

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 401

The month passed in the blink of an eye.

Less than a week after they crossed paths at the Horton family's house, the 30-day cooling-off period came to an end. The day before the appointment, Vance received a call from Gabriel's lawyer, reminding him not to miss the next day's visit to the courthouse.

He had originally intended to make the divorce as difficult as possible. Even though he knew the outcome was inevitable, he had planned to drag things out through filing for litigation or feigning second thoughts—anything else to prolong the process and see Rebecca a few more times.

But now, he no longer had the nerve to do any of that.

At 9 a.m., he arrived punctually at the entrance of the courthouse, only to find that Rebecca had already come ahead of him. She was accompanied by the lawyer and Gabriel.

He had once felt deep resentment toward Gabriel, but at this point, that bitterness suddenly lifted. It was a good thing after all, with Gabriel truly caring for and protecting her.

Rebecca had arrived early and waited inside the car. At nine sharp, she saw Vance's car pull up right on time.

He had gotten a fresh haircut and looked neatly put together. He was wearing the custom shirt she had once ordered for him through Derek. As he closed the car door, the cufflinks at his wrists caught the morning light and flashed with a cool blue gleam.

He had lost a dramatic amount of weight; the tailored shirt now hung loosely on his frame. Yet the defeated slump and near-mad fury from recent days had been gone.

He appeared calm, with only a faint melancholy in his eyes, looking almost like the boy she remembered from high school. It was a shame that time could never turn backward. Everything that had happened between them had left only scars.

He walked straight up to her and offered a small, quiet smile. "Rebecca."

"Let's get this over with," she said, ignoring the smile.

There was nothing left worth saying.

Vance glanced at Gabriel and greeted him. The latter just brushed it off. “It’s fine. Do away with the pleasantries.”

Vance didn’t argue. He just quietly followed behind them.

The divorce proceeded without any complications. The only real change was Vance’s attitude toward the assets. He kept only a five-figure sum for himself and signed everything else over to Rebecca.

All the properties he had purchased during marriage-most already registered in her name-went to her with no additional paperwork required.

She didn’t object. Since he was showing such sincerity, she decided not to pursue the house he had bought for Catherine through Aiden.

“Consider it me leaving you a roof over your head,” she said with sarcasm. “You and Catherine can move in once you’re married. Double congratulations.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “Come on. There’s no happiness here.”

“Marriage is one happy event,” she replied coolly. “And the other... becoming a dad.”

Vance pretended not to hear the jab. He drew a deep breath, his eyes filling with raw reluctance and tenderness. “Rebecca...”

He wanted to say a proper goodbye, but the words caught in his throat. In the end, he forced a smile and swallowed the ache deep inside.

“This is the end. We won’t see each other again,” she concluded, turning toward the car under Gabriel’s protective watch.

He watched, feeling as if someone had carved a hole straight through his chest. He couldn’t stop himself from shouting, “Rebecca!”

She paused, and he stared at her back, condensing every ounce of longing and pain into short sentences. “If you ever need anything in the future, come to me. I’ll do everything in my power to help. I’ll always be here.”

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“Don’t bother,” Rebecca answered without turning around. “Even if we cross paths someday, let’s pretend we never knew each other at all.”

“Rebecca...” Vance’s voice cracked, but she had already climbed into the car and was pulling away.

The grief he had held back for so long finally crashed over him. His vision blurred until he could barely see anything around him.

He leaned heavily against his car, struggling to steady himself.

At least during the goodbye, he had managed to keep his composure and demonstrate the best version of himself.

A sudden cry cut through the haze. “Vance!”

He quickly turned his face away to hide his tears.

“Vance, are you crying?” Catherine felt both shocked and lost.

After a moment, Vance composed himself and turned back. His face showed nothing.

Aiden and Catherine stood a few feet away.

Aiden clapped him on the shoulder. “It’s over. Life moves on to the next chapter. Let it go.”

Vance said nothing.

“We came to pick you up,” Catherine said, reaching for his sleeve. “Come on, let’s sit down and talk.”

Vance pulled his arm free. “You guys go ahead. I still have things to handle.”

“What kind of things?” She frowned. “You’re free now.”

“I’m heading to the bank to sort some matters.” He opened the car door and got in.

“Vance!” she called out again, but he had already started the engine and driven away.

Watching the car disappear down the street, she stamped her foot. “He’s really going to give every penny to Rebecca, isn’t he?”

“You bet,” Aiden said with a dark chuckle. “His savings, investments-everything. He even bought back the shares at the last shareholder meeting and cashed them out for her.”

“What about all those properties? I know he just bought another villa,” Catherine grumbled.

“Every single one is already in her name. No transfer needed,” he laughed mockingly. “He has been stupidly generous with money in the past five years.”

Resentment flashed in her eyes, but he just grinned at her. “Don’t make that face. You’re supposed to be the girl who only wants true love, not money. Keep the act up in front of him.”

She rolled her eyes, and he continued, “Stop sulking. The only person to blame is yourself. Who told you to run off five years ago? If you had just stuck it out a little longer, everything would have been yours.”

That only made her angrier.

“Easy there,” he warned, patting her belly with a nasty smile. “Don’t get worked up. We can’t have anything happen to that baby. Otherwise, you’ll walk away with nothing.”

She slapped his hand away in disgust.

Vance spent almost the entire day at the bank straightening out his assets. Whatever could be transferred went to Rebecca that afternoon; the rest was scheduled for the next day.

As the balance hit zero, it felt like his first half of life had been wiped clean. His future suddenly had no direction.

After leaving the bank, he sat in his car, feeling lost for a long while before driving to the house where Darren’s parents lived.

He had been stopping by every few days lately and had hired a cleaning crew to tidy and disinfect the place from top to bottom.

The overgrown weeds had been cleared, and the whole house had been thoroughly cleaned. Darren’s parents had sorted out what they wanted to keep. It finally looked like a real home again.

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Darren’s parents had grown used to Vance’s visits.

The moment he stepped inside, they welcomed him warmly. The comforting aroma of dinner drifted from the kitchen.

On the way, he had stopped at the neighborhood supermarket and bought bags of fresh vegetables and fruit.

The couple thanked them profusely. "From now on, treat this place like your own home."

His eyes stung with unshed tears. Starting today, he truly had no home left and had nowhere else to go. He had given away every property and left himself no backup plan.

They invited him to stay for dinner, and he didn't refuse. He ate with them, helped wash the dishes, and then sat chatting with them until it grew dark.

His face gradually turned blank. The couple sensed something was wrong and asked what was bothering him.

The rims of his eyes reddened, and he told them the truth: he was homeless. The couple sighed but didn't press for details. They simply told him to stay for the night.

Vance knew he was imposing and couldn't live with them long-term, but tonight, he couldn't bear the thought of being alone.

He felt selfish. He had come here to check on them, yet now, he was the one clinging to their warmth.

They made up the guest room for him. The study was right next door. 1

"If you want to read, help yourself," they said. "Many of the books were Darren's."

"Thank you." His voice was thick with emotion.

They told him to rest early and went to their room. He sat in the small study with no hope of sleep.

The room held two walls of bookshelves. One belonged to the couple, and the other was packed with Darren's wide-ranging collection—from cosmology and geology to history, philosophy, and even culinary art.

His old school textbooks from elementary through high school were lined up neatly. Vance's gaze drifted over the high-school volumes—the ones he, Darren, and their old group had once shared.

One book caught his eye: a craft manual on origami. Intrigued, he pulled it out and saw a cover that suggested paper-folding techniques.

As he flipped it open, a paper crane slipped out and fluttered to the floor. He picked it up in surprise, and the memory clicked into place. The open page explained how to fold one.

Darren had written a note across the top in pen: [Some dummy kept folding paper cranes for Vance and wouldn't let me help. How long would it take to fill a whole jar? Idiot! Anyway, I stole one from her pile. Daily mischief: complete.]

[Heh, she wrote something inside every crane. Wonder what this one says...]

Vance's heart slammed against his ribs. He quickly unfolded the crane. Inside, in tiny handwriting, were the words: [No matter what happens, you have to be happy!]

His mind reeled. He read Darren's note again, then bolted out of the study. The noise startled the couple, who came to the stairs asking what was wrong.

"I just remembered something urgent at the office. I have to head back," he replied quickly and said goodbye.

He jumped into his car and sped toward the company.

Once inside the building, he took the elevator straight to the top floor, unlocked his office, and yanked open the desk drawer.

Inside was a small glass box holding a paper crane-the one he had kept as a memento after burying the rest with his grandmother.

The unfolded crane from Darren's house now lay on the desk. The handwriting was unmistakably Rebecca's. The one in the glass box was clearly made from the same paper, just a different color.

He took a deep breath and carefully took it out of the box. It was pale pink. With trembling fingers, he unfolded it and saw the same handwriting.

”

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It read: [Mrs. Bradford Sr., please get better. Vance only has you now.]

It was Rebecca's distinctive style-plump, round letters that always looked innocently cute. It was nothing like Catherine's sharp script.

Staring at the two slips of paper side by side, he felt his heart drop, sinking deeper and deeper into a bottomless abyss. He had lost far more than he had ever imagined.

He finally broke down sobbing. "Rebecca, I'm so sorry."

He sat motionless in the silent office. The whole world felt eerily quiet. If this could be the end of time, it would have been a mercy.

He no longer looked forward to another sunrise. But the night dragged on-endless and black, just like his life.

He stayed there without moving until morning, when Aiden and Catherine arrived.

“Vance, did you spend the whole night here?” Catherine burst in, then spotted the papers in his hand.

Before she could get a closer look, he slipped them away.

His shirt collar hung open, dark stubble shadowed his jaw, and deep, bruised circles ringed his eyes. He looked at her with a cool, thin gaze.

She faltered. “How are you doing?”

He stared at her without answering, making her squirm.

Her voice trembled with guilt. “Tell me what is wrong. If the divorce is hitting you hard, we can keep you company.”

“I’m fine,” he said, the sharpness vanishing from his eyes. “I was just trying to fold a few paper cranes and couldn’t remember how. Even the video tutorials weren’t helping.”

Catherine’s eyes darted left and right. “Why would you suddenly want to fold paper cranes?”

“Oh, I’m planning to visit my grandmother’s grave,” he replied smoothly. “I’ve been doing so badly. I must have let her down, so I thought some cranes might cheer her up.”

Mentioning his grandmother made Catherine even more nervous; her smile slipped.

“Right, you know how,” he continued, pulling out a stack of printer paper and tossing it on the desk. “Teach me.”

“Uh, it’s been so many years,” Catherine stammered, hiding her hands behind her back. “I don’t remember anymore.”

He nodded. “Fair enough.”

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True to his words, Vance was moving out.

After finishing what he needed to do that morning and at lunch, he called a moving company and had them empty the entire marital home he had shared with Rebecca.

There were plenty of expensive items inside-appliances, décor, and kitchenware. When the movers asked what to take, he told them to leave it all behind.

He stood in the middle of the house and saw traces of Rebecca's life everywhere. She had been with him for five years, embedding herself into every corner of his existence and pinning her whole future on him.

"I'll pack this room myself," he said hoarsely. "You handle the rest."

In the end, he was the one carefully boxing up Rebecca's things while the movers stood around awkwardly.

He blinked. "Are you guys done?"

"Uh, you told us to leave everything," one mover explained.

He froze, then sighed. "Give me a few minutes. There should be snacks and drinks in the kitchen. Help yourselves."

The movers exchanged confused glances, eager to explain to him about their business. They had never had a client who insisted on packing everything himself while they lounged around eating snacks.

Vance gathered every item that had belonged to Rebecca. She had already sold most of her clothes, bags, and jewelry; what remained were only the toiletries she no longer wanted, some books, and a few miscellaneous items. It all fit into just a few boxes.

He packed almost nothing of his own-only a change of clothes and the shirts that carried the cufflinks Rebecca had designed for him. The movers handled the study room.

He gave it one final check and noticed several sheets of paper scattered on the floor-French notes and vocabulary from when Rebecca had been practicing for her exams.

"Sir, we thought those were trash. There are more in the bag," a mover said apologetically, pointing at a garbage bag.

Vance opened the bag and found more pages covered in her handwriting. He pulled every single one out, smoothed them carefully, and placed them neatly into the box.

The movers, thinking they had thrown away something important, apologized awkwardly. “Sir, we didn’t know they were useful. We’re sorry.”

“That’s fine,” Vance said quietly. “It was my mistake. We’re good now. Let’s load up.”

He had them take everything to the hotel that would be his temporary home. From the safe box, he took the gold bars and all the property deeds, packing them into a rolling suitcase that went straight into the trunk of his car.

Everything else was tossed into the trash.

Over the past two days, Rebecca had received several huge wire transfers-Vance’s entire savings. When the second enormous deposit hit her account, she was quietly finishing packing her things.

Gabriel had already booked the flights according to his schedule. In just a few days, they would travel across the ocean to join Kaitlyn.

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Rebecca stared at the bank alert on her phone, but she didn’t even bother counting the zeros anymore. Twelve years of love and five years of marriage had been exchanged for this long string of numbers.

She had no idea what she would do differently if she could go back in time, but there were no do-overs in life. She could only keep moving forward.

As she held her phone, Gabriel came down the stairs. “Vance is outside. Says he has some things to give you. Want to see him, or should I handle it?”

She blinked, wondering how he had found out.

“You blocked him, remember?” Gabriel explained. “He called the lawyer, who then informed me.”

“You go,” she said.

“Alright.” He nodded and stepped outside.

Vance sat in his car, nervously watching the path Rebecca would have to take. Instead, Gabriel walked out.

He gave a bitter smile, realizing she didn't want to see him after all. He had expected as much. He got out and greeted Gabriel, who waved dismissively. "No need for pleasantries. Just get to the point."

Vance accepted the cold tone without complaint. He lifted the heavy suitcase from the trunk and handed it over. "I cleared out the house. It's empty now, so Rebecca can list it for sale whenever she wants. All the deeds are inside. She can handle them however she likes."

"Okay," Gabriel replied evenly, turning to head back.

Vance quickly added, "Oh, and tell her I changed the door code. It's 123456 now."

The ridiculously simple password made Gabriel's eyebrows twitch, but he only nodded again.

Vance stopped him one last time. "Gabe..."

"Call me Rossi or Perry,"

"Gabriel..."

"Say everything you have to say at once."

Vance stood there, words failing him. He didn't actually have anything important to say; he simply didn't want the moment to end.

Even though he was not facing Rebecca, it was at least someone tied to her.

"I'll go now. If anything comes up, I'm only a phone call away," he finally said, eyes full of longing.

"We won't be needing that," Gabriel replied, heading back into the house.

Vance's shoulders slumped as he felt the deep solitude.

Back inside, Gabriel set the suitcase in front of Rebecca. "He brought this. Deeds are inside, the new code is 123456, and the house is ready to sell."

She opened it right there. The flash of gold nearly blinded them-half the suitcase was stacked with gold bars, the rest with property deeds.

"At least, he's not stingy," Gabriel whistled. "Then again, he'd better not be. If he had tried to short-change you, I would've ended him faster."

Rebecca flipped through the deeds. She had forgotten where half the properties even were, planning to keep three and sell the rest. She would have Gabriel drive her past all of them later.

Suddenly, something slipped out from between the papers and fell to the floor.

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Rebecca picked it up, realizing it was a paper crane.

Her heart gave a small, painful lurch as old memories stirred. “Has he figured it out?”

This crane wasn’t made from the same paper she had used back then. It looked brand new.

She carefully unfolded it. Inside was a note in Vance’s familiar handwriting: [Becky, may you always be happy and safe.]

It seemed he had learned about the paper cranes and the volunteer work she had done for his grandmother. But what did it matter now? They didn’t have any relationships anymore.

She had been long done with him. If she had received this note at any point in the past 12 years, she would have been overjoyed.

Now it was far too late. Belated affection meant nothing, and besides, she wasn’t even sure if this counted as affection, but it was certainly cheap.

She dropped the crane into the trash and closed the suitcase lid. Gabriel laughed behind her, causing her to spin around and glare.

He spread his hands, grinning. “Everyone says I only care about money. Guess it runs in our blood.”

She burst out laughing.

“Well done,” he praised. “Come on, let’s get Grandma and go grab a big dinner. Then I’ll take you to the therapy session.”

The thought of a proper meal made her agree instantly. “Sounds like a plan!”

After leaving the villa, Vance drove straight back to the office.

Lucas was waiting and following him into the CEO's office. "What's going on? Where have you been?"

Vance shut the door, and Lucas pressed, "What on earth have you been busy with? So secretive. Where did you come from just now?"

He noticed the sweat on Vance's forehead and poured him a glass of ice water.

"From Gabriel's place," Vance replied, downing the water.

Lucas's eyes lit up. "No way! You patched things up with him? Is the deal back on? Tell me how you pulled it off,"

Vance was speechless. "You're reading way too much into this."

Before they could continue, someone pounded on the door. Vance had deliberately locked it, just to prevent others from barging in.

"It must be Aiden," Lucas said, heading to open it. "He's having a rough day."

It was indeed Aiden, and Catherine was right behind him.

"Vance, where have you been?" Catherine asked, holding takeouts. "Aiden and I went by your place, but the code had changed. What's going on?"

Vance stayed silent, and she whined, "Tell us. Are we your friends or not?"

He brushed it off. "The house belongs to Rebecca now. She's handling everything and probably selling it."

"Then... Where are you staying?" she asked hopefully.

"Hotel for now," he replied casually, turning to Aiden.

Catherine's eyes grew teary again. "Vance..."

Lucas cut in, "Aiden ran into some real trouble today."

"Oh?" Vance raised an eyebrow. "What happened?"

Aiden waved dismissively. "Nothing major. Just received a court summons. That's all."

"What for?" Vance pressed.

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Aiden snorted without elaborating.

“Sonia filed for divorce,” Lucas whispered.

“Like she has the right!” Aiden scoffed. “She thinks if the first hearing doesn’t grant the divorce, she can keep me on a leash? Guess what? When we get to court, I’ll agree right away. Let’s see how she likes it!”

Lucas tried to calm him. “Come on, Sonia is such a good person.”

“Would a good person suddenly file for divorce? Doesn’t she know who’s been feeding her all these years?” Aiden ranted. “The women outside are falling over themselves to please me. She only ever gives me a cold shoulder. I’ve spoiled her too much!”

He took a deep breath and added, “Forget it. Let’s get the meeting started.”

The meeting dragged on all afternoon as they discussed how to get through the crisis. Last year, they had expanded into a new business line that was still being bankrolled by the old one.

If core profits dropped, the new division would collapse. The millions they had invested would go down the drain. Worse, both the old and new businesses were now clashing head-on with Gabriel’s operations.

Not only was further development of the new field threatened, but the original business was also in a grim state.

No solution was in sight.

The afternoon was spent arguing over whether to kill the new division and focus on the original line. No decision was reached.

After the shareholders’ meeting dispersed, only the three of them remained in the conference room.

“Vance, maybe you should go talk to Rossi or Rebecca,” Lucas suggested hopefully. “She might help for old times’ sake.”

Vance pinched the bridge of his nose, knowing how much Gabriel despised him.

“Meeting’s over.” He waved dismissively and strode out.

“If only he hadn’t divorced Rebecca...” Lucas sighed. “Rossi would’ve thrown us a lifeline.”

“Come on!” Aiden scoffed. “If Rebecca hadn’t kept sabotaging us, we wouldn’t have been in this mess. She is our bane!”

“I don’t think it’s her fault,” Lucas muttered. “Five years ago, things were bad. The company took off after Vance married her. It’s only since Catherine came back that everything started going downhill.”

“What did you just say?” Catherine screamed, appearing in the doorway.

Lucas shut up fast, having never really bought into that superstitious nonsense. In the past, when Aiden used to say such things, he would just listen and let it slide.

But lately, with one crisis after another at the company and personal dramas piling up, Isabelle had been preaching karma and metaphysics nonstop-claiming their bad luck stemmed from Vance inviting the wrong person into his life.

“Lucas, you idiot!” Catherine snapped. “I felt sorry for you guys working so hard, so I brought lunch. Then I waited and brought dinner after the meeting, and this is how you talk about me?”

She hurled the takeout bag onto the table with all her strength. The containers were scattered everywhere, and food spilled across the surface.

She spun around and stormed out in a rage.

She had come by taxi, intending to take advantage of Vance being alone and show him some warmth and care. But he had been ice-cold at noon, and by afternoon, she hadn’t even seen him.

Ever since getting pregnant, she felt she had suffered nothing but grievances. She flagged down a cab and went straight home.

The moment she stepped out of the cab and started walking toward her building, a bike sped past. The rider tossed an envelope straight into her arms. (1)

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The rider, dressed entirely in black with a mask and hat, flew by so fast she only saw a dark blur.

Catherine looked at the envelope in her hands and frowned. “What the hell is this?”

She tore it open right there on the sidewalk. Inside was a medical report for Vance.

She gasped, “What? Low sperm motility? Then we...”

All kinds of questions swirled in her mind. The more she thought, the more everything started to click into place.

No wonder Vance’s attitude had completely changed ever since that night she and Aiden set up their trap. From then on, he must have stopped believing her.

But he never said anything, just growing colder and more distant.

She muttered to herself, “What is he planning? I can’t just sit by. I have to talk to Aiden about this.”

She immediately turned around and headed back to the company, frantically jabbing the elevator button. Just as the doors opened, Aiden and Lucas stepped out.

She looked at Aiden with pure urgency.

Lucas, completely clueless, grinned at her. “Cathy, I’m sorry. I was just talking nonsense. You know how my mouth runs away sometimes.”

Catherine had zero patience for him, shooting Aiden desperate looks instead.

Aiden caught on immediately. “Alright, Lucas, you head home and keep your wife company. I’ll patch things up with Cathy.”

Lucas breathed a sigh of relief. “Great! Thanks, man. I’m off.”

The second he was gone, Catherine looked at Aiden nervously. “I have something important to tell you.”

“Come with me,” he said, leading her to a quiet restaurant nearby.

She showed him the medical report and laid out all her suspicions. Aiden stared at the diagnosis and fell into deep thought.

“No wonder he and Rebecca never had a kid,” he muttered. “Because he can’t.”

“What?” she pressed, hating the suspense.

He leaned in close with a grin and whispered, “Your darling might be impotent.”

Her eyes widened. “What? That’s impossible.”

“Don’t you know better than anyone? Weren’t you two together back in school?” he teased.

She glared. “We were students then. Nothing like that ever happened. Not everyone is a sleaze like you.”

“If he weren’t a sleaze, why did Rebecca dump him?” he scoffed. “If you weren’t, why did you sleep with me? And how many guys did you go through while you were overseas?”

She itched to splash her drink on his face. “Do you have the nerve to talk about me? You’re the one with lovers all over the place, yet you still think you deserved my first time?”

He grabbed her hand. “Knock it off. Let’s focus on what’s in front of us. Vance must have found out something.”

“What about the baby?” she asked, putting her hand on her belly. “One paternity test, and everything falls apart.”

“We keep the baby, obviously,” he replied, tapping the table. “It’s no big deal. I’ve got you covered.”

“You? You want to be the father?” she snorted.

“Why not?” he smirked. “You think you’re too good for me?”

“Then what does that make me? Whose kid is this supposed to be?” She had never once considered marrying him.

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“Is it so bad to be with me?” Aiden asked with a sleazy smile. “If you can’t handle Vance, you’re stuck with me. At least, you’ll never have to worry about food or money.”

“What do you mean by that?” Catherine asked warily.

“What do you think?” he asked back. “You’re not hoping to become my wife, are you?”

“No way!” She slammed her glass down. “I’ll never marry a scumbag like you!”

She knew better than anyone how chaotic his love life was. He had zero standards. From college girls to bar escorts, he rotated through every type.

How could she possibly marry someone like him?

Aiden looked offended. "I'm willing to take you even after everything, and you're looking down on me? Go ahead. Walk out of this restaurant and see who protects you. Vance, or Rossi? He only wants you dead." Furious but trapped, she sat back down.

Aiden poured himself a cup of tea. "Since that's the case, we might as well act sooner rather than later." She eyed him warily. "What are you planning? You're not thinking of hurting Vance, are you?"

He gave her a sideways glance. "Vance only knows how to chase romance every day. How could he ever do big things?"

"Y-You're terrifying!" She was stunned. "I thought you two were best friends."

"Best friends?" He burst out laughing. "Would best friends betray each other?"

She sat frozen in her chair, feeling like she had never known the man in front of her.

"What?" Aiden sneered. "You still think you're some pure, innocent fantasy to him?"

"I..." She gritted her teeth. "I'm nothing like you."

"No?" he laughed coldly. "You're not the same as me when you ran off five years ago while he was at rock bottom? You're not the same when you claimed to love him and then jumped straight into my bed? You're not the same when you got pregnant with my kid and tried to pin it on him?"

"T-That was all your idea!" she protested.

"My idea wouldn't have worked if you hadn't gone along with it," he shot back. "Did your pants fall off by themselves?"

She slumped into her chair, at a loss for words. "Then... What about Lucas?"

"Just a loyal little tag-along, every bit as pathetic as Vance," he snorted.

Her eyes glittered with dark calculation. "Aren't you afraid I'll go tell him everything?"

"Go ahead." He shrugged with a sly smile. "We're on the same boat. Do you really think Vance would forgive you if you told him?"

She fell silent, and he added, "Stop fooling yourself. He only loves the fantasy of you. He's just too proud to admit he lost."

He pushed a bowl of soup toward her. "Eat up, and don't be reckless. In this world, only I truly understand you. We're the same kind. Your fate is tied to mine, whether you like it or not."

She paused. “Then will you get a divorce?”

He shrugged. “Of course. Now eat. I’ve got plans tonight.”

She insisted, “I’m coming with you.”

“You’re pregnant and still want to tag along?” he said impatiently. “What’s with that look? It’s the same way Sonia stares at me. You think I’m going to see another woman?”

“What else could it be?” She was falling apart inside and full of regret.

At this point, there seemed to be no way out except locking herself to Aiden. This wasn’t what she had planned at all.

She had only wanted to be with Vance. How could a playboy like Aiden ever compare to him?

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But now, Catherine didn’t really have a choice. Nevertheless, Aiden took her with him that night.

When they arrived, Catherine realized the person Aiden was meeting was a stranger—a young man who looked even younger than Vance or Aiden, with a baby face that made him appear harmless.

“This is Mr. Wade Nolan.” Aiden introduced them to each other. “And this is...”

Wade glanced at Catherine and grinned. “Oh, I know her. Mr. Bradford’s beloved confidante.”

That was awkward. Even someone as quick-witted as Aiden didn’t know how to pick up the conversation.

“Mr. Nolan, hello. I’m actually good friends with Mr. Bradford and Mr. Hodge,” Catherine tried, unsure whether the man was insulting her or just trying to sound more friendly.

But Wade didn’t let her finish. He stood up and said, “Mr. Hodge, it seems this partnership won’t work out after all.”

His words took the pair by surprise.

Aiden jumped in. “Mr. Nolan, we had a deal. Why are you suddenly backing out now?”

Wade’s smile stayed disarmingly sweet. “Have you forgotten? We are supposed to be cooperating with Mr. Rossi. Our people will eventually have to face him directly. Your presence could be explained as switching sides for business interests. But don’t you know who Mr. Rossi hates the most?”

Catherine’s expression shifted. Recently, she had barely dared leave the house alone. Everywhere she went, she clung to Aiden, freaking out at the mere mention of that name.

It was like a ghost breathing down her neck. She had always wondered why he hadn’t exposed her past yet. The longer he stayed quiet, the more it felt like a blade dangling over her head, ready to fall at any second.

When Wade mentioned Rossi, it filled her with dread, and Aiden forced an unnatural smile.

Wade kept going. “Everyone knows how much Mr. Rossi values his cousin, while Mr. Bradford and Miss Welch are the ones who hurt her the deepest. If not for legal constraints, he’d probably want to chop them up. Yet you dare bring her here? That only shows you can’t even protect yourself. I only considered working with you because you’re on the opposite side of Vance. Don’t drag me down with you.”

Catherine panicked and blurted out, “Mr. Nolan, you’ve misunderstood. I have nothing to do with Vance Bradford, I’m with Mr. Hodge here.”

“Shut up!” Aiden snapped, his harsh tone making her flinch.

She had been pampered by the three men ever since returning to the country. No one had ever spoken to her so harshly. Even when Vance’s attitude had cooled, he had only been distant and never yelled at her.

But Wade understood what she had left unsaid. He reminded her, “You seem to have forgotten the trending topic scandal. Almost everyone in Soliaridge still remembers it clearly. People’s memories aren’t that short. Back then, photos of you and Vance Bradford in bed were all over the internet. Do you honestly think Mr. Rossi would trust either of you?”

“I’m already done with him,” she explained desperately. “I’m even...”

“I said shut up!” Aiden barked, cold ruthlessness in his eyes sending a shiver down her spine.

She suddenly realized something with painful clarity: Aiden was nothing like Vance. He was a vicious dog. If he could treat his wife so cruelly, how could she expect him to treat her any differently?

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Chapter 412

“Mr. Nolan...” Aiden tried. “We are just old classmates. Even though things have fallen apart between Vance and me, Catherine and I have always remained friends. Cutting her off completely would just be heartless, wouldn’t it?”

Wade gave a small smile. “Fair enough. But my belief doesn’t matter. What Mr. Rossi believes does. Don’t you agree, Mr. Hodge?”

Aiden’s expression turned thunderous.

“So, I’m truly sorry, Mr. Hodge,” Wade sighed. “I’m just starting my own company. Mr. Rossi showing interest already has me walking on eggshells. I’m afraid I can’t even stand steady on my own. Accepting you was already a big risk because of the old favor you once did me. Adding another risk factor now... I really don’t have the courage for it. My sincere apologies.”

He stood up and walked out, leaving the pair alone in the private room. They stared at each other in speechless despair.

“Aiden...” Catherine started.

But he shot her a vicious glare. “I told you not to come along, but you insisted!”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I just didn’t know what to do.”

He stayed silent, and she asked softly, “Who is this man anyway?”

“He’s the partner Rossi hand-picked. His company is a brand-new startup,” Aiden explained. “He used to work at our company for a bit, then quit and started his own thing.”

“Doesn’t he have a non-compete?”

“He was a nobody at the bottom of the totem pole. He screwed up once, and I bailed him out. That favor is the only reason I could approach him. Goddamn it! One lifetime of grinding can’t compare to having a rich dad!”

“What’s his background?” Catherine asked deliberately, trying to steer the blame onto Wade.

“His old man is a big shot in Arelmoor. He didn’t want to inherit the family business, so he came out here to discover his real passion. He didn’t even last a month. Later, his dad

bought a company outright and handed him a nine-figure startup fund to chase his dreams. The brat got lucky again and caught Rossi's eye. That sly fox! Rossi must be after his father's power and connections!"

His gaze swung back to Catherine, turning sharp once more. "I finally managed to get close to him, and you just had to tag along! If you ruin this deal..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but the threat in it was unmistakable.

She shook her head desperately. "I didn't mean to, Aiden. I'm sorry."

"Crying. That's all you ever do!" He was fed up. "You're crying away every bit of my luck! You think I'm Vance? That I'm gonna baby you? Cry again and see what happens."

She shivered and forced the tears back. "Then... What do we do?"

His eyes narrowed. "Where did that medical report come from? Is it legit?"

How was she supposed to know if it was legit? She had already told him how she got it.

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Chapter 413

Was the report genuine or not? Who had slipped it to Catherine? Aiden only confirmed the answer to the first question.

After making discreet inquiries through various channels, he verified that Vance had indeed undergone a check-up recently, and the results matched the report exactly.

As for who had given it to Catherine... They clearly had an agenda, but that didn't matter.

At this point, Aiden had burned every bridge. Betraying Vance was no longer optional, and if he wanted to strike out on his own, he had to stay glued to Wade.

With Rossi now firmly planted in Soliaridge, the industry would soon be dominated by Rossi Enterprises. And there was Wade, the spoiled rich kid with deep pockets.

If Wade was willing to share even a small slice, Aiden would swallow it first and ask questions later.

In this dog-eat-dog world of fame and fortune, only Wade seemed relatively naïve and easy to manipulate -like a second Vance.

“When Rossi first arrived, everyone said we would be his top choice for cooperation. Wade used to suck up to us every day, hoping to use us as a bridge. Now...” Aiden ground his teeth. “The wheel of fortune really does turn!”

His boiling rage scared Catherine. She stammered, “Then... What do we do?”

If they needed Wade’s help but he wanted nothing to do with her, what would Aiden do to her?

His eyes were ice-cold. “From now on, keep your head down. Stay out of sight and stop showing off. Your social media accounts had better have nothing to do with me.”

Her face flushed red with anger, but she didn’t dare lash out. After being yelled at, she didn’t even dare cry anymore.

She could only stare at him with wet, resentful eyes. “So, I can’t even be seen in public anymore? What am I supposed to be?”

He squinted. “Just behave. I’ll take care of you and the baby anyway.”

“What am I?” she finally exploded. “I gave up being Mrs. Bradford to follow you, and now I have to hide in the shadows like some dirty secret?”

“Mrs. Bradford?” he snorted. “You think you were worthy of that title? You’re daydreaming. Does Vance look like someone who wants to marry you?”

She stamped her foot. “You said you’d get a divorce and marry me! Otherwise, what is our child? And what am I? One of your many mistresses?”

“That’s right. I did say I would get divorced,” he said contemptuously. “But I never said I would marry you.

If I want a wife, I only need to snap my fingers. Plenty of young girls will throw themselves at me. What makes you think I’d settle for a fading woman like you?”

“You piece of trash!” She had never suffered such humiliation from any of them.

In a fit of rage, she grabbed the fruit knife from the table and lunged at him.

But how could she be a match for Aiden? He easily twisted her wrist and snatched the knife away. The blade hovered right in front of her face. With just a little pressure, it would break the skin.

He gritted his teeth. “You’d better behave. I already warned you. If my cooperation with Wade goes wrong because of you, you won’t like what happens next. I’m not Vance. I don’t give a damn about your face.”

He pressed the knife down, and she felt a slight sting on her cheek. She froze in terror, her voice shaking. “Aren’t you afraid I’ll get rid of the baby?”

He threw his head back and laughed out loud. “Go ahead! I already have a son. If I want more kids, plenty of women are willing to do it.” ¹

He tossed the knife aside and stormed out.

She touched her face. Her fingers came away with a smear of blood. She rushed to the mirror and saw a thin cut on her cheek. She had no idea whether it would leave a scar.

Staring at her disheveled reflection, she couldn’t understand how things had come to this. In a burst of fury, she swept everything off the vanity onto the floor and broke down crying.

But even worse things were still waiting for her.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 414

Sonia and Aiden’s divorce finally went to court.

Isabelle went along to support Sonia, and both sides brought lawyers. Sonia requested the divorce on the grounds of irreconcilable differences and presented evidence of Aiden’s numerous entanglements with other women.

Aiden had already declared he wouldn’t beg or play nice. He agreed to the divorce without a fight.

The case, which appeared to have mutual consent, made people wonder whether it even needed to go through the courts, but the real battle broke out over property division and child custody.

Aiden wanted custody of their son, which took Sonia by surprise. He had always been cold and absent as a father. To Shane, “Dad” was nothing more than a distant title.

His lawyer argued that Sonia had not worked for many years, was merely a housewife, and lacked the ability to raise the child.

Sonia had come prepared. Her lawyer submitted evidence showing that she had single-handedly raised their son while Aiden had never been present.

In particular, there were chat records where Sonia had begged Aiden to come home when the boy was sick, only to be ignored or rejected.

The most damning evidence was Aiden's medical records from treatment for a sexually transmitted disease. It proved his chaotic private life and that he carried an infectious illness, making him unfit to raise a child.

Aiden nearly exploded with rage in the courtroom. His lawyer claimed the records were private information and that the other side had infringed on his rights; they could not be used as evidence.

Sonia's lawyer simply spread his hands and stayed silent. The message was clear: "Yes, my client may have obtained them improperly, so what? The disease is a fact, and now it's on the table."

In his fury, Aiden decided not to give Sonia any leeway. It was just a son. He could have as many as he wanted. Catherine was already carrying one.

So, the dispute shifted back to property.

Aiden had almost no assets in his name. The house had been bought before marriage and counted as premarital property. He had several cars, but they weren't worth much. He could let Sonia have them.

Cash? Practically zero. There were debts. He had played the asset-hiding and transferring game perfectly.

Sonia only wanted a quick and clean divorce, so when her lawyer warned her that Aiden had likely moved assets around, she had already mentally prepared herself to walk away with almost nothing.

She simply instructed her lawyer to recover whatever could be traced. The lawyer requested Aiden's recent bank statements.

Aiden was cunning and trusted no one. From the day they married, he had guarded against her. Besides household expenses and credit card payments, he had never given her any extra money.

She had no idea how much he had.

Older transactions, whether they were investments, gifts to his parents, or other forms of transfers, were difficult to trace now. Only recent transactions could be checked, and the most obvious transfers were the house, luxury bags, and cash he had lavished on Catherine.

So, the first target was recovering those marital assets.

His lawyer fought hard on his behalf, but Aiden suddenly realized his records might not withstand scrutiny. If they dug too deep, they might uncover other things that could land him in serious legal trouble.

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Chapter 415

So, Aiden stopped fighting.

He agreed to the divorce and gave Sonia full custody of their son. He also agreed to recover the marital assets he had given Catherine.

In addition, he would pay generous child support in one lump sum. Finally, he offered Sonia a settlement taken from the money he had “gifted” to his parents.

Of course, those gifts had been nothing but asset transfers.

Sonia’s only real goal had been to get the divorce and escape this scumbag. She was willing to walk away with nothing. Now that she had achieved her goal and even gained a little more, she was already satisfied.

She only hoped the judge would grant the divorce and not reject it on the first try. Fortunately, both she and Aiden were resolute about ending the marriage, s

uccess went smoothly.

She had finally cut ties with that rotten mand

When she walked out of the courthouse, she still felt dazed. If Isabelle hadn’t been holding her up, her legs might have buckled.

Isabelle had asked Lucas to come pick them up. Then, right outside the courthouse, the two men got into it.

Lucas felt sorry to see Aiden’s marriage end like that. Coming to pick up Sonia felt like betraying and insulting his friend.

The second Aiden saw him, he charged over and started throwing punches. Lucas felt so guilty that he just stood there and let Aiden hit him to blow off steam.

But Isabelle couldn’t stand it. Why should Lucas get beaten? It wasn’t like he had taught Aiden to cheat.

“Lucas, fight back!” she yelled. “Don’t just stand there and take it like a coward!”

The two men were too tangled up to hear her. Her hot temper kicked in. She grabbed an iron rod from the car and swung it straight at Aiden.

Lucas saw it and panicked, quickly jumping in front of her, but the rod still landed hard on Aiden's back. Terrified Aiden would turn on her, Lucas shielded her.

She couldn't break through, but the iron rod flew out of her hand and smashed toward Aiden again. Ready this time, he blocked it with his arm, but the impact still sent pain shooting through him.

"You crazy bitch!" he roared, ready to charge.

Sonia quickly stepped in, picking up the rod and holding it horizontally in front of her. "Try coming any closer!"

For years, Aiden had manipulated and belittled her. She had never stood up to him like this before. Her action took him by surprise; he had every reason to believe it was under Isabelle's influence.

"You dare challenge me?" he bellowed, lunging for the rod.

Before he could get close, Sonia started swinging it wildly. She didn't know if she could hit him; she just needed to keep swinging so he couldn't grab it.

If he got hold of it, she would never win.

In the chaos, Aiden couldn't get close. Every time he reached for the rod, it smacked him painfully. After taking several solid hits, he gave up and attempted to circle past her.

But wherever he moved, she blocked him. For a moment, he couldn't break through.

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Chapter 416

The court security finally came out and stopped the brawl.

Sonia's iron rod was taken away by the officers. Her hair was disheveled, and she was trembling all over. Across from her, Aiden was being held back by security.

Aiden glared at her with pure hatred. "I don't think I ever treated you badly. How can you be so vicious?"

Sonia steadied her breathing, unwilling to waste time on him. When one refused to listen, no amount of talking would change their mind. It was better to let them believe whatever he wanted.

She was done wasting energy on toxic people and toxic feelings.

“Don’t regret this!” he spat, then turned his hateful gaze on Lucas. “Our friendship ends here!”

Lucas was flabbergasted. “We went through thick and thin together, and you’re discarding it like that? We’ve been friends with both you and Sonia for so many years. Do you really want to end things like this?”

Isabelle grabbed his ear and dragged him away. “Who is your friend? You can only pick one! If you choose that garbage, you can get lost with him!”

Her message was clear: if he chose Aiden, their marriage was done.

He panicked. “Is it really that serious?”

“It is!” she declared, climbing into the car.

He hurried after her like a scolded puppy.

Once again, Catherine’s house was facing repossession.

The news came, hitting her hard. She screamed into the phone, “No! That house wasn’t even bought with your money! It was Vance’s!”

“Whatever,” Aiden said indifferently. “Wait for Rossi to come collect it himself.”

She went quiet, knowing that scenario would be even worse.

“Then what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to live?” she said worriedly, thinking back to the grand welcome the three men had given her when she returned.

She had believed her life was finally entering its glorious new chapter. She never imagined it would come to this.

“I’m still carrying your son!” she added.

“You can’t stay at my place,” he replied, knowing he needed to keep distance from her if he wanted any shot with Wade. “Stay in a hotel for now. Pack your things and keep things quiet. Better days are waiting ahead.”

She hurled her phone across the room, but his voice continued to drift from the speaker. “Don’t go crazy! I won’t be sending you money for a while. Watch your spending and stop thinking about buying a new phone.”

His words were like gasoline on a fire. She screamed in pure rage.

When Sonia came to take the house, she brought a full moving crew. Lucas tagged along, forced by Isabelle, after he picked a side.

He had no choice. If he didn’t come, Isabelle would come herself despite her pregnancy. He came with a heavy heart, unable to understand how the four of them had fallen apart like this.

He rang the bell and asked Catherine to open the door. The latter murmured his name, as if she had finally seen her savior.

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Chapter 417

Catherine’s tearful, nasal voice drifted out. “Lucas, have you come to rescue me? I knew it. You’re the only good one. The other two are so awful!”

She opened the door and froze. Outside, Lucas was standing beside Sonia, with a dozen burly men behind them.

“Lucas...” she whined, disregarding everything.

“Cathy, I...” Lucas faltered.

He knew Isabelle disliked Catherine, and he also knew there had always been something ambiguous between Vance and Catherine.

But he had been best friends with both of them for years. People sense of right and wrong could be double-standard. No matter what, the four of them had shared many years of friendship. Coming here in person to evict her still made him feel terrible.

His understanding of their relationships was still stuck in the past. He had no idea how drastically the other three had changed, even dismissing Aiden’s threat to cut ties as mere angry words.

He didn’t realize they could never go back.

Catherine covered her face. Tears streamed between her fingers.

“Lucas...” she murmured pitifully, trying to throw herself into his arms.

Isabelle’s explosive warning suddenly echoed in his mind: “If you get fooled by her fake tears and pitiful act again, don’t bother coming home!”

His heart tightened, and he quickly stepped aside. Catherine couldn’t stop her momentum and stumbled forward, crashing into one of the moving workers’ chests instead.

The guy jumped in surprise, quickly steadying her. “Are you all right?”

She shot Lucas a resentful look. “Lucas, what are you doing?”

Lucas didn’t dare meet her eyes. His face flushed red. “Let’s talk nicely. Don’t cry.”

Sonia kept her face straight, speaking to the crew. “Let’s get started.”

Those men immediately poured into the house.

“What are you doing?” Catherine tried to block them.

“Didn’t Aiden tell you?” Sonia said coldly. “This house is our marital property. The court awarded it to me, and I’m here to take it back. Please leave.”

Catherine refused to budge, shouting, “No, this is my place! Everything inside belongs to me! Leave now, or I’m calling the police! This is trespassing and robbery!”

“By court order. Go inside,” Sonia said calmly.

Catherine couldn’t stop so many people alone. She talked about calling the police, but she didn’t dare actually do it.

Aiden had warned her against causing trouble. If the police got involved, he would tear her apart.

“Pack everything up,” Sonia ordered once inside. “Sell what can be sold and throw away the rest. None of it stays.”

“No, you can’t do this! Those are all my things!” Catherine protested.

But all her efforts to stop them were in vain. She turned to Lucas and pleaded desperately, “Lucas, help me! Aren’t we best friends? Please help me stop them...”

His heart twisted into knots. Both Aiden and Catherine were important to him, but Isabelle was his wife. If he defended Catherine today, he would never be able to explain it to Isabelle.

Why did he have to make such an impossible choice? But he couldn't bear to see Catherine's tearful, broken state either.

Finally, he tried negotiating with Sonia. "How about letting her pack her important things first? Let her take her documents and anything personal. Once she's done, you can handle the rest."

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Chapter 418

Share get it

Sonia gave a cold snort but didn't object.

Lucas urged Catherine gently, "Hurry up and pack. They need to get back to work soon."

She cursed him silently, but with Sonia and the movers standing there like grim reapers, she had no choice but to start packing.

She didn't care much about the documents. Her eyes were only on jewelry, luxury bags, and expensive clothes. She stuffed them all into boxes, but Sonia demanded to inspect them.

"Take all of that out!" Sonia pointed at everything except the documents. "You can keep the clothes you've already worn. They're dirty anyway."

Catherine threw herself over the boxes as if her life depended on getting it. She screamed hysterically, "These are all things! Don't you dare touch them! They're all mine!"

"Yours?" Sonia tossed a bank statement in front of her. "Look carefully. These are the recent transactions from Aiden's card. How was the money spent? How much was transferred to you? It's all clear. If you want to prove these things are yours, show me the receipts."

Catherine collapsed onto the boxes and stopped moving.

It wasn't that she couldn't produce receipts, but many of the bills showed bank card information that wasn't hers. And the rest had been bought with money Aiden had transferred to her.

Lucas knew the truth: none of that money had come from Aiden. They had all come from Vance through Aiden. But how could he reveal that, especially since Catherine wasn't admitting it?

He shook his head wearily and decided to let it go. Even if he explained it was Vance's money, it wouldn't change anything.

Vance was already divorced, and the money had come through company dividends that Vance had given to Aiden. It was complicated.

In the end, no matter how much Catherine cried and protested, the only things left in her boxes were her documents and clothes.

Two hours later, the house was empty. The keys were now in Sonia's hands.

"I'm locking up," she said, changing the code and urging Catherine to leave.

The latter sat on the floor, sobbing and refusing to move.

"Fine. Guess it's my turn to say it," Sonia said, pulling out her phone. "If you don't leave, I'll call the police. This is a private residence-my residence."

"Come on, let's go," Lucas said, picking up her suitcase.

Catherine was afraid of the police, but she couldn't swallow the humiliation. She immediately called

Aiden and put it on the speakerphone.

"Aiden! Come see what Sonia is doing!" she said urgently, figuring the divorce had turned the two into enemies.

Even if she had to leave, she could at least have Aiden chew Sonia out. Then she could walk away with some dignity.

"What is it?" Aiden's voice was flat.

Catherine recounted with heavy exaggeration how Sonia had burst into the house, thrown out her belongings, and was kicking her out.

She glared at Sonia triumphantly, waiting for Aiden to explode.

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Chapter 419

Aiden did explode, but his curses were directed at Catherine.

“I thought something serious had happened. I told you not to contact me lately. Are you deaf?” he spat.” Get the hell out! I’m busy!”

He hung up, and Catherine’s hand shook with rage.

Lucas couldn’t bear to watch it. He sighed heavily. “Forget it, Cathy. Just leave.”

What else could she do? Waiting for the police to drag her out?

“Just you wait! And Aiden, too!” she spat, her eyes blazing with pure hatred. “None of you will have a good ending!”

She walked out with her head held high. Lucas carried the suitcase for her.

Sonia locked the door. Behind her, two moving workers carried the last two boxes.

They waited for the elevator together. When it arrived, Sonia stepped in, but obviously, Catherine refused to ride with her.

Sonia looked at Lucas and said, “I’ll go first. You know what to do. Don’t make Isabelle come ask me what happened.”

“I didn’t...” he started to explain, but the doors closed. He shouted desperately, “Sonia, don’t twist anything to her.”

Sonia and the movers headed down to the underground parking lot. Lucas and Catherine went to the first floor.

Once outside the complex, looking at the heavy traffic and bustling world, Catherine sat down on the curb and started crying. “What am I supposed to do now?”

She didn’t even have a place to live anymore. Where was she supposed to go?

Lucas squatted down beside her and sighed heavily. His mind was foggy from exhaustion and stress.

Neither of them was aware that across the street, in a parking spot, a car window rolled down slightly, then rolled back up.

Inside the car sat Rebecca. A baby-faced young man was in the driver’s seat, and beside Rebecca in the back seat sat a young woman.

They watched the moving truck pull out of the parking lot and drive away.

The young woman said, “Looks like it’s done.”

“Yeah,” Rebecca replied, staring out the window.

“This house was bought with Mr. Bradford’s money. Now it belongs to Ms. Hodge. Are you really okay with that?” the young man asked.

Rebecca nodded. “It’s fine. Sonia has suffered a lot and has been raising her child alone. It’s not easy.”

She already had more money than she knew what to do with. She just hoped Sonia could start a fresh life after leaving Aiden.

“What about those two?” the young man asked, looking across the street.

Rebecca took one last look. “Everyone has their own fate. This is just the beginning. Let’s go.”

“Alright.” The young man started the car and pulled off.

Catherine sat on the curb, still crying nonstop. Lucas’s phone buzzed with a message asking if he was done yet and urging him to come home.

He grew anxious. “Sitting here isn’t helping. You should find somewhere to stay. A hotel for now, then look for a place.”

“Where am I supposed to stay?” she said tearfully, leaning toward him. “Can you help me find a place? You’re the only one I can rely on now.”

He jumped back and used the suitcase to block her. Catherine ended up leaning on it. A flash of anger crossed her eyes, but it quickly dissolved into tears.

“Lucas...” she whined miserably.

He sighed. “It’s not that I don’t want to help, but the second I spend any money, Isabelle will know.”

Isabelle had registered a SIM card using his ID, and all his bank and credit cards were linked to that number. Any payment he made would instantly alert her.

Catherine cried in frustration, then quickly switched to a concerned tone. “Lucas, I’m not trying to criticize you, but you’re a grown man. Isn’t it embarrassing to let your wife control every little thing? You don’t even have a penny of your own money. You can’t even pay for a client’s dinner. Doesn’t that humiliate you? You’re the one earning all the money through hard work, yet she controls it so tightly. She really doesn’t think about you at all

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Chapter 420

“That’s not true. Don’t talk about Izzy like that,” Lucas said quickly, not feeling the slightest bit embarrassed. “I asked her to manage the money. I’m terrible at it. She’s been handling it since we started dating. How is that embarrassing? Izzy says taking care of the family is a good quality. Sometimes, I do want to stay out longer with the guys, but when she reminds me to come home, it’s because she wants to spend time with me.”

He paused and added, “I’m busy with work all day and don’t have much time for her. Staying out after work makes it even less. Her reminding me is completely normal. I may complain sometimes, but Izzy isn’t wrong. When I’m out having fun, I actually feel uneasy and keep thinking about her. As for legitimate expenses like paying for client dinners, even if she gets the notification, she won’t complain. Says she has the right to know because she loves me. If a woman doesn’t care at all about what her man does, that means she doesn’t love him anymore.”

Catherine stared at him with contempt. “Are you stupid? She’s brainwashed you.”

“To be honest, I used to think that way too,” Lucas sighed. “I thought she was too strict and I had too little freedom. But now, looking at Vance and Aiden, I believe she is right. I don’t know the full story with Vance and Rebecca, but I saw what happened with Aiden and Sonia. In the first couple of years, Sonia used to argue and cry all the time. Later, she just went quiet.”

He paused. “And Rebecca... I only got to know her better this year. No matter what Vance did or how late he came home, she stayed indifferent. That’s what not loving someone looks like. In the end, both couples got divorced. When Isabelle and I got married, she set one rule: the wife is always right. I used to see it as a joke, but now I think it’s the truth.”

2

He rambled on and on, his eyes full of tenderness. Catherine felt a sour twist in her chest.

1

Out of the three men, Lucas was the dumbest and most useless one. Without Vance’s help, he never would have gotten anywhere. Yet he treated his wife the best.

Catherine didn’t get it. Why did that shrew get such a sincere man?

“Fine. I can’t argue with you,” she sniffed. “I’ll find a hotel to stay in.” 1

“Alright, I’ll drive you there,” he offered,

At least, Sonia hadn’t been completely ruthless. Catherine was left with some money. Otherwise, she’d find it hard to survive.

She booked the nearest hotel and checked in at the lobby. 1

Lucas handed her the suitcase. “Go up and get some rest. I’m heading home.”

“Lucas...” She placed her hand on the back of his. “Don’t go back, okay? I-I’m scared to be alone.”

He flinched, repeatedly shaking his head. “I already broke the rules by not going back with Sonia. If I stay any longer, Izzy will kill me.”

Hatred burned in Catherine’s chest. She forced it down and gave him the puppy-dog’s eyes. “What am I going to do from now on? I don’t have much money left. I won’t last many days.” 1

He stroked his chin. “Why don’t you look for a job?” 1

Her brow furrowed, and he quickly added, “Or... Maybe go find Vance?” 2

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Chapter 421

Lucas left her there without even offering to walk her upstairs, simply telling her to find a job or go look for Vance.

“Find Vance?” Catherine gave a bitter smile.

At this point, he must have figured out something. Otherwise, why would he suddenly vanish when they were about to get married?

She had already tried on the wedding dress, but he hadn’t called or even texted her. That didn’t make any sense, yet she was now at the end of her rope.

Vance was her last hope.

Curled up on the hotel bed, she finally dialed his number.

To her surprise, he answered. The moment she heard his voice, real tears poured out. Not acting this time.

“Vance...” she cried, thinking back to the days when he had pampered her in every possible way.

Now she was cast aside like a stray dog. Regret flooded her, but she still blamed him. If he hadn’t always refused to take their relationship to the next level and left her feeling so insecure, she never would have let Aiden talk her into anything. 1

Her heart pounded with anxiety because she had no idea where his head was at now. Did he already suspect something? 1

But his voice was calm and steady. “Cathy? What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

It was the same soft tone he had always used. She sighed in relief and sniffled, “Why haven’t I seen you these past few days?”

“Oh, I’ve been sick,” he replied smoothly. “I haven’t even gone into the office. Just resting.”

“Sick? How are you feeling? Do you want me to come take care of you?” (13

“It’s fine. I had a high fever and kept drifting in and out of sleep. But I’m feeling much better today.”

“Vance... You’re still the best one.”

“What happened? Anyone treating you badly?”

“It was Aiden and Lucas...”

She launched into her complaints, telling him how Aiden and Sonia had divorced, how Sonia had kicked her out of the house, and how Lucas had helped Sonia instead.

She sounded furious. “That house wasn’t even bought with Aiden’s money. It was yours!”

“I see...” Vance coughed lightly. “Legally, Sonia’s actions are perfectly fine. Even though I gave the money to Aiden, it was in the form of bonuses and dividends. On paper, it belongs to him.”

“But what about me? I’m homeless again,” she sobbed.

“There’s not much I can do right now,” he sighed. “I gave all my assets to Rebecca. For the time being, just stay in a hotel or rent a place.”

“But I don’t have any money,” she groaned, deeply disappointed.

She had hoped he would offer to buy her a new place.

“I’m really sorry, but I’m also in a difficult situation. Right now, I only have about 10,000 dollars in my account-barely enough to cover one month’s rent.”

“Doesn’t the company have money?”

“It’s in a tough spot, too. Besides, even though I own the company, the business accounts and my personal accounts are separate. Don’t worry, though. Things will get better next month. You can rent a place first, and by the end of the year, you should be able to buy something new.”

She saw a glimmer of hope.

“Can I come stay with you? It would save on expenses.”

“I’m still sick. I don’t want to pass anything on to the baby.”

Fresh tears welled up in her eyes. “You still remember the baby?”

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If course,” Vance replied. “How could I forget? Is the baby doing okay?”

Catherine finally relaxed. It looked like he wasn’t suspecting anything.

At the other end of the phone, Vance sat by the floor-to-ceiling window of his hotel room. He set the phone down and stared out at the city lights. There wasn’t the slightest sign of illness on his face.

His phone rang again. He glanced at the caller ID and answered.

Aiden’s anxious voice came through. “Vance, where have you been? I haven’t seen you for days.”

Vance leaned back in his chair. “Oh, I haven’t been feeling well. What’s up?”

Nothing too important. You okay?” Aiden started testing the waters with small talk, just like Catherine had done.

Vance sounded perfectly normal. “I’ve been so sick I could barely think straight. I haven’t even had the energy to plan the wedding with Catherine. Can you help me look into some wedding planners? She wants something unique. I’m too weak right now to handle it, but we can’t keep putting it off. Her belly is ready showing.”

Sure,” Aiden agreed quickly, feeling half-relieved yet not fully convinced. He kept probing. “One more thing. A few outsourcing companies need their payments settled, and their contracts are about to expire.

ey want to renew. We should keep working with them.”

see. Let’s talk about it at the office tomorrow.”

erfect. I’ll have them wait for you there.”

e call ended, and Vance stared at Aiden’s profile on his phone. The background was still the old photo the three of them.

hey had been college classmates-brothers who had fought through thick and thin together, closer an family.

e tossed the phone aside and stood up to change. Then he went to the clinic, knowing Rebecca should there doing her rehabilitation session at this hour.

hen he arrived, she had just finished her therapy session. The doctor was talking to her. “This month’s sults have been pretty good. If you keep it up, combining therapy with rehab exercises, you’ll see better ogress than doing it on your own.”

e saw her hesitation and added, “I know you’re planning to move abroad. Mr. Perry mentioned it and oped I could relocate the clinic overseas, but that’s a bit difficult. Our roots are here in the States. It’s ot something money can solve.”

he nodded. “I understand. Gabriel was just worried about me.”

Vance’s ears caught the key information. “They’re planning to move abroad?”

“Go ahead and start your rehab session,” Edwin encouraged. “We’ll take it one step at a time and see if Mr. Perry can come up with any other solutions.”

He called over a nurse, who led Rebecca into the rehab room. Throughout the entire conversation, Vance remained silent in the corner.

Rebecca never noticed him. After she disappeared into the rehab room, he walked straight up to the doctor. “Dr. Jefferson, hello.”

Edwin nodded, recognizing him.

Vance asked urgently, “Is Rebecca really moving abroad? Do you know which country?”

Edwin looked puzzled. “That’s strange. You’re her husband. Don’t you know where she’s going?”

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Chapter 423

Vance was stumped and felt a wave of embarrassment.

Without another word, Edwin turned and went back into his office. Vance sat down in the waiting area, not stepping forward until Rebecca came out two hours later.

A few days apart, saying her name felt like it belonged to another lifetime, but clearly, she didn't want to see him.

In her mind, they had said goodbye and should not cross paths again.

He saw the impatience in her eyes and smiled bitterly. "You won't even see me for a minute? Do you really hate me that much?"

She shook her head. "I don't ha you."

Hope flashed in his eyes, but her next words sent him straight back to hell. "I've already erased you from my life. If you don't show up, I don't even remember you."

At that moment, Vance finally understood what people meant when they said indifference was crueler than hatred. For a second, he wished she would hate him. At least then, she would still think of him sometimes.

She started toward the exit. He fell into step beside her, matching her slow pace. The distance from the clinic to the gate was short-too short for them to say more than a few words.

Once, he had an entire lifetime to walk with her and talk. He hadn't cherished it.

He wanted to say, "Thank you for folding those paper cranes for my grandmother. Thank you for staying with her during her final days."

But the words wouldn't come out. In the end, he only managed, "Which country are you moving to? Have you been planning this for a long time?"

He remembered all the French books she had been studying and the practice tests she had been doing.

He had once teased her about her level. Now that only made his face burn with shame.

She stayed silent, not owing him any explanation.

He continued, "Silly question. Of course, you're going with Gabriel. Wherever he is, you'll be there, too. That's good. At least, you'll have someone looking out for you."

He thought for a moment and added, “Don’t worry about things here. I’ll take care of Josette, though we...”

“No need,” she interrupted. “She is coming with me.”

At those words, something inside him snapped. He never expected she’d take Josette away with her.

If Josette stayed in the country, there would still be a thread connecting Rebecca to Soliaridge. If Josette left with her, there would be nothing left behind.

His eyes started to sting. Soon enough, they reached the gate, and she was about to get into the car.

“Rebecca!” he called out desperately, his voice trembling. “If I were still the old me, would I still have a chance?”

She shook her head without looking back, but he would not give up. “What if I were still a clean, innocent man?”

“Vance,” she said, “it has nothing to do with what kind of person you are. I just don’t want to go back to that life. I hope we never see each other again. Just the thought of spending my days with you makes me feel sick. Do you understand? No matter what version of you it is, the things that happened and the hurt you caused can’t be erased.”

“Rebecca...” He watched helplessly as she got into the car, his voice choked with emotion.

He wanted to step closer and say something through the window, but a bodyguard in a black suit blocked his view. “Mr. Bradford, please respect her wishes.”

He could only watch her car drive away, not knowing if this would be the last time he ever saw her.

That evening, he went to the Hortons’ house for dinner.

The couple had grown used to his visits. They would go buy fresh ingredients and cook proper meals. They’d even ask what he felt like eating and make it for him.

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Vance never held back when telling them what he wanted to eat. It was better to keep them busy than let them sit around sighing every day.

After dinner, he helped Andrew tend to the small vegetable garden in the backyard. The once-overgrown yard now had neat rows of vegetables and finally felt alive again.

But as he squatted among the plants, he couldn't help recalling the time he and Rebecca had gone back to Josette's suburban house.

They had sat at the front door watching the melons and flowers blooming in the yard. The pain hit him without warning, but there was nothing he could do.

Only when it was dark did he leave the place and return to the hotel.

The next morning, he showed up at the office. Aiden had arrived earlier and was waiting with several outsourcing company representatives.

"Let's go to the conference room," Vance said.

"Now that Mr. Bradford is here, you can finalize the renewal contracts with him," Aiden told the representatives smoothly.

Everyone sat down around the table. As Aiden had said, they had come today not only to renew the contracts but also to settle their outstanding payments. They were waiting for Vance's signature.

"I've reviewed the contract Mr. Hodge sent me. No issues. We'll continue working together as usual," Vance said, frowning slightly. "As for the payments... You know our current situation. It's really..."

Aiden forced a smile. "We understand, but the payment deadline is approaching, so..."

"Let's push it back a few days," Vance suggested. "There are still a couple of days left, right?"

"Could you sign first?" one of the representatives asked.

"Let's do everything together-sign the new contract, settle the old payments, and handle the new project deposit at the same time," Vance replied, handing the documents back.

The representatives looked at Aiden, who said smoothly, "Then we'll wait a few more days. It's not a big deal."

The meeting ended, and everyone left the conference room. A flash of ruthlessness crossed Aiden's eyes.

Lucas arrived and greeted Aiden, but the latter ignored him, which made him feel bad.

Vance was still in the conference room. Lucas walked in with a dejected look. "Vance..."

He then recounted everything about Aiden's divorce and how Catherine had been kicked out of the house. "Aiden wants to cut ties with me because I helped Sonia."

He was genuinely upset. Aiden had really stopped speaking to him. At first, he had thought those were just angry words.

Vance stared at Lucas, his mind replaying scenes of them playing basketball in college, starting the company together, celebrating their first successes, and encouraging each other through tough times.

Those passionate days and shared struggles were gone forever. He didn't know where things had gone wrong.

Was it because he hadn't been good enough? Or had the ruthless tide of vanity finally washed everything away?

"Lucas..." he muttered with genuine sadness. "If only..."

He paused mid-sentence, suddenly catching a glimpse of a corner of cloth flickering at the door. He changed his words. "If we can't survive the pressure Gabriel is putting on us, what then?"

"Huh?" Lucas blinked. "We start over. What's the big deal? We've faced tougher times before. As long as the three of us stick together, I believe we can get through anything."

Vance gave a small, bitter laugh and lowered his head, hiding the tears that had welled up in his eyes.

"And what about Cathy?" Lucas asked quietly. "She's pregnant. Aren't you going to check on her?"

Vance steadied his emotions. When he looked up again, his eyes were clear.

He stared at the shadow outside the room and declared, "Of course, I'll check on her. She's doing fine right now," (3

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Chapter 425

Aiden paused outside the room, almost certain Vance was putting on an act.

He wondered if Vance had found out about everything he had done over the past few years. Anyway, he couldn't just sit and wait.

He needed to figure out what Vance knew. But how could he test the waters? There was only one person he could use.

When he came to find Catherine, she was still sulking. But the moment he handed her 100,000 dollars in cash, her anger vanished.

“You’re the mother of my child. I won’t abandon you,” he said, playing the emotional card.

She felt better, even thinking that she might have to stick with Aiden in the end. After all, she was carrying his child.

If she stayed with Vance, that landmine would eventually explode, and when it did, she would have nowhere to run.

As her tone softened, Aiden began his performance, downing wine one glass after another.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

He sighed dramatically and refused to speak. Finally, he pretended he was at the end of his rope and explained what he needed her to do.

She was reluctant. Doing that meant fully betraying Vance. Even though she had decided to side with Aiden, she still couldn’t bring herself to cut off Vance completely.

“I really don’t have any other choice. This is the only way to save the company,” he said, working hard to brainwash her. “We’ve offended Rossi deeply; he’ll definitely come after us. Should we just go down with Vance? Do you want to go back to those poor days when we had to share a loaf of bread?”

Of course, she didn’t want that. If she could handle hardship, she never would have left them and gone abroad when she was in her early 20s.

Now she was approaching 30. There was no way she’d turn the clock back and end up worse off. Besides, Vance had told her he only had 10,000 dollars left.

She was still hesitating when he dropped the heavy artillery. “Right now, I need to know what leverage Vance has so I can figure out how to handle it. Once I get past this crisis, I can ride Rossi’s coattails and make it big! Otherwise, I’m finished, and so are you.”

He paused deliberately. “Let’s be honest. I’m not the type who can share the good times or the bad. If I go down, I’ll make sure everyone knows the truth about that baby.”

The malice in his tone left her with no choice. She could only do what he told her.

The very next day, she invited Vance out for dinner and booked a private room at a restaurant. That evening, the two of them arrived one after the other.

Right after they entered, a car pulled up and parked across the street.

Inside the car sat Rebecca, the baby-faced young man, and two men in black suits. After parking, one of the men in black got out and went into the restaurant.

He exchanged a quick look with another man, who had been tailing Catherine. The latter nodded, indicating everything was going as planned.

Inside the private room, Catherine waited anxiously until Vance finally arrived.

She greeted him softly. Vance smiled and sat down across from her. They exchanged some fake pleasantries, then started looking at the menu.

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Chapter 426

That was when Vance suddenly realized his phone was missing.

“Your phone is gone? Did you leave it in the car? Go check,” Catherine said, glancing at the laptop Vance had brought with him.

He frowned. “I’ll go take a look.”

He stood up and left the room, taking the laptop with him. She stared at him in disbelief.

Why would he take the laptop just to check the car? How was she supposed to look through his files now? She had thought it would be a good chance.

Before Vance could walk out of the hallway, the door to another private room suddenly opened. Someone clamped a hand over his mouth and dragged him inside, then quickly shut the door.

“Mr. Bradford, please cooperate. We won’t hurt you,” the person whispered behind him.

Meanwhile, Catherine was racking her brain inside the room, trying to figure out her next move.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. “Room service.”

“Come in,” she answered irritably.

A server in a white shirt and bow tie walked in holding a phone. “Excuse me, is this your friend’s phone?”

He asked about it at the front desk. We found it for him.”

Catherine looked over and recognized Vance’s phone. Now was her chance.

She nodded quickly. “Yes, that’s his.”

The server was cautious. “Sorry, how can you prove it’s his?”

“Oh, that’s easy.” She pulled out her phone. “I’ll just call him. My number is…”

She recited her number. “When I call, check if it’s my number ringing. He has me saved as Cathy or Cathy Babe.”

She dialed Vance’s number. Sure enough, the phone in the server’s hand rang, showing “Cathy Babe” on the screen.

Only then did the server believe her and set the phone down.

“Where is he?” Catherine asked, clutching Vance’s phone with a racing heart.

She hoped he wouldn’t come back too soon.

“Oh, he stepped out. Said he was going to check the car.”

“Okay, thank you.”

She hoped the server would leave quickly and stop wasting her time. Once he was gone, she started frantically going through Vance’s phone.

But when she tried the password, it didn’t work. He had changed it.

“What now?” She was already nervous, and now she was completely flustered.

She immediately called Aiden, who thought that changing the password was normal. Otherwise, he would have suspected Vance was setting a trap.

“Try something else,” he suggested.

Catherine tried Vance’s birthday. Still, it was wrong.

“I can’t keep guessing. What if it locks the phone? He might come back any second.”

“Try Rebecca’s birthday. Do you know?”

“I do.”

On Rebecca's birthday, Vance had posted something on social media for the first time.

She quickly entered Rebecca's birthday, and the phone unlocked.

"It worked!" she exclaimed, feeling bitter inside.

"Hurry up. Check the files, chat records, emails-anything related to me. Take screenshots and send them to me," he urged.

She was already looking, but there was nothing.

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Chapter 427

"Maybe you're overthinking it," Catherine said. "Vance has always valued our friendship. He used to say we were the closest thing he had to family. How could he suspect you?"

"You said 'used to' yourself," Aiden said. "You're useless. Turn on the video. Point the camera at his phone so I can check."

She cursed him under her breath but opened the video call anyway. She searched every app and folder for anything related to Aiden. There was nothing.

She went through his email several times-even some of his business correspondence. Still, nothing was connected to Aiden.

"That's impossible. Doesn't he suspect anything at all?" Aiden muttered to himself, then remembered something. "Check if he has another account logged in!"

She followed his instructions and found a secondary account.

"That's it! Switch to it!"

"It won't let me. There's a secondary"

"That's suspicious enough!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Try guessing the password."

So, they started another round of password guessing. Nothing worked-not Rebecca's birthday, not combinations of their birthdays, nothing.

Her head pounded. "It's not working! The password is a mix of numbers, letters, and symbols. We could try forever and never get it."

“Wait, let me think. Try this!”

He gave her a combination of letters, numbers, and symbols. It worked!

“What kind of magic combination was that?”

“His old gaming account password from college. Stop talking and keep looking!”

Catherine discovered an email from a week ago, titled: [Regarding some matters concerning Mr. Hodge.]

“Open it!” Aiden said urgently.

Clicking on it revealed a long list of attachments. She opened the preview and froze.

They were all evidence of how Aiden had set up shell companies, committed embezzlement, and siphoned off huge amounts of company funds.

There was also a note: [These are only the tip of the iceberg, but they might serve as a warning so you can dig deeper.]

“You... You took so much money?” Catherine exclaimed. “Are you richer than Vance now?”

“You idiot! All you care about is money!” Aiden cursed, ending the video call.

He was on hot bricks. It didn’t matter who had sent the email. What mattered was that Vance had got evidence. That explained why he had refused to settle the payments with those outsourcing companies.

The video call cut off right as Vance walked back into the room. Catherine still had his phone in her hand, and the email page was still open.

She quickly locked the screen. He didn’t speak, just looked at her.

She forced a smile. “The server found your phone and gave it to me. I was just checking to make sure it was really yours.”

“Give it to me,” he said, holding out his hand.

“W-What?”

“My phone.”

“Uh... It’s nothing.”

Her smile faltered, and her facial muscles were twitching.

“That is my phone. What do you mean by nothing?”

She refused to let go at first, but her strength couldn't compare to his. When she couldn't hold on, she quickly clutched her belly.

“Ow, my belly hurts...”

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Chapter 428

But Vance acted as if he hadn't heard her cries. He calmly unlocked his phone and saw that it was still open to the email page-even the attachment preview was visible.

“It's our baby... It really hurts...” Catherine groaned, hoping to distract him from realizing she had been snooping through his phone.

He remained unmoved and watched her coldly. She braced herself against the table and struggled to stand up. “If you don't care about our baby anymore, I'll go to the hospital by myself. It hurts so much...”

She used the classic push-and-pull tactic. Vance simply sat down and watched her performance.

She lingered instead of leaving, waiting for him to comfort her. But all she got was one cold sentence.

“Aren't you going? I thought Aiden was waiting for you.”

“W-What are you talking about?”

“Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“You mean looking into your phone? Aiden asked me to do it. I'm sorry. You're not going to get mad over something so small, right?”

He interrupted her dramatic performance.

“I was talking about your ache. Shouldn't you call the baby's father to take you to the hospital?”

Her mind went blank, and her eyes bulged with shock.

“A-Aren't you the father?”

“Am I? Should we do a paternity test?”

She choked up, feeling as though someone had grabbed her by the throat. After a long silence, she stammered, “It was Aiden! He is evil! He raped me...”

She started crying. “It happened that night when the three of us were drinking. You got drunk and passed out. That bastard raped me. I was so angry. I wanted to call the police, but he came up with a plan. If he made you think something had happened between us, you would divorce Rebecca. Later, when I got pregnant, he told me to marry you. That way, everything you owned would become ours.”

She kept talking while observing his expression. When he remained unmoved, she started wailing. “I’m telling the truth. You gotta believe me. I love you so much. How could I ever lie to you? It was all Aiden forcing me.”

“He forced you? You never wanted to lie to me?” Vance repeated her words and found them almost laughable.

Brotherly loyalty? Pure love? He had believed all those carefully woven lies. How stupid could he be!

“Yes, I’ve always been sincere toward you. I never wanted to deceive you.”

“Then how do you explain the volunteer work and the paper cranes?”

Her crying stopped abruptly, as if someone had grabbed her by the neck. 2

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Chapter 429

For a moment, Catherine thought she was doomed.

Vance had found out everything. He would never let her go.

But to her shock, after a burst of cold laughter, he simply stood up and walked out, leaving her alone in the private room.

After a brief daze, she quickly called Aiden. “Aiden! What do we do? Vance knows everything! He knows the baby is yours. He knows that I wasn’t that volunteer in high school and that I didn’t fold those paper cranes. What am I supposed to do?”

Aiden hung up without a word. She tried calling him again, only to find he had blocked her number.

Her heart sank to the bottom. “How could this happen? How could things turn out like this? He promised to take care of the baby and me. Said better days are ahead.”

“Aiden, you bastard!” she screamed, but no one would coax her anymore.

Outside the restaurant, Vance realized the servers who had grabbed him earlier had already disappeared.

He smiled wistfully. None of this complicated game was necessary. If she had just asked, he would have done anything for her.

His phone hadn’t been lost by accident. Someone had taken it when he walked in. When he had gone out to look for it, two men had pulled him into another private room.

He had thought it was a robbery, but instead, someone brought his phone back in-the same person who had stolen it while disguised as a server.

They had told him to cooperate, which meant resetting his phone password, resetting his email password, and logging into a new email account on his phone.

The new email wasn’t his. He had no idea what was in it until the phone was returned to him. They had him set a password that was complicated but still something Aiden and Lucas could eventually guess if they tried hard enough.

He used his old gaming account password from college, not sure what they were planning to do, as the fake server took the newly configured phone out.

A short while later, they brought him to the door of the original room and told him he could go back in.

When he walked in, he saw Catherine hunched over his phone on a video call. Only then did he realize that the email they had logged into contained an email from a week ago.

It was an old account full of spam. The only important email was the one titled “Regarding some matters concerning Mr. Hodge.”

It had a long list of attachments with titles that clearly suggested evidence of Aiden’s crimes. The sender was an unknown address.

Because Vance had returned so quickly, the attachments hadn’t been opened yet, but the titles alone were shocking enough.

When he stepped outside the restaurant, he noticed a car across the street slowly pulling out of its parking spot. He suddenly understood whose car it was, who was inside, and who those so-called servers and kidnappers had really been.

He didn't know what she was planning, but none of this elaborate scheme had been necessary. All she had to do was call him, and he would cooperate with anything she wanted.

After seeing Vance leave the restaurant, Rebecca turned to the driver. "That's enough. Let's go."

The baby-faced young man was still puzzled. "Ms. Perry, wouldn't it have been simpler to just send those emails directly to Aiden?"

The whole plan involved so many twists and turns.

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Chapter 430

"Aiden is paranoid," Rebecca explained patiently. "If we sent the emails directly, he would immediately think it was a trap. It's much more convincing if he discovers them through his own efforts. That's the first reason. The second reason is even more important."

"What is it?" the baby-faced young man asked curiously.

"I don't really have any evidence," Rebecca chuckled. "When did you ever give me solid proof? I just made up the filenames. The attachments are all nursery rhymes!"

The young man was stunned. "I-I thought you had real evidence!"

Rebecca shook her head. It had only been a bluff.

She hadn't been sure whether Vance knew about Aiden's betrayal, but it didn't matter. What she was doing had nothing to do with Vance's feelings and didn't require real evidence.

She only needed to make Aiden panic and give away the racket.

"Wow!" the young man exclaimed. "That was risky. Thankfully, Mr. Bradford came back in time. If they had opened the attachments, the whole thing would have fallen apart."

Rebecca brushed it off. "You call yourself a computer expert? The attachments had their own download password."

The young man facepalmed. "I completely blanked out. Looks like I'm not cut out for the big leagues."

"You are," Rebecca said. "I promised Vivian that I would give you two a chance."

Aiden never expected to find Catherine waiting for him at his doorstep.

The moment she saw him, she started swinging her handbag at him and screaming curses nonstop. He dodged for a while, then grabbed the bag, yanked it hard, and flung her to the ground.

“Where the hell have you been, you heartless bastard? Are you just going to abandon your child and me?” she screamed, still trying to hit him with the bag.

He blocked the bag with his arm and looked down at her. The tight frown on his face suddenly relaxed. He squatted down in front of her, his expression full of feigned distress.

“Why do you think I’ve been avoiding you? It’s all for your good!”

“Bullshit! You just want to dump us!”

He put on a heartbroken look. “You saw the emails on Vance’s phone. Don’t you get what’s happening? I’m about to go down. Staying away is a form of protection. I can’t drag you down with me. Listen to me. Just terminate the pregnancy and find an honest man to marry. Or go beg Vance to take you back.”

She paused, knowing how absurd it sounded. Vance didn’t want her anymore.

“You’re really going to prison? There’s no way out? What about all that money you have?”

“All you ever think about is money! Forget about it! All that money is going to be frozen and seized. I’m going to prison. There’s no point in sticking with me anymore.”

Her face drained of color.

“Is there really no other way?”

“Well... There is one way.”

A spark of hope flashed in her eyes. “W-What?”

“Make sure the people who know keep their mouths shut,” he replied, a ruthless light flashing in his eyes.

She shivered under his venomous gaze.

He added, “I’m counting on you. Vance is suspicious of me now. He won’t let me into his office anymore.”

Nancy went to the supermarket to buy groceries, as usual. After she finished picking out some fish and turned around, she almost collided with someone.

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Chapter 431

The moment Nancy turned around and saw who was standing there, the groceries in her hands slipped and crashed to the ground.

It was none other than Catherine. She smirked. “Transferred your daughter to a new school?”

Nancy’s face turned pale in an instant.

Catherine giggled viciously. “You think that would stop me from finding her?”

Nancy’s voice trembled. “W-What do you want?”

Catherine stepped closer, her perfume heavy and cloying. “Help me with one little thing. Otherwise, your dear daughter will be in trouble.”

Nancy clenched her teeth. “Why wouldn’t you leave me alone? I’m just a housekeeper.”

“Too bad you crossed paths with me.”

“You’re a monster! You’ll go to hell!”

“What can you do about it? Now come with me to the café outside. Immediately!”

Nancy dragged her feet the whole way, and Catherine grew impatient. “Try any tricks, and your daughter will have a very ugly end. Give me your phone. Turn it off. Don’t even think about recording anything.”

Nancy reluctantly handed over her phone.

“Now listen carefully...”

Catherine gave her a long list of instructions, then handed her a paper bag. Nancy took it with shaking hands.

“Oh, right,” Catherine added. “I had a friend visit your hometown last month. What’s your husband’s name again? Maybe I should have them pay him a little visit?”

Nancy’s face grew even paler, and Catherine laughed with satisfaction.

“I’m sure you’ll make the right choice. Think about your daughter.”

That evening, Catherine and Aiden huddled together, both restless and on edge.

“You got a housekeeper to handle this?” he snapped. “What were you thinking?”

“Or what?” she shot back. “How was I supposed to get inside their house? If you’re so smart, why didn’t you do it yourself?”

“I...” He swallowed his anger.

Why hadn’t he done it himself? Precisely so there would be a scapegoat if things went south.

Just then, his phone rang.

His assistant reported, “Boss, it looks like they’ve been taken to the hospital!”

“The hospital?” Catherine jumped up.

“Let’s go find out,” Aiden said.

Catherine didn’t rush it. Instead, she searched online and eventually located a buried topic-a screenshot of a chat between someone claiming to be a nursing worker and his friend.

The former complained about his busy day, as four members of the same family had been rushed in after poisoning, overwhelming the emergency room.

His friend asked how the rescue was going.

The nursing worker replied: [It’s touch and go. They’re all in the ICU, unconscious. No one knows if they’ll wake up.]

“Four people?” Aiden muttered. “Is it them?”

“If you include Vance, that makes exactly four,” Catherine said.

“We still need to go to the hospital and see for ourselves,” Aiden insisted.

But before they could leave, Lucas called, his voice choked with sobs. “Aiden, something terrible happened! Vance was poisoned! His family, I mean, ex-wife’s family, was all poisoned! They’re in the hospital right now. It was some kind of chemical toxin. The doctors say they might never wake up!”

”

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Chapter 432

Aiden returned to his seat at the board meeting. Vance's hospitalization had been confirmed by Lucas, who had visited the hospital.

The directors were worried, asking how Vance was doing.

"He's still in the hospital. The doctors can't tell when or if he'll wake up," Lucas said anxiously. "But several important decisions still need his approval, and some critical contracts need his signature. What do we do now?"

Aiden knew the truth: once someone was poisoned with this substance, waking up was almost impossible. At best, they'd be in a deep coma forever.

"Let's wait for now," Aiden suggested. "If Mr. Bradford still hasn't woken up, the board will discuss the way forward together"

Lucas sighed, knowing this was the only way. After all, Vance had no heirs and no designated successor.

Aiden continued, "But some payments and obligations still need to be fulfilled according to the contracts. Shouldn't we, as vice presidents, sign those for now? Several outsourcing companies are expecting their payment. They're small firms that can't be strung along."

"No," Lucas objected immediately. "Any outgoing payment requires Mr. Bradford's final signature. We can't do it like this."

Aiden suppressed his irritation. "He can't sign anything right now, can he?"

"Didn't we agree to wait for a few days?" Lucas countered. "He is still in the hospital. We can't act like he's already gone."

They argued fiercely over the matter. Aiden grew frustrated, silently calling Lucas stubborn, pedantic, and downright stupid.

One of the directors spoke up. "Mr. Bradford is ill, yet instead of showing concern, Mr. Hodge seems awfully eager to settle these payments."

"Yeah!" Lucas echoed.

"I..." Aiden gritted his teeth, silently calling them old fossils. But on the surface, he remained polite. "I'm just worried about our business operations."

Another director expressed his concern. “And how did Mr. Bradford end up poisoned along with his ex- wife? They’re divorced. He has no contact with them anymore.”

“I’ve no idea.” Aiden shook his head. “Maybe they got back together. Who knows?”

His tone was light and unconcerned.

Catherine had assured him everything was taken care of. Even if the matter was traced, the housekeeper would confess with a made-up story.

If she were cooperative, Catherine promised to cover all of Cecilia’s living expenses, send the girl abroad to study, and make sure her husband could never find them.

But if she dared to expose them, not only would she go to prison as the poisoner, but Cecilia would be left alone to sink or swim.

In any case, she would take the fall.

After the meeting, Aiden left the office whistling cheerfully.

He was going to meet Wade, who would take him to a luncheon and press conference at Rossi Enterprises.

Since neither Gabriel nor Vance would be waking up, he had no idea if the company’s plans would change. Anyway, he would make sure things went in his favor.

Whether Rossi Enterprises stayed in Soliaridge or not didn’t matter. He had successfully latched onto Wade and secured a ticket to future cooperation. He just needed to keep this rich, naïve heir on a tight leash.

According to Wade, Rossi only held a grudge against Vance and welcomed real talent with open arms.

Aiden sneered, no longer needing their acceptance. The real question was whether Rossi Enterprises could even survive the press conference or remain in Soliaridge at all.

A malicious sense of glee surged through him. He had planned to share the boundless fortune with Lucas, but the latter’s attitude had left him cold.

With these complicated feelings, he headed to the venue and entered with his invitation. The moment he walked in, he saw Wade sitting and talking quietly with Hugo, the CEO of Rossi Enterprises. 2

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Chapter 433

“Mr. Hodge has arrived,” Wade said, standing up to greet Aiden.

Hugo smiled at him as well.

Several other executives from partner companies were also present. They seemed to be here to discuss future cooperation and attend the upcoming press conference.

Aiden stepped forward and shook hands with them. Their normal, polite attitude eased his worries.

Before long, Hugo took the stage to deliver the opening speech. “Mr. Rossi was supposed to host everyone, but a family emergency caught him. So, I’m here on his behalf. I hope you can understand.”

By now, almost everyone present had heard rumors about the poisoning. From Hugo’s words, they guessed it was true, though no one dared say it out loud.

What concerned them was the future of Rossi Enterprises. If Rossi was really poisoned, would the project still proceed?

When someone asked about their plans, Hugo answered carefully, “We’ll have Mr. Rossi address that later. Let’s wait for him.”

Aiden sneered inwardly. “Wait for Rossi? You’ll be waiting forever.”

The Rossi family was huge, and Gabriel was the only American descendant in his branch. If something happened to him, the family leadership would shift, and the company might abandon its plans for Soliaridge.

Hugo then announced the start of the luncheon.

Aiden hadn’t eaten or slept well these past few days. He finally felt like he could enjoy a proper meal.

He sat with Wade and struck up a conversation. “Mr. Nolan, you’re still quite young. You haven’t been in this industry for very long, have you?”

“No,” Wade replied modestly. “I started by interning at your company. Later, when I started my own firm, I got lucky and was selected by Rossi Enterprises.”

More people gathered around, flattering him. “Young and talented! Your future is limitless!”

Wade smiled humbly, praising Aiden. “Mr. Hodge is the real deal in our industry. I learned a lot while working at his company.”

The crowd laughed. “You used to work as an employee?”

They tried hard to curry favor with Wade, since his company had been chosen by Rossi Enterprises as the partner.

Aiden felt a surge of jealousy and sneered inwardly. “What a joke! The higher you lift him now, the harder he’ll fall.”

When Hugo wasn’t around, some people couldn’t resist bringing up the rumor.

Wade hesitated. “About that... I really don’t know.”

Aiden chuckled, and someone asked, “Mr. Hodge, do you know something?”

“I don’t know about Mr. Rossi’s situation, but Mr. Bradford...” he sighed.

He didn’t finish his words, but that was all the confirmation they needed. If the rumor about Vance was true, so should be the one about Rossi.

Someone even revealed that the toxin involved was no ordinary poison, and the atmosphere grew tense.

Unwilling to participate in the discussion, Wade stood up to get a drink. The others gathered around Aiden and pressed him for answers.

“With Mr. Bradford in the hospital, how are your operations now?”

“You have three founders. Now that one is out of commission, who’s in charge?”

Aiden smiled without answering. Everyone understood the implication and quietly returned to eating.

In the business world, opportunists were never in short supply. Survival was hard. If there was any chance to climb up, they would take it.

Some people began currying favor with Aiden, calling him a rising star and the future leader of the industry, in exchange for favors once he took the helm.

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Chapter 434

The flattery made Aiden feel immensely pleased. He knew these were empty words, but who didn't enjoy hearing them?

He watched Hugo networking with the various company representatives and sneered inwardly.

Soon, the press conference started, and reporters swarmed in. He had heard the event would be livestreamed. It was going to be quite a show.

When everyone had eaten their fill, the staff came to invite them to take their seats for the press conference.

Once inside the hall, Aiden looked around. Name cards marked every seat, but his seat was not in the front row.

The two people who had just been praising him were seated on the side, but still ahead of him.

"Mr. Hodge, your seat is over here!" one of them said, clueless or deliberate.

Just moments ago, the same man had fawned all over him. Aiden sat down, simmering with anger.

The front row was reserved for important figures-high-ranking officials and the partners Rossi Enterprises had selected.

Aiden sneered inwardly. "The more heavyweight the guests, the better."

He'd like to see how Hugo would handle this.

The hall gradually filled up, and the press conference began. Aiden turned his head and spotted Catherine lurking among the media crowd.

He mouthed, "What are you doing here?"

That was a meaningless question. Of course, she had come to watch the show.

She hated Rossi with every fiber of her being and would like to see Rossi Enterprises discredited.

The emcee took the stage and announced the start of the press conference.

After the officials delivered the opening speeches, Rossi Enterprises was supposed to present its vision and plans.

Everyone was expecting Rossi, but it was Hugo who took the stage and delivered a long, impressive speech.

Next was the Q&A session. Aiden smirked and waited eagerly for the fun.

A reporter stood up and asked, “Mr. Ballard, this is Rossi Enterprises’ first public appearance, livestreamed online and much anticipated. It’s such an important event. Why isn’t Mr. Rossi here?”

Prepared for that question, Hugo nodded politely. “Mr. Rossi had a small emergency, so...”

“What kind of emergency could be more important than this press conference?” the reporter interrupted. “Rossi Enterprises is establishing itself in Soliaridge and has received attention and welcome from millions of people here. We’ve even offered many preferential policies to welcome patriots back home. Yet Mr. Rossi casually skips such an important event. Does that mean he lacks sincerity? Is his patriotism just an image?”

This heavy accusation caused many faces to darken.

The media held the pen, and with self-media outlets everywhere, there was no telling how this clip would be twisted and spread.

Hugo seemed momentarily at a loss. He could only manage, “Mr. Rossi is not that kind of person.”

The reporter pressed, “It’s not judged by what you say but by what he does. Mr. Rossi hasn’t shown us any sincerity.”

Aiden snickered as he watched Hugo being cornered. “You were so arrogant before, Rossi. How are you going to handle this now?”

The reporter had been arranged by Aiden. He wasn’t from a major outlet, but in the age of the internet, it didn’t matter.

Finally, the emcee stepped in to end that line of questioning. But before he could call the next one, the reporter handed the microphone to another person, who was also arranged by Aiden.

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Chapter 435

The new reporter took the microphone and demanded, “Mr. Rossi once said that his so-called patriotism was just about making money. How do you explain that statement?”

Hugo was taken aback and replied urgently, “No. Mr. Rossi has never said anything like that.”

Hugo could swear that Gabriel had returned out of a sincere desire for his mother to return to her roots. Everyone had a hometown, and his grandmother was still there. The purpose of coming back was to lay a foundation.

If he succeeded, he could give his mother a home she could return to anytime. And if he failed, that would be another story.

But Hugo’s explanation didn’t stop the reporter from pressing, “Really? Returning to his roots? Then please explain why Mr. Rossi said that.”

“He never said it!” Hugo stressed.

Aiden snickered once again. Of course, Rossi had never said that.

It was simply a setup. Sometimes, the truth didn’t matter. A lie told often enough became a fact.

After this press conference, paid trolls would spread the claim and make it a fact.

The officials in the front rows looked increasingly displeased. A good press conference had turned into a mess.

Camera flashes went off nonstop. Even more outrageous questions followed, eventually turning into outright insults. The situation spiraled out of control, and the emcee was flustered.

A sharp voice cut through the chaos. “I represent the people of Soliaridge and demand that Rossi Enterprises get out of our city!”

Aiden turned to see Catherine standing in the crowd, waving her arms dramatically. Yet in that dire situation, Hugo suddenly calmed down.

He took the microphone from the emcee and declared, “Ladies and gentlemen, we returned to our homeland with sincere hearts. Today we also came with full sincerity to openly share our plans with the public and the media so that everyone who cares about us can know what we intend to do and supervise whether we deliver.”

After a pause, he continued, “I believe most people support us. Only a few members of the media have misunderstood us. I’ve got two points to make. First, Mr. Rossi never said anything about returning just to make money. If you believe otherwise, please provide evidence. Spreading rumors carries legal responsibility. Can I randomly say that you borrowed one million dollars from me and ask you to repay it today?”

Laughter erupted throughout the hall, but he remained serious, “Second, everyone seems curious why Mr. Rossi hasn’t appeared today. We didn’t plan to make this public, but since we came with full sincerity, let’s be open and honest.”

He glanced at the accusing reporter. “You may not have evidence, but we do.”

Everyone had heard rumors about the poisoning. They thought Hugo was about to address it, but instead, he played an audio recording.

A conversation then echoed throughout the hall.

“Miss Welch, please let me go. Why do you keep coming after me?”

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Chapter 436

Aiden’s heart jolted. He quickly looked at Catherine, whose face had gone ghastly pale.

“That idiot!” he cursed silently.

The recording continued playing.

“Try any tricks, and your daughter will have a very ugly end! Give me your phone. Turn it off. Don’t even think about recording anything.”

“Now listen carefully. I have a packet of medicine here. Put it in their food or drinking water. Make sure both Rebecca and Rossi ingest it. I’ll give you five million dollars for the job. In addition, I’ll arrange for you and your daughter to go abroad. I’ll fund her studies and keep her far away from your husband. He’ll never be able to find you.”

“What kind of medicine? What will happen if they take it?”

“They’ll either die or stay unconscious forever. If you can’t bear the guilt, you can die with them. I’ll take care of your daughter.”

“I’m just a housekeeper. I can’t do something like this. I’m scared.”

“Scared? Aren’t you scared when I go to your daughter’s school? Don’t play games with me, and transferring schools won’t help. No matter where she goes, I can find her. You don’t want anything to happen to her, do you? Of course, I won’t kill her. I’ll just find a few kids to bully her every day.”

Then came the sound of Nancy crying.

“Stop crying! Your employers aren’t dead yet. Also, if the matter gets exposed and the police come investigating, you will take the blame. Make up any reason and leave me out of it. Don’t worry, though. If you go to prison, I’ll give the money to your daughter and send her abroad to study.”

“But if you rat me out... Remember, you’re the one who poisoned them. You’ll still go to prison. The only difference is I’ll be there with you. Your daughter will have nothing and no one. Who knows? She might end up dying in some ditch somewhere.”

Hugo paused the recording and spoke. “I believe everyone has understood why Mr. Rossi could not attend today. We returned to our homeland with sincere hearts, never imagining we would encounter such a villain. Mr. Rossi has never offended this lady, yet she threatened the housekeeper into harming him and his family.”

The moment Catherine heard the first sentence of the recording, her mind went blank. “That bitch! She recorded it? How? I took her phone.”

As the recording continued, she realized she was done for. She didn’t even dare shout for it to stop; that would only confirm her identity.

Flustered, she decided to get out of there. But before leaving, she would make Nancy pay for betraying her.

She glanced at Aiden, who was sitting there stunned. That only strengthened her resolve. With his cold, selfish nature, once he recovered from the shock, he would be the first one to destroy her.

She crouched low, trying to hide among the crowd, and quietly backed toward the exit. Unfortunately, the security guards blocked the doors.

Several police officers appeared and walked straight toward her. In her desperation, she grabbed a guard’s sleeve, clutched her belly, and pleaded, “Please, let me go. I’m pregnant. My belly hurts so much!”

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The security guard frowned. “That’s exactly why we can’t let you leave. What if something happens to you on the way? We’ll call 911 for you.”

Catherine cursed under her breath and tried to bolt past the guard, hoping to hide in the bathroom until the police left.

But it was too late. The officers had already reached her.

“Excuse me, are you Catherine Welch?” one of them asked.

Her face drained of color, and she shook her head frantically. “No. You’ve got the wrong person.”

“Your ID, please,” the officer pressed.

She clutched her bag. “I-I don’t remember.”

But everyone had to enter their ID to get into the venue. The lie obviously didn’t hold up.

The guard suggested facial recognition, finally driving her to the edge. She turned and screamed, “Aiden, save me! Aiden!”

The man nearly lost his mind. This crazy woman was dragging him down with her.

She kept on. “Don’t you dare ignore me, you bastard! It was you...”

“Catherine!” His voice pierced through the chaos. He ran over, looking heartbroken. “I never expected you to be cruel! How could you do this?”

His eyes flashed with murderous intent, as if one more word from her would make him strangle her on the spot.

“You’re so disappointing!” he lamented, full of pain. “When you came back from abroad, the three of us treated you like our little sister. We always thought you were kind and gentle. How could you try to kill Rebecca and her family because of Vance? You...”

He spoke loudly, planting the idea that this was a crime of passion. The other nodded, remembering the scandal involving Catherine and the Bradford couple.

Catherine stared at him in shock. This bastard was throwing her under the bus and even providing a motive for her.

“Damn you!” she cursed.

He dramatically pulled her into a hug and wailed, “But no matter what, you’re still our best friend. Don’t worry. I’ll hire the best lawyers for you. Just cooperate with the investigation and tell the truth. We won’t abandon you, but you need to help yourself first.”

Catherine understood the implication. He would try to save her, but if she said anything she shouldn’t, he would sit by and watch her rot in prison.

He could go down with her or just silence her to get out of it.

He turned to the officers and pleaded, “She is pregnant. Please be gentle with her and make sure she takes care of herself.”

Catherine understood the hint. Her pregnancy made her eligible for bail, but she needed to behave. She hated it, but he was the only person she could rely on now, even though he was a viper.

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Catherine finally fell silent, her eyes pleading with him to save her.

Aiden breathed a sigh of relief, but the officers didn’t leave.

The commotion had already attracted the attention of far too many real reporters. Such explosive audio was far more newsworthy than the press conference itself.

Since it was being livestreamed, the internet had already exploded. The reporters swarmed around Aiden and Catherine, desperate for the scoop and traffic.

“Mr. Hodge, can you tell us what’s going on?”

“Did Miss Welch really try to poison Mr. Bradford’s ex-wife and her family out of jealousy?”

“May I ask how Mr. Rossi and his family are doing now?”

“Mr. Bradford didn’t attend either. Was he also poisoned?”

All kinds of questions flew at them. The microphones were practically shoved into Aiden’s face.

It was a mob, and the officers were almost pushed aside. Catherine wasn’t spared either.

“Miss Welch, why did you instruct the housekeeper to poison Mr. Rossi’s family?”

“Are you and Mr. Bradford together?”

“Do you know why Mr. Bradford didn’t come today?”

Catherine’s mind was in turmoil. She had no idea how to respond and could only look at Aiden for guidance.

Afraid she might spill the beans, he quickly took over. “About the truth of this matter, we trust the police. They will not wrong a good person, nor will they let a bad one go free.”

“So, are you saying Miss Welch has been wrongly accused?” pressed the reporter.

“I-I’m not sure. AI technology is so advanced nowadays. Anything can be synthesized,” he answered evasively, but his words caused another uproar.

“Are you saying that Mr. Ballard’s audio was AI-generated?”

“I didn’t say that. I was only commenting on the current state of technology. And isn’t Rossi Enterprises in this industry? Anyway, let’s wait for the police investigation and further statement. Beyond that, I don’t know anything.”

Just then, the voice of a man cut through the noise. “You don’t know? Then let me tell you!”

With his arrival, both Aiden and Catherine freaked out.

Along with Lucas, Vance made his way through the crowd. The reporters immediately crowded around them, shoving microphones and firing questions.

“Mr. Bradford, rumor has it that you were poisoned. It seems that’s not true. Do you have any comments?”

“Mr. Bradford, how is your ex-wife’s family doing now?”

“Mr. Bradford...”

Not answering, he just politely asked everyone to make way and walked straight to the stage.

“Mr. Ballard, excuse me. Can I borrow the microphone?” he said humbly.

The emcee handed it to him, and the media’s focus shifted back to the stage. Flashes went off nonstop.

“I’m sorry, everyone,” he began. “Today was supposed to be a good day for Rossi Enterprises, but because of me, so much trouble has been caused, and the launch has been delayed.”

He glanced at Aiden and Catherine, then continued, “Some things need to be clarified. Mr. Ballard just played an audio recording. I also have a recording and a surveillance video. Let’s listen and watch them together.”

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The large screen then displayed surveillance footage from Vance's office.

Aiden was dumbfounded, having no idea when Vance had installed those cameras, but it proved Vance had been guarding against him all the time.

What kind of true friends did that?

Catherine was stunned as well. That meant her every move had been captured.

Sure enough, the footage showed her sneaking cautiously through the office, constantly looking around. She added something to the water tank of the purifier and smeared something onto Vance's cup.

Everything was crystal clear.

Vance held the microphone and explained, "The timestamp is visible. From that moment on, I never returned to the office, and no one else entered. Every frame is intact. I will ask the police to investigate what Miss Welch placed there. Now, please listen to this audio recording."

A conversation played on.

"Hello, is this your friend's phone?"

From there, the entire conversation from the night Catherine invited Vance to dinner was played back in full- including how she and Aiden had discussed cracking Vance's phone password, unlocking his email, and checking its contents.

The venue erupted into chaos again.

"When did you record all this?" Catherine screamed. "Why does everyone love recording so much?"

Vance looked at her from across the room. Of course, he would not tell her he had placed a listening device in the private room before he left to find his phone.

Aiden tried to escape, only to be blocked and captured by the officers at the door.

In fact, they had come for both people, but after Catherine's arrest, the reporters and spectators had swarmed over and nearly pushed them out of the crowd.

They couldn't use force casually, since the event was being livestreamed. So, they had stayed in place and waited for a better opportunity to proceed with the arrest.

"Vance, save me!" Catherine screamed as she was dragged out. "You know my heart has always belonged to you. I did everything because I love you."

Her cries faded beneath the wail of the police sirens.

Peace was restored in the hall. The reporters hired by Aiden had slipped away the moment things went south.

On the stage, Vance bowed deeply to everyone. "I know saying sorry won't fix anything, but this is my fault. It caused a series of terrible consequences, damaged the company's reputation, and put Mr. Rossi and his family in danger. It was all because of me,"

His voice choked with emotion,

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With that, Vance stepped down from the stage and left with Lucas.

Hugo returned to the stage and steered the press conference back to Rossi Enterprises' plans and vision. The reporters' questions finally focused on the company's development, their voices echoing from the microphones.

Vance quickened his pace. None of this had anything to do with him anymore.

Lucas chased after him and scrambled into the passenger seat, panting heavily. After catching his breath, he closed his eyes and began crying like a child.

Vance remained silent and impassive as he drove on. Lucas kept on crying until the car pulled up at the company building, following him into the conference room.

Vance's office was sealed off as a crime scene, waiting for the police to collect evidence.

Lucas couldn't stand being alone right now. His fragile heart needed comfort, but Vance opened his laptop and started working.

He plopped down heavily in the seat opposite Vance, unable to hold back. He cried out, "Why? Why did things turn out like this?"

Vance's fingers paused on the keyboard, then continued typing.

Lucas kept crying with his eyes closed. “Why? We swore brotherhood. We promised to share the good times and the bad and to go through thick and thin together! Why did Aiden change?”

Vance kept typing. He also wanted to know why, having no answers for Lucas.

“He wasn’t like this before. Do you remember? In our freshman year, I spent all my parents’ living expenses for the semester on a new computer and phone. You and Aiden supported me the whole time. Aiden would always give me his drumsticks.”

“And remember sophomore year, when we were playing basketball? I fell and hurt my foot. He carried me to the hospital on his back. You two pooled money for my medical bills and took turns staying with me. You helped me with classes and brought me food. I was afraid of holding you back and told you not to come, but Aiden said as long as he had a bite to eat, he wouldn’t let me go hungry.”

“And...”

Vance finally looked up at him. Lucas didn’t continue reminiscing, but he was still heartbroken.

“There are countless stories like that. And Shane calls me Godfather. Didn’t we all agree? When we had kids, the three of us would be godfathers to each other’s children. I’m about to have a child soon. He was supposed to call Aiden Godfather. How did things end up like this?”

Lucas wouldn’t stop crying, but Vance didn’t try to comfort him, knowing it would not work. He had to figure it out himself.

“Go home and rest for a couple of days,” Vance said. “Pull yourself together.”

Lucas regained a bit of composure, but tears still glistened in his eyes. “We’re facing so many problems. How can I rest now?”

He just didn’t get it. “We already have enough money. Compared to our college days when we lost everything and had to share a loaf of bread, we’re so much better off now. How much money is ever enough?” 4

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That was an unsolvable question.

“Thankfully, I didn’t listen when Aiden tried to get me to sign off on those outsourcing company payments in your place,” Lucas sniffled. “Otherwise...”

The thought made him even more upset. He continued painfully. “Why? Why did he set up those shell companies to siphon money? Isn’t everything supposed to belong to all of us?”

Vance let out a heavy sigh. “Why don’t you go home and rest for a while? I’ll sort through the affairs.”

Lucas sniffled again, feeling the immense pressure Vance was under. He clenched his teeth. “I’ll go back to work.”

Vance tried to comfort him, but he added, “No matter what happens, you still have me. We made a promise, and at least I won’t change.”

Vance softened, patting him on the shoulder. Lucas left the office and threw himself into work, not going home until it was dark.

Isabelle sensed his bad mood the moment he walked in and pressed him for answers. At first, he didn’t want to tell her since she was pregnant, but she was relentless.

Finally, he told her everything. But instead of getting mad, she merely snorted, knowing all along Aiden was a bad apple.

Vance and Lucas were just two idiots trusting him fully.

Besides Aiden’s betrayal, Lucas was also worried about the company’s future, but Isabelle wasn’t worried at all.

“What’s the big deal?” She brushed it off. “If the company goes under, just come home and sell tea with me.”

Her composure was shocking. Truthfully, Lucas had very few material desires and didn’t ask much from life. He was only afraid of letting Isabelle and their child down.

“We’re already living very comfortably,” she explained. “Even if things go wrong, we still have that huge plantation. We won’t end up begging on the street.”

She pointed at the watermelon he had just brought home. “Go cut that.”

“Okay.” He nodded, heading to the kitchen.

He hadn’t expected her to already have their backup plan ready. Maybe she had been secretly planning for the company’s collapse all along.

Aiden and Catherine had been arrested, and Rebecca’s departure was imminent.

She didn't know if she would ever come back. And if she did, it was unknown whether she would be in Soliaridge or somewhere else.

They had never actually been poisoned. Ever since Rebecca noticed something off about Nancy, she had sat down and talked with her. Nancy was not an ungrateful person; she told Rebecca everything Catherine had said to her.

In fact, Nancy had already been planning to transfer her daughter to a new school. Vance had previously arranged a private school, but that wasn't the kind of place they could afford.

Now that they had obtained temporary residency, Cecilia could attend a public school. But somehow, Catherine found out.

Rebecca told her not to worry. Since it was still summer vacation, she simply had Nancy bring Cecilia to stay at the house. They could share a room.

Grocery shopping was the only time Nancy needed to step out, so Rebecca gave her a voice recorder and told her to record everything if she ran into Catherine again.

The plan worked. That packet of medicine, along with the recording, eventually became evidence and was handed over to the police.

Rebecca and her family hadn't been poisoned at all. Josette had simply suffered another flare-up of her stomach problems after eating something cold-the same issues left over from the earlier abuse.

She had been admitted to the hospital for observation. The rumors online had been nothing but a smoke screen.

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Chapter 442

In truth, they had prepared for someone to cause trouble at the press conference. They had been waiting for it and welcoming the chaos.

How would the law punish someone who incited intentional harm but failed to cause actual injury? It probably wouldn't be too severe.

But the greater the public impact, the harsher the sentence was likely to be. Not to mention the court of public opinion.

For the past few days, furious condemnation had kept the story trending nonstop. Rebecca just hadn't expected that Catherine would try to harm even Vance.

Where was the so-called true love? But then again, whether those two loved or hated each other and whether they lived or died no longer concerned her.

Once Gabriel finished handling the company matters, they would fly to Europe. School was about to start; they couldn't delay any longer.

Rebecca asked Nancy if she wanted to continue working for them. Even though they wouldn't be living there, the house still needed looking after.

Gabriel would be flying back and forth. He would stay at the house whenever he returned to Soliaridge.

Nancy was more than willing, especially since Cecilia would start commuting to public school. Rebecca allowed the girl to live in the house, which touched Nancy deeply.

So, everything was settled.

On their last day, Rebecca stayed home with Josette, carefully double-checking all the small, scattered items they needed to take.

Vance went to the clinic and waited for her, but she didn't go there that day. He waited until Edwin finished for the day and came out of the consultation room.

"Rebecca didn't show up today," Vance muttered, feeling lost.

"She told me yesterday she wouldn't be coming in." Edwin glanced at him, surprised that he didn't know.

Vance felt both guilty and deeply embarrassed. Still, he couldn't help asking, "How is her recovery? Has the treatment been effective?"

Edwin squinted at him with obvious displeasure. He knew the doctor didn't like him, but he pressed on anyway.

"But she's about to move abroad. Won't that mean interrupting the treatment again?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"Well... I want to sponsor some students to study overseas. They must be one of your students-someone skilled in therapies and rehabilitation. While studying abroad, they could help treat Rebecca. Do you think any of them might be interested?"

Edwin gave him a withering look. Vance grew anxious, unsure what the look meant.

Edwin let out a long breath. "Her family has already come up with a plan. In fact, Mr. Perry has already started the process overseas to open a branch clinic. Even though it's

difficult, he swore to overcome every obstacle and spare no expense. Can you do the same?”

Vance froze, knowing he could not.

He just hadn’t expected Gabriel to go to such lengths, but it was not bad. At least, Rebecca wouldn’t have to suffer anymore.

He smiled bitterly and said goodbye to the doctor. It seemed the rest of his life’s journey would have to be finished alone, but he still desperately wanted to see her one last time.

The next morning, Rebecca set off with Gabriel and Josette.

Nancy stood at the front door, waving tearfully as they departed. Hugo drove them to the airport, and Rebecca had no idea how many bodyguards would be on the same flight.

At the departure hall, she ran into someone unexpected.

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Chapter 443

Vance had come to see her off.

All he had needed was her passport number to look up her flight information. After all, they had once been the closest people in each other’s lives. On some booking apps, they were still listed as family.

Even though their marriage had ended, he couldn’t bring himself to remove that connection. It felt like as long as it stayed there, there was still a thin thread tying them together.

He walked toward her, trying hard to force a smile. However, his facial muscles were stiff, making that impossible.

“I-I came to see Grandma off,” he stammered.

Josette silently shook her head. Everyone knew who he had truly come for.

“Grandma...” He stood in front of her, not daring to meet Rebecca’s eyes. “Take good care of yourself out there.”

He didn’t dare to face Rebecca directly, but as memories flooded back, raw emotion rose in his chest.

His voice cracked as he continued, “Thank you for loving me all those years. I’m sorry I failed your trust and hurt Rebecca. I’ll never have the chance to take care of you again.”

Rebecca stepped in. “This is my grandma. I’ll take care of her, and you don’t have to bother.”

He paused, unable to argue about that. She was right. It really had nothing to do with him anymore because they were divorced.

Her only request after the divorce was that they never see each other again. If they did happen to cross paths, they should treat each other like strangers.

But he couldn’t do that. Even facing her disdain, he was unwilling to walk away.

“If there’s ever anything you need handled back home, just tell me,” he muttered.

“No need,” Gabriel cut in impatiently, shielding both women. “I can do what you can and can’t do. We don’t need your help. Please respect our wishes. Don’t make me say something unpleasant.”

Vance thought of how this man was building a clinic abroad for Rebecca. Of course. With him around, what couldn’t be done?

“Excuse us. We need to get through,” Rebecca said, annoyed by his constant pestering.

Vance silently stepped aside and watched the three head toward security.

“Grandma! It’s your first time abroad! Take good care of yourself! Watch out for the climate change!” he shouted, feeling as if his heart were being torn out with every step they took.

No one responded.

The heart that had risen to his throat fell back down into an endless abyss...

He didn’t leave right away. Instead, he sat in his car in the parking lot, staring blankly at the blue sky and the planes taking off and landing.

Several hours passed. Only when a Virgin Atlantic plane lifted into the sky did his eyes finally focus. That must be their flight.

The weather was perfect. The sky was a clear, almost transparent blue. The sunlight was bright and dazzling.

“Rebecca, take care,” he murmured, squinting against the light.

His eyes burned, and when he touched the corner, his fingertips came away wet. The sunlight was simply too harsh.

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Chapter 444

Rebecca quickly settled into her new life.

Kaitlyn's house was near a park, with a beautiful environment and fresh air. There were gardens in both the front and back-perfect for Josette.

The household was simple with just Kaitlyn, Gabriel, and a few staff members. Before they arrived, the rooms had already been prepared.

Josette's room was on the first floor with large floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the garden.

Rebecca's room was on the second floor with a spacious terrace that held a coffee table, fresh flowers, and even a swing. The interior was decorated in an elegant style that perfectly matched her taste.

Kaitlyn was delighted and took Rebecca on a tour of the house, linking arms with her. "I always wanted a daughter. Now I finally have one."

In truth, Rebecca hadn't had much interaction with Kaitlyn before. From what she had seen of Gabriel, she knew Kaitlyn would treat her and Josette well, but she hadn't expected this level of warmth.

It made sense for Josette, who was her mother, but Rebecca was just her niece. Kaitlyn had even prepared a small house for Rebecca near the school.

She whispered, "This is for you. Don't tell Gabriel."

Gabriel overheard it and laughed. "Why hide it from me? Afraid I'll be jealous of her?"

Then he turned to Rebecca. "My mom is so biased. When I was little, I wanted a nice room, but she said boys should just be clean and tidy. What did I need all that stuff for? When I went to college, I wanted a place near campus, and she told me to earn it myself."

Kaitlyn chuckled. "Nonsense."

But Rebecca felt overwhelmed to receive something so precious. It was good enough to live with them.

She had planned to rent something near campus during her studies, but Kaitlyn insisted, “Actually, it’s for Josette. But we can’t put it in her name. You know, I don’t want to leave your father a single cent.”

Rebecca thought of the man back home and lowered her head with shame.

In the following days, while preparing for the start of school, Rebecca went with Kaitlyn and Josette to finalize the papers for the house.

Every morning and afternoon, she took Josette for walks in the park. Seeing the squirrels running around helped Josette gradually relax in the new environment.

By the time school started, the old lady had become familiar with the surrounding area. Rebecca finally felt at ease.

Kaitlyn and Gabriel were both very busy. They couldn’t stay home all the time, so she taught Josette how to use the translation app.

On her second day of school, they video-called, and Josette happily told Rebecca she had gone to a café that afternoon and successfully ordered tea and desserts using that app.

Finally, their life abroad passed the adjustment period.

Rebecca was still in touch with Jenny. One day, the latter told her about the latest class reunion.

“Vance came to the reunion. He didn’t look like he was doing well. I heard his company has been struggling lately. He even posted something on social media and got roasted,” Jenny said, sending a screenshot of Vance’s post.

She thought Rebecca had already seen it, but no. Rebecca had blocked him long ago.

Vance had posted a photo from the reunion, captioned: [One person missing.]

Rebecca found it rather funny, and in the comments below, some people felt the same way.

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Obadiah commented: [Who is missing? Rebecca? You never let her come to our reunions anyway.]

Rebecca silently cheered, “Perfect burn!”

Reading her mind, Jenny replied to Obadiah: [Mouthpiece!]

The scandals about Rebecca and Vance had trended twice, the recent one still fresh. Their old classmates all knew, so their comments were far from friendly.

[What's the point of saying this now?]

[Vance, I never thought you could be so fake!]

[I hope Rebecca never looks back!]

She saw some familiar names-old high-school roommates and boys from her class whose faces she barely remembered.

She didn't think they were meddling. Instead, she felt touched that so many classmates still remembered her. Given the long period she had closed herself off, they should have forgotten her.

Her phone buzzed with a message.

Jenny: [How are you doing abroad?]

Rebecca: [Everything's great! Don't worry about me.]

Jenny: [Good. Let's meet up when you're back.]

Rebecca: [Sure.]

Just as she finished chatting with Jenny, another message came in.

Vivian: [Thank you, Rebecca. Wade has started working with Hugo. We wouldn't be where we are today without you. You're our lucky star.]

Rebecca: [I guess fate brings us together, and we hit it off, sharing the same values. That's what changes everything. Besides, Wade deserves it. He has the ability and talent, just needing an opportunity. And don't forget, I invested in the company. Whatever he earns, I get a share, too.]

Wade was never a rich heir from Arelmoor. He was Vivian's boyfriend. To keep that fake identity from being exposed, Rebecca had even asked Pascal to help cover for him.

Wade had joined Vance's company as her eyes and ears. Originally, it was just to deal with Catherine and Vance, but he had discovered that Aiden might be committing embezzlement.

There was no solid evidence, so Rebecca had never tipped her hand.

Later, before his probation period ended, she had told him to quit. There was nothing worth watching at Vance's failing company.

She had fulfilled her promise to Vivian and set up a new company for Wade with full investment. She hadn't planned to make it big right away.

Then Gabriel had decided to come to Soliaridge and needed partners. That was when she had revealed the existence of that company.

Wade had always been her planted agent, deeply grateful to her. Now that he had boarded Gabriel's ship, his career had taken off overnight.

She had only one requirement for Wade. He must treat Vivian well for the rest of his life and never betray her.

Rebecca hoped this energetic, forward-charging young woman could have a happy ending. Wade swore on it without hesitation.

Making a promise was easy. Many people meant it at the time, but the hard part was keeping that promise for a lifetime. Hopefully, Wade could do it.

Rebecca had wanted Vivian to join too, but she refused, saying a tech company didn't match her major. She preferred the fashion industry and had her own plans.

Rebecca respected her choice.

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Chapter 446

During her first week of school, Rebecca smoothly integrated with her teachers and classmates.

She was the only student with a mobility issue and had been worried about receiving judgmental looks. But fortunately, no one seemed to focus on her condition.

Maybe some people noticed, but no one mentioned it. Everyone treated her normally, which was perfect.

In her second week, on the morning she returned to campus from Kaitlyn's house, she saw someone at the school gate.

He was holding a bouquet of lilies and standing on the path she had to take, smiling so brightly that even the overcast sky seemed to clear up.

“Desmond? What are you doing here?” Rebecca walked up to him, surprised.

“I came to drop Denise off at school and thought I’d visit you.” His smile grew even brighter as he handed her the flowers. “Congratulations on your brand-new beginning.”

She smiled back. For her, this indeed was a new beginning.

“By the way, I live nearby. Want to come over for dinner tonight?” he added, his ears flushing red.

“What school is Denise attending?” she said casually, thinking he was talking about Denise’s place.

“Oh, she has so many interests-dancing, painting, always changing her mind. She applied to an art school. Go to class first. I’ll pick you up tonight. Denise is so excited to know you’re here.”

“Sure!”

Not thinking much of it, she held the flowers and headed to class.

After morning classes, she decided she couldn’t show up empty-handed, so she went to a dessert shop nearby to order a cake. She also ordered a bouquet to pick up in the afternoon.

But it wasn’t Desmond who came to pick her up. It was Denise.

The girl skipped over happily and nearly gave Rebecca a big hug, almost squishing the cake. She caught herself just in time, her eyes sparkling. “Rebecca, I’m so happy you’re here too! Otherwise, I would’ve been so lonely.”

She had been spoiled by her family. Coming abroad alone to study, she probably missed her parents. She was outgoing, which Rebecca had noticed back in Arelmoor.

Denise linked arms with her and started complaining. “But having Desmond around isn’t so good. I’d rather be alone. I don’t want a third wheel when we go shopping together.”

Rebecca was confused. “What do you mean? Is he living here too? I thought he was just dropping you off?”

“He’s not here for me. He has ulterior motives toward you.” Denise shrugged. “To be honest, he came here to attend a language course and plans to apply to your school this year. You should test him thoroughly and not agree so easily.”

Rebecca didn’t know what to say. What surprised her even more was that their house was right next door to hers, separated only by a garden fence.

The apple trees in her yard were already bearing fruit. If he stood on tiptoe, he could reach over and pick apples from her garden.

Desmond came out to greet them in an apron, his sleeves rolled up. He smiled. “Denise ordered me to cook and insisted on picking you up herself.”

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Chapter 447

Rebecca stared at him.

Desmond finally sensed something was wrong. His smile faded, and his eyes darted.

Denise made a face at him and earned a knock on the head. His hands were covered in flour, and some were left on her forehead.

Rebecca watched the siblings tease each other and couldn’t help giggling. The scene reminded her of Emmett. She and her family had never shared such warm moments.

But now, she had a cousin, and he was better than any brother could be.

When Desmond saw her smile, he came over apologetically. “I’m sorry. I didn’t tell you beforehand because...”

He couldn’t quite explain why. Probably afraid she’d be angry.

She brushed it off. “It’s your choice. You don’t need to tell me.”

She simply didn’t want his decision to be because of her. That would put a huge psychological burden on her- suddenly feeling responsible for someone else’s future and life.

“Actually, I’ve been thinking about studying abroad since I graduated,” he explained smoothly. “But my dad disagreed. He wanted me to go home and take over the family business. I don’t like business, so I ran off to Soliaridge to dance. He saw how determined I was, and since Denise was coming here too, he finally gave in.”

His eyes curved into a smile again. “We’re neighbors now. We’ll get each other covered.”

With that denial, what was she supposed to say? She couldn’t just force him to admit it.

She rolled up her sleeves. “Alright. Is there anything I can help with?”

“No need. You guys just wait and eat,” he said, hurrying back to the kitchen.

Denise came over and whispered, “My brother is actually a good cook, even though I hate admitting he has any good qualities.”

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. “Really? Then I’m in for a treat!”

She had assumed a rich kid like Desmond wouldn’t know his way around the kitchen.

Denise nodded vigorously. “Can I draw you? Just a quick sketch. It won’t take long.”

“Sure.” Rebecca stood up. “How should I pose?”

“Just sit naturally. Whatever feels comfortable,” Denise said happily, pulling out her sketchbook.

By the time Desmond finished cooking, Denise had almost finished the drawing. She signed her name and the date before handing it to Rebecca.

Rebecca was surprised. “This is for me? That’s wonderful. Thank you.”

Desmond saw it and grumbled, “I gave you flowers, and you interrogated me. Denise gives you a drawing, and you’re smiling like that.”

Rebecca was speechless. How could he even compare the two things?

Denise hugged Rebecca’s waist and leaned against her shoulder, teasing Desmond. “Of course, it’s different.

Super 411

You’re a stinky guy. I’m a soft, sweet girl.”

“You little brat. I cooked all this food for nothing. You never take my side,” Desmond complained as he set the dishes on the table.

Rebecca looked at the main course. “You made this? It’s not takeout?”

“Of course. Look, I even got oil splatters on my face.” He leaned in so she could see the little red spots.

She was about to express some sympathy when Denise pushed his face away. “Come on. The food is getting cold.”

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Chapter 448

Desmond raised the tongs threateningly at his sister.

“Alright, let me try this local specialty,” Rebecca said.

She had to admit that their family atmosphere was genuinely warm and comfortable. As for Desmond’s so-called specialty... Well, fried fish and chips just tasted like they were supposed to.

No matter who made it, it would taste the same.

“How is it?” he asked expectantly.

She nodded. “It’s good.”

He smiled with pride. “I also baked a dessert-an apple pie. After dinner, we can sit in the yard and share it.”

She blinked. “Apple pie?”

“Yeah!” He popped a large fry into his mouth.

Her eyes narrowed. “You didn’t steal apples from my garden, did you?”

He paused, then laughed sheepishly. “How can you call it stealing when the chef does it? I just picked them.”

She laughed along. The atmosphere at the dinner table grew light and relaxed.

After dinner, Desmond brought out the apple pie he had baked along with the cake Rebecca had brought. He set everything up outdoors, turned on the garden lights, and made drinks.

The three of them sat in the yard, chatting and eating. From time to time, the siblings bickered. They stayed out until ten o’clock before Rebecca finally went back to her house next door.

When she finished washing up and lay down on the bed, she was still thinking about the night. Knowing that Desmond and Denise lived right next door gave her an unexpected sense of security.

Just as she was about to sleep, she received a friend request from Vance. The note read: [I need to ask about Aiden’s case. Please accept.]

They were thousands of miles apart now, but he was still restless. But precisely because of the distance, she didn't have to worry about further entanglement.

She accepted the request, curious about how the four people had handled the mess. Hearing it from outsiders was never as satisfying as getting the story firsthand.

Vance asked for the download password for the email attachments that her people had accessed on his phone the other night.

Rebecca: [What do you need that for?]

Vance: [To gather more evidence against them.]

She hesitated, debating whether to tell him that those files only had the titles and no actual data.

Vance waited for a while, then typed: [What's wrong? Inconvenient?]

Rebecca: [Not really. Isn't the evidence the police collected enough? It's undeniable he incited Catherine to poison you.]

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Vance was silent for a long time, the status showing him typing, probably stung by her words.

Vance: [Rebecca...]

It seemed like he was silently begging her not to continue.

Rebecca: [It's in your own recording. She said it herself. Her contact on your phone is saved as Cathy Babe.]

The status showed him typing again.

Vance: [Stop making fun of me.]

But she wanted to. In fact, she had accepted the friend request just to watch their drama and mock him a little.

Rebecca: [By the way, how are your buddies doing? Did you bail them out? Cathy is pregnant, right? That makes her eligible for bail.]

It was pure mockery, but he took it seriously.

Vance: [No.]

Rebecca sneered and sent an exaggerated emoji: [What? You used to baby her, and now she's just a suspect?]

After a long pause, he typed: [I was blind and deserved this. Go ahead and laugh if it makes you feel better.]

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Rebecca suddenly felt bored. She was perfectly comfortable now, both physically and mentally.

She didn't need to mock him to feel better. She was just enjoying the drama that had been served to her. In the end, she let him off, sent him the download password, and let him handle the rest himself.

Vance: [Received. Thank you.]

She was about to block him again when he sent a string of question marks.

Rebecca: [What?]

Vance: [There's nothing here.]

Rebecca: [That's right. I never said I had evidence.]

He sent a thumbs-up emoji, looking old and wise: [Clever. Feels like I'm only just getting to know you.]

She rolled her eyes. So what? In his heart, had she always been an idiot? And his next message made her even more speechless.

Vance: [You didn't post on your social media today?]

What did he mean? Why would she post anything?

The next second, he sent her a video-the footage of her sitting in the yard eating apple pie. Beside her, Desmond cut the pie with a knife, placed a slice on her plate, handed her a fork, and looked at her with a smile.

Denise had been filming, so the video only showed the two of them. She had no idea how Vance had gotten the video, but it made her feel like she was being watched.

Vance: [He made that for you? Envable.]

Envious that Desmond could make dessert for her? That was cheap.

Rebecca: [$365 \times 5 = 1,825$. You had at least 1,825 days to make yourself enviable, but you didn't.]

Vance: [Are you two together now?]

That was none of his business. She didn't bother replying and blocked him again.

Vance: [Please don't block me. Even if we're not married anymore, just knowing you're doing well would put my mind at ease.]

Only a red exclamation mark appeared on the screen, along with the prompt: [The recipient is not your friend.]

He stared at the chat window and smiled bitterly. But he couldn't bring himself to close it.

He had been stuck in Rebecca's blacklist for so long. Even when she occasionally let him out, she quickly put him back in, just like today. So, their chat history was painfully short.

Yet he read those few sentences over and over, as if he could imagine her expression and gestures. The more he thought about it, the more it felt like she was right in front of him.

Unconsciously, a smile crept onto his face.

The office door was open. Lucas walked in to see his foolish smile, thinking there was good news.

"What's going on? Do we have a turnaround?" Lucas asked excitedly.

Vance quickly closed the chat window and cleared his throat. "No."

But Lucas had already seen the screen, realizing Vance was chatting with Rebecca. He was genuinely happy for Vance. "Rebecca finally unblocked you? She still has me blocked."

That comment made Vance feel deflated once again.

"No," he replied darkly. "Get back to work. If we don't work harder, the two of us will end up handing out flyers on the street soon."

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Chapter 450

Lucas left with a gloomy face, ready to return to his own office.

The front desk called Vance on the internal line. "Sir, a lawyer claiming to represent Miss Catherine Welch is requesting to meet you."

Lucas was furious. What the hell? Did they still expect Vance to pay her bail?

He had come to terms with being betrayed by his best friends. Once he accepted it, his love had turned into hatred-stronger than if anyone else had betrayed the company.

Now he hated Aiden and Catherine to the core.

Vance thought for a moment and replied, "Send him up."

Lucas objected. "What? Are you serious?" 3

Vance nodded. "Let's hear what he has to say."

Lucas decided to stay, and Vance raised an eyebrow.

"Why are you still here?"

"I'm afraid you'll do something stupid."

"How could I? Haven't I already paid enough for my stupidity?"

Lucas remained unconvinced and stayed right beside him.

The lawyer soon arrived. He walked in, shook hands with Vance, and greeted him. "Mr. Bradford, hello."

Then he noticed Lucas standing behind Vance and paused, unsure whether to speak in front of a third party.

"Go ahead," Lucas spoke up. "He isn't the only one who makes decisions here. Tell Catherine that Lucas Lewis said so. This matter is my business now."

He was usually slow, but years in business had sharpened his ability to read situations.

The lawyer realized who the man was. Catherine had told him that if Vance refused to help, he should go to a vice president named Lucas Lewis-someone who was easier to talk to.

The lawyer quickly greeted him. "Mr. Lewis, hello."

“Get straight to the point,” Lucas said impatiently.

The lawyer began, “I am Catherine Welch’s defense attorney. I will do everything in my power to help her.

You can rest assured.”

“What? Then we can’t rest assured!” Lucas exclaimed.

The lawyer was confused. To prove his point, he quickly added, “Miss Welch is pregnant. I can help reduce her sentence.”

“You can say those things to your client. Why come to us?” Lucas interrupted.

“Well, I need to contact her family, but she says she has no family in Soliaridge,” the lawyer explained. “You two are the people closest to her, so...”

“So, you want us to pay her legal fees?” Lucas cut in again.

Talking about money so directly felt a little awkward, but that was indeed the lawyer’s purpose.

He explained, “Because she is in custody and can’t access her accounts, she would like you to act as her representative.”

“Then trust me, she has no money left,” Lucas said, knowing that woman too well.

With her spending habits, whatever money Vance had given her was long gone. The lawyer was stunned, having never encountered this kind of client before.

“I don’t know your name, so I’ll just call you Mr. Lawyer,” Lucas said seriously. “We are not her family, and we certainly won’t act as her representatives. We’re victims. Hiring a lawyer is her business. Don’t come looking for us again.”

Lucas gestured toward the door, inviting the lawyer to leave.