

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 71

Rebecca was startled, thinking it was something related to her studying abroad.

When she leaned over to check, however, she realized it was simply her conversation with the brand's salesperson.

Vance was reading the specific part where the salesperson had thanked her for her long standing support of the brand.

Rebecca: [No worries. I'm with the spokesperson.]

After checking the brand's spokesperson, Vance tossed the phone back to her. "Didn't expect you to be a fangirl. So, that's why you've stuck to this one brand for years, using my money to tawn over some male celebrity?"

Actually, he was mistaken about that. She had supported the previous spokesperson.

The chat history he was viewing dated back to last year, and the spokesperson at that time had been her old classmate from the dance academy.

Although her own dancing dreams were shattered forever, seeing her former classmate shine on screen filled her with genuine joy, and in her own quiet way, she showed support by buying the brand's makeup, perfumes, and ready-to-wear line.

This year, the spokesperson had changed, but she had grown accustomed to the brand, and since the clothes suited both her and Vance perfectly, she saw no reason to bother switching.

But really, what was the big deal if it were a male celebrity?

Vance glanced down at his outfit, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he remarked, "Why do I suddenly feel like I'm dressed head -to-toe in green every day?"

Rebecca was speechless.

After five years of marriage, she was only now discovering this hidden streak of humor in him, and it had to be Catherine's return that had breathed new life into him, making him so unexpectedly vibrant.

She waved it off dismissively. "These days, who doesn't carry a bit of green on their shoulders? Life goes on anyway."

Wasn't she in the same boat, after all? She had loved him so deeply once, yet she had let it all go, so what right did he have to complain?

"Time to sleep. I have an early flight to catch tomorrow," she said, suddenly distant.

Just then, her phone rang. It was Desmond calling.

"Hello?" she answered as she headed toward the bedroom.

"Who is it?" Vance demanded from behind her.

She ignored him completely and focused on the call instead.

Desmond's voice came through. "My mom and Denise made me check if you'd gotten to the hotel safely, and since I didn't see you off, I've been thoroughly scolded."

Rebecca couldn't help but smile as she pictured him enduring a tag-team lecture from Joyce and Denise.

Denise snatched the phone. "Hey, Rebecca. I didn't get to hang out with you properly today, but next time, I'll come visit you in Soliaridge."

"Sounds great!" Rebecca replied, her heart swelling with the unexpected warmth of these new friends, and her smile bloomed even brighter as a result.

By now, she had reached the bedroom, where she half-reclined on the bed, propping herself up with a pillow and pulling the blanket over her legs.

Chatting and laughing with the Schroeders, she became so absorbed that she barely noticed, or rather, cared that Vance had followed her in.

When she finally said goodbye and hung up, Vance had been standing there, watching her for who knew how long

Her lingering smile faded as she looked up at his stormy face, and the screen still glowed with Desmond's name, unlocked and bright.

Vance's eyes locked onto it, and even after it dimmed, his gaze bored into her as he said, "I didn't realize you could smile so genuinely."

They had been married for five years, and she had always seemed anxious around him, forcing smiles that felt artificial. He had even wondered if living with him had turned her into some kind of puppet, but now, seeing this genuine joy was a revelation. She sighed deeply. What did he expect her to say? That all her unhappiness stemmed from him?

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It really wasn't necessary.

Marriage was a mutual choice, and she had chosen poorly from the start.

"Sighing? Right after talking to him?" Vance jabbed a finger at her phone before adding, "Have you forgotten whose name is on that marriage certificate?"

Rebecca met his gaze with weary resignation. "Who has forgotten that? Not me."

He furrowed his brow, then let out a bitter laugh. "So what? This is all an act for my benefit? What's the endgame—making me jealous like you are, snatching me away from Catherine, and chaining me to your side? Playing mind games with me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever you think."

She slid under the covers, set her phone aside, and prepared to sleep.

"Get up! You're not sleeping yet!" he commanded as he yanked the blanket off in one swift motion.

"Just go to bed! I'm not as shameless as you think. I was only chatting with Mrs. Schroeder and her family," she shot back, finding his unreasonableness grating on her nerves.

His face twisted with anger. "So, now you're bragging about cozying up to his whole family?"

He snatched her phone and held it to her face to unlock it.

"What are you doing? Give it back!" she demanded as she lunged for it.

He was too focused on scrolling through her contacts, and she managed to wrest it away.

"Give it to me! Delete Desmond now!" he commanded with a stern expression. "I won't tolerate anyone living off my money slipping out of my control!"

She shoved the phone under her pillow, remaining defiant.

Furious, he bent down to grab it. "Defying me over some guy?"

She held firm, pressing down on the phone, and for a tense moment, they were locked in a standoff, evenly matched.

Finally, he abandoned the phone, standing at the bed's edge with a stare that was cold and alien, sending a chill through her. Instinctively, she pulled the blanket tighter, but in the next instant, he hoisted her up-blanket and all. Then, with a rough flip, he pinned her face-down, his weight pressing against her back.

"You're crazy!" she yelled, trapped beneath him and unable to budge.

"Crazy?" His hand slipped under her nightgown, his eyes burning with an inexplicable fury. "You'd see just how ruthless I can be!"

This wasn't the first time he had spiraled like this recently. She shuddered to think how thrilled she would have been if this had happened before their fifth anniversary.

But now, on the cusp of her escape, she wanted no deeper entanglement with him, and only one name could halt his madness: Catherine.

"I'm not Catherine! Let me go!" She struggled, but his grip tightened, pinching her skin with a burning pain.

He didn't stop. Far from it, his actions grew more brutal as hot breath scorched her ear. His voice was low and intimidating, something she had never heard before. "Since I can't see your face, I'll just pretend you're her!"

"You monster!" Rebecca felt unprecedented humiliation.

She had resigned herself to him cherishing Catherine in his heart for five years, but she couldn't accept that he would do this to her while imagining her as Catherine.

"You're worse than an animal!" she roared.

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Rebecca's hoarse cries fell on deaf ears as Vance's actions became increasingly excessive, stripping away her defenses until she felt utterly exposed.

She suspected he was bare, given the slick press of his skin against hers, which filled her with a paralyzing dread.

Despair gripped her tightly, and she realized that tonight, she might lose everything.

“Stop! I hate you!” she yelled, her voice filled with genuine resentment.

She was on the brink of starting a new life brimming with hope, yet here he was, dragging her back into the abyss,

In the wake of despair came an eerie calm. Her strength was no match for his frenzy, so she’d better plan for the worst. Above all, she couldn’t let this pull her back into his toxic orbit.

Tomorrow, emergency contraception would be her top priority. She couldn’t let this derail her escape. After tonight, only 20 days remained in her countdown to freedom.

She had endured it for five years, and 20 days would just fly by.

As her resistance faded, his movements slowed, and he murmured in her ear, “Obedient now? Should have done so earlier.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, tears cascading down her cheeks unchecked.

“Don’t cry,” he soothed. “I’ll be gentle. Just a quick sting. Here I come.”

His fingers grazed her cheek, then covered her eyes. She wondered why he would blindfold her. Perhaps so he could fully delude himself that she was Catherine.

The doorbell shattered the moment, but he ignored it.

“The waiter’s here for the dishes! If you don’t answer, they’ll come in!” she pleaded, clinging to this fragile lifeline.

“Who’d dare enter without my say-so?” he retorted, his response a surge of aggression.

Pain pierced her as the bell rang again, and outside, a faint voice called, “Vance...”

“Catherine! It’s Catherine!” she blurted desperately.

At last, the pain ebbed. He froze, but he didn’t pull away.

“Thrilled she’s here?” he asked, his breath coming in ragged gasps laced with accusation.

She didn’t know how to respond in a way that would satisfy him, especially since he was still closely pressed against her. If she answered incorrectly, it might send him spiraling back into madness.

“No, I didn’t.” Her mind was a chaotic mess. “I just thought you’d be happy.”

The doorbell rang once more, the voice outside laced with sobs. “Vance...”

Vance hesitated, finally getting up and stepping back.

Rebecca swiftly cocooned herself in the blanket as he dressed hurriedly and headed for the door.

It was indeed Catherine.

Relief washed over Rebecca. Was she saved? Should she thank Catherine? It seemed ironic, yet strangely fitting.

The door opened, and Catherine's voice floated in, soft and quivering, as if squeezed from her throat, "Vance, I'm sorry. Am I interrupting you?"

"No, I'm still up," he replied, his tone shifting to a gentleness worlds apart from moments ago. "What's wrong?" "I'm scared. I had a nightmare of going back abroad, and..." she gasped, dissolving into tears.

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"Don't be afraid. I'm here with you," Vance soothed Catherine.

Rebecca blinked in disbelief as their exchange made her feel like the intruder.

Catherine whimpered, "Vance, thank you. You're so good to me."

"That's what I do." His voice overflowed with tenderness and warmth.

She continued her coyness. "There's one more thing I need to tell you, but promise you won't be mad."

Rebecca's mind reeled. Catherine had summoned him out, so why linger at the door, flirting right in her earshot?

"I could never be mad at you," he vowed.

Suddenly, Rebecca recalled the "100 Little Things about Cathy" in that notebook. One item stated that Vance would never get mad at her.

He truly was a man of his word, but that faithfulness felt almost ridiculous.

"Vance..." Catherine's voice turned even more coquettish.

“Yeah?”

“Vance...” Her tone was coy and flirtatious, evoking an image of her squirming. “I don’t like you sharing a bed with Rebecca and doing things with her.”

Rebecca’s world tilted at the bluntness, and Vance’s reply shattered it further. “No, I won’t be doing anything with her. Come on, let’s get you back to your room.”

The door finally clicked shut.

Rebecca exhaled shakily, limping over to lock it. Leaning against the door frame, she clutched her aching chest as a dull, pounding pain crushed her like a boulder.

The pain was familiar, but it didn’t terrify her. Time might not spark love, but it would mend wounds.

She let out a deep breath, finally settling down for some sleep. How funny! She didn’t want to do that with him either.

The king-size bed felt luxuriously spacious alone, and without her alarm, she might have overslept.

She had set her alarm for five in the morning, planning to sneak out early, head back to her hotel, and fly back to Soliaridge. But opening the door revealed her suitcase waiting outside. She wondered who had brought it there. Vance? She remembered him fiddling with her phone last night. He must have seen her hotel reservation on it.

A call to the hotel confirmed her suspicion. Vance had checked her out and taken her luggage.

Rebecca was confused. How did he manage that? How did he convince the hotel staff about their marital status? Surely, he didn’t bring along their marriage certificate.

But she didn’t dwell on it. Since the room had been checked out, she figured she might as well go back to bed for more sleep.

At 6:30, she headed downstairs for breakfast.

Plate in hand, she chose a table tucked away in a corner, behind a column, and close to the window. She intended to enjoy her meal while taking in the garden view, but Vance and his crew also entered for breakfast.

Unaware of her presence, they opted for a table right in front of the column.

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“Vance, are you tired from going out so early? Can’t you wait a bit to check out over there?” Alden griped.

“If I’d delayed, she’d have bolted at dawn,” Vance replied coolly

“So? She’d still fly home eventually,” Aiden countered.

Vance paused, then sighed, “I guess you’re right. I was just pissed.”

“I’d be raging too,” another guy chimed in. “Spending your money and cheating? You don’t want someone like that to be your wite.

“She’s begging for a wake-up call,” Lucas Lewis echoed. “You’re too soft, Vance. A solid smack might straighten her out.” Rebecca’s lips curled in a bitter smile. Birds of a feather flocked together. They wouldn’t spend a day without badmouthing her. “Cut it out,” Catherine interjected. “Vance is hurting enough without you piling on; honestly, if he weren’t so generous, you’d all be nowhere. And a crook in his shoes? You’d starve.”

Silence fell briefly.

Aiden nodded. “Spot on. Without his loyalty, we wouldn’t be this tight-knit, but Catherine, you get him best.”

“Yeah,” Lucas agreed. “Good thing you’re back. These years have been rough on him; he needs someone attuned like you.” “Alright, let’s drop it,” Vance said. “I know you’re looking out for me, and I’m grateful you’ve stuck by me through the worst. Whatever comes, I can handle it.”

In essence, they were saying that the five years with Rebecca had been full of torment and that Catherine was his salvation. Rebecca set down her coffee cup, the Americano a bit too bitter for her taste. She rose quietly, emerging from behind the column and gliding past their table.

The person directly in front of her was Aiden. He had just taken a bite and looked up, only to see Rebecca smiling as she walked by. He gaped, his food falling from his mouth.

“Aiden, you’re dropping food everywhere,” Catherine teased.

“She...” Aiden pointed, stammering.

“What?” Catherine looked over, paling instantly.

Sensing the shift, Vance and Lucas turned. Vance froze, but his astonishment was fleeting.

Rebecca observed their twisted faces, reading their minds. They were wondering if she had overheard their conversation.

She smiled sweetly, picking up the coffee cup in front of Vance and bringing it to his mouth

He stiffened, his gaze dropping to the cup. She slowly tilted the cup, the coffee nearing his mouth, but he didn't open it. As a result, the liquid dripped down onto his clothes.

After spilling nearly half a cup onto him, she set the cup down, feigning surprise. "Whoa, you didn't drink? My bad."

"What are you doing?" Catherine's eyes reddened at the stain. "If anyone's at fault, it's me. Why take it out on Vance?"

"This isn't about you, Cathy," Rebecca cooed, echoing Vance's tenderness. "Just offering him coffee. I thought he sipped it, but who knew it'd spill?"

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Rebecca leaned down to Vance. "Sorry, Mr. Bradford. I wasn't watching. But is the coffee really that awful? Not a drop touched your lips. Tell me, is your life even more bitter?"

A clatter echoed as Lucas's spoon hit his bowl, for her words confirmed that she had overheard everything

"Can't hold a utensil?" she teased. "Did I spook you? Sorry about that. I'll head out now. Enjoy your meal."

She strolled toward the exit, dishes clinking behind her amid Catherine's pleas, "Aiden, don't be reckless. For Vance's sake, let me talk to her."

"Rebecca!" Catherine called after her, swiftly catching up.

Blocking her path, Catherine started shedding tears. "I'm sorry. Last night was my fault, calling him away, but I was terrified. I've endured horrors you can't fathom, and nightmares haunted me. If you want to blame someone, blame me. If you want to throw water on someone, throw it on me. Don't take it out on Vance, please."

Vance had followed, now flanking Catherine with his glare leveled at Rebecca. "She means no harm. Vent on me if you must." Rebecca felt a mix of amusement and sorrow. She hadn't said or done anything, yet he was so quick to defend Catherine. If only he had defended her once like that, his friends would never have dared to trash her so boldly.

She laughed bitterly, shaking her head. “I’m not blaming anyone. You’re imagining things.”

Both Catherine and Vance were stunned, their rehearsed lines evaporating

Vance regrouped, explaining, “I know that’s sarcasm, but Cathy really had a nightmare last night. She cried throughout the latter half of the night.”

Rebecca snatched tissues from a nearby table, pressing them into Catherine’s hands with a smirk. “Yep, I heard it all. It makes sense for you to comfort her. Cathy, dry those tears. I’m out.”

The air became thick with tension once again.

Catherine glanced between Rebecca’s retreating form and Vance, feeling as if she had punched a pillow.

Her show hadn’t been fully staged yet, but Rebecca had left. Vance, too, struggled to comprehend Rebecca’s unusual calm around them lately.

“Ah, she’s just playing hard-to-get, right? It’s a psychological tactic of pretending not to care, and you’ll chase after her,” Aiden chimed in. “My ex-girlfriends pulled that on me—tears and threats. Women and their games.”

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“I agree with Aiden on this point,” Lucas said, elaborating further on his thoughts. “It’s the same kind of tactic she used when she suddenly started associating with Mr. Mueller’s son. Just think about it: that family has built an enormous business empire, which means their son has been surrounded by wealth and privilege since birth. What type of woman hasn’t he encountered? There must be an endless line of aspiring actresses and celebrities vying for his attention. Would someone like him truly take notice of Rebecca?”

“Come on, you guys, don’t talk about Catherine like that,” Catherine interjected, reproachful. “Vance might feel uncomfortable. But hey, what Lucas is saying isn’t entirely wrong. It’s simply a statement of fact. As a woman myself, I understand that kind of mindset all too well. It’s designed to catch attention and stir up emotions. I’ve tried such things before.” 1

Vance’s voice finally cut through the escalating conversation, bringing an end to the morning’s chaotic drama. “I have a clear understanding of the situation. She is my responsibility, and it’s my personal matter to handle. From the very beginning of our marriage, I intended to shoulder this burden alone without involving any of you. I never

anticipated that it would end up causing you all to worry and suffer alongside me as well.”

“What are you talking about? We’re brothers here. There’s no need for apologies or formalities like that,” Aiden responded.

“Exactly,” Lucas echoed in agreement. “We’re only concerned because we don’t want you to be the one suffering in silence.”

Rebecca stepped out of the restaurant, unable to hear their voices anymore. The bitter taste of the Americano lingered, settling uncomfortably in her stomach. It made her feel downcast.

In Vance’s mind, the ones who had been wronged and put through hardship all along were his friends. Thankfully, it was not too late to change course, and she could take solace in the fact that these past five years had not been entirely wasted on regret and stagnation.

She couldn’t bear to think what it would have felt like if she had lain back and done nothing. How desperate and helpless would she have felt then?

She made her way upstairs to the room, wasting no time as she gathered her luggage and headed straight to the airport.

Having not eaten enough for breakfast, she grabbed a bite in the lounge. Then it was time for boarding.

On this flight, the configuration had one window seat on either side of the aisle and two seats in the middle.

She selected a window seat, turned off her phone to prepare for takeoff, and retrieved a French novel from her bag. Reading was a habit she had maintained over the past five years. Every day she would read a little, whether it was a few pages, several chapters, or more.

As she immersed herself in the book, familiar voices suddenly flooded into the cabin.

“Vance, my seat is in the middle. What about yours?”

“Cathy and I are together. How about we switch seats? You can sit in the middle.”

“That works for me.”

And then, right next to Rebecca, two people settled into the seats—Vance and Catherine.

At that point, Rebecca couldn’t help but believe that the three of them must have been entangled by some unbreakable karmic bond from a previous life. How else could one

explain such uncanny coincidences—ending up on the same flight and even in the same row?

The atmosphere in the cabin immediately grew stifling and uncomfortable, but she did nothing more than close her eyes briefly, pressing a hand to her chest for a few seconds to steady herself, before resuming her reading, as if nothing had happened. “Rebecca?” Catherine called out from across the aisle, her voice laced with teigned surprise,

Rebecca lifted her head and offered a polite smile. “What a small world! You’re on this flight too?”

She spoke as though she had just encountered a casual acquaintance or a distant neighbor, not even sparing Vance a glance, though she caught a glimpse of his unusual expression from the corner of her eye.

He must have known she was on this flight, having already gone through her phone and seen her travel details. No way this was a coincidence.

Catherine smiled sweetly. “Indeed.”

A flight attendant approached to offer service, inquiring about meal preferences and beverages, Catherine promptly handed back the small blanket provided by the airline. “I don’t need this one. Please take it away.”

“Of course,” the attendant replied courteously before walking off with the blanket.

Only then did Catherine turn to Vance and complain, “That blanket looked so dirty. I would never use anything like that.”

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“That’s absolutely right,” Vance replied matter-of-factly.

“But the temperature in the cabin is so low. I’m freezing,” Catherine whined, her arms fully exposed in the sleeveless dress.

Vance, who had brought a jacket with him, immediately removed it and draped it gently over her shoulders. “Here, you can wear my jacket instead.”

From the corner of her eye, Rebecca noticed the smug, triumphant glance that Catherine directed her way, but she kept her focus firmly on the pages of her book, offering no reaction whatsoever.

But evidently, Catherine had no intention of leaving Rebecca alone. She leaned over slightly and whispered, “You wouldn’t mind if I wore Vance’s jacket for a bit, would you?”

She put on an expression of exaggerated apprehension and vulnerability, as if bracing for disapproval,

Rebecca found the whole display rather amusing. Who exactly was this performance intended for, her or Vance?

She looked up with a smirk. “Not at all.”

She had already relinquished any claim on the man, so what significance could a mere jacket possibly hold?

“I appreciate your understanding,” Catherine said, her voice dripping with feigned gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” Rebecca replied curtly, turning back to her book.

“Cathy,” Vance called out.

Rebecca had no idea what kind of look he had given Catherine, but she heard Catherine whisper, “I want to get along with Rebecca. That way, when you come home, she will treat you better.”

Rebecca’s mind went momentarily blank at the absurdity of it all. Words like these seemed straight out of a melodramatic novel, where a gullible male protagonist got easily manipulated.

Vance appeared to fit that role perfectly.

She could almost guess what Vance and his friends were thinking. “Oh, Catherine is so considerate and understanding ”

Please—all she desired was to sit through this flight in peaceful silence, without any further disturbances from them.

Yet Catherine seemed determined to make that impossible, as she turned her head once again and called out, “Rebecca, what are you reading there?”

“Just something to pass the time,” Rebecca replied dismissively, closing the book.

“A French book? You can understand it? Cool!” Catherine exclaimed.

It sounded like a compliment, but the mockery gleaming in her eyes was unmistakable. “I never knew you read French. Aren’t you an art student by background?”

Vance felt compelled to “testify” for Rebecca. With the same mocking tone, he said, “What can she understand? I’ve seen her workbook, and even the middle school vocabulary is annotated. She gets 70% of the questions wrong.”

His description was wildly exaggerated. Even at her lowest point, when she had first begun relearning everything from scratch, she had never been that incompetent. She certainly recognized basic middle-school vocabulary, and claiming she missed 70% of the questions was nothing short of ridiculous.

“What?” Catherine couldn’t hide her schadenfreude. “Workbook? Does she plan to go abroad or something?”

Vance’s eyes narrowed, but he quickly laughed it off. “How could that be? She’s just bored and studying for fun ”

Clupe

“Fair enough.” Catherine nodded. “With her condition, how could she ever manage to go abroad? Without your support, she couldn’t even survive out there,”

Aiden and Lucas struggled to contain their laughter, desperately holding it in until they finally burst out. “Sorry, but I’ve just run through every sad event in my life to try and stay serious. This is just too hilarious. Rebecca studying French? It’s like a vegetarian at a steakhouse. What is the point? Hahaha...”

Even Vance joined them, laughing at her.

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Rebecca returned their stares with a calm smile.

Gradually, Vance’s laughter subsided, and one by one, the others followed suit.

She locked eyes with him and asked pointedly, “Is it really that funny?”

His jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

She pressed on. “Does it amuse you to join others in mocking your own wife?”

He remained speechless, unable to formulate a response.

“Rebecca...” Catherine began, her eyes welling up with tears as if she were about to launch into another performance.

Wanting no part in it, Rebecca slipped on her headphones to tune out the noises. Whatever complaints Catherine might have whispered to Vance afterward no longer mattered to her. If only she could erase ever having known any of them. 7

For the rest of the journey, she had no further interactions with the group.

The plane landed, and it was time to retrieve luggage from the overhead bins, Catherine put on an exaggerated display of capability, pulling open the compartment cover and turning to Vance. "Help Rebecca with her luggage. She can't manage it on her own."

Vance paused from reaching for Catherine's suitcase, then walked over to open the bin for Rebecca.

Rebecca found the situation bitterly amusing. Was he only assisting her now to appease Catherine and save face?

Vance frowned at her expression. "What's so funny about this?"

But her grin grew even wider. "Just wondering if I should thank Cathy for it."

The mere mention of Catherine's name drew immediate wary glances from everyone, as though they feared the disabled Rebecca might pose some kind of threat to her.

Catherine quickly interjected, "No worries, Rebecca. It's nothing."

Rebecca ignored Catherine entirely, keeping her eyes fixed on Vance. "Should I thank her for graciously lending me my own husband for a minute to help with my luggage?"

His expression darkened. "Rebecca!"

His friends were equally indignant. Aiden clenched his fists, as if itching to hit her

Catherine's eyes welled up, but Rebecca wasn't impressed. She hadn't said anything wrong.

"As it happens, I don't have any luggage in there," Rebecca said flatly, her smile vanishing. "But thank you anyway, Mr. Bradford."

She brushed past Vance and made her way toward the cabin door.

Behind her, Catherine sniffled, "I was just trying to be nice."

"I know," Vance soothed her.

"Besides bullying Cathy, what else is she even capable of?" Aiden huffed. "Cathy, you're far too soft-hearted for your own good!"

Soft-hearted? That had to be the most absurd joke in the entire world.

Rebecca hailed a cab from the airport and headed home alone, knowing Vance would have a driver waiting, but there would never be a place for her in that car.

That was fine. She had long since stopped expecting to be included in their world. It was a circle she could never truly enter, no matter how hard she tried.

Upon arriving home, she took a two-hour nap. Afterward, she received a text message notifying her that the visa for her international performance tour with Lauren had been approved and would be mailed to her in the next couple of days.

The unpleasant encounters from the flight melted away in the face of this exciting news. Everything was progressing smoothly and according to plan, filling her days with a renewed sense of hope and anticipation.

She changed her clothes and went to her treatment sessions. She had no idea if they would work, but just like studying French and professional theories, endeavors that had once seemed pointless might one day reveal their value.

Support

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Even if Rebecca never achieved a full recovery, the process of her treatment could still contribute as a valuable case study for the doctors and a meaningful experience for herself.

It was not a bad thing, and once hope entered her life, it brought a profound sense of tranquility that permeated every aspect of her being.

After the treatment session, she stumbled upon a newly opened ice cream shop in a nearby mall and decided to treat herself to a scoop of pistachio-flavored ice cream.

Her next task was to schedule an appointment for her student visa application. She selected the nearest available date, and when the confirmation email arrived notifying her of the successful booking, a quiet spark of excitement ignited within her heart.

The recent days of travel had left her body worn out. With the appointment secured, she had a light meal, took a relaxing shower, and climbed into bed earlier than usual.

Lying there, she began scrolling through her phone, browsing rental listings, reading personal experiences and tips about studying abroad, and searching for potential connections with alumni.

Before long, she figured out an effective method for renting an apartment and logged onto a dedicated rental website.

As images of apartments filled with exotic charm and vibrant street scenes from foreign lands appeared on her screen, an overwhelming surge of emotion welled up inside her. The impulse to cry became irresistible, and tears began to stream down her face in an unstoppable flow.

Yet these were not tears of sorrow; they were tears of pure joy, born from the relief of hardship finally giving way to sweeter times ahead.

It felt as though a pair of invisible wings were rapidly sprouting and extending from her back. Once they were fully formed, she would be soaring into the distant sky.

Night fell, and with it, another day passed, bringing her one step closer to saying goodbye to this place. She was counting down the days now.

She had no idea where Vance had gone after returning to Soliaridge that day, nor did she have any desire to find out.

In the past, she had always made a point of waiting for him to come home, especially in the early years of their marriage. She had been desperate to bridge the emotional distance between them.

But their lives before the wedding had run on entirely separate tracks, with no points of intersection whatsoever. Yearning to draw closer to him, she would inquire about his day and where he had been.

His responses were always curt. “The company.”

Of course, she knew he was at work, but couldn’t he share just a little more? She had wanted to open up about her own day— what books she had read and what activities she had pursued.

But he had shown no interest whatsoever. Over time, she came to understand that his cold indifference stemmed from a complete lack of desire to engage in conversation with her, to share details of his life, or to learn about hers.

As long as she remained healthy, free from illness or pain, and alive, he paid her no further attention.

Around ten o’clock that night, Vance returned home.

By then, her tears had dried, and upon hearing the door open, she swiftly deleted her browsing history to cover her tracks.

“Sir, would you like something to eat?” Nancy asked.

“No need. I’ve already eaten,” he replied dismissively before heading straight to the bedroom.

Rebecca turned over in bed and pretended to be asleep, ensuring he wouldn’t notice the traces of her earlier tears. Without a word, he took a shower and went to bed, oblivious to anything unusual about her.

The following morning, she had a treatment session scheduled for eight o’clock, so she rose early and bustled around to get ready.

Just as she was about to head out, Nancy reminded her, “Mr. Bradford’s suitcase hasn’t been unpacked yet.”

The suitcase sat conspicuously by the entrance.

In the past, whenever he returned from a trip, she would unpack it meticulously that very evening—washing the clothes anew and organizing everything back into its proper place.

To her, a suitcase was a deeply personal item, so she had always preferred to handle it herself rather than delegating it to Nancy. But today, a sudden realization struck her, making her feel foolish for her previous efforts. If the suitcase truly qualified as a private belonging, then her insistence on unpacking it had been an unwelcome intrusion all along.

In his mind, she was no different from Nancy—just another stranger sharing the same roof.

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