

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 61

All night long, the same tiresome arguments had circled endlessly, with Catherine's every word and sentence branding Rebecca as an utter embarrassment, until Rebecca had finally reached her breaking point.

"Alright, if you want to avoid embarrassment, stay away from me," she said. "I'm on the edge right now. Who knows what unpredictable things I might say or do? In your eyes, I'm already a complete disgrace, so why should I fear making it even worse?"

"

She deliberately embraced a reckless, devil-may-care demeanor, wishing these intrusive people would simply back off and spare her the mounting irritation.

Yet Vance remained rooted in place, unmoved. The other two lingered as well, settling into seats around her.

Desmond returned carrying a glass of juice, his eyes scanning the trio before he let out a bemused chuckle. With no vacant spots left near Rebecca, he handed her the drink and chose a chair a short distance away.

Catherine then launched into an effusive monologue extolling the Mueller family's unparalleled prestige, reserving her most extravagant praise for Tracy Mueller, the enigmatic powerhouse steering the Mueller Group, a distinguished Harvard alumna, and the esteemed president of numerous international associations, among other accolades.

"He is the eldest son of Mr. Sean Mueller, and rumor has it he's returning to assume formal control of the group," Catherine cautioned Rebecca, casting a glance at Vance as if to highlight her own exemplary discretion and foresight. "When he makes his appearance later, you absolutely must not commit any faux pas."

Desmond, who had been listening, interjected with a light-hearted chuckle. "That's peculiar. I was never aware Mr. Mueller had such a son."

"Of course you wouldn't be privy to that," Catherine retorted, rolling her eyes in blatant contempt. "You're merely a dancer, so how could you possibly know about such matters?"

She nursed a simmering grudge against him for unmasking her pretense as Mrs. Bradford. Her discreet inquiries had confirmed he was nothing more than a performer from the Soliaridge Troupe, lacking any significant influence or connections.

Who knew how he had even gotten into this high-end business gala in the first place?

“Rebecca,” Vance interjected, “Cathy does make a valid point. It would be wise for you to familiarize yourself with the Mueller family’s background to prevent any missteps.”

“What does my misstep have to do with you? We’re strangers here, remember?” Rebecca countered, secretly amused by Catherine’s fervent references to the so-called eldest son of the Mueller family.

“Forget it, Cathy. Don’t bother with her,” Aiden said, rolling his eyes. “She’s already said she doesn’t know us. Clearly, she couldn’t care less about Vance’s well-being. Why waste your breath?”

“But we can’t just ignore it. We have to look out for Vance,” Catherine insisted, looking utterly devoted.

The duo orchestrated their exchange like a well-rehearsed duet, their words meticulously crafted to provoke Rebecca and deepen Vance’s growing aversion toward her.

In fact, their audacity stemmed directly from his tacit indifference. People invariably gauged others’ reactions and pushed limits accordingly. Had Vance demonstrated even the slightest respect for her, they would never have dared to belittle her so brazenly in his presence.

“Rebecca won’t hold it against me, will she?” Catherine muttered, her voice quivering. “Will she think I talk too much?” “You do talk quite a bit,” Desmond chimed in with a sly, amused smile, taking a sip of his drink.

“Mr. Schroeder, I presume?” Vance glared. “What entitles you to interfere repeatedly in my family’s private matters?”

“Your family?” Desmond scoffed. “My apologies, but I only acknowledge Rebecca as your lawful wife. As for the others present, what roles do they play, exactly? Take this lady, for instance. Does contemporary society still condone the archaic notion of concubines?”

Catherine whined, irritated, “Vance...”

Vance’s expression darkened ominously. “Mr. Schroeder, I have no desire to escalate this into a confrontation in such a setting, but I will not tolerate anyone bullying those under my protection. If you have grievances to air, perhaps we can address them privately afterward.”

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“Are you proposing we settle this with a fight?” Desmond was unshaken by the veiled threat. “Rushing to her defense like a knight in shining armor? Yet it strikes me as profoundly ironic. You’re prepared to clash over your lover, while I’m standing here advocating for your wife. Doesn’t that inversion feel utterly bizarre?”

“It’s not your place to advocate for anyone,” Vance retorted sharply, his usual poise fracturing under the strain. “Regardless of the accuracy of your characterizations, neither of them has anything to do with you. But for your egregious rudeness, I wouldn’t mind giving you a piece of my mind.”

Vance had been driven to the brink of his endurance, otherwise, this paragon of calm restraint would never have uttered such overtly confrontational words.

Desmond was undeterred by the provocation. “Are you so sure you can handle me?”

“Try me,” Vance replied icily.

Catherine tugged at his sleeve. “Forget it, Vance. Why bother with a dancer? We can’t go down to his level.”

Rebecca could barely suppress a laugh at Catherine’s inflated self-importance.

Just then, a ripple of excitement stirred through the assembled guests. Joyce and her husband, Sean Mueller, had made their entrance, accompanied by a poised young woman who could only be Tracy Mueller.

“They’re here,” Catherine whispered, rising to her feet with eager anticipation. “And it seems they’re heading our way.”

In a gesture of collective courtesy, the group stood as one, including Rebecca and Desmond.

Joyce smiled from a distance. “You look stunning today. I could hardly recognize you.”

Catherine beamed with excitement, leaning toward Vance. “Is Mrs. Mueller complimenting me?”

But Vance sensed an undercurrent of discrepancy, especially since Desmond’s expression betrayed subtle amusement. Moreover, the warmth in Joyce’s gaze seemed disproportionate for someone like Catherine, whom she had met only fleetingly.

Rebecca smiled, knowing Joyce was addressing her. Just as she prepared to step forward in greeting, she tripped over something and stumbled forward.

“Rebecca!” Joyce gasped.

Desmond was a bit too far away to help, while the closest people to her were Catherine and Vance.

Vance reacted with lightning reflexes, seizing Rebecca’s arm and hauling her upright with a firm pull, though the momentum caused her to collide squarely with his chest.

Catherine rushed over to help Rebecca, explaining anxiously to Joyce. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Mueller. Our companion here has a problem with her leg. She didn’t mean to make a scene. She has a limp. Look...”

Catherine lifted the hem of Rebecca’s gown, exposing her scarred calves for all the surrounding guests to see.

A wave of visceral humiliation surged through Rebecca, shattering the tentative confidence she had mustered to reengage with the world outside her isolation. Panic clawed at her as she frantically tugged at her dress, desperate to cover her legs. Desmond’s features contorted with fury, but Joyce moved first, her brows knitting in disapproval as she advanced decisively. She displaced Catherine with gentle firmness, encircling Rebecca’s waist in a protective embrace. “Are you alright, dear?” Rebecca inhaled deeply, drawing comfort from the subtle, floral fragrance emanating from Joyce—a scent that evoked an inexplicable sense of security and solace.

She shook her head, her voice shaky. “I’m fine. Thank you ”

Joyce patted her back soothingly, then turned to her husband. “This is Rebecca, the special friend I mentioned before.” Sean appeared momentarily lost, trying to place the name amid his recollections.

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Catherine froze, darting a bewildered glance at Vance, as if asking, “Why is Mrs, Mueller being so nice to Rebecca?”

Vance was equally puzzled, unaware of any connection between Rebecca and the Muellers.

Joyce shot Sean a mildly reproachful look. “Honestly, have you forgotten our son’s lifesaver?”

Recognition finally flickered across Sean’s face. “Ah, yes the girl from the dance academy, right? Blame my poor memory.” Catherine and Vance were even more confused. How did Rebecca become the lifesaver of the Mueller family’s eldest son?

The young woman, who had walked in with Joyce, extended her hand to Rebecca with a friendly smile. “I’m Tracy. It’s nice to meet you, Rebecca.”

Rebecca regarded Tracy for a moment, her mind flashing back to Catherine’s earlier boasts. Her lips curled with quiet amusement.

Catherine’s face flushed crimson and eventually turned ashen with embarrassment.

Adding insult to injury, Desmond chuckled, “Tracy, you need to step into the public eye more often. Otherwise, people will think the eldest son of the Mueller family has three heads and six arms.”

“Is it that exaggerated? And when did I become the eldest son? Isn’t that you?” Tracy laughed.

“No kidding. I’m just the little brother,” Desmond quipped. “At home, even Pudding outranks me.”

“Pudding is our pet dog,” Joyce explained to Rebecca.

Rebecca laughed heartily, charmed by the family’s whimsical banter. Although she didn’t know them well, she could feel their heartfelt kindness.

Catherine simmered with frustration. Her grievous error in assuming Tracy was a male dealt a crushing blow to her pride. And recalling how she had just bragged about knowing Tracy so well, she wished the floor could open and swallow her.

Worse still, the guy she had looked down upon turned out to be the real heir. Observing Rebecca engage in lively conversation and shared laughter with the Muellers pushed her beyond her limits of endurance.

She shouted at Desmond, “Weren’t you supposed to be just a dancer? And isn’t your last name Schroeder?”

Desmond gave a half-smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I bear my mother’s last name. What’s the fuss?”

Catherine reeled backward, collapsing heavily into her chair. Desmond was the true heir, and she had just mocked him, which meant she had completely offended the Mueller family. Vance’s business dealings with them were doomed.

Her disruptive exclamation inevitably captured Joyce’s keen attention. Still holding Rebecca’s hand, Joyce leveled an accusatory finger at her. “It was you who tripped Rebecca just now. Who are you? Why did you do that? What are your intentions in ruining my party?”

Catherine panicked, unsure of what to do. Her first instinct was to deny it. “I didn’t. Mrs. Mueller, don’t listen to baseless accusations. I never tripped her.”

Turning to Rebecca, she spluttered, “I know you don’t like me, but you can’t slander me like this. Mrs. Mueller, she is framing me. I didn’t trip her at all. Without evidence, you can’t take her word for it.”

“Evidence?” Joyce scoffed, “I saw it with my own eyes. Am I supposed to defame you?”

Catherine’s face turned ashen, and she sank into despair, unable to utter another word.

But so what? Rebecca knew that Vance would invariably stand by Catherine’s side, even if she ruined his business dealings. Catherine would always be his precious darling.

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Sure enough, Vance positioned himself steadfastly at Catherine’s side.

Catherine seemed to find her anchor and began to cry, “Vance, I didn’t mean this. I really didn’t. I just got so excited when I saw Mrs. Mueller that I wanted to go talk to her and be a good assistant for you. Rebecca happened to get up at the same time. It might have been our dresses getting tangled. I just wanted to explain to everyone and hoped they wouldn’t blame Rebecca for being rude. I wanted them to sympathize with her.”

In her trademark fashion, Catherine deftly extricated herself from all responsibility, but Vance bought it without a second thought. “Don’t fret, I’ve got you covered.”

His tone brimmed with such unmistakable tenderness that Rebecca found herself almost admiring the pair’s dynamic. It was a display of devotion so poignant that it could inspire envy.

Joyce appeared to finally place Vance in her memory. “Mr. Bradford, right?”

“Vance Bradford. We met a couple of days ago,” he affirmed, standing next to Catherine like a pillar of support.

His gaze swept past Rebecca, laden with meanings that she couldn’t grasp.

Joyce nodded, turning to Sean. “Mr. Bradford is discussing a project with you, right? Whether to proceed or terminate it, it’s your call. However, I don’t think much of this woman. My party doesn’t need a guest like her.”

In truth, Vance's invitation to Arelmoor for these negotiations already attested to his substantial influence and capabilities. Yet he was also notorious as a man enslaved by love, willing to sacrifice everything for his beloved woman.

Rebecca watched impassively as Vance helped Catherine up, maintaining his composure and grace as he took his leave, "I sincerely apologize for any trouble caused at tonight's banquet. I'll take my companion to leave now. You guys enjoy yourselves.

He guided the tear-streaked Catherine away from the scene, with Aiden following closely in their wake. Midway through their exit, Aiden turned back, casting a venomous glare at Rebecca.

Once again, the blame fell squarely on her.

"Let's not let those unpleasant folks spoil the mood, Rebecca. The banquet goes on," Joyce said, tugging her along with a warm smile.

Joyce had just introduced her as Desmond's lifesaver, but Rebecca racked her brain and couldn't recall any heroic act worthy of such praise. She didn't dare claim undeserved credit.

"It's perfectly normal that you don't remember," Joyce said gently. "Someday, let Desmond fill you in himself."

"I didn't do anything earth-shattering, right?" Rebecca joked lightly. "Otherwise, I'd surely recall it."

Joyce squeezed her hand. "Saving someone doesn't always mean pulling them from the jaws of death or a blazing inferno. Sometimes, when a person is trapped in their deepest despair, unable to find any reason to go on, even the faintest glimmer of light can reignite their hope."

Rebecca froze, the words sinking in like a revelation. She wasn't sure if everyone endured such profound darkness, but in her own bleakest moments, her light had been dancing itself and the memory of her once-vibrant, shining self.

The thought always brought a sting of tears to her eyes.

Throughout the evening, Joyce and the rest of the family enveloped Rebecca in kindness, going out of their way to make her feel cared for and included.

As the banquet wound down, Desmond offered to escort her back. Stepping out of the venue and descending the grand steps, Rebecca spotted Vance waiting at the bottom.

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Hadn't Vance left with his crew? Why was he still here?

He remained in his tuxedo, blending seamlessly among the elite crowd, though his hair was slightly disheveled now.

He stood motionless on the lowest step, as if patiently awaiting Rebecca's descent.

"Shall we take this side path instead?" Desmond suggested, noticing her hesitation.

Rebecca nodded in agreement.

But just as they veered away, Vance bounded up the steps, blocking her path with deliberate calm.

"You see me now, yet you're still planning to leave with someone else?" His voice was steady, but his eyes held an inscrutable intensity.

The night's events had clearly shaken him deeply. If resentment brewed, he'd likely direct it at her, as he always did. Rebecca offered a wry smile. "Didn't you want me to pretend I don't know you?"

"When did I ever say that?" he countered sharply.

She found the back-and-forth exhausting. Pointless accusations without proof could loop endlessly.

"Excuse me, Mr. Bradford," she murmured, dipping her head to slip past him.

But in a move that caught her off guard, Vance scooped her into his arms, his grip firm and unyielding.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed, her heart racing in surprise.

Not responding, he carried her down the steps with purposeful strides.

The banquet had just ended, and guests lingered everywhere; making a scene would only humiliate her further. She couldn't afford that kind of attention.

Vance leaned in close, his voice a low warning. "You're my wife. You'd better make sure Desmond knows his boundaries. I'm an outsider here, and I can afford to lose face if I snap. But can the Mueller heir handle the scandal of pursuing another man's wife?"

"Not everyone is as shameless as you," she shot back.

Yet she truly didn't want Desmond entangled in any gossip because of her, so she signaled him to hold back. She was going back anyway. It didn't matter who she went back with.

Vance had driven that night, his car parked right at the base of the steps. He carried her straight to it, yanked open the door, and deposited her inside with little ceremony.

"Where are you staying?" he demanded once behind the wheel.

Rebecca pressed her lips together, refusing to answer.

"Fine, keep it to yourself," he muttered, starting the engine and pulling away.

She had no clue where he was headed, but jumping from a moving car was out of the question. Her legs could not bear any more injuries.

She wasn't worried that much. A dignified man like him would not truly harm her. Objectively speaking, he wasn't a villain. For five years, he'd treated her well enough.

On their wedding day, he'd vowed before Josette to care for Rebecca lifelong, never to betray her trust. And in the days that followed, he had kept that promise, bringing in renowned doctors to treat her leg and showering her with gifts regardless of

CL need or cost.

If she coughed even once at night, he'd instruct Nancy to take her to the hospital and prepare medicine.

Such gestures were innumerable. Without them, she wouldn't have endured five years until Catherine's return.

If there was one fault he had, it was that he didn't love her. That absence tilted every balance toward those he truly cherished.

Vance drove straight to a hotel and parked smoothly before circling to her side, opening the door, and lifting her out.

"Should I carry you inside, or can you walk on your own?" he asked, his arms still cradling her.

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“I’ll walk,” Rebecca replied, her brow furrowed in confusion and unease.

What was he playing at, bringing her to a hotel? But she saw no point in a futile escape. With her limp, outrunning him was impossible.

He proceeded to book a room, leaving her staring in disbelief.

“Don’t tell me this is for me.”

“Exactly.”

“I’ve already got a room elsewhere. Why on earth would I stay here?”

Ignoring her protest, Vance turned to the receptionist. “Can we check in with just the number?”

“Of course,” came the reply.

To her astonishment, he smoothly recited her ID number.

“You remember my ID number?” Rebecca muttered.

She’d always acknowledged his meticulousness, but it stemmed from organization. His phone reminders did the work for him; it was not a heartfelt effort.

His eyes narrowed. “How could I forget the details of the woman set to inherit everything I own?”

Rebecca was at a loss for words.

Vance noticed Rebecca’s silence, sneering. “Plotting my demise already? Or just counting down the days?”

The receptionist was startled, almost dropping the key card. She even cast a suspicious glance at Rebecca.

Rebecca met her gaze with wide-eyed innocence, as if saying, “Do I look like a killer?”

Vance snorted, reading her mind. “Drop the act. You’ve come close to finishing me off these past days.”

She had to admit his insight was razor-sharp, piercing her subtle thoughts effortlessly. Yet he remained blind to Catherine's manipulations or perhaps willfully so.

Vance took the key card, fixing Rebecca with a steady stare. "Come on."

"I..." Her protest dissolved as he swept her up again, leaving the receptionist gaping in shock.

He carried her to the elevator, only setting her down as it ascended. In the mirrored walls, she glimpsed his arm wrapped tightly around her waist and shoved against him instinctively.

"That repulsed?" he murmured, pulling her closer. "You didn't seem so averse when that dancer spun you around."

"Vance!" She bristled at his insinuating tone. "Quit pretending you're a jealous spouse. That's not your role!"

"Then what is?" he retorted with a cold laugh. "Anyone eyeing what's mine will regret it."

"You're just being possessive!" Rebecca knew better than to misread his jealousy as romantic. Desmond held no such intentions, and Vance's grudge stemmed solely from the sabotaged deals.

He loosened his tie, shadows of fury clouding his eyes. "You'll see soon enough. I'm far from harmless."

The elevator dinged at the top floor. He seized her arm, guiding her out firmly. He unlocked the presidential suite and ushered her inside.

"I don't need such a big room," she said.

He shut the door with a click. "Who said you're alone?"

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"Wait! Aren't you supposed to be with Catherine?" Rebecca scanned the suite, utterly baffled by his intentions.

Vance let out a frustrated chuckle. "I never pegged you for being this accommodating. Had I known, I might've entangled myself with a dozen more over these five years."

Rebecca slipped off her shoes, her bare feet sinking into the plush carpet as she shrugged indifferently. "It's never too late to start."

Once she'd resolved to let go of love, no inner turmoil could sway her. She'd endure and move on.

Vance's brow creased as he watched her silhouette against the floor-to-ceiling window, elegant in her gown. "You don't actually believe you've won over Desmond, do you?"

"Some minds are so tainted that they see corruption everywhere," she snorted.

"The elite world is more cutthroat than you imagine. It's no fairy tale where CEOs tumble from the heavens in endless romance. It's all transactions, pure and simple." He joined her at the window, their reflections gazing out over the city's twinkling lights. The words struck a familiar chord, drawing a bitter laugh from her. "So, you think no one would want me? An aging woman? A crippled one?"

He faltered. "That's not what I meant."

"But it is." She tilted her head back, a sardonic smile playing on her lips. "You're just more polite than my mother about it. Touch your heart and admit it. Who'd desire a worthless, nearly 30-year-old like me? Right?"

Vance fell silent, but she wasn't done. "These years must've been a burden for you."

It must have been a tough decision to marry a woman no one else would touch.

"I didn't bring you here for a fight," he said, clasping her wrist. "Let's order food first. I haven't touched a thing all day—not even water."

He sank onto the sofa, menu in hand, ordering food and wine. Catherine's return had evidently shattered his sobriety vow.

Exhaustion etched his features. He leaned back, pinching the bridge of his nose with a deep furrow between his brows.

In the past, she'd been the one to ease his tension, rubbing his shoulders and temples upon his return. She'd empathized with his burdens, wanting to contribute despite her limitations. Most nights, she'd stay awake, offering massages as he unwound.

Five years had ingrained those routines, even if they hadn't thawed his stony heart. Eventually, on weary evenings, he'd request, "Rebecca, come massage me."

Now, with someone he adored to tend to him, those calls had ceased.

After a brief rest, he phoned the front desk for fresh clothes. The garments arrived before the meal, sealed, sanitized, and packed in bags.

“Sir, this one’s for the lady, and this is for you. Brand new and sterilized,” the attendant explained.

“Thank you.” Vance took the clothes and handed a set to Rebecca. “Shower and change. That dress must be stifling.”

It wasn’t intolerable, but resting in formalwear felt awkward. She did crave comfort.

“Need assistance?”

“No thanks.”

Help her? Help her get out of her dress or take a shower? She could manage those things alone.

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“Nancy isn’t here. If you need something, just call me,” Vance said.

Rebecca had already entered the bathroom when his words hit her. He’d always assumed even basic tasks like showering required help.

The warming weather felt more intense in the North than in the South, the heat hastening summer’s arrival

After the evening’s chaos and Vance’s unexpected detour, her gown clung uncomfortably, sweat making it nearly impossible to remove. The struggle only worsened the stickiness.

Hearing no sound of water running, Vance knocked on the door and called out, “Rebecca? Is everything okay?”

“I’m fine. Don’t come in,” she burriedly replied.

“Need a hand?”

“No! I said, don’t come in!”

Panic sharpened her tone, but her urgency only fueled his worry. He pushed the door open, finding her battling the stubborn fabric.

“Can’t get it off?”

“I”

Before she could object, his fingers found the zipper.

“It’s jammed,” he noted, tugging firmly.

Silence stretched, and he didn’t move further. Impatient, she urged, “Are you done yet? If not, just go out. I can manage myself.”

He extended his palm, revealing the broken zipper pull. “Poor quality. I’ll have to tear it.”

With a sharp tear, the dress split down the back, cool air rushing against her skin. She whirled, clutching the torn bodice. “You can go now.”

He arched a brow, words hovering on his lips, but the doorbell interrupted.

The food had arrived. He turned and walked out.

Post-shower, Rebecca emerged refreshed, her damp hair towel-wrapped. Her pajamas were loose and comfortable.

The suite boasted dual bathrooms. Vance had finished his own shower and was now seated by the window with the spread of food and wine before him.

“Come join me for a bite,” he invited.

“Not hungry.” Coerced into this situation, she opted to scroll through her phone instead.

“I need to talk to you.”

“If it’s the same old drivel, spare me. I know the world doesn’t hand out rich CEOs like candy, and I’m certainly not lucky enough to meet one, especially since the only one I managed to meet is already taken.”

“Not that.”

She paused. Could he have something new to say?

“Check the view—stunning nightscape.” He downed his wine in one swallow.

As she browsed, an email caught her eye. It was the Certificate of Enrollment sent by the school.

Now she could resume her visa applications. Absorbed in the details, she missed his words until his voice loomed behind her. “Why’s that art school emailing you?”

Her hand shook, and her phone fell to the floor.

“Nothing,” she stammered, snatching it up and locking the screen. “Just reconnecting with a former teacher who’s back from abroad.”

To deflect, she added quickly, “What did you say earlier?”

“I have something to discuss. Come over,” he replied, dropping the subject of the email.

Relief washed over her. “Sure, just let me sort my hair.”

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Back in the bathroom, Rebecca swiftly switched email accounts on her phone for safety.

She unwrapped her towel, combing through her semi-dry locks before returning. In mere minutes, Vance had drained another glass. The bottle was now half-empty.

“I’ll keep it moderate—no drunken repeats,” he said, justifying the lapse. “Too much stress lately. Need to unwind a bit.”

“Oh,” she responded flatly

She had once risked her life to save him, but now the debt was cleared. She’d honor his choices without interference. He gestured toward the plate. “Their steaks are good. Eat it while it’s hot.”

She declined, “I’ve had enough tonight. Can’t manage more.”

He offered a rueful smile. “You certainly enjoyed your evening.”

She nodded. “It was indeed enjoyable.”

Refilling his glass, he shook his head and sighed, “Impressive. You thrive while my deals crumble one by one.”

She was tempted to retort, “Is it because of me that they failed? Don’t you know how it happened?”

But this argument felt like a broken record—pointless. No matter how much she debated, she couldn’t change his mind. It was better to let it go than waste her breath.

So, she simply stayed quiet, cradling her glass of water and sipping it slowly.

“Rebecca,” he said after finishing nearly half his glass, his brow furrowing. “I know your angle. You’ll say it’s all Cathy’s fault.”

“No, really,” she protested. “You’re misreading me entirely.”

“I knew you’d say that.” He drained the glass. “But cut her some slack. She went through a lot overseas. Her boyfriend was abusive, leaving her battered enough to end up in the hospital. She came back with injuries and has a poor relationship with her family. We’re her only source of support.”

He paused, observing her reaction.

She nodded. “Fair point.”

Stunned by her ease, he blinked. “You’re not upset?”

In her bathrobe, she felt the air in the room was a bit cold. Cradling her warm cup, she found its warmth comforting, “Why would I be?”

Should she punish herself for their mistakes? She didn’t even mention divorce anymore. It was easier to let things be this way. After all, she was studying abroad soon. She’d handle it then or simply wait out the two-year separation clause.

After the initial surprise, he relaxed. “Glad you see it. Catherine’s pampered upbringing left her unprepared for suffering. After returning, she’s dealt with so much, so I pay more attention to her. Sure, she can be a bit headstrong and doesn’t always know how to read a situation, but that’s just who she is. Everyone admired her pure innocence and liveliness. Age doesn’t erase that. Core traits endure.”

She popped a grape into her mouth. “Makes sense.”

He chuckled, a rarity before her, but it was courtesy of Catherine.

She couldn’t help but recall a line from a romance novel: [The young master hasn’t laughed like this in a long time.]

It suited Vance perfectly. The only twist was that in the novels, the male lead laughed because of the female protagonist, whereas here, it was because of a supporting character.

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From Vance's viewpoint, perhaps Catherine starred as the heroine, relegating Rebecca to a mere side role.

"You're throwing me off with this attitude," Vance said, still chuckling as he poured more wine. "Let me put it this way don't worry, everything I have – my house, my wealth, my company is yours rightfully. Just ease up on Catherine; no more clashes. Deal? I'm working hard to earn all this for us."

Rebecca searched for the meaning behind his long winded speech and tried to decipher it, "So, you mean your house, car, company, and money are all mine, but your heart belongs to her?"

"I said drop the grudges. Why circle back?" He frowned. "You already own so much. Why still the jealousy?"

"Scumbag!" she thought bitterly,

But he was wrong. She truly didn't intend to dwell on it, just trying to get to the point.

Setting her glass down, she picked up the plate of grapes and began eating. "Solid arrangement. Let's seal it. Notarize if needed for peace of mind."

Having money but no husband? That was no different from hitting a jackpot.

He had been swirling his wine glass the whole time, and she knew when he did that, he was contemplating, probably strategizing about how to negotiate terms with her.

Her words halted him, shock etching his face. "You really think this is a good idea? No resentment?"

She waved her hand dismissively. "None. So, when are we going to get it notarized?"

His expression soured. "That's unnecessary."

A pang of disappointment hit her. Verbal promises meant little. Hopefully, he would remember this when it came time for a divorce.

She popped grapes thoughtfully, her eyes darting. There were no signs of displeasure, but Vance was upset.

He yanked the plate away. “Why are you eating so many grapes at night? They’re full of sugar. Aren’t you worried about toothaches? And you said you weren’t hungry.”

Innocent fruit, scapegoated.

“You done? I’m going to brush my teeth,” she said, grabbing her phone from her lap.

To be honest, what worried her was not how far his affair with Catherine had gone but whether he would discover the secrets stored on her phone.

“What’s so captivating on that device? You’re glued to it all day,” he said.

Now the phone was scapegoated.

“Give it here.” He set down his wine glass and extended his hand. “Don’t force my hand.”

She recalled her messages, thinking through each one. Most of the ones related to going abroad had been deleted, while important emails remained untouched. And to be safe, she had logged out of that email account, so there shouldn’t be any issues.

To avoid a pointless tussle, she surrendered it.

He scrolled intently, scrutinizing her chats with Desmond, but there was nothing abnormal.

“What’s this?” he suddenly asked.