

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 451

Vance sat there in stunned silence, having not said a single word the entire time.

The lawyer was speechless. Wasn't Lucas supposed to be the easier one to talk to?

"By the way, how qualified are you as a lawyer? Didn't you read her case file before taking her on?" Lucas said, twisting the knife even deeper. "She tried to poison Mr. Bradford. Do you think he's stupid enough to vouch for her now?"

Vance paused at his blunt words.

The lawyer pushed up his glasses. "Of course, I reviewed the file. But Miss Welch insisted that Mr. Bradford didn't blame her and that it was never her intention to harm him. She said she is the person he loves most, and no matter what she's done, he'll always forgive and save her."

He cleared his throat and looked at Lucas. "She also mentioned that you are the soft-hearted one who always protects her."

"Bullshit!" Lucas exploded. "He's an idiot, not me!"

Vance was speechless.

"Let me make this very clear," Lucas continued. "If we stay out of this case, fine. But if we get involved, we'll be the ones hoping she rots in prison!"

He chased the lawyer out, slammed the door shut, and turned to Vance with a serious expression. "I just got rid of him. If he comes back, don't you dare go soft again."

The lawyer's words about forgiving and saving Catherine made him uneasy. He knew Vance wouldn't take Catherine back, but he wasn't sure whether Vance would go soft and help her one last time.

The lawyer left the building in a daze. This was nothing like what Catherine had described.

He even began to worry that the next person he had to meet would react the same way. But he had no choice. He had to try.

When Sonia received the lawyer's call, she was on the plantation learning how to roast tea leaves. She had set up a stove in the courtyard with a pot and was stir-frying a small batch.

Isabelle sat beside her, occasionally offering tips.

When Sonia glanced at her, Isabelle waved her off with a laugh. “What? Don’t you trust me? I’ve been roasting tea for 20 years. I started helping my grandfather when I was this tiny.”

“Who would dare doubt you? You’re good at everything,” Sonia quipped, having always admired how freely and boldly Isabelle lived her life.

Isabelle shook her head. “Actually, I’m pretty lazy. Just want to eat, sleep, and do nothing.”

Sonia’s phone rang. It was the lawyer, who wanted to meet about Aiden’s case.

“You can just tell me over the phone,” she said. “Aiden and I are already divorced. Whatever happens to him has nothing to do with me anymore.”

She already had a rough idea of what Aiden had done. Betraying his friends, getting arrested, and probably heading to prison.

The lawyer felt truly unlucky. None of these people was cooperative.

“Ma’am, here’s the situation,” he explained. “Mr. Hodge has been detained. I’m the lawyer he hired, and I’ll do everything I can to protect his legal rights.”

“Oh, I see,” she replied coolly, having no desire to get involved in anything related to Aiden.

The lawyer felt the conversation dying again. He gathered his thoughts. “Would it be possible for us to meet in person? The retainer contract needs a family member’s signature.”

“Go talk to his parents,” she simply suggested.

The lawyer was speechless, having already tried that two days ago.

But his parents had been uncooperative, claiming that they didn’t need a lawyer and that they trusted the law and the government.

Since their son had broken the law, they would let the state deal with him.

Chapter

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 452

In short, they refused to spend a single cent.

The lawyer said helplessly, "I already spoke with them, but..."

"What?" Sonia was puzzled.

Aiden should have transferred almost all his assets to his parents. They had no reason to just discard him.

"They're not willing to hire a lawyer," he explained. "When I went the second time, they had already left on a trip with their younger son and his wife."

"Ha?" Sonia took a moment to process it, then burst out laughing. "Serves him right! He finally got a taste of his own medicine."

"Madam?" The lawyer was truly confused.

"Since even his parents won't help him, why should I bother?" she scoffed. "I'm just his ex-wife, having nothing to do with him anymore. You've got the wrong person."

"Please wait..." The lawyer hurried to stop her from hanging up. "Mr. Hodge hopes you'll help him for old times' sake, or at least for the sake of your son. He can't have a father in prison, right? That will affect his future job applications. Even if he doesn't go into public service, his classmates and friends will laugh at him. And he will be at a disadvantage looking for a partner, won't he?"

"That's fine," she hummed, still indifferent. "I'll just tell him his father is dead."

The lawyer was dumbfounded.

"I'm busy right now. I hope this is the last time you contact me. I have no relationship with Mr. Hodge anymore. To be honest, I don't just want him in prison. I want him dead. So, why would I hire any lawyer for him?" she added firmly.

She still felt bitter as she thought back to Aiden's coldness and her despair when her mother passed away.

The lawyer sounded dejected. "Understood. I'm sorry for disturbing you."

Sonia hung up and went back to roasting tea, stirring with more force than necessary.

Isabelle reminded her softly, "The leaves are broken now."

Sonia paused, moved the pot aside, and let out a deep breath.

Isabelle took her hand. “Are you upset?”

Sonia shook her head. “I’m not. I’m thrilled, actually. This is karma. I thought he’d be out there on the loose forever. Turns out it was just a matter of time before justice got him.”

She sneered and added, “Now he knows what it feels like to be abandoned by everyone. You know, he transferred almost all his assets to his parents. During the divorce, he gave me a portion and called it half. Now that he needs money for his legal defense, his parents have just abandoned him. They took all his money and went on vacation with their younger son. Isn’t that worth celebrating?”

Isabelle studied her carefully.

Sonia pushed her face away. “Stop looking at me like that. I really don’t feel anything. He is just a stranger to me now. Whatever happens to him, I couldn’t care less.”

“Good. Then let me tell you something.” Isabelle had heard this piece of gossip but hadn’t dared tell her.

Sonia mused, “He has an illegitimate child outside, doesn’t he?”

Isabelle’s eyes widened. “You’re sharp!”

“With how wildly he fooled around, it would be strange if he didn’t have illegitimate children,” Sonia snorted.

“You don’t know who the mother is,” Isabelle said mysteriously. 3

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 453

“Who is it? Do I know her?” Sonia asked, having never been interested in Aiden’s affairs.

Isabelle nodded. “It’s Catherine. I was afraid it would hurt you, so I didn’t dare say anything.”

Sonia paused, then heaved a sigh of relief. “You know what? They’re made for each other.”

“Huh?” Isabelle was surprised by her composure.

“Aren’t they?” Sonia smiled. “Two rotten people together-a match made in hell!” 1

“That’s right,” Isabelle chuckled. “But I don’t think that baby will be born. I know Catherine’s type; she’s all about self-interest. She cheated on Vance and tried to pin the child on him. Now the truth is out, and Aiden is in jail. What good does having that baby do for her?”

“Yeah,” Sonia agreed. “But none of that concerns us. Let the trash stay far away.”

Far away in another country, Rebecca heard bits and pieces about the changes happening back in Soliaridge. Hugo would report to Gabriel, and on weekends when she went back to Kaitlyn’s house, she would catch a word or two.

But like Sonia, she felt nothing. It was the same as seeing celebrity gossip trending online. She might feel a moment of surprise, but that was all.

Gabriel worked fast. By the third month after Rebecca started school, the clinic construction was completed. And for her convenience, it was located near her school.

The doctors and nurses had all come from the States. Gabriel offered generous salaries and proposed one-year contracts. If anyone didn’t adapt, they could return home the following year and be replaced.

In Edwin’s team, there were always people willing to come. They joked that Gabriel was paying way too much.

The doctor responsible for the therapy was named Archer Davidson. His wife was a rehabilitation nurse. The couple had come together.

Every day, Rebecca went for the therapy session and rehabilitation.

Her classmates were curious but knew better than to pry. Eventually, a girl named Edith Gould, who had become close to her, asked what the clinic was for.

Rebecca finally revealed she was treating her leg there. Her classmates were all fascinated.

“Can it really heal your leg?”

“Depends on my own effort. If there is even a sliver of hope, I won’t give up.”

Deeply touched, her classmates hugged and encouraged her.

Since everyone was curious about the clinic, Rebecca gave them a full introduction, mentioning body regulation and treatment for various conditions. What interested them most were the therapy sessions.

“It’s like magic! I’ve seen it on YouTube,” one classmate said.

One day, when Rebecca was heading to the clinic, Edith tugged along. She tried a program and went back, describing it vividly.

The others became even more intrigued and wanted to try it themselves. When Rebecca mentioned herbal medicine, they imagined various herbs being decocted together, which sounded even more like wizardry or witchcraft.

Whenever they had headaches, aches, and other discomforts, they'd all go to the clinic. Word of mouth spread quickly, and the clinic's reputation grew.

The doctors and nurses suddenly got very busy. The clinic Gabriel had opened specifically for Rebecca began turning a profit.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 454

Rebecca's life became simple, orderly, and fulfilling.

It was basically class, rehabilitation, and on weekends, she would go back to Kaitlyn's house to spend time with Josette.

Time passed quickly. Before she knew it, winter had arrived.

In mid-December, the school broke for Christmas. With a half-month holiday, most students left the campus. Rebecca stayed behind for her daily rehabilitation instead of returning to Kaitlyn's house.

On the first day of vacation, she made herself a simple, healthy breakfast. Afterward, she put on a thick down jacket and headed to the clinic.

The moment she walked in, she heard a deep voice call out to her, "Hey, dancing girl."

It was one of the clinic's regular patients-an older countryman in his fifties named Robert.

The doctors said he suffered from a rare, incurable disease. In other words, he was waiting for his time to run out. Death could take him at any moment.

He didn't come to be cured, just to find some relief from the pain. Archer explained that painkillers could also help, but he preferred coming here for the nostalgic comfort of being among fellow countrymen.

Robert was an outgoing, friendly man. Sometimes, he would bring gifts like flowers and cookies.

Rebecca always got her share. For the past several months, the two of them had been the only patients showing up at the clinic every day.

“We’re the spiritual shareholders of this clinic,” Robert often joked.

That day, Rebecca brought her gifts-apple pies she had baked the night before, using a recipe she learned from Desmond.

Robert loved sweets and ate two slices. The man who came with him looked like a friend or a caregiver, named Jerry.

When he reached for a second slice, Jerry frowned but ultimately didn’t stop him. A trace of sorrow flashed in Jerry’s eyes, as if saying, “Never mind. Enjoy it while you can.”

Rebecca found that look heartbreaking.

As usual, she first did therapy, then moved on to rehabilitation. It took about three hours. When she came out, Robert had already left.

“He took all the apple pies with him. We didn’t get any,” one of the nurses complained playfully.

Right then, an elderly woman came in. When she heard about the pies and that Robert had taken them all, she grumbled, “That old thing! How can he eat them all by himself?”

She suffered from joint pain. The clinic’s treatments brought her a lot of relief, and she was also a regular.

Rebecca greeted her with a smile and promised to bake her a whole pie tomorrow. Only then did the lady cheer up and call her a little angel.

Life was like this-quiet and ordinary. Yet even the smallest things, like a piece of cookie or a casual acquaintance, carried a certain warmth.

On the way home, it started snowing. She walked back slowly instead of taking a car.

The snow grew heavier, covering her coat in white flakes. When she got home, the online orders of wreaths, bells, and other decorations had arrived and were piled by the front door.

It was time to start decorating for Christmas. She carried everything inside, unpacked the boxes in the warm room, made herself a simple lunch, and brewed a cup of coffee.

Then she lit the fireplace, sat on the fluffy rug in front of it, and turned on the music. It was pure bliss.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 455

The phone lying on the rug lit up as a message came in. Rebecca picked it up and saw it was from

Desmond.

It read: [Come outside and see the snowman!]

“Snowman?” She put on her coat and opened the door before a gust of cold wind rushed in.

In just one afternoon, the snow outside was already half a foot deep. In the garden next door stood an ugly little snowman. Desmond was standing beside it with a big grin, waving enthusiastically.

She walked over and noticed the snowman had a rose in its mouth.

“His name is Little Snow.”

“That’s the most half-hearted name I’ve ever heard.”

“But his attitude isn’t half-hearted.” He suddenly pulled a bouquet of roses from behind the snowman. Little Snow wants to give you these flowers and wishes you a happy vacation.”

She smiled at him without a word. His face flushed red, and his hand holding the flowers shook a little.

Unknowingly, they had already been here for nearly half a year. Desmond’s feelings had been obvious, and she naturally understood.

He would do little surprises like this from time to time. She had to admit they made her feel happy and touched, but she wasn’t ready for another relationship yet.

“Thank you.” She accepted the flowers. “When are you and Denise leaving?”

She knew they were going back to the States for the holiday and planned to treat them to a meal before they left.

“She took a flight this morning,” he replied. “She should be home in a few hours.”

“Huh?” Rebecca hadn’t expected him to stay behind. “You...”

He instantly put on a pitiful expression. “My mom said she only misses Denise. So right now, I’m a poor, unwanted orphan.”

She chuckled at his dramatic act. “Got any dinner plans?”

His eyes lit up. “Nope. Can I mooch off you?”

She gave him a playful glare. “Come on over!”

Actually, the siblings had eaten at her house many times. Desmond knew her house better than she did. The moment he walked in, he headed straight for the kitchen.

Rebecca shook her head. She was supposed to be treating him to dinner, but it became him cooking for her. 7

Denise hadn’t exaggerated things. Desmond really was an excellent cook.

He made a beautiful tomahawk steak-crispy on the outside, tender on the inside, and perfectly seasoned to her taste. He also baked a pizza loaded with toppings-so rich an Italian might want to fight him for it. Then he went on to make some side dishes.

Rebecca looked at the spread on the table and marveled, “What kind of cuisine is this?”

“Desmond-style!” he said with a proud grin. “The taste is the whole point. I’ll go grab some wine.”

He now came and went between their houses by hopping the garden fence, thinking the gate was too much trouble. A short while later, he returned with two bottles of sweet wine-the purely sugary kind.

Even though it was winter, the fireplace was roaring. Drinking the sweet wine over ice felt refreshing and soothing.

They had nothing urgent to do that evening, so they ate slowly, chatting as they went. Before they knew it, the two bottles were empty.

Rebecca had thought the sweet wine wouldn’t make her drunk, but the aftereffect was surprisingly strong. Gradually, Desmond’s figure started to blur, and his voice sounded far away.

At the end of the meal, she stood up to clear the table and immediately felt dizzy. She swayed and nearly fell.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 456

“Sit down. I’ll take care of it.” Desmond quickly caught her, helping her to the sofa.

Rebecca waved her hand. “I’m fine. I’m perfectly fine, really...”

“Okay, you’re fine. I’ll clean up,” he said, humoring her.

But when he finished loading the dishwasher and came back out, she had already fallen asleep on the sofa.

Worried she would be uncomfortable sleeping there, he gently called out, “Rebecca, hey. Would you like to sleep in bed?”

She was unresponsive, her eyes tightly shut. He sighed, lifted her into his arms, and carried her to the bedroom.

She really was drunk, her cheeks rosy. When he leaned down to lay her on the bed, her warm breath brushed against his ear.

He tensed up, staring at her flushed cheeks and lips that looked like they had been stained with rose juice. For a moment, he didn’t want to get up.

Rather, he wanted to lean down just a little more, until he could touch her lips. Even just a light touch would be enough.

But then, he caught himself. That would be disrespectful to her.

Sanity returned, and he quickly left the bedroom, planning to go straight home. Then he realized that she was drunk and might need care if she felt unwell later.

So, he came back.

With all this excess energy and the alcohol still burning in his blood, he decided to clean the house.

And so, on that winter night, while Rebecca slept soundly in her room, Desmond cleaned every inch of her house, even the hidden corners, until he was exhausted.

Only then did he lie down in the living room and fall asleep. 1

The next morning, Rebecca woke up, and her eyes met Desmond's as he lay in the living room. 2

He panicked. "You got drunk last night. I was worried you might feel sick, so I stayed. I-I saw your house was a bit messy, so I cleaned up a little. After I finished, I was so tired I fell asleep here. I was afraid you might catch a cold, so I carried you to bed. I didn't do anything inappropriate. I'm sorry for being presumptuous."

He explained things in a hurry. The more he talked, the redder his ears became. 1

"Would you like some breakfast? I'm planning to fry a couple of sausages and make scrambled eggs." Rebecca interrupted his stream of excuses as if she hadn't heard any of them.

He froze for a second, then his eyes lit up. He nodded vigorously. "Yes! What else do you want to eat? I'll make it right now."

He dashed into the kitchen, and soon the clatter of kitchenware came out. She shook her head, realizing he had taken one more step forward.

In the past, even though he and Denise often came over for meals, they had never stayed the night. Now she had meant to make breakfast herself, but he ended up in the kitchen once again. 1

Feeling a little embarrassed, she walked into the kitchen. "You cooked dinner last night. Breakfast is simple. Let me do it." 1

"It's fine." He turned around with a bright smile. "I love the kitchen, just like I love dancing."

She chuckled. "That's quite the comparison. Isn't dancing your life?" 1

"Exactly! So is the kitchen!" he said smoothly. "Cooking for the person you love most in the kitchen. Isn't that also a very important thing?"

He bit his tongue the moment the words left his mouth, having accidentally blurted out what was in his heart. 1

Afraid she'd be mad, he quickly backpedaled. "T-That's something my dad always says. It's his catchphrase." 2

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 457

Rebecca frowned, and Desmond forced a smile. “Yeah. When my dad isn’t busy, he cooks for my mom. I learned it all from him.”

It was like carrying on with the family tradition. She hadn’t expected that.

She didn’t believe a household had to have the woman cook. In a wealthy family like Desmond’s, there were probably countless housekeepers and even professional chefs.

Sean must be very busy, yet he still cooked for Joyce often? It made sense that a child’s character was shaped by what they saw every day at home.

For example, the way her parents behaved had produced someone like Emmett. It was no surprise. And with parents like Desmond’s, the child they raised...

She didn’t quite know how to describe it, but it should be someone like Desmond.

They were both dancers, so their diets were relatively simple. Last night had already been indulgent, so the breakfast was light.

Afterward, Desmond offered to take her to the clinic.

The snow had stopped during the night, but the temperature was low.

Rebecca was bundled up tightly before stepping out. The front yard was covered in ice, making her frown.

“Hold on. It’s slippery. I’ll get to you.” Desmond had just gone home to shower and change.

When he saw her come out, he was afraid she might slip. He hopped over the fence, trotted to her side, and helped her walk.

Her footsteps on the ice weren’t steady. She stumbled, nearly pulling him down with her. He caught her in time and steadied them both.

“I’ll have to carry you. Is that okay?” he said.

The houses there were townhouses with gardens. The space was small, and cars couldn’t drive into the courtyards.

His eyes glittered with pure sincerity that seemed to be saying, “No other intentions. Just want to help you get around safely.”

“Alright,” she agreed, reaching out.

Actually, they had plenty of physical contact before from dancing duets, with all kinds of lifts and holds. But that had been purely professional. Being carried like this was different.

No matter what his intentions were right now, he had taken one more step forward.

“Okay.” He took her hands, placed them on his shoulders, squatted down, and lifted her onto his back.

The walk from the front yard to the gate was only a few steps. His car was parked right outside his courtyard. But as soon as he carried her out of the yard, they saw a man standing beside a car parked across the street.

“Rebecca.” The man walked over, his eyes fixed on her.

“What is he doing here?” Desmond muttered under his breath.

Rebecca had the same doubt.

Vance stopped in front of them, but Desmond had no intention of putting her down.

“It’s been a long time,” Vance said.

Even though his heart was twisting painfully, he forced himself to look calm and gentle.

Rebecca nodded and said to Desmond, “Let’s go.”

“Okay.” Desmond was more than happy to comply.

He carried her all the way to the car before carefully setting her down. Then he opened the door, helped her in, and went around to the driver’s seat.

Vance walked up to the passenger-side window and said to Rebecca, “With all this fresh snow, where are you headed? Isn’t it vacation time?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 458

Rebecca ignored Vance.

Desmond quickly got into the car and drove off, the tires kicking up slush and spraying snowmelt everywhere.

Vance stood in the snow, looking down at the stain on his clothes, but he didn't bother brushing it off. He simply lifted his head and watched the car disappear into the distance.

A voice echoed in his mind. "She's with him now. She's really with him. They came out of the same house this morning. Are they living together? They..."

A strong wave of bitterness surged in his chest. They were married for five years, yet he had never truly touched her. 2

Desmond remained tense until they arrived at the clinic. Then his expression turned timid, as if he had done something wrong.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"I don't like him coming to find you, and I didn't want you to talk to him. So, I drove off without giving you a chance to speak."

"It's fine. I didn't want to talk to him anyway."

"Really?"

"Yeah. If I still had any feelings left, I wouldn't have divorced him."

"Alright, let's go do your rehab!"

He perked up, jumped out of the car, and opened the door for her.

The path to the clinic had already been cleared of snow and sprinkled with salt so it wouldn't ice over. He held her arm and helped her inside step by step.

Because of the heavy snow, there were fewer patients than usual.

Even Robert hadn't come. He usually came no matter the weather. Even if he weren't getting treatment, he would still come and chat for an hour.

Rebecca's heart skipped a beat. In a clinic like this, the thing everyone feared most was when a regular patient suddenly stopped showing up.

"Rebecca, you're here. Come on in," Archer called her for therapy. "It's quiet today."

"Didn't Robert come?" she asked.

"No, not today." Archer didn't say much.

Probably, no one wanted to voice the worst possibility.

The therapy and rehabilitation took up most of the morning again. When she finished, the elderly woman had arrived, but Robert still hadn't shown up.

The elderly woman mumbled, "He must be slacking off. It's cold, so he doesn't come. Lazy old man!"

Everyone fell silent, hoping that was really the case.

Desmond had been waiting outside. When she came out, he hurried over to support her and asked quietly, "Do you know where Robert lives?"

She shook her head.

They were just clinic friends meeting because of their illnesses. The clinic was all they shared; everything else remained private.

"Let's go home," she said.

"Okay." Desmond helped her into the car and rode her back.

When she got out, she noticed there was now a snowman in her yard, too. As she got closer, she saw a card tucked into its chest.

It read: [To the person I love: happy snow day.] 1

She took the card and threw it into the trash. Then she said to Desmond, "Go inside and heat a bucket of water." 1

"Huh?" He blinked.

"Pour it on the snowman," she explained, pointing at the one in her yard.

He perked up, more than happy to comply. Not to mention one bucket of water, he could do ten.

Vance hadn't left.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 459

Vance had seen the snowman in the neighbor's garden and wanted Rebecca to have one too, even though she might never come back to him.

He watched from a distance, hoping she would feel at least a little surprised. Even if she didn't want to talk to him, the snowman might bring her a tiny bit of joy.

Yet she not only threw away the card but also asked Desmond to pour hot water on the snowman.

One bucket wasn't enough. The man kept pouring more. What was he trying to prove?

Watching the snowman's head start to melt, Vance couldn't take it anymore. He got out of the car and marched straight over.

"Hey, what the hell are you doing?" he barked.

His clothes still had the mud Desmond had splashed on him that morning, and during the snowman- building, half of him had gotten soaked with snow.

He looked quite disheveled.

"Can't you see?" Desmond sneered. "The snow made the ground slippery. I'm clearing away the trash so Becky doesn't slip and fall."

He had never dared call her Becky before. But today, in front of her ex-husband, he needed to show some dominance.

His words made Vance furious. "What do you mean by that? This snowman is a winter gift I made for Rebecca!"

"This?" Desmond poured another bucket of hot water on it. Steam rose from the melting snow. 1

Vance lunged forward to grab the bucket. "Stop that!"

Desmond refused to let go, and they started wrestling in the snow. The ground was slippery, but it gave Desmond the advantage, thanks to his dancing skills.

After a few rounds, Vance couldn't stay upright.

Desmond knocked him to the ground and started punching him in the face. Desmond had wanted to do that for a long time, not caring about leaving scars. 1

This man had no sense of decency anyway.

Vance naturally wasn't going to just lie there and take it. He kept trying to flip Desmond over, but the slippery ground made it impossible. He stayed pinned down the whole time while Desmond beat him. (1)

Rebecca heard the commotion and came outside. Desmond got up, ran to her side, and flashed Vance a smug look.

Vance didn't want her to see him like this. This was one of the few truly humiliating moments of his life.

He tried to stand up, but the more he tried to look dignified, the more awkward he became. Several times, he almost got to his feet, only to slip and fall again.

Rebecca suddenly remembered certain moments in their marriage when she had been the one panicking and stumbling in front of him.

No matter how hard she had tried, her feet would betray her. She would either fall again or stagger helplessly.

Now their roles had reversed. He became the one panicking, while she watched with perfect composure.

After several failed attempts, he finally managed to stand. By then, he was bruised and swollen, his clothes soaked with snow water and mud.

He looked nothing like the elegant, polished CEO he used to be. Self-aware, he pointed at the snowman and complained, "I made that snowman for you, and he poured hot water on it."

Rebecca shrugged. "So what? I told him to do it."

He was stunned. "You..."

She cut him off. "I don't like having trash in my yard."

He felt as if something had exploded in his head. The blast left him dizzy and staggering. After a few unsteady steps, he couldn't stay on his feet and fell to the ground again.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 460

Rebecca turned decisively and went back inside. Desmond gave Vance one last contemptuous look.

She urged, "Come back home. What are you dawdling for?"

Vance lay on the ground, watching helplessly as the door closed.

"Come back home..." He had never imagined she would say it to anyone else.

Her past words echoed in his mind.

"Vance, when are you coming home?"

"Vance, I think I'll head home first."

"Vance, can you bring something when you come home?"

"Vance, let me know before you come home."

"Vance, come home."

Once, that phrase had belonged only to the two of them. They used to have a home, but now she was telling another man to come home.

His heart felt like it was ripped apart by sharp claws. The pain was unbearable. So, this was what heartbreak felt like.

She must have felt this way, too, back when he kept ignoring her because of Catherine.

"I'm sorry, Rebecca. I was wrong," he murmured.

He didn't know how long he sat there in the snow. Only when the smell of baking bread drifted out from the house did he realize his clothes had been soaked through.

The snowman had already melted away. She had wanted to build one for so many years.

Back in high school, whenever it snowed, the students would go crazy, running around the playground and having snowball fights. The mischievous boys would even stuff snow down the girls' collars.

She would just sit quietly by the window, watching the snowflakes fall. The others would invite her to play in the snow, but she would just shake her head, saying the snow was too light.

When would Soliaridge ever get heavy snow so they could build snowmen? Unfortunately, the snow in that city was always just a thin layer that melted before school even let out.

He murmured, "We've finally got heavy snow, but you don't want my snowman anymore."

The smell of baking bread was Desmond's doing. Rebecca didn't like crusty European bread, so he baked soft, fluffy loaves that felt like clouds.

Naturally, he stayed for lunch. In the afternoon, they watched a show together. Halfway through, Rebecca fell asleep. He gently covered her with a blanket, then went to prepare dinner.

For dinner, they didn't drink. Afterward, they continued to watch the show they hadn't finished. That night, she didn't ask him to leave.

After she fell asleep, Desmond kept watching TV in the living room and eventually dozed off.

The next day, he made breakfast again and went with her to the clinic.

The days passed like this. He even decorated both houses for Christmas. It continued until the day before Christmas Eve, when Gabriel called to say he was coming to pick her up for the holiday.

Since she couldn't miss her daily rehabilitation, Gabriel planned to pick her up on Christmas Eve. Rebecca told him to come at noon, right after her rehab session ended.

Desmond accompanied her to the clinic. When they returned, she packed the gifts she had prepared for her family. Gabriel arrived shortly after.

Desmond was still in her house, looking like a lost puppy.

Rebecca was going home with Gabriel for the holiday, while his only relative there, Denise, had already gone back to the States. That meant he would be spending Christmas alone.

The festive atmosphere was intense. Every house was lively and warm with family gatherings. Being alone made him feel miserable.

Gabriel loaded Rebecca's things into the car, then came back to help her in.

Desmond stood at the gate, his eyes watery. "Rebecca, Merry Christmas!"

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 461

Rebecca glanced at him and couldn't help but burst into laughter. "Aren't you getting in the car? Planning to stand out here and freeze?"

“Huh?” Desmond blinked, still processing.

“Are you really gonna spend Christmas Eve all by yourself?” she teased.

“No... I... uh... I really...” He paced back and forth before snapping out of it. “Oh, right! Hang on! I need to grab the gift!”

He had anticipated this, knowing Gabriel would pick her up for Christmas. He had dreamed about her inviting him along, even getting the perfect gift ready.

When he bounced back out, however, he spotted someone else standing by the car. It was none other than Vance, who had been gone for a couple of days.

He wondered, “What is this guy doing here? He isn’t seriously expecting to tag along, is he? Gabriel would never allow that.”

Vance had come to deliver a gift for Rebecca. He knew that she wouldn’t spend Christmas Eve alone and that he would never be welcome in Gabriel’s home, so he had decided to hand it over right here on Christmas Eve-only to run straight into Gabriel picking her up.

Facing Gabriel’s glare, he forced a smile and held out the gift box. “Merry Christmas.”

Rebecca didn’t take it. Instead, she warned him, “There’s something I’ve been meaning to say. A decent ex should stay dead and buried! Not popping up like a zombie every couple of weeks.”

His face paled. “I just wanted to wish you well.”

“I don’t need your gifts or best wishes,” she said bluntly. The best thing you can do for me is stay gone. Do you understand?”

His hand holding the gift box dropped, his eyes dimming.

“Seriously, what are you even doing here with gifts? Is it really for my sake? No. It’s for yourself. You feel guilty, so you keep showing up to apologize, hoping I’ll forgive you.” She pointed out.

After a pause, she added, “Catherine betrayed you, and suddenly you realized you’d loved the wrong person. So, now you want to come back to what you think was your first love, but I don’t love you anymore. Your constant pestering only annoys me. Do you get it?”

She got it all out, confident that she had herself crystal clear and that he would stop bothering her after this.

She looked up and spotted Desmond standing a short distance away. “Desmond, hurry up! We’re waiting on you!”

“Coming!” Desmond bounded over, deliberately shouldering Vance aside as he climbed into the car.

The force nearly knocked Vance off his feet. That was intentional, making him burn with resentment, but all he could do was stand there and watch them leave like a family.

He stayed rooted to the spot as the wind whipped across his face. It was colder than any winter he had ever known.

In the rearview mirror, Rebecca watched him and muttered, “How long has he been hanging around here? Like ten days now? Why hasn’t he gone home? Did his company go under or something?”

Gabriel chuckled, and her eyes widened. “Wait, really?”

“Would you care if it did?” he asked back.

“Not even a little,” she replied without hesitation. “I mean what I said. He and I are just strangers now. Whether he thrives or crashes has nothing to do with me.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 462

Gabriel filled her in about the situation.

In just half a year, Vance’s company had ground to a near standstill and would have no momentum left next year.

Lucas had already gone back to selling tea, and Vance was still figuring out the company’s future.

Aiden and Catherine had both been sentenced. Aiden received the heavier term, while Catherine, being pregnant, was serving her time on house arrest.

Rebecca’s parents had gone to prison for the abuse. Emmett was spared since he hadn’t directly taken part in mistreating Josette. But without Vance’s support, his company collapsed, and his girlfriend dumped him. The pregnancy had been faked.

“He showed up at my office once looking for help,” Gabriel said quietly. “I didn’t see him. Do you think I’m heartless?”

Rebecca shook her head. “You handled it the way you needed to. I know what kind of person you are.”

Gabriel smiled without revealing more. She had only seen the good side of him. In her mind, he was a perfect cousin and a wonderful grandson, but that was not the full extent.

He hadn't hidden any of this from Desmond. His reputation in Europe was far from stellar. Stories depicted him as a man ruthless toward his family, driven solely by power and money.

Back home, he had mellowed considerably. Whether those stories were true or not, he never explained himself and didn't mind letting Desmond see his darker side.

One thing was for certain: he was indeed ruthless toward outsiders, yet fiercely protective of his own. He would shield those he cared about with everything he had, but if anyone, family included, dared to hurt the people under his protection, he would show no mercy.

He hadn't told Rebecca that her parents had been treated the same way as they had once treated Josette. He feared it would upset her, but these people had to face the consequences of their actions. ¹

His words also served as a subtle warning to Desmond in the back seat: "You can pursue Rebecca, but once she agrees to be with you, you'd better not hurt her, or I'll show you how heartless I can be."

Those matters were settled by the time they reached the house. Once inside, it was officially Christmas Eve, and no one brought up unpleasant topics again.

The Christmas atmosphere at Kaitlyn's home was now even stronger.

Rebecca hadn't seen Josette in days. With the heavy snow and Gabriel's recent trip abroad, it hadn't been convenient.

Now Josette's skin glowed with a healthy pink flush, and her face looked fuller. That delighted Rebecca greatly.

Kaitlyn and Josette spotted Desmond trailing behind and welcomed him warmly.

For Christmas, Kaitlyn had given all the household staff the day off, meaning she had to prepare the big holiday feast herself. That was an enormous challenge for her.

In the old days, the entire extended family had pitched in, so she never worried about it. Later, when it was just her and Gabriel, they kept things simple. But tonight, there were Josette, Rebecca, and a guest. The pressure hit her all at once.

"Anything I can help with?" Desmond offered right away.

"You?" She looked skeptical.

He rolled up his sleeves. “I’ve got this. Ask Rebecca if you don’t believe me.”

Rebecca nodded without hesitation. “Let him help. He knows what he’s doing.”

And so, the three of them headed into the kitchen.

Kaitlyn had planned for Desmond to assist and even called Gabriel in, figuring the most lavish meal of the year needed extra hands.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 463

In the end, Kaitlyn got eased out, and a while later, Gabriel came out as well.

“Guess I was in the way,” he chuckled.

He didn’t mind testing the young man a bit. The result? In a single afternoon, Desmond put together an absolute feast, including desserts and soup.

“Is your family in the restaurant business?” Kaitlyn gasped.

“No. I just love cooking,” Desmond replied with a grin.

“In all my decades, I’ve never sat down to a dinner this incredible!” Kaitlyn exclaimed.

It was probably an exaggeration, but it showed just how impressive the spread was.

“Thank you, Aunt Kaitlyn,” he responded smoothly with a beam.

Every time he used that appellation, Rebecca would glance at him. He pretended not to notice, but his ears slowly turned pink.

This was the kind of warm family reunion night Rebecca had always dreamed of. As a kid, she had watched holiday commercials on TV-bright colors, smiling faces, laughing families.

It always looked so warm. But in her first 20-plus years, she had never experienced anything like it.

Before marriage, her parents would come home and turn the place upside down, especially while her grandfather was alive. The shouting, scolding, and insults aimed at Josette and her had been relentless.

She had felt like hiding in a dark corner, peeking at other people's happiness.

After marriage, she thought she would finally have her own warm home with bright lights and joyful holidays. Yet across five years and ten New Year's Eves and Christmases, Vance was either away or shut in his study.

He only came out for meals, then disappeared again. The more she tried to create a lively atmosphere, the more he withdrew. Only at Josette's did it feel slightly better, but even then, he was stiff and distracted.

Tonight was completely different.

The five of them sat in a bright, spacious dining room with the fireplace roaring and the heating turned up high. One bowl of hot soup was enough to make one break into a light sweat. Every face wore a genuine, happy smile— just like the ones on TV.

There were only five people, yet the laughter and conversation never stopped all evening. Desmond's easygoing personality let him blend in seamlessly. He kept sharing funny stories, and Josette laughed until her cheeks hurt.

That was more than enough.

She told herself that this was what happiness looked like, made tangible at last.

After the feast, no one wanted to disperse. They stayed gathered around the fireplace, chatting. Outside, heavy snow fell, the flakes whispering against the windows. Inside, it was as warm as spring, the firewood crackling in the hearth.

She leaned against Josette, tipsy, while Desmond sat across from her. When the mood struck, he went over and played a piece on the piano.

Rebecca fell asleep to the music, still curled in Josette's arms, smiling even in her dreams.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 464

Rebecca woke up the next morning in bed. She had no idea who had carried her there; she distinctly remembered falling asleep in Josette's arms.

The fireplace, the snow, the bright lights, the incredible feast... everything from last night was still wrapped around her like a warm blanket.

As a kid, she watched Christmas shows on TV. They always played that song about an unforgettable night.

She had never really understood what that felt like, but now she did. A beautiful night made one wish it could stretch on forever.

She stayed curled under the warm covers, then finally sat up. On the nightstand were four gifts-from Josette, Kaitlyn, Gabriel, and Desmond.

The two jewelry sets were obviously from Kaitlyn and Gabriel, each trying to outdo the other in luxury. Opening the boxes nearly blinded her with their sparkle.

The real surprise was Josette's gift. It was another piece of jewelry, but one with a special meaning. It was the very first design Josette had created herself.

In the months since arriving in France, Josette had not only adapted to life here but had also started learning jewelry design from Kaitlyn.

Every girl once dreamed of sparkling things, and Josette had been a little girl too-probably stringing plastic beads into necklaces just like so many others.

Watching Kaitlyn sketch and play with beautiful gemstones like toys, she had grown interested. At first, she worried she was too old and that people would laugh.

Rebecca had encouraged her, "You were brave enough to start dancing again. Age is just a number. Do what you love."

This brooch was Josette's very first design, given to Rebecca as a gift. Its meaning was simple: "If I can start over, so can you."

Desmond had given her a pair of crystal dance shoes. On the card, he wrote that the princess would put on her crystal slippers and start dancing again.

In truth, he had given her far more than shoes. During her recovery, he had been there every step of the way, especially during that month of the performance tour, when he stayed with her morning and evening, kept her safe, and helped adjust her therapy plan.

These past few months, he had lived next door and accompanied her to the clinic almost every day. If the crystal shoes were the visible gift, his constant presence had been the invisible one carrying her forward.

She didn't feel the shoes poke at the pain of her injury. Dance was still her totem, regardless of whether she could ever perform as she once had. It would always be her greatest love.

The clinic didn't close on Christmas, so she still had a half-day rehab session.

When it was time to leave, Desmond insisted on driving her. He hadn't brought his car, so Gabriel tossed him the keys. "Take mine."

Desmond lit up, taking it for Gabriel's approval.

"Thanks, big cousin!" he said happily.

Gabriel didn't correct him or tell him to stop using the nickname. This was real approval.

Desmond drove with a huge grin, humming "Jingle Bells" all the way to the clinic.

Inside, a man dressed as Santa Claus was handing out gifts. It was none other than Robert, whom they hadn't seen in a while. He looked thinner and worn out, but his eyes sparkled with holiday cheer.

When he spotted Rebecca, he boomed, "There's my dancing girl!"

Then he handed her a gift.

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 465

Rebecca had brought gifts too-one for everyone at the clinic.

After she went in for her therapy session, Robert called out a loud goodbye. In his bright red suit and carrying an empty red sack, he headed out, wishing Desmond a Merry Christmas on his way.

Rebecca felt like something was missing. The gentleman who always came with Robert wasn't there-probably taking the holiday off.

Outside the clinic, the usual row of cars was mostly gone because of Christmas, but a few still lined the curb.

Robert climbed into the passenger seat of one of them. The driver sat stone-faced, staring straight ahead. When Robert got in, the man didn't even react.

"I saw her arrive with her boyfriend," Robert chuckled. "Good-looking kid-seems really nice and incredibly attentive. You've got no chance, son."

The driver's face flushed red with anger.

Robert laughed. "Mad? That won't change anything."

The man kept his jaw tight. “Are you enjoying this?”

“What’s there to enjoy?” Robert said with a grin. “As my son, what have you done to make me proud?”

“As a father, what have you ever done?” the man shot back.

“Oh, I’ve done plenty,” Robert replied, still smiling. “I passed my genes on to you. The way you used to curse me? Now you can curse yourself.”

The man froze.

“Son!” Robert sighed. “You walked on the same path as I did. You became another me.”

The man’s hands tightened on the wheel until the veins stood out.

“Don’t hate so hard,” Robert continued. “You inherited my genes, and I’m not thrilled about that. At least, I don’t want you to end up the same way I did.”

“That won’t happen!” the man growled. “I will never become you! I’ll be better than you!”

That had been his vow since childhood. He’d never be like his father.

“Really?” Robert gave a tired smile. “I hope so. Every father wants his son to be better. Especially true for me. I’ve been through a lot of ups and downs. Loneliness and pain have been my constant companions. My biggest wish is that my son doesn’t follow in my footsteps.”

The man gave a cold laugh. “Belated fatherly love? Sorry, but in every school form, I filled in ‘Deceased’ under Father.”

Robert gave a bitter smile. “See? You still haven’t forgiven me, and you probably never will-not even when I’m gone. So, how do you expect her to forgive you?”

The man paused, his eyes clouded with confusion.

“Son, if you keep going like this, your ending could be even worse than mine,” Robert added. “At least, I have a son who’ll bury me. You’ll have nothing.”

1:2

Guter 465

“Shut up!” the man snapped.

Robert shrugged. “Fine, I’ll stop. So, what’s the plan? Are you just going to sit here keeping watch?”

The man stayed silent.

“All right, then keep watching. I’m going to nap. I’m beat.” Robert reclined his seat and closed his eyes.

The man whipped his head around. Robert waved a hand. “Relax. I’m not dead yet.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 466

Rebecca finished her rehab session close to noon.

Desmond helped her out of the clinic. The snow made everything harder for someone with mobility issues, and that day’s session had also been more intense than usual.

When she stepped outside, her legs felt like jelly. Even with Desmond supporting her, the moment he let go near the car, she slipped.

A short distance behind their car, another vehicle had been parked unmoved the entire morning. The man inside watched and slammed the steering wheel. “Can’t even hold someone upright?”

But right after he said it, Desmond reacted instantly and caught Rebecca. On instinct, she grabbed him back.

In the snow, they stood face to face, close enough to see the white puffs of the other’s breath.

Her cheeks were still flushed from the workout. She looked up, and a single snowflake drifted down on the tip of her nose, tickling her. She started to push him away so she could brush it off, but his face suddenly drew closer.

Warm breath brushed her nose. The icy snowflake melted against the heat of his lips, turning into a tiny droplet that clung there.

“I’m sorry.” He held her tightly, pressing her cheek to his chest. “I overstepped, but I really like you.”

Her face rested against the soft cashmere of his sweater. It was warm and comforting. In the middle of a snowy winter day, she felt no cold at all.

“If you’re mad, you can hit me,” he murmured, his voice soft and sticky-sweet like it was rolling around in his throat.

She tugged at his sweater. “Young man, you’re not dressed properly. Your coat is unzipped, and cold wind is pouring in. Careful, or when you’re old, those bones are going to ache.”

It was the same thing Josette always nagged about whenever Desmond or Gabriel wore their coats that way.

Desmond paused, then laughed heartily. Thankfully, she was not mad.

“It’s cold out here. Get in the car already,” she urged, her eyes sparkling.

“Okay!” He stared at her, reluctant to look away, but it really was cold.

He was burning up inside, hoping he could hold her forever and never let go. But he didn’t want her to catch a cold.

When he finally released her, he quickly leaned in and pecked her cheek.

“All right, let’s get in! We’re heading home!” he chattered happily, opening the door and helping her inside.

Then he jogged around to the driver’s side. Once inside, he didn’t start the engine right away. Instead, he turned the heat on full blast and stared at her.

She blushed and glared. “Drive now. If you can’t manage it, I’ll just call Gabriel to come get us.”

“No... No need, I’ve got it,” he said quickly, fearing that Gabriel would punch him because of his actions.

The car pulled away smoothly and headed home.

In the vehicle parked behind them, the driver’s face had gone dark as thunder. If he had still been clinging to any shred of hope before, it was gone now. He had seen Desmond kiss Rebecca and heard their laughter as they drove away.

That irritating voice rang out again. “Ha! Given up yet?”

Fonus

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 467

“If you don’t keep your mouth shut, I might just leave your body out in the woods somewhere!” the driver snarled, whipping around.

Robert raised an eyebrow. “Toss me wherever you like. I can’t control anything while I’m alive. Why would I care what happens after I’m gone?”

Desmond drove along in high spirits. They were almost at the park road. One more stretch, and they’d be home.

But he suddenly pulled over. “I need to call Gabriel.”

“Why?” Rebecca blinked, knowing this guy could be sneaky.

“I booked a restaurant a month ago. I thought... maybe I’d get the chance to take you out for Christmas...”

Those big, pleading eyes were back. He reached over and gently tugged her sleeve. “Is that okay?”

“Go ahead and call him. See if he’d yell,” she said, unable to resist the look.

Right in front of her, he asked Gabriel for the rest of the afternoon off.

Gabriel wasn’t thrilled. “Everything outside is closed. Where can you go?”

“A few places are still open.”

“Put Becky on the phone.”

Desmond handed over the phone and looked at her pleadingly.

She bit back a laugh. “Hi, Gabe.”

“You actually want to go out with him?” Gabriel asked directly.

“I... well... I don’t really...” Rebecca drawled, glancing at Desmond.

His eyes went wide. “Rebecca...”

She laughed. "I don't really want to turn him down."

Desmond's heart had been on a roller coaster the whole call. Good thing he didn't have a heart condition.

Gabriel gave a short hum. "Hand the phone back to that kid."

From then on, Desmond had no name with Gabriel. He was simply "that kid".

"Gabe..." Desmond said in his most charming voice.

"Home by nine."

"Okay."

Rebecca wanted to protest that she was already 27, not a teenager, but that was enough to make Desmond beam with happiness.

He hung up, grinned at her, and drove straight to the restaurant.

On Christmas Day, the international metropolis was almost empty. Only a few cars moved along the quiet streets. Few passengers were in sight, and just as Gabriel had said, most stores and restaurants were closed.

Every block was decked out in Christmas decorations. At night, the lights would be spectacular.

Desmond had booked a Christmas meal at an upscale hotel. Inside, it was a different world with lively music and waiters moving efficiently between tables.

It felt like a party, complete with music, singing, and dancing.

The dancers in Santa outfits came down from the stage to invite guests onto the floor. They naturally stopped at Rebecca and Desmond's table.

Desmond was ready to decline, worried the fast group dances might be too much for Rebecca, but she stood up before he could stop her.

Delighted, he joined her on the dance floor. To the upbeat music, they bounced and jumped with total strangers. Rebecca didn't worry about steps or forms; she just moved and had fun.

Then the music slowed, and the band's bagpiper in a Scottish kilt began to play a winding melody.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 468

As the tempo dropped, so did the dance steps. The crowded floor gradually emptied around Rebecca and Desmond

The music was hypnotic, the band was playing a beautiful love song

The two of them, each carrying their own secret feelings, barely noticed the world around them. Both passionate dancers, they unconsciously slipped into the smooth, flowing moves of a classic duo dance

Once they started, they couldn't stop. The floor was empty around them as everyone else returned to their seats to watch. That was fine. Right now, all that mattered was dancing.

After six months of steady rehabilitation, Rebecca had made significant progress. Movements she had once faked her way through now looked nearly flawless. She could execute about 80 percent of them, especially the lifts, which she performed beautifully.

Desmond wanted to showcase every bit of her beauty, so he added extra lifts.

Rebecca had worn a red wool skirt under her down jacket. When she spun, the skirt flared beautifully. The other diners couldn't resist pulling out their phones to record.

When the song ended, the entire room erupted in applause. Rebecca hadn't realized they were the only ones still dancing until that moment. Everyone else had become an audience, giving them thumbs-up.

Even the hotel's professional dancers were clapping along. A few girls ran over, asking where they were from and what kind of dance that was.

"We're from the United States," Rebecca and Desmond answered almost in unison. "This is contemporary American dance."

"Amazing!" one girl marveled, holding Rebecca's arm. "Are you a fairy?"

Rebecca chuckled. "No, I'm just an ordinary dance student."

"Really? How long have you been dancing? How long would it take me to dance like that? To fly like that!"

Rebecca thought for a second. “I’ve been dancing for more than 20 years.”

“Gosh!” the girl exclaimed. “Do all Americans have to learn this? You can all fly?”

Rebecca chuckled, unsure how to answer that question. Not every American danced, and that wasn’t exactly flying.

Someone posted that joyful moment on social media, and the dance video went viral. Rebecca and Desmond had no idea until that evening back at the house.

Desmond was in the kitchen preparing dinner when Kaitlyn, sitting beside Rebecca, suddenly gasped.

“Look at this! Is that you?” She forwarded the video to them.

Rebecca opened it, and sure enough, it was them. A diner from that afternoon had posted it, calling her “the fairy from the States”.

The restaurant had reposted it: [Wishing the fairy from the States a very Merry Christmas.]

The clip took off, and the comments were all praise.

Someone commented: [I knew it. Americans can fly.]

It earned tens of thousands of likes.

Josette watched the video with tears in her eyes. For so many years, only she understood how much Rebecca loved dance.

After the injury, Rebecca had never returned to the stage, and Josette had always felt sorry for her. Seeing her dance again and seeing so many people love it filled her with joy.

The video reached more than just the Perrys. It also reached Vance.

While the video was full of warmth and laughter, he sat alone in Robert’s large but chilly living room. His face grew darker as he stared at the screen.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 469

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Vance didn't want to admit how perfectly they fit together and how well they moved as partners.

What hurt most was that Rebecca could still dance, yet the person helping her chase that dream wasn't him. He had been the one who wanted more than anything to see her back on stage. He had been the one willing to lift her at all costs.

For five years, he had said countless times, "Rebecca, I want you to be happy more than anyone else does in the world."

Whether he said it to her or to himself, in the end, he had chosen the worst possible way. He had thought that giving her a luxurious life, beautiful clothes, and freedom from financial worry meant she was happy.

He had never once considered that she wasn't a pet. He had never realized she wanted her own sky to soar high into.

Now someone else had lifted her, and she looked so radiant, just like the 16-year-old girl who had done backflips in front of the entire grade to join her class photo. She probably hadn't even known she was the center of everyone's attention that day.

Now she had finally found her way back to that version of herself.

That night, he watched the video on repeat, scrolling through every comment. Everyone was praising her, and an indescribable pride swelled in his chest.

He murmured, "That's the girl I know. She's always been this extraordinary, always worthy of everyone's admiration."

Suddenly, the phone was snatched from his hand. He exploded. "Give it back!"

"Look at the time. You've been glued to that thing for five hours. What day is it today?" Robert said. "At least, say Merry Christmas to your old man so I can give you some gifts. They are not for nothing."

Vance lunged for the phone. "I don't want your gifts. I'm here to bury you. I don't want anything. Give me the phone!"

Robert glanced at the screen and chuckled. "Scrolling your wife's videos, huh? Oh, right. Ex-wife."

"You..." Vance was pissed off.

Robert tossed the phone back. “She’s out there living her best life with someone else, and you’re hiding in this dark corner spying on her?”

“You don’t understand!” Vance grabbed the phone and dove back to the video. “She is my pride.”

“Pride? Whose pride?” Robert snorted.

Vance caught the sarcasm and dropped back onto the sofa.

“This girl is definitely worth being proud of,” Robert continued, settling onto the smaller sofa beside Vance and crossing his legs. “But she’s not yours anymore.”

Vance frowned, knowing it was true, but he didn’t need anyone to remind him. Furious, he headed for his room with the phone.

“Remember the email I sent you?” Robert’s voice followed him, making him pause.

There had been a time when Robert sent many emails, but he had never replied.

“I apologized back then, telling you the biggest regret of my life was letting your mother down,” Robert sighed heavily. “You never replied, and clearly you never took it to heart.”

Vance vaguely remembered the email he had read and deleted.

At the time, Robert had just been betrayed by that woman. The child wasn’t even his, and he had been heartbroken, sending Vance an email.

Vance’s only reaction had been mockery and satisfaction. That was karma.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 470

“You weren’t regretting anything,” Vance sneered. “You were just broke and lonely, and suddenly you remembered Mom.”

Robert smiled bitterly. “So, what about you? Why are you thinking about this girl now?”

The question hit Vance like a club to the head. His mind buzzed, and the pain in his chest flared. “You don’t understand! I’m nothing like you!”

“What’s different?” Robert challenged. “I gave you the perfect bad example, and you didn’t learn. How are you any different?”

“I am different!” Vance refused to listen. “What right do you have to lecture me?”

He stormed into his room, collapsed onto the bed, and kept watching the video. Gradually, his vision blurred until he couldn’t see the screen at all.

At some point, the tears started falling.

That night, he had many dreams. He dreamed of many people from their youth those awkward, passionate days when everything felt direct and intense.

He dreamed of Obadiah, who loved to draw and used to sketch Rebecca in class.

Vance had caught him and torn the drawings to shreds. They had fought, becoming enemies ever since. The grudge still hadn’t been resolved.

He also dreamed of Darren. They were on the same team. Rebecca watched from an inconspicuous spot in the stands, then slipped away quietly.

Darren would sling an arm around Vance’s shoulder and say, “Hey, that’s Rebecca from your class. She’s so cool and proud.”

The other guys understood immediately, and so did Vance. “Get lost! You go after her, and our friendship is over!”

The guys slipped love letters into her desk, but Vance had taken them and delivered his warnings before she could even see them.

The guys left snacks at her desk, but she never got to eat them. Vance did, and the guys got the warnings.

The innocent crushes of youth had once been bright and clear as morning dew, but then... why had everything changed?

He wandered in the dream, unable to find the answer. But undeniably, he had lost Rebecca.

He ran into Jenny and asked where Rebecca had gone. Jenny called him a scumbag.

He ran into Obadiah, and they fought again. He ran into Darren, who smiled and said, “Rebecca? You hurt her, so I hid her. You’ll never find her.”

He met so many people, but Rebecca was never there.

“Vance!” A crisp voice rang out behind him.

He turned to see a girl with a ponytail do a string of backflips and land right in front of him.

“Rebecca!” He opened his eyes to nothing but the white ceiling.

1:2

He was lying in bed, his phone still in his hand. The battery was already dead.

It had all been a dream. Rebecca was forever gone from his life.

He plugged the phone in and found it was already nine in the morning. Robert was usually up by six, but the house was silent.

Suspicious, he went to the living room and found Robert lying motionless on the floor. He quickly went over to check Robert’s breathing, then called emergency services.

An ambulance arrived and took Robert away.

As the paramedics were loading the stretcher at the front door, the elderly woman happened to drive past. She saw Robert and gasped. “Hey, old man, you live here? What happened to you?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 471

Robert lay unconscious and could no longer answer any questions.

The paramedics lifted him onto the stretcher while Vance climbed into the ambulance right behind them. The elderly woman kept exclaiming until the ambulance drove away. Her voice faded in the distance.

Emergency treatment followed, then admission to the ICU. The entire day passed in a blur.

By the time Vance returned to the house, night had already fallen. The doctor had told him the outlook was grim and that the family should prepare for the worst.

He had nothing to prepare. Robert had arranged everything for himself long ago. Calling Vance here had probably been nothing more than a request for him to bear witness: Robert Bradford had once existed.

Vance had once declared he had no father, but when the end came, he would show up to see Robert off and close the bitter chapter of their bond.

That night, he ate a couple of dry slices of bread, choking them down with water until he couldn't swallow another bite. Even with the heat turned up high, the rooms felt strangely cold and oppressive.

The next day, before visiting hours had even begun, the hospital called to declare Robert's death.

Vance didn't feel sad. He had stayed all this time waiting for this moment. Still, he couldn't shake the strange feeling that it had happened too quickly.

The arrangements were kept simple. There was no funeral. The body was cremated, the ashes were buried, and the headstone bore no name. Following Robert's wishes, it carried only one line: [A man without a soul.]

The day after the burial, Robert's lawyer came to visit. There was a will and a letter addressed to him.

[To my son:

[I know you hate it most when I call you that, but you also know how stubborn I am. Forgive me for calling you my son one last time.]

[My life has been one long failure. In the end, I'm truly grateful you were willing to stay with me for a few days, even if you said you only came to bury me.]

[I picked up the pen, hoping to leave you something, yet I discovered that besides money, I have nothing worthwhile to give. I'm only worried about what you will do from now on. I have no right to teach you anything. I stumbled through my own life in confusion, so all I can do is wish you this: don't suffer too much.]

[I'm sorry for causing you pain. If I had known it would turn out this way, I would rather never have brought you into this world. You wouldn't have had to endure this. We probably won't meet in the afterlife. In the next one, I hope you are born into a good family, with parents who love you and light up your path.]

[Your unworthy father, Robert Bradford.]

"Your father left everything to you," the lawyer said. "I'll help you handle the inheritance procedures going forward."

Vance gave a bitter smile. What was the point of any of this now?

He read the letter once more. Robert had written that he was worried about what Vance would do in the future.

Vance had the same question in his mind.

He sent Lucas a message: [He's gone. I'm heading back to the States.]

Lucas replied almost immediately: [My condolences.]

Condolences for what? He wasn't grieving at all.

Lucas: [The New Year is coming. What are we going to do?]

The same question came again.

Vance: [Are you really fine with going back to selling tea?]

It took Lucas a while to answer: [I know my limits. I was never any kind of business genius. Without you pulling me along, I'd just be an ordinary office worker. I'm more worried about you. What are you gonna do without the company?]

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 472

Vance vanished after that.

From Christmas through New Year, he never appeared in front of Rebecca again.

She felt nothing, barely thinking of him at all. These days, her life was filled with holidays, family gatherings, and Desmond. There was simply no time or space left for old memories.

If there was even the slightest regret in these happy days, it came from a piece of sad news she heard at the clinic.

The elderly woman told her that Robert had passed away. The cheerful man who always called her "my dancing girl" would never walk through the clinic doors again.

“I saw his son put him in the ambulance,” the old lady said, wiping her tears. “That old man never came back.

In a place like the clinic, patients shared a quiet sense of camaraderie. When someone passed away, it was impossible not to feel a pang. But the sorrow was brief.

Some patients were curious. “Robert had a son? What was he like? How come we never saw him?”

French people did gossip.

The elderly woman didn’t know much. She only said, “He’s an American, and quite handsome. Their house is just up the street. The son probably still lives there. You might run into him.”

A person’s life, whether filled with glory or quiet days, eventually drifted away like dust on the wind.

For the first few days, the patients talked about Robert, then gradually forgot him. No one mentioned him anymore, and certainly no one remembered he had a son who might live nearby.

Rebecca received three emails. Two came from her old schools-Soliaridge High and Arelmoor Dance Academy. The third was from a children’s disability foundation.

All three were thank-you letters for donations made in her name. But when had she ever made those donations?

It was easy to find out. She asked her former teachers.

Clueless, Lauren looked into it and soon got the answer. The donation had indeed been made in Rebecca’s name. She sent screenshots of the payment account and name to Rebecca.

The high school teacher’s reply came too. “The donor was Vance Bradford. He gave us an entire multi-purpose building complete with an arts hall, science labs, a library, and more. The teachers asked me to thank both of you.”

The dance academy confirmed the same thing.

Rebecca hadn’t expected to hear that name again under these circumstances.

The disability foundation forwarded the donor’s note: [Every child is a little angel. They simply arrived in this world running a little too fast and left some parts behind. I hope this small contribution can give them an extra pair of wings on the road to rediscovering their dreams.]

Rebecca felt a flicker of curiosity. How did he still have so much money?

Gabriel returned, told her that Vance had sold his company, and even shared the exact sale price.

So, had the donations come from the proceeds?

“His company still held some core technology and source code,” Gabriel explained. “Even though the business wasn’t doing well, the brand still had decent recognition, and not all the core engineers had left. Packaged together, it sold for a good price. But how he paid off the bank loans, compensated the employees, and divided the rest with the other shareholders... that’s his business. I don’t know the details.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 473

Rebecca had zero interest in Vance’s money, but these three large donations had suddenly been made in her name. She couldn’t just ignore them.

She planned to take him off her blacklist and ask him directly, but when she tried to send a message, a red exclamation mark appeared: [The receiver is not your friend.]

He had deleted her after making those huge donations. She clicked on his profile. The background image was an AI -generated illustration of two hands cradling a fluttering butterfly.

His bio had changed. It now read: [May all blessings in the world belong to her.]

Rebecca thought of Isabelle, who had given birth. Her social media was now filled with baby photos and videos. Rebecca had even sent her a gift recently.

She checked the time difference. Isabelle should be awake, so she sent a greeting. Isabelle replied right away, and they started chatting.

Rebecca asked about the company.

Isabelle explained: [The company has been sold. Lucas has been busy with the handover and final settlement. It’s all finished now. They did receive money from the sale, but Vance didn’t take any of it. He split everything proportionally, and Lucas got the largest share.]

“So, that is how it is? Then, where did the donation money come from?”

Rebecca couldn't figure it out and decided not to dwell on it. He had already deleted her, and they were truly strangers now.

That was the ending she had wanted. Still, the donations left her feeling a little pressured.

But at least, it was a good deed. People would benefit from it.

“What are you looking at?” Desmond's voice came. “We need to head home for dinner.”

He had already started calling Kaitlyn's house “home.”

When she closed the chat, her movements slowed. He glanced over and caught Vance's name in the conversation.

His puppy-dog eyes appeared again. “I didn't mean to peep, but why are you still talking about him?”

She laughed and covered his eyes with her hand. “All right, we're done talking about him.”

She decided to let it go.

With the deletion, every trace of one another had been erased from their lives. That was that. She should move forward without looking back or overthinking it.

The new semester began, but the festival atmosphere lingered, making it feel like the holiday wasn't over.

Every day, they still returned to Kaitlyn's house for dinner, mainly to keep Josette company.

Kaitlyn was waiting for them to discuss dishes for the upcoming gathering. Since it was Josette's and Rebecca's first New Year abroad, she was determined to make it lively and traditional.

Desmond's cooking skills had become highly respected in the house, so Kaitlyn waited for him to help decide the menu.

Rebecca looked at him with new respect. “Your status in this family is getting pretty high!”

He grinned. “Kaitlyn likes me. That's all.”

“Don't get cocky,” Rebecca teased.

He took the menu and carefully discussed it with Kaitlyn until they settled on 12 dishes. He even promised to come over early on that day to cook everything.

“Without you, I’d have to hire a professional chef,” Kaitlyn said gratefully.

She had also been counting on Denise coming, but Desmond waved it off. “Don’t worry about her. She won’t come in a while. School isn’t nearly as important to her as eating.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 474

“Being far away in another country, it’s normal for her to miss home,” Kaitlyn said.

After dinner, Rebecca watched Josette knitting a cashmere sweater.

Since arriving here, Josette had become fascinated with jewelry design and tailoring. With Kaitlyn’s encouragement, her passion had only grown stronger.

In autumn and winter, she had fallen in love with knitting cashmere and had made sweaters for Rebecca, Kaitlyn, and Gabriel.

The one she was working on now looked like a men’s style. Desmond hovered beside her, his eyes shining with longing.

“This one isn’t for Poppy, is it?” he asked hopefully.

Poppy was Kaitlyn’s pet dog.

Josette burst out laughing. “What do you think?”

Desmond scratched his head. “After Poppy gets hers, can I maybe have a pair of gloves?”

He didn’t even dare ask for a sweater.

Josette grinned from ear to ear. “This one is for you.”

Desmond was overjoyed. “Thank you, Grandma!”

The heir of the Schroeder family, who could wear anything worth a fortune, was now competing with a dog for a hand-knitted cashmere sweater. That was entertaining.

Rebecca smiled at him, her heart growing steadier. Desmond was so focused on watching Josette knit his sweater that they stayed later than usual.

It was too late to go home, so they decided to stay the night.

Desmond already had his room there. Since the Christmas holiday, they had stayed over several times, and slowly his things had started appearing around the house—clothes, toiletries, and even books.

Without anyone noticing, he had quietly become part of the family. Rebecca's room was on the second floor, and his was on the third.

When it was time to go upstairs, he lingered on the second-floor landing, just like he used to do back at her place near school. He would hover outside her bedroom door, only to be gently pushed away in the end.

He was doing the same thing again. She smiled, stood on her tiptoes, and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before darting into her room.

He watched her go with a soft smile.

Had she noticed? When she ran now, the limp was barely visible anymore. She moved almost like a normal person.

Back in her room, her phone vibrated with a message.

Desmond: [Rebecca, I want to choreograph a dance. I'll send you the music. Let's work on it together tomorrow.]

She didn't think twice, replying: [Sure!]

Then he sent the music. It was his own recording of "I'm willing".

That night, the lyrics kept looping in her dreams: "I'm willing... willing to do anything for you."

Even a heart that had once dried up was slowly being soaked with warmth again.

It was already late at night there, but back in the States, it was dinner time. Lucas came to pick up Isabelle so they could head back to the plantation for dinner.

Since the company was gone, he no longer had to rush around. He planned to stay home for a few years to take care of the baby and learn how to make tea. In the future, he planned to sell tea with Isabelle.

But he seemed preoccupied that day. Isabelle sensed it immediately.

“What’s wrong?”

“A few things happened today.”

He never hid anything from her.

“Tell me one by one!”

He organized his thoughts. “Prison visits are allowed now. Aiden called and asked me to bring Sonia to see him. He misses Shane, too.”

“Visit for what?” She flared up. “You want Shane to know he has a father like that and feel proud?”

He thought about it and had to agree.

“Anything else?” she asked again.

He sighed. “Vance has disappeared.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 475

Isabelle frowned. “What do you mean by ‘disappeared’? Did he vanish on his own, or did something happen to him?”

“He vanished on his own,” Lucas said hoarsely. “I sent him a message today and found he had blocked me. I tried calling him and discovered he had changed his number. I can’t reach him at all.”

Isabelle stroked her chin. “Did he emigrate?”

Lucas shook his head. “I don’t know. But he has nothing. How is he supposed to live?”

“You said he went to see his father. The old man passed away. Maybe his father left him something? Otherwise, why wouldn’t he take any of the company money?” Isabelle said thoughtfully.

“He donated every cent his father left him and refused to take any of the money from selling the company.” Lucas frowned, growing even more upset. “And during the divorce, he gave all the money he had earned to Rebecca. He really has nothing left now. I’m

honestly afraid he might do something drastic. The last time we talked, he sounded like he was saying goodbye forever.”

“What did he say?” Isabelle pressed.

Lucas wiped his eyes. “He said, Lucas, live a good life from now on. Talk to Isabelle first about anything important; she’s more rational than you. Selling tea is fine. Don’t take big risks or make reckless investments. Guard the money you have and raise the child well. That will be enough for this lifetime.”

“He might really...” Isabelle also felt something was off. “Wait, Rebecca messaged me today, and we talked about him. Maybe he went to find... No, better not. Don’t look for her again. Just let her go.”

Lucas was immersed in sorrow. “But why did he block me? He wasn’t angry with me. He was clearly worried about me, even reminding me not to make risky investments. I get the feeling he arranged everything for everyone else, then quietly disappeared.”

“Respect his choice if you’re truly his friend,” Isabelle said, not caring about Vance so much.

In fact, from a woman’s perspective, she had always felt antipathy toward him.

She added, “He must have his reasons.”

After a long pause, Lucas choked up, “How did it end up with only me left?”

“Have you had enough?” Isabelle’s temper flared. “I can tolerate you moping around like you are half-dead, but what do you mean by ‘only me left’? Aren’t I a person? Isn’t our child a person? Don’t my parents count? There are so many people around you! How can you say you’re the only one left? Are you planning to abandon us? Fine! Then get out! Go find him!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Lucas snapped out of it. “I was just lamenting. How could I ever abandon you and the baby?”

She snorted at his flustered expression. If she didn’t scold him hard, he’d not know which way was up.

They finally reached the tea plantation with the baby. Before Lucas even got out of the car, he saw Isabelle’s cousin squatting by an outdoor faucet, using a brush to wash the mud off Shane’s shoes.

When he finished, he started brushing Sonia’s shoe, too. She had just come back from the fields.

Lucas immediately understood that the prison visit was out of the question.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 476

Time flew by.

Not long after, Desmond received an offer from the school. He would be following right behind Rebecca to start his master's program.

The dramatic part was that Rebecca was set to graduate at the end of this semester after just one year of master's study.

That evening, Desmond cooked a delicious American meal, trying to say something. Rebecca sensed his hesitation.

Receiving the offer should have been happy news, and that night was supposed to be a celebration for him. Yet he looked anxious and had made everything formal. He had even sent Denise away, giving her money to eat out with friends.

Rebecca sat down and rested her chin on her hands. "Why the long face on such a happy day? Upset I didn't get you a gift?"

He scratched his head. "No."

She glanced at the table. The only thing she had made-or rather, helped with-were the little butter cookies. He had prepared everything else and only asked her to open the oven door.

"As a reward for starting your master's, here's a little cookie for you." She picked one up and fed it to him.

He ate it, but his eyes stayed wet and fixed on her. That look always made her unable to tease him for long.

"Now that I've given you your reward, what are you going to give me?" she said.

He blinked, not understanding.

Her eyes sparkled. "I'm going to continue with my PhD. What reward will you give me for that?"

His face lit up. “Really? I was worried...”

In his excitement, he ran around the table, scooped her up, and spun her in circles. Only after the rush of joy passed did he set her down and hold her tightly. “I’m so happy. Your future includes me, right?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist. “Can you just say what’s on your mind from now on? Don’t keep it bottled up.”

“Yeah, okay.” He grinned from ear to ear. “I just didn’t want my feelings to influence your future or your decisions.”

“Why not?” she pressed. “Don’t you want to be with me for real? Don’t you see a long future for us?”

“Of course I do!” he said quickly. “I’m anxious precisely because I want to be with you for the long haul.”

“Then how can my future and my decisions not include you? We should be planning together so both of us keep getting better.” She pinched his cheeks. “All right, I’m taking back that cookie reward now.”

He giggled. “Too late. I already ate it.”

“Doesn’t matter! I’m taking it back.”

“Then... punish me by making me bake cookies for you for the rest of my life.”

“You are dense.”

He wasn’t dense at all; he was just pretending.

He leaned close to her ear. “Then teach me. How do I get smarter?”

She pinched him again, and he just pulled her into a tight embrace.

Winter hadn’t fully left yet. Outside, the wind was still biting cold, but inside the house, it was warm and sweet.

Rebecca’s master’s program focused mainly on theory, but she had formed a small dance troupe, mostly made up of international students.

While touring in Europe with Lauren, she had gotten the idea to create a large-scale dance drama based on the Classic of Mountains and Seas. Both Desmond and Helia had strongly supported her.

Now, even though she still couldn't perform as the lead, she wanted to stage the full production. Her graduation thesis also revolved around this theme and the introduction of traditional American culture.

As a result, she became extremely busy with the rehab sessions, choreography, and graduation. Luckily, Desmond shared her passion. Whether it was helping with her recovery or supporting her dance work, he was her greatest help.

He was also the male lead in the drama. The school's rehearsal studio became the place where she and the troupe members spent the most time. During rehearsals, she would dance too.

In the blink of an eye, several more months passed, and they decided to perform once in the school theater.

Rehearsals became even more intense.

Lately, however, she kept feeling like someone was watching her during practice.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 477

But every time she looked around, Rebecca couldn't find anyone else.

Maybe she was imagining things.

On the weekend, she went to the clinic as usual. The treatment-on and off-had added up to almost a year now, and the results were remarkable.

Because she hadn't lost any bone length, the therapy was effective. Even though she couldn't return to the peak of her dancing career, her everyday walking was basically normal.

She could dance as long as she avoided extremely difficult moves.

Desmond had come with her, as always. The clinic staff members were all familiar faces now.

The first group of medical professionals Gabriel had hired at high salaries had been told they could leave anytime if they didn't adjust, as long as they gave notice.

They had all chosen to stay and plan to renew their contracts. The moment she walked in, she noticed a table in the waiting area covered with pastries.

Lately, the clinic had been providing snacks for everyone-sometimes cookies and sometimes cakes. She had even seen green bean cakes, rice cakes, and foxnut pastries.

She assumed the young nurses were baking in their spare time and bringing them in. They were delicious.

One of the plates held pineapple tarts. She loved them and ate several.

After her session, she went to the school rehearsal hall and practiced hard for the rest of the day. When it ended, the students changed clothes and started eating pineapple tarts.

“This pineapple tart...” Rebecca paused.

They looked like the ones at the clinic. Even the packaging was the same.,

The students thought she was going to scold them and quickly hid the tarts. “Coach, we’re only having one each. We won’t eat more.”

She assisted with undergraduate classes, and the students respected her.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Rebecca brushed it off. “Where did you get these tarts?”

“We bought them,” one student said, quickly offering her one. “Try it. They’re really good.”

“Where?” She examined the packaging and confirmed it was identical to what was in the clinic.

“At a new bakery two blocks away,” replied the student.

Rebecca decided to go and buy some, but Desmond protested, “Don’t my desserts taste good?”

“They do!” She chuckled at his jealousy. “It’s just that I haven’t had pineapple tarts in a long time. I really like them.”

He thought for a second. “I’ll look up a recipe when we get home.”

“You really...” Rebecca shook her head. “Are you going to learn tailoring next? Or start making skincare products? Might as well take care of everything I eat, wear, and use.”

He nodded eagerly. “Great idea. I’ll ask my mom to acquire a few more companies and open some new production lines.”

She facepalmed, finally remembering that he was the son of a business tycoon.

The bakery the students mentioned was tucked in a corner, eye-catching because of its unique décor. It looked like a gingerbread house from fairy tales.

The door, walls, and roof resembled cookies. The windows looked like chocolate. Inside, the counters and tables were shaped like cakes and donuts. It was as if a fairy tale had come to life.

The shop's name was simple: Cookie House.

There was only one blonde girl inside, wearing a cute cookie-shaped hair clip. She greeted them warmly.

"Your shop is beautiful! The design is adorable!" Rebecca marveled.

The blonde girl smiled. "My boyfriend designed it. I love this fairy-tale style."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 478

"Your boyfriend sounds wonderful," Rebecca said sincerely.

He had turned the whole store into a fairy tale just because his girlfriend liked them.

"Do you make everything in the shop yourselves?" Rebecca added.

"Yes, my boyfriend does the baking," the girl replied with a sweet smile. "I'm not very good at it. I just handle sales."

"That's impressive!" Rebecca praised. "Quite a few of these are traditional American pastries. Does your boyfriend know how to make those, too?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, he's American."

"Really? That's great," Rebecca said casually, out of natural warmth toward a compatriot.

She bought a big bag of pastries and handed it to Desmond. They waved goodbye to the girl and left.

After they were gone, a man stepped out of the back workroom. He stared at the still-swinging door and the tinkling wind chimes without saying a word.

Once they were in the car, Desmond kept sneaking glances at her. Especially at the red lights, his jealousy overflowed.

Those reactions never failed to amuse her. “What’s with that face?”

“Are other people’s boyfriends so great? Yours isn’t?” he grumbled.

“Man, humility is a virtue. Can’t you be a little humble?”

“No. My greatest strength is being proud. Watch this.”

She blinked, wondering what he was up to. He rolled down the window and cheerfully greeted the driver of the car stopped beside them.

The driver responded with a friendly “Hey!”

Desmond smiled brightly and introduced Rebecca. “This is my girlfriend. She’s the most beautiful girl in the whole world.”

She was stunned. That was embarrassing.

The other driver was kind enough to play along. He not only called Rebecca a fairy but also praised Desmond.

When the light turned green, they said cheerful goodbyes. At the next red light, Desmond rolled the window down again, ready to repeat the performance.

Rebecca cringed. “That’s enough. You may not be embarrassed, but I am.”

He brushed it off. “How so? My girlfriend really is beautiful. I’m proud of her.”

“You really...” She laughed. “You’re silly!”

“So, who is better? That girl’s boyfriend or me.”

“You’re the best. Happy now?”

“Hmm?” Desmond pointed at his cheek.

“We’ll do it when we get home. The light’s green.” She reached over and pinched his arm.

“You have to show your sincerity first.”

“How? I’m not shouting out the window like a lunatic.”

“Then say it just for me. Right here.”

That was acceptable. She whispered, “Desmond Schroeder is the most handsome and best boyfriend in the whole world.”

He beamed. “Very sincere. I’ll let it go this time. Don’t do it again.”

She rolled her eyes, but the smile never left her face.

Gabriel had recently asked if she was serious about Desmond.

She had thought about it carefully, then answered, “I am.”

“Why him?”

“He makes me happy.”

Only then had Gabriel given his approval. “If you had told me today that you’re with him because he’s good to you, I would have considered talking you out of it. What I hope is that from now on, you’ll be the same as you are now. Whatever you do, do it because it makes you happy. Your life is for you to enjoy. We don’t need you to do anything for the family. Just live happily.”

“What if one day I’m not happy anymore?” she had asked playfully.

“Then come home,” he had said. “I’ll always be there for you.”

She believed that after everything with Vance, she would never be unhappy again.

From 16 until now, 12 years had passed. She had given her whole heart and had been hurt beyond recognition. If even those wounds could heal, what else could hurt her?

The next day was Sunday. Their rehearsal was scheduled for the morning, and they would head to the clinic in the afternoon.

It was Archer’s birthday. The clinic staff had ordered a big birthday cake and invited everyone to come celebrate.

After Rebecca finished her session, the cake still hadn’t arrived.

One of the nurses whispered, “We just called. They’re on the way. Dr. Davidson doesn’t know yet.”

Rebecca went to change and freshen up. When she came back out, the cake had arrived. It was a magnificent three- tiered cake.

“Rebecca, come here!” A nurse waved her over excitedly.

She looked around and noticed Desmond sitting off to the side. He didn’t look enthusiastic.

“The bakery forgot the candles and plates. The owner went back to get them. He’ll be right back,” the nurse explained, grabbing Rebecca’s arm. “Wow, first time seeing the bakery owner in person. He’s hot!”

“Really?” Rebecca already knew the owner was American.

She glanced at Desmond’s sulky face and decided she shouldn’t agree that any other man was handsome, or this jealous puppy would need half a day of coaxing.

So, she smiled at the nurse and added, “Is he as handsome as my boyfriend?”

But as soon as those words left her mouth, Desmond’s face grew even darker.

The nurse’s reaction was even more troublesome. Her eyes sparkled as she said, “He is! He has a different vibe. Desmond is sunny and bright, but the bakery owner has this mature charm. I don’t have enough vocabulary. I can only say ‘handsome’.”

“You’re exaggerating!” Rebecca raised an eyebrow.

She had seen plenty of mature, handsome men. She had one in her family. Could this guy be more handsome than Gabriel?

“Here he comes! Look!” The nurse pinched her arm.

Rebecca turned around, then froze as the man walked in with candles and plates. No wonder Desmond was unhappy.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 479

It was Vance!

He was the owner of the Cookie House, the blonde girl's boyfriend, and the mature, handsome man the nurse had been raving about.

Vance saw Rebecca and gave a small nod. His expression was calm and distant, like that of a polite acquaintance.

Rebecca felt an arm tighten around her waist. Desmond had come over and was holding her possessively, his eyes fixed on Vance with clear hostility.

He was staking his claim.

Vance understood but remained composed. "Anna usually delivers the pastries. She couldn't carry this three-tier cake by herself today."

It sounded like an explanation for why he was there.

The nurse was stunned, glancing between them. "You know each other?"

Rebecca studied Vance's face, ready to explain. He beat her to it. "We're from the same city. I used to run a company there and met her a couple of times."

"You ran a bakery there, too?" the nurse asked curiously.

Several of the nurses had only started last year after graduating, so they wouldn't have known that Vance had once visited the Soliaridge clinic. Or maybe they had seen him and simply forgotten.

After all, so many patients came and went.

He paused, then answered politely, "No."

"Then why did you move here and switch to running a bakery?" the nurse asked again.

Vance glanced at Anna beside him. His eyes softened with warmth. "Because someone likes to eat cake."

He put his arm around Anna's shoulders the same way Desmond was holding Rebecca. "Meet my girlfriend, Anna."

"She's your girlfriend? I thought she was just a store clerk. I..." The outgoing nurse was visibly disappointed. She waved her hand. "Never mind. It ended before it even started."

The tenderness in Vance's eyes deepened. "Our little shop is just starting. Thank you all for supporting our business. Anna is still young and has just learned how to ride a bike, so deliveries sometimes take a little longer. We appreciate your understanding."

The once high-and-mighty CEO was now so humble, asking the customers to be patient with his girlfriend.

“We’ll be going now. Happy birthday,” he said.

Anna placed a bouquet on the table. “The flowers are a gift from us. Happy birthday.”

As they left the clinic, Anna grabbed Vance’s arm and said something. He bent down slightly and tilted his head to listen.

“What kind of sweetheart is this?” the nurse yelped with admiration. “He opened a bakery because his girlfriend likes cake. He decorated the whole shop like a gingerbread house because she loves fairy tales, and he’s so handsome!”

Her eyes landed on the card tucked in the bouquet. She quickly pulled it out and exclaimed again, “Wow, his handwriting is beautiful, too! It’s in English. It must be written by him!”

The card read: [Wish you a full, happy life!]

Rebecca looked down and recognized Vance’s handwriting. When she looked outside again, the two people had disappeared.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 480

The cake was berry-flavored, loaded with all kinds of fresh berries. It looked delicious, but Rebecca didn’t eat any.

If she did that, Desmond would definitely get jealous and make her eat his homemade cakes for the next whole month.

So, after singing “Happy Birthday” to Archer with the staff, she quickly pulled Desmond away.

To her surprise, Vance and Anna hadn’t gone far. They were eating pizza at a popular pizza place right next to the clinic.

It was a well-known spot with long lines every day. They had already bought their slices. When Rebecca stepped outside, she saw Vance feeding a piece to Anna.

The girl took a bite, her eyes crinkling. The setting sun bathed the city in a rare golden light that fell across them and lit up her smile. If one didn't know Vance's past, the scene would look genuinely sweet and beautiful.

Desmond had parked a bit far away. To reach the car, they had to walk past the pizza shop.

"Let's go," Rebecca said, trying to circle behind the queue to avoid awkwardness.

But Desmond took her hand, kept his face stiff, and strode straight past Vance. She sighed without protesting, but that way, Vance couldn't just pretend he hadn't seen them.

Vance and Anna stood side by side, each holding pizza. He nodded to them in greeting but said nothing.

Desmond led Rebecca past them, cut through the long queue, and finally reached the parking spot. Vance and Anna stood at the curb, waiting to cross the street.

Desmond pulled up and stopped to let them go first. Pedestrians had the right of way, and he was usually courteous.

But just as Vance and Anna started to cross and nodded in thanks, Desmond suddenly leaned over and kissed Rebecca on the cheek.

She was looking straight ahead and met Vance's eyes directly. He gave a faint smile and walked away with Anna.

"Happy now?" she groaned, feeling both helpless and amused.

But that wasn't enough for Desmond. He pressed, "Do you like mature men or young ones?"

She sighed. "That was the nurse talking, not me."

He insisted, "Then what kind do you like?"

She held his gaze until he wilted. "Are you mad?"

"I'm not." She took a deep breath. "I thought you already knew the answer. You've been watching me this whole time. Do you really think I would go back to the past?"

He stayed quiet for a long while. "I'm sorry. I was afraid he would keep haunting us.

"He already has a girlfriend, and they seem very happy together," she said, ruffling his hair. "Stop overthinking it.

He nodded. “You didn’t eat any cake today. I’ll bake one for you when we get home.”

“Sure,” she agreed.

Once at home, he baked a berry cake too—a small, beautiful four-inch one—and presented it to her like a treasure.

Was he really going to compete over this? Or was he still not over it?

This childish side of his was something else, but she decided not to call him out.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 481

Sometimes, the way people encountered each other was truly fascinating.

The bakery had been open for quite some time, yet before that day at the clinic, Rebecca had never once run into Vance. After that encounter, however, she began seeing him from time to time.

Sometimes, she spotted him and Anna shopping together at the supermarket. Other times, she saw him out delivering cakes. He’d only nod at her or not seem to notice her at all.

He had really done it. He had done exactly what she had asked. If they met again, they would treat each other like strangers passing on the street.

Even his appearance had changed dramatically. In the past, he had always worn sharp suits, every detail perfect, his hair styled so rigidly that not a single strand was out of place.

That formal attire and stiff hairstyle had been like armor, making him look detached and unapproachable. His gaze had always been sharp and icy.

Now he had shed that armor, wearing simple white T-shirts instead. On cooler, rainy days, he would add a thin cashmere cardigan. Even when every button was neatly fastened, the overall effect made him look softer.

His short bangs were allowed to fall naturally across his forehead, and his eyes had grown gentle and calm.

Who could connect this man, gentle as the sunlight mixed with the scent of lilies, with the former CEO who used to stride through the bustling CBD towers of Soliaridge like a force of nature?

That night, the troupe gave their first formal performance of one chapter from Rebecca's drama *Classic of Mountains and Seas* in the school auditorium. It was named "Deer Cry".

She had choreographed it herself. Desmond was the male lead, while she took a supporting role.

The performance was a great success, and they received countless bouquets. During the curtain call, Rebecca spotted many familiar faces in the audience.

A large group from the clinic had come, including the staff and patients, along with neighbors from the area. Even Vance and Anna were sitting among them.

When the show ended, the clinic staff and the patients came forward to applaud and cheer for them. Vance and Anna rose with the rest of the crowd, then walked out of the auditorium.

As they left, Vance turned back to take her hand.

Many flower baskets had been delivered and were now lined up at the entrance. They were from the clinic, the school, Denise, and the teachers.

Rebecca divided the flowers among the audience members. The elderly woman had also shown up, holding a red rose. She praised their dancing and insisted on taking a photo with the male and female leads.

Rebecca acted as photographer, snapping a picture of the old lady, Desmond, and the female lead, Willow Stanton.

Right after, Desmond quickly pulled Rebecca over. "This is our choreographer. She's the most talented person in our troupe. You have to take a picture with her, too."

The old lady laughed. "Of course, I know Becky. She still owes me that apple pie she promised. I ordered one from the bakery as a gift to celebrate your successful performance."

The insulated bag she carried had the Cookie House logo on it. The custom apple pie had come from Vance's shop.

Inside, the card read: [Wish you a successful performance!]

It was handwritten in familiar script.

“I asked Robert’s son to write it in American. Did he get it right? I can’t read English,” the old lady said.

“It’s perfect. Thank you,” Rebecca replied.

She handed the apple pie to Willow and asked the latter to share it with the whole cast. When she turned around, the card had already been torn to pieces by Desmond.

She caught a glimpse of him dropping the scraps into the trash can.

“Rebecca, let’s go home!” Desmond called out with a bright smile, as if nothing had happened.

“Okay.” Rebecca pretended she hadn’t noticed and told the cast, “Everyone worked hard tonight. Go home and take a good rest. We’ll meet tomorrow and the day after to review tonight’s performance and make improvements.

She planned to take the troupe to the Edinburgh Festival in August and let the whole world know about American traditional dance.

If “Deer Cry” succeeded, she would continue choreographing the rest of the series.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 482

That night when they got home, Rebecca’s mind was still full of the performance.

The troupe had recorded the entire show, and she watched it again and again, noting problems and thinking of ways to improve the choreography.

By the time she had gone through everything, written down her notes, and organized her thoughts, she realized Desmond had left without saying goodbye.

She remembered the torn card he had thrown away at the end of the show. With a sigh, she picked up her phone to message him, but a text message came first.

Denise: [Becky, did you guys fight?]

Rebecca: [No, why?]

Denise: [Desmond came home, didn’t say a word, and shut himself in his room.]

Rebecca: [We didn't fight. I'll ask him.]

Denise: [DON'T ASK!]

Rebecca: [Why?]

Denise: [Don't spoil him! His temper is so annoying!]

Rebecca chuckled at the message. Denise was so adorable as a little sister.

Still, she sent Desmond a message: [What's going on? Where are you? Why did you disappear?]

After a long while, Desmond replied: [Hmph! I disappeared, and you didn't even notice!]

Rebecca: [I was reviewing the performance.]

Desmond: [Are you sure?]

Rebecca: [Yes. What else?]

It took him a while to reply: [Nothing. You ignored me the whole night. I thought you didn't want to talk to me anymore.]

She paused, then replied: [How could that be? You're overthinking it.]

Desmond paused even longer this time. The message read: [You stared at him during the curtain call. I saw it.)

Rebecca: (I was just...]

She didn't know how to continue. She wanted to say she had only glanced at the audience and noticed Vance standing right there. That big guy was simply hard to miss.

But suddenly, explaining felt meaningless. They had already talked about this. Repeating it over and over, like a grade-schooler writing lines, was exhausting.

If she explained this time, what about next time?

The next day was Monday. Rebecca had morning classes.

Desmond wasn't starting school until autumn, so he was basically free and usually drove her to campus. But that day, he didn't come out to wait for her.

The house wasn't far from school, so she simply walked. In the afternoon, she was supposed to go to the clinic for rehab, but Desmond still hadn't shown up.

So, she went by herself, and, as fate would have it, ran into Vance again.

He was there delivering cakes. The clinic staff wanted to celebrate Rebecca's successful performance and had ordered a large cake.

The moment she walked in, she came face-to-face with Vance and Anna, who were just leaving.

"Hello," Anna greeted her politely.

Rebecca hesitated for a second, then nodded at her before turning to Vance. "Can we talk for a moment?"

He glanced at Anna, who obediently stepped aside. "I'll wait for you outside."

Rebecca got straight to the point. "You came to the performance last night."

He paused. "Yes. All the neighbors were going, and Anna wanted to see it, so I went with her."

"Please don't come to any more performances in the future," she warned.

His eyes dimmed, and he forced a smile. "Did I bother you?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "Just don't come to any more performances and stop delivering cakes to the clinic. Don't appear anywhere I might be."

She almost told him to move the bakery somewhere else, but that felt too harsh. It was Anna's shop, too.

He looked a little hurt and tried to explain, "The cake wasn't my idea. The clinic ordered it, and I can't predict where you'll be."

He paused, then nodded. "Alright, I understand. It won't happen again."

He didn't look at her again as he walked past her.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 483

"Vance!" Rebecca called after him.

He paused in surprise, waiting for her to continue.

She asked, “Why did you open the Cookie House in this neighborhood?”

He let out a soft sigh. “This shop was left by the father I didn’t want to acknowledge. It used to sell alcohol. I don’t have the money right now to buy a new location somewhere else. If this is causing you trouble, then I...”

“No need,” she interrupted, turning and continuing her way toward the clinic.

They were living separate lives now. She wasn’t going to be that overbearing.

Behind her, she heard Anna’s voice.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Let’s go. What do you want for dinner?”

“How about pasta?”

“To go with sauce or seafood?”

“Either is fine.”

Was this really Vance Bradford? The man who could now discuss such ordinary, everyday things with a girl?

He had truly changed.

Vance finished packing up and prepared to head back to the shop. Before leaving, he glanced back one last time and saw Rebecca walking into the clinic with steady, confident steps. There was no trace of a limp anymore.

After her rehab session, Desmond still hadn’t appeared.

There was no rehearsal scheduled that afternoon, but she needed to discuss the notes she had made after reviewing the previous night’s performance with the troupe. She had already posted the meeting notice in the group chat.

When she arrived at the rehearsal hall, all the members had gathered, except for the male lead. She thought for a moment and called Desmond, who picked up on the first ring.

“Where are you? Everyone’s waiting for you,” she said.

“I’m right outside the rehearsal hall.” Desmond walked in with an unreadable smile on his face.

Since the whole troupe was present, it wasn't the time to discuss personal matters. Rebecca simply clapped her hands and announced, "Alright, everyone's here. Let me go over the issues of last night's performance."

For the next two hours, she went through all the points she had noted, deciding not to rehearse that evening so the dancers could digest the feedback. If anyone had different opinions, they could bring them up during tomorrow's rehearsal.

Once everyone else had left, she finally turned to Desmond. "What's going on?"

He looked aggrieved. "You finally remembered I exist."

She frowned. "When did I ever forget you?"

She was the one who had been forgotten. He had been missing all day.

Desmond held up his phone. "From last night until now, almost 20 hours have passed. You never replied to my message."

She finally remembered that unanswered question. She felt it was time to have a serious talk with him.

"Desmond," she said seriously, "are you bothered by the fact that I was once married to Vance?"

"I'm not," he answered immediately.

She nodded. "That's a fact that can't be changed. If it bothers you, we can think about this again."

"I'm not," he said anxiously. "I'm just afraid you loved him more than you love me."

Her eyes narrowed. "So, you disappeared for a whole day to test me?"

His shoulders slumped. "I wanted to see if you cared about me, but you only remembered your male lead when it was time for rehearsal. I was waiting outside the whole time, hoping you would notice my absence."

She let out a soft sigh. "I thought you understood me. Vance and I will never get back together. He is no longer in my heart. I hope this is the last time I have to say these words."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 484

Touched, Desmond pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry. It was my fault. I won’t do it again.”

Rebecca smiled. “Good. Now I’m hungry.”

He perked up immediately. “Let’s go home!”

He turned around, squatted down, and placed her hands on his shoulders. Then he lifted her onto his back and jogged out of the school, drawing cheers from the students still on campus.

After that, they didn’t see Vance for a long time. Occasionally, Rebecca would run into Anna shopping at the supermarket, but Vance was never with her.

One day, she overheard several nurses at the clinic gossiping.

“Why hasn’t the Cookie House been sending us pastries lately? It’s been days.”

“Don’t start complaining. They’re running a business. Why would they keep giving things away forever?”

“You’re right.”

“Actually, I tried to order a cake the other day. The owner said he wouldn’t deliver anymore.”

“Really? What kind of business does that? Doesn’t he want customers?”

“Who knows? We were regular clients. We bought bread and everything from him to support a fellow countryman. Now that business is picking up, his service attitude has gotten so bad.”

“They can use a delivery service.”

“Feels like once business improved, he didn’t want to deal with us. Never mind. There are plenty of other places to buy cake.”

Rebecca and Desmond heard every word of their conversation. Of course, Rebecca knew why the Cookie House had stopped delivering. Desmond paused, then quickly figured it out.

After they left the clinic, he asked her in the car, “Did you say something to the bakery?”

“Yes,” she admitted honestly. “I might have overstepped. Vance and I are supposed to live separate lives now and have nothing to do with each other. But I didn’t want little things like this to affect us.”

Desmond looked both ashamed and moved. He leaned over and hugged her tightly. “I’m sorry.”

She patted his back. “It’s okay. But I’m doing this only once.”

“I know,” he murmured, kissing her earlobe. “I like you so much. That’s why...”

She listened quietly to his heartbeat, suddenly realizing he was the first person who had ever said that to her.

“I’m going to practice hard from now on,” he vowed in her ear. “I’ll show my best self in your choreography!”

“Good!” She nodded, believing that he loved her with his whole heart.

Since they had started this relationship, she would do her best to protect it. True love was rare in this world. Now that she had it, she would cherish it.

1.2

Taper 484

Just as Desmond had promised, he performed exceptionally well in the dance drama. He was a natural male lead. With his outstanding performance and the suggestions on choreography, their second show at the neighborhood’s theater was even more successful.

The neighbors turned out again to support them. In their exaggerated words, they had clapped so hard that night their palms turned red.

Vance and Anna didn’t come this time.

2:2

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 485

After the second performance, Rebecca and Desmond kept making further refinements to the choreography until they finalized the version they would take to Edinburgh.

By then, summer vacation was almost here.

Rebecca completed her thesis. After that, she and Desmond needed to return to the States briefly to handle new visa paperwork.

She handed over rehearsal duties to Willow and told the troupe to communicate any issues in the group chat.

Desmond's household registration was in Arelmoor, so he went back first to prepare documents. Rebecca flew to Soliaridge.

Gabriel wasn't there, but Hugo came to pick her up. Breathing in the familiar air again made her feel excited.

The past was like smoke. The pain had drifted away like clouds. The girl who had desperately wanted to escape two years ago had finally come to understand what home meant. Every street and corner of the city was imprinted deep in her mind.

Hugo watched her running toward him with steady steps and felt deeply relieved. He wasn't related to them by blood, but he had been with Gabriel long enough to witness how she had slowly walked out of darkness.

Now she moved with confidence and strength. It was truly a gift from God. Hugo drove her to the villa. Only Nancy, Cecilia, and the bodyguards were there now.

Nancy almost burst into tears with joy, and Cecilia stepped forward respectfully. "Miss."

Rebecca pinched her cheek. "Have you been reading too many novels? No 'Miss' or 'Madam'. Just call me Becky."

Cecilia blushed and complied.

"That's better." Rebecca flopped onto the sofa. "Home, sweet home! Nancy, I want to taste your best dishes!"

"Sure," Nancy agreed happily.

Even so, Rebecca didn't eat at home very often during this visit. Besides sorting through documents and scheduling her visa appointment, she also contacted Jenny.

Jenny was shocked to see how freely Rebecca could walk now, hugging her and spinning her around in circles. Since then, they had hung out together almost every day.

One Friday, Jenny mentioned that some old classmates had invited her to dinner that night. She accidentally let it slip that Rebecca was back in town, so the others immediately insisted she join them.

“Sure,” Rebecca said, not bothered at all.

Although she hadn’t kept in close touch with her high school classmates, being abroad had made her cherish her hometown and old friends even more.

Later that day, she picked up Jenny and drove toward the restaurant. Five classmates showed up, including both guys and girls. Obadiah was among them.

The last time they had seen each other was at last year’s reunion. Once again, Rebecca’s steady walk left everyone stunned.

One of the girls said, “You have no idea how heartbroken I was when I heard about your injury. I didn’t dare mention it. Back in high school, when we rehearsed together, I was always in the back row doing the filler moves. I used to watch you dance and feel so envious. When your leg was injured, my heart broke. I’m so happy for you now!”

Rebecca was genuinely surprised. In her mind, she had been invisible in high school, and no one had particularly liked her.

“You don’t know that a lot of guys liked you,” Obadiah chimed in. “They tried to give you snacks and wrote you love letters.”

Rebecca was stunned once again. She had never received a single love letter.

“Know why you never received any?” Obadiah said.

Jenny nudged him, trying to stop him. It was all in the past. Rebecca and Vance were already divorced. Why bring up old history?

“Why?” Rebecca asked, genuinely curious.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 486

“Sorry, we’re late.” The door opened, and a classmate walked in, followed by Vance.

His eyes met Rebecca’s in the air.

Jenny froze, then tugged at Rebecca's sleeve and whispered, "I didn't know he was coming."

The guy who had brought Vance grinned casually. "Vance is back in town, so I invited him along."

Vance stood awkwardly by the door. "I thought you were in France."

He didn't use anyone's name, but everyone knew he was talking to Rebecca.

She was momentarily lost for words. If she had known Vance would be there, she never would have come. But she had assumed he was still in France and never imagined she would run into him at a domestic classmates' gathering.

For a moment, Vance considered turning around and leaving, but that would only make things more awkward. The others probably hadn't noticed anything unusual yet.

If he lay low for a bit, it might be fine. Making a big scene would only embarrass Rebecca.

The person who had invited him was his old basketball teammate, Jethro Hart.

"Vance, sit here," Jethro said, pulling him toward the empty seat beside him. "There are exactly two spots left."

Vance sat down, and Jethro opened a bottle of wine.

Vance refused to drink. Rebecca used the excuse that she was on medication and couldn't drink. The others ended up finishing most of the first bottle, then opened a second.

Everyone chatted while eating, reminiscing about funny stories from high school. As the alcohol took effect, the conversation gradually slipped out of control.

Obadiah had always harbored resentment toward Vance. Once drunk, he pointed straight at Vance and cursed, "If it weren't for you..."

Still sober, Jethro quickly covered his mouth. "That's enough, Obadiah, What's the point of bringing this up every time?"

Obadiah slapped Jethro's hand away. "I know you're close with him, but wasn't Rebecca innocent? So many people liked her. She would have been better off with any of them!"

Rebecca was confused. Why were these guys dragging her into their argument?

"Rebecca, did you know that any guy who tried to give you snacks or write you love letters got beaten up by Vance? "Obadiah's face was flushed red from drinking. "This guy was full of dirty tricks!"

She realized what was going on and glanced at Vance, who happened to be looking at her. The lighting in the private room was dim, making it difficult to read the emotion in his eyes, but her heart remained still.

Time had passed. Those things from many years ago no longer mattered. Whether other boys had liked her made no difference to her now.

“What’s your problem, Obadiah?” Jethro huffed. “Why do you bring this up at every reunion? It was all in the past! Let it go! They’re already divorced. If you care for her so much, then chase her. You’ve been single, and she is right here. Go for it!”

“Jethro!” Vance suddenly raised his voice.

He had been silent the entire evening, but now he sounded angry.

“Am I wrong?” Jethro countered. “He never stops doing this. Who is he trying to embarrass? If he really cared about her, would he have mentioned ancient history every time?”

“I’m sorry. He’s drunk. I’ll take him out.” Vance grabbed Jethro’s arm and dragged him toward the door.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 487

The classmate reunion ended just like that.

After Vance dragged Jethro outside, Obadiah gave Rebecca an awkward glance and made an excuse to leave as well.

Rebecca found it funny. Jethro had been right about one thing. If Obadiah really liked her, he could try chasing her.

Yet he didn’t. He was only using her as an excuse to vent his personal grudge against Vance.

“What a man!” she sighed.

The remaining classmates, all drunk, began to disperse. Some called for designated drivers, and others called cabs.

Rebecca had to support the heavily intoxicated Jenny and went outside to hail a ride. When they stepped out of the restaurant, Jethro was slumped against Vance, still waiting for their car.

It was the peak ride-share hour. Rebecca canceled her booking three times in a row. Her car was still seven or eight minutes away.

That was fine. She would wait.

The summer night in Soliaridge was warm, with a gentle breeze. Rebecca stood on the sidewalk holding Jenny, about two feet away from Vance. She stared at the passing cars as if he didn't exist.

He suddenly spoke. "Need help?"

She looked over and saw Vance propping Jethro upright, as if trying to make him stand on his own. Vance pointed at Jenny, concerned she couldn't support Jenny's weight.

"Oh, I'm good," she declined.

She was no longer the girl with the injured leg. Now she could hold Jenny up.

Jenny had been quietly resting on Rebecca's shoulder. Hearing the voices, she mumbled, "I'm sorry, Rebecca. I didn't know Vance was coming. Otherwise, I wouldn't have brought you along."

Rebecca paused. Actually, they didn't have to be so dramatic.

Jethro stood for two seconds before collapsing back onto Vance and starting to mutter, "Vance, you heartless man, are you abandoning me again?"

That sounded ambiguous.

Vance paused, and Rebecca glanced over.

Jethro was clinging to him, and he stammered awkwardly, "He's drunk and talking nonsense."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

They were already strangers. It didn't matter who he was with now-man or woman.

"It's not..." he started to explain, then realized it was pointless.

"Vance..." Jethro kept on mumbling. "Why did you run off to France? I finally came back to Soliaridge, and you slipped away. Was it because of that girl, Anna? Is she that great?"

“You’re drunk,” Vance said stiffly.

“You used to have such big ambitions, saying how you were going to build your tech empire,” Jethro mumbled. “Now you’re in France every day baking cookies, dressed like an old man. Are you planning to live like a retiree? I was counting on you when I came back. Men are so unreliable...”

Rebecca paused at those words. She couldn’t help glancing over again, only to meet Vance’s eyes.

He pointed at Jethro. “This guy has been watching too many dramas lately, so he sounds like a bitter wife.”

“Dramas?” Rebecca was puzzled.

“The kind about scumbags,” he explained.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 488

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. “You have quite a broad knowledge base. How come I never heard of them in France?”

“You know, those entertainment companies released some reels overseas. Anna watches them when she studies English,” Vance explained.

Rebecca nodded, and he added, “Is Desmond good to you?”

She thought about it carefully. “Yes. He’s nice.”

“That’s good,” he said quietly.

They fell silent again. Even though cars were honking and traffic was heavy, the space around them somehow felt strangely quiet, as if separated from the noisy world.

Rebecca checked her phone. Her car was still four minutes away and currently stuck somewhere. She decided to go back inside the restaurant and wait.

Just as she was about to move, Vance spoke again. “You and Desmond are both dance majors. You have common goals and can support each other professionally. That’s nice.”

She paused, unsure of what he meant.

Reading her confusion, he explained, "It's nothing. Just wanted to wish you well. I hope from now on, you will always be happy."

She nodded. "That's for sure."

He smiled faintly once again, which reflected his peaceful state of mind.

Still draping over Vance, Jethro suddenly clicked his tongue and poked Vance's chest. "That's a bitter pill to swallow. Wishing her happiness."

"You're drunk. Just shut up." Vance grabbed his hand and pushed it away.

"I'm drunk? But my head is clear," Jethro snorted. "Are you really going to spend the rest of your life hiding in that little cookie shop like an old man, living with that French woman?"

Vance frowned, but before he could respond, their ride arrived.

He turned to Rebecca. "You and Jenny go first. I'll change the route."

"No need. Mine should be here soon. You go ahead," she replied, checking her phone again.

Her car had finally started moving. Now it was four minutes away.

Vance didn't insist. He opened the car door and pushed Jethro inside. Then he turned back and said to her, "I'm doing pretty well. I've had glory and rock bottom. From now on, two people with a simple life and a little shop are good enough."

Chapter des

She was confused. She had never asked how he was doing. Why was he suddenly telling her this?

He got into the car, and it slowly passed Rebecca. He rolled down the window and gave her a small smile. "Goodbye, Rebecca."

There was something strange about that smile. It felt like a final farewell. She stood frozen in place and forgot to respond, thus missing the sadness in his eyes as the window went back up.

The spot on his chest where Jethro had poked was aching fiercely. It wasn't just bitterness.

Rebecca's ride finally arrived six minutes later. She helped Jenny into the vehicle, dropped her off at home, and then headed home.

She had never imagined that this trip back to Soliaridge would turn dangerous. All the danger should have been removed. Not even Hugo had expected it.

During the few days she had been back, she had gone out shopping and eating with Jenny every day without any problems.

But after she dropped Jenny off, the moment she stepped into the elevator, she was grabbed from behind. A hand clamped over her mouth and nose.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 489

Those were two men wearing caps and sunglasses.

She had no chance to resist. Her hands and feet were immediately restrained, and she couldn't even scream.

They dragged her down to the underground parking garage and shoved her into a car.

"Who are you?" Her mind raced with every possibility. "If it's money you want, I can give it to you."

Her first thought was that this had something to do with Soren. He was in prison, so it could be his unpaid debts, or it was about Emmett.

One of the men was driving, and the other was holding her. When money was mentioned, they glanced at each other in the rearview mirror.

So, it was for money?

"I won't ask who you are. Just tell me how much you want and how to pay. I'll give it to you, and I won't call the police. We can all walk away safely," she proposed, trying to buy time.

But they weren't impressed. The one holding her warned, "You'd better behave."

She didn't know if they had weapons. At least, she hadn't seen any yet.

“I’m not misbehaving. Look, I’m not struggling at all. I can’t fight or outrun you. Struggling would only make things worse for me. I just want to know why you’re taking such a big risk. If it’s money, there’s no need for this. I’ll give it to you,” she said, trying to sound calm.

It was completely dark outside now, and the car was moving fast. She had no idea where they were taking her. If they kept driving nonstop without doing anything else, wouldn’t she have any chance at all?

Right now, her only hope was Desmond, who would call her every night.

If he called tonight, would she have a chance to answer? Her phone was in her bag, but the two men had taken the bag.

Just as she was pondering, her phone rang.

“My phone is ringing.”

“Don’t answer!”

That was expected.

The phone kept ringing, and she frowned. “That’s my boyfriend calling. If I don’t pick up, he’ll get suspicious.”

“So what? Can he find us? Don’t answer!” snorted the man.

She didn’t mention that he might call the police. That could provoke them. If it were Desmond, he might get suspicious and check her phone’s location.

The car sped up, and the surroundings grew darker. It looked like they had left the city. She didn’t know how long they drove, but she began to hear ship horns.

It was the harbor.

She demanded, “Where exactly are you taking me?”

The car door opened, and sea air blew in. Before she could say more, her mouth was taped shut, and a sack was pulled over her head.

She was lifted, wondering, “What are they going to do? Throw me into the sea? Put me on a ship? Can they get past security?”

All kinds of possibilities flashed through her mind and made her panic. Still, she did the only thing she could. She quietly kicked off one of her shoes while they were carrying her, hoping it would leave a clue.

She felt herself being thrown into a box. Then she was moved up and down and finally tossed again. Her head banged painfully against the inside of the box.

After that, the two men went silent.

Above her, she heard footsteps moving back and forth. Her hands and feet were bound, so she couldn't move.

With the long blast of the ship's horn, she felt movement and the swaying of waves. She had really been put on a ship.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 490

It seemed the ship had already set sail

Rebecca wondered who these people were, what they wanted, and if this was human trafficking. For a moment, she didn't know what to do.

She suspected she was in the cargo hold because she could hear rats squeaking. And there was the sound of waves.

Fear crept over her as she thought about the ship leaving the shore and being surrounded by the vast pitch-black sea. She was terrified of the deep sea and had never been this afraid before.

Curled inside the box, she kicked hard with her bound feet, hoping to create an opening so she could get

Out

But that was nearly impossible.

Just as she gritted her teeth and kept trying, someone suddenly knocked on the outside of the box. She froze and listened carefully.

Yes, someone was knocking. She didn't know if it was one of the kidnappers, so she stopped moving

The person outside kept knocking and asked, "Is someone inside?"

The voice sounded familiar. But she couldn't believe it. How could he be here?

"Is someone inside the box? the person asked again.

It really sounded like him.

She decided to take the risk, kicking the box with her foot. It was better to sit there waiting for death.

"Rebecca? If it's you, kick three times!" he said.

Now she confirmed it was Vance.

How was he here? But there was no time to wonder. Getting out was the priority.

She kicked the box hard three times. He was already prying the box open from the outside. Hearing the three kicks, he worked even faster.

After several sharp cracking sounds, the lid was lifted.

"Rebecca?" He pulled off the sack covering her and lifted her out.

She was shaking all over, unable to hide her fear, not after drifting in the dark cargo hold with rats for so long and being surrounded by the rolling waves. She had always been afraid of the sea.

"It really is you!" Vance pulled her into his arms. "Come on, let's get out of here!"

"No" She clutched his clothes, her hands shaking. "I don't know how many people there are or why they kidnapped me. We don't know what's waiting outside."

His face darkened, but she couldn't see it in the dim cargo hold.

"I know," he said. "I'll take you up. It's going to be okay."

"What do you know?" Her voice trembled with uncertainty.

"I'll explain once we're up. It's too dark down here."

Vance carried her up to the deck. The sudden open space made her shiver.

They were out at sea. The wind was strong. Everything around them was pitch black, and the ship was rocking.

She didn't know what to hold onto, so she simply sat down on the deck. She needed something that felt like solid ground.

But even sitting didn't help. The ship kept rising and falling. Thinking about the two kidnappers made her even more anxious.

"How did you end up here? How did you find me? What about the two men who kidnapped me? What's the situation now?" she asked, feeling lost.

The sound of the waves only made her more afraid.

"Don't get mad if I tell you," he said.

She shook her head. Right now, anger was the last thing on her mind.

The dark sea felt like a giant beast. The howling wind sounded as if it wanted to swallow them both.

"My phone still has location sharing with yours," he said. 1

She paused, realizing she hadn't changed her phone. She had forgotten about it.

"Nancy noticed you didn't come home and got worried. She reported it to Hugo, and he asked everyone who was at the dinner. I checked your location."

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 491

Rebecca felt a heavy knot of frustration twisting in her chest. She was the one who had declared they were now strangers, yet here she was, rescued by his the moment trouble struck.

"Don't think I saved you on purpose," Vance said, as if he had read her mind.

She turned to glare at him, as if saying, "Now your instincts are so sharp? Weren't you so blind and muddle-headed before?"

"Hugo Ballard called me, and I happened to be able to provide the location," he continued in a calm, detached tone. "It could have been anyone, even a total stranger. The suspects were taken off the ship by the police. Hugo has been away from Soliaridge these past two days, so if I didn't board, who would?"

All the vague resentment and bitterness she had been carrying suddenly lodged in her throat.

“Besides, ultimately, it was me...”

“Found her?” someone called from the other end of the ship.

“Yeah!” Vance stood up, knowing it was the police.

An officer came up, asking Rebecca numerous questions and taking detailed notes.

Only then did she learn that, for the safety of the crew and cargo, the two men had already been removed from the vessel by speedboat and taken ashore. The officer and Vance had stayed behind to search for her and would disembark at the next port.

“How far is the next port?” Rebecca asked anxiously. “How long will it take?”

This was a cargo ship with few passengers. The farther they traveled, the more it felt like they were swallowed by the vast, inky sea. The sight of the darkness ahead sent a shiver down her spine.

“About two to three hours,” the officer replied before walking away.

Rebecca didn’t feel comfortable following him. She opened her mouth, then closed it again and let out a quiet sigh.

Vance finally noticed. “Are you scared?”

She ignored him, and he glanced around. “Afraid of the dark? Afraid of those guys?”

Her expression clearly said that she didn’t want to talk to him.

“You don’t have to be afraid,” he added. “I’ll stay with you the whole way on this ship.”

Her irritation flared. “You’re scarier than any criminal, and you don’t even realize it?”

He froze, understanding what she meant. Some wounds, even if she chose to forget them, could never truly be erased. He sat down beside her without another word, guessing that she didn’t want to hear his voice now.

The weather was pleasant that night, with a clear sky full of stars that shone brilliantly over the open sea. Rebecca curled up with her knees to her chest and would not look up.

The starlight stung Vance’s eyes. A voice from the past echoed in his mind, “Vance, look! Are those stars twinkling up there, or just osmanthus blossoms?”

He had rarely stopped to watch the stars; tonight made it only the second time. It felt like a distant echo of when he was 16.

Every faint sparkle overhead carried him back to summers he could never return to. Suddenly, a shooting star streaked across the sky, trailing a fiery tail as it fell.

“Rebecca, look! A shooting star!” he called out instinctively.

She had her chin resting on her knees and only caught the final flicker of its tail vanishing into the darkness.

Chaptop

“Did you make a wish?” he asked, still gazing at the streak.

“Yeah,” she replied curtly.

“I hope it comes true,” he said, smiling at her..

“You know what I wished for?” she scoffed.

He paused, surprised that she answered. “Would you tell me?”

He assumed it was probably for Josette’s health or a lifetime of happiness with Desmond.

“I wished that you would be sterile yet somehow have a house full of kids, lose money on every deal, stay broke and miserable, die alone, and never find peace,” she rattled off in one breath.

He only smiled at her words, but that grated on her nerves. “I really did. Don’t you believe me?”.

“Suppose I do,” he said. “You still hate me that much?”

From his tone, she could tell that he didn’t believe a word. Of course, she hadn’t made that wish; she had just wanted to spite him.

“Don’t flatter yourself. Hating you takes effort, and you’re not worth the energy,” she snorted. “You made a wish, too?”

That didn’t fit the man she knew. He never believed in superstition and had only sneered at classmates making wishes before exams.

Even blowing out birthday candles had seemed like torture to him. Yet now he had wished on a shooting star?

“I did. But I can’t tell you. As you once said, telling would stop it from coming true.”

“Who cares?”

It was probably about Anna anyway. Just days ago, he had told her that he wanted a simple, quiet life with Anna.

Rebecca buried her head in her knees again. The night grew deeper, and the air turned colder.

She shivered, then sneezed.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 492

“Cold?” Vance asked.

“I’m fine.” Rebecca sneezed again.

He looked around them, but there was nothing he could use to warm her. The ship had blankets, but they were the rough ones used by the crew. She would probably mind.

He was only wearing a T-shirt and had nothing to offer.

“Want to go inside the cabin?”

“No.”

This was a cargo ship, and the cabins belonged to the crew. She didn’t want to take over someone else’s space or sleep in a bed that wasn’t hers.

“Wait here,” he said, standing up.

She figured he was going to find a jacket or blanket, but coldness wasn’t the only problem. Seasickness made it worse, nausea churning in her stomach.

If the ship rolled any harder, she would vomit. Just then, the wind strengthened, and the entire vessel pitched violently.

From the center of the deck, she looked at the pitch-black surroundings. The sea looked like a giant black hole. She imagined a bigger wave flipping the ship and dragging everyone under.

She tried to stand and find Vance, but dizziness hit and brought her back down. The urge to vomit grew stronger, a salty taste already rising in her mouth,

She was afraid she might throw up on the deck, but she didn't dare to approach the railing. She had to fight hard to hold it in.

"Rebecca, come over here!" Vance called from the other end.

She slowly shook her head, and he waved. "What's wrong? It's warmer over here."

She tried to stand, but another wave hit, making her slip. The nausea surged once more.

"I'm not going!" She crouched down, hugged her knees, and refused to move again.

"What's wrong?" He hurried over. "The captain and the crew have set up a fire. Come warm up."

She only buried her face in her knees and shook her head. That was when he realized he had pulled her out of the cabin without checking for injuries.

"Are you hurt?" he asked with concern.

At the time, he had been worried that holding her too long or getting too close would upset her.

"Let me see." He squatted down and tried to pull her hand away. "Is it your foot?"

She didn't want him to touch her, but her resistance only made him more insistent. Frustrated beyond endurance, she snapped, "Can you stop pulling at me? I'm feeling terrible! I'll throw up on you!"

He paused, finally realizing it was seasickness.

"Are you seasick? Come on. Some hot food will help settle your stomach."

"No, I'm not going."

She couldn't even stand steadily, and she certainly didn't want him to see her so miserable.

"Tell me what's going on. Why won't you go over there? You don't want to sit with them? Then I'll bring you some food," he said, starting to stand.

She panicked and lurched to stop him. "No, don't!"

She couldn't let him ask the crew for special treatment as if she were too good for them. The ship was still rolling, and the nausea worsened with every pitch.

He finally noticed her pale face and grabbed her arm. "Is it that bad?"

She frowned and stayed silent, terrified that opening her mouth would make her vomit.

“I’ll carry you,” he offered, reaching for her, but she shoved him away.

Unable to hold back anymore, she lunged for the railing and threw up violently over the side. When she finished, the dark, churning sea roared right below her.

She gripped the railing tightly, her lips trembling with terror.

He insisted, “Something’s not right with you. Let me check.”

She turned her face away, refusing to let him get closer. They had nothing to do with each other anymore. Besides, she felt filthy and smelled awful right after throwing up.

Her fingers grasped the railing, turning white from the force.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 493

“Let go!” Vance wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her away from the edge.

“Can you just leave me alone?” Rebecca yelled, refusing to face him.

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“Are you kidding? After everything we’ve been through, why try to keep up appearances in front of nie?” he said with a frown. You threw up, so what? I’ve seen you in every possible state for over ten years. No one in this world knows you better than I do.”

She had to admit that no matter how many times she insisted they were strangers, he always managed to cross the line.

She glared. “You know me better than anyone? How dare you say that?”

Because he knew her so well, he also knew where her weaknesses were. And he had used them to wound her deeply and leave her scarred.

He paused, then pulled her into his arms. “I’m sorry. Please trust me just for one night. I swear I won’t hurt you.”

“Let me go. I can walk by myself.” She knew she couldn’t stay clinging to the railing while the ship pitched wildly.

Pushing him off, she braced herself against the bulkhead and staggered slowly toward the other end of the deck.

Thankfully, her leg had recovered most of its function; otherwise, she couldn’t imagine how many times she would have fallen.

He didn’t insist, simply watching as she lurched and swayed until she finally reached the far side. The crew had set up an alcohol burner on the deck and was sharing a big pot of stew. The rich, peppery aroma cut through the salty air.

“Sit here,” Vance said, claiming an empty spot and motioning to the space beside him.

She didn’t argue this time. Squeezing in among the sailors wasn’t such a good option.

“Come eat with us, young lady. It will help calm your nerves,” an older sailor invited, handing her a set of disposable utensils.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully.

With more people around, her fear of the deep sea eased somewhat. Still, she felt cold, especially after the wave soaked her clothes at the railing.

The crew began discussing the earlier incident, finding it unbelievable.

“How could something like that happen? It’s the first time we’ve encountered anything like it!” one said.

Even now, Rebecca still didn’t fully understand what had happened or why those men had targeted her. The police officer aboard wouldn’t reveal details, not before the case was closed.

She glanced at Vance, who appeared just as unaware. He handed her a cup of hot water. “Drink this to warm up.”

The warmth from the paper cup made her shiver harder, goosebumps rising on her arms.

One of the sailors chimed in, “If you really want to warm up, there’s an old trick we’ve used for decades at sea.”

He pulled out a bottle of bourbon. “Back when conditions were rough, this is what got us through the cold.”

“She just threw up,” Vance explained. “Alcohol might upset her stomach more.”

“Then eat something hot first,” the sailor suggested, pointing at the pot.

“Thank you.” Rebecca nodded.

She had been sitting there for a little while now. The steam from the stew had already made her feel better. Despite the spicy broth, she ate some hot meat. Her body warmed noticeably.

“Want to try a little?” The sailor poured a tiny splash into a disposable cup.

She accepted it and took a sip. The fiery heat spread from her tongue through her whole body.

“How is it?” he asked.

It felt invigorating; the warmth was chasing away the chills in every pore.

He laughed heartily. “I’ll give you a bit more, but your boyfriend is looking daggers at me.”

The others laughed along.

Rebecca glanced at Vance and quickly clarified, “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Oh? My mistake,” the sailor apologized. “He was acting so protective, so I assumed he was.”

“We’re just old classmates,” Rebecca said.

Then, ignoring the sailor’s warning to drink slowly, she finished the second shot as well.

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 494

The bourbon was strong and hit fast,

As warmth flooded her body, her head grew pleasantly fuzzy. The upside was that the haze dulled her fear.

Once the stew was finished, the crew cleaned up and returned to their duties, leaving only Vance and Rebecca on the deck.

Vance had never seen her drink anything this potent. Her cheeks were now flushed bright red. “You okay? Not too drunk? Stomach feeling all right?”

She had already been seasick and nauseous; drinking probably hadn’t helped. Maybe sleep would make it better.

“Rebecca, stay awake.” He started to reach out to pat her cheek, then caught himself. “Open your eyes. Don’t fall asleep.”

“Can you stop bothering me?” she muttered, lifting her heavy eyelids.

“If you sleep, I’m splashing water on you. Rebecca, wake up, or I’ll leave you here alone. Are you not afraid of sea monsters? I’m serious. I’m really leaving now.”

She cracked her eyes open, saw he was still there, and closed them again.

He tried again. “I mean it. Look behind you. The black water is creeping up the deck.”

She had finally started to relax, but his words jerked her awake. She looked over and saw the water, but it wasn’t creeping anywhere.

“This is not funny!” she exploded in fury.

“Okay, you’re awake now. Don’t go back to sleep,” he said, backing up several steps.

But her irritation from being woken burned hotter. “What the hell do you mean?”

He sighed. “There’s wind out here, and you’ve been drinking. You’ll catch a cold if you sleep.”

She fell silent, and he grinned. “Liquid courage, huh? Not so scared anymore?”

“You’re scared!” she shot back.

Was it so funny? Some people feared heights, others hated the dark, and some suffered from claustrophobia, while she simply feared the deep sea.

After watching Titanic, where many were moved to tears, she had been plagued by nightmares for nights on end.

In her dreams, she was alone in a tiny boat, drifting in the dark expanse of the ocean, surrounded by nothing but darkness and towering waves that could swallow her at any moment.

“What’s wrong?” Vance was surprised by her strong reaction.

She knew she wasn’t acting like herself, but alcohol amplified everything, including her anger and the old, buried resentments.

Words she had never planned to say came tumbling out. “Yes, I’m timid. I’m terrified of the ocean, okay? A lot of people think the sea is beautiful. I won’t deny that, but I’m still afraid. That’s why island trips were never on my travel list. But you? You always dreamed of island vacations, didn’t you?”

He froze, then looked past her at the dark water. “You’re afraid of the ocean? Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Yeah, I was stupid. I never said anything. I even convinced myself that one day I could go with you. As long as you were there, I wouldn’t have to be afraid!” She glared. “Who knew you would turn out to be the most dangerous part? Good thing I never went. Who knows? You might have thrown me overboard.”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 495

Shock, regret, and guilt flashed in Vance’s eyes, but all that he could manage was a bitter smile. “What? No, I would never...”

“Nothing is impossible!” Rebecca interrupted. “Remember that classic scene in Titans? The guy stands behind the girl at the bow, and they fly? If it were me with you, I would already be in the water.”

“I would never...”

“Shut up! I don’t want to hear any more of your lies! It’s all over! Just stay the hell away from me!”

Vance lowered his head. When he looked up again, his eyes held endless sorrow. “Fine. I’ll move farther away. You stay here.”

She turned away without answering. A minute passed with no movement, and she glanced over her shoulder. “I thought you were leaving. Why are you still here?”

“Okay.” He started walking away but called back, “Move around a bit. It will help sober you up and keep you warm.”

He jogged toward the other end of the ship. The ride had steadied, so he moved smoothly.

But she had no intention of following suit. She wasn't crazy.

Yet he had been right about the liquid courage. When drunk, she only wanted to sleep and forget her fear. Now that he had woken her, the sound of the waves brought the terror back.

Suddenly, the sound of a harmonica floated across the ship, probably played by one of the crew. It reminded her of the various artistic works she'd seen, where a lonely sailor always played a harmonica at sea.

A surge of inspiration hit her. Surely, she wouldn't follow Vance to run, but she could dance. Then nothing could scare her anymore.

Under the starlight, to the rhythm of the harmonica, she began to move across the deck.

It was strange. When she stood still or sat, she felt sick, unsteady, and terrified. But the moment she started dancing, she found a perfect balance.

Dance had always been her salvation. Once she began, the world narrowed to only her and the music. Fear vanished. Even her stomach settled, and the nausea disappeared.

The melody was familiar. It was Motherland, a piece of music she had danced to countless times.

She slipped into a state of complete immersion, unaware that the crew had gradually gathered or that who was playing the harmonica.

It was a song every American knew by heart, so it made perfect sense for sailors far from home to play it while drifting overseas.

The harmonica performer stood among the crew, watching her dance gracefully under the deck lights. The music carried his memory through the night, back to those sunny days when he was 16.

A girl in her dance uniform, with pigtails and leg warmers, had spun, flipped, and leaped in the rehearsal studio.

The aloof boy had stood outside the window, picked a leaf, and played along with the music. She danced freely inside, and he played steadily outside.

Cheers and applause broke his reverie and stopped the music. The girl on the deck halted her dance. Her gaze cut through the crowd and landed on him, the harmonica still at his lips.

Her eyes seemed to say, “It was you.”

Yes, it was him. From 16 until now, it had always been him.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 496

It had always been Vance, yet he had still lost Rebecca.

Some crew members had taken photos and videos. They showed them to Rebecca and politely asked if she minded. If she did, they would delete them immediately.

She watched the footage. In the deep night at sea, a single beam of light from the ship had turned the deck into a stage. She had danced within that pool of light, with only the wind and harmonica as soundtrack.

It was breathtakingly beautiful-not because her dancing was flawless, but because of the entire scene. It was one of the most beautiful stages she had ever performed on.

“It’s fine,” she said, returning the phone. “Thank you for capturing the beautiful moments.”

She even wanted to ask them to send her the video, but unfortunately, her phone was lost.

“Hey, why don’t we all dance together?” someone suggested.

It was the same sailor who had poured her the bourbon earlier.

The others teased him. “What do you know about dancing?”

“I was known as the Dancing King back in my younger days,” he boasted with a grin.

“Show us!” The group started cheering him on.

The older sailor didn’t hesitate. He called to Vance, “Bro, play something.”

Vance hadn’t played harmonica in years and only knew a few tunes well. He thought for a moment, then started the Doll and the

Little Bear Dance.

In the cheerful melody, the older sailor danced like a playful bear. Rebecca laughed and bounced along with him.

“Come on, everyone! We’re all black bears tonight!” the sailor called out, laughing.

Vance paused, clearly not intending the song to be interpreted that way.

“Keep going, brother! Or do you want to join the dance?” the sailor shouted, enjoying himself.

Vance quickly resumed playing, noting that they had less than three hours until the next port. Rebecca lost herself in the joyful atmosphere. The fear, seasickness, and cold all faded away.

All that remained was pure enjoyment. Even the effects of the alcohol burned off through the movement

When the ship prepared to dock, the group finally dispersed. Vance returned the harmonica to the older sailor. “I used this. I’ll buy you a new one.”

“No need. We’re not picky out here,” the sailor replied, tucking it away. “Next time we cross paths, we’ll drink together again.”

“Deal,” Vance agreed readily.

As the ship slowly approached the dock, the lights of the port came into view.

He walked over to Rebecca, whose face was flushed from dancing and drinking. “We’re almost there. Not scared anymore?”

She was panting and sweating a little. Fear was no longer the subject. She asked, “How are we getting back to Soliaridge?”

“We could stay the night.”

“No.”

The thought of spending even one more night anywhere near him, even in separate rooms, was impossible.

She asked, “Do you know where my bag and phone are?”

He shook his head slightly. “They should still be in the car. We’ll ask the police if they’ve recovered it.”

She thought about the situation, Even without her phone or money, she could take a cab home and pay later.

“If you don’t want to stay overnight, we can take a cab We’ll just get home around sunrise.”

“That’s fine. I want to go home.”

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 497

Vance nodded. “All right, home it is.”

As they drew closer to shore, cellservice returned, and Vance’s phone began ringing.

“I need to take this,” he said, stepping aside. “Hello, Anna?”

His voice was softer than the sea breeze, almost lost in the wind. “Something came up here. I’m...”

She couldn’t make out the rest, but Anna’s voice came through loudly, angry and repeating, “You can’t... You can’t...”

Vance said sorry repeatedly, his tone humble, even a little subservient. Rebecca had never seen this version of him. For a moment, she doubted if this was really the man she knew.

“Apologize to Cathy!”

“Don’t even think about driving Cathy away!”

“When did you become so mean?”

He was supposed to sound like that.

She wasn’t trying to compare, but the dead memories flooded back like a tide. She had never believed in judging people by their affection rather than their actions.

Everything he had done while they were together proved he hadn’t treated her like a human being. Why believe anything he claimed to feel?

Luckily, she had walked away. She hadn't given up on herself in those five long years.

When he finished the call, he tapped at his phone. Rebecca turned her back to him and watched the port lights grow brighter.

What rotten luck-to be forced to spend another night with him! But the more she replayed the previous evening, the less random it felt.

If those men had grabbed her at random, there were usually only two motives: money or something worse. They had considered her offer of cash but ultimately refused. And they hadn't actually harmed her.

That suggested someone had sent them. Who could it be? She immediately ruled out Emmett, who lacked both the money and the connections.

Who else? She glanced back at Vance, her eyes now filled with hatred. This had better not be connected to him.

The harbor lights reflected in his eyes. He gave a small smile. "What's wrong? We're almost there."

She gritted her teeth. "I've figured it out. Anything that touches you turns into a disaster. You're my bane!"

He paused. "Didn't we get our compatibility charts read together once?"

She was unimpressed. "That chart reader was obviously a fraud!"

When they got married, they had gone through the whole compatibility ritual, and the chart reader had sworn they were a perfect match. That was total nonsense.

"Actually..."

"Don't talk! Just hearing your voice gives me a headache. You're bad luck for me!"

Vance swallowed the rest of his words. They both fell into silence as the ship finally docked.

Just before reaching the pier, his phone rang again. He muttered softyething about having someone leave an item at the terminal hall.

A few minutes later, the ship was secured. The crew escorted them down the gangway, waving goodbye.

Rebecca waved back, knowing none of this had been their fault. She was actually grateful, having enjoyed their food and bourbon.

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 498

Once ashore and through the terminal, Rebecca saw a brand new comforter and a pair of shoes.

Apparently, they had been delivered under Vance's order. He took out the shoes and helped her put them on.

She had been barefoot the entire time, and her feet were cold.

She didn't refuse. Although she wanted to draw a strict line with him, there was no need to suffer unnecessarily; she would pay him back later.

As for the comforter, she had no idea what it was for and didn't care to ask. She simply walked straight out of the hall.

Vance had already called a car.

"Get in," he said, holding the door open. "Sleep on the way back. The AC will be cold. You've been drinking and sweating. Cover yourself with the blanket so you don't catch a cold."

He handed her the comforter. "It's brand new. The delivery guy just brought it."

"What about you? Not going back?"

"You don't want to ride with me, so I'll call another car."

That was unnecessary.

"Just get in. You sit in the front."

"All right."

He closed her door and took the passenger seat.

As soon as the car started moving, exhaustion overwhelmed Rebecca. The cool air and soft blanket were perfect. She fell asleep almost instantly.

In her half-dream state, she vaguely heard the driver ask Vance, "You guys have a fight?"

Vance said nothing and only gave a quiet laugh.

The driver continued, "Couples go on trips and come back divorced all the time, you know."

Since they had come from the port, he assumed they were returning from a vacation.

"Yeah?" Vance's laugh was noncommittal.

"It's simple. Think about what she wants and do what she wants. A grown man should know how to keep his wife happy. It doesn't matter where you go or what you do. What matters is going together and enjoying each other's company," said the driver.

Vance made no comments.

"Am I wrong?" The driver suddenly realized he might have talked too much. "Sorry, I tend to chat when I drive at night. Keeps me from getting sleepy."

"No, it's not that," Vance replied. "She's not my wife."

"Girlfriend?"

"Not exactly."

The driver glanced at them. "No way. You two look like a married couple or at least dating."

She was his ex-wife, but there was no need to explain it to a stranger. To avoid further conversation, Vance simply closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.

They arrived in Soliaridge at sunrise. Rebecca had slept the entire way and was woken up by him when they reached the destination-Gabriel's house in the city.

"Should we pull into the driveway or drop you at the curb?"

"Right here is fine."

She got out. The cold morning wind cleared her head. She glanced back at the comforter site had used.

"I'll take care of it," Vance said, stepping out as well.

"How much?" she asked in the chilly dawn air.

"What, you want to split the cab fare, too?"

“Yes.”

Although most of her money had come from their marital assets, this was separate.

“Your Venmo is still linked to the same number, right?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll Venmo you later.”

“Okay.”

He checked the order and told her the amount without arguing. As he took out his phone, she remembered something and demanded, “Delete the location sharing.”

“Is that necessary? The phone is already gone anyway.”

“What if it turns up? Besides, with location sharing, it shouldn’t be hard to find.”

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Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 499

“It only gives a general area, not precise tracking,” Vance explained, looking uncomfortable. “By the way, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Give me the phone!” Rebecca demanded, holding out her hand.

He didn’t move, just looked at her. “Does it have to be like this?”

“Give it to me!” she repeated. “Don’t pull any tricks. A proper ex should disappear like they’re dead. It’s best for both of us. Don’t make Anna go through what I suffered.”

He sighed, finally placing the phone in her hand.

“Unlock it.” She held it up to his face.

But when she opened the tracking app, her phone wasn’t listed at all.

“What is this? You lied to me? It’s not even on the list. Don’t tell me you deleted it in the car!” She checked his Venmo next and saw her old card still linked. “Unlink this, too. Remove anything that still has me connected.”

She tossed the phone back to him. “Explain it! How did you know I was on that ship?”

He paused, then said quietly, “Because of Catherine.”

“I knew it!” Her suspicion hadn’t been wrong after all. This was indeed connected to him. “And you still lied to me?”

“You were upset last night. I was afraid telling you would make you even more unstable.”

“Enough! You’re doing it again! You always have excuses to defend her! She tried to poison you, and you still protect her? She’s a disaster that just won’t die! Why didn’t she finish the job? The world would have two fewer problems!”

It was always like this. Spending even a little time with him made her want to scream.

“Rebecca!” He grabbed her shoulders. “See? The second her name comes up, you lose all calm. I’m not protecting her. I already told the police everything. That’s how I reported the incident.”

“She was supposed to be serving her sentence. How did she get out and do this? What did she want by kidnapping me?” she yelled.

If they hadn’t rescued her, who knew what those men might have done?

“I’ve no idea. She has disappeared. That’s what I was trying to warn you about. Be careful these days. Avoid going out as much as you can, and if you do, take Gabriel’s bodyguards with you. Don’t go anywhere alone,” he said.

She yanked free of his grip. “Everything I said was true! Meeting you was the worst luck of my life! You really are my bane!”

“Rebecca, calm down.”

“I can’t! I was finally trying to live my new life, and now this happens. She was on house arrest because she was pregnant, right? Where’s the baby? Did she have some kind of miracle pregnancy that never ended? How did she escape supervision?”

“It’s complicated. She disappeared months ago. She used a miscarriage as an excuse to go to the hospital, then escaped from there. The pregnancy ended at that time. She has some criminal connections overseas, and it looks like those people came looking for her.”

“Then how did you find me? And how did you report the case?”

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford (by Koi Fish)

Chapter 500

“You’ll only get angrier if I tell you,” Vance muttered.

Rebecca pointed at herself. “I’m already this angry. Just tell me the truth! At least, I’ll die knowing the whole story.”

He gave a bitter smile and opened the app again, pointing to a device labeled “V”.

“It’s a phone I once bought for her. She switched to a new one and stopped using it. But last night, it suddenly started moving,” he explained. “I called the police immediately. Then Hugo Ballard called, asking where you were. I suspected it was connected, so I followed the signal to the port, where I saw your shoe.”

Rebecca’s anger drained away, replaced by cold sarcasm.

“You really are sentimental. You couldn’t even unlink an old, discarded phone? What, keeping it makes you feel like Cathy is still with you?”

“No, it’s a work habit. Any small digital trace can serve as evidence for unpredictable situations in the future.”

“Whatever. I don’t care. We have nothing to do with each other anymore. Keep whoever you want linked. Just remove me. The thought that I still exist anywhere in your world makes me sick to my stomach.”

She waved it off and turned to leave. He watched her walk away in silence, then spotted Desmond standing up ahead.

The man had probably been waiting for a long time. She must have seen Desmond, too, because she suddenly broke into a run, racing straight toward him.

Desmond ran forward, scooped her up, kissed her forehead, and whispered something into her ear. Probably things like “Where have you been?” and “I was worried sick all night.”

Vance closed his eyes in dismay. Once, she had run to him the same way.

At 16, she would bounce, jump, or even cartwheel over to him with a bright smile. Later, after they married, she would wait at the apartment door, in the underground garage, or in the living room, always with a brilliant smile.

At first, she walked with a cane, then holding the wall, then with a slight limp-every step still aimed straight at him, full of enthusiasm and determination.

Yet he had never once given her such a warm, enthusiastic embrace.

Not at 16. Not ever.

When he opened his eyes again, they had already walked away. Perhaps Desmond was carrying her, or they were holding hands.

It no longer had anything to do with him.

Rebecca finally reached home.

Nancy breathed a huge sigh of relief. She had been worried sick about Rebecca's disappearance. Her eyes glistened with happy tears at Rebecca's safe return.

"Sorry for making you worry," Rebecca said, then remembered something. "By the way, you still have Vance's contact, right? You haven't deleted it?"

Nancy faltered. "I... Well..."

"It's fine," Rebecca said quickly. "Who you stay in touch with is your business. I'm not going to force you. After all, he helped with Cecilia's school enrollment, and you might still need him for that."

Nancy felt even more guilty. She had almost called Rebecca "Madam" out of habit.

"It's okay," Rebecca reassured her. "I actually need you to do me a favor. Please send Vance 2,000 dollars and tell him it's from me. He'll know what it's for. I'll pay you back right away."