

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 351

But the woman had no intention of letting Catherine go. Instead, she yanked even harder.

Aiden roared, jumping out of the car to help, but another vehicle shot in from nowhere and screeched to a stop. Several men in black suits poured out, blocked Aiden's path, and started beating him.

Aiden could barely protect himself. At the same time, the woman kept pulling Catherine's hair while another reached inside, unlocked the door, and dragged her out of the car.

"Give our stuff back! Give our money back, you liar!" barked the woman. 1

A chaotic storm of punches and kicks rained down. Neither Aiden nor Catherine had any chance to fight back. In the whirlwind of violence, they couldn't even tell who was hitting them.

The two groups came and went like a whirlwind. After venting their anger, they jumped back into their cars and sped away.

Just before leaving, one of the women shouted, "Remember to pay us back! Or we'll come beat you again!"

Aiden and Catherine lay sprawled on the ground, unable to get up.

Since graduating, Aiden had never experienced anything like this. He intended to call the police, but Catherine stopped him. "No, please don't call them."

Her hair was a wild mess, her face bruised, and her makeup had turned into a smeared disaster. Because her lips were so swollen, her words came out slurred. "If we call the police, I'll get in even more trouble."

Besides scamming the women out of gifts and money, she had plenty of other dirty secrets. She didn't dare to risk angering Gabriel. He could dig up her entire past and expose everything.

Aiden's face was a swollen mess. His nose was bleeding, and his mouth tasted of blood. When he spat, two teeth came out.

"Damn! Those bastards hit so hard! Don't let me find out who they are!" he cursed, turning to Catherine.

Are we just letting this go?"

She covered her bruised face and shook her head. "I don't know what to do. I..."

"I know," he sighed. "If the deal had gone through, it would have just been normal business favors. Taking a few gifts wouldn't have mattered,"

"Aiden..." she sobbed. "You always know me by heart."

"Let's go," he said, trying to stand, but his legs gave out,

He fell back down and started to curse again in the darkness.

In the ballroom, the banquet was nearing its end.

Aside from the small disturbance in the middle, it had been a successful evening for both hosts and guests. Even if someone wasn't happy, in this kind of setting, they had to pretend they were.

After seeing off the guests, Gabriel and Rebecca prepared to leave.

Someone came looking for Hugo and quietly reported something. He nodded, walking over to Gabriel.

"Becky, get in the car first," Gabriel said, opening the car door for her and closing it gently once she was inside.

Rebecca watched through the window as Hugo spoke to Gabriel in a low voice. The driver had locked the windows, so she couldn't hear anything.

The conversation was short, with Gabriel mostly listening. Then he got into the car and sat beside her.

Rebecca was full of questions. He chuckled, and she mimicked him.

"I know what you were talking about. Did you finish cleaning up?" she said.

"Can't hide anything from you, can I?" he laughed. "You said that if someone took money or gifts that didn't belong to them, they should pay it back. So, I had the creditors go collect what was theirs."

There was no need for him to handle it personally. A few hints and provocations were enough to send the debt collectors straight to the targets.

He had simply sent a car and some men to make sure Aiden got properly handled. Of course, neither Aiden and Catherine nor the group of women knew who was behind it.

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Since the matter had been taken care of, Rebecca didn't dwell on it.

Gabriel told the driver to start the car, then turned to her. "Get some good sleep tonight. You still have something important tomorrow, right? I'll go with you."

She nodded, thinking it would be good to have him there. That way, Vance couldn't pull any last-minute stunt.

Their five years of marriage were finally ending.

After getting simple treatment at the hospital, Aiden and Catherine went to Catherine's place. Their injuries weren't serious. There was no internal bleeding or broken bones, but they looked terrible.

The men in black had focused almost entirely on their faces, so while the rest of their bodies ached, the worst damage was the swelling.

"Damn! Those guys were definitely sent by Rossi!" Aiden dropped onto the sofa, his whole body throbbing. "Professional work. Hurts like hell but leaves almost no visible marks."

There was nothing they could do. In the darkness, they hadn't seen the attackers' faces clearly, and the whole thing had happened so fast they hadn't even caught the license plates.

And they had no way to access traffic camera footage if they didn't involve the police.

Catherine opened her phone to check the trending topics and found them flooded with hate. Her social media accounts hadn't been spared, filled with vicious insults.

She was flustered. "What should I do? Everyone's cursing me. How am I ever going to show my face again?"

Then she noticed the residents' group chat had over 99 new messages. She checked them out, only to discover they were all talking about her.

Someone had shared the trending link.

[Look, isn't this homewrecker from our complex?]

[It's her! She argued with me in the elevator. I won't be mistaken.]

[The one right above yours. Didn't you know?]

[Oh my God! How can someone have the nerve to be a mistress? Shameless!]

[No wonder she is always so arrogant and sarcastic. Next time she argues with me, I'm going to slap her silly. Disgusting!]

Catherine threw her phone across the room, unable to take it. She then suddenly remembered how the security guards had been whispering when she had entered the complex. They must have been talking about her, too.

"What do I do?" she cried out, burying her face in her hands. "People online and offline are all cursing me, and all the big shots at the banquet must be despising me. There is no way out."

Aiden hissed in pain. "You lost your head and sent those messages to Rebecca. Otherwise, they wouldn't have had anything to hit back with tonight. Whether there was surveillance, Gabriel wouldn't have dared release it publicly. If those powerful people and elites knew the dinner could be recorded and exposed, he wouldn't be able to survive in Soliaridge."

"What's the point of saying that now? The damage is already done," Catherine grumbled.

Aiden thought for a moment. "I've got an idea."

"What?"

"Call Vance. He's supposed to divorce Rebecca tomorrow. Have him issue a statement, saying the divorce is already finalized and he's single. That way, he won't be considered a cheater, and you won't be labeled as a mistress."

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At home, Vance lay sprawled on the floor, feeling like his life had never been darker.

His phone rang, cutting through the silence of the night. He jumped up and scrambled to find it. After locating it under the coffee table, he saw Aiden's name on the screen.

He collapsed back onto the floor and answered the call.

Aiden's urgent voice came through. "Vance! There's something important I need to tell you."

Vance had zero energy. "What?"

“What are you doing now? Haven’t you seen the trending topics? It’s blowing up! Gabriel’s post is stuck at number one. You need to make a statement right now!”

“Gabriel? Number one?” Vance’s mind was foggy.

While Aiden’s voice exploded in his ear, he opened the trending list and finally remembered it.

“Listen to me. The only thing you can do right now is issue a statement saying you and Rebecca have already divorced,” Aiden continued. “That way, you’re not a cheater, and Catherine isn’t a mistress. Think about the company. If this mess doesn’t die down, our stock is going to hit the bottom tomorrow.”

He rambled on, but Vance was unresponsive.

“Vance!” he shouted.

Vance, lost in the sea of hateful comments about himself, snapped back to reality. “Mm.”

“Did you hear what I said?” Aiden yelled.

“I did,” Vance answered slowly. “Issue a statement.”

“Yes! Do it right now! Hurry!”

“Okay.” Vance was already preparing to type.

Ending the call, Aiden heaved a sigh of relief. “It’s done. Vance agreed to issue the statement.”

But Catherine’s mood didn’t improve. An inexplicable dread kept pressing on her heart.

“Alright, stop overthinking it,” he added. “Take a shower, get some rest, and eat something. Everything will look better tomorrow.”

She continued to sob quietly.

He sighed, ordered takeout, and went to shower. When he came out, the food had arrived. Before eating, he checked the trending topics again to see the effect of Vance’s statement.

There was a new entry at the top: [Vance Bradford’s Apology.]

So, Vance had indeed posted a statement, but it read:

[I’m sorry. My private matters have taken up public resources and caused a negative impact on society. I sincerely apologize to everyone. I also want to say sorry to my wife.

For so many years, I have let her down. I am willing to accept any punishment. Finally, I hope you'll stop disturbing her and her family. All the mistakes were caused by me alone. They are the victims and are innocent.]

Shocked, Aiden read it three times to make sure he hadn't misunderstood.

Then he cried out, "Has he lost his mind?"

"W-What?" Catherine leaned over and turned pale at the content.

"I'm calling him right now!" Aiden fumed, starting to dial, but Vance didn't pick up.

Tears streamed down Catherine's face. "He is blaming me now. He doesn't care about me anymore."

Aiden mulled over the situation and found an explanation. "He is trying to get forgiveness from Rebecca and Rossi. He still wants to cooperate with Rossi Enterprises, and this is the only way."

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"Really?" Catherine had a vague feeling it wasn't that simple.

"Of course," Aiden said confidently. "Besides, don't you still have that volunteer charm? Bring that up, and Vance will forgive anything you've done."

She forced a smile. That so-called charm might not be protection at all. It could turn out to be a time bomb that would explode at any moment and make things even worse.

"What's wrong?" Aiden was puzzled by her reaction, but she couldn't tell him the truth.

The volunteer from back then hadn't been her at all. She had simply been playing around in the hospital room and had fallen for Vance at first sight.

The handsome boy had offered her expensive gifts as thanks, and she had accepted them to get closer to him.

"Don't worry," Aiden reassured her. "We still have one final trump card."

She stayed silent.

The next day, Vance woke up on the living room floor.

He had barely slept all night. Only near dawn had he dozed off lightly, but the alarm soon woke him. It was seven o'clock. Rebecca had asked him to meet at the courthouse at nine.

No matter what, he had to go. Things were already bad enough. He couldn't stand her up now and make it worse.

He went to shower and saw in the mirror that one night had left him looking utterly haggard. He was unfit to face anyone like that.

After showering, he cleaned himself up as neatly as possible. When he put on his shirt, the sapphire cufflinks on the sleeves sparkled and dazzled him.

He touched the gems on them, then headed out. He arrived at the courthouse at 8:30, but Rebecca wasn't there yet.

He rested his hands on the steering wheel. The morning sunlight streamed through the windshield and once again caught the cufflinks.

Faintly, he thought he saw an engraving on the platinum base. He lifted his hand to look closer and found that both cufflinks had letters on them. One was with R, and one was with V-the initials of their names.

His mind flashed back to the time when Rebecca had prepared the wedding invitations. She had bought a stack of beautiful cards and waited excitedly for him to come home so they could discuss how many tables to book and how many invitations to send.

"No need," he had said differently.

Thinking he was just busy, she had hugged the stack of cards and shown them to him with a bright smile. "I know you don't have time. I'm free anyway, so I'll do it. Look, I've filled in all our names this afternoon. Once we decide on the hotel, exact time, and guest list, I can fill those in."

On every card, she had carefully written down their names. Every stroke was neat and precise, without any sloppy connection. It showed how seriously she had taken it.

"How many relatives and friends do you have on your side?" She had asked hopefully. "On my side, it is mostly high school classmates, but we have a lot of overlap. How many colleagues do you want to invite?"

She had really been looking forward to a proper wedding, but he had brushed it off. "No need. There aren't many people. We can just call them."

The light in her eyes had visibly dimmed. He had felt a little sorry, but he had still insisted on no big banquet-just a small ceremony with a few close friends and family.

Her family hadn't cared as long as he paid enough

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Thinking back, Vance figured the most disappointed people had to be Rebecca and Josette.

Josette's simple wish had been to see her granddaughter married in a beautiful, proper ceremony. The thought made a sour ache bloom in his chest.

Lately, that kind of ache had been hitting him more and more often.

Just then, a car pulled up and parked nearby. In the rearview mirror, he saw Rebecca step out with Gabriel.

He quickly got out to meet her. In the golden sunlight, they faced each other.

"Rebecca." He quickened his steps toward her.

She nodded lightly. "You're here. Let's get inside."

He had so many things he wanted to say. "I never wanted to divorce you. I said I would spend my whole life with you. I never changed my mind."

But she had no desire to hear those words. They were meaningless and frustrating. How many times did she have to say it before he saw the truth? She was really done.

"We're already here. Let's not talk about that anymore. It's pointless." She walked firmly toward the courthouse doors, making it clear with her actions that she would not turn back.

He quickly followed her. "I'm sorry about last night. I didn't know Catherine had sent you those messages. Why didn't you tell me?"

She halted her steps, turning to face him.

"And if I had told you, what then?"

"I would have..."

"I told you I wanted a big wedding with lots of guests. Did you listen? I told you I wanted a child. I told you I hated it when they made fun of my leg. Did you listen? I told you I didn't like spicy food. When did you ever remember? I told you I was Mrs. Bradford. You

turned around and left with her. When the kidnappers made you choose between us, if I had asked you to choose me, would you have done so?”

His lips were pale and trembling.

“...”

“Let me tell you why I didn’t say anything when I received those messages. Because I didn’t want to. I only kept them as evidence for the divorce lawsuit. If nothing had happened last night or if you had refused to come today, you would have seen those messages in court.”

“Is there really no way to turn this around?” He stood still, his eyes pleading. “That photo you received wasn’t real. I was asleep. Catherine staged the whole thing to provoke you.”

“And what does that change?” She stared at him. “Does that mean the two of you never slept together?”

His face turned pale as he remembered the night he and Aiden had gotten drunk at Catherine’s place.

His expression said it all, but she sneered, “You’re disgusting.”

She continued to stride toward the doors. Her steps were unsteady and uneven. As he watched, his eyes burned with hot pain.

“Go on, Mr. Bradford,” Gabriel said coldly, standing beside him,

Gabriel had no idea Rebecca had suffered so many grievances in this marriage.

Vance knew then that this divorce was inevitable. He finally lowered his head and followed them inside.

The process was quite simple. Since both parties agreed to the divorce and had no objections to the property division, they only needed to wait out the 30-day cooling-off period before collecting the certificate.

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However, Vance raised an objection regarding the property. Not only did he want to keep Rebecca’s original shares, but he also wanted to give her even more.

He explained that even though Gabriel and Kaitlyn had plenty, she needed her own fortune. After their separation, he hoped she would live comfortably for the rest of her life.

Rebecca thought for a moment. "Alright. Convert everything to cash at market value."

He gave a bitter smile. "Wouldn't keeping the shares be better? There would be annual dividends. It's long-term income."

"No," she insisted. "I don't like loose ends, and I don't want any further connection with you. Let's finish this quickly so we never have to see each other again. Besides, what if your company goes bankrupt?"

His smile was forced, and his voice shook. "Why do you have to be so absolute? At the very least, we're still high school classmates living in the same city. Maybe we'll run into each other someday."

That was basically impossible.

"Stop talking so much nonsense," she concluded, preparing to leave with Gabriel. "Oh, right. About the money you gave Catherine later... I'll let that go. And since we're divorcing, our previous agreement is now void. Marry whoever you want. Go back to Cathy."

"I never..." he started.

She simply took Gabriel's arm and walked away quickly. They got into the car and drove off.

He watched the car disappear, murmuring the rest of the sentence to himself, "I never planned to marry her."

But Rebecca could no longer hear him. Even if she had, what difference would it have made?

His phone rang, and he answered.

"Where are you guys? Why isn't anyone here?" Lucas asked anxiously.

"Us?" Vance's mind was blank. He didn't know who Lucas was referring to.

"You and Aiden. Neither of you are at the company. We're having a meeting and have been waiting for almost an hour."

"Meeting?" Vance murmured,

The sun was blazing outside, but he felt as if his brain had been frozen solid and couldn't function.

"Come on. We're supposed to finalize the cooperation proposal with Rossi Enterprises today, right?" Lucas said.

Vance gave a bitter laugh, realizing what was going on. Lucas had left early last night and didn't like gossip, so he probably had no idea what had happened afterward at the banquet.

"Cancel it."

"What?"

"Cancel the meeting. No need to hold it."

He no longer had the nerve to submit any proposal to Rossi Enterprises.

"Vance..."

"Give up. We're not struggling anymore."

He hung up and drove toward the company. As usual, he parked in the underground garage. But the moment he stepped out of the car, a group of people pointed at him.

"That's him! The guy from last night's trending topic-Vance Bradford, the boss of the company in Building A!"

"The cheating scumbag?"

"Yeah, that's him!"

"What are we waiting for? Get him!"

Vance was suddenly bombarded with trash. He didn't even know these people.

Someone had emptied the garbage bin and started throwing everything at him. Stinking garbage hit his face, body, and head.

"You..." As soon as he opened his mouth, a foul-smelling clump smashed into his mouth.

The stench was overwhelming. He couldn't help grabbing the pillar and starting to vomit.

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The group came and went quickly. In the blink of an eye, Vance was left alone, standing by the garbage bin.

Nothing came out of his mouth while his stomach churned violently.

The garage cleaner came out, saw the mess, and started cursing. “You dress like a decent person, but you do things like this? What kind of person plays with garbage? You are the garbage! Why don’t you throw yourself away!”

She deliberately poked his foot with her broom while sweeping. Vance couldn’t explain himself while fighting the urge to vomit.

He snatched the broom. “I’m sorry... Ugh... Ma’am... I’ll clean it... Ugh...”

“Clean it properly and wash the floor too!” the cleaner huffed.

In a hidden corner behind a nearby wall, the attackers exchanged glances and walked away. They had originally planned to clean up the garbage after Vance left, but since he insisted on doing it, they figured they might as well let him.

He belonged with garbage anyway.

Vance couldn’t go to the office looking like that. After cleaning up, he drove straight home, took a shower, and sat blankly in a chair-the same chair Rebecca used to sit in all the time.

She would sit here watching dramas, reading books, and probably studying French.

On the desk were some of the things she had used. The pens were in the holder, and several art history books were lying there.

He pulled open a drawer and saw more books. He took one out and saw it was a practice book.

As far as he remembered, her French hadn’t been very good. She was an art student, and in his memory, her high school grades had been average.

The last time he had flipped through her practice book, her answers had been a mess.

He opened it casually and was stunned. The reading score had reached 7. He looked closer and found that she had noted the date for every practice test.

Most were from the first half of this year, and she had done quite well. The highest score was an 8. Most scores hovered around 6.5.

Then, at the very bottom of the drawer, he found an envelope containing her French Proficiency Test results.

Inside were five or six score reports. They started at 5 and ended with several 6s in the final attempts.

“Why did she take the exam so many times?” he wondered with a frown.

Even if she wanted to travel abroad or watch performances, she didn’t need scores for that.

A notebook caught his eye. He opened it and saw the title: [Countdown to Leaving Vance Bradford.]

Day 25 of the countdown: [He gave our rings to someone else. But at this point, I don’t even want him anymore.]

His eyes stung sharply. So, from that point, she had planned to divorce him.

Her claims each time had been serious, not a tactic to keep him or drive Catherine away. She had genuinely wanted to leave him.

Further on, she had recorded every little thing that had happened in the 20-plus days before she went to Europe—things that had seemed trivial to him at the time.

With each passing day, her heart seemed to die a little more.

He lowered his head and rested his forehead on the notebook. His eyes burned with unshed tears.

If he had stood in her shoes and thought about her feelings even for one day, he might still have had a chance to save their marriage.

But he hadn’t. He had walked down the wrong path until he had destroyed everything between them. He had thought she would never leave him or this place, so he had protected Catherine again and again.

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Vance had thought that since Rebecca was his wife, she belonged to him and would never leave. No matter when he came back, she’d always be waiting at home.

How could she bear to leave him? She had loved him so much since high school, even risking her life to save him. How could she really divorce him? How could she abandon their home?

He then discovered she had applied for two visas. “A Schengen visa only needs to be applied for once. Why have there been two applications? Is Gabriel planning to take her away? Has she been in contact with him for a long time and planned to go abroad?”

And he had just said today that since they lived in the same city, they might run into each other someday. If she moved abroad permanently, how would he ever see her again?

Suddenly, the sound of the front door lock turning broke the silence.

“Rebecca!” He jolted upright and rushed toward the living room.

It was pure reflex. Who else could open the door except Rebecca coming home? But the people who walked in were Catherine and Aiden.

“It’s you two,” Vance muttered, still barefoot.

He then remembered that Catherine knew the passcode.

“Who else did you think it was?” Aiden looked behind him. “You’re home alone, right?”

“Yeah.” Vance slumped lifelessly onto the sofa.

Of course, there wouldn’t be anyone else with him. Rebecca was never coming back.

“We called, but you didn’t answer. Catherine was worried sick about you,” Aiden said, sitting down across from him.

Catherine sat down right beside Vance.

“What brings you guys here?” Vance asked, his eyes unfocused.

“We were worried about you,” Aiden grumbled. “We care so much about you, but do you care about us at all? Look at the state we’re in. You never even asked.”

Only then did Vance look at them and notice their swollen faces. “What happened?”

“Hmph! Rossi sent people to hit us!” Aiden guessed,

“You should go to the hospital,” Vance said blandly, grabbing his phone to transfer money.

“What?”

“Medical expenses. I’ll cover them.”

He sent an amount large enough for treatment, recovery, and even a vacation.

“What do I need your money for? Can’t I afford medical bills myself?”

“This is on me.”

Catherine chimed in, “It’s not. Aren’t you divorcing Rebecca? Rossi is not related to you anymore.”

Vance froze, then lowered his head in defeat.

“What? You already went through with it?” Aiden asked.

Vance nodded. “Yeah.”

Aiden gave a cold laugh. “She really is heartless. Couldn’t even wait one day.”

Catherine took out a transparent box from her bag. Inside was a full box of paper cranes. “Don’t be sad. This is for you. May the rest of your life be smooth and happy.”

His gaze fell on them, but the sour ache in his heart only grew stronger.

“Thank you,” he said hoarsely.

“What kind of reaction is that?” Aiden sulked. “Catherine stayed up several nights folding them for you. Last night, she got beaten black and blue, but she kept folding them anyway and insisted on bringing them to you today. She cares so much about her appearance, yet she didn’t even care if people laughed at her swollen face. And here you are acting half-dead.”

That stirred almost nothing. Vance simply repeated, “Thank you.”

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The rims of Catherine’s eyes reddened. “I don’t need your thanks. I just want you to be happy.”

“Yeah, losing the deal is nothing,” Aiden echoed. “What matters is that the three of us are still together. We started from nothing. With the company at this scale now, can it really be worse than when we first began? We’ll just earn a little less.”

“That’s right. Even though you’re divorced, you still have us. We’ll always be by your side,” Catherine said, pressing his lips together.

Aiden winked at her urgently, but she didn’t catch the hint.

“Yeah, I know that.” Vance rubbed his temples. “I’m just a little tired. I need some time alone.”

“Are you driving us away?” Aiden sulked.

Vance shook his head. “No. I just haven’t sorted some things out yet. I need to calm down and think clearly.”

“About the property division?” Aiden pressed.

Vance nodded, not feeling like explaining anymore. Whatever Aiden wanted to think was fine.

“Your family...” Aiden sighed. “They won’t treat her badly. Alright then, we’ll leave you alone. Take a few days to recover. If you feel bad, just call us. No matter what, we’re friends forever!”

“Yeah.” Vance stood up and saw them out, not turning back until they entered the elevator.

As he closed the door, an idea struck him. He operated on the lock to change the passcode.

Then he shut the door and locked himself inside. The box of paper cranes sat on the coffee table. For some reason, the small transparent box no longer brought him the warmth from his youth.

Instead, it felt like a brick pressing on his chest-so heavy he could barely breathe.

Catherine still looked deeply troubled. Once they were in the car, she muttered, “Don’t you think Vance has become cold lately?”

The paper cranes were her trump card, but he hadn’t reacted much.

“He just got divorced. It’s normal for him to feel bad,” Aiden mused. “As I said, even raising a pet for five years creates attachment. Plus, Rebecca is taking at least half of his assets. His mind must be chaotic right now. Give him a few days to calm down. He’ll be fine.”

She shook her head. “It’s not just today. I can feel the difference. I think we might have used the wrong approach.”

“What do you mean?”

“My sixth sense tells me this. It all started from the night we slept in the same bed.”

“Really? I feel nothing.”

“You’re not me. Anyway, I think ever since that night, he’s been much colder and more distant. The most obvious change is that he hangs out with us less often. Didn’t you notice?”

“It’s not a big deal. Just trust me and give it more time. He will marry you. Now that the divorce is finalized, the last obstacle is gone.”

Once they arrived at her place, Aiden stayed instead of going to the company.

“With my face looking like this, I can’t go anywhere,” he said. “You’re no better. Might as well recover together.”

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With both Vance and Aiden absent, Lucas had to manage the company operations alone.

Three days later, he couldn’t take it anymore. He called again, urging them to come.

It was the start of a new week. The stock had hit the limit down again at opening, and the company was going down.

The mention of stocks inspired Vance, and he immediately called Rebecca.

The line went through, but her voice was cold and distant. “What is it?”

“Rebecca...” His throat tightened so much he could barely speak.

In the past, whenever he called her, her voice had always carried such joy that he could imagine her smile.

“Speak,” she urged him.

“L...” he said hoarsely, “I’m at home. It feels strange. The house feels so empty.”

“Oh.” Her voice grew even colder. “You can just invite all your friends over for a party. Celebrate your freedom from all the pain.”

“No, I don’t. I won’t.”

“Why not? Gabriel is throwing a party for me tonight. You should do the same.”

He smiled, but it was bitter. “Rebecca...”

“If you have something to say, say it. If not, I’m hanging up. I’m busy.”

“Wait, don’t hang up,” he said quickly. “Didn’t you want the shares converted to cash? We need to set a time to handle the paperwork. You have to transfer the shares you currently hold back to me. Otherwise, it’ll be hard to explain to the shareholders.”

“Okay.”

“So, when would you like to...”

“Whenever you want. Just let me know when you schedule the board meeting. I’ll go through the process then.”

“O-kay, I’ll call the meeting right now,” he stammered. “It will start in one hour, Wait for...”

“Fine,” she cut in, then ended the call,

He listened to the busy tone, swallowing the rest of his words. He was going to say he would go pick her

He gave a bitter smile, but new energy surged through him. He called Lucas, saying, “Notify everyone.

Board meeting in one hour.”

Lucas was thrilled to hear him finally sounding alive again. “Sure, right away.”

Vance changed his clothes, cleaned himself up, and drove straight to the company.

Aiden was also notified. “What’s so urgent that it has to be held right now?”

He agreed despite his reluctance. Just before heading there, he needed to go home to change his clothes.

He had some at Catherine’s place, but he had already worn them for two days. The others were too casual for meetings. 1

When he got home, the house was unusually quiet.

“Sonia?” he called out, but there was no response.

He guessed she was at the hospital.

“Shane?” he called out again.

Still no response. He wondered if the nanny had taken his son out to play.

The nanny came out and greeted him. “Sir.”

“Where’s Sonia?” he asked casually.

“Mrs. Hodge, she...”

“What’s wrong?”

“She left.”

“Left? Where did she go?” Aiden frowned.

“She said she was going back to her hometown.”

“Back to her hometown? Is her mom better?”

“She didn’t specify.”

“What about my son?” 1

“She took him with her.”

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Aiden assumed Sonia had taken their son along to help her sick mother return to their hometown, so he didn’t think much of it.

He simply changed his clothes and headed straight to the company. When he arrived, Vance was standing at the front desk.

“Vance, what are you doing here?” Aiden asked, half-joking. “Playing greeter today? Anything important to announce in this meeting?”

“Go up first,” Vance said, his eyes locked on a car pulling up outside.

Rebecca stepped out, and he quickly walked over.

Aiden glanced back and muttered, “Really playing greeter.”

Rebecca was surprised to see Vance waiting there. “What could make you stand out here waiting in person, Mr. Bradford?”

He looked a little embarrassed, and she smirked. “Afraid I’d get burned to death on the way?” 1

His face flushed red, then turned pale. She walked past him and went straight into the building.

The receptionist had been replaced. It was someone Rebecca didn’t know.

She greeted Rebecca. “Hello...”

Vance caught up from behind. “She’s with me.”

The receptionist nodded politely and held the elevator for them.

Rebecca felt a strange sense of irony. In the past five years, Vance had been so busy that he had never once come down to pick her up. He hadn’t even had time to reply to her messages.

Back then, she had wondered if her messages were too trivial and were disturbing his important work.

After Catherine came back, it wasn’t just messages. Whenever Catherine needed him, he would drop everything and rush to her side.

He hadn’t really been that busy. He simply hadn’t cared.

How long did it take to reply to a message? One second? Two?

It was the same with Rebecca and Josette. No matter how busy she was, if Josette messaged her, she would reply or call back immediately, regardless of the nature of the matter.

She stayed silent in the elevator. Vance tried to speak, but each time, she’d pull out her phone and look at it, cutting him off.

Finally, when she put her phone back in her bag, he seized the chance. “Are you really that busy? You’ve been on your phone the whole time.”

She nodded. “Didn’t I tell you? Gabriel is throwing a party for me tonight. He’s been discussing details with me.”

His face visibly darkened. “He seems pleased about our divorce.”

She nodded again. “Aren’t you?”

“...”

“Oh, right. Gabriel said if you’re interested, you’re welcome to come. We could celebrate it together.”

Vance was speechless.

What kind of absurd situation was this? Gabriel was hosting a party to congratulate Rebecca on the divorce?

“Are you really so happy about us getting divorced?” Vance couldn’t wrap its head around it. “You used to love me so much. Why are you...”

“Stop,” she cut him off. “Can we please not bring up the dark history anymore?”

“Dark history?” He didn’t understand the term.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “The fact that I was blind and loved you is the darkest history of my life.”

The elevator doors opened, and she stepped out, unwilling to reminisce for another second. She didn’t know what their shared past meant to Vance, but for her, it only brought pain.

She went straight to the conference room. Several board members were already seated, looking shocked when she walked in.

They knew she was a shareholder, but she had barely attended a board meeting before.

The meeting began, but Vance kept stalling and refused to get to the point.

Rebecca couldn’t hold back any longer. She spoke directly. “I’ll say it, Mr. Bradford and I are divorced. I’m here today to complete the share transfer. The shares I hold will be transferred to him. Does anyone have any objections?”

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The other shareholders were shocked. "Divorce? Share transfer?"

Rebecca had only attended two board meetings in total. One was when she and Vance got married, and the other was when they got divorced.

They had all seen the stock plunging and knew about the scandal blowing up online, but they were still shocked by the news.

One of them spoke up. "Mr. Bradford, at this critical moment, shouldn't you think twice?"

"This decision was made after careful consideration," Rebecca said seriously.

"The stock has been fluctuating wildly, largely due to recent public opinion," the shareholder reasoned. Would you and Mrs. Bradford consider issuing a joint statement? Just put on a show for the investors. Show them a harmonious couple with no scandals, that everything was just made up."

Silent, Rebecca turned to Vance, her meaning crystal clear.

Vance averted his gaze, his voice hoarse. "There's no need."

"Mr. Bradford..." the shareholder tried again.

"Marriage is a private matter. Even if it affected the stock price, that's my problem, having nothing to do with her." Vance waved his hand. "In this incident, she is a victim. I'm sorry that my personal actions have caused losses to the company. What I can do now is focus on future development, make the right decisions, and work hard instead of blaming others."

Aiden chimed in, "Business has its ups and downs. We have weathered many storms. Are we really afraid of this little turbulence? We don't need any shows."

Lucas was a bit lost about all the recent dramas, but he stood firmly with his friends.

Since the three decision-makers had expressed their opinions, the shareholders had nothing more to say. The transfer was smoothly approved by the board, and only some paperwork remained.

"When would it be convenient for you to handle the formalities?" Rebecca stood up. "If we can do it now, let's finish it quickly. No need to drag it out."

Vance looked around the conference room. He had held countless meetings here over the years, but none had ever felt as depressing and desolate as this one.

The other shareholders stood up and left one after another. Lucas lingered, standing in front of them. Finally, he sighed, patted Vance on the shoulder, and walked out.

Rebecca waited for his answer, all serious. It would be good if they could handle the paperwork immediately.

Vance gave a bitter smile. "You really don't want to see me at all? You won't even give me one extra day?"

"I don't," she confirmed, not yielding an inch.

Since they were divorcing, she wanted it clean and final.

"Even if you don't want to, it's too late now," he sighed. "We'll do it another day. I'll contact you then."

She turned and left without another word. Her decisiveness made him smile bitterly once again.

This wasn't the woman he knew anymore. The shy, gentle girl who used to smile at him had disappeared overnight, blown away by the winds of time.

The one in front of him now was a hard, unpolished stone. She was full of sharp edges that could cut him if he wasn't careful.

Rebecca reached the elevator and pressed the button. When the doors opened, she saw him following her and frowned.

"What now?"

"It's my company's elevator, I can ride it too, can't I?" he joked, though he felt how awkward it sounded.

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That only irritated Rebecca further. She stepped out of the elevator. "Fine. Ride it as you like. I'll take another one."

"Rebecca!" Vance felt helpless. He grabbed her shoulders and gently pushed her back into the elevator. "I just want to walk you out."

"There's no need." She reached for the button.

He knew she would respond that way, so he quickly held the door open. “Then at least take me off your blacklist so I can send you the documents.”

She did it right in front of him. “Is that enough? Don’t contact me unless it’s necessary.”

He knew he had to stop there. Pushing any further would only make her hate him more. He could only watch helplessly as the doors closed and the digits decreased.

Inside the elevator, Rebecca kept pressing a hand to her chest.

Over the past five years, countless thorns had accumulated there, always causing dull pain. Sometimes they would stab deeper and make her heart bleed.

She had thought it would take a long time to pull out every thorn, but it didn’t. Today, when she touched that spot, she felt no pain anymore.

So, it would hurt only when she loved someone. When pain vanished, so was love.

That was good. She didn’t love Vance anymore. They were finally done.

When she stepped out of the elevator, however, she saw Lucas waiting for her. He looked a little awkward. “Rebecca, do you have time for a cup of coffee?”

“No,” she said flatly, having no good feelings toward any of Vance’s friends.

She walked away, but he caught up and blocked her path again. “Just a few words.”

She stopped and looked at him.

These people were really strange. When she was Vance’s wife, they badmouthed her every day and hoped she would get divorced. Now that she did that, they kept approaching her.

“I know you hate us,” Lucas said, “We didn’t respect you before and said a lot of bad things. That was all our fault. Vance never said those things. Please don’t blame him.”

So, he thought she divorced Vance because of them.

He sighed and continued, “I know you don’t like Catherine. She was his first love, but they broke up ages ago. Now she’s just a friend. I can vouch for that. We always hang out as a group. I saw that photo on the trending list. I was there that day, and so was Aiden. They weren’t alone together at all. They didn’t do anything.”

“Are you done?” Rebecca said calmly.

He insisted, “Vance really doesn’t have any other intentions. He told us more than once that he wanted to spend his whole life with you.”

She walked away, tired of hearing that sentence. Who wanted a rotten lifetime like that?

Gabriel had sent a driver to pick her up. The moment she left the building, she saw the car waiting at the curb.

She got in and went straight home, unwilling to stay there for another second.

When she arrived home, Gabriel had already decorated the house beautifully. She hadn't lied to Vance; Gabriel really was throwing her a party.

The house was filled with fresh flowers, balloons, and all kinds of sparkling decorations. The guests had arrived; they were Vivian, Desmond, Helia, and Jenny. 3

Gabriel had told her to invite them, saying that joy should be shared. That was fine. Who said only weddings were happy occasions? Divorce could be, too.

Gabriel had ordered a three-tier cake and lit a candle. The card on it read: [Congrats on Your New Beginning, Becky.]

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Amid the music, they pushed the cake toward Rebecca, all beaming with joy.

"I thought you were going to sing Happy Birthday," Rebecca chuckled.

"We can do that, too," Gabriel said, helping Josette come downstairs.

The old lady looked a little fuller than a few days ago, but she had been through hell. Recovery wouldn't happen overnight. She was still weak, but her gaze was as gentle as ever.

It was a pleasant evening. Although it was just a home party, it felt much warmer than any formal business banquet. And the food prepared by Gabriel was delicious.

After dinner, Rebecca sat on the sofa next to Josette while the others gathered around, chatting about all kinds of topics.

Although her friends hadn't known each other before, they quickly became comfortable and got along wonderfully.

Josette sat beside them and didn't feel out of place. She enjoyed listening to them talk, and no one felt constrained by her presence. The conversation flowed happily.

Desmond and Helia shared stories from their performance tour in Europe. Since Jenny and Rebecca were high school classmates, Jenny talked about what Rebecca had been like back then.

Desmond was surprised by those facts.

The conversation eventually turned to fashion, which was Vivian's comfort zone, and the discussion became lively.

Gabriel took care of everything behind the scenes, making sure everyone had food and drinks. This kind of life was heavenly. It was so much better than staying home waiting for a man who might not even come back.

When it ended, everyone was reluctant to leave, But since it was getting late, they didn't want to disturb

Josette's rest.

Gabriel arranged for cars to send them home,

"It's fine. I drove here, but could you come out for a moment?" Desmond said to him.
"Helia and I have a gift for Rebecca that's still in the car."

Rebecca's sharp instincts picked up the hint. This guy had something to say to Gabriel in private.

"Sure," Gabriel agreed readily.

Rebecca walked them to the door, but they wouldn't let her go any farther and told her to go back inside to keep Josette company.

Josette was still sitting in the living room where Gabriel had replaced all the lights with warm ones.

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Under the soft golden glow and with the vintage furniture, Josette sat smiling at her.

The whole scene felt incredibly warm. Rebecca went over and hugged her. "Grandma."

Josette reached out and stroked her hair. "Sweetheart, are you really happy?"

Rebecca nodded. "Yeah, very."

“That’s good.” Josette breathed a sigh of relief. “You’re braver than I was. Brave children will be happy.”

“Yeah!” Rebecca nodded again, sure of it.

She had no idea what Gabriel and Desmond were talking about. Together with Nancy, she helped Josette wash up and get ready for bed.

Only after Josette was settled did she return to her room. The busy day had finally quieted down.

She took out her phone, only to find that Jenny had already posted about tonight’s celebratory dinner on social media, captioned: [Congratulations to Rebecca on her new beginning.]

The photo showed Rebecca surrounded by her friends behind a cake. In the candlelight, her smile was radiant.

However, one comment stood out and made her frown.

[What are you all doing? Why is that pretty boy there, too?]

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Rebecca commented on Jenny’s post: [It was a wonderful evening.]

She then headed downstairs to find Gabriel, hoping to figure out what he and Desmond were discussing.

Gabriel entered and found her waiting in the living room. He smiled knowingly. “I knew you’d ask. Have a seat.”

Rebecca settled onto the sofa, wearing soft slippers. As she sat down, Gabriel’s gaze fell to her ankle.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, realizing that was where her old injury was.

For five years, she had grown accustomed to hiding it, disliking the attention it drew. Even now, having come out of the shadows, she instinctively shrank.

But Gabriel walked over, squatted in front of her, and gently lifted her injured foot.

“What?” She blinked, unsure of his intentions.

“Is this here?” He pressed lightly on the area of permanent damage.

It was the root cause that she could no longer dance.

She nodded, and he slipped her slipper back on. “The Schroeder kid tried to curry favor with me earlier. Do you understand his intentions?”

She hadn’t thought much of it before, but now that she reflected, something did feel off.

She frowned, and he spoke in a serious, almost elder-like tone. “You just crawled out of a quagmire, so don’t rush into things. The only one who can heal you is yourself, not another relationship. Life is long, and we can take our time.”

She understood his meaning. “I get it.”

For now, she had no romantic feelings for Desmond, nor did she have any plans to dive into another relationship.

“Aren’t you going to the clinic tomorrow to check your leg?” he asked. “I’ll go with you.”

She did plan to go. During the past month abroad, she had kept up with rehabilitation and felt stronger, though she wondered if it was just psychological.

But she hadn’t planned to have him accompany her. “You’re so busy. You don’t have to come with me.”

“I’m good. Hugo is the one with a packed schedule. I should reward him.” He thought for a moment and added, “By the way, Desmond and Helia left their gift in the yard. Wanna take a look?”

Rebecca wondered what kind of grand gift needed to be placed in the yard. She followed him outside and saw a sculpture of her mid-dance pose.

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They had commissioned someone to carve it.

“It needs a base. I’ll have one custom-made and place it in the yard. What do you think?” Gabriel said.

She nodded, not sure if she could ever be able to perform that pose with such perfection again.

When she returned to her room, her phone kept lighting up with incoming messages. She picked it up before seeing several missed calls and a string of messages-all from Vance.

The notifications were also in double digits.

She checked Jenny's post once again. The comment section had turned into a battleground between

Vance and Obadiah.

Obadiah: [Congrats to Rebecca on finally saying goodbye to the scumbag and starting a beautiful new life.]

Vance: [Who are you calling a scumbag?]

Obadiah: [You. What about it?]

Vance: [Just wait! You bastard!]

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Vance: [Send your location!]

Obadiah: [Come get me!]

It had turned into an endless loop.

Rebecca could imagine Vance's fury behind his phone, but this was just childish. She checked his messages and found them ridiculous.

[Did you really throw a party tonight?]

[Are you so happy about the divorce? Have you been waiting for this day?]

He had even sent her the photo.

[Look at yourself. You're smiling so brightly. Did you ever smile like that when you were with me?]

[No wonder you were in such a hurry to divorce. You had been planning it forever.]

[It's because of Schroeder, right? When did you two start hooking up?]

[From the first time you mentioned divorce? When he sent you flowers?]

Vance was beyond reason. What right did he have to question her? As for the flowers, she had no memory of them at all.

Rebecca: [Desmond and I are just friends.]

She didn't want to cause Desmond unnecessary trouble, but her reply seemed to trigger something. Vance's messages started bombarding her again.

[Friends? You had a husband and a home. What kind of friend sends you flowers in that situation?]

[Would a normal friend take you on an international performance tour?]

[Would a normal friend go through all the trouble to find doctors to treat your leg?]

[Would a normal friend accompany you for rehabilitation every day?] (2)

His accusations were ridiculous.

She typed back quickly: [Yes, why would normal friends do all these things for me? Is it because I didn't have a husband?]

Finally, he went quiet.

But Rebecca wasn't finished. She kept typing and sent another message: [I wonder who my husband's normal friend was and what they were doing together? Got the answer, my ex?]

She added: [Let's just block each other. For future share transfers and property division matters, Gabriel's lawyer will contact you.]

Without hesitation, she blocked him on social media and put his number on the blacklist. She hoped this kind of meaningless conversation would never happen again.

She took a shower and went to bed.

The next morning after breakfast, Gabriel accompanied her to the clinic. Rebecca brought Josette along, hoping the doctor could figure out a way to accelerate her recovery.

At the clinic, Rebecca asked the doctor to check on Josette first. Since the old lady was still weak, Edwin suggested avoiding heavy tonics.

He didn't prescribe medicine but recommended nutritional supplements suitable for her current condition and advised her to do more gentle exercise.

Josette reassured them, "I told you I'm fine. You worry too much."

How could they not worry? Josette was the most important person to Rebecca.

When she was little, Josette took care of her. Now that she had grown up, she would take care of Josette and keep her company in her later years.

She would not let anything happen to Josette.

Afterward, Edwin examined Rebecca's leg. He confirmed that she had made some progress in the past month, but it was small. At this rate, no one knew what the outcome would be.

Gabriel and Josette both frowned at the news, but Rebecca wasn't bothered.

"It's okay," she said lightly. "I'm already used to it. It doesn't affect my daily life, and dancing isn't my whole world. I can do many other things."

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When they were leaving the clinic, Gabriel asked Rebecca and Josette to wait in the car.

He went back inside to speak with the doctor. About 20 minutes later, he came out with a smile.

"I discussed the treatment plan with Dr. Jefferson again," he explained. "We still have one month in Soliaridge, right? We'll come for therapy every day and do rehabilitation here. Let's see how it goes."

Rebecca didn't have much confidence, but when she saw their hopeful expressions, she couldn't bear to disappoint them, especially Josette.

"Okay," she agreed.

From then on, her life became very routine. She basically went back and forth between the clinic and home every day.

One week later, Gabriel told her it was time to go through the formal share transfer with Vance.

He accompanied her to the company, not telling her one fact. If his lawyer hadn't kept pressing, Vance would have tried to delay it even longer.

The process was simple. Gabriel had already reviewed all the documents and agreements. She only needed to go and sign.

She showed up, signed the papers, and was gone in almost no time. She barely spoke; Gabriel handled most of the conversation for her.

The moment the formalities were done, she turned to leave. Vance chased after her but nearly ran into someone.

He looked up and saw Gabriel standing between them. He looked dejected. "Gabriel..."

"Don't call me that. We're not so close." Gabriel shut him down. "Transfer the money to Rebecca's account within the agreed time. For anything else, contact my lawyer."

Seeing that Rebecca was about to go downstairs, Vance said desperately, "We're not officially divorced yet. There's still the 30-day cooling-off period. I can change my mind anytime."

"That's fine." Gabriel shrugged. "We can afford to wait. Let's see if you can afford the time."

Vance's expression shifted. "You wouldn't be so despicable as to suppress me in the business world, would you?"

Gabriel smirked. "Wrong choice of words, Mr. Bradford. In business, it's called competition, not suppression."

Vance froze in place, not coming to his senses even after Gabriel left. He suddenly realized something: once the transfer was done, there would be no more connection between Rebecca and him.

In 30 days, or rather, there weren't even 30 days left now... The day they collected the divorce certificate might very well be the last time they ever saw each other.

A sudden, heavy pain struck his chest. He ran downstairs and saw Gabriel's car still parked by the roadside.

He sprinted over and pounded on the window. Gabriel looked at him coldly as he shouted, "Wait! I have something to say!"

Gabriel lowered the window, silently warning him against playing tricks.

But Vance had nothing substantial to say. He racked his brain and finally blurted out, "Rebecca, what about your parents and your brother? How do you plan to handle them?"

It was the only thing he could think of. He knew it was pointless; Gabriel definitely wouldn't let them off.

In fact, he had heard that Gabriel was suing them for abuse.

“I mean, Emmett’s company still has some dealings with mine. Tell me what you want done. I’ll listen to you.” He breathed hard. “Emmett didn’t directly participate in the abuse. How should he be handled?”

Both Gabriel and Rebecca looked at him like he was an idiot. Finally, he let go of the window in defeat.

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Vance felt like an idiot himself. The questions he had just asked were just filler-anything to keep

Rebecca there a little longer.

Gabriel looked gentle and refined with his gold-rimmed glasses, but he drew very clear lines when it came to grudges.

Rebecca’s parents and brother had long been written off in his mind. Why would he show them any mercy?

Vance had heard that Rebecca’s parents didn’t even want to leave the detention center. Someone had gone to post bail for them, but they had refused to come out.

The reason? It was safer inside. If they got out, Gabriel would definitely give their lives hell.

With his power, he could do that without leaving a trace. He was backed by the Rossi family, after all.

At a young age, he fought his way to the top and became the head of a massive family. It was practically a legend.

Vance just hadn’t expected that they were the same person. He smiled bitterly, not sure what had gone wrong with him lately, but everything seemed to taste bitter.

The food in his mouth was bitter. The water he drank was bitter. Even the air seemed to carry a faint bitter scent.

That afternoon, Lucas came to his office and suggested they go out for a meal together with Aiden and

Catherine.

Behind his desk, Vance didn't feel like going at all. "Forget it. I'm tired. You guys go ahead. I'll foot the bills."

"It's not about the food," Lucas explained. "You have been down these past few days. I thought a get-together might cheer you up."

Vance shook his head. "I'm not in the mood. Just go without me."

"What's wrong?" Lucas looked at him with worry. "You used to love hanging out with us. No matter what was bothering you, it would disappear once we got together."

Vance froze. What was wrong with him? He didn't know either.

It was just an instinctive reaction. Maybe he was tired of the noise as he grew older, preferring solitude and quiet.

"Maybe I'm getting old," he replied.

Lucas giggled, "You? Getting old?"

But Vance couldn't find any other reason.

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"What exactly is going on with you?" Lucas sighed. "We all know you never really wanted to marry Rebecca in the first place. You didn't love her. Now that you're divorced, shouldn't you be happy?"

"Yeah..." Vance murmured blankly. "Shouldn't I be happy? But why don't I feel anything? I really don't feel good."

"Are you just used to having her around?" Lucas guessed. "It's normal to feel reluctant when someone suddenly disappears from your life. Like the dog I had when I was little. It was around for two years and then disappeared one day. I cried for a long time."

Vance shook his head. "It's not the same. Didn't you love your dog? That's why you cried."

Lucas was stumped. "I guess I did love it."

They both fell silent.

Lucas thought for a long time, then asked, "You didn't fall in love with Rebecca, did you?"

The question hit Vance like a blow to the head. He had never considered it before.

“Okay, let me put it another way,” Lucas said. “You’re single now, right? Suppose you have two choices. One is going back to Rebecca, and the other is marrying Cathy. You’re single now, so you can marry her. Which one would you choose?”

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Vance’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about? When have I ever planned to marry Cathy? Since she came back, I have never thought about marrying her.”

Lucas was stunned. “Wasn’t that because Rebecca was around? Now that you’re divorced, you’re not considering Cathy?”

“We were over a long time ago,” Vance said bitterly. “What are you thinking?”

“Then why have you been so good to her?” Lucas stammered.

“Aren’t I good to you?” Vance asked back. “Aren’t I good toward Aiden?”

“How is it the same?” Lucas didn’t know what to say.

“What’s different? You guys are my buddies, and you’ve enjoyed the company’s benefits. When Catherine was hanging out with us back then, we were still in the startup phase,” Vance explained. “She didn’t enjoy anything, and she suffered so much abroad. Now that she’s back, shouldn’t I spoil her a little? She’s always been a little sister to us. Plus, there’s a volunteer story between us. You all know about that.”

“But...” Lucas still felt it was different.

“Of course, it’s different!” A sharp voice exploded behind them.

Isabelle came in, and Lucas quickly stood up. “Honey, what brings you here?”

“To hear what kind of nonsense you are spouting again,” she replied sullenly. “Do you guys only have one topic when you get together? Talking about that two-faced woman?”

“Don’t say that. How is Cathy two-faced?” Lucas said weakly, glancing at Vance.

“Say one more word for her and see what happens.” Isabelle pointed at Lucas’s nose, looking ready to slap him.

“I didn’t...”

“You did! Weren’t you just talking? What, you want to argue with me because of an outsider?”

“No way. Absolutely not.”

He quickly took her hand. Only then did Isabelle calm down a little.

“Come home with me.”

“Uh, why don’t we have dinner with Vance?”

“No way!” Her temper flared again. “I’m not joining your little gatherings. You’re coming home to eat with me! People like him deserve what they get. They’re not worth wasting time on.”

Lucas cringed, hoping she would hold back a little.

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Vance looked listless. “What kind of person am I, then?”

Isabelle turned to face him. “I didn’t want to say anything. Getting angry at scumbags and bitches is bad for my baby. I don’t want them to learn about the ugly side of the world. But since you asked, I’ve changed my mind.”

Lucas broke out in a cold sweat. “Please, say no more. Let our baby stay innocent. Don’t change your mind.”

“No!” Isabelle huffed. “I’ve decided to teach them how to tell right from wrong.”

She turned to Vance. “Stop talking like a saint, will you? Catherine accompanied you during your humble beginnings. She suffered abroad, so you should compensate her. And that volunteer story. What’s the point of mentioning those things? Is it so hard to admit you’re a scumbag? All those excuses are just to cover up your infidelity.”

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Vance turned ashen. “I didn’t. Cathy and I never...”

He stopped mid-sentence as he remembered something. He had no right to say that anymore.

On a roll, Isabelle didn't notice the shift in his expression. She kept going. "I don't care whether you slept with her or not. That's not my business. I only care about Lucas. This has nothing to do with sex."

Lucas panicked about her reckless speech, especially since they were in the office. His hand shot out and clamped over her mouth.

"Let her speak." Vance was unpleasant, but he wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Fine!" Isabelle slapped Lucas's hand away. "Vance Bradford, you are a scumbag! The worst of its kind. You enjoyed Rebecca's wholehearted love while flirting with Catherine under the guise of brotherhood. Go check out her posts. What kind of friends sleep in the same bed half-naked?"

"Honey, that was staged. I was there, too," Lucas chimed in, only to earn himself a solid slap across the face.

Isabelle sneered. "You were there? You just admitted it yourself. Pathetic! I'll deal with you when we get home."

She turned back to Vance. "What kind of friends buy houses, bags, and luxury items for each other? Why don't you buy some for Lucas, too? What kind of friends go on island vacations and share one room? Oh, Lucas has that treatment too, but put your hand on your conscience and tell me. Was it the same when you shared a room with Lucas as when you did it with Catherine?"

Lucas had to admit her tongue was sharp, but he had the same doubt.

"What?" Isabelle turned and scolded him. "He has no brain, and you? You think you're any better? Your head is full of shit."

"That's enough already. Let's go home," he pleaded.

Isabelle's fierceness was well-known throughout the company. Everyone knew Lucas had a formidable wife.

"Let me finish!" she insisted.

She had originally not wanted to say anything, but since she had started, she wouldn't feel good if she didn't finish.

She glared at Vance. "Your mind is just filthy. Put your hand on your nonexistent conscience and ask yourself. When you were flirting with Catherine, didn't your heart fly away? Didn't it feel like you were back in your teenage years? A grown man suddenly rediscovering pure love. Didn't life feel exciting again?"

She paused and added, “And then? You were emotionally cheating. Yes, emotional cheating is still cheating. I don’t know if you actually did it, but whether it was emotional or physical, it’s cheating. Yet you still claimed you two were just friends. If you openly admitted it, I might still respect you as a man. Cheating, then pretending to be devoted? Pathetic and cheap!”

With that, she turned back to Lucas. “Aren’t you coming?” 2

“Oh, okay.” He gave Vance an apologetic look, then followed Isabelle out with his head hanging low.

Just as they stepped outside the office, Catherine and Aiden appeared.

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Aiden’s head started throbbing the moment he spotted Isabelle. He quickly looked away, pretending he hadn’t seen her.

Catherine, still stinging from the verbal beating Isabelle had given her at the banquet, immediately shrank behind Aiden, but the latter didn’t even spare her a glance.

Isabelle’s sharp gaze stayed fixed on Aiden. She felt unlucky to run into these people again.

Sure, she had a sharp tongue, but it wasn’t like she enjoyed being fierce. These people kept pushing her buttons. If they didn’t act so shamelessly in front of her, why would she bother?

Aiden had a sinking feeling that Isabelle was about to use him as her punching bag this time. He wasn’t her husband, so why should he put up with it?

If it weren’t for Lucas’s sake, he would have slapped her long ago.

“Lucas, you should head home. It’s quitting time,” he said, hoping his friend would take the shrew away before she ruined his image in front of the staff.

“Honey, let’s go home,” Lucas said, his stomach already in knots.

Cold sweat prickled down his back. He was terrified his pregnant wife would cause a scene and tear the company in half.

With so many employees watching, it would be utterly humiliating if the three leaders all got cursed out.

Surprisingly, Isabelle only shot Aiden a cold look and said nothing. Lucas heaved a deep sigh of relief and wrapped an arm around her waist, ready to steer her out.

If nothing else had happened, they would have left just like that. But Catherine peeked out from behind Aiden, looking timid. “Is she mad at everyone because of me?”

She cowered, adding, “Izzy, is it okay if I call you that? Last time I overstepped and called you the wrong thing.”

Isabelle sneered, watching the performance unfold, but Lucas panicked again.

Things had finally calmed down. Why was Catherine poking the bear again? These women were all troublesome.

Catherine was surprised that Isabelle gave no response, but it didn’t stop her.

“I know I can be really impulsive.” She winced, trying to squeeze out some tears. “The guys have always protected me too much. I don’t understand a lot of things and end up offending people. If I’ve done anything wrong, please forgive me. Lucas, could you please tell her I’m sorry? I’ll change, I promise.”

Lucas immediately jumped in. “Cathy is...”

Isabelle roared at him before he could finish, but no slap this time. Instead, she grabbed his ear and tirimha twisted. “Are you deaf or dull? Can’t you hear or remember anything? Didn’t I tell you not to speak up for her?”

“No, I wasn’t. I swear!” His heart raced. That had been way too close.

She turned back to Catherine, scoffing. “Forgive you? Why should I? You used this little act to break up Vance and Rebecca. Now you’re trying it on Lucas and me?”

Catherine’s face drained of all color. “No, I didn’t mean that.”

Isabelle wasn’t impressed. “Save the act! I may not have seen much of the world, but I’m good at identifying bitches. Now get the hell out of my face!”

Catherine had never been humiliated like this in front of the guys. Tears immediately started streaming down her face.

Aiden couldn’t stand it anymore. “Isabelle, you went too far!”

“I just said this two-faced snake broke up Rebecca and Vance,” Isabelle sneered. “You really think she only did it to them?”

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Aiden didn't understand what Isabelle meant.

Lucas was equally confused. "Honey, what are you talking about?"

"What am I talking about?" Isabelle let out a cold laugh. "Aiden, you can drop the innocent act. I have no interest in disciplining someone else's husband. But whether you're still Sonia's husband or not, that's becoming questionable."

Aiden frowned. "What the hell do you mean?"

"Have you even noticed how long Sonia has been gone?" she asked, studying his face. "Figures. You've barely been home lately."

All these men were scum.

Aiden's eyes narrowed. "If you've got something to say, just say it!"

Isabelle's eyes stung with unshed tears, but she forced them back. "Her mom passed away.'

Aiden's mind went blank. He then remembered the message Sonia had sent him, saying her mother wasn't doing well and asking him to come to the hospital.

Lucas was stunned. "This is serious. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What good would telling you do? You're all the same!" Isabelle snapped, turning on her heel and striding toward the elevator.

He hurried after her, trying to defend himself. "I'm not a scumbag! I didn't..."

"Shut up! Birds of a feather flock together. You're all cut from the same rotten cloth!" she yelled, stepping into the elevator.

Lucas followed her inside, trying to say more when he noticed the red rims of her eyes.

"How is she doing now? Something this big should have been shared with us. How has she been holding up all by herself?" Lucas sighed, knowing the two women were close.

They often chatted and went shopping together, unlike Rebecca, who mostly kept to herself.

“Us? Who exactly? Aiden?” she scoffed.

“Yeah, Aiden is...” He stopped mid-sentence when he caught the cold glint in her eyes.

Her chest rose and fell with anger. “Did she have to tell him? As a husband and a son-in-law, doesn’t he have any sense of responsibility at all? If he cared even a little about her, wouldn’t he have known? His mother-in-law was in the hospital fighting for her life, and he had no idea?”

He paused, then sighed. “You should have at least told me, I could have helped her run errands or whatever a man could do.”

}

Isabelle remained silent, her heart aching. It wasn’t that she hadn’t wanted to tell them, but Sonia’s voice had been eerily calm on the phone. “Izzy, I don’t have a mom anymore.”

Isabelle had immediately wanted to rush over. Sonia said her mother’s body had already been cremated and that she was already on the way back to her hometown to bury the ashes.

Isabelle had asked the same question. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I could have helped.”

Sonia had calmly replied that there was no need. She had handled the cremation and left. Isabelle understood why she had waited until everything was done before notifying her.

There were two reasons.

First, she had been totally disappointed by Aiden. Their marriage had never been happy.

Aiden had never stopped seeing other women, but because Sonia’s mother had been ill for years and she had quit her job early, she had limited financial independence.

Aiden had used that to keep her trapped. It was imaginable how devastated she must have felt when her mother died.

Second, Sonia knew Isabelle was pregnant and didn’t want to upset her.

Even at her lowest point, Sonia had still been so considerate. But why couldn’t someone so good be treated with the kindness she deserved?

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Even after the couple left, those words echoed in Aiden's mind.

With a frown, he pulled out his phone to call Sonia. The line went through quickly this time.

"Where are you?" he demanded.

"At home," she replied, accompanied by their son's chatter in the background.

Aiden relaxed, knowing she couldn't cause any real trouble. Remembering her mother's passing, he asked, "About your mom..."

"It's already taken care of," she replied, her tone remarkably calm.

"I..." He hesitated. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You were busy. I didn't want to disturb you, so I handled it myself."

"Alright. I'll come home early tonight. Have the housekeeper make dinner and wait for me."

Losing a mother was a serious matter. He should go back and check on her.

She hung up without replying.

Aiden noticed Vance had stepped out of the office and was staring at him. Catherine stood nearby, also watching.

"Is she alright?" Catherine asked worriedly.

Aiden shrugged. "Nothing serious. She just went to her hometown to handle her mom's funeral arrangements. She is already back."

"You should head home," Vance said seriously. "Losing a parent isn't a small thing. Sonia says she doesn't blame you, but it may not be how she feels."

Aiden brushed it off. "You're wrong there. Unlike Rebecca, she's the most understanding wife one could ask for. She even said she understood how busy I was and didn't want to trouble me."

Vance shook his head. "Are you sure she wasn't just being sarcastic?"

"No way. I know her," Aiden said dismissively. "Without me, she couldn't survive. She wouldn't dare leave me. Who else would support her?"

“I used to think the same way,” Vance sighed.

“I’m different from you,” Aiden said smugly, patting his shoulder. “Can’t spoil them. You throw money around like it’s nothing, while I only give her a fixed allowance every month. If she wants something, she uses my credit card as an authorized user. No extra cash. To control someone, you first control their financial lifeline.”

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He turned away and waved smartly over his shoulder. “Bye. You guys enjoy your night. I’m heading home to check on her.”

Vance and Catherine were left standing in the hallway.

“Vance...” Catherine began, her voice full of grievance. “Aiden was planning to invite you out for dinner. Do you have time?”

He looked at her, his mind replaying Isabelle’s harsh words earlier.

“Is it so hard to admit you’re a scumbag? All those excuses are just to cover up your infidelity. Whether it was emotional or physical, it was cheating. If you openly admitted it, I might still respect you as a man. Cheating, then pretending to be devoted?”

When he didn’t respond, Catherine forced a smile. “It’s okay if you’re busy. I can eat by myself. I’ll be fine.”

Her tone was understanding, but she looked aggrieved.

In a trance, he nodded. “Okay.”

She froze, not understanding what he meant.

“Well then, I’ll head back on my own. You don’t need to see me out,” she said, on the verge of crying.

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“Okay,” Vance muttered before walking back into his office.

Catherine followed a few steps, only to hear the door slam shut. She stood frozen outside for a long time, unable to process it.

Was this really the same man who, when she first returned, had given her anything she wanted?

She had looked so pitiful, but he hadn't even noticed. His gaze no longer lingered on her. It was unbelievable.

She sneered, realizing that men were always chasing what they couldn't have.

When Aiden arrived home, the first thing he noticed was two large suitcases in the entryway. He assumed Sonia had just returned and hadn't unpacked yet.

He walked in and called out, "Shane?"

Their son came out dragging a small suitcase, walking quietly beside Sonia. She held his hand and carried a large canvas bag over her shoulder.

"Are you just getting back or heading out?" Aiden asked, sensing something was off.

"Heading out," she replied flatly.

"Where to?" He thought they were going on a trip. "It's fine if you want to get away for a bit, but I don't have time to go with you."

She remained indifferent. "No need."

"Alright, then go by yourselves," he said, feeling quite pleased with himself.

This was the wife he had properly trained. Compared to him, Vance and Lucas were pathetic. One got divorced, and the other got slapped. Embarrassing!

She looked at him with cold detachment. "What I mean is, you won't need to from now on."

"What?" He blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"I mean, let's get a divorce," she replied calmly,

He paused, then scoffed, "Divorce? Are you trying to copy that cripple Rebecca? She has a powerful cousin. What do you have? Do you have what it takes to divorce me?"

Sonia's gaze was colder and more determined than he had ever seen. "Just because I have nothing left, I'm not afraid anymore. I want a divorce."

"You're not joking?" Aiden studied her carefully. "You'd better think twice. If you divorce me, you'll truly have nothing. Who would want you then? How would you even survive?"

Shane, who had been nervously clutching Sonia's hand, suddenly spoke up. "I want Mom. She has me!"

"You?" Aiden sneered. "You brat, siding with your mom? If she leaves me, she won't even have money to feed you."

Shane was too little and feared Aiden. Even so, he gathered his courage, puffed out his chest, and said in a trembling voice, "I'll grow up fast. I'll take care of her!"

Blinking back her tears, Sonia pulled her son tightly into her arms, took a deep breath, and said, "Divorce is inevitable. If you're willing to do it amicably, it will save us a lot of trouble. If not, I'll file a lawsuit."

"You're learning all the wrong things," Aiden sneered. "You really think you can threaten me with that? You see, after your mom passed, I felt some pity for you and wanted to make it up to you. But if you insist on this, then fine. Divorce it is, but I won't give you a cent."

That was within her expectations. Without another word, she led Shane to walk toward the door.

"Sonia!" Aiden roared as she reached the entryway. "If you walk out that door, you can forget about ever coming back! Think carefully, and don't regret it later!"

Sonia didn't pause for even a second. She opened the door, let Shane go first, and then wheeled the suitcases out without looking back.

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Chapter 375

Rebecca's life had been peaceful and simple these days.

Josette's visa had finally been approved, and the plane tickets to Europe were already booked. Gabriel would accompany them on the trip.

Having him around meant she no longer had to worry about details like renting accommodations or arranging transportation abroad.

Everything was handled perfectly. She simply had to show up with her suitcase.

Her daily routine consisted of therapy sessions and rehabilitation at the clinic. When she had free time, she would meet up with Vivian and Jenny for tea.

The driver assigned by Gabriel dropped her off and waited in the car. But the moment she stepped into the clinic, she saw Vance sitting there.

The second Vance saw her, he stood up and walked over, stopping in front of her with a small smile. ”

Rebecca.”

He was dressed up and clean-shaven with a fresh haircut. He looked thinner but still sharper.

She nodded at him like a stranger and tried to walk past him. He quickly stepped sideways to block her path again.

She stopped, looking at him with confusion. “What? Got some good news to share?”

Her tone was laced with sarcasm, making him pause.

“Good news?”

“You’re so determined to talk to me. It must be because of some good news, right? Let me guess. Has your infertility been cured? You’re finally going to be a dad?”

“No.” He turned pale. “How could that be? I came here to see you.”

“For what? What is there left for us to talk about?”

“Well...” His eyes darted. “Regarding the divorce terms, I have some thoughts.”

She laughed in disbelief. “Be a man for once, will you? Stop going back and forth.”

“I’m sorry, but on the division of assets, I have a different opinion.”

“Gabriel has already sent a lawyer for that. You should talk to him. I suppose I overestimated you. Not taking half of your assets was my biggest compromise. It’s for the sake of the 12 years we’ve known each other and the five years we’ve been married.”

“Rebecca...”

“Save it. Any response or opinion I have will go through the lawyer. If you have a problem, talk to him. Don’t come looking for me anymore. If the cooling-off period ends and you still haven’t decided, we’ll see each other in court. I’ll accept whatever the judge awards. No objections.”

Unwilling to waste another breath, she pushed past him and headed straight for the treatment room.

The therapy and rehabilitation sessions took up the entire morning. While she was in the rehab room, Vance stayed outside, refusing to leave.

The doctor had adjusted her therapy plan. Each session felt like her bones were being reshaped. It was extremely painful and exhausting.

But she had never mentioned a word to Gabriel or Josette, afraid they would worry.

When she finished changing and walked out, her steps were unsteady. The nurse opened the door, revealing Vance standing right outside.

Annoyed and eager to avoid him, she nearly lost her balance. He reached out quickly to catch her, but she recoiled with disgust.

His eyes dimmed, and he forced a smile. "Can't I even touch you anymore?"

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Chapter 376

Rebecca steadied herself, her gaze icy cold. "We've known each other for 12 years. In your eyes, I probably have nothing but flaws, but I forgot to mention one more. I have a serious cleanliness obsession."

Vance was stunned. "You think I'm dirty?"

"Didn't I already tell you?" She remembered clearly that she had said it to his face.

Didn't he know the answer?

Vance suddenly felt powerless, having no confidence to deny it.

"Rebecca..." He grabbed her wrist, but the moment her gaze landed on his hand, he let go.

The disdain in her eyes made him flinch, but he refused to step aside. "Is there any chance for us to start over?"

She stayed silent, then muttered, "Only if we could go back to when we were 16."

Back then, he had been her whole world. Nothing bad had happened between them, and they hadn't met anyone else.

Now the wealth he possessed could buy almost anything, but he could not turn back time. Despair was the only thing left in his eyes.

When she tried to leave again, he couldn't stop her.

The driver, noticing she had been inside for a long time, had come in to escort her out. With that build, the man looked more like a bodyguard than a simple driver.

"I don't agree to the divorce," Vance murmured. "Go ahead and file the lawsuit."

She paused, saying curtly, "Understood."

"Rebecca!" Vance called after her, trying to say more, but everything condensed into that single desperate shout.

She seemed like a soulless shell. No matter what he said, she remained unmoved.

She hadn't been like this before. She would get angry, but even then, she couldn't bear to ignore him or raise her voice.

She would simply look at him with those big, doe-like eyes full of hurt, then quietly swallow the pain.

She would be happy. Even if he did nothing special, the mere sight of him would light her up. Sometimes, he didn't even understand what she was happy about.

That was the woman who had loved him-the one he had known for 12 years. He had thought she would remain that way forever and thus had taken everything for granted.

His phone kept ringing. It was Lucas, urging him to come back for a meeting, but he just stood frozen in place.

"What the hell is going on with you two?" Lucas grumbled. "Doesn't the company matter anymore? Or is it suddenly just mine?"

Vance made it back to the office, but Lucas's life didn't become any easier.

After the meeting, he complained again, "What were you two even doing in there? Especially you, Vance. So many decisions needed your input as the CEO, but you were spaced out."

Vance rubbed his face.

"Come on, say something," Lucas pressed. "Do you still want the company or not? Two major partnerships are coming up for renewal. I've been negotiating, but their interest is fading. They're waiting to see what Rossi Enterprises does. If Rossi decides to compete with us, we might lose the deals."

He was stressed, but the other two were still not themselves.

Finally, Vance's eyes slid back to focus. He muttered, "Why exactly do we work so hard?"

"I don't know about you guys, but for me, it's to give Izzy and our baby a good life," Lucas replied.

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Chapter 377

"Pathetic!" Aiden mocked him.

"What about you, then?" Lucas shot back.

"Remember what we said back in the day? To make something of ourselves, to rise above everyone else, and to become the top dogs," Aiden said.

"Then why were you so out of it?" Lucas asked. "Don't tell me you fought with Sonia last night, and now she's ignoring you."

"She ignored me?" Aiden scoffed. "She left and wanted a divorce. Think that can pressure me? Keep dreaming. If we split, plenty of young girls will line up to marry me. Who would want her?"

His mind had been elsewhere during the meeting, but it was not on Sonia.

"That's not how it works," Lucas tried.

"Isn't it? You're too soft," Aiden cut him off. "A real man shouldn't let a woman control him like that. Every time we go out, doesn't Isabelle call to check when you're coming home? And you just put up with it. You're the one earning money, not her. Grow a backbone."

Lucas didn't argue with that. "I guess I'm just not that assertive, but I like it this way. I follow you guys at work and listen to Isabelle at home. I don't need to overthink things. So, now it's your turn to show some spine. What do we do now?"

Vance remained silent, and Aiden grew frustrated. "Stop spacing out, Vance! Are you still thinking about why we work so hard?"

Vance winced. "I am."

"Have you figured it out yet?" Lucas asked, feeling a bit overwhelmed.

If both Vance and Aiden checked out, he couldn't carry the company alone.

Vance drifted into memories. “To make something out of ourselves and to rise above others. That’s what I said back then, I wanted to prove that without my father’s support, I could still succeed. Starting from nothing, I would do even better than those who relied on their families.”

“That’s it!” Aiden said. “So, why have you been wandering like a lost soul?”

“Because...” Vance narrowed his eyes. “I got married to Rebecca, who lost her future because of me. That’s when my goals changed. I pushed harder, not just for my own future, but for hers too. I wanted to support her for the rest of her life and give her the very best of everything.”

Lucas wanted to say something, but eventually held back.

When he had gone home last night, Isabelle had lectured him, calling the three of them the worst kind of scum.

He felt unfair. Though he shared some faults with Aiden and Vance, his fidelity was intact. He was loyal to Isabelle and had never crossed the line.

“If you were as rotten in that aspect, do you think you’d still be standing here talking to me?” she had responded.

Aiden voiced what Lucas was thinking. “Snap out of it, Vance. Rebecca doesn’t want you anymore.”

He went even further. “Don’t be so pathetic. A successful man having a few women on the side is normal. As long as their position stays secure, that’s enough. They demand more and more because you’ve spoiled them.”

“Vance, I honestly don’t understand you. You said you didn’t love Rebecca, and you two never even... Well, consummated your marriage, right?” Lucas chimed in. “I thought when Cathy came back, you’d divorce Rebecca and finally be with her. Sure, it wasn’t the most honorable thing, but as your friend, I would have supported you. I backed you guys. And now, look at yourself.”

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Chapter 378

“Yeah. What are you even depressed about? Just get the divorce done. You and Cathy can finally be together,” Aiden echoed. “Don’t tell me you never thought about marrying her. We’re all men here; we understand each other. If your old feelings for her ever died, I’d let you kick my head around like a ball.”

“That’s my biggest mistake,” Vance admitted. “I’ve been thinking about this seriously these past few days. Isabelle wasn’t wrong when she called me out. I never planned to divorce Rebecca, but it’s also true I let that old spark with Cathy come back to life.”

He lowered his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I kept telling myself I could control it. Even if I had feelings for Cathy, I could keep them in check. I would never betray my marriage. I swore I would never become the kind of cheating scumbag my father was. I’d stick with whoever I was married to for life. I believed that as long as I didn’t cheat physically, it didn’t count as betraying Rebecca.”

His voice grew quieter until it turned into a bitter laugh.

“You did keep that promise,” Lucas said. “You didn’t...”

Even though Isabelle claimed emotional cheating counted as cheating, in Lucas’s view, if Vance had held the physical line, there might still have been a chance to salvage things.

Vance sighed with regret, and Lucas was stunned. “You didn’t actually... When did that happen? Damn, it’s over! You can’t save this anymore.”

“Yeah. It’s over, and I can’t even try to win her back. She thinks I’m dirty,” Vance muttered, his eyes getting glazed. “So, I suddenly don’t know why I should keep working so hard. I’ve already proved I don’t need my father, and my other goal-carrying a lifetime of responsibility for Rebecca-has been lifted. She doesn’t need me anymore. So, why should I keep pushing?”

“Wait a second,” Lucas interrupted. “Aren’t you working hard for...”

He started scrolling through his phone. “Let me check... Hey, why did you delete that post? The one you put up on your socials.”

“What post? I don’t make a habit of posting on social media.”

“You did post! Let me find it. Izzy captured it in a screenshot and sent it to me, calling you a scumbag. Let me check the chat history. You said something about your lifelong effort being to give Cathy a clear blue sky or whatever.”

Aiden snatched his phone. “What’s there to look for? Vance says he didn’t post anything. You must be remembering wrong. He never posts on socials.” (1)

“Yeah, the only thing I ever posted was wishing Rebecca a happy birthday last month,” Vance confirmed.

Chapter 3/4.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 379

“Really? Did I remember it wrong?” Lucas frowned, looking puzzled. “That’s impossible.”

“Let me check,” Aiden said, searching through the chat history and finding the screenshot.

He quickly deleted it, then handed the phone back. “No. There’s nothing.”

Lucas looked confused, but since Aiden said so, he must have his reasons. It was probably for Vance’s best interest, so Lucas just let it go.

“Maybe I mixed it up,” he muttered, staring at his phone.

Vance stood up to leave, and Aiden asked, “Where are you going?”

Vance wasn’t sure. In the past five years, he had never been eager to go home. Right after they got married, he had been terrified of facing Rebecca.

He feared her overwhelming, passionate love, and even more so, he feared facing her injured leg. The guilt and shame had weighed on him like a boulder, pressing down so heavily that he couldn’t even be intimate with her.

It wasn’t that he didn’t want to, but whenever he saw her injured leg, guilt would overwhelm him and make intimacy impossible.

It had become a vicious cycle. The more psychological pressure he felt, the less he could perform. Then the pressure grew greater.

He had even seen therapists about it, but nothing had helped. Over time, he grew more and more reluctant to return home, always finding excuses to stay out until late at night—hanging out with the guys, client dinners, but mostly, work.

He truly had been busy with work, often staying late at the office alone. But no matter how late it got, he always had a clear direction—home.

Whether out of duty or something deeper, going home every night had become as routine as his work.

The apartment was still there, but he no longer knew where to go when he left the office. He had always told himself that being good to Rebecca for the rest of his life was his responsibility.

He didn't realize when it had stopped being just a duty. Without the woman who would light up at the mere sight of him, the apartment was no longer a home,

Going home had lost all meaning,

She had promised him that no matter how poor or rich, she would never leave. She had promised to leave a light on for him, no matter how late he returned.

He had believed that light would shine for him forever. That belief had pushed him to take her love for granted and eventually snuff it out.

For a moment, all kinds of thoughts rushed through his mind.

Aiden caught up with him, slinging an arm around his shoulders. "Come on. You're single again anyway. Let's go have some fun. Just the three of us."

"Don't count me in. Izzy's pregnant. I need to be home for her." Lucas gathered his things, ready to leave.

Aiden clicked his tongue. "You keep saying that. It's not like you're carrying the baby."

Lucas grabbed his folder and walked out. "I'm not hanging around. I've got dinner waiting at home."

Aiden ignored him and pulled Vance along.

"Let's go."

"Where to?"

Vance pulled his arm free. "I'm not going."

"To have fun! Drinks with some girls at a bar."

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"You're such a fake saint," Aiden protested. "Back when you had Rebecca, you refused to go to places like that. Now that you're divorced, you're still saying no? What's the point of making all this money if not to enjoy it? Or are you just going to sit and count your cash for fun?"

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 380

“You should go find Sonia,” Vance suggested. “Don’t end up like me, regretting everything when it’s too late.”

“No way!” Aiden waved it off. “If you’re not coming, I’ll go by myself. Boring.”

Aiden ended up spending the night with several middle-aged men in the flashing lights and loud music, living it up with girls on each arm.

When he finally stumbled out in the wee hours, his phone was ringing. His mother had called more than ten times.

When he answered, she told him she wasn’t feeling well and would be coming to Soliaridge the next day to see a doctor.

Deeply drunk, he mumbled in agreement.

The following day, he remembered the call, but Sonia wasn’t home.

He needed to get her back, calling her without hesitation. Sonia answered, but her voice was cold. “Hello?”

“My mom is coming today,” he started. “Says she’s not feeling well. Where are you? Get back here and take her to the hospital. We don’t know if she’ll need to be admitted.”

He sounded casual, as if Sonia had simply stepped out for groceries.

At that moment, she was standing on the tea hills. Her heart sank at his demanding tone.

She had been married to him for four years. She had quit her job and devoted herself to being the woman behind him-bearing his child and caring for his parents.

Her mother had been in poor health, yet she had still shouldered the responsibility of looking after Aiden’s mother, who ended up in the hospital twice a year.

His mother was difficult and refused to have a caregiver, insisting that Sonia handle everything personally.

Shane was little and needed attention. Even with a housekeeper, she couldn’t completely step back from her responsibilities as a mother,

For four years, she had worked harder for him and this family than if she had held three jobs, yet she had never received a single word of appreciation. In his mind, everything she did was simply expected.

Even now, after she had asked for a divorce, he still acted like it was no big deal, treating her as the same obedient woman he could order around.

“Are you listening? What are you doing?” Aiden grew impatient.

“I’m not going,” Sonia replied, cold and resolute.

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“Look, I’m giving you an out here,” he said arrogantly. “You’d better take it while you can. Don’t be ungrateful and make me lose patience. Then even if you come crawling back later, I won’t be so nice.”

Her blood ran cold. “I told you, I’m not coming back. I’ve already filed for divorce. You’ll receive the papers soon.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious. I don’t want to be with you anymore. That’s all.”

She hung up the phone, and a few minutes later, a notification from the bank arrived. Her card had been canceled.

Since their marriage, she had only ever used Aiden’s credit card as an authorized user. On holidays and birthdays, he would send her money, and every month he gave her a modest allowance. That was it.

A message from him followed: [I don’t care where you are. You have one day to come back and fix this.]

She shut her eyes, feeling bitter inside.

This was the man she had been blind enough to choose. He wouldn’t even leave her a way to survive, and he hadn’t even considered their son.

But she no longer had to rely on him to live. Over the four years, she had saved a small amount by living frugally. In addition, with her mother gone and her being the only child, the insurance payout and benefits had all come to her.

In the end, she had to depend on money from her mother’s death to get through this difficult time. The realization made her heart ache with unbearable sorrow.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 381

“Mom!” Shane came running up the hill path.

Sonia quickly wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes. She crouched down and pulled him into her arms. “Sweetheart, what brings you here?”

“I came to help you. I can work too.” He used his small hands to gently wipe her eyes. “Mom, don’t cry. I’m growing up quickly.”

A wave of aching sorrow surged through her heart, but she didn’t want him to see her pain. She fought hard to hold it back, then forced a smile. “I wasn’t crying. I just got some dirt in my eye.”

“Let me blow it away for you.” He cupped her face in his hands and puckered his lips.

His warm breath brushed across her eyelids, making them feel even hotter. At the same time, her resolve to divorce Aiden strengthened.

She would not yield under the pressure. She would build a better life for both of them.

Now she was grateful to Isabelle for introducing her to this job. She was a complete novice when it came to growing and processing tea, but she was willing to learn.

The pay wasn’t high, but she loved the work. The air was fresh. The surroundings were beautiful, and the interpersonal relationships were simple.

It suited her perfectly. She had even become an apprentice to Isabelle’s uncle, learning the art of tea- making under his guidance.

Tomas Leblanc was a good man with the same straightforward, loyal personality as Isabelle. He was patient and thorough when teaching her.

To Shane, the vast tea hills had become his playground. He could run freely across the open land.

Most days, Sonia and Shane stayed in the simple dormitory provided by the plantation. It was a modest brick house with just one main room. It couldn’t compare to the large house Aiden had bought, but it was clean and cozy.

After a long day of work, she could fall into bed without a care, no longer worrying about which woman Aiden was with or what time he would come home.

She spent the entire morning working in the fields, watering plants and dealing with pests.

The plantation avoided chemical pesticides, so pest control relied entirely on traditional methods. It was one of the biggest tasks during the summer season.

At noon, she called for Shane, who had been “helping” in the fields in his own playful way, and headed down the hill for lunch.

She never expected to find visitors-familiar ones at that.

“Sonia?” Rebecca gasped.

Sonia was equally surprised. She hadn’t expected Rebecca and Gabriel to show up at the plantation.

“My aunt loves tea, so Gabriel and I came to buy some for her,” Rebecca explained.

As she took a closer look at Sonia, she noticed a significant change in just a few days.

Rebecca had no idea what had happened to Sonia’s family. She only saw that Sonia had grown thinner and darker from working outdoors, yet her eyes now held a strange new determination that seemed to sparkle.

Tomas blinked. “You guys know each other?”

“She’s my friend, and Isabelle’s friend too,” Sonia replied, then explained to Rebecca that this was Isabelle’s uncle’s plantation.

“Oh, I see. Please have a seat. I’ll go get the tea for you,” Tomas said.

He wasn’t very sociable and quickly excused himself to fetch the tea, preferring to focus on his craft.

Sonia invited Rebecca and Gabriel to sit at a table in the courtyard.

Behind her, Shane’s laughter rang out. When she turned around, she saw Shane riding on the shoulders of Tomas’s son, Corey Leblanc, as they approached.

“Shane, get down! How can you act like that?” she scolded.

“It’s fine. Kids love to play,” Corey grinned, then greeted Rebecca and Gabriel. “Please excuse us. Let me wash my hands first.”

He had just come down from the hills, his feet covered in mud.

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Chapter 382

“That’s Tomas’s son,” Sonia explained. “By the way, how did you guys find this place?”

It didn’t seem like something Isabelle would have recommended.

“It was my cousin,” Rebecca chuckled, glancing at Gabriel. “He claims he has great taste and doesn’t like any of the big brands, so he insisted on checking out smaller places one by one.”

“Then you came to the right spot,” Sonia laughed. “Tomas puts his heart and soul into making tea. He’s honest and sincere. Once you taste it, you’ll understand. The only downside is that it doesn’t have a big name. Traditional handmade tea like this isn’t heavily marketed, so not many people know about it.”

Just then, another car pulled into the kind of day is today?”

courtyard. When the group got out, she muttered in disbelief, “What

It felt like everyone was showing up at once. Three people stepped out of the car: Isabelle, Lucas, and

Vance.

Rebecca was just as shocked to run into Vance in this remote place.

Lucas stared with his mouth open. “Uh... Izzy, tell me this isn’t a coincidence.”

It was exactly a coincidence.

If Isabelle had known she would run into so many people today, she would never have brought Lucas to Tomas’s tea plantation, and she definitely wouldn’t have let him drag Vance along.

She had gone to the company to pick up Lucas because she wanted to visit her grandma and check on how Sonia was doing at the plantation.

Lucas had insisted on bringing Vance along, saying the latter had been in a bad mood and needed a change of scenery.

She had wanted to say that Vance deserved it, but in the end, she had brought him anyway. As long as it wasn’t Aiden, it was fine.

Aiden still had no idea Sonia was working there.

“Rebecca, I really didn’t know,” Isabelle apologized, looking embarrassed.

Rebecca shook her head. “It’s okay. We’re just here to buy tea. Your uncle is getting us good stuff.”

One person, however, stood frozen in place, his eyes fixed on Rebecca. From the moment he stepped out of the car, she hadn’t looked at him once.

The sunflower that used to revolve around him had stopped turning in his direction.

Because Tomas wasn’t comfortable with socializing, it was Corey who eventually brought out the tea.

The guy had no idea about the complicated relationships between these guests. He only knew they all

Chariton Sc seemed to know one another, so he warmly invited everyone to sit together and taste the tea.

Lucas felt like he was dreaming. He never would have imagined this group would end up sitting at the same table.

He quietly slid into the seat next to Gabriel and offered a polite smile.

The company wasn’t in a good situation. With Vance checked out and Aiden distracted, he felt he had to do something as one of the three founding members.

“Mr. Rossi, what kind of tea do you usually drink?” he asked, trying to build rapport.

“I don’t know much about tea. I drink coffee more often,” Gabriel replied honestly.

Rebecca was speechless. Just earlier, he had boasted about his good taste in tea.

“Our plantation mainly produces green tea,” Lucas explained. “My cousin just brought out several batches of the finest. Would you like to try them?”

He brewed the tea with practiced, elegant movements.

Gabriel watched with amusement. “You seem to know more about tea than about your company business.”

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Chapter 383

“I’m just an amateur,” Lucas said smoothly. “When it comes to tea, Vance and Aiden know far more than I do. I don’t really understand it. I’m the type who wastes good tea. They’re real connoisseurs, especially when it comes to green tea. The taste is subtle.”

He trailed off, feeling something was off and instinctively glancing at Isabelle,

She was always going on about a certain type-the kind of girl who seemed soft, harmless, and subtle in her own way. After hearing it so often, he’d started second-guessing even the word itself.

“Uh...” He straightened. “I mean tea. Just the tea.”

Isabelle let out a cold laugh, and he immediately shut up.

Gabriel took a sip, smiling faintly. “My English isn’t very good. Does ‘subtle’ have some other special meaning?”

Lucas couldn’t help glancing at Vance, whose expression had already darkened.

“Oh?” Gabriel tilted his head slightly. “Does Mr. Bradford understand it better?”

Vance smiled bitterly, unsure if Gabriel was playing dumb or really didn’t understand.

He said nothing, but Corey was out of the loop.

Thinking that Gabriel genuinely didn’t understand, he explained, “It starts with something simple-taste, preference. But people read into it. They start using it to describe a certain kind of person. Someone who doesn’t seem like much at first but knows how to make an impression.”

He paused, then added, more thoughtfully, “Still, I think men are more to blame. If someone falls for that so easily, that’s on him. He’s not exactly innocent, but somehow all the blame ends up on the woman.”

Applause suddenly rang out across the table. It was Gabriel,

“Just from those words, I can tell Mr. Leblanc is a man with real integrity,” he praised. “I’m sure he makes tea with the same honesty and responsibility. We definitely came to the right place today.”

He then turned to Vance. “Mr. Bradford, don’t you think his words were especially insightful?”

Vance was livid. He didn’t dare meet Gabriel’s eyes and simply hummed, “Yeah.”

A flash of cold amusement crossed Gabriel’s eyes. He stood up. “Mr. Leblanc, could you please pack the tea for me?”

Lucas quickly rose to stop him. “Mr. Rossi, we’re all acquaintances here, and it’s rare for us to gather like this. Why not stay for a meal?”

“Mr. Lewis,” Gabriel said with a polite smile, “I’m sorry, but perhaps another time.”

Lucas’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

Gabriel smiled and led Rebecca to select the tea leaves. When they came out with their purchase, Vance was standing beside their car.

Gabriel instinctively moved Rebecca behind him, the half-smile on his face vanishing. Vance hated the way Gabriel always positioned himself protectively in front of Rebecca.

“I’m looking for Rebecca.”

“Hasn’t she already told you? If you have anything to discuss, contact her lawyer.”

“As of right now, Rebecca is still my wife. I have the right to speak to her. No one can stop me.” Vance’s voice rose with anger. “Not even you!”

“Is that so?” Gabriel countered. “You seem very clear about your rights. But setting aside whether she has the right to refuse, have you fulfilled your duties as a husband? For example, basic loyalty.”

“I...” Vance was at a loss for words. He craned his neck to look behind Gabriel. “Rebecca, come out. I need to talk to you.”

She stepped forward, not because she wanted to talk. She couldn’t hide behind Gabriel forever and rely on him to handle the mess.

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“I don’t think there’s anything left for us to talk about,” Rebecca said evenly. “You don’t want a divorce? Fine. I’ll file a lawsuit. You have objections to the asset division? Fine. Let the court decide. We’ve already made everything crystal clear. What more is there to say?”

The man in front of her was like a total stranger. Where had the cold, distant man who always kept her at arm’s length, scrutinized her with critical eyes, and sided with outsiders gone?

“Why isn’t there anything to say?” Vance frowned, his eyes swirling with emotion. “You brought up divorce unilaterally. I’ve only ever been on the receiving end. You’ve never listened to what I think.”

She felt exhausted. “In five years of marriage, when have you ever listened to what I thought? Wasn’t the coldness you showed me also one-sided?”

His eyes dimmed, and his body seemed to deflate. But he quickly rallied again, as if afraid she would get in the car and leave.

“That’s why we need to talk properly, right?” he reasoned. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, and you don’t know what I’m thinking. We’ve both been making assumptions, so we need to communicate, don’t we?”

“No,” she refused, shaking her head lightly. “Communication only matters when two people still want to make the relationship work. I don’t want to be with you anymore, so there’s no need to communicate.”

“That’s not true.” Vance glanced at Gabriel, hoping he would give them privacy, but the man clearly had no intention of moving.

But he had to go on. If he didn’t speak now, who knew when he would see her again?

“I didn’t understand before. I was stupid. You’ve been rooted in my life, but I just ignored it. I...” he choked

His eyes grew hot, and his throat tightened,

“What exactly are you trying to say?” she sighed.

“I can’t live without you,” he croaked.

She let out a short, bitter laugh. “Things seem to take root in your heart pretty easily.”

He was momentarily stunned by her words.

”

“Five years ago, someone took root in your heart. When she left, she pulled those roots out, and I saw how devastated you were. Now, are you going to be devastated again?” she said coldly. “How many times does your deep love get to appear in one lifetime? If it happens too often, it stops being worth anything.”

“No, that time wasn’t...” He tried to explain, but his phone rang.

It was Aiden, and he didn’t answer.

Then Aiden’s message came through. The content was visible on the lock screen, and his face turned pale in an instant.

Aiden called again, and he answered with a trembling hand. “Hello?”

“Did you see the message I sent? Get over here right now!” Aiden shouted.

“I saw it.” Vance sounded like his soul had been drained. “I know.”

After hanging up, he looked at Rebecca again. The swirling emotions in his eyes had been replaced by boundless pain. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

She had already said everything she needed to say. Seeing the drastic change in his demeanor, she had no desire to continue.

She opened the car door. “Gabriel, let’s go.”

Vance didn’t try to stop her again. The words he hadn’t finished remained unsaid.

Gabriel stood outside the car, looking at him with contempt. “Why did you stop talking? Did something more important than her come up again?”

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Chapter 385

Vance didn’t answer.

The hostility he had shown toward Gabriel earlier had vanished. His eyes now held only endless pain and reluctance as he gazed at Rebecca inside the car.

She didn’t turn around, but she heard Gabriel’s words. Abandoning her had always been Vance’s standard procedure, hadn’t it?

The only difference was that the heart that had once been whipped raw by his countless abandonments now felt absolutely nothing.

“Gabriel, there’s no need to waste time on him. Let’s go,” she urged from inside the car.

Gabriel roughly understood what was going on. He smirked, adding one last mocking remark. “Good luck, Mr. Bradford.”

Vance didn’t understand what Gabriel meant by that. He stood there dazed as Gabriel got into the car and drove away.

Gabriel always seemed like he knew everything, and his words now must be suggesting something.

Lucas rushed out, only to catch a glimpse of the taillights before the car disappeared. He stamped his foot in frustration. “Damn it! Why didn’t you stop Mr. Rossi? You should have talked to him properly.”

Vance didn’t respond. “Give me the keys. I’m borrowing your car.”

Lucas handed them over while still pressing anxiously, “Did you bring up the company matters with him?”

Vance took the keys and got into the car.

“Hey, where are you going? If you take the car, how am I supposed to get back?” Lucas shouted after the exhaust.

In the blink of an eye, Vance had driven off and vanished.

Lucas trudged back to the tea table, still preoccupied with company matters. He told Corey, “Next time that gentleman comes to buy tea, please let me know.”

Isabelle rolled her eyes. “What are you planning? Trying to help Vance win Rebecca back? Don’t be stupid.

“I’m not.” Lucas looked genuinely worried. “Mr. Rossi didn’t reject my invitation earlier. He said we could have dinner another day. Doesn’t that mean our company still has a chance? I have to keep working on it.

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“You’re the only one still trying to run the business,” Isabelle muttered under her breath.

Rebecca and Gabriel returned home with the tea and found Josette packing. They smiled at the same time.

Ever since her visa had been approved, Josette had been packing every day, carefully deciding what to bring abroad. Gabriel had told her she didn't need to bring anything; his mother had already prepared everything on the other side.

Josette told him that she wasn't packing daily necessities. She was choosing things to bring to Kaitlyn, but it was far more than just a few items.

She wanted to bring every local snack and specialty from Soliaridge's streets and alleys.

"These are all things Kaitlyn loved when she was little," she had said.

Rebecca walked in and saw Josette busy in the dining room. She sneaked up, wrapped her arms around Josette's waist, and asked playfully, "What treats are you making for Aunt Kaitlyn this time?"

Josette turned around, grabbed her, and laughed. "Making fun of me again?"

"Not at all," Rebecca grinned. "I wish you'd pack even more. Gabriel will be the porter anyway. I can tag along and still enjoy delicacies in that so-called food desert of a city."

"Food desert?" Josette paused, glancing at Gabriel. "No wonder your cousin is so thin. Is it because he hasn't been eating well?"

"Grandma, I'm not thin," Gabriel chuckled. "This build is popular with girls. Even if the food abroad isn't as good as in Soliaridge, I won't starve."

She zeroed in on the first part. "So, where are all these girls?"

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Chapter 386

Gabriel froze, losing his tongue for the first time. Rebecca burst out laughing.

He shot her a playful glare, both amused and helpless.

"Weren't you two saying you wanted to order some traditional candies and pastries from the old sugar shop?" he said, steering the conversation away. "It's time to place the order. When should we go?"

"Tomorrow or the day after," Rebecca calculated.

She knew of an old shop that specialized in traditional handmade candies, but custom orders required waiting in line. They didn't have that much time.

Josette smiled and let Gabriel off the hook. "I'll go with Rebecca."

"Alright. I'll have the driver take you. Go without me," Gabriel said, visibly relieved.

He didn't want to be questioned about his love life anymore.

The old sugar shop was in a narrow alley in Soliaridge. These days, the alley was filled with boutique stores and custom shops selling tailored suits, bubble dresses, custom leather shoes, jewelry, hand-embroidered pieces, and brocade fabrics.

Many shops displayed intangible cultural heritage plaques. Nothing there was cheap.

But since they were already there, Rebecca decided to take Josette browsing. She also wanted to buy a gift for Kaitlyn.

Since Kaitlyn worked in the fashion industry, Rebecca thought handmade embroidery, brocade fabrics, or traditional garments might appeal to her.

They went from shop to shop. When they reached a traditional formalwear store, Rebecca helped Josette inside without hesitation.

Kaitlyn, who designed modern fashion, would surely be interested in traditional formal attire, too. What she never expected was to run into Vance inside the shop..

He was sitting on a wooden sofa, looking dejected and lost in thought. Rebecca groaned, having been running into him far too often these past few days.

Vance saw them and paused, nervously glancing at the fitting room. If there had been any way to hide, he would surely have done it.

He forced himself to approach, his eyes avoiding hers. He greeted Josette softly, then murmured Rebecca's name.

Josette nodded, having no intention of speaking with him. She just signaled to Rebecca that they should leave.

Rebecca was ready to go as well. When old acquaintances met under awkward circumstances, the best thing was to treat each other as strangers.

Before they could turn away, a coquettish voice rang out. "Vance, what do you think of this one? Is the color too dark? I prefer something brighter."

Catherine stepped out of the fitting room with two shop assistants adjusting the layers of her outfit. They were helping because the wedding gown she was wearing had many complicated layers.

Vance panicked, instinctively trying to block Rebecca's view.

But there was no way he could do it. Even if he tried, Catherine had no intention of hiding.

She blatantly walked straight forward and twirled in front of him, her voice growing even sweeter. "Help me decide. This one has so much black. I really want white."

One of the assistants explained, "This style considers black the most noble color. And this isn't pure black. It's profound black, a color that symbolizes royalty."

"But for a wedding, white is still better," Catherine insisted.

Rebecca got the picture: they were getting married. 2

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Chapter 387

Catherine stressed her tone when she said the word "wedding". Her eyes were locked on Rebecca, filled with provocation and triumph.

Vance shook all over, cautiously glancing at Rebecca. "I..."

She gave a half-smile. "Getting married? Congratulations. When's the big day?"

His face drained of color. "It's not like that. Listen to me..."

"What's the fuss?" she cut him off. "Worried about that contract we signed?"

"What contract?" Catherine chimed in, dragging the long train of her gown over.

"Oh," Rebecca hummed, "it's an agreement between Mr. Bradford and me. You can ask him about it."

She turned to Vance. "Aren't you being a little too impatient? Shouldn't you at least wait until we get the divorce certificate?"

Catherine immediately put on a pitiful act. "Rebecca, you're not going back on your word, are you? Please, let him go. He's already suffered for five whole years. Why wouldn't you just set him free?"

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Rebecca countered, staring at Vance. "Who exactly is refusing to let go? Please, try harder. Get him to agree to finalize the divorce once the cooling-off period ends."

“How is that possible?” Catherine protested. “It’s you using your disability to keep him around. He’s so kind-hearted. Of course, he couldn’t bear to divorce you. Please, stop holding onto him, okay?”

At that moment, what bothered Rebecca most wasn’t the news of their wedding. It was the fact that she had always kept things peaceful in front of Josette.

Even though Josette knew the marriage was falling apart and they were going through a divorce, Rebecca had never let her witness the ugly reality.

She was afraid Josette would get upset. So, she intended to end this embarrassing scene as soon as possible, then explain things to Josette.

“Enough! Stop disgusting me! Just because you like collecting trash doesn’t mean everyone else does!” she snapped, steering Josette toward the exit.

Vance moved in front of her, looking tense. “Rebecca, I had no choice.”

“Get lost!” she yelled, unwilling to waste another breath on him.

Without a choice, he turned to Josette and pleaded, “Grandma...”

The old lady trembled with anger and pressed her lips together. He bowed. “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault. Please don’t be mad.”

Catherine hurried over, lifting the hem of her dress, and tried to pull him up. “Vance, get up. You don’t

Shute, 387 owe her anything. Even if she saved you, you’ve already repaid her with five years of your youth and countless amounts of money. You’re even now.”

“Shut up!” he bellowed.

She looked at him in disbelief. “You’re yelling at me? For her?”

Ignoring her, he spoke with deep remorse. “I remember our contract. I’m sorry I broke it, but I promise to give you all the assets. Once the cooling-off period ends, we’ll go get the divorce certificate.”

“What? You’re giving her all the assets?” Catherine shrieked. “What about me? What about our child? Are you going to let us starve?”

It turned out she was pregnant.

Rebecca hadn’t been wrong that day at the clinic the other day when she sarcastically congratulated him. His infertile darling was finally pregnant.

The smirk on her face was glaring. Still bowing, Vance turned ashen. “Please, let me explain...”

What was there left to say?

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Chapter 388

Josette raised her hand and slapped Vance hard across the face. Five clear finger marks immediately bloomed on his cheek.

She pointed at him, so angry that she couldn’t speak.

“Grandma,” he choked up, his cheek swollen. “Please forgive me. I won’t be able to fulfill my filial duties anymore. Take good care of yourself.”

Holding Josette, Rebecca gritted her teeth. “Don’t bother! She’ll be better off without you around her!”

Vance grabbed the old lady’s hand, sounding desperate. “Grandma, I know you loved me. I...”

He was so choked up he couldn’t continue.

Josette pulled her hand away and pointed at him with a trembling finger. “Don’t call me grandma anymore! From today on, our family has nothing to do with you. We don’t want to see you ever again. Rebecca, let’s go.”

She grabbed Rebecca’s arm and walked quickly toward the exit.

Catherine yanked at Vance’s clothes. “Vance, don’t do this. Stop blaming yourself. No matter how good you are to them, they won’t appreciate it. And you’re bowing to that old hag. Why? It’s not fair. You’re the president of a big company.”

Josette paused at the door, then turned around with a sharp look. “Say that again!”

Furious about the insult, Rebecca tried to step forward, but Josette held her back. “Let her say it!”

Catherine grew smugger and shouted again, “Old hag, old hag, old hag...”

Vance straightened up and yelled at her, but she wouldn’t stop.

Rebecca was enraged. If not for Josette's best effort to stop her, she would have rushed over and ripped off Catherine's mouth.

Josette's reaction was off. She gripped Rebecca's arm as a voice from the past echoed in her mind: "I'll leave the old hag to you. Make yourselves useful and handle this well."

"So, it was you..." she murmured.

"Grandma, what's wrong?" Rebecca asked.

Josette darted a cold look at the pair, then tightened her hold on Rebecca's hand. "Let's get out of here."

Rebecca was puzzled but followed her toward the exit.

Catherine paused as the same words echoed in her mind. In the voice messages she had sent to Soren, she had called Josette an old hag more than once.

That idiot might have played them out loud for Josette to hear. If so, that would be disastrous.

No one could know that she had been the one behind the abuse. Vance valued the old lady so much. If he found out, her image in his heart would collapse completely.

And if Gabriel learned the truth, she'd be finished.

"Josette, wait." Catherine chased after them. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I was just too anxious. Let me apologize..."

She glanced around and found a chance. Pretending to trip over her long dress, she lunged forward and collided hard with a shop assistant standing near a display shelf.

The assistant was caught off guard and stumbled into Josette. The latter fell to the ground and, in the process, knocked against the shelf.

A heavy iron decorative piece toppled off and fell straight toward her head.

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"Grandma!" Vance moved fast.

He reached out and deflected the iron piece, sending it clattering to the floor. The sharp spikes on the piece pierced his arm, drawing blood.

Rebecca helped Josette up. After checking multiple times to make sure Josette was unharmed, she turned to look at Vance's bleeding arm and the sharp iron teeth on the fallen piece.

She couldn't imagine what would have happened if it had struck Josette's head.

The shop assistant was terrified and kept apologizing to Rebecca. "I'm sorry. I didn't do it on purpose. Did the lady get a fright? I..."

||| |||

She was just an employee who couldn't afford the consequences. When she saw the blood on Vance's arm, she became even more flustered. "I'm sorry. I'll cover the medical expenses."

The decorative piece had fallen because of her, but she had been pushed by Catherine. With her modest salary, she couldn't afford it if the customers demanded an exorbitant price.

Vance shielded Catherine behind him and told the assistant, "You don't need to pay the medical expenses. It's just a small injury. As for the elderly lady..."

He looked at Josette and Rebecca. "Grandma, let me take you to the hospital for a check-up. I'll cover the costs and compensation for the fright."

"Shut up!" Rebecca snapped, hatred flashing in her eyes. "Do you think we're short on money?"

Vance paused, feeling the irony. With Gabriel around, money was the least of their concerns.

The shop owner arrived, visibly shaken. "Perhaps we should call the police?"

She had heard what happened and didn't want her shop to take the blame. It was the customer trying on the wedding gown who had caused the incident.

Even if they said the shop wasn't responsible now, who knew if they would change their minds later? The police had to be called.

Catherine clutched Vance's clothes, panic written all over her face. At this point, whether or not to call the police was no longer the main issue.

Catherine had only wanted to injure Josette, knocking her unconscious if possible and silencing her for a while.

Then Catherine could figure out a way to silence her permanently later. She had never expected Vance to interfere.

Vance assumed she was just nervous, and he was worried that Rebecca wouldn't let it go. This was already the second time the two women had been involved in something that might require the police.

Charter

Last time, getting Rebecca to drop the case had taken considerable effort. This time, he had seen the whole thing clearly.

Although the decorative piece had been knocked down by Josette, the real cause was Catherine pushing the assistant.

He pleaded, "I'll take full responsibility for today's incident. Catherine is..."

He couldn't bring himself to say the word "pregnant". After a moment of hesitation, he continued, "It was an accident. Name your price. I'll agree to anything."

Rebecca wasn't surprised at all. Whenever a choice had to be made between them, he always chose Catherine. That was an unchanging rule.

She smiled, but it was chilling. "So, my husband is willing to go to any lengths to protect his mistress and illegitimate child."

Earlier, when she and Vance had been talking about the contract and the wedding, their voices had been low, so only a few people had heard. But now, she spoke loudly without any restraint.

Everyone in the shop was stunned. Sharp glances shot toward Vance and Catherine as murmurs quickly filled the air.

"What? A mistress and her illegitimate child?"

"My goodness! Mistresses so bold nowadays? Coming to buy a wedding gown?"

"And she kept insisting on white. No wonder she was so obsessed!"

"What bad luck! How did we end up with this kind of customer?"

"When I was helping her try on the dress, I heard everything. I've never seen such shameless people."

Share get it

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Vance turned ashen amid the growing gossip. He bit the bullet and pleaded again, "Can we not call the police? I will agree to any terms."

Holding Josette, Rebecca sneered. "Don't worry. I won't call the police."

He relaxed a little. "Really?"

"Yes, but..." She paused deliberately.

That single word made both Vance's and Catherine's hearts leap into their throats.

“Do you believe me when I say I wanted us to part on good terms?” she continued. “I truly did, right up until today. Never seeing each other again would have been the best ending.”

But they had ruined it by laying their hands on Josette.

“So...” Vance couldn’t read her mind.

“Now...” Her gaze shifted to Catherine behind him. “I won’t call the police.”

With that, she helped Josette toward the exit. “Grandma, let’s go.”

Of course, she wouldn’t call the police. What good would it do in this situation? Catherine would claim she tripped over her dress and accidentally bumped into the assistant.

The assistant would say she accidentally knocked into Josette. And then? An apology? Medical expenses?

They wouldn’t even get medical expenses because the person who got hurt was Vance. Sometimes, things were easier to handle without involving the police.

Their arguing faintly came from inside the shop. The shop owner was reasoning with Vance about whether to go to the hospital and how to handle responsibility if they didn’t call the police.

Vance, of course, insisted on taking all responsibility himself. Amid the noisy chaos, Catherine’s sobbing could be heard.

The shop owner asked Catherine to take off the wedding gown. She no longer wanted to sell it and asked for their understanding,

Catherine cursed the owner for being snobbish. As for what Vance said, Rebecca could no longer hear it. She had already gotten into the car, and the moment the door closed, all the noise was shut out.

The driver was also a bodyguard. He hadn’t followed them into the shop, and now that something had happened, he looked tense.

“It’s okay,” Rebecca reassured him. “I didn’t ask you to come in. This has nothing to do with you.”

“Becky...” Josette held her hand tightly, eager to say something.

“Grandma, go ahead.” Rebecca leaned closer.

As Josette whispered the truth into her ear, the hatred in her eyes burned hotter.

The car carried them home. Gabriel was away, still at work.

Rebecca helped Josette back to her room and soothed her until she finally felt at ease.

Only then did Rebecca ask Nancy to cook something. About ten minutes later, the housekeeper brought a bowl of chicken soup to the room.

“Grandma, have some soup.” Rebecca stirred it evenly, placed the bowl on the small coffee table, and helped Josette sit down.

“What about you? You should have some, too,” Josette said, holding her hand. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

Rebecca nodded. “I’ll eat something later. I still have rehabilitation this afternoon.”

Josette sighed, but after taking the first sip, she furrowed her brow.

“What’s wrong?” Rebecca asked.

Josette took another sip. “It’s nothing. Nancy must have been distracted and mixed up the sugar with the salt.”

Rebecca picked up the spoon and tried it. Indeed, there was no saltiness at all. It was sweet.

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“I’ll take this downstairs.” Rebecca stood up with the tray in her hands.

The moment she stepped out of the room, she spotted Nancy standing in the hallway, looking distracted and uneasy.

“Nancy, why are you standing here?” Rebecca asked.

Nancy jumped in surprise, her eyes shifting uncertainly. “Oh... I was just waiting to collect the bowl.”

But the bowl was still full.

“Did it not taste good?”

“Oh, you must have used sugar instead of salt. Have you been tired lately?”

“Not really,” Nancy replied, her smile strained. “I’ve been a bit absent-minded. I’ll make a fresh bowl right away.”

Before Rebecca could respond, she took the bowl and hurried downstairs.

Rebecca ate a quick bite to fill her stomach, then headed to the clinic for her therapy session.

On the way, a message came in from an unknown number: [Rebecca, I’m sorry I failed you. I never planned to get married before the divorce was finalized. The wedding gown simply takes time to customize. Of course, nothing I say now matters anymore. I only hope that in the days without me, you can find true happiness.]

She read it, then blocked the number.

It was obviously from Vance. He had typed, deleted, and rewritten the message several times before finally sending it.

He waited anxiously for her reply, but none came. Instead, his phone vibrated with a message from Catherine: [Vance, how is your hand?]

The small cut on his hand didn’t hurt at all, but it somehow reminded him of that car accident. When that car slammed into her body, how much pain must Rebecca have endured?

He tossed his phone onto the desk and leaned back heavily in his chair, staring at the ceiling. He didn’t want to think about anything anymore,

Lately, insomnia had become his constant companion. He would lie awake for hours, and when sleep finally came, it was shallow and filled with dreams.

Leaning back like this, he unexpectedly felt sleepy and drifted off.

In the dream, he was back in his teens. His father abandoned him, throwing a wad of cash and a bank card at him while cursing that he was just as unlucky as his mother and telling him never to look for him again.

Young and proud, he had turned away without picking up a single bill, knowing a pair of timid, clear eyes was watching him from the corner.

She was always so shy and flustered, often stealing glances at him. When he caught her, she’d quickly look away like a frightened hare.

She was thin and danced beautifully. But unlike the other dance girls who were full of confidence, she always practiced quietly by herself.

Once she left the studio and returned to the classroom, she became silent and almost invisible.

She had no idea how dazzling she looked during the school's New Year's Eve performance. In her stage costume and makeup, she had been the brightest presence on that stage.

"Vance, that girl Rebecca in your

"Get lost!"

class..."

"Get out of my way! Let me in!" A shout came, jolting him awake.

He felt dazed as the office door swung open. Lately, he had kept dreaming about people and events from long ago.

"Lucas is really getting out of hand. He had someone block me from coming in," Catherine grumbled, walking up to his desk.

The secretary standing at the door looked helpless.

Vance waved her away, then told Catherine, "It has nothing to do with Lucas. I gave the order not to allow anyone in."

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"Then your new secretary is useless. She doesn't know who matters." Catherine rested her chin on her hands and leaned across his desk.

Vance avoided her gaze. "So, what brings you here?"

"I came to see you," she replied. "You didn't reply to my messages. I was worried."

He cleared his throat lightly and picked up his phone. "I just fell asleep."

"Are you working too hard?" She blinked. "Why don't you move in with me? I can take care of you."

With his head low, he kept tapping on his phone. "That's not a good idea. I have too many work files on my home computer, and I often need to work late."

“But...” she pouted. “I don’t want to go back to that place either. It’s full of traces of Rebecca.”

Vance froze as Rebecca’s past accusation echoed in his mind: “You really think that is my home? Even the door password is Catherine’s birthday. The decoration style is what she likes, and you call it my home? I hate it.”.

“Vance...” Catherine called out.

He snapped back to reality. “Then... Let’s not go there.”

“But after we get married, we’ll need a place to live. I know you still remember our promises and what I like. Can we decorate a new house together?” she said, her eyes sparkling. “Keep the door code as my birthday and style it the way I want. Is that okay?”

“A new house?” he muttered absent-mindedly.

She nodded eagerly, waiting for him to agree, but he didn’t. His mind had already drifted far away.

“What are you thinking about?” She stamped her foot. “You don’t want to buy a house for the baby and me?”

He took a deep breath. “It’s not like that, but I promised Rebecca that all joint assets during the marriage would go to her. Buying a house now would count as transferring property.”

Her face twisted with anger. “Rebecca, Rebecca, Rebecca. Everything is always about her. Do you even care about us?”

He thought carefully and answered seriously, “I do care, but she is the only person I’ve ever failed. To everyone else, my conscience is clear. Technically, until the divorce is finalized, I still belong to her, and so do the assets. As for you and the baby...”

He paused, then continued, “I’ll take responsibility for the rest of my life.”

She was so furious she couldn’t speak, Finally, the rims of her eyes reddened. “You’ve changed. You weren’t like this when I first came back. Have you stopped loving me?”

He pressed his lips together, not answering.

“I get it. You don’t love me anymore!” She twisted away and ran out of the office, crying.

Vance didn’t chase after her. He only felt exhausted-so exhausted that he didn’t even want to leave his chair.

As for love or not... He pinched the bridge of his nose.

This enormous mistake was made by him. He could only bear the consequences himself.

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Moments later, Vance's phone rang.

It was Aiden calling.

"Hello?" He assumed Aiden was trying to invite him out again and was ready to refuse.

He never thought he'd one day avoid going out and just want to go home. It was ironic.

But Aiden was calling to ask him to comfort Catherine. "What did you do to make Cathy cry like this?"

In the background, Catherine's soft sobbing could be heard.

Vance thought for a moment. It seemed to be because he hadn't agreed to buy her a new house. He gave a bitter laugh and hung up.

"As long as I'm in your heart, it's enough?" he muttered, never believing in that nonsense.

Back then, he had simply been willing to indulge her.

Five years ago, when Catherine left, his startup with Aiden and Lucas had hit a major setback. Years of hard work looked like they were about to go down the drain.

She had wanted to leave and had broken up with him. He wasn't stupid; he understood why and had the self-awareness of not asking her to stay and suffer with him.

Later, he learned that she had gone abroad with a rich kid. He knew all of it.

That period of depression had been half because of the breakup and half because of the business failure.

He had hit the bottle, but not always out of despair. Most of the time, it had been to entertain clients and investors. On the night Rebecca saved him, he had been truly desperate.

He had hit wall after wall and lost all confidence, almost ready to give up, until Rebecca saved him, trading her leg for his second chance at life.

From that moment on, he carried another person's future on his shoulders. He told himself not to give up whatsoever. Someone was waiting for him to take responsibility and provide for her.

Fate could be truly amazing. Right after that car accident, things suddenly turned around. When she was discharged from the hospital, his company began its miraculous recovery.

Then it took off like a rocket. His wealth grew exponentially. In five years, money became nothing more than numbers on a screen.

And that was when Catherine came back. He had faced her with resentment and unwillingness, thinking, "The person whom you once looked down on has now succeeded and is standing proudly right in front of you. How does that feel?"

To vent the grudge, he had even designed their wedding house according to her preferences.

At the time, the company had just started turning around and had some capital, but not an abundance. He had taken out a loan for that place.

He had thought, "See? The decoration you liked, the password you wanted... I gave them all to another girl. I can afford it now."

He had carried that lingering resentment and enjoyed her admiration. There had been a childish satisfaction in it.

The person who had abandoned him back then was now trying to please him. That grudge had finally been smoothed out, but along with it, the balance in his heart had tipped.

Just as Isabelle said, he had shamelessly enjoyed two relationships at once, indulging in that ambiguous state.

He reveled in Catherine's admiration and, almost as an act of revenge against her, showered her with every indulgence and pampering, as if to prove to his former, broken self the extent of his current success.

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Chapter 394

Vance had never really thought about whether he loved Catherine or not.

He had simply wanted to prove his power and influence-to show that if he wanted, he could spoil a woman to the extreme. But in the process, he had hurt Rebecca.

He hadn't thought that much. He had simply lost himself in his interactions with Catherine while explaining to Rebecca that he was only grateful to Catherine for volunteering to help his grandmother back then and that nothing was going on between them.

That excuse probably sounded reasonable enough. He needed a noble-sounding reason to support his dark and despicable motives, but by and by, he truly believed it.

He could do anything for Catherine, but he would not betray Rebecca.

By that, he meant he would never cross the physical line. Yet Isabelle said emotional betrayal was still betrayal.

"Is it? Have I emotionally betrayed Rebecca?" he muttered, not sure of the answer.

As for Catherine... He couldn't tell whether it was unresolved resentment or actual love. The one thing he had been certain of was that Rebecca loved him deeply.

It had made him believe that no matter how much his inner balance tilted, she would always stay and would not change faith.

But then, on the island, when Catherine had hugged him from behind, he had realized one thing. He could never cross any real line because his heart belonged to Rebecca. (1)

That night, he had wanted to see her more than ever. But when he rushed home, she was gone.

It turned out she could leave. All the glory and boundless wealth could not trap her. Of course, she didn't care about money.

Back in the day, she had lived frugally, yet she had been afraid he didn't have enough money. She'd save a few dollars to pay him for tutoring. How could someone like that care about money?

He had been wrong and arrogant for too long. He had forgotten the road he had walked on and had neglected the most important person.

Ironically, he realized it only after losing her. Before that? Everything else had come first.

Work had come first because he needed to make money, grow the business, and support her for a lifetime.

His pride had come first because he couldn't lose face in front of Catherine. He had forced Rebecca to apologize even when she wasn't at fault.

His thinking had been simple. Even if he wronged her, it didn't matter. She loved him so much that she would forgive him no matter what. He just needed to go home and coax her a little.

For so many times, he had taken her forgiveness for granted and kept choosing Catherine over her. Unfortunately, she wouldn't forgive him forever. She wouldn't wait for him forever.

His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts. He looked down and saw Jenny's name flashing on the screen.

"What's up?" she said. "Just say it over the phone. I have to work overtime and can't go out for dinner."

"O-kay..." He sounded disappointed. "Never mind."

He simply had nowhere to go and wanted to talk about the past with someone.

"Oh, right. Do you still remember Darren Horton?"

"I do."

It wasn't a name that brought pleasant memories.

"He's gone."

"You mean..."

"Passed away. A long time ago. In another country," Jenny sighed. "It was an accident. Just don't tell Rebecca."

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Chapter 395

"Darren Horton has passed away?" Vance couldn't believe it.

A conversation then echoed in his mind.

"Hey, Vance, that girl Rebecca in your class..."

"Get lost!"

Jenny continued, "Oh right, you couldn't tell Rebecca even if you wanted to. Otherwise, you wouldn't be calling me to reminisce over dinner."

Vance stayed silent. Lately, he had kept dreaming about things from when he was around 16. And he had occasionally chatted with Jenny.

Between the lines, he could almost smell the sweet osmanthus flowers drifting through time.

Jenny went on, "Only people who aren't doing well dwell on the past. The thriving ones just keep moving forward. You should let her go. She deserves a better future."

Vance's heart suddenly clenched with pain, and his vision started to blur. Now, even if he didn't want to let her go, he had no chance.

He no longer had the right.

"I regret it so much," he croaked.

The more high-spirited and arrogant he had been these past two months, the more desolate and remorseful he felt now.

"You deserve it!" Jenny snorted. "Don't play the devoted lover now. Look at that post you made on your social media. 'My life's work is only for you.' Ha! I thought you were talking about Rebecca. Turns out it was for that mistress. What, you thought deleting it would make everyone forget?"

He was momentarily stunned. When had he posted that? Then he remembered Lucas mentioning a screenshot from his socials. It might be the same thing.

"I couldn't have..." he started to explain, but Jenny hung up, sending him a screenshot.

Then she called back. "My chat history is still here. What a scumbag you are! And you still have the nerve to reminisce with me? If we met, I'd slap you in the face."

He stared at the screenshot, frowning. "Listen to me. I didn't post that. I..."

"Shut up! It doesn't matter what you posted! What matters is that you failed Rebecca!" Jenny exploded, scolding him so fiercely he couldn't get a word in.

In the end, she asked, "Anything else to say? If not, I'm hanging up. I'm busy."

He felt a lump in his throat. "If I say I love Rebecca, do you believe me?"

"Bullshit!" she spat. "Stop pretending to be devoted! You don't love anyone; you only love yourself. You're nothing but a selfish, self-centered bastard. Put your hand on your chest and ask yourself. Who do you truly love from the bottom of your heart?"

She paused. “Whether it’s that mistress or Rebecca, you only love whoever you need at the moment. Do you really think you love that mistress? No, you only love yourself. If you hadn’t said that, I might not have cursed you so hard. Now you just make me sick, you bastard!”

Her loud voice echoed even without the speakerphone.

Just then, Aiden led Catherine into the office and caught the tail end of it. They didn’t hear all the details, but the word ‘bastard’ came through loud and clear.

Catherine rushed forward, asking, “Who are you calling?”

Jenny had already hung up, and Vance was still holding his phone. “A classmate.”

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“Who? I don’t remember you having any female classmates like that,” Catherine pressed.

“High school classmate. You don’t know her,” Vance replied.

She wasn’t convinced. “A high school classmate who cusses you out?”

He was now a powerful CEO. Who would dare speak to him that way? She didn’t even dare.

She tried to snatch his phone and succeeded. He watched her skillfully enter his phone password and thought of a saying: “You reap what you sow.”

He finally understood how that strange post had appeared on his social media. He truly deserved it.

She saw the top call log entry, then put the phone down. “It really is a classmate, but she has no manners at all.”

He took the phone back. “Who else did you think it was?”

“I thought...” She didn’t finish the sentence. Of course, she had thought it was Rebecca-the only person daring to curse him like that.

But how? Despite her bad attitude, he was willing to give Rebecca all the assets. That was crazy.

Catherine had always admired and pampered him, but she had gotten little for it. Now, even acting spoiled wouldn't work anymore.

Vance unlocked his phone, opened the chat, and sent the screenshot to her. "Care to explain what this is about?"

Her phone buzzed, and when she checked out the content, she panicked for a second. Then she quickly composed herself, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"I was drunk," she sobbed. "I just wanted your acknowledgment. I wanted your friends to know about me. I-I got emotional because I care about you too much." 2

He listened stiffly, offering no response. There was nothing he could say.

Even if she admitted it, what difference would it make? This wasn't the only problem between him and Rebecca. Compared to everything else, this was probably the smallest issue.

He gripped his phone so tightly that the veins on the back of his hand popped. In the end, he decided to let it go.

Aiden quickly stepped in. "About this matter..."

Vance looked at him, remembering how he had stopped Lucas from finding the screenshot. "You know about this?"

"Yes," Aiden admitted. "I saw it right after it was posted and talked to Cathy. She saw her mistake and deleted it immediately."

Vance stood up and walked out of the office without another word.

"Vance, where are you going?" Catherine shouted after him. "I have a check-up at the hospital tomorrow. Will you come with me?"

"Yeah," he hummed, quickly disappearing.

She chased him to the door and saw he was almost at the elevator. She ran forward, then squatted down to clutch her belly. She cried out in pain, "Ow, my belly hurts."

He turned around and rushed back.

Aiden scolded him, "Come on! You know Cathy is pregnant. You're about to become a father. How can you still be so careless?" (4

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At the hospital, Vance went to pay the fees while Aiden and Catherine waited.

Catherine looked unhappy. "Vance is so stubborn. Does he really plan to give all the assets to Rebecca? The divorce agreement Rebecca sent didn't even mention that. She doesn't ask for it, but he insists on giving it."

"He's giving his personal assets," Aiden said quietly. "With the company running, we can still make money. Don't see the wood for the trees. Let him finalize the divorce first. If we drag this out, the baby will be born without a legitimate father."

She looked troubled. "Does it have to be this way? Do you think he might..."

Just then, Vance returned. "Alright, time for the check-up."

The two immediately stopped talking. The examination showed everything was fine, and they left the hospital.

In the car, Catherine asked, "Where should we go for dinner? I'm hungry."

Behind the wheel, Vance muttered absent-mindedly. "Wherever you want. I'll drop you off."

"You're not eating with me?"

"I still have some things to do."

She sulked, but he kept driving, not sensing anything wrong. She grew even angrier but had to break the silence. If she didn't initiate, he probably wouldn't say a word until they reached their destination.

"I can't keep eating irregularly like this," she said, turning back. "Pregnant women need nutrition. I can't live on takeout and restaurant food all the time."

He paused. "Should I hire a housekeeper to cook for you?"

She whined, "Can't you come to my place after work?"

He hesitated. "I-I don't have time. A lot of things have been going on at the company."

"You'd rather zone out in the office than come to me? I don't even know what's keeping you so busy," she cried. "Don't you care about the baby or me at all?"

He glanced at her belly and said nothing.

“What do you mean?” She cried even louder. “If you don’t like it, I’ll just terminate my pregnancy.”

Aiden winked at her, and Vance stopped the car. “Are you sure?”

“I...” She was at a loss for words.

“You had a hard time getting pregnant. This baby wasn’t easy to conceive. If you don’t want it, I’ll respect your decision,” Vance said seriously.

After a long pause, she opened the car door. “I’m getting out! If you don’t care, then don’t bother with us anymore!”

“You’re really not going after her?” Aiden asked tentatively.

“You go. See what she’s up to.” Vance frowned slightly.

Aiden sighed, “Alright. I’ll go check on her.”

He got out and caught up with Catherine.

Vance watched, then turned the car around and headed in the opposite direction. He wanted to visit an old place and see if there was anyone left.

Had that person really disappeared just like that?

Standing in front of Catherine, Aiden sighed heavily, “Can you stop being so willful? This baby was hard to conceive. You should cherish it.”

“I should just terminate it,” she sulked. “No one wants them anyway!”

“Who said no one wants them?” He steadied her. “Calm down and think about the future. Endure this for now. The company and the assets will be ours.”

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“Don’t even think about it. It’s all mine.” Catherine rolled her eyes. “You can’t compare with Vance.”

Aiden wasn’t impressed. “Except for that pretty face, how is he better than me?”

She insisted, “He’s better than you in every way.”

“Is that so?” he scoffed. “We graduated from the same school and the same major. We founded the company together. I didn’t do any less work than him. In what way am I inferior?”

“He’s the president, and you’re the vice president. That’s the difference,” she snorted.

“Then why did you sleep with me?” he smirked. “Rather than with him?”

She glared at him, but he wasn’t fazed. “Stop overthinking it. Take good care of the fetus, give birth to my child, and work hard to become Mrs. Bradford.”

She frowned. “Easy for you to say. What if he demands a paternity test?”

“He won’t,” Aiden said confidently. “His biggest weakness is that he values our old friendship too much and trusts the people around him too deeply.”

She was puzzled. “I didn’t expect you to be this kind of person. He has so much faith in you. How could you betray him?”

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “For you, of course.”

She snorted, “Spare me.”

“Feeling sorry for him? Having second thoughts? Still in love with him?” he whispered viciously in her ear.

She didn’t answer.

“Too late, honey,” he sneered. “If he finds out how you’ve been deceiving him the whole time, you’re finished.”

Fear flashed in her eyes.

“There’s no turning back,” he added darkly, “Be good and stay on my boat. All the glory and wealth will belong to you.”

She stiffened, feeling a shiver down her spine.

Vance drove alone toward the old district where Darren had once lived, but his family had probably moved out.

After high school graduation, he had never asked about Darren. Later, he had heard that Darren had gone abroad to study, and soon after, his parents had followed.

He had never imagined Darren would be gone. That lively boy with a bright smile was gone.

Lost in memories, he arrived at the place—a small villa surrounded by plane trees.

In the past, every autumn, the ground would be covered with fallen leaves. When they waited for Darren outside, the leaves would crunch under their feet.

It was one of autumn's special pleasures. Now the plane trees were lush and green. The courtyard was overgrown with weeds, and the iron gate was covered in rust with a few caterpillars crawling on it.

There was no sign of anyone living. He lingered outside, not every day rooted to the ground.

knowing why. His feet seemed to be

Suddenly, the brick-red door of the house opened, and someone walked out. Vance's heart skipped a beat, and he looked closer, realizing it was Darren's father.

"Mr. Horton!" he called out involuntarily.

Andrew Horton squinted in his direction, then walked over to open the gate.

"It's me, Vance Bradford." Vance looked at the man's gray hair and felt his eyes sting.

How much grief did it take to turn someone's hair gray like this before their time?

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Finally, seeing the shadow of the boy in Vance, Andrew opened the gate.

For a moment, neither of them knew what to say.

At last, Andrew stepped aside and said, "Come on in. Sit for a while."

On the way into the house, Vance learned that Darren's parents had only returned from abroad the day before and planned to spend their remaining years there.

Inside, he saw Darren's mother, Jocelyn Horton, sorting through things. It took her a while to recognize him.

She invited him to sit, and they chatted about everyday things. Slowly, the atmosphere warmed up.

"It's been so many years, but it still feels like yesterday," Jocelyn sighed. "Every time I think about it, my heart aches."

Vance's throat tightened. He didn't know what words could comfort her.

She wiped her tears and forced a smile. "Thank you for still remembering Darren and coming to see us."

He felt embarrassed because he hadn't brought any gifts. He hadn't expected anyone to be still there.

"I'll come often, if it doesn't bother you," he said.

The last time he had seen Darren, they had fought. In their youthful arrogance, they had said harsh words about ending their friendship. He never imagined it would be a permanent farewell.

"Not at all," she said. "But young people are busy with their careers. We don't want to trouble you."

He smiled bitterly. There was no trouble to speak of. These days, he was practically homeless.

Later, Jocelyn brought out Darren's belongings in a rosewood box. There weren't many items.

"These were the things he carried with him. We burned his clothes and kept only these," she said tearfully.

They were a notebook filled with travel diaries, a pen, a watch, a Swiss army knife, a lighter, a pair of sunglasses, some documents, and a few outdoor survival tools.

But Vance's gaze was drawn to a small stone. His voice trembled slightly. "Can I look at this?"

"This stone?" She took it out. "He always carried it with him. I teased him once, asking if a girl had given it to him."

Lost in memory, she smiled, then started crying again.

Vance recognized it—a colorful, beautiful stone with a circle carved on it and several osmanthus flowers inside the circle.

The person who carved it had said the circle represented the moon and wished the recipient a fulfilling and blossoming life.

Vance held the stone, his eyes stinging with pain. This stone had originally been meant for him.

“Did he ever get married?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

Jocelyn shook her head. “No. He didn’t even have a girlfriend.”

She took out the travel diary and opened one page. “Here. He probably liked someone, though—a dancer. He never got the chance to pursue her. Still, I’m grateful to her. At least in his short life, he got to taste love.”

It read: [Through the moon covered in blooming flowers, I vaguely see your face.]

[It’s Halloween, and I’m traveling through the wilderness of Europe, staying in a simple inn with a terrible signal. Yet on the international channel, I see you dancing in a show. I’m overjoyed.]

[How are you? I miss you very much. But I don’t dare tell you.]

With a plop, a tear fell onto the notebook.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 400

It blurred the words into a smear of ink.

Vance quickly closed the notebook and handed it back to Jocelyn, afraid more words would be ruined by his tears. “I’m sorry...”

Jocelyn put the notebook back in the box and smiled bitterly. “It’s alright. These past few years, I’ve flipped through this notebook so many times it’s almost falling apart. I don’t even know how many tears I’ve dropped on it myself.”

Vance still held the stone in his hand, turning it over carefully. He remembered it had once been rough. Now it was smooth and rounded from years of being rubbed between fingers.

“Do you recognize this stone?” Jocelyn asked.

He nodded. “Yes, it was carved by one of our high school classmates. During an autumn outing, we picked up this stone by the river. Someone carved patterns on it, drilled a hole, and made it into a pendant. I didn’t know who had it in the end. Turns out, it was Darren.”

“He treasured it very much,” Jocelyn said. “Since it’s something from your classmate, you should take it.”

Vance was surprised. "Can I?"

"Yes." She nodded. "We hope that besides us, someone else in this world will remember him."

"Okay." His hand trembled slightly.

Just then, a voice came from the doorway. "Mrs. Horton."

Vance recognized it instantly, and his grip on the stone tightened.

Darren's parents vaguely remembered a girl among Darren's classmates, but their impression of her wasn't as deep as that of Vance.

After all, the boys usually hung out together playing ball.

They quickly invited Rebecca inside. "Come on in. We're happy to have you."

She had brought some nutritional supplements and placed them on the table, then sat down beside Jocelyn.

The conversation continued. The two elders loved hearing stories about Darren's high school days. Listening to memories of his youth made them sad, but the reminiscing also brought a touch of warmth.

Considering their feelings, she didn't clash with Vance.

Time seemed to flow backward to those carefree days with summer cicadas. It wasn't until the moon rose high in the sky that Rebecca and Vance finally said goodbye.

Vance had even gone into the kitchen and cooked for them. The two elders felt sorry because they had just returned and hadn't properly arranged the house or prepared any food.

But they promised to treat the two to a good meal next time. Vance agreed happily; that was the best meal he had eaten in a long time.

Two cars were parked outside. One was Vance's, and the other was waiting for Rebecca.

She halted her steps and turned to look at Vance. The rims of his eyes were still red.

He murmured, "Rebecca..."

She held out her hand. "Give it to me."

He froze. "What?"

“The stone.”

“Can’t I keep it?”

“No. You don’t deserve it.”

He smiled bitterly and finally placed the stone in her hand. The moment she gripped it and turned away, he asked hoarsely, “Why didn’t you end up with Darren?”

She ignored the question and got into the car, which cut through the wind and sped off.