

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 51

Rebecca closed her eyes, as if trying to fall asleep. “Yeah, I know.”

She’d already blocked Catherine anyway. No more posts for her to see.

“What’s going on? Heading to bed already?” Vance frowned. “You feeling okay? Let me check”

He leaned down to get a better look at her face. “You’re not crying quietly, are you? Get up and let me see ”

His hands slipped under her waist, lifting her from the bed. She opened her eyes, and he saw that they were dry. There were no tears at all—not even the redness around the edges that she used to get.

Her gaze, however, was distant, as it veiled in mist.

“Are you really that tired?” He set her back down. “Then go ahead and get some sleep.”

He tucked her in and watched her close her eyes once again. His voice was hesitant. “I’m heading out on a business trip tomorrow.”

Her eyes snapped open. Didn’t that mean she could sneak off to Arelmoor without him knowing?

She sat up, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “How long will you be gone?”

“Three or four days—maybe a week if it drags on.” He frowned, sensing her reaction was over the top. “Why?”

Her heart bubbled with excitement, but on the surface, she appeared nonchalant. “Nothing. Who are you going with?”

“Aiden...” He faltered. “And maybe Cathy too.”

“Oh.” She lay back down. “Good. Let me know before you come back, and I’ll have Nancy prepare food.”

He stared at her incredulously. “You’re not mad?”

She shook her head. “Go to bed early. You have a trip tomorrow and need to rest well.”

“It’s a group thing.” He leaned closer to her, trying to peer into her eyes.

She pushed him away. “Go take a shower. I’ve already bathed, so don’t get too close to me.”

His brows furrowed in displeasure. “What does that mean? You think I’m dirty?”

She was speechless. “You’ve been out all day. Who knows how many germs you’ve brought back? Of course you’re dirty.”

This was especially true, with Catherine’s perfume clinging to him. Did she have to spell it out?

His face darkened as he got up and headed to the bathroom. Even after he left, Catherine’s perfume still lingered in the air.

She got up, sprayed her own perfume all around the room, and took a deep breath. Then she told herself, “Forget it. I’ll be leaving soon anyway. No point wasting energy on these pointless things.”

The next morning, when Vance got up, Rebecca was still asleep.

She assumed he would pack his things and leave on his own accord, but unexpectedly, he insisted on waking her up.

“I’m tired!” She swatted his hand away.

“Mrs. Bradford,” he drawled from the bedside. “You’re slacking more and more clothes, and not even packing my luggage?”

not checking if I’ve eaten, not preparing my

She opened her eyes, fed up. She went into the walk-in closet, opened his suitcase, and prepared a week’s worth of clothes, folding them neatly and placing them inside.

She also portioned out his daily essentials and packed them into the suitcase. Finally, she dragged the suitcase back into the bedroom, opened a drawer, took out a pack of condoms, and was about to put them in.

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Where did you get this thing?”

In fact, it had been there since their wedding—something she had prepared. At that time, she hadn’t yet decided if their marriage was suitable for having children.

At least right after getting married, she felt they lacked an emotional foundation, so it seemed better not to have kids for the time being.

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Rebecca hadn't expected her preparation to be completely unnecessary.

She sneered, "I prepared it for you. Am I a worthy wife or what?"

"You...." Vance snatched the box and hurled it into the trash. "I don't need this stuff. Even if there's a kid, I can afford to raise them. Right now, I'm good without one."

He closed the suitcase, locked it, and stepped out. She stood there in a daze, then shook her head, driving all the unhappiness and pain from her mind.

She had her own plans to worry about. The form from yesterday hadn't been completed; it was still missing bits.

After breakfast, she went out to the bank to get a deposit certificate, then returned home and shut herself in her room to continue filling out the form.

By afternoon, she still wasn't done. However, she couldn't delay any longer. She had a flight to catch.

She gathered all the materials, planning to fill them out on the way. Nancy saw her wheeling out the suitcase and asked in surprise.

Her question was reasonable since Rebecca rarely went out alone.

"I'm going back to university for a school anniversary celebration. I'll be back in two days. Don't tell Vance, so he doesn't worry, **Rebecca replied.

"Oh... alright," Nancy agreed.

Outside, Rebecca hailed a cab and headed straight to the airport.

She arrived in Arelmoor that evening and sent a message to Lauren, letting the latter know she had arrived and that they could meet at the visa office the next day. Then she took a cab straight to her hotel.

Once she checked in, she didn't bother resting. Instead, she turned on her laptop and continued filling out the form, working until three in the morning before finally completing it and emailing it back to the school.

She set her alarm and went to bed. Her sleep time was severely insufficient, but the next day, she felt surprisingly energetic.

The weather in the north was excellent, nothing like the constant rain in the south during this season.

Sitting in the cab, she gazed at the street scenes she hadn't seen in five years. A dreamlike sense of familiarity, carrying a faint sorrow, struck her intensely.

It was as if every flower, every shop sign, and every overpass made a voice in her heart scream, "This is the place! Ah, this has changed! Ah, this is still the same!"

This familiar city wasn't her hometown, but it had once held her most brilliant youth and dreams.

She got out of the cab, almost in tears, heading to the visa office. Everyone was already waiting there.

Lauren spotted her and waved. Rebecca smiled and walked over, still feeling a bit uneasy.

Among those waiting to record fingerprints were familiar faces as well as unfamiliar juniors. They were all elites in the dance world. As someone with a limp, she stood out awkwardly in such a lineup.

"Rebecca!" a girl called out excitedly, recognizing her.

"Rebecca!" Several girls crowded around her warmly. "We finally get to meet you! We've studied your dances in our textbooks! Can't believe we're seeing you in person!"

They surrounded her tightly, all beaming with enthusiasm. Rebecca's anxiety finally eased up.

Right then, her phone rang. She pulled it out and saw it was Vance calling. "Excuse me for a moment."

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GET IT

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Rebecca rejected the call and sat down next to Lauren, escorted by the juniors.

No one mentioned her leg, as if they hadn't noticed it at all. But she knew that for a dancer, a leg problem was incredibly conspicuous. No one could miss it.

The only explanation was that Lauren had given everyone a heads-up in advance. Regardless, in this small waiting room, she received the greatest kindness from strangers that she had experienced in five years.

Her phone kept vibrating in her bag, so she simply turned it off and focused on chatting with everyone.

Desmond was there, too, which caught her by surprise.

Wasn't he the principal dancer at the Soliaridge Dance Troupe? Why was he here?

"This is a joint tour with several dance troupes," Lauren explained. "Each troupe has its own repertoire."

Desmond smiled at her, and she smiled back.

The group went in one by one to record fingerprints and then left gradually. Rebecca and Lauren were among the last.

Once done, they walked out together. Rebecca transferred some money to Lauren and asked her to pass it on to the school or the tour organizing committee.

Lauren had invited her with good intentions, but she couldn't take advantage of everyone's expenses for her food, lodging, and travel. She would cover it herself.

"You and your principles," Lauren sighed, accepting the money. "I'll check later on how to incorporate it into the funds." Desmond's voice rang out. "Mrs. Lemke, Rebecca."

He was leaning against a car in the curbside spot, waving at them. Lauren put an arm around Rebecca's shoulders. "There's something I'm not sure if I should bring up."

"Go ahead." Rebecca believed that whatever Lauren said was for her good.

"Are you scared to try treating your leg again?" Lauren asked cautiously.

Rebecca froze. In fact, she'd tried everything for her leg right after the injury. For those first two years of recovery, Vance had pulled out all the stops, but none of these treatments ever worked.

Back then, Vance had been wracked with guilt. As long as there was a chance to cure her leg, he was willing to pay any price and had indeed spent a lot of money.

Five years had passed, and she had long since given up hope for her leg.

She suppressed her disappointment and forced a smile. “Lauren, it’s fine. I’m used to it now. It can’t be cured.”

Lauren glanced at Desmond. “Want to give it another shot? Desmond knows an old expert in this area and has talked about your situation. If you’re up for it, we can go there today.”

“But...” Rebecca was skeptical.

“Never give up until the last second. Let’s try, okay? What if there’s a miracle? Desmond didn’t dare tell you himself and asked me to bring it up. I...” Lauren said, her worried look reminding Rebecca of Josette.

If Josette knew about this expert and saw the slightest hope, she’d want Rebecca to try.

“Okay, let’s go,” Rebecca agreed.

It was a chance anyway. She’d treat it like a sightseeing trip without expectations.

Desmond and Lauren both lit up.

The appointment was for the afternoon, and the three had lunch together.

During the meal, the school summoned Lauren for something important, so she entrusted Rebecca to Desmond and headed off.

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Desmond drove her toward the old alley.

The old expert was seeing patients at a clinic at the entrance of an alley, and there was already a long line waiting.

Desmond looked at the queue and worried that Rebecca’s leg couldn’t handle standing for so long. “I’ll go line up. When it’s your turn, I’ll come get you. Just wait in the car.”

Rebecca felt embarrassed. “I can handle it.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got this.” Desmond parked the car and hopped out to join the queue.

Rebecca stayed in the car, pulling out her phone and turning it back on.

There were over a dozen missed calls. Eight of them were from Vance, and two from Nancy.

Vance had texted: [Where are you?]

Wasn’t he on a business trip with Catherine? And he still had time to track her down?

She called Nancy back.

As soon as it connected, Nancy anxiously reported, “Mr. Bradford is looking for you, and I didn’t know how to explain where you went.”

“Got it. Thanks, Nancy.” She hung up, and immediately another call came in.

“Where are you? Why didn’t you pick up all those calls? And why did you turn off your phone?” Vance demanded, his voice laced with anger.

“Something up?”

“I hear car horns. You’re not home?”

“Yeah. Just out for some air. What’s going on?”

“Nothing now. Forget it.”

He hung up, and she put away her phone, glancing at the line.

Out there, Desmond was talking to a girl in a nurse’s uniform, holding his phone—probably checking the appointment.

The girl nodded, and Desmond came back to the car.

“It’s based on online appointments,” he said, opening the door. “Our number is up front. The next one should be us.”

Rebecca got out of the car, and Desmond continued, “I just asked some folks in line. They’re here for all kinds of issues. This doctor is a general practitioner, but he’s especially skilled in orthopedics.”

She nodded and walked slowly, still not holding much hope. When she got from the curb to the alley entrance, an argument broke out.

“There’s no one now! Why won’t you let me in?” protested a woman.

The nurse explained, “There is someone. The patient’s family went to call them over, and they’ll be here soon. You didn’t get an appointment, but I’ll ask the doctor if we can squeeze you in.”

“Then squeeze me in. I want this slot.”

“This slot is taken, and look at all the people lined up behind. They all have appointments.”

“I’ll pay double the fee! Ten times! Twenty! How much is one slot? I’ll pay ten thousand dollars! I want it today!!! The people in line started voicing their complaints.

“Money doesn’t make you special!”

“Blatant line-cutting? Shameless!”

“So rich? Charter the whole clinic for yourself!”

“Or heck, buy out the whole city!”

“You..”

The woman was riled up by the jabs, turning around. Rebecca wasn’t mistaken. It was indeed Catherine. Furious, she glared down the alley and stomped her foot in frustration. “Vance, come over here! We’re buying out all the remaining slots today!”

Support

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The one striding from the other end of the alley was none other than Vance.

He hurried to Catherine’s side, his eyes filled with genuine tension and concern, without a glance at anyone else. “What’s wrong?”

She pouted, whining, “These people are picking on us outsiders. The slot is open right now, and I said I’d pay ten times the price to buy it. They won’t let me. They’re awful.”

Vance patted her reassuringly. “It’s okay. I’ll handle it.”

“I want to buy out every slot here today. Show them we’re not pushovers. Give these people...” Catherine twisted away, pointing at the line of people waiting. “Give each of them ten thousand! We’re chartering the place today. Tell them to leave!”

Vance laughed, indulgent.

Rebecca watched the scene unfold, feeling utterly ridiculous.

Catherine’s demand was outrageous, but Vance found it adorable. It was unbelievable, but he seemed to eat it up, even ruffling her hair. “People charter places for dining, but who charters a clinic? That’s not auspicious, is it?”

In less than a minute, he laughed twice, and it was heartfelt. The difference between love and lack of love was so obvious. Rebecca watched his hand brush through Catherine’s hair, remembering how that same hand had often stroked her own hair, held her shoulder, and even embraced her.

A wave of discomfort surged in her heart.

But such pampering wasn’t enough for Catherine. She kept tugging at his sleeve and swaying, clearly unhappy.

“I’ll take care of it. We only need one slot. Afterward, we go pick out a gift?” he cooed, his patience endless.

He’d been patient with Rebecca, too, and it was even more so with Catherine.

She perked up at the mention of a gift. “I’ll pick an expensive one.”

His eyes overflowed with endless affection. “Anything, as long as you like it.”

Then he turned to negotiate with the nurse. “Hello, my family was anxious earlier, so she was a bit aggressive. I apologize on her behalf. Since this slot is open, can you transfer it to us? We’re from out of town, and it’s not easy to see Dr. Ramsey.”

“Family...” Rebecca muttered quietly, stepping out from behind Desmond.

Throughout Catherine’s unreasonable outburst, Desmond had been shielding her.

Catherine and Desmond had only met once, so she probably didn't remember him. As for Vance, since arriving, his gaze hadn't left Catherine, so naturally, he hadn't noticed Desmond.

The nurse pointed at Desmond. "This slot's not open. They're here."

Vance looked over, freezing at the sight of Rebecca and Desmond coming over together.

After a brief standoff, he demanded sharply, "What are you doing here?"

The indulgence he had shown Catherine vanished without a trace. Rebecca met his gaze, suspecting his next move might be to come over and strangle her.

She had never really learned how to face his anger, because for those five years, he had truly never gotten angry at her.

It was only since Catherine's return that she had occasionally touched his sore spots.

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But Rebecca wasn't scared of Vance's anger.

Desmond instinctively moved to shield her, which irritated Vance even more. He barked, "Get over here!"

Rebecca walked over, not because of his order. It was her turn to see the doctor.

Standing in front of him, she smiled faintly. "I'm here to treat my leg, and this slot is mine. You're gonna snatch it for her?" Vance's face went ashen. The subject was his Achilles' heel and the pain in their marriage.

"Vance..." Catherine tugged his sleeve.

"Cathy..." His expression softened.

"Forget the slot. Let Rebecca go first. We owe her too much." Catherine flipped from bratty to gracious in a flash, the rims of her eyes reddening dramatically.

"Sorry you're putting up with this," he murmured.

She shook her head. "It's fine. I get you."

She pulled him away from the door and turned to Rebecca. “Go on in, I’ll come another day.”

Rebecca felt like losing in this showdown. If she gave up the slot to Catherine, she’d undoubtedly lose. If she went in now, she would still be the loser.

Then again, winning or losing didn’t matter.

“Wait up. I’ll go with you.” Desmond hurried forward, holding her arm to provide support, so she wouldn’t be limping too much.

Rebecca didn’t refuse, unwilling to get emotional and look pathetic in front of Vance and Catherine.

Behind them, Catherine spoke to the nurse.

“Can I schedule one now?”

“Your issues?”

“Um, I have trouble getting pregnant.”

Rebecca stumbled and nearly fell, even with Desmond’s support,

She bet Catherine had said that loud enough for her to hear. But were they really progressing that quickly—to this stage already?

Vance’s words echoed in her mind. “I don’t need this stuff. Even if there’s a kid, I can afford to raise them. Right now, I’m good without one.”

She clenched her fists, her nails digging into her palms. It hurt... still hurt...

Desmond, holding her left arm, called out worriedly, “Rebecca...”

She shook her head to indicate she was fine, but her right arm was suddenly grabbed. She didn’t need to look up to know it was

Vance.

In their five years of marriage, he was both familiar and distant to her.

“I’m going with you. It’s my responsibility,” he said, tightening his grip.

“Isn’t it your responsibility with that infertility case outside?” Desmond scoffed.

Vance frowned. “My family affairs aren’t for you to comment on.”

The doctor, who had been waiting for quite a while, called out, “Next one! What’s the holdup?” Desmond and Vance flanked Rebecca, neither willing to back down.

Rebecca shook her right arm free. “Vance, is this something to be proud of? So many people are lined up waiting outside. You want our situation exposed? Think that’s a win?”

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Rebecca added, “If you don’t want to lose face, just go ”

Facing her firm stance, Vance didn’t push it. Stepping out, he said, “I’ll wait outside.”

The doctor was an old-timer. After Rebecca described her condition, he examined her thoroughly and concluded that too much time had passed. There was no guarantee of success, but it was worth a try.

He provided a rehabilitation plan, which included daily treatment sessions. That wasn’t practical for Rebecca, who lived in Soliaridge.

The doctor reassured her, “Treatment sessions are no issue. I have a student there. But you should prepare yourself mentally. It might not fix your problem.”

“I understand. Thank you, doctor.” She hadn’t held much hope for her leg anyway, so there wasn’t a huge psychological drop.

The doctor did one session and suggested two more to monitor her situation, but her flight was tomorrow.

She thought it over and decided to change the ticket since Vance had found out everything. She changed her flight to the afternoon two days later.

“Rebecca,” Desmond said as they left the clinic, “do you want to go back to school and take a look?”

She did, actually.

“Let’s go!” he said happily.

Outside the clinic, Vance was nowhere to be seen, probably off picking gifts with Catherine.

Rebecca got in Desmond's car, and they headed to the dance academy.

The familiar classrooms, dorms, and practice rooms stirred more turmoil in her heart. Those four years at the academy were the most shining moments of her life.

They were forever frozen in the summer of five years ago, and she didn't even dare think about whether she regretted it.

"They're doing a showcase promo. Mrs. Lemke is probably at the exhibit hall. Let's check it out." Desmond led her toward the exhibit hall.

Upon entering, Rebecca saw not only Lauren but also an elegant lady viewing the texts and photos on the display boards.

"Desmond, Rebecca!" Lauren called out, waving at them.

Desmond winked at the lady, and she smiled knowingly.

"This is Rebecca." Lauren pulled her close. "And this is Mrs. Schroeder."

Rebecca couldn't help glancing at Desmond. He grinned. "You guessed right. This is my mom, and she's a big fan."

It dawned on her that he took his mom's last name.

During the subsequent tour, Rebecca learned that Joyce Schroeder was donating a new theater to the academy. Moreover, she had watched Rebecca dance before and liked her very much.

They dined together that evening, and Joyce invited her to their family banquet the next night.

"Lauren is coming too. You won't be alone," Joyce enthused.

Rebecca agreed, touched by her kindness.

Afterward, Desmond drove Rebecca back to the hotel, and she asked curiously, "Your family is living in Arelinoor Why did you join the Soliaridge Troupe?"

He gave her a deep look and smiled. "My mom kicked me out to make me independent."

She didn't press, knowing he was joking to dodge the question. He arranged to pick her up the next day, and the two parted ways.

In the hotel room, Rebecca realized that for a banquet, she needed to dress up. So, she contacted a brand consultant in Soliaridge, asking the latter to help order clothes and shoes from their Arelmoor store.

The consultant immediately sent photos of new arrivals, but they were for men.

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That was because Rebecca had barely gone out and didn't need many clothes for herself. She had mostly ordered for Vance.

She smiled bitterly, telling the consultant she wanted women's evening wear. The consultant apologized and quickly sent over the women's options.

She selected an apricot gown, a pair of flat shoes, and a clutch bag. She paid and had them delivered to her hotel before Vance's call came in.

The sight of his name flashing on the screen stirred nothing but disgust. She rejected the call and blocked him.

An hour later, the gown arrived. She tried it on and felt it was suitable, then took a shower and went to bed.

She hadn't brought her notebook, so before falling asleep, she recited silently to herself, "Countdown to leaving Vance Bradford, Day 22: I've blocked him, and now the world feels quieter."

On Day 21, she woke up to find a new email in her inbox.

It was from the school, informing her that her certificate of enrollment had been processed. Now she could schedule her student visa appointment.

Since the tour visa hadn't come through yet, she planned to book the appointment later in Soliaridge, giving her time to prepare the required documents.

The Schroeder family was hosting a banquet that day, and she figured they would be very busy, so she went to see the doctor on her own.

When Desmond called, she lied that she had already finished the session and returned to the hotel. She reassured him that she would see him at the banquet that evening and insisted he didn't need to pick her up. She could make her own way there.

In the afternoon, she returned to the hotel and took a nap. When she woke up, it was time to prepare for the banquet.

She had no issue with makeup and hair, fortunately, she had brought some simple cosmetics. After she changed into the gown and did her makeup, Desmond called again, still intending to pick her up.

Unwilling to trouble him too much, she lied that she was already on her way and would call him when she arrived at the venue.

She was indeed about to set off. Once Desmond agreed, she headed out with her bag.

The banquet was quite an extravagant affair. She had passed by this place during her school days, thinking that it was magnificent and that entry required an invitation.

What she hadn't expected was to encounter Catherine here.

Catherine stood waiting on the steps, and as Rebecca approached, they came face-to-face.

Without Vance around, Catherine dropped all pretense, looking her up and down with a mocking expression. "Even wearing that dress, you look like a mismatched mess. What are you doing here?"

There came another voice. "Who are you talking to, Cathy?"

Aiden approached after hearing the commotion.

With someone else present, Catherine's tone shifted to a more delicate one. "Rebecca, are you here to sabotage Vance's business again? Last time with Mr. Lemke's project falling through, he was so worn out that he lost a lot of weight. This time, he's finally negotiating cooperation with the Mueller family. Can't you just give him a break?"

Ignoring Catherine, Rebecca lowered her head to send a message, telling Desmond she had arrived.

"Are you messaging Vance?" Catherine continued, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Why bother? Even if he lets you in, it'll only make him a laughingstock. Know some shame and go back."

"Some people just don't know when to be content," Aiden scoffed. "Here she is, living the good life at home, with everything provided for her, and still, she can't sit still. She has to come out and embarrass herself. Even if she doesn't care about her reputation, what

about Vance's career? Doesn't she feel bad about that? As if it's not Vance's money being spent."

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Aiden's tone was filled with contempt. Previously, he had resented Rebecca for not being worthy of Vance. Now, that hatred had become more concrete because Vance's collaboration project with Pascal had fallen through.

Rebecca found it puzzling. Why was she being blamed for the project's failure at all? Had she forced those two to pretend to be a couple?

"You should go back. The Mueller family's banquet is invitation-only. Each of us has an invitation letter, and you don't. It would only cause trouble for Vance; he'd have to explain who you are. What if they don't believe you and refuse you entry? That would embarrass him," Catherine said with a pleading look, as if entirely considering Vance's interests.

Aiden snorted, "She's just afraid Vance will abandon her. He comes to Arelmoor, and she follows. He attends the banquet, and she chases after him. It's been five years. Doesn't she care about his well-being at all? All she thinks about is maintaining her status."

"Don't say that about Rebecca," Catherine said, still wearing an innocent expression. "I understand her anxiety. Without Vance, how could she survive? Holding on to him is her only hope. That's pitiful."

Aiden was unimpressed. "You're just too kind-hearted."

Vance's voice rang out from behind them. "What are you guys talking about?"

Rebecca was standing just two steps in front of him, but he didn't realize that the woman in the apricot gown was his wife.

He walked straight toward Catherine, looking over only when he noticed that both Aiden and Catherine were staring in the same direction.

"Rebecca?" His eyes widened, but he quickly regained his composure. "You found your way here? If you had just told me, I would have arranged an extra invitation."

His words carried a faint reproach that only Rebecca could detect. He was blaming her for rejecting his call and blocking him. And now, she had followed him there.

Aiden firmly took Catherine's side. "This is our first time dealing with Mr. Mueller, so it wouldn't be proper to impose it."

The implication was clear. He was against letting Rebecca go inside.

From a distance, Rebecca spotted Desmond coming out. She was about to say that she had no intention of going in with them, but before she could, Catherine interjected, "Maybe I shouldn't go in? Let Rebecca take my invitation."

She was playing the emotion card again, but Rebecca refused flatly. "No need. I'll go in by myself."

Catherine grabbed her arm. "If you do this, people will laugh at Vance. Just take my invitation."

"I never said I'd go in with you, did I?" Rebecca scoffed. "Relax. Even if you claim to be Vance's mother today, I won't expose you. We're just strangers, and I'll keep my distance, okay?"

Vance's face darkened. "What kind of talk is that?"

"Just speaking from my heart!" she replied, grinning as she looked ahead.

Vance followed her gaze to look over, and there Desmond approached with a girl.

"Hi, Rebecca. I'm Desmond's sister," the girl said, casually linking arms with her.

This was Desmond's thoughtful arrangement, considering Rebecca's leg inconvenience and fearing she might feel uneasy, so he had his sister come to support her.

However, the girl's enthusiasm was a bit over the top. Rebecca chuckled, and so did Desmond.

Denise Schroeder laughed heartily. "Pardon my manners. I'm just so happy to meet Rebecca. Come on, let's get inside."

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“Rebecca!” Vance called out.

Unfamiliar with Vance and his friends, Denise blinked. “Are they your friends?”

Rebecca glanced at Vance, snorting, “Not really.”

As they all wished, she’d stay far away from them and would not sabotage anything.

“Okay, let’s go,” Denise said, smiling warmly at the group. “Bye! See you inside!”

She really was that outgoing. As they moved inside the venue, Rebecca learned her name. Like her mother, Denise loved to dance and had watched Rebecca perform as a child.

She also mentioned an older sister named Tracy Mueller, explaining that while Tracy took their father’s last name, she and Desmond took their mother’s.

If her friends hadn’t called her, she would have kept chattering endlessly with Rebecca.

She told them, “I’m accompanying Rebecca today. Have fun!”

Rebecca encouraged Denise to go with them, saying she would be fine sitting there, and Desmond echoed her sentiment. Denise promised to come back soon before joining her friends.

“Denise has always been spoiled since she was little—lively and a bit of a chatterbox,” Desmond said, inviting Rebecca to sit down.

“She’s adorable,” Rebecca said, genuinely charmed by Denise’s innocent vitality and energy.

Desmond chuckled, “Sit tight. I’ll get you a drink. Juice?”

She nodded. “Yeah, thank you.”

Once Desmond walked away, Vance and his group entered, making a beeline for her. Vance led the way, the other two following reluctantly.

His expression was far from pleasant, and his tone was sharp. “Rebecca, what do you mean by this?”

“What?” She lay back in her chair, looking up at him defiantly.

“You and that dancer... What’s going on between you two?”

“Show some respect! He has a name.”

Catherine stepped closer, interjecting, "Vance doesn't mean to disrespect. You're his wife, and being seen with another man in such a grand setting makes things awkward for him. Today's meeting with Mr. Mueller is very important."

Vance shot Rebecca a frosty look, as if silently agreeing with Catherine's words.

Rebecca was unfazed. "I have a clear conscience. I don't think I've done anything to embarrass him. If anyone should be embarrassed, it's those married men showing up with other women, right? And those women clinging to married men."

Catherine winced. "Vance..."

"Rebecca!" Vance's anger flared up, simmering just below the surface. "Are you really going to make a scene here in public?"

Rebecca maintained her composure. "Seems like you've got it all wrong. I've been pretending not to know you all, but you came over to bother me. Am I to blame for that?"

Catherine tried to sound reasonable. "We didn't come here to bother you. It's just that this occasion is very important, and since you haven't been exposed to such occasions, we're afraid you might not handle it well and end up embarrassing yourself."