever need a place like Aiden said, I’ll be right there. You can come whenever you want. I’ll get you food, chat with you, and listen to your worries.”

Vance remained silent. His mind kept replaying Aiden’s words: “What’s done is done.”

He didn’t know how he left the apartment. Once he was gone, the two exchanged a quick look, and both exhaled in relief.

Vance didn’t go to the office or back to the hospital. He drove aimlessly and ended up at his home.

His clothes still reeked of alcohol. He stripped them off and threw them straight into the trash. Then he climbed into the bathtub and closed his eyes.

He stayed in the tub for over an hour before his phone, charging on the counter, rang and jerked him out.

It was Aiden, calling about a meeting at the company, but he had zero energy.

“You guys handle it.”

“This is the big one. We will discuss the Rossi partnership. You have to come.

“Postpone it.”

He hung up and fell back onto the bed, his head still buzzing.

Then his phone rang again. Still Aiden.

Vance fought back his annoyance and answered. “The Rossi thing isn’t urgent. Move the meeting to tomorrow.”

He needed some alone time.

“I know what’s bothering you,” Aiden said. “You don’t have to overthink it. Cathy told me that if you couldn’t face her, she could go back overseas.”

“It’s not that,” Vance said frankly. “The responsibility is mine. I won’t let her bear the consequences of my mistake.”

“I know. You just haven’t figured out how to be responsible for two women yet,” Aiden said. “It’s simple: give them what they want. Unlike Rebecca, Cathy doesn’t ask for much. Think about it.”

The call ended, and Vance hurled the phone across the room.

When he walked into the living room and saw the liquor cabinet full of bottles, rage surged. He grabbed a chair and smashed the glass doors and every bottle inside,

The huge crash snapped him back to reality. Standing among the shards, he seemed to see Rebecca in the kitchen-bustling around, ladling soup, putting food on his plate, orbiting him like a sunflower, and smiling at him.

He took a deep breath and finally knew what he had to do. He needed to go back to the hospital and check on Josette.

At the hospital, Gabriel was communicating with Hugo.

Hugo: [Last night, after we dumped the woman on the roadside, Aiden Hodge picked her up and drove her to her apartment. Vance arrived later and stayed with them for the night. He left in the morning, followed by Aiden an hour later.]

Gabriel: [Keep watching.]

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Hugo: [Something must’ve gone down.]

Gabriel caught the hint and let out a low, knowing chuckle: [Now things are getting interesting.]

Hugo: [You sure we shouldn't fill Ms. Perry in on any of this?]

Gabriel: [No need. I want a front-row seat to whatever mess these clowns cook up next.]

Hugo guessed Gabriel was trying to shield Rebecca from the ugly side of things and send a clear message: cutting all ties with Vance.

Anyway, with him there, both Rebecca and Josette were under tight protection. Nothing would go wrong.

Gabriel had just pocketed his phone when Josette stirred in bed. Her eyelids fluttered, and a thin, raspy whisper escaped her mouth. "Becky..."

Rebecca and Gabriel shot to their feet at the same time, flanking the bed like bookends.

"Grandma, I'm right here. I came back." Rebecca cradled her grandmother's hand, swallowing the lump in her throat.

It cracked something open in Josette's clouded mind. Hot tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. Becky, stay away. I'm dirty. Don't come near me."

Rebecca's chest tightened like a vise. She leaned in until their cheeks touched. "No, you're not. We're at the hospital, and you're safe. No one's gonna hurt you again. Look, you're on an IV. All fresh and clean. Don't worry about anything."

She pressed a gentle kiss to Josette's cheek, just like how Josette used to soothe her as a child. Realizing she was indeed safe, the old lady hugged back, and they both cried.

Gabriel watched silently, then stepped forward to wrap them in a careful embrace.

"It's okay. It's all over now," he said.

"Is that Vance?" Josette murmured, squinting.

Rebecca was shocked, "Grandma, can you see?"

"Is it Vance?" Josette squinted harder, trying to focus.

"I'll call the doctor," Gabriel said, already stabbing the call button.

The door flew open. A heavy shoulder slammed into him, shoving him sideways.

"Grandma, it's me, Vance. I'm here!" Vance barreled in at Josette's calling.

She frowned and yanked her hand back.

Hurried footsteps thundered down the corridor, and medical staff rushed in. Rebecca stepped aside so the nurse and the doctor could get to the bed. Vance had no choice but to do the same.

The doctor performed a careful examination, lingering on the eyes. Finally, he turned to Rebecca and Gabriel. “It’s a temporary loss of blood flow to the retinas from diarrhea and dehydration. It will clear up. Overall, her vitals are markedly better than when she was admitted. With rest, nutrition, and her solid baseline health, she’s got a strong shot at a full recovery.”

Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief, and the doctor continued, “I’ll tweak the meds. Buzz me if anything changes.”

Once the staff left, Rebecca was about to settle in when Vance swooped in again, seizing Josette’s hand. “Grandma, I’m right here. What would you like to eat? I’ll get it for you.”

But Josette pulled away a second time.

Vance’s voice cracked with disbelief. “Grandma? It’s me, Vance.”

She looked exhausted, closing her eyes and waving him off.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 312

“Let the patient rest.” Gabriel snatched the back of Vance’s collar and hauled him away from the bed.

Unable to hold back anymore, Vance spun around and threw a punch.

Gabriel caught his wrist, hissing, “I said Josette needs rest. Conduct yourself now!”

“On what basis are you telling me to do anything?” Vance tightened his jaw. “I’m her grandson-in-law. What are you?”

“On the basis...” Gabriel said calmly, “I could toss you out right now.”

“Fine! Let’s take it outside!” Vance clamped onto Gabriel’s wrist, trying to yank him toward the door.

Rebecca looked at Vance coldly. “Are you done making a fool of yourself?”

He didn’t let go. His brows knotted as he turned on her. “Why do you keep siding with him? We’ve known each other for 12 years. How long have you known this clown? A

week? A month? And you're riding for him like he hung the moon? Do you even know his past? Is he really trustworthy?"

She didn't even blink. "So what? Should I start comparing timelines with Catherine? Who has known you longer?"

The name hit Vance like a freight train. His brain short-circuited, flashing back to that morning scene in her apartment. He stumbled backward, the color draining from his face.

"Just leave," she whispered. "I don't want to look at someone who's been tainted, and I surely won't let them touch my grandmother."

Her voice was low so Josette wouldn't hear, but every syllable sliced him like broken glass.

"Rebecca, you..." His mouth hung open as he felt the burn of that tag. It was worse than the harshest rebuke.

He intended to ask if she had found out about everything, but the words caught in his throat. He couldn't voice it, terrified of the answer.

"Door's that way," Gabriel said firmly, stepping between them.

Vance searched Rebecca's face one last time and found nothing but cold disgust. Something deep inside him cracked and collapsed. He sucked in a ragged breath and walked out.

Gabriel shut the door with a decisive click, and Rebecca sank back onto the stool, as if nothing had happened.

She took Josette's hand and murmured, "Grandma, how about soup? Something warm and gentle?"

The doctor had suggested liquids..

Josette squeezed Rebecca's fingers, shook her head, and slipped back into sleep.

"This isn't going to work. She needs nourishment," Gabriel muttered, already dialing. "I'll have Hugo prepare something and bring it over."

"Cooking?" Hugo blinked. "Any dietary restrictions?"

He had only been back a short while and was still living in a hotel. But he could let the hotel chef do it.

“No weird spices and no heavy cream. Just make some soup with the best ingredients and simplest prep,” Gabriel ordered. “Stand over the chef so he doesn’t get creative.”

He returned to bed, finding that his grandmother had drifted off again. She still didn’t know who he was.

Once she was discharged, they’d need a place to stay. He could live in hotels, but Josette deserved comfort.

He decided to assign this task to Hugo. Even if it was only for a month, they’d buy it outright and make it perfect.

His mind then drifted to Vance. He assumed Rebecca owned properties tied to that man’s name.

That was not fine. There was no way he’d let her sleep under any roof Vance had paid for.

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 313

The morning meeting had ground on for four brutal hours. It was already past lunchtime when the conference room suddenly fell pin-drop silent.

The agenda was already finished, but everyone exchanged uneasy glances, waiting for Vance to call it. Yet the man just sat there, lost in thought, like there was more to discuss.

Aiden cleared his throat. “Mr. Bradford, anything else?”

Vance snapped back. “Oh, no. Thanks, everyone. Meeting adjourned.”

Chairs scraped back as everyone stood up. Just then, the door swung open, and in came a syrupy voice.” Hey, you guys have been killing it. Lunch is on me. Let’s eat right here in the room.”

Catherine breezed in with two enormous takeout bags. “There’s way more outside. I’ll grab the rest once we unpack these.”

The room erupted in cheers.

“Mrs. Bradford feeding the troops. Legend!”

“Madam, we’ve got it.’

“Thanks, boss lady. You’re the real MVP!”

Catherine chuckled, her eyes crinkling. “This is nothing. You guys are the ones holding this place together.”

Turning to Vance, she added, “Your lunch is waiting in your office. Want to eat there?”

The room exploded with good-natured teasing.

“Special delivery for the boss!”

“Not fair.”

“We want to see what he got.”

Those people on the core team often joked around, but Vance didn’t crack a smile that day. His face stayed carved from stone.

Aiden jumped in fast. “He has been working around the clock on the new business expansion plan. Let’s cut him some slack.”

Amid the laughter, Vance slipped back to his office.

Lunch was already laid out on the coffee table. The food was from his favorite spot, but he had zero appetite. He just needed to drop his laptop and head out again.

Aiden and Catherine followed him in. Catherine looked up at him cautiously. “Vance...”

Camping 313

He turned and met her watery eyes. She dropped her gaze, dabbing at her eyes. “I swear I don’t know why they started calling me Mrs. Bradford.”

“It’s just a joke,” Aiden said smoothly. “Besides, you deserve that title.”

Vance closed his eyes. The horrible morning slammed into him once again.

“It’s all my fault.” Catherine’s voice wobbled. “I shouldn’t have come. I just heard you guys have been working around the clock, so I thought I’d help. I’m sorry I messed up. It won’t happen again.”

The knot in Vance’s chest finally loosened. He sighed, “It’s not on you. I know what you were trying to do.

We’ve known each other forever. This one’s on me.”

He pulled out his phone, opened the chat with her, and sent a transfer. "I've been slammed. Go buy yourself something nice."

"Vance!" Her voice suddenly sharpened. "What do you take me for?"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 314

"It's not like that." Vance pinched the bridge of his nose. "I genuinely don't have time for this now."

"I know you're busy." Catherine's tears spilled freely. "Everyone calls me a gold-digger. Do you think of me that way, too?"

"That's not what I meant."

"You do!" She snatched her phone and sent the money straight back, crying harder. "I don't want your money. The whole world can think I'm after your wallet. I don't care. I only care what you think of me."

"I get it. I do," he said repeatedly.

"Good." She smiled through tears. "Come and eat. I got your favorite poached fish."

"You two go ahead. I need to go handle something," he said, starting for the door.

"Grab a bite first," she said, already opening the containers.

"I'm good." He scrolled his contacts, found a number, and dialed. "Nancy? It's me, Vance."

Catherine perked up at the name and started following him.

He continued, "Here is the thing. Rebecca is back, and her grandma is in the hospital. We need someone reliable to help. If you are not locked into anything else, could you come back? Yeah, the timeline's flexible. Long-term would be great. At least, until the patient is stable. Good. I'll pick you up tomorrow."

Catherine followed him all the way to the elevator. Vance stepped in, turned, and froze.

"I just wanted you to come back and eat," she explained quickly. "Are you sure you're not hungry?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Rebecca's grandma is in the hospital. I need to get over there."

“Oh, of course. Go ahead and check on her,” she said thoughtfully. “Is she sick? What happened?”

He brushed it off. “It’s nothing serious. Don’t worry.”

Those few careless words were all Catherine needed to breathe easy.

It looked like he was still in the dark. Had that shadowy man not told him? Not Rebecca either?

Anyway, the secret was being held. Soren and his family definitely wouldn’t spill.

But Vance was bringing that backwoods housekeeper back? She decided to make a little trip to Cecilia’s school. \$4

Vance stopped at a deli on the way and picked up a patient-friendly meal.

The atmosphere in the room was warm and alive. Yesterday, Josette had woken to nothing but blinding white light. The doctor had adjusted the meds, and today, her condition had improved a lot.

Rebecca and Gabriel had just finished feeding her. Her health had been severely damaged, but once the crisis passed, it bounced back fast.

Today, she looked brighter, happy to have Rebecca around and meet Gabriel again. Pure joy was the best medicine.

Following Gabriel’s instructions, Hugo had found a suitable house in no time. The agent told him to go check it out, but this wasn’t up to his preference.

Gabriel was the one to make the final decision.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 315

“I’ll step out for a bit,” Gabriel said. “Call the caregiver if you need anything. I’ll be right back.”

“Go ahead.” Rebecca nodded.

“It’s nothing urgent,” Gabriel smiled. “I’ll be quick.”

He’d booked Josette a private room. Last night, he and Rebecca had both crashed there, taking the sofa and the caregiver’s bed separately.

The daytime caregiver had started that day, but she only handled medical needs. Meals needed a dedicated nanny.

Gabriel mulled it over as he left the ward. In the elevator lobby, five or six men snapped to attention the second he appeared.

“Hugo sent you?” Gabriel groaned.

“Yes, sir,” the lead man reported crisply. “There are more downstairs and under the windows, too.”

Gabriel stared at the matching outfits and felt a headache coming on. “Guys, you’re gonna terrify the nurses. Security here is fine. You don’t need to go in full Secret Service mode.”

“Sir, it’s our job,” the man answered, dead serious.

Gabriel waved it off. “Just try to look a little less like a SWAT team.”

When he and Rebecca had flown back, at least 30 bodyguards had been sprinkled among regular passengers. A second flight had brought dozens more.

Hugo was being too careful, which made sense when they were abroad. Gabriel’s father’s side of the family were sharks circling for blood. But this was overkill.

The bodyguards were at a loss, having worn plain T-shirts just to blend in. But somehow, they had ended up buying the same cut. The conspicuousness was further highlighted by their heights and frames.

“Alright, stay put,” Gabriel sighed.

The elevator dinged, and he stepped in, followed by two guards automatically.

He shook his head with a wry grin. “No need to follow me. Stay here and block Vance Bradford if he shows up.”

“Yes, sir.” They stepped back out.

Gabriel climbed into a car waiting at the curb, finding more bodyguards and Hugo inside.

“This whole production...” he chuckled helplessly.

“Better safe than sorry with the snakes out there,” Hugo replied, deadpan.

The car took them to a sprawling standalone villa. The place had everything—a garden, a swimming pool, and six floors, including a basement and dozens of rooms.

Yet after the full tour, Gabriel wasn't impressed.

Hugo read that expression. "This is the best option on short notice."

"Fine, it'll do. Plenty of space," Gabriel said. "It will be just a month anyway. We're not sure if we'll settle down here. Can't change the hard fixtures, but we're gutting every soft furnishing."

"Yes, sir." Hugo already knew he hated over-the-top opulence.

"Any-luck finding a housekeeper?"

"It's slim right now. Should we fly one in from overseas?"

"Keep looking and bring a couple anyway. The more, the merrier."

The company was still in the early setup phase, with lots of work needing review and approval, so Gabriel swung by the office instead of going back to the hospital immediately.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 316

Arriving at the hospital, Vance parked the car, grabbed the soup container, and strode into the inpatient building.

But the moment he stepped into the elevator lobby and reached for the button, a couple of big men in black T-shirts closed in like a human wall.

His hackles rose in an instant. "Who are you?"

"Mr. Bradford," the lead man said flatly.

"How do you know my name? What do you want?"

"Please go back. You're not going up."

"What gives you the right to stop me? You think you're above the law?"

"Just doing our job. Not letting you go up to disturb the peace is the wish of the patient's family."

"Family? That smug bastard? What makes him think he can butt in?" Vance snapped, recalling how that man had kept provoking him.

“Mr. Bradford, language. We’ve been perfectly civil. Foul language tends to have consequences.” The bodyguards stayed polite, but their thick arms flexed like coiled springs.

“What, are you gonna hit me? We have laws here!” Vance was undaunted, even as the circle tightened.

He didn’t believe they’d do anything reckless there in public.

The lead man answered calmly, “No, sir. We’re polite and reasonable. We definitely won’t throw hands in broad daylight.”

They’d only do it in a dark alley with a sack over the head.

Facing the wall of muscle, Vance found it hard to break through and get into the elevator.

The man added, “Save yourself the trouble. It’s not happening.”

Vance was furious, but he couldn’t start a brawl in the hospital lobby. Worse, these people knew who he was, while he had zero clue about who they were.

Knowing that Rebecca’s local SIM was back online, he dialed her, but she didn’t answer.

Without a choice, he texted: [I’m downstairs in the lobby with soup for Grandma, but security won’t let me up. Can you tell them to back down?]

Rebecca had felt the buzz and chosen to ignore the call. Then the message came in, leaving her confused.

But instead of dwelling on it, she simply typed back: [She already ate. No need.]

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His reply came fast: [Are you really going to drag her into this? No matter what happened, she’s always been good to me. Can’t I at least repay her kindness? Even a regular friend would do that.]

Rebecca: [We’re not even regular friends. Being strangers is the best we can manage, and Josette doesn’t want to see you. So, stop coming here. Once she’s discharged, we’ll finalize the divorce.]

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 317

That one word hit Vance hard.

The soup container slipped from his fingers and clattered on the marble floor.

After a whole month, he'd convinced himself that Rebecca was just throwing a tantrum and blowing off steam. He never imagined she'd come back still wanting a divorce.

The man always glued to her side crossed his mind, and rage rose in him.

Vance: [Is it because of him?]

Rebecca had no idea who he was referring to, but she refused to waste another second on it. Josette needed the bathroom right then, so she ignored the text and called the caregiver to help.

Vance waited for a reply that never came.

Right then, Gabriel returned, his appearance finally igniting Vance's anger.

He charged in blind fury, but trained bodyguards moved like lightning. He never even grazed Gabriel's clothes before they had him pinned.

Gabriel headed straight to the elevator, waving a dismissive hand. "Let him go. Don't scare the patients and their families."

Vance watched helplessly as the man entered the elevator. The whole process, Gabriel didn't even glance in his direction, as if he were nothing more than a speck of dust that could be brushed off without a second thought.

The fury inside Vance roared hotter than ever. Who the hell was this guy, looking down on him like that?

Back at the company, he was still seething.

On the way to Vance's office, Aiden caught his thunderous expression and asked about it.

Vance finally came back to reality. "Do you know the guy hovering around Rebecca?"

Aiden knew everything, including Rebecca's return and the trouble her family had stirred. He also knew that a formidable man was helping her.

But since Vance had never brought it up, he played dumb with a blank expression.

Vance pinched his brow. "I'm losing it. Rebecca's back, and there's a mystery guy glued to her side. Can you find out who he is?"

Aiden didn't have the slightest clue. He had heard many times from Catherine about how intimidating this man was, but she hadn't really seen his face.

"I'll dig," Aiden replied.

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Vance nodded and shut himself inside his office.

Aiden came back that evening. The door was still closed, the calls unanswered. He knocked once, then turned the knob and walked in. They'd been friends too long for formalities.

The room was filled with cigarette smoke, too thick even for a heavy smoker like Aiden. He coughed hard and rushed to crack the windows.

"Man, what is going on, smoking like that?" he croaked.

Vance remained silent, sitting rooted to the chair.

Aiden went around the desk and stood in front of him. "What happened?"

It wasn't until Aiden's face was inches away from his that Vance snapped out of his daze.

"Aiden..." he murmured, leaning back in his chair and furrowing his brow.

"What's wrong?" Aiden pressed. "Whatever it is, just tell me. We've got your back."

Vance paused, silent for a long time. "Rebecca is back."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 318

Aiden blinked. "I know. You already told me."

Vance muttered, "She still wants a divorce."

The office went dead quiet.

Aiden spoke. "If she wants out, let her go. You've tried everything and never screwed her over. To you, this is a relief."

“A relief?” Vance echoed blankly.

“Yes,” Aiden kept going. “This marriage wasn’t what you wanted in the first place. Back then, you had no choice but to marry her. You’ve been carrying that weight for five years. Now that she is asking to leave, you can just sign the agreement and breathe.”

Vance’s face turned to stone.

“You’re not upset about it, are you?” Aiden probed.

Vance stayed silent.

“I get it,” Aiden sighed. “Five years together. Feelings creep in. You’d miss a pet after five years, but forced love never works. Time will dull the pain. Most importantly, you’re not dumping her. She is the one leaving.”

“Say no more.” Vance leaned back, rubbing his temples.

“All right, forget it. Come on, let’s grab a drink and clear your head,” Aiden said, pulling at his arm.

But Vance didn’t budge. “Not tonight. You guys go ahead.”

“No, you’re the engine,” Aiden insisted.

Vance closed his eyes, exhausted. “I can’t. I promised her.”

“Promise?” Aiden was confused.

“I promised her,” Vance murmured, almost in a trance, “never to drink again.”

“Are you really not going?” Aiden asked again, worried about his state.

Getting no reply, Aiden hovered for a moment, then left the office. His mind drifted to the man Vance had asked him to investigate.

Strangely enough, there was no information about the man at all.

The next day, Rebecca was overjoyed to see Josette visibly improving. The weight loss wouldn’t reverse overnight, but Josette’s spirit was brighter, her color better.

During rounds, the doctor confirmed steady progress.

Josette held Rebecca with one hand and Gabriel with the other, her eyes shining with happy tears. “I thought I’d never see you guys again.”

“Of course, you would,” Rebecca said, leaning against her shoulder. “Gabriel and I have decided that we’ll be staying together as a family from now on.”

Of course, that family didn’t include her parents or brother. She’d been completely focused on Josette these past two days and hadn’t spared them a thought.

Vance’s text arrived: [I brought Nancy to help take care of Josette. Let us come up.]

Rebecca was confused, not sure what was holding him up.

“What’s wrong?” Gabriel asked, noticing her expression.

She showed him the message, and he asked, “Who’s Nancy? Can we trust her?”

She nodded. “She took care of me for five years.”

“I’ll go down and check.”

“I’ll come along.”

It was a good chance to make everything clear with Vance and stop the constant pestering.

Gabriel thought for a moment and nodded. With him right there, nothing would go sideways.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 319

Rebecca saw Vance again..

He looked wrecked with hollow cheeks, deep circles under his eyes, and a stale stench of cigarettes clinging to his body.

She wrinkled her nose before she could stop herself,

He noticed and awkwardly cleared his throat. “Sorry, a client came to the company this morning, and we smoked a few cigarettes.”

He waved Nancy forward. “Both you and Grandma need proper care. Although...”

He paused, glancing at Gabriel. “Although you could hire someone new, Nancy is an old hand who took good care of you before.”

Seeing Nancy again felt both comforting and ironic. They had been married for five years, and in that household, the person Rebecca was closest to was not her husband, but the housekeeper.

If Nancy were free, she could come back and help. But if she had other commitments, Rebecca didn't upend her plan for such a short time.

So, she asked Nancy's opinion. The latter readily said she had the time and would love to help.

Rebecca finally relaxed, having been used to Nancy's care anyway.

Normally, they would have taken Nancy upstairs and parted ways. But Vance stayed rooted in place.

"Rebecca..." he called out.

Rebecca sighed under her breath, telling Gabriel, "I'll talk to him for a minute."

Seeing him frown, she shook her head. "It's fine. Just a few words."

"I'll be right here," he said, staying put.

Vance fumed at Gabriel's constant presence, but he couldn't let it out in front of Rebecca.

"Come on." She walked out of the lobby into the small garden.

Vance followed, finally having a chance to face her alone. He forced a smile, starting, "When will Grandma be discharged? I'll get things ready and come pick her up."

She held his gaze. "We're not going back there."

Vance's face went pale with disbelief. "What? You're not staying at home? Where will you live? Are you still upset? It's okay. You don't have to speak to me. I'll wait until you are ready."

Rebecca stayed silent; she certainly would not tell him she was only staying a month before leaving again. She didn't want him to make some desperate scene that might trap her.

"I know you're hurt, but we have a long life ahead of us," he said, his voice cracking. "You'll see. I never wanted to separate from you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

She remained calm. “I really do want a divorce. Grandma would be discharged in five days. The moment she’s out, we’ll go straight to the courthouse. The agreement is in the drawer. I presume you’ve seen it. If you have any objections to the terms, say them now.”

“I object. I don’t...”

“If you don’t want to go in person, I can file online. I’m not trying to bleed you dry, so don’t make this harder than it has to be. Let’s end it with some dignity.”

She pulled out her phone, ready to start the online filing process.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 320

Only then did Vance truly believe Rebecca meant every word.

He pressed her hand down gently. “Wait.”

She looked at him. He refused to let go, stammering, “I’ll read the agreement again. Is it because of him?”

She stared, genuinely confused.

He jerked his chin toward Gabriel. “Is it because of that guy? You think he’s better than me?”

Finally, she understood what he meant and shook his hand off. “Don’t paint everyone with your own dirty brush. He’s my...”

“How long have you even known him? A month? Two weeks?” he interrupted, desperate. “I never saw him in Venice, so it has to be less than half a month.”

“So what?”

“You can’t judge a book by its cover. Can you really trust someone you’ve barely known?”

His know-it-all expression made her laugh.

“I’ve known you for 12 years, so what? Are you worth trusting?”

“Have I ever lied to you? Haven’t I treated you well?”

“Treated me well?” She laughed without humor. “I don’t want to rehash the past; it’s meaningless. Go ask Catherine what happened on the day she was kidnapped. Ask her who you treated better.”

His face went ashen.

“Sorry, I don’t have time to keep digging up old graves. We’ll see each other at the courthouse.” She walked past him toward the building.

Gabriel, waiting on the steps, strode forward instantly. Vance lunged for Rebecca, but Gabriel pulled her smoothly behind him.

He warned, “Mr. Bradford, you can leave now.”

The bodyguards closed in like a black tide as he led Rebecca inside and headed straight into the elevator.

Vance stood frozen in the garden, but they never came down again.

Now Nancy was the only link he had left. She only reported on Josette’s condition and nothing else.

With a full-time caregiver already there, Nancy took the role of cooking and delivering meals.

Efficient as ever, Hugo had the house redecorated and cleaned in just one day. Nancy became the first person moving in, with a driver picking her up daily to deliver meals to the hospital.

Vance ran into her at the inpatient building, but each time, he couldn’t get close enough to speak. He could only watch her carry the lunchbox inside under bodyguard escort.

When he pressed her for more information, she always answered the same, “I don’t know, Mr. Bradford.”

He snapped, “I’m the one who hired you!”

Her eyes dropped. “I’m sorry, sir. I really can’t tell you.”

He couldn’t push further because Rebecca had already texted him: [I’m paying Nancy’s salary now. Please don’t make things difficult for her.]

He smiled bitterly at the screen.

Five days later, Josette was discharged. Vance timed his arrival and had just parked the car when she came out of the building with the help of Rebecca and Gabriel.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 321

Vance stood face-to-face with Josette again.

The woman who had once loved him more fiercely than anyone now regarded him with quiet, helpless.

sorrow. Rebecca and Gabriel stood on either side, steadying her.

“Grandma,” Vance croaked. “I came to pick you up from the hospital. Let’s go home.”

Josette was as gracious as ever, but now, all she could manage was a sigh.

“I’m so sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t get there in time to save you.”

The thought of her suffering sent fresh pain through his chest.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said softly, shaking her head.

“Then come home with me, please. Back to our place,” he pleaded, flicking a desperate glance at Rebecca.

She didn’t even acknowledge him, her face cold as frost. Together with Gabriel and the bodyguards, she helped Josette into the car.

The car pulled away smoothly, leaving Vance in the dust. He remained rooted to the spot for a long time.

Rebecca hadn’t expected Gabriel to prepare such a large house in such a short time. Josette was shocked as well, especially by the dozens of neatly uniformed bodyguards. She had never seen anything like that.

She tugged at Gabriel’s sleeve. “Sweetheart, who are all these men?”

The little crease between her brows screamed nervousness, making him chuckle. “Grandma, relax. They’re good guys, just like me.”

Josette flushed, embarrassed. “That’s not what I meant. I only...”

She paused, unsure how to put it.

His grin widened. “Guess I did pretty well. Quite a few people count on me for their livelihoods, so they send people to keep me safe. If I go down, they lose their meals.”

She quickly stopped him. “Hey, don’t talk like that. Good stays, and bad goes away.”

He chuckled, leading them upstairs to choose bedrooms.

“We’ll stay for just a month,” Rebecca said quietly.

A mansion this size felt excessive.

“Even one day shouldn’t be thrown away,” he said, tapping her forehead lightly. “Life is too short, and we should never shortchange ourselves.”

She recalled her aimless five years, and that tap felt like a wake-up call.

In the end, she and Josette chose side-by-side rooms on the second floor. Each had enormous floor-to-ceiling windows that opened onto a curved balcony. A huge old sycamore stood just beyond the railing, its leaves thick and summer-green.

“This place is nice,” Josette marveled. “Never thought I’d live to see days like this.”

“Grandma,” Gabriel said softly, “every day from now on is going to be like this.”

His phone kept vibrating, but he ignored it.

“Go take care of whatever that is,” Rebecca urged. “Grandma and I can manage on our own.”

He did have pressing business. Now that Josette was home from the hospital, it was time to set up the local office.

At that point, Hugo was planning a banquet to introduce Gabriel to Soliaridge’s power players.

“You and Grandma are both invited, if you feel like coming,” Gabriel said. “And I’ve already scheduled Grandma’s visa interview; I’ll take her myself. For the rest of the time, feel free to relax. If you ever leave the house, remember to take Piero with you.”

Piero was the head of security.

Comments:

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 322

Rebecca barely left the house for the next few days. Her whole world narrowed to Josette.

Josette was improving steadily, though she was still fragile. It was better for her to stay at home and rest quietly.

Gabriel, meanwhile, had disappeared into a whirlwind of work. He went out before dawn and returned home after dark.

Rebecca hardly saw him until the morning he took Josette for her visa interview. He apologized for his busy schedule, having no time to keep them company.

Josette brushed it off. "Work comes first. We're fine, honey."

He then brought up the banquet. "Feeling up for it? If you do, Hugo will send gowns and jewelry over for a try-on."

She shook her head. "I'll sit this one out. Becky, do you want to go and have some fun?"

Rebecca hesitated, guessing that since Gabriel was new, maybe he didn't yet understand local etiquette. As host, he might need her there, but her leg was unsightly for a grand occasion like that.

After a beat, she nodded decisively. If he were asking, he wanted her beside him. She'd go.

Gabriel's face brightened. "Perfect. I'll tell Hugo to send the gown."

He thought for a moment and added, "Uh, never mind. I'll take you shopping tomorrow. Hugo's taste in women's clothing is questionable at best." 1

She grinned and nodded, planning to drop by Derek's studio.

In Vance's office, Aiden and Lucas sat across the desk, talking through the upcoming Rossi Enterprises debut banquet.

"Every heavy hitter in Soliaridge will be attending," Aiden exclaimed. "And we are on the list."

Vance nodded, expressionless.

"Man, why the long face lately?" Lucas teased. "You look like a college kid who just got dumped by his first love."

"It will get easier with time," Aiden exhaled. "You're just not used to it yet. Don't overthink. The whole company is riding on you; this deal has to land."

Vance took a deep breath. "I know."

“Oh, about the guy you asked me to look into?” Aiden added. “He is Rebecca’s cousin, named Gabriel Perry, You know about her aunt living overseas, right? That’s her son. They must have crossed paths while she was abroad, and he tagged along when she came back.”

The knot in Vance’s chest loosened. “What does he do for a living?”

“Hard to pin down. Barely any public footprint. Probably just some regular guy at an overseas firm.”

“But... He had serious security. Looked expensive.”

“Security isn’t that pricey. The lobby guys would jump for \$500 a day. Easy hire when you’re scared for your life.”

Aiden believed these people were hired hands to rescue Rebecca’s grandmother.

Vance nodded, agreeing to the point. And the car that had picked Josette up on discharge day hadn’t been anything exotic.

“Okay,” he said, his shoulders dropping. “Then we go full throttle on Rossi. Starting with the banquet. No mistakes.”

“Oh, right,” Aiden said carefully. “Catherine wants to come, too.”

He paused, then sighed, “She’s terrified of setting you off these days. She doesn’t dare to ask you and comes to me instead. She wants to get out, meet some decent women, and have a life rather than hide in that apartment forever.” (1

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Chapter 323

Lucas frowned. “Why? What happened?”

Lucas had been less plugged in lately, with his wife pregnant, so he’d missed chunks of the drama.

“Nothing,” Aiden said quickly. “Catherine is worried Rebecca will get the wrong idea, so she’s keeping her distance from you.”

Vance stroked his chin. “Fine. Bring her. List her as an assistant.”

“Got it. Should I get her a gown?”

“Sure. I’ll transfer you the money.”

The next morning, they arrived at Derek’s studio.

Rebecca had called ahead, and the team had already curated a rack of dresses in her size and preferred palette.

Derek waited in the showroom, jumping up the moment they walked through the door. She flinched at his overreaction. When had he become so outgoing?

But he was running toward Gabriel, not her. He exclaimed, “Man, you’re back in the country?”

His gaze fell on Rebecca’s hand that was holding Gabriel’s arm, and something clicked: these two had the same family name.

“Wait, you guys...” he said.

“Yep,” Gabriel said, grinning. “She is my cousin.”

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” Derek glanced at Rebecca. “No wonder she always looked so familiar. I thought we had some cosmic connection. Turns out you guys are related.”

Cosmic connection? Really?

“Come on, coffee time.” Derek herded them to the lounge and brewed two cups. “These beans just landed. Call yourselves lucky.”

Years ago, while studying fashion in Europe, Derek had been mentored by Kaitlyn. His friendship with

Gabriel had started then.

“I can’t believe I didn’t put it together sooner. Perry isn’t exactly Smith,” Derek groaned.

“If I had, would you have given her discounts?” Gabriel teased.

“Obviously!” Derek grinned, unusually animated.

“Not too late now,” Gabriel said, mock-stern. “Bring out your best. Make her shine at the banquet.”

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“Done. I’ll throw in my top makeup and styling team-red-carpet caliber,” Derek promised, then jabbed a finger at Gabriel. “You came back to the country and didn’t even contact me. Big important heir now, too busy for your old friends?”

“Come on,” Gabriel laughed, having been buried in work.

An assistant appeared. “Ready for fittings, Ms. Perry?”

Rebecca had been grinning the whole time listening to them. She followed the assistant to the dressing area.

“She looks a lot lighter,” Derek whispered.

Gabriel’s expression shifted. “Was she unhappy before?”

Even an outsider had seen it?

Derek shook his head. “Obvious in a way that hurt to watch. She’s got real light in her. Back when she danced, they called her Swallow. Then her wings broke. She came here to manage her husband’s wardrobe and insisted on designing custom cufflinks so his shirts would stand out. People lost their minds over them.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “Cufflinks?”

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“Yeah.” Derek pulled out a velvet tray of samples. “Every pair sold out. Customers used to beg her to take more orders, but she always refused. Now she’s suddenly open to it, and there’s already a long waiting list. I told them the mysterious designer wasn’t accepting new clients. Figured I’d square up with her today.”

Gabriel Perry looked at the exquisite purple-diamond cufflinks in his hand; his eyes grew even darker.

Rebecca had no idea what was happening in the lounge. She stepped out in a champagne gown, walking a little stiffly with the assistant’s help.

“How do i look?” she asked, self-conscious.

It was her classic color-gentle, elegant, and safe.

“Beautiful,” Gabriel said, studying her. “But it’s not even close to what I had in mind.”

He glanced at Derek, who instructed the assistant, “Queen of the ballroom. Bring the vintage burgundy.”

The moment the gown was brought out, Rebecca’s breath caught.

The red was breathtaking. Not loud or cheap, it was deep, shadowed, and aristocratic. The vintage cut, the regal lines, and the low neckline promised fire with the right jewels.

Gabriel nodded with satisfaction, but before he could urge her to try it, a shriek cut through from the entrance.

“Wow, that gown is gorgeous! Sonia, can I have it?”

The speaker made a beeline for the gown. Of course, it was Catherine Welch, freezing at the sight of

Rebecca.

A dozen questions crossed her mind, but she quickly pasted on a smile. “Rebecca? Didn’t expect to see you here.”

Rebecca’s gaze slid past her to Sonia Hodge. Aiden’s wife was shopping with Catherine?

She had never liked Aiden, but she was cool with Sonia. For five years, they’d barely crossed paths, but Sonia was one of the few people who had shown her real kindness.

Not long after the wedding, she had gone to the company and overheard Vance’s disgust for her injured leg. Heartbroken, she had run out and almost collided with Sonia at the elevator entrance.

Back then, Sonia was a staff member and hadn’t yet married Aiden. Sonia had steadied her, seen her tears, and pulled her into a hug, quietly asking if she wanted to sit in the break room for a while.

She had declined, and Sonia had pressed a piece of chocolate into her hand without saying anything else. The characters on the wrapping read: [Stay Happy!]

After that, they occasionally bumped into each other at Derek’s studio. They’d only nod and go their ir topte: 394 separate ways after collecting their clothes.

Each time, Sonia would offer a soft smile. That small gesture of kindness was one of the few bright spots she had seen in the past five years.

Rebecca could never resent her. But why in the world was Sonia here with Catherine?

Nevertheless, she gave the same gentle smile Sonia had once given her.

At that point, Catherine was already communicating with the assistant. “I’d like to try on this gown. Thank you.” [1

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Catherine knew well that the studio only accepted returning clients. She’d been turned away here before, but the forbidden fruit always looked the sweetest.

It was just a small designer studio in Soliaridge. She could buy any big international brand she wanted, yet a small designer was putting on airs.

By chance, Sonia was a regular customer here, so through Aiden, she had asked Sonia to bring her along.

Since she had visited the studio once, she didn’t think the staff would have any impression of her.

But the assistant did remember her. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but that gown is already reserved.”

Catherine wasn’t blind. The assistant was standing right beside Rebecca.

“Rebecca, would you mind if I tried this one on?” she asked deliberately, then turned back to the assistant. “We go way back. She’ll let me have it.”

Rebecca blinked, stunned by her brazenness.

In the lounge, Gabriel watched the scene unfold with rising disgust. That woman seemed to have forgotten her days in that basement.

He started to stand, but Derek pressed him down. “Easy, big bear. Just chill and watch.”

Derek saw him frown and added, “Trust me. Rebecca can handle it, and my employees are no pushovers.

Just watch the show.”

His voice was low, so those outside couldn’t hear him.

As Rebecca stayed silent, Catherine pulled Sonia forward. “I came with Sonia. She’s one of your regulars. Can I try the gown now?”

“I’m sorry,” the assistant repeated, unruffled. “You might not have heard me, but this gown is already spoken for.”

“I heard you,” Catherine laughed, bright and brittle. “Rebecca said I could have it.”

She looped her arm through Sonia’s and smiled at Rebecca. “I came with Sonia to pick gowns for the banquet hosted by Rossi Enterprises. You know that global powerhouse, right? They’re establishing operations in Soliaridge and looking for local partners. Their business overlaps with Vance’s company, and his team is desperate to win the contract.”

“Rossi Enterprises?” Rebecca glanced at Gabriel, who sat there perfectly still.

“Global powerhouse?” She didn’t know the full scale. “So, what does that have to do with this gown?”

She had no interest in Catherine’s ramble at all, but since Gabriel was involved, she decided to listen.

Catherine lit up. “Tomorrow, they are throwing the event of the season. Soliaridge’s entire elite circle is invited, and Vance’s company is on the list. Sonia and I will be there to put up front. For the greater picture, you’ll let me have this gown, right?”

At that, Gabriel started to rise again. Derek pulled him back down and signaled him to chill.

Rebecca laughed, and Catherine beamed, misinterpreting it. “I knew you’d agree. You’ve always been so sensible. We’re in this for Vance.”

“No,” Rebecca said calmly. “I’m not agreeing.”

“What?” Catherine’s voice pitched higher. “You’ve been cooped up at home for so long, unaware of what’s happening outside. You have no idea how big Rossi is or how important this collaboration is for

Vance.”

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Rebecca shook her head. “Sonia is Aiden’s wife, so it makes sense for her to attend that event. If she wanted the gown, I’d hand it over in a heartbeat. You’re representing Vance’s company? In what capacity?

Catherine faltered, her eyes darting to Sonia. “I...”

Sonia slid her arm free and gave Rebecca a small smile. “It’s fine. That gown looks beautiful on you and suits your skin tone. I already have my custom gown ordered.”

“Sonia?” Catherine gaped, surprised that Sonia didn’t take her side.

Before they came, Aiden had told Sonia to look out for her.

Sonia turned to another salesperson. “Help me match shoes to my custom.”

She then walked away toward the footwear display. Catherine stood alone, facing Rebecca, the assistant, and the red gown.

“I know you’re jealous of the bond Vance, Aiden, and I have,” she said righteously. “But don’t twist my intentions into something ugly. I’m attending the banquet as an assistant. The company didn’t become what it is by accident. You’ve been living comfortably at home and have no idea how hard he works. Landing Rossi would be a game-changer. This banquet really matters to him.”

“I know.” Rebecca reached into her bag and pulled out her phone.

She dialed Vance’s number and put it on speaker. Catherine grew anxious. “Why are you calling him?”

Rebecca ignored her, waiting for the line to get through. Catherine pulled back, regaining her confidence.

Vance had always taken her side anyway. Even when she and Rebecca were both kidnapped, he had chosen her. Rebecca’s effort now was just futile.

Vance was having a meeting; his hushed tone and the background noises said it all.

“Hang on,” he whispered, surprised and delighted.

She waited as he strode into the corridor, then spoke normally. “What’s up? Where are you? I’m coming over right now.”

“Aren’t you in a meeting?” she asked casually.

“It’s not that important. Aiden and the team can handle it. Where are you? I’ll head over now.”

“No need. Just want to ask you something.”

“Go ahead.”

“The agreement we signed... You haven’t forgotten it, right?”

He paused. “Of course not.

Unease settled in his chest because he hadn’t honored every line. In fact, he’d just gotten more creative, thinking that she didn’t know.

“Good.” She glanced at Catherine, who was already unraveling. “One clause states that Catherine may not hold any position at your company or any affiliate, or all your assets become mine. Correct?”

“Yes,” he replied quickly, having abided by that clause strictly.

“So, Catherine isn’t your assistant?”

“Of course not.”

His voice came through, crisp and final. Catherine’s panic twisted into raw anger.

“Another clause,” Rebecca continued. “You may not spend another cent on her. If you do, I’ll reclaim it and take all your assets. Correct?”

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Vance fell silent, those seconds loud with guilt, because he had found workarounds to funnel money to

Catherine.

“Rebecca...” he muttered, buying time to form a response.

She skipped over that part. “I’m at Derek Sinclair’s studio buying clothes. Catherine is here, too. This dress costs \$280,000. So, tell me. How did an unemployed person like her get that kind of money?”

“Hey, you’re going too far!” Catherine protested.

Rebecca ignored her and spoke into the phone. “Answer me.”

“I’m coming over. Wait for me,” Vance said.

“I said no need. You’ve been in business long enough to understand what a contract means. I don’t want this to end in court. Honor what we signed.”

“Let me come...”

“For what? To show me your bank statements?”

“...”

She ended the call, turning to Catherine. “Still want the gown?”

Catherine’s fists clenched. “I-I borrowed the money. Who says it came from Vance?”

“Really?” Rebecca raised an eyebrow. “That’s simple. Once he’s here, we’ll just check the transaction records. Everything will be clear.”

“That’s privacy. You have no right to check anything!” Catherine countered, gripping her phone.

Most of her money came through Aiden these days, but there were traces. Worse still, Sonia was still in the store. If she saw the records, that would be catastrophic.

And Vance had occasionally transferred smaller amounts to her.

Rebecca was unfazed. “You keep forgetting one small detail. I’m still his legal wife. Our joint accounts and statements are none of your concern, are they?”

“You’re getting divorced!” Catherine growled.

“Oh, I can always withdraw the petition,” Rebecca said lightly. “Doesn’t really make much difference.”

Catherine’s face flushed with anger. “You’re just after his money! Isn’t everything you’re buying today coming out of his pocket?”

“How do you keep forgetting the basics?” Rebecca sighed, shaking her head. “Me spending his money is completely legitimate. His money is mine too. It’s called community property. Looks like I’ll have to reclaim everything again to help you remember.”

“I-I didn’t! I never touched his money!” Catherine refused to admit it, no matter what.

Rebecca didn’t argue with her. “Alright. Wait and let the statements talk.”

“Whatever!” Catherine turned around. “Sonia, let’s go! We’re not buying anything here!”

Sonia had no intention of leaving. “I still need to try on my custom piece. If you’re in a rush, you can go first.”

“I...” Catherine was furious.

This studio was a curse, and she blamed herself for having any attachment. Why would she want to shop here? She could buy couture anywhere else.

In a final burst of rage, she stormed out. At the same time, Rebecca went with the assistant to try on the burgundy gown.

Sonia was already dressed in her custom outfit, looking in the mirror. When Rebecca stepped out, she flashed a smile. “It looks great. This bold color suits you!”

Rebecca admired Sonia’s blue outfit. “Gorgeous! Like you’re wearing the ocean.”

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For once, Rebecca and Sonia exchanged genuine compliments.

When Sonia finally gathered her gown to leave, she paused at the door. “Sorry, I didn’t know you were here. Aiden asked me to bring her, so I did.”

Rebecca shook her head. “No worries. It was not your fault.”

A hint of melancholy flickered in Sonia’s eyes, but in the end, she smoothed it away with a smile. “Are you going to the banquet tomorrow night?”

“Yes.” Rebecca nodded.

She would not be attending as Vance’s wife but as Gabriel’s cousin.

“See you then.” Sonia’s smile still carried a trace of sadness as she left.

Rebecca understood that look. Sonia couldn’t be truly happy with Aiden. They were not the same kind of people at all.

Back then, she’d been young, striking, and brilliant. As VP of the company, Aiden had chased her hard, and she had fallen for it. A big mistake!

Rebecca had never really wanted to clash with Catherine, but the latter wouldn’t stop provoking her. Today counted as her victory, but it was not something glorious.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror, feeling too raw to go to Gabriel and ask his opinion about the new gown.

Arguing with Vance's mistress in public and exposing the ugliness of her marriage was shameful. Even though Gabriel already knew her marriage was unhappy, this was humiliation in full color.

Gabriel appeared behind her, lifted a necklace from the display case, and fastened it around her neck. Needs jewelry to complete the picture. Hair up completely. Hmm, missing earrings. I'll have Hugo source them. He's got impeccable taste in gems."

Rebecca was confused because he had just questioned Hugo's taste earlier.

"Clothes, maybe not. Jewelry? Different story," he explained, reading her mind. "In any case, just buy the most expensive. This gown needs the most expensive jewelry to match it."

Rebecca knew he was backing her up. Her throat tightened, and her head lowered. "Gabriel..."

"It's okay." He gathered her long hair, twisting it into a loose chignon. In the mirror, her features looked sharper and more vivid. "Today was a pleasant surprise. I thought you were a little lamb. Turns out she's a baby leopard."

This gown did look better with an updo. But lambs and leopards? She was almost 30, not a child anymore.

"I made a spectacle," she murmured, her eyes stinging.

It wasn't because of Vance or Catherine. She just remembered what he had told her before: "In front of me, you'll always be a child."

"Yep!" Derek bounced over.

Rebecca's stomach sank; she knew how blunt this man could be.

He continued, "That woman was comedy gold! What a disaster! Gabriel was two seconds from exploding. I had to hold him back, telling him you could handle it. He didn't believe me."

She blinked, realizing he was talking about Catherine. The embarrassment wasn't hers.

He read her mind. "Please, you're not a joke. If I laughed at you, Gabriel would tear me down. No kidding. I want to stay alive."

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Chapter 329

Derek was known for being aloof, cold-faced, and allergic to small talk. Yet in front of Gabriel, he was loud, dramatic, and playful.

The contrast was astounding.

He and Gabriel had stayed in the lounge the entire time, so Catherine hadn't seen him. Even if she had, she wouldn't have recognized him as the same man who had locked her in the basement.

Rossi Enterprises' debut banquet would happen on the following evening.

That afternoon, the matching ruby necklace arrived, along with the styling and makeup team. They worked on Rebecca for hours, and Gabriel just waited.

She was surprised. The banquet was important, and he was supposed to be at the venue overseeing the final details.

"Hugo has it covered," he explained. "I'd just be underfoot."

That sounded suspiciously modest.

"Seriously." He sensed her doubt and straightened his face. "If I'm there, everyone freezes up. Slows down the whole operation."

"They are that tense in front of you?" She couldn't picture it.

To her, he was always gentle and attentive-nothing like the ruthless figure people whispered about.

He was perplexed. "I don't know. Do I look intimidating?"

She laughed despite herself. He brushed it off. "Enough about me. Your hair isn't done, and your gown isn't on. Go get ready."

In the dressing room, she slipped into the burgundy gown, sat back at the vanity, and lifted the ruby necklace from its box.

It was dazzling. The vintage, deliberately patinated gold chain gathered all the brilliance into something regal, serious, and understated.

A massive central ruby dominated, surrounded by graduated smaller stones like courtiers framing a queen. It looked opulent, exquisite, and expensive.

She couldn't even guess how much it cost. When she finally stepped out, Gabriel was stunned.

On the one hand, she looked breathtaking. On the other hand, she walked steadily without the slightest limp.

"I'm ready. Let's go," she said briskly.

In fact, she had quietly commissioned custom shoes from Derek. One was flat, and the other had a slight lift, perfectly compensating for her inconvenience.

At 5'7" and with a dancer's elongated posture, she never looked short without heels anyway. These shoes corrected the difference.

Meeting his astonishment, she lifted the hem just enough to reveal the mismatched soles. If she had to attend the banquet, she'd at least look like a normal person.

But he didn't look pleased, making her question her decision.

Without a comment, he offered his arm with a soft smile. "Shall we go, my princess?"

The knot of worry in her chest unraveled, and she slipped her hand through his elbow.

Outside waited a car that wasn't ostentatiously luxurious-just a budget sedan middle-class people could afford.

She felt perfectly fine, climbing in without even glancing at its logo.

Gabriel's outfit was also from Derek's studio. The classic black suit was paired with a garnet shirt, perfectly matching her gown.

Flanked by security vehicles, the car started and sped toward the hotel where the banquet was being held.

They arrived early, and the ballroom was almost empty.

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Chapter 330

Hugo warmly ushered Gabriel and Rebecca inside.

Since it was still early, he settled them in a private lounge with tea and light refreshments. Gradually, the hum of arriving guests grew louder outside. It was time to step outside.

“Ready?” Gabriel offered his arm.

“Yes.” Rebecca took it, bracing for nerves.

In the past five years, she’d never attended an event like this, so she basically didn’t know anyone from the Soliaridge elite world or Vance’s business circle.

But once she stepped into the ballroom, her anxiety evaporated. There were no familiar faces, which meant no one recognized her or could figure out who Gabriel truly was.

She looked breathtaking, and Gabriel looked quietly commanding. But they were both young, registering only as unimportant juniors to the seasoned power players present.

Eyes slid over them in a second before hunting for more useful conversations. Networking was the real currency here.

Gabriel looked refined and gentle in a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, smiling all the time. No one could associate him with the rumored devil incarnate.

“Looks like we’re off the hook,” he said. “Come on. Let’s get something to drink over there.”

They shuffled from the private lounge to the ballroom.

“Aren’t you supposed to be the main attraction tonight?” Rebecca asked, curious.

She had rehearsed polite greetings and small talk, hoping to help him entertain the guests.

But he avoided the question. “The foie gras looks decent. Think Hugo flew it in special? Want some? I’ll grab you a plate.”

She didn’t want to eat anything now, having already drunk enough sparkling water. The formal program. hadn’t even started, and acting like a bumpkin wasn’t the plan.

Nearby, some young women were discussing jewelry, sharing details about their customized pieces.

One of them sighed dramatically, “Have you heard about that ruby jewelry set? It’s one-of-a-kind worldwide. Just the 55-carat center stone went for over \$30 million. The whole necklace was hammered for more than \$40 million at auction yesterday. Some Soliaridge whale bought it. No one knows who it was.”

Another said, “I saw the headlines. But who? That kind of flex is next-level.”

“Total mystery. The buyer is anonymous. Wonder if it will appear at any future banquets. At least, we could feast our eyes on it.”

“Would it be here tonight?”

“Doubt it. Delivery can’t be that fast.”

Rebecca glanced down at the ruby necklace on her neck, then up at Gabriel.

He gave a tiny shrug and whispered, “Hugo picked it.”

“This thing feels heavy on my neck,” she muttered, self-conscious as an ordinary person.

A \$40-million necklace was a lot to carry. Once again, she had underestimated how deep Gabriel’s pockets went.

II

“Hold it together,” he encouraged her. “You deserve the best of everything.”

That was true. She couldn’t back out just yet, not since Vance’s company delegation had just walked in.

Those people were Aiden, Sonia, Lucas, and his wife, Isabelle Lewis. Of course, Catherine was with them, but Vance was absent.

Undeniably, Bradford Tech was a powerhouse in its sector. The moment they appeared, people began drifting over.

One asked, “Is Mr. Bradford not joining us tonight?”

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“Oh, he is right behind us,” Aiden replied with a smooth grin.

“Your almost-ex does have some pull in town,” Gabriel whispered.

Rebecca glanced at him, and he shrugged. “On raw strength alone, this deal should have been theirs. No contest. It’s a shame that...”

“So, family over fairness?” she said quietly.

She might be soft-hearted, but she wasn't blind. No way was she letting Gabriel pour money into a nest of vipers.

He met her eyes. "Whether that company survives or implodes is literally one sentence from you."

She looked at the high-spirited group in front of her, lost in thought.

Gabriel added meaningfully, "Skyscrapers take years to raise from nothing, but gravity only needs a heartbeat to bring them down."

They stood shoulder to shoulder, whispering like conspirators because no one in the room had clocked them. But the private commentary died fast because people who did know them had just arrived.

The five people approached in a noisy wave, greeting the other guests along the way. They halted at the sight of Rebecca and Gabriel.

"Rebecca!" Isabelle called out.

Rebecca offered a polite smile. "Isabelle."

In truth, they had barely crossed paths. She had even less contact with Isabelle than with Sonia. The sudden enthusiasm surprised her.

"You arrived early. Come join us," Isabelle said.

She had a reputation around the office. Unlike Sonia, she was bold and straightforward. At home, Lucas was the obedient one.

Seeing Rebecca hesitate, she extended her hand. "Come on. Vance will be here any minute. We're all friends here."

Rebecca wasn't used to the instant inclusion, and technically, she wasn't close to any of them. Just as she was about to decline, Catherine stepped forward, "Isabelle..."

"Hang on. Don't interrupt us," Isabelle said without blinking.

Her bluntness couldn't be taken lightly.

Catherine and the guys had been classmates, while Isabelle and Sonia were younger. The guys might pamper Catherine, but Isabelle refused to play along.

Catherine's face flushed with embarrassment, and her eyes shimmered with grievance.

Isabelle couldn't stand it. "This is a big night. Don't pull your pitiful act. Make a fool of yourself as you like, but spare us."

When her temper flared, even Lucas didn't dare say a word. Sonia pretended not to hear anything, but Aiden looked annoyed.

"Lucas, keep your wife in line," he sulked.

Isabelle rounded on him like a guided missile. "Excuse me? Don't you think you meddle too much? Mind your own business."

Rebecca fought the urge to laugh, never realizing Isabelle could be this blunt. Aiden and Lucas were jerks, but their wives were so nice.

Catherine's tears evaporated, and Aiden swallowed his anger. He was vice president, representing the company. Arguing with Isabelle would affect its image.

Comments:

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Chapter 332

Catherine refused to be outdone. When the waterworks failed, she switched tactics.

"I'm sorry, Bella," she apologized with an earnest expression.

"Don't bother." Isabelle waved it off, turning to Lucas. "Am I that close to her?"

His brain flatlined. "What are you talking about?"

She gave a cold, humorless laugh. "Then why is she addressing me like we're family?"

"That's enough," Aiden interjected, unable to hold back anymore. "We are a family here."

"I'm talking to Lucas. What's it to you?" Isabelle shot back. "She can get cozy with anyone but my husband. Lucas doesn't have a sister, and we are not related."

Aiden was lost for words, just glaring at Lucas, who was already sweating bullets.

He sidled up to Isabelle and whispered, "Honey, please don't make a scene on this big occasion. It's embarrassing."

She itched to twist his ear, holding back only for public decorum. She gritted her teeth. “Embarrassing? I’m your wife. Sonia is Aiden’s wife. Rebecca is Vance’s wife. We’re here openly and legitimately. Who is the real embarrassment?”

“Please, say no more,” Lucas pleaded, clinging to her arm.

She snorted, reaching for Rebecca’s hand, but Catherine jumped in once again with her signature timid look.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” she sobbed. “I’ve been friends with the guys forever and only have their best interests at heart. This banquet is huge for the company. Rebecca’s never really done this social scene, and...”

She flicked a deliberate glance at Rebecca’s legs. “Her mobility is limited. If she trips up, it reflects on all of us, right?”

“Business partnerships are based on strength, not looks,” Isabelle countered. “If Rossi Enterprises chooses partners like that, then you shouldn’t cooperate with them at all. They don’t deserve it.”

Rebecca glanced at Gabriel meaningfully. He nodded and silently encouraged her to play along. They had nothing else to do anyway.

When Isabelle reached for her hand again, Rebecca willingly stepped over. Gabriel followed, not gonna let her face those people alone.

“And you are?” Isabelle asked, sizing him up.

Rebecca replied, “My cousin, Gabriel Perry.”

Isabelle nodded, acknowledging that the name wasn’t on the power-player roster, but she stayed gracious. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Gabriel replied, warm and easy.

The group then drifted toward the center of the ballroom. The earlier spat hadn’t carried because they had been tucked in a quiet corner.

Except for the few ladies at the table next to them, almost no one had heard what had just occurred. In fact, those ladies had no interest in the argument at all, their attention fully on Rebecca’s necklace.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 333

Isabelle added, "Behavior like this is insufferable. Lucas swears he was just helping out. Bullshit. I'm not blind. I don't know how deep he's in with her, but since I found out, I can't ignore it. Anyway, be careful."

It occurred to Rebecca that Lucas seemed to have joined their gatherings less often. Only Vance and Aiden kept up the old routine.

Anyway, Lucas had been part of it when they mocked and hurt her. She could separate Isabelle from him, but she couldn't forget the humiliation.

Across the room, Catherine was deep in conversation with the ladies.

"They're all from small tech companies. Executives and their wives. They all have dealings with Vance," Isabelle whispered. "She acts like the spokesperson. Showoff."

The women were fawning over Catherine, stroking her ego.

Catherine played coy. "Oh, I'm just the executive assistant. I don't really call the shots."

Rebecca clicked her tongue. Executive assistant? Keep bragging, and Vance's entire net worth might land in Catherine's account.

Catherine was nervous deep down. After dropping the line, she stole a glance at Rebecca, saw no reaction, and relaxed.

Truthfully, running into Rebecca made her stomach twist. The man who'd locked her in that basement knew all her secrets.

If Rebecca knew even half of them... But she didn't seem to. Otherwise, she'd have humiliated Catherine publicly already.

Catherine's eyes skimmed past Gabriel. Pretty men weren't her target; only rich older women chased looks.

According to Aiden, this man was Rebecca's cousin who'd popped up out of nowhere. In her mind, the Perrys were all trash. Rebecca's parents and brother were losers, and her cousin couldn't be any better.

"Miss Welch, once the Rossi deal closes, we'll all ride your coattails!" said an executive from a smaller firm with an obsequious smile.

"Oh, it's not settled yet." Catherine waved her hand, but the smugness on her face never died.

“No suspense. Rossi needs Soliaridge’s strongest tech player. Who else could it be? Just don’t forget us when you’re swimming in success,” the executive said.

“No way.” Catherine’s grin widened. “But yeah, it’s pretty much locked in. We indeed have a great relationship with the new successor.”

“Really? That’s huge!”

“Actually, it’s my connection. Rossi is headquartered in Europe, and I used to study there, going to the same school as him. Mr. Rossi Jr. was the campus star and a senior. You know how it is: U.S. students stick together. We did labs together and often hung out.”

“Wow! So, it’s your pull!”

“Exactly! Why else would he choose Soliaridge for his new branch? I did all the persuasions.”

Rebecca’s jaw dropped at those words. She turned to look at Gabriel.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 334

Once they reached the heart of the crowd, the energy shifted fast.

Vance’s company was a rising star without deep roots, but tech rewarded speed and youth. Bradford Tech was a true leader in the industry, its core business aligning with what Rossi Enterprises needed in a local partner.

So, an unspoken consensus seemed to have formed at the banquet: Bradford Tech would stand out.

People swarmed them with warm handshakes and bright smiles.

The group splintered quickly. Aiden and Lucas peeled off to talk shop with some male guests. Catherine attached herself to a group of women. Rebecca, Gabriel, Isabelle, and Sonia stayed together.

“Who is that guy? Why is he hanging with the ladies?” someone asked Catherine, eyeing Gabriel.

No one expected Catherine to have acquaintances at an event of this caliber. She flicked a dismissive glance at Gabriel and sniffed. “Some nobody, riding a woman’s invitation to get in. Nothing but a pretty face.”

Her voice carried just far enough, and a burst of laughter rippled through the group.

In rooms like this, that was never a compliment. It usually meant decorative. Gabriel heard every syllable, but he only lifted his wine glass and smiled faintly.

He looked a bit too bookish and civilized in his attire, giving off a completely different vibe from the man in the basement.

Someone had asked why he wore glasses when his vision was perfect. He'd answered, "To look civilized, obviously."

They had brushed it off as a joke, never knowing it was the truth.

When he was younger, he had been all sharp edges and barely leashed violence. The glasses were camouflage-something to blunt the ferocity inside him and hide the murderous glint in his eyes.

Now he was older and more controlled. But the habit remained. In a country ruled by law, it was better to look civilized.

Rebecca was ready to leap to his defense, but he just shook his head.

The game was just getting started. Nothing beat a public slap delivered at the absolute peak of smugness.

Isabelle couldn't stand such behavior, but in the middle of the crowd, a shouting match would only backfire. She leaned toward Rebecca. "She just has a cheap mouth."

The message was clear. They should just ignore Catherine and her taunt.

"Don't worry," Rebecca murmured. "He is fine."

Isabelle nodded, then glanced at Sonia. "Honestly..."

She caught herself, given the public occasion, and sighed instead. "We should grab coffee sometime.

Just us."

Sonia nodded quietly, maintaining her smile.

Isabelle scrolled through her phone, then turned to Rebecca. "Hey, we're not even friends on here yet.

Come on, add me."

Rebecca nodded. “Sure.”

The second they connected, Isabelle sent over a string of screenshots, then muttered under her breath, “You know, I tolerate no indecency. Anyway, Catherine is trying to flirt with everyone. You need to keep an eye on Vance.”

Rebecca checked out the content, realizing they were chat logs between Catherine and Lucas.

[Lucas, are you there?]

[Lucas, my place suddenly lost power. Can you come take a look?]

[Lucas, it’s so dark; I’m scared.]

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 335

Gabriel shook his wine, suppressing a laugh.

Rebecca realized she still had a lot to learn. This was her first time witnessing such a scene.

“If she knew Mr. Rossi Jr., I’d be the queen,” Isabelle scoffed.

“Your Highness,” Rebecca said smoothly.

Isabelle burst out laughing, but Sonia looked worried. “She’s being too ostentatious. Won’t that hurt the company? Hope this won’t ruin the collaboration.”

Isabelle shrugged. “If it fell through because of her, she’d be held accountable. Everything has a cause and effect. It’s their fault for coddling her too much.”

The four of them watched as Catherine continued her performance with even more vigor.

“Oh my gosh! We had no idea of these stories behind this. Girl, you’re incredible! You’re the lucky star of Bradford Tech!”

“Right? We thought this would be a straightforward partnership. We didn’t know you played such a crucial role.”

Catherine basked in their flattery, putting on a façade of modesty. “What can I say? You all know how much Vance has struggled to keep this company afloat. It’s truly hard, but his wife is...”

She glanced at Rebecca and lowered her voice to a whisper. Rebecca couldn't hear it, but it couldn't be anything good.

The group sighed collectively in response.

"Oh, you work so hard yet get no credit. It's really tough."

"And some even call you a homewrecker. That's so unfair."

Catherine shook her head with a bitter smile. "What can I do? Vance and I met when we were both struggling. Even if the whole world criticizes me, I'll still do it. I don't care what others say; I just want him to be well."

"You're remarkable!"

"Absolutely! He's so lucky to have you."

Isabelle fumed, turning to Rebecca. "Are you just letting them slander you like that?"

Rebecca shook her head. "No rush."

They'd soon find out whether this was really a blessing for Vance or not.

"By the way, what is Mr. Rossi Jr, like?" one of the ladies asked. "We've been hearing so many legends about him."

"Well..." Catherine hesitated for a moment before diving in. "He's incredibly handsome. No doubt about it. He has this typical noble aura. Whenever he walks into a room, you can feel his unique presence, like a European royal prince. Not even a prince has features as sculpted, let alone that tall stature and noble demeanor. And you know, his hair is thick and beautiful."

The ladies burst into laughter, and someone exclaimed, "If I meet him, I might just faint!"

"You definitely would!" Catherine continued. "Back at our school, screams followed him everywhere. So many girls fell for him, but he never paid attention to them. He was aloof."

"Oh my gosh! I can't control my racing heart! How much longer until he shows up? The banquet should be starting soon, right?"

"Oh, please, introduce me to him! I just need to add him on WhatsApp; I promise I won't bother him. Just seeing his profile picture every day would be enough."

"Uh... You know how cold he is; he doesn't just add people on social or even talk to anyone casually."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 336

The lady was frustrated. “Makes sense.”

Another lady suddenly had an idea. “So many girls chased after him, and he ignored them all. He only has a good relationship with you. Could it be that...”

“Be honest with us. Does he like you?”

“Well...” Catherine paused deliberately. “There was indeed a little something back then, but you know, I was eager to come back, while his focus was in Europe, so... He actually sent me a lot of emails later on, but I didn’t reply. If there was no future, I couldn’t string him along.”

“I heard that he is still single. Because he can’t get over you?”

“My goodness! This kind of unrequited love, where one would rather stay single for life? I’ve only seen that in novels.”

It was getting too far-fetched, and someone burst out laughing.

Gabriel laughed, not at Catherine’s words, but because Rebecca was silently mimicking every line with her lips.

It was hilarious, and he couldn’t hold it in. Rebecca grinned, and Isabelle joined in.

Catherine felt embarrassed. Her eyes quickly locked onto Gabriel. “What are you laughing at?”

A loser like him had the nerve to mock her?

He was undaunted. “Excuse me, which university did you attend? How could you be classmates with Mr.

Rossi Jr.?”

Catherine regretted not checking his background before coming here. What if she made up a school that didn’t match? But she couldn’t back down now.

She glared. “What does it have to do with you?”

“Nothing much. Just wanted to admire the school,” he replied, holding back his amusement.

“Who do you think you are?” she sneered. “The students there are all royal members. Someone of your status could never get in.”

“Good to know.” He maintained a humble smile.

Just then, some ladies suggested, “Hey, let’s go get some drinks.”

“Catherine, are you coming with us?”

“Okay.”

Catherine shot a disdainful look at Rebecca and the others, walked past them, and headed to the

IEIT BE beverage area.

Isabelle was indignant. “What a joke! Mr. Perry, you have way too much self-control. I would’ve slapped her directly.”

Gabriel sipped his wine. “I will.”

That slap was definitely coming.

The group walked away, but their conversation continued.

“Now that Mr. Rossi Jr. has come to Soliaridge to start a company, doesn’t that mean you have a chance to get back together?”

“Exactly! You separated because of the distance, and now he has chased you all the way to Soliaridge. Don’t let this chance slip away.”

Rebecca convulsed with laughter, almost falling over. Gabriel quickly steadied her.

Isabelle and Sonia were both puzzled. “Is it that funny?”

“Don’t you find it funny?” she asked back.

“Yep,” Isabelle said. “She is daydreaming.”

Catherine’s voice drifted over. “That’s not cool. I’m with Vance now.”

“What if he pursues you again? He spent a fortune to start a company here for you.”

“Well, about that, we’ll see.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 337

“What’s the point of bragging like that?” Rebecca scoffed. “If Mr. Rossi Jr. really liked her, would she even come back?”

She didn’t get it. Was it just for reputation?

“Of course, there is a point,” Gabriel said.

Being in a different field was like being in another world. Rebecca came from an arts background, so she didn’t quite grasp the business games.

“Identity is whatever you claim,” Sonia chimed in, her voice cool and precise. “If she’s bold enough to brag, someone will believe it. The half-believers will still kiss up-maybe not with big contracts, but handbags, perfume, and other small gifts work fine. Even if the deal falls through, no one’s going to ask for the trinkets back.”

Skeptical, Rebecca turned to Gabriel for clues. His faint smile confirmed it.

Isabelle looked on with disdain as the group returned with drinks. She muttered, “Shameless to the bone.”

The group stopped in front of them. Catherine raised her glass, announcing, “Rebecca, these are all Vance’s business partners. Guys, this is Vance’s wife, Rebecca.”

The partners greeted Rebecca, then glanced at her legs and started giggling.

Gabriel’s hand settled on her shoulder; he was about to step in. She tugged at his sleeve, signaling him to stay cool.

Vance arrived just then, striding in from the entrance and scanning the room. Now it was time to drop the mask.

He spotted them and quickly headed in their direction. Unaware, Catherine stood there radiating smug benevolence.

“Mrs. Bradford doesn’t go out much because of her leg, so her social skills aren’t great,” she said sanctimoniously. “Tonight is huge for Vance’s company, so let’s help her settle in. She’s still learning. If she slips up anywhere, please be understanding.”

Gabriel’s voice sliced through the room. “She doesn’t need anyone to help her settle in. And no one here is qualified to offer understanding.”

Isabelle and Sonia exchanged worried glances. They understood Gabriel's anger, but this was a high-profile occasion. Even Vance couldn't afford to go full scorched earth here, let alone some unknown outsider. He'd end up being the one humiliated.

Isabelle jumped in, trying to smooth things over. "Catherine, we're not with you. Take your fan club and go play somewhere else. Sonia and I will take care of her."

Sonia took Rebecca's other hand—a silent reassurance.

Catherine laughed mockingly. "You two? No kidding. And you..."

She pointed at Gabriel. "What are you? If not for Vance's invitation, you couldn't even get in. This isn't your village meeting hall. Better to lay low and not let that dirt-poor vibe show. Security might toss you out."

"Toss me out?" Gabriel's gaze passed through his lenses.

But Catherine was already carried away with smugness. She cackled, "What else? Look, this is an important night. Not just anyone can waltz in. Ever heard of class? Hanging around low-rent people is an embarrassment in front of real power. It's a slap in Mr. Rossi Jr.'s face. You think he meets just anyone?"

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Chapter 338

Catherine's gaze finally landed on Rebecca's necklace. She shook her head with exaggerated pity. "And that necklace? You're here representing Vance, yet you wear cheap glass and tarnished metal? Are you trying to embarrass him?"

Rebecca touched the necklace. Glass? Tarnished metal? That was worth 40 million dollars! She wasn't one to shout, but this was absurd.

Vance was now only a few steps away. His gaze also fell on the necklace.

Catherine kept going. "It's okay, Rebecca. I know you don't understand these things. You were just an arts student. Dancing was your whole world, and then the accident ruined that. You've stayed home ever since, scared to go out. You don't know how any of this works and can't really help Vance. I get that. Come on. I'll take you to meet some people."

She reached for Rebecca's hand. That force would definitely make Rebecca trip and fall.

Luckily, Gabriel's grip was iron. Catherine couldn't budge her.

She shook Catherine's hand off and stepped back steadily.

“Wait, her leg is fine?” someone murmured.

Catherine lunged forward and flipped up the hem of Rebecca’s gown, exposing the custom shoes. One was flat, and the other was subtly lifted.

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Rebecca’s mind went blank with shock. Then a hand closed around hers, guiding her to slap Catherine across the face.

The force sent Catherine crashing to the ground. She fell at Vance’s feet. Her head spinning, she grabbed his pants leg and dragged herself up.

“Vance, I meant well,” she sobbed. “I was afraid Rebecca didn’t know how to act. I just wanted to introduce her to people.”

Before she could finish, a shadow fell over her. Rebecca stood in front of her, with Gabriel looming behind.

For some reason, meeting his eyes through the lenses sent a shiver down her spine.

Gabriel’s voice was low and lethal. “Again.”

Rebecca swung her hand again, knocking Catherine down once more. This was one of the few times she had hit someone. Her palm went numb from the recoil.

Due to her leg condition, she had always been cautious. Any misstep could lead to a fall, making her naturally less combative. She had never thought she would win if she fought back, so she had never tried.

Today, she did it, and it felt amazing.

Catherine had never taken a hit from Rebecca before. She scrambled up and hid behind Vance, tears streaming. “I really was trying to help. Does she hate me that much? I’ll just stay far away from you. I won’t say a word to her.”

Her words landed like a bomb.

Vance shut his eyes for a second, then stepped in front of her and smiled faintly at Rebecca. “You didn’t tell me you were coming.”

The chaos had attracted the attention of the entire hall. Aiden and Lucas were already jogging over.

“Why do you care?” Rebecca said flatly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

Vance only interpreted it as a rebellious remark. After all, in this entire venue, the only person connected to her was him.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 339

Vance glanced at the growing crowd, frowning. “Can we talk about this later? It isn’t appropriate to make a scene here.”

Gabriel wasn’t impressed. “Rebecca has every right to do whatever she likes.”

Vance ignored him, treating his words as noise.

“This man has been mouthing off this whole time,” Catherine accused. “No manners and no class. He could drag Rebecca into trouble and hurt the company, so I tried to reason with him and take Rebecca away. But they slapped me in front of so many people. I can’t take this humiliation.”

Aiden and Lucas arrived, frowning at the scene.

Isabelle cleared her throat and furrowed her brow. Lucas caught the signal, quickly moving over to steady her. “Honey, be careful. You’re pregnant.”

She snorted, saying nothing.

Aiden frowned at his reaction, then turned to glare at Rebecca, “That’s enough. Let’s not make this ugly. Apologize to Catherine, and she’ll let it go for Vance’s sake.”

“What?” Gabriel was incredulous. “You want Rebecca to apologize to her? What’s your problem?”

“Who the hell are you?” Aiden shot back.

Gabriel tucked Rebecca closer. “And who the hell are you?”

His smile was chilling despite his refined looks behind glasses.

Aiden lost it. “How did this trust-fund wannabe even get in? Call security and throw him out!”

Like Catherine, he assumed Gabriel had piggybacked in on Vance’s invitation.

Vance never liked Gabriel, but he wasn’t about to turn this into an even bigger circus. Involving security would be worse optics.

He stepped in front of Rebecca and extended a hand. “Come on. Let’s go. We’re all on the same side.”

She didn’t take his hand. Instead, she linked her arm through Gabriel’s.

“Don’t be willful, okay?” he added, still thinking she was throwing a tantrum. “I’ll apologize on her behalf, alright?”

Gabriel scoffed, “What is this? You’re going to apologize on her behalf? In what capacity? Her lover?”

Many people had gathered around them, all watching the spectacle. His words sparked a flurry of discussions.

Vance went livid. “I respect you as Rebecca’s cousin. Please show some decorum! This is not a place for you to act recklessly.”

“So what if I act recklessly? What can you do about it?” Gabriel took on an air of arrogance and superiority.

Vance glanced at the surrounding crowd, trying to control his emotions. No matter what, he had to keep the situation under control and preserve his dignity.

He suppressed his anger and spoke to Rebecca. “Come here. This is a matter between us. I’ll make it up to you. How about a new necklace? I’ve bought you so many pieces of jewelry. Why are you wearing that one?”

He had heard Catherine’s comment earlier. He also assumed the seemingly old necklace was just a worthless item from some online store.

“I don’t want it,” she refused, leaning closer to Gabriel.

This was their turf, and they could do whatever they liked. Whether it escalated or not, they didn’t care. It wasn’t their opponents who would lose face.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 340

Vance rubbed his temple. “You’re my wife. Why are you siding with an outsider?”

“Who’s the real outsider?” Rebecca snorted. “Gabriel would never make me apologize to an outsider. He would never let an outsider bully me. And he would never let thugs put a knife to my throat just to save an outsider.”

“This is a public event!” His voice dropped to an angry hiss. “You can’t run your mouth like that. People will laugh at you.”

“So, you know those things are wrong?” she scoffed. “You knew saying them out loud would make people laugh, and you still did it.”

He was rendered speechless.

Aiden was incandescent. “Why waste your breath? Just let security get him out.”

As the situation was spiraling out of control, the onlookers started to murmur advice.

“Mrs. Bradford, you can fight him privately, but this is a public occasion. Better to consider his reputation.

“That’s right. This banquet is practically held for Mr. Bradford. Everyone knows he’s got the Rossi deal locked. Think of the big picture, Mrs. Bradford.”

“Okay.” Rebecca pointed at Catherine. “Have her apologize to me.”

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“What the hell?” Aiden exploded. “You hit her and ask for an apology? Being Vance’s wife doesn’t give you the right to bully people like this.”

Catherine’s little fan club jumped in.

“Catherine was just trying to teach Mrs. Bradford how to socialize and introduce her to people.”

“She did it for Mr. Bradford and the company. In fact, Mr. Rossi Jr. coming to Soliaridge was her credit.”

The murmurs turned to gasps, surprised by Catherine’s influence, and people started drifting toward her side.

“I know this couple. Mrs. Bradford has mobility issues and never comes out to socialize. Mr. Bradford’s had it rough all these years.”

“Miss Welch has been carrying so much and taking the blame, too.”

“Mrs. Bradford, just let it go.”

“Rebecca.” Vance extended his arm again. “Come here. I’ll introduce you to some real contacts.”

So far, he still believed she loved him and was just jealous of Catherine. Now that he'd publicly chosen not to protect Catherine, she was supposed to embrace him, his career, the company, and the greater

Ymples 340 good.

That was his wishful thinking.

"Have her apologize," Rebecca repeated.

"Damn it!" Aiden lost it. "Apologize for what? This is crazy, Vance. Just call security and get them out.

No security arrived. Instead, a ring of black-clad bodyguards materialized and surrounded the group.

At the same time, Hugo stepped onto the stage and announced animatedly, "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming tonight. Mr. Rossi has arrived. Let's welcome him with a round of applause."

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 341

The crowd in the ballroom began to buzz with excitement. Everyone had long heard of Mr. Rossi Jr., but few had ever seen him in person.

Several top-tier elites had already turned their gazes toward Gabriel. He had paid the necessary courtesy visits to them upon arriving in Soliaridge, but given their status, they remained quiet in the background and did not join the commotion.

Amid the rising clamor, there was gossip, anticipation, and the loud, excited shouts of Catherine's entourage.

"Mr. Rossi is coming out!"

"Catherine, those slaps are finally going to get payback!"

"That's right! Mr. Rossi will stand up for you and throw these people out!"

Vance and Aiden were both confused. What connection could Mr. Rossi Jr. have with Catherine?

Under their questioning stares, Catherine shrank back and covered her face.

The entire room waited in eager expectation, but the man of the hour still did not appear on stage. It wasn't that he was deliberately delaying, but the crowd in front of him had packed so tightly that he couldn't move forward, giving these people extra time to keep talking.

Only when his bodyguards carved a clear path did he finally step forward, with Rebecca's hand on his arm.

"Hey, where are you going? Don't wander around and embarrass yourselves. This isn't your..." Catherine's voice echoed behind them.

But Gabriel had already led Rebecca, stunning in her burgundy gown, straight toward Hugo.

"Rebecca!" Vance reached out, but his fingers only brushed empty air.

"What on earth are they doing?" someone muttered.

Gabriel matched his pace to Rebecca's, walking at a calm, considerate speed. Behind them, it wasn't only Catherine and her group who stood stunned. Vance and his group also watched with wide eyes.

None of them had connected the obvious dots that Gabriel was Mr. Rossi Jr. They might have suspected it somewhere deep down, but they refused to admit it.

Hugo stepped aside respectfully, offered the central position to Gabriel, and began applauding,

Vance's face drained of color. He stumbled back, accidentally stepping on Aiden's foot. A voice screamed inside his head, "No way. How is this possible?"

Gabriel's voice rang out through the microphone the next moment, reaching every corner of the ballroom. "Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. I'm Gabriel Rossi."

Those few words sent shockwaves through the crowd.

"What? How could it be? Isn't that Rebecca's useless cousin? How could he be Mr. Rossi Jr?" Catherine swayed on her feet, nearly collapsing.

Suddenly, the memory of that venomous man from the basement flooded back. Terror wrapped around her like a net, tightening until she could barely breathe.

The sycophants who had been flattering her earlier gasped in disbelief.

“How can he be Mr. Rossi Jr.?”

“Catherine, didn’t you say that you went to the same college as him and that he was a senior?”

“Didn’t you say he liked you? That he came to Soliaridge just for you?”

*How could you not even recognize him?”

Humiliation burned Catherine, but far worse was fear.

She knew how terrifying this man could be. Given the way she had behaved that night, he might really throw her into the ocean.

The shock hit everyone differently. Isabelle and Sonia felt a surge of satisfaction once the initial jolt passed.

“Hah! She was just bragging her ass off. Now that’s a slap in the face!” Isabelle gloated.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 342

Sonia gave a half-smile, enjoying the spectacle as well, but Vance was overwhelmed by the shock.

His head buzzed, and the word “finished” echoed through his mind. This time, it was truly over. The deal was off the table.

He looked at Rebecca across the room, remembering Aiden’s past words: “Every single deal falls through because of Rebecca.”

This was the third time. Without her, it would have been secured.

Someone nearby whispered, “Isn’t that Mrs. Bradford up there? She hardly ever shows her face. How come she’s standing next to Mr. Rossi tonight?”

Gabriel paused briefly, but the ballroom had already exploded into a storm of speculation.

He continued smoothly, “There is an unknown fact. My mother is a Perry, and the lady beside me is my cousin.”

Rebecca smiled gracefully and gave a small nod to the crowd. Her excellent posture and natural elegance turned that simple gesture into something captivating.

Thunderous applause followed-for her or her status. That night, she was undeniably the most radiant presence in the room.

Holding her hand, Gabriel delivered an enthusiastic welcome speech, but Vance could no longer hear anything. His mind was in turmoil.

One of the ladies, who had been gossiping about the necklace earlier, exclaimed, “Oh my God! The necklace she’s wearing... That’s the one from yesterday’s auction! One of its kind in the world, valued at 40 million dollars!”

Another echoed, “Jesus, they must have flown it back overnight. Mr. Rossi really spoils his cousin rotten!”

Catherine stared at the massive ruby resting on Rebecca’s neck, her eyes blazing with jealousy.

Isabelle laughed out loud. “Who was running their mouth earlier, calling that thing glass and tarnished metal? Their faces must be swollen now.”

Sonia also laughed, but Lucas remained clueless. “Who said it was glass?”

Catherine’s face twisted with rage. Aiden figured out the situation at once and yanked Lucas back, hissing, “Shut your mouth.”

Vance felt bitter, having said the same thing about that necklace.

The women who had mocked Rebecca alongside Catherine were struck dumb. That necklace was worth 40 million dollars?

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Chapter 343

They quickly distanced themselves from Catherine, spitting, “What a liar, dragging us into her scam!”

Catherine glared at these snobbish people who had fawned over her just moments ago. Their attitudes had flipped in a flash.

One of them sneered, “You’re nothing but a homewrecker and a delusional side piece! Keep staring and see what happens!”

“Get lost!” Aiden shoved past them and pulled Catherine protectively behind him.

Sonia watched the scene with cold disdain, but tears glistened in her eyes.

Vance stood there woodenly, staring at that striking burgundy figure, as if nothing else in the world existed.

An acquaintance pushed through the crowd and shook his hand with a hearty laugh. “No wonder your company was a guaranteed lock for the partnership! Turns out your wife is Mr. Rossi’s cousin. You didn’t say a word about it. What, with a connection like that, were you afraid we’d steal the deal?”

Vance shook the man’s hand mechanically and smiled awkwardly.

At this point, anyone could cut in line. The only one shut out was him.

“Man, you eat the steak. Just let me have a little gravy. I’ll be more than satisfied.” The man clapped Vance’s shoulder good-naturedly.

He wasn’t using much force, yet each pat felt like it was cracking Vance’s ribs and lungs apart.

Gabriel finished his welcome speech, encouraged everyone to enjoy themselves, and led Rebecca down from the stage.

Now they were no longer the overlooked juniors. A wave of people surged forward, surrounding them. The center of the entire venue naturally became theirs.

Hugo had a small crowd around him as well. Those who preferred to stay out of the limelight simply gathered with their friends, enjoying the fine food and wine.

Vance’s group suddenly found themselves standing in an empty spot. Only a few minor business owners who hadn’t caught on lingered nearby, hoping to network.

Isabelle gave a short laugh. “The show is over. Let’s go home. There is nothing left to see.”

Vance remained motionless, his face ashen.

Aiden was livid, huffing, “I knew it. As long as Rebecca is around, nothing ever works. This is the third time. Three strikes, and you’re out. She’s bad luck!”

His words grated on Isabelle’s nerves. She had never been one to hold her tongue.

“What the hell?” she scoffed. “Blaming a woman for your incapability? When will you grow up? What is even in your head? Rubbish?”

Aiden trembled with anger, pointing at Lucas. “Are you going to control your wife or not?”

Lucas opened his mouth, but one sharp glare from Isabelle made him swallow every word. He put an arm around her instead. “Honey, for the baby’s sake, don’t get worked up.”

She pulled him behind her, facing Aiden head-on. “Am I wrong? Both previous deals fell through because Vance dragged Catherine along and got thrown out with her. And now you have the nerve to blame Rebecca for everything?”

Catherine’s face was streaked with tears. “That’s not true. I never...”

“Shut your mouth!” Isabelle roared.

“What are you shouting about? Have you no decency left?” Aiden snapped, no longer caring about his image.

He knew he couldn’t rely on Lucas to step in. That man was a coward.

Isabelle was undaunted. “You still care about decency after all this? Vance, you screwed up this third deal all by yourself. If you had treated Rebecca even a little better, the partnership would never have slipped away. Yet you blame her? Don’t you have any self-awareness about who the real ‘bad luck’ is?”

“Who are you calling bad luck?” Catherine shrieked.

“Just borrowing a phrase from Mr. Rossi: scum cheaters! Whoever it fits can wear it!” Isabelle shot back relentlessly, berating both Catherine and Vance.

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Lucas felt embarrassed that Vance had been pulled into the crossfire.

He tugged at Isabelle’s sleeve. “Honey...”

“Don’t touch me! You’re just as pathetic as they are!” Isabelle snapped, remembering everything he had done for Catherine.

Catherine covered her mouth as tears rolled down her cheeks. “I was only trying to help you all.”

Those business owners nearby were bewildered. Wasn’t this supposed to be a celebration? It sounded like a domestic dispute, and it seemed the partnership was already lost.

Their plans to fawn over Vance died.

“Mr. Bradford, what’s going on here?” one of them asked.

Vance snapped back to reality. Before he could say anything, Aiden explained quickly, “It’s nothing serious. Vance and his wife just had a little argument. Couples fight all the time, right? He’ll apologize tonight, and everything will be fine.”

Those business owners nodded. Of course, couples argued and made up.

Aiden’s face lit up with an idea. He turned to Sonia and Isabelle, his tone softening. “We’ll be relying on you two.”

Isabelle narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Rebecca gets along with you and Sonia. The rest of us are already on her blacklist. Go talk to her. Business is business. No matter how much they fight, she and Vance are still married. She can’t just let the deal fall into someone else’s hands.”

“I don’t have the thick skin for that,” Isabelle snorted, turning to walk away.

When she glanced back and saw Lucas still standing there, she barked, “Are you coming or not?”

Lucas looked at Vance, then at Aiden, and mumbled, “Sorry, guys. It’s pregnancy temper. I’ll see you at the office tomorrow.”

He hurried after Isabelle, and they quickly went out of sight.

Aiden fumed, then turned to Sonia. “You go talk to her.”

His tone was commanding, but Sonia didn’t want any part of this mess. She wasn’t the one who created it, nor could she fix it.

“Are you going or not?” he growled. “Your whole lifestyle depends on the company. You go up and down with it.”

She stayed silent for a moment, then said, “She wanted an apology.”

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Aiden glanced at Catherine, who was still crying bitterly. “How can we ask Catherine to apologize? What did she do wrong? You’ve enjoyed all the benefits of the company. Can’t you handle a little networking?”

Sonia thought for a moment, then walked toward Rebecca.

“Wait,” Vance called out. “I’ll go. This is my mess.”

He walked step by step through the crowd. Standing beside Gabriel, Rebecca was smiling and chatting naturally with everyone who greeted her.

Elegant, composed, and glowing in that burgundy gown, she looked like a magnificent peony-more beautiful than ever.

He finally reached her side. "Rebecca."

She glanced at him, gave a polite nod, and smiled-the same greeting she offered every stranger.

"You look stunning tonight," he said, feeling unusually flustered and unsure how to begin.

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Rebecca kept her faint, polite smile. "Thank you."

It was the same response she gave to every compliment at the banquet,

"Becky, come here," Gabriel called from steps away.

She nodded slightly and started toward him.

"Rebecca!" Vance grabbed her arm.

"Mr. Bradford, Gabriel is meeting his friends tonight," she said, growing impatient. "If you have any business matters to discuss, please contact Hugo during office hours."

Her tone was coldly professional and distant.

His throat tightened. "What did you just call me? Mr. Bradford?"

She shrugged. "What else?"

She had called him that many times before. Besides, what other appellations did they even have left? She had always called him Vance or Mr. Bradford, and he had called her by her name all this time.

After their wedding, she had shyly tried calling him "honey", like other wives did. He had flinched and said, "Just use my name."

From then on, that was all she had ever called him. And now he was upset about it.

He kept his grip on her wrist. “Becky...”

“Wait,” she cut in. “The nickname is only for my family. Outsiders shouldn’t use it.”

His pupils contracted. “Outsider? I’m an outsider to you now?”

“Aren’t you?” She tried yanking her arm free. “I don’t want to discuss our private matters here. Remember what I said about Josette being discharged? Tomorrow morning at nine. I’ll meet you at the courthouse.”

“Rebecca!” He tightened his hold, refusing to let go.

“Mr. Bradford.” Gabriel stepped in, prying Vance’s fingers off one by one. “Rebecca is leaving you the last bit of dignity. Otherwise, tonight would have been far more humiliating.”

Vance’s face went deathly pale. He involuntarily released her hand and watched helplessly as Gabriel escorted her away.

The crowd around him drifted away. He staggered back in defeat. The only people left beside him were Aiden and Catherine.

“Vance, what’s wrong?” Catherine saw how pale he looked and rushed to steady him. “Aiden, help him. He doesn’t look well.”

Together, they helped him to a side table and sat him down.

“Man, how are you feeling?” Aiden asked.

Vance gave a bitter laugh. “Rebecca asked me to meet her at the courthouse tomorrow to finalize the divorce.”

Aiden gritted his teeth. “How heartless! She lived off you for five years without a shred of gratitude. Now that you need her help, she wants a divorce. As I said from the beginning, she is bad luck.”

“Enough,” Vance cut him off.

“We still need her help right now,” Aiden sighed. “Maybe Sonia can...”

Only then did he notice Sonia was gone. He cursed, “That ingrate! Every last one of them is disloyal!”

He texted her: [Where are you? Your mom’s still in the hospital. Do I need to keep paying the bills?]

There was no reply.

“Unbelievable!” He looked ready to smash his phone.

“What are we going to do?” Catherine started crying again. “Is this because of me? I should never have come back. If I just disappeared, would things be better?”

Vance remained silent.

Comments:

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“It’s not your fault,” Aiden said firmly. “Stop taking the blame for everything.”

Catherine kept crying, not feeling any better.

Aiden sighed and placed a hand on Vance’s back. “What’s your plan? Are you really going through with the divorce?”

“I don’t want to divorce her.” Vance shook his head, looking at Aiden pleadingly. “Help me figure out something.”

Aiden exchanged a look with Catherine, then sighed, “Just don’t show up tomorrow.”

Vance buried his head in his hands. His fingers dug into his hair, and his body trembled slightly.

The ballroom was enormous, filled with lively clusters of people. Only the three of them sat isolated in a corner, completely ignored.

It was the first time they had ever been left on the sidelines at such an event, watching someone else’s glory and success.

Gabriel hadn’t made any further moves yet, but every person there was sharp and observant. They had all sensed the undercurrents, though at first, they had dismissed them as just minor conflicts among the younger generation.

But ever since Gabriel brought Rebecca onstage and revealed their identities, the tide had subtly shifted.

Aiden felt bitter. “Let’s at least get something to eat. We can’t leave here without the deal and go hungry on top of it.”

Vance didn't move, having no appetite. Catherine kept staring at Gabriel from a distance, too afraid to approach.

She still wasn't sure whether he was the same man from the basement who had threatened to throw her into the ocean, but the terror lingered.

Aiden went to get food alone and returned with several plates, sharing with them. The rest of the guests had also moved into the dinner portion, chatting casually with friends while eating.

Hugo hurried over to Gabriel and whispered something into his ear. Gabriel frowned slightly, then nodded.

"Becky, take a seat. I'll get you something to eat," he said before stepping away.

Rebecca habitually took out her phone, only to find dozens of messages and several missed calls from Jenny. She quickly opened the chat and sensed the urgency between the lines.

[You guys are on the trending lists!]

[That video of you slapping Catherine! Check it out! What happened?]

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[The whole internet is turning against you. You need to do something immediately.]

Rebecca opened the link shared by Jenny and saw a video of her slapping Catherine that night. In the clip, she looked cold and arrogant while Catherine lay on the floor sobbing pitifully.

The narrative claimed that Gabriel Rossi's cousin had casually bullied and humiliated a junior assistant. The assistant had tried hard to network and be friendly, but the cousin had been rude and arrogant, insulting her verbally and physically.

The video had been skillfully edited so that all the insulting remarks Catherine had made were now attributed to Rebecca.

Phrases like "What are you?" "Low-class trash," and "Does someone like Mr. Rossi Jr. even notice nobodies like you?" were spliced together to create the illusion that they came from Rebecca.

Catherine was left looking like a helpless victim. They had even inserted a clip of Gabriel saying, "My cousin can do whatever she wants."

The video had exploded across the internet.

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Apparently, someone had paid trolls to spread it; otherwise, every post wouldn't have used the same wording.

Someone had also paid to push it onto the trending list. Otherwise, it wouldn't have spread this quickly since they weren't celebrities.

The "rich heiress versus working-class girl" angle triggered instant outrage. Internet users naturally sympathized with the underdog, and the comments were flooded with people calling Gabriel and Rebecca heartless capitalists.

Some were even calling for a boycott of Rossi Enterprises entering Soliaridge, labeling it foreign capital that had come to suck the city dry.

Jenny mentioned that a few of their old classmates had tried defending Rebecca, but their comments were quickly buried under waves of hate.

Rebecca skimmed through the comments and saw numerous low-follower accounts copying and pasting identical long rants. Undoubtedly, they were paid trolls steering the narrative.

When Gabriel returned, he saw her staring at her phone and instinctively tried to snatch it away. She held on tightly, realizing he must have learned what was happening.

"You already knew and didn't tell me?" she grumbled.

He brushed it off. "It's just unhealthy stuff for you."

"I want to see it, and I'm sending it to Vance," she insisted, tapping forward.

She had been a little worried about what would happen if Vance refused to go through with the divorce tomorrow. This left him with no excuses to back out.

Seeing that she was fine, Gabriel relaxed. "I was just afraid it would upset you."

Rebecca shook her head. She wasn't some fragile greenhouse flower that would wilt at the first sign of trouble.

On the other side of the room, Vance's phone buzzed. When he saw the message was from Rebecca, his whole body perked up.

He quickly opened it, only to see a link. He had been there witnessing everything, yet the video had been edited into this twisted version.

He turned to look at Catherine, who was still clueless about the online storm, but his stare was terrifying.

She shuddered. “W-What’s wrong?”

He shoved the phone toward her. “Did you do this?”

She saw the video and panicked. “No, it wasn’t me! I swear!”

The fear that Gabriel might be the same man from the basement had consumed her all night. She only wanted to stay invisible as much as possible.

How would she dare to do something like that? Gabriel could really throw her into the ocean.

She waved her hands frantically. “It really wasn’t me, Vance. You have to believe me.”

Aiden cut in, “It wasn’t her. I know that for a fact.”

Vance’s gaze swept across Aiden’s face, and his fists clenched. “Don’t tell me it was you.”

Aiden didn’t deny it.

Vance swung a fist, stopping just an inch from Aiden’s nose. He couldn’t bring himself to land the punch.

Aiden caught his fist. “I know you can’t do it. We’ve been buddies for so many years. Everything I did was for you and for the company.”

Vance’s punch slammed heavily into the marble column beside him. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Rebecca and I are finished now.”

On the other side of the ballroom, Gabriel was cutting the steak for Rebecca. “Hugo told me something earlier.”

“What is it?” She was still on her phone, organizing her files.

“Someone bribed the technical staff at the venue to project the trending video,” he said, pushing the perfectly cut steak toward her.

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Rebecca blinked. “Huh?”

“They’re going for mutual destruction,” Gabriel explained. “If they can’t get the deal, they don’t want anyone else to have it either. That kind of twisted mindset!”

Rebecca couldn’t understand that kind of thinking at all.

“I was holding back because of you. I really wanted to keep this reception classy tonight. But since they insist on playing dirty, let’s just give them what they asked for,” he said, glancing at her. “Are you really not upset?”

They wouldn’t be the ones losing face anyway. The cheaters would. He was just afraid it would break her heart.

Rebecca shook her head calmly. “Go ahead. And take my phone. I have already organized everything you’ll need into a folder.”

She pushed her phone toward him. Gabriel left for a short while and then returned, handing the phone back to her.

Moments later, the large screen in the ballroom flickered to life, displaying the same edited video.

The editing work was professional. In it, Rebecca appeared coldly arrogant while Catherine looked heartbreakingly pitiful.

Not everyone had witnessed the slaps in real time, but the story had spread among the guests. When they saw the video, many began to wonder if the rumors had been wrong.

It was totally reversed, but they didn’t rush to comment, only treating it as entertainment.

Then someone in the crowd shouted, “We don’t welcome such arrogant capitalists in Soliaridge! They shouldn’t be allowed to invest here or partner with anyone!”

The words only stirred up shallow murmurs. No one joined in.

As if on cue, the screen switched to the trending page. Every repost and hateful comment appeared in giant letters for the entire ballroom to see.

Apparently, someone staged this. These sophisticated guests would not miss that.

Vance glared at Aiden, as if trying to burn holes with his eyes.

“You twisted the truth and painted Rebecca as some kind of monster?” he hissed. “And you had it projected on the big screen? How is she supposed to show her face after this?”

Aiden spread his hands. “What’s the big deal? She barely comes out in public anyway. It’s not like people haven’t gossiped about her before.”

Those words echoed in Vance’s mind like a curse. He suddenly remembered two months ago, when

Rebecca had come to the restaurant to find him.

His friends had been mocking the way she walked. Aiden had even imitated her limp, and she had run off in anger.

He had brushed it off, saying it was just a joke. Now he realized the joke wasn’t funny at all.

She hadn’t come home that night. How deeply hurt must she have been? 3

The urge to punch Aiden died completely. He had no right to do that. What made him any different from

Aiden?

He stood up abruptly, and Aiden asked cautiously, “Where are you going?”

“To clear her name.” He intended to get on stage, take the microphone, and tell everyone the video had been edited.

“No, don’t go!” Aiden cried out.

The scene on the screen shifted again, switching to a newly registered account belonging to Gabriel.

The single post read: [Hi everyone, I’m Gabriel Rossi-the guy you’ve all been attacking on tonight’s trending topic. Here’s some material. Take a look and judge for yourselves.] 1

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It showed the chat records, including the photos and messages Catherine had once sent to Rebecca.

[Hurry up and divorce him. Stop clinging to him like a piece of gum.]

[What can you even give him? Can you sleep with him? Can you have his children?]

[Guess where we are right now! In a new house! And there are even more expensive bags and watches! Guess who bought them for me!]

Alongside Catherine's taunting messages were Rebecca's replies, carefully worded to document the situation.

[Vance and I are legally married. What are you up to?]

[We've been married for five years. Our marriage is licensed and protected by law.]

Catherine's messages made it crystal clear that she was the other woman.

[Vance only loves me. No matter how long I'm gone, I'm the one in his heart.]

[At the company, everyone treats me like Mrs. Bradford. Vance's friends all treat me like his wife.]

[Go ahead and show him the messages. He understands me and will never blame me.]

Rebecca had saved them all in the form of screen recordings, and they were now displayed on the big screen for everyone to see.

She had kept these records as backup evidence in case the divorce encountered obstacles. She hadn't expected to use them this way.

The photo of Vance shirtless with Catherine in sexy lingerie resting on his shoulder was also displayed.

Others could hire trolls and buy trending slots, so could Gabriel.

Within minutes, the post shot to the top. Public opinion flipped almost instantly from "heartless capitalists bullying a working girl" to "shameless mistress deserving a beating".

The reversal took less than 30 minutes, and Catherine's old social media posts flaunting her romance were also dug up. One post featured the same photo, with Vance's face blurred.

The blurred version matched the newly released photo with 100% accuracy, and her account was immediately flooded with hate.

The fairy-tale love story everyone had once admired turned into one of catching adultery in the act. The comments were vicious.

The giant screen kept updating the trending topics in real time. The entire ballroom erupted in chaos. Vance stared at the screen, his head spinning. Catherine clutched his clothes desperately. “I didn’t mean

Vance was unresponsive.

“You’re not mad at me, right? I was really drunk,” she cried, tears falling heavily.

He stood up and started to walk away.

“Vance!” Aiden and Catherine called after him, but he didn’t stop.

He walked straight toward the front of the room. People pointed and whispered as he passed. The voices sounded like curses that were dragging him down to hell.

No one knew why he had come forward. He kept his head low and stayed silent for a long moment before finally speaking. “I’m sorry. Because of my mistakes, Rebecca suffered a lot of pain, and Mr. Rossi’s banquet was disrupted. I’m really sorry.”

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Having said his piece, Vance no longer had the face to stay. He turned and left the venue quickly.

“Vance!” Catherine and Aiden chased after him, but he had already disappeared.

In the ballroom, the screen went dark. Hugo stepped forward to offer a polite apology, but no one cared much about the interruption.

After all, the star of the night was Gabriel. Everyone had come for him.

Rebecca looked at the main doors, muttering, “Some people love taking money that doesn’t belong to them. Maybe it’s time they pay it back.”

Gabriel nodded. “Agreed.”

Aiden and Catherine looked back at the brightly lit hall, unable to return.

Catherine’s eyes were swollen with tears. “I was really drunk that night. I couldn’t let it go.”

“I understand,” he replied. “You only wanted to get back together with Vance. We all wanted that. It was that greedy woman who refused to step aside.”

She continued to cry, and Aiden's phone rang with a call from Sonia.

His temper flared because she hadn't replied to his messages earlier. He rejected it, but she kept calling.

He ignored it altogether, then noticed Catherine's eyes were already swollen from crying.

"Let's go home," he said. "There's nothing worth staying for at this stupid party."

As their car drove out of the parking lot, he received a message from Sonia.

It read: [Can you come to the hospital? My mom isn't doing well.]

Awen sneered inwardly, "Thought you were so capable. In the end, you have to rely on me."

He didn't reply, driving straight toward Catherine's place.

However, just a hundred yards down the road, another vehicle cut them off and stopped dead in front.

Aiden was about to get out and start yelling when several women stepped out of the car. They were the same group of women Catherine had been hanging out with earlier.

They surrounded the car and pounded on the windows aggressively. "Catherine, get the hell out!"

"W-What do you want?" Catherine shrank back, her voice shaking.

"Get out right now!" they demanded.

No matter how hard they pounded and shouted, Catherine stayed huddled inside while Aiden kept the car doors locked tight, pretending not to hear.

"Stop playing dead!"

"Open the door now before I call the police and report you for taking bribes!"

"Actually, this isn't even bribery. This is straight-up fraud!"

Aiden cracked the window a little. "What are you talking about? When did she ever scam you?"

One of the women laughed coldly. "You told us you were Mr. Rossi's old college friend, used your company's name, and promised that once the deal went through, you'd look out for us. If that's not scamming, what is?"

Another echoed, “Damn right! Hand over everything-every bag, every lipstick, and every meal you ate on our dime. Spit it all back out!”

Puzzled, Aiden turned to Catherine. The guilt on her face said it all.

“I thought the deal was secured. You know, business favors,” she muttered weakly.

“You call that business favor? Get out of the car right now! Or I’m smashing the windows!” One of the women slammed her palm hard against the glass.

Catherine nervously lowered her window a crack. A hand immediately shot through the gap, grabbed a fistful of her hair, and yanked hard.

She screamed in pain.