

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

Chapter 501

Rebecca added the cost of the shoes and the cab fare together. She refused to transfer the money to Vance herself.

“Oh, sure, no problem,” Nancy said quickly, already pulling out her phone to send it.

“Good.” Rebecca turned to head upstairs to her room.

She had barely reached the staircase when Nancy called after her, “Mr Bradford says it’s too much money.”

“Just tell him I’m covering it. If there’s extra, he can use it to top up a few phone plans,” Rebecca replied.

She was still covered in the scent of sea wind, bourbon, and stew. Plus, she had thrown up on the ship. All she wanted right now was a hot shower and clean clothes.

Nancy didn’t quite understand the remark but passed on the message anyway.

“Nancy,” Desmond called out, watching Rebecca disappear around the corner of the upstairs landing, “let me see what he replies.”

Nancy hesitated, but he was Rebecca’s boyfriend now. She sighed and handed him the phone.

Desmond opened the chat and saw years of messages stretching back. He scrolled all the way to the beginning.

There were daily instructions from Vance.

[Remember to help Rebecca turn over according to the doctor’s instructions so she doesn’t get bedsores.]

[How was her mood today? Was she upset? Did she cry?]

[Tell her I’ll be late getting to the hospital tonight. There’s a meeting that might run until nine, but I’ll be there.]

[She might not tell me what she's thinking. Talk with her, get her to open up, and let me know.]

[Josette takes good care of Rebecca, but she is getting older. Don't let her overdo it. Please keep an eye on her.]

[She can't stay in bed all the time. I wrote down the exercises she needs to do every day. Follow the list.]

Attached was a photo of two full pages of handwritten notes.

The messages ran from the earliest days after Rebecca's injury all the way through her slow recovery and difficult walking. They messaged almost every day.

Even recently, there was one day when Vance had simply typed "Nancy" and sent nothing else. Desmond checked the date. It had been right after the divorce.

His chest felt tight. This phone felt like a time machine, opening a window into the five years of marriage between Vance and Rebecca.

Even though Rebecca never appeared in the chat, every line was about her. The messages were short and simple, yet they offered a glimpse into those five years that had been closed off and mysterious to him.

He couldn't help wanting to push the crack wider and see more.

"Mr. Schroeder, may I have my phone back?" Nancy asked softly.

Just then, Vance messaged: [She's not in a great mood. She had a scary night, threw up, drank strong liquor, and might be coming down with a cold. Please take good care of her. Make her something warm and easy on the stomach. If she has a cold, take her to the doctor.

[Most importantly, don't let her go out alone. Have several bodyguards go with her whenever she leaves the house, at least until she goes abroad again. Don't let your guard down for even one day.]

Desmond read the message, then typed back: [Bradford, I'm here. Mind your own business and have some boundaries. You're just her ex-husband!]

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Nancy watched Desmond send the message and panicked. She snatched the phone back and quickly unsent it.

Desmond's face darkened. "Nancy, do you know who's employing you now? Who's paying your salary? Rebecca doesn't say anything because she's kind-hearted, but if you're really on her side, you should cut all ties with this man. Don't you know how much pain he caused her?"

Nancy's face flushed red. "I... I know. I didn't delete him before because of my child's school transfer."

"Even so, do you have to keep all the old chat history? Some of it goes back five years," Desmond chided.

Nancy lowered her head. "I didn't keep it on purpose. It all transferred over when I changed phones."

"Then delete everything now. Both the chat history and the contact," Desmond ordered, heading upstairs.

Nancy sighed, then sent Vance a message: [I'm sorry, sir. That last message wasn't from me.]

Vance had already seen it before and knew exactly who had sent it, but he had no intention of replying.

It was normal to feel possessive when one loved another person. Back when he and Rebecca were together, he had strongly disliked Desmond, believing the younger man was coveting what belonged to him.

If love weren't selfish, it wouldn't be love.

He had lost control whenever Rebecca spent time with Desmond, yet he had never cared when Catherine was around other men.

A man nearly 30 years old understood plenty about love and the ways of the world. He had simply been blinded while in the middle of it. Only after stepping out did everything become clear, but by then, it was too late.

Right now, he was glad Desmond cared so much about Rebecca. Only love made someone that protective. He hoped Desmond would keep loving her like this.

He knew there was no chance left between him and Rebecca. They had drifted too far apart. So, he hoped someone would love her more than he had and cherish her better than he had.

“Desmond, don’t let her down. And don’t let me down either,” he muttered.

That was why, when Nancy apologized to him, he didn’t feel offended at all. He had been typing a reply, asking her to tell Rebecca that the old phone labeled “V” had never been something he chose to keep linked. It was Catherine who had insisted on binding it.

But suddenly, it felt unnecessary to explain. He deleted the words one by one and simply replied: [I know It’s fine.)

Nancy: [Sir, I’m going to delete you. I’m sorry.]

He understood that Desmond must have said something to her.

Vance: (Sure, no problem. I’ll be heading to France soon anyway.)

Nancy: [Sir, I’m a woman, so I can empathize more with Rebecca. I did hate you for a while, but you helped Cecilia. I’m grateful for that. Thank you.]

Vance: [Actually, you don’t need to thank me. I’m a cold person. It was Rebecca who wanted to help you. Just delete me. I

Nancy tried to reply with “Okay”, but it couldn’t be sent. A red exclamation mark appeared.

She felt a quiet sadness in her heart for what had become of the once-married couple.

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Rebecca had once told Nancy that she and Vance had known each other since they were 16-the kind of story people online called “from school uniforms to wedding dress”.

Rebecca had even injured her leg because of him.

Why had things turned out this way? She had loved him deeply, and he had clearly felt something, too.

For five years, Nancy had watched it all unfold day by day. Why couldn't men resist temptation? She had thought Vance would be different, but in the end, all men were the same.

Rebecca was in the shower, and Desmond waited for her in the bedroom.

When she came out, her hair was wrapped in a towel. Her face was flushed from the hot water, and her eyes looked soft and dewy.

"Come here. I'll blow-dry your hair," he offered, having done that for her many times in France.

But then, he remembered a line from Vance's old messages to Nancy: [Sometimes, Rebecca gets lazy and goes to sleep with her hair still damp. If I'm not back, make sure you dry it for her before letting her sleep.]

His fingers moved through her hair with a little more force, causing her to wince.

"My bad, did I hurt you?" he said quickly.

"What's on your mind?" she asked.

Seeing him first thing that morning had touched her deeply.

He had been in Arelmoor when Hugo called. Then he jumped on the next flight immediately. At that time, she had been drifting at sea with no phone, out of contact for the whole night.

She could imagine how worried he must have been. Probably, he hadn't slept, running through every terrible possibility.

"I'm sorry for making you worry," she said, tilting her head up and reaching for his chin.

The man who was usually so careful about his appearance hadn't even shaved that morning. He caught her hand, kissed it, and pulled her onto his lap.

"I'm the one who should be sorry," he muttered. "You were in danger, and wasn't there. I let you down."

"It was not your fault. Nobody could have predicted something like that. Just seeing you waiting at my door already made me so happy." She leaned her head on his shoulder. "Were you worried sick last night?"

"I was. Hugo called when I was a thousand miles away. I bought a ticket and flew straight here. They told me you'd been kidnapped. Even though the two guys were caught, you were still out on that ship. How could I stay calm? Not just me, Hugo and Nancy were also

losing their minds, too. Nancy didn't sleep all night either," he sighed, thinking back. "You were unreachable, so I went outside to wait for you every half hour."

"It was close, but I'm fine now," she reassured him.

Last night was quite dangerous. If Vance and the police hadn't gotten on the ship in time, she didn't know what might have happened.

She wanted to tell Desmond everything she had gone through and how terrified she had been, but now she decided against it. There was no need to make him worry more. It was over.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "It's all in the past now"

"From now on, wherever you go, I have to go with you. Otherwise, I'm not letting you leave the house." He gently pinched her nose.

"Does that mean you're turning into my accessory?" she laughed.

He grinned. "Yeah, a really big one. Hanging on to you for the rest of our lives. How does that sound?"

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"Great!" Rebecca curled up in Desmond's arms.

Her freshly dried hair was warm and smelled of shampoo. She was wrapped in a cozy, sweet fragrance that felt worlds away from the cold, dark sea last night.

"Rebecca," Desmond murmured, running his fingers through her hair.

"Hmm?" She felt so warm she could barely keep her eyes open.

"Tired?"

"Yeah."

"Talk to me a little before you sleep, okay?" He held her tighter and whispered against her ear.

“You talk.” Her voice was soft and sleepy.

“How did Vance end up with you last night?” he asked casually, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

“Well...” She told him the truth. “I had dinner with some high school classmates. After it ended, I got kidnapped. Hugo called every classmate who had been at the dinner.”

“How did he manage to track you down?”

“It’s a long story.”

It involved Catherine and location sharing.

Desmond’s eyes darkened, and she quickly added, “It had something to do with Catherine.”

His expression eased a little. He pulled her closer and said softly “From now on, let’s skip any gatherings where Vance will be there, okay?”

He looked adorably pleading, his eyes wide and puppy-like. She had never been able to say no to that face.

She touched his chin and nodded. “Okay. I didn’t even know he would be there. If I had, I definitely wouldn’t have gone.”

“I love you.” He kissed the top of her head.

When he leaned in to kiss lower, a knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” he sighed in frustration.

“Who do you think?” she chuckled, slipping out of his lap to open the door.

Outside, Nancy was carrying a bowl of hot soup. “I just made this. It will warm you up and settle your stomach. Drink it and get some good rest.”

She handed over the whole tray.

“Thanks.” Rebecca took it.

Nancy paused, as if trying to say something. In the end, she just closed the door and went downstairs.

“What kind of soup is it? Does it taste better than mine?” Desmond came over to inspect the bowl.

She gave him a playful glare. “You’re even jealous of Nancy’s cooking now.”

“Yeah,” he grinned. “I’m that petty. I want you to love only me in the whole world.”

She sipped the soup. “What about Josette? Kaitlyn? Gabriel? Should I stop loving them, too?”

“They’re family. I’m talking about everyone else-random people.”

—

“Nancy isn’t random. She’s taken care of me for years. Now she’s with Gabriel, so we treat her like family, too.”

Desmond wasn’t happy but didn’t argue further.

“Fine. We can add her, but no more. Your heart is only so big. How many people can it hold?” He gestured. “A person’s heart is about the size of their own fist./Look how small your hand is.”

She set the tray down and wrapped her hand around his fist “Even if the heart is small, it can still hold the whole world. Want some?”

She sat down, stirred the sweet soup, and lifted a spoonful to his lips. “This is the sweetness of everyday life. I’m giving you half.

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Desmond smiled. “Why do I love hearing all your sweet talk so much?”

He drank the spoonful. It really was sweet.

At that moment, Rebecca felt perfectly content. Sweet words only sounded beautiful because of love. Without love, no matter how honeyed they were, they would only make someone want to run away.

She sat in the chair, slowly finishing the soup while Desmond tidied up her room. She had done some online shopping since returning home, and the packages had been opened but not yet put away. Everything was piled up.

He neatly organized it all for her, hanging clothes in the closet and putting things in drawers. Then he noticed a small wooden box in one of the drawers. It was cute and delicately made.

“What’s inside? Can I look?” he asked.

She looked over and saw it was the box for the stone. “Go ahead.”

Desmond opened it and saw a smooth, beautifully colored stone. Someone had carved a simple circle into it with flower petals inside.

“Did you carve this?” He turned the stone over in his hands.

It was so polished and glossy that it must have been rubbed thousands of times.

She nodded while sipping her soup. “I carved it for fun back in high school. It’s ugly. Nobody wanted it, and it ended up back with me.”

She had originally meant it as a gift for Vance, but he hadn’t wanted it back then. Somehow, it had ended up with Darren.

“Ugly? No way,” Desmond protested. “Anything made with care becomes a treasure to the person who cares about you.”

He had assumed it was for Vance, but her tone said otherwise.

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow.

That might explain why Vance had turned it down back then.

Desmond closed his palm. “Can I have it?”

She pondered. “Maybe not. I can give you something else.”

“Why not? I don’t want anything else.” He refused to let go of the stone. “I like this one. I already have all the expensive stuff.”

“It’s not that...” She gently pried the stone from his hand. “Even though I carved it, it’s also someone else’s keepsake. Giving it away doesn’t feel right.”

“A keepsake?” He blinked. “Whose? Do I know them?”

She shook her head. “You don’t. It was a high school classmate. I don’t know how it ended up with him. The next time I saw he was already gone.”

“What kind of person was he?” he pressed, a tinge of jealousy in his tone. “I’m realizing I still don’t know enough about you. I barely know any of your friends.”

“His name is Darren Horton,” she replied.

Saying the name again gave her a distant, dreamlike feeling. Her heart still ached a little. They had been classmates, after all, and he had left the world so young.

Desmond understood that this guy had loved her, maybe even more than Vance did. He couldn’t stand anyone else trying to compete tot her love.

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Vance alone had given him enough headaches. He didn’t need another rival, even if that guy was already gone.

“Babe...” he whined, “I wish I had been born two years earlier. I wish I had grown up in Soliaridge, in the same neighborhood as you, so I could have filled every part of your youth.”

Shore

GET IT

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Desmond used to call her Becky or just Rebecca.

What had gotten into him today?

Even though “babe” was a common, cheesy nickname one heard everywhere online, when he said it to her, it still felt like biting into a molten chocolate lava cake. The sweet center melted and filled her heart with warmth.

“Why are you being so cute today?” Rebecca chuckled, her eyes curving.

“I’m serious!” he emphasized earnestly. “I really regret it. I shouldn’t have been such a coward in college. If I had tried harder back then, I might have had a chance.”

She fed him another spoonful of the sweet soup. “Don’t you have the perfect chance right now?”

“I just hate that we lost so much time. I missed the years that other people had. He drank the soup and only tasted bitterness.

She raised an eyebrow. “Then why don’t you talk about how the next few decades are all yours?”

His face lit up instantly. “Does that mean you’ll marry me? We’ll spend our whole lives together happily?”

“Aren’t you planning on that, too?” She rolled her eyes. “Were you just messing with me?”

“No, of course not! I just...” He put the stone back in the box and handed it to her. “I just wanted something special, like this.”

She picked up the stone and examined it carefully. “There are so many nice things in the world. Are you sure you want something this worthless?”

It was just a colored pebble. Back when she was younger and naïve, she had thought it would make a good gift. If she had been five years older, she never would have done something so childish,

Ten years had passed, and the stone had been worn smooth by time. The memory of Darren had also grown blurry, like looking through fogged-up glass. The lines of his face had softened and blurred with the years.

Since she was back, she felt she should visit Darren’s parents again. It was heartbreaking for the couple who had lost their only child.

Desmond stared at the stone between her fingers. “I just want something one-of-a-kind.”

“Okay. I’ll think of something good.” She put the stone back in the box.

“Are you sure you still want to keep this?” He pointed at the box. “People say keeping mementos from the deceased isn’t lucky.”

“There’s a saying like that?” She didn’t believe it.

“Yeah. It feels kind of creepy.” He sounded a little unsure. “Why not just throw it away? It’s only a rock.”

It was a rock that another man had treasured.

Her heart tightened. “Be honest with me. You just don’t want me to keep it, right?”

“Well...” He smiled awkwardly, unable to deny it. “Think about it. Didn’t you feel unhappy when Vance kept something from his mistress?”

She felt a twinge of discomfort. Vance represented her painful past and wounds that had once bled freely. Desmond knew that, yet he was using it as an argument right now.

“How is that the same?” She tried to explain.

The relationship between Vance and Catherine was nothing like her relationship with Darren. They had only been ordinary classmates.

But when she saw Desmond’s stubborn, pitiful expression, she stopped herself from saying more. Instead, she pushed down the uncomfortable feeling and tried to understand his perspective.

Still, throwing the stone away was out of the question.

“The stone was something Darren’s parents kept. I took it back, so I can’t just throw it away. I’ll find a proper way to handle it,” she said.

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“Or you could return it to his parents?” Desmond suggested. “It might give them something to hold onto.”

Rebecca shook her head.

Darren had left a few things behind, and his parents treasured every item. If their beloved item was taken away—even if not directly by her and then returned, how would they feel? It would be like cutting open the wound again.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll figure out a way to handle it properly.” Rebecca finished the soup, called Nancy up to take the bowl away, and felt sleepy. “By the way, have you scheduled your visa appointment? In Soliaridge or back in Arelmoor? Is all the paperwork ready?”

“Let’s do it in Soliaridge, together. The materials aren’t ready yet. I flew here because you went missing.” Desmond held her hand, sounding a little spoiled.

She patted his shoulder. “You didn’t get much rest last night either. Want to take a nap?”

“No need.” He shook his head. “I’ll head back this afternoon. I’ll get everything sorted quickly, then come back to Soliaridge so I don’t have to keep going back to Arelmoor. I can stay here with you the whole time.”

She thought about it and agreed. “Then I’ll sleep for a bit. You rest too. I’ll take you to the airport this afternoon.”

“Okay.” He stroked her hair. “Sleep. I won’t disturb you.”

Rebecca slept deeply, having planned to wake up by noon to see him off, but when she finally opened her eyes, it was already three in the afternoon.

Nancy had already started making soup again. She explained, “Mr. Schroeder told me not to wake you. He had already left for the airport.”

“Okay.” Rebecca nodded.

Without a phone, everything was inconvenient. She planned to go out and buy a new one, but she really did need to bring bodyguards now.

Danger was still lurking in the shadows.

She brought three bodyguards-enough to fill one car. Getting the new phone and new number set up was a hassle. By the time everything was done, it was already evening.

She searched online for the proper way to handle a deceased person’s belongings and chose one suggestion: take it to a church.

She then looked up nearby churches and picked one that looked ancient and had a good reputation. The next day, she took the three bodyguards and drove straight to the church.

Once there, she found the reception hall and explained her purpose to the priest in charge. After a detailed conversation, she learned the church could indeed help in many ways. The priest recommended one method: return it to nature in a blessed location.

Rebecca thought that was perfect.

Darren had always had a deep love for nature. Back in school, he had said his dream was to visit every corner of the earth.

It was a shame he never got the chance.

She remembered that outside their high school building, there had been a row of camphor trees. On summer evenings, the boys from the basketball team liked to sit under them, picking leaves and trying to whistle tunes that sounded worse than squeaky chalk on a blackboard.

After choosing one tree, they still needed to hold a small ceremony. There wasn't enough time that day, so they scheduled it for another date.

Rebecca decided to stay at a nearby guesthouse

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It really was a small world.

Rebecca never expected to run into Vance at this place.

The next morning, she packed her things, took the stone with her, and walked into the guesthouse lobby. She saw Vance and Anna getting ready to head out as well.

Three bodyguards over six feet tall stood beside her. Vance nodded to her in greeting. At least, she had listened to one piece of advice.

Rebecca pretended she hadn't seen him and walked straight out. But at the church gate, she saw him and Anna again.

"Are you here for the church, too?" Vance asked.

In a place like this, Rebecca didn't want to argue with him. Besides, for some reason, her emotions felt complicated that day. She felt calm, yet a faint melancholy lingered.

Her eyes seemed to carry a soft ache, but at the same time, she felt wrapped in a strange warmth. It was a complex feeling. Maybe it was because of all the camphor trees planted around the church. They reminded her of those sunny high school afternoons.

Sunlight would filter through the leaves outside the classroom windows, turning them into flowing bits of gold. Cicadas would sing endlessly while students inside grew drowsy.

Memories were always warm but carried a touch of bitterness, especially when the person in those memories was no longer here.

Today belonged to Darren, so she decided not to pick a fight with Vance. She only hummed in response.

They walked in one after the other. She headed to the reception hall while he went to the main hall, acting like mere acquaintances.

Vance paid his respects inside the hall, then went to request protective charms. Without much thought, he chose ones for safety and health. He no longer needed anything related to wealth at this stage of his life.

He slipped the charms into his pocket and turned to Anna. "Ready?"

She didn't answer.

He smiled. "Come on, I'll show you around the old architecture,"

There was a centuries-old camphor tree on the church grounds. As they passed it, they saw Rebecca with several priests.

His heart stirred. "I'll go see what's happening."

Anna sat down on a stone bench to wait and drink some water as he walked straight over.

"What are they doing?" he asked one of Rebecca's bodyguards.

He had arrived just in time to see Rebecca handing the stone to one of the priests. The bodyguard didn't dare speak freely and looked at Rebecca.

She didn't hide anything and told him what she planned to do. Something heavy struck Vance's heart. He looked at the stone, his voice slightly shaky. "That's good. Let it return to nature and be free like the wind."

He stood beside her and stayed for the entire ceremony. In such a solemn setting, Rebecca completely ignored his presence. She watched the small stone disappear into the earth while the sutras were chanted.

She silently prayed, "Darren, may you be as free as the wind and go wherever you want. If there is a next life..."

She didn't know what to wish for. She hadn't known Darren that well.

So, she went on, "If there is a next life, may every path you walk be smooth and every wish you have come true."

Once done, she saw that Vance had his eyes closed. He was praying for Darren as well, though she didn't know what he wished for. He had known Darren better than she had.

After the ceremony, she thanked the priests again. Vance insisted on donating, and she didn't object.

He and Darren had been close after all. He would offer his part, and she would offer hers.

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For the sake of Darren's spirit the tension between them was unusually absent that day.

Rebecca didn't bristle like a porcupine as usual, raising all her quills the moment they were together. They could talk normally.

"Why did you decide to do this?" Vance asked as they left the reception hall.

Rebecca couldn't say it had started because of Desmond, so she gave a vague answer. "I found it while organizing my things. I'll be abroad, and I don't know where the future will take me. Even though it's just a stone, it was important to some people-like Darren's parents. So, I thought I should find a proper place for it."

Vance nodded. "That's good. I hope in the next life, he..."

Rebecca heard only half the sentence and asked instinctively, "What about the next life?"

"If there is a next life..." He took a deep breath. "I really hope I can help him fulfill all his wishes."

She grew curious. "What were his wishes? Besides walking every corner of the earth?"

He smiled. "Those are guy wishes. You don't need to ask about all of them."

"There's a difference between guys and girls? That's boring," she scoffed.

They kept talking as they reached the gate. Along the way, they met up with Anna, who had been waiting on the stone bench.

"I'm heading back to Soliaridge. What about you two?" Rebecca asked.

Three bodyguards were with her, and her car couldn't take all of them.

"We drove ourselves," Vance replied. "We're going to look around a bit more. We're not heading back yet."

"Makes sense." Rebecca nodded. "Anna finally made it to the States. You should show her around."

Anna didn't speak English. When she heard her name, she smiled politely at Rebecca.

Rebecca didn't know what else to say. She just wondered if Vance had even told Anna about his marriage history.

He read her mind. "You don't have to look like that. She knows about you."

"All right." Rebecca switched to French for Anna. "I'll head back to Soliaridge now. You guys have fun."

Anna smiled sweetly and kindly as always. Rebecca silently called Vance a scumbag, hoping he would not fail this girl.

On the drive back to Soliaridge, she received a video call from Desmond. He asked why she was in the car, and she told him about her trip to the church.

Desmond's eyes glittered. "That's good. You're so kind."

In the end, she had fulfilled his wish, and he had given up a lot for her. True love was hard to come by, and she cherished it.

"When are you coming to Soliaridge?" she asked.

Her visa appointment was coming up soon. It would be best if their times overlapped. Once she had the visa, she needed to think about returning to France. The Edinburgh Festival was in August, and they would need a few days to rehearse.

"In a couple of days. I already scheduled it around the same time as yours. I finally came back, and my dad has been dragging me to meet people. The elders at home miss me, so let me stay a couple more days, though my heart is already flying to you."

"Spend more time with your family. No rush."

They talked for about half an hour. Desmond could jump from topic to topic endlessly. If she were not in the car, they could have talked for an hour.

In the end, he reluctantly hung up. His affection and attachment couldn't be hidden.

It was a different story with Vance, whom she had known for 12 years. Vance had never stayed on a phone call with her for more than two minutes.

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This trip back home was short

Rebecca was scheduled to leave at the beginning of August. It felt like the excitement of returning had barely started, yet she was already thinking about when she would leave again.

She arranged to meet up with Jenny and visit the Hortons. To her surprise, when she stood in front of the Hortons' house this time, the atmosphere was completely different from her previous visit

It wasn't that the couple had fully moved on, but the house finally had life in it again. The yard was full of green. The flowers and vegetables were blooming with vitality.

The door opened, and a dog came running out, circling happily around their feet.

"Doodle, stop that." Jocelyn picked up the dog and flashed a kind smile. "Did he scare you? This little guy is too energetic."

"Not at all." Rebecca shook her head. "He's so cute. His name is Doodle? Doodle, look here. Give me your paw."

It was a small breed, perfect for elderly people. It was easy to pick up and not too strong to walk on a leash.

"He's pretty smart," Jocelyn said. "Vance bought him for us so we'd have some company."

It was Vance again. Why was he everywhere?

But this was one thing he had done right. The dog had probably brought some liveliness to the couple's later years.

The couple invited the two women to sit down, poured tea, and cut fruit. They bustled around happily.

"You don't have to trouble yourselves. Come sit and rest," Rebecca and Jenny said at the same time.

Jocelyn smiled. "We're resting all day long. It feels better to be busy."

Andrew teased her, “You call this busy? You’ve been disappearing on me lately.”

“It’s not really being busy,” Jocelyn explained to Rebecca. “Before Vance went to France, he signed both my husband and me up for senior classes. He even came with us every time. But once he’s gone, Andrew keeps skipping. I’m the one still going.”

Rebecca was amused. Parents skipped school, too?

“He was never a good student even when he was young,” Jocelyn added playfully.

“If I didn’t cook and do all the housework every day, how would you have time to sing and dance?” Andrew countered.

Rebecca couldn’t help laughing, but then her heart ached.

The couple’s life had changed dramatically. They could laugh and bicker now. The house had gone from deathly silence to lively and warm. It was wonderful to see, yet it also felt like they were seeking joy from pain.

There was no other way. Life had to go on.

Rebecca looked around the house. The empty, desolate feeling was gone. Fresh flowers sat on the table, and one wall had been turned into a photo display filled with pictures of Darren – from when he was a baby and a little boy all the way to adulthood.

She looked at each photo. The blurry image she had carried in her mind, the one that had seemed hidden behind fogged glass, gradually became clear again.

Along with it came all the memories of their youth-the laughter, the crazy fun, and the days of growing up.

And yet, he was gone.

Jocelyn invited them to stay for dinner, but they couldn’t bear to let the two elders work in the kitchen alone, so they went in to help

They weren’t great at cooking, but they could at least assist.

They had just started when Vance’s voice came from outside the door. “Mr. and Mrs. Horton, did you make enough dinner?”

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Chapter 511

“Oh, Vance is back!” Jocelyn cheered. “Didn’t you say you weren’t coming back today?”

Rebecca caught the keyword: “Back.”

It sounded as though Vance belonged here.

“Good thing we made enough food!” Andrew said, having planned a big meal since Rebecca and Jenny had come over as guests.

Rebecca rolled her eyes. Why did this guy show up everywhere?

Jocelyn went out to greet him, her happy voice carrying into the living room. “You’re back at just the right time! Your old classmates are here. Let’s eat together.”

“Classmates? Which ones?”

“Two girls.”

Their voices reached the doorway. “Rebecca? Jenny? It’s you two?”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Don’t even say ‘nice to see you.’ It’s not.”

Vance smiled and told Jocelyn, “We used to bicker all the time in school. We still do it out of habit whenever we meet.”

Jocelyn laughed. “Oh, I know. Andrew and I are the same way. We can’t go a single day without teasing each other.”

Rebecca was surprised by how close the couple was to Vance, while Jenny held back from snapping at Vance again, out of respect for the elders.

They were here to visit the couple, not to cause trouble.

“You guys go sit in the living room,” Vance said. “I’ll help in the kitchen.”

“Yeah, go on,” Jocelyn agreed. “The kitchen’s too small for all of us. You girls head out and keep Anna company.”

Jenny immediately grabbed Rebecca's arm. "Perfect. We won't be in the way. Just holler if you need help."

"Go on, have fun," Jocelyn urged.

In the living room, Anna sat primly on the sofa, scrolling on her phone.

Jenny led Rebecca to sit down beside her, flashing a bright smile. "Hi! You are Vance's girlfriend, right?"

Anna looked a little lost but smiled politely. Jenny switched to French and repeated herself.

Anna nodded with a sweet smile. Jenny tried chatting with her, but Anna's answers stayed short and safe-nothing too revealing.

After a few exchanges, Jenny lost interest. She leaned toward Rebecca and whispered, "Man, how does Vance get so lucky? He always ends up with these sweet, innocent girls. First you, and now Anna. I feel bad about this. It's like a wolf bullying a rabbit. What am I supposed to do?"

Amused, Rebecca whispered back, "Come on. I know you're trying to stand up for me, but Anna didn't do anything wrong. The scumbag here is Vance."

Anna suddenly asked in English, "What's the wolf and rabbit story?"

Rebecca and Jenny both froze. Anna turned her phone screen toward them. It was a real-time translation.

"I was afraid I wouldn't understand you, so I used the app," she explained awkwardly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

Vance came out carrying a plate of appetizers. Seeing the three of them chatting away, he asked casually, "What are you girls talking about? Looks like you're hitting it off."

Jenny shot him a glare. "Oh, I was just telling Anna that the girlfriend you brought back last time wasn't her."

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Chapter 512

Vance glanced at Anna and chuckled, She smiled instead of getting mad.

Jenny was baffled, not expecting them to react that way. She glanced at Rebecca, as if saying, “Do you understand these people?”

Rebecca gave a helpless shrug, having no idea either.

Over dinner, Rebecca learned quite a bit. Whenever Vance returned to the States, he came here for meals and brought Anna with him. He stayed somewhere else, but all his eating and drinking happened at the Hortons’.

The couple treated him with genuine warmth, as if he were part of the family. Watching how comfortably he interacted with them, Rebecca had the strange thought that this man was good at almost everything, except being a husband.

He was a good boss, a good friend, and a good junior, but not a good husband. At least, not a good husband to her. Maybe he was different with Anna.

The main reason she had come today was to check on Darren’s parents. Seeing them doing well put her mind at ease.

When it was time to leave, Vance offered to ride them off, but Rebecca declined.

She used to dislike having bodyguards follow her everywhere, feeling it took away her freedom. But after the kidnapping and with Catherine still missing, she now brought them whenever she went out.

It would have been inappropriate to bring them inside the house, so she had given them money to eat nearby. Now they were already waiting in the car.

As Vance walked over to talk to her, she couldn’t help sighing. “Sometimes, I think you’re actually a decent person. Other times, I think you’re lower than an animal. Then you do something halfway human again. You’re kind of a miracle.”

She grabbed Jenny’s arm and walked out. The bodyguards Gabriel had assigned were already there to open the car door for them.

Vance watched her leave with a bitter smile.

“Lower than an animal?” Anna repeated the phrase with her slight accent. “What does that mean?”

Vance winced. “It’s not a nice thing to say. Don’t learn it.”

She insisted, “But what if someone calls me that? I won’t even know.”

Vance glanced at the car pulling away. “How could anyone call you that? You’re too sweet for anyone to insult.”

Anna’s eyes dimmed, and she let out a quiet sigh.

“Come on,” Vance said. “What else do you want to eat tonight? You finally made it to the States. We’re going to make sure you have the full experience.”

But Anna was already typing and searching on her phone. She looked up and said, “You must have done something really bad to her, right?”

His smile froze.

“Scumbag. Lower than an animal...” Anna recited the new phrases she had just learned.

He looked at her helplessly.

Rebecca hadn’t even made it home when Desmond’s video call came in. He told her his flight was landing in Soliaridge the next day.

Then he noticed Jenny sitting beside her and asked where she had been. Not hiding anything, she told him she had gone to visit

Darren’s parents.

Desmond made a little huffing sound, his eyes turning soft and watery. “The second I take my eyes off you, you’re running around everywhere. Not Dehaving

Jenny nudged Rebecca and mouthed, “Love is definitely in the air!”

Rebecca smiled, but she didn’t think it smelled like love. Lately, she had started to feel suffocated. She could already guess what he would say next. 1

Sure enough, Desmond continued in that familiar jealous tone, “The guy’s gone, but you’re still thinking about his parents.”

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Chapter 513

Rebecca suddenly felt drained She didn’t want to answer, but with Jenny there, she kept her smile.

“You’re still smiling?” Desmond protested. “Who else from your class was there?”

Rebecca hesitated about mentioning Vance, knowing that if she did, he would get upset. Besides, it wasn’t planned but was a sheer coincidence.

But lying didn’t feel right. He minded so many things. Did she have to lie about everything for the rest of her life?

That pause was all it took. His expression shifted. “Don’t tell me Vance Bradford was there, too.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “But we didn’t go together. He visited on his own.”

“Really?” The jealousy in his voice grew thicker. “You two surely have great timing.”

She sighed inwardly and tried to stay patient. “He and Darren were close. Now he treats Darren’s parents like his own. Whenever he’s back in the States, he basically stays with them.”

“Oh.” Desmond’s tone got even more acidic. “He’s such a good guy in your eyes? Taking care of the elderly like that.”

She went quiet, though she kept the smile on her face.

He finally realized he had gone too far and quickly changed the subject. “Well, my flight starts tomorrow around noon. Can you pick me up? Then we can go grab some paella.”

She pulled herself together and took the out he had offered. “Sure. I’ll book the table right now.”

He grinned. “Then I won’t keep you. Have fun with Jenny. See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.” Rebecca ended the call.

Jenny looked at her, eager to say something.

“Just say it,” Rebecca told her.

Emotions were contagious. Even the smallest shift could be felt by those closest to her.

“Well...” Jenny began, “I don’t know him well enough to give advice, but you know what he’s really like. Honestly...”

“What? You think we’re not a good match?” Rebecca felt uneasy.

“Not really,” Jenny said carefully. “I just hope you end up with someone who really fits your soul. Maybet’s Desmond, maybe not. You have to decide. The main thing is that you are happy. If not, well, you know what I mean.”

Rebecca nodded. “I know. I just think any relationship needs work. If it’s not a deal-breaker, we should try to fix it together.”

“Exactly. You know what you’re doing. I just don’t want you to be unhappy. Life is too short. We’re almost halfway through our lives. Don’t waste your best years being miserable, no matter who you’re with.” Jenny pulled her into a hug.

“Okay,” Rebecca murmured.

“By the way,” Jenny added, “they’re planning another classmate reunion. Jethro Hart is organizing it. He said last time got ruined because of Obadiah, so he wants to do it again while he’s back for a couple of months. He asked me to invite you. Vance said he wouldn’t come, but we both know how that usually goes. Somehow, he always shows up when you’re around.”

Rebecca thought about Desmond’s reaction and decided against it. She wasn’t going, whether Vance showed up or not.

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Chapter 514

When Desmotid arrived the next day, he brought an enormous bouquet all the way from Arelmoor.

Did Soliaridge not have flowers?

“I want every day you see me to start with flowers,” he explained. “So, the very first thing you feel is happiness.”

That little knot in Rebecca’s chest loosened. As long as they loved each other, those little frictions could be worked through.

For the rest of their time in Soliaridge, they were practically inseparable. After their visas were approved, they took a short trip around the area.

At the beginning of August, they left Soliaridge and flew back to France.

Those peaceful, sweet days made Rebecca believe that the tiny issues between her and Desmond were fixable. They could compromise and change for each other.

Back in France, they threw themselves into rehearsals for the upcoming Edinburgh Festival.

During her time in Soliaridge, Rebecca had kept up her therapy, except for the day she went to the church. Once they returned, she continued her daily sessions at the clinic.

The doctor told her that her progress this month had been remarkable. The injured leg was getting noticeably stronger and was almost even with the other one.

Rebecca was thrilled. “Does that mean there’s a real chance I could get back on stage?”

She meant being able to perform difficult moves again, not just the easier ones she could manage now.

“In theory, yes,” the doctor said. “In reality, it’s going to be extremely hard and painful.”

“That’s fine!” she said firmly.

If there was even a sliver of hope, she would fight for it.

From then on, she spent even more time in the studio than before. She rehearsed with the troupe first, then stayed after everyone else left and kept working—two hours, three hours, sometimes losing track of time until late at night.

All that extra physical work meant she needed serious fuel. Desmond prepared high-nutrition meals that gave her exactly what she burned without adding fat, and they tasted amazing.

Going home every night after rehearsal made the best part of her day. What could be better than sharing three meals and four seasons with the person she loved?

As she started staying later and later, Desmond adjusted too. At first, he waited the whole time, but eventually, he would slip out to cook dinner, then come back to pick her up.

She was never worried about safety, with the bodyguards around her. After learning about the kidnapping, Gabriel wasn’t taking any chances, especially since they were abroad, where things could be even more dangerous.

The walk from home to the studio was short, so sometimes they strolled back together. When she was too exhausted, Desmond would carry her home on his back. During those nights, all she saw when she looked up were stars.

They were beautiful and brought her hope.

One evening, around the usual time, she finished rehearsing, and Desmond texted that he was almost there. She locked the studio and walked to the front gate to meet him.

That was when she ran into Vance, who had also returned.

She had heard the nurses at the clinic talking about it earlier-the owner of the cookie shop was back, and the place was open agatu

But customers had to go get their orders themselves. The nurses had grumbled that he no longer delivered, but they still loved the pastries.

Rebecca tensed up immediately. The first thing she did was scan the area to make sure Desmond hadn't arrived yet. Thankfully, she didn't see him.

"What are you doing here? Can you just stop coming to find me?" she snapped, not holding back at all.

Just seeing him these days made her temper flare.

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Chapter 515

Vance stayed calm and gentle. "I wouldn't come if it weren't important."

He held out a dust-proof garment bag. "Your bag. The police found it. Everything is still there, including your phone. I don't know if anything's missing. Check it yourself."

She took it and quickly looked through. Everything seemed to be there.

"I don't have your number, and the shop was busy during the day. That's why I came at night," he explained, his voice carrying a note of helplessness. "Besides, he's with you all the time. He wouldn't be happy if I showed up then."

She frowned. "You have Gabriel's number. Why come to me?"

He gestured with palms up. "I only have his U.S. number, and he's not in the States right now."

"Then why didn't you just drop it off at the clinic? I'm there every day," she countered.

He smiled bitterly. "What would I say if I dropped it off there? Whose bag is this? Why do I have your purse, your phone, and your wallet? Should I tell them you're my ex-wife?"

"That's enough," she cut him off.

"The police recovered it. When they tried calling you, your phone was off. They reached me instead, and I brought it to you."

"The police trusted you with it?"

"Yeah. I told them you're my ex-wife and showed them the divorce papers.

"You're lying. Why would the police hand someone's stuff to an ex-husband?"

He hadn't actually said that, but it didn't matter. The bag was back.

"If there's nothing else, I'll head out." He glanced around. "Gabriel probably still has people watching you, right?"

"Yeah. They're here." She knew the bodyguards stayed out of sight so they wouldn't disturb her, but they were always close.

"Good. Be careful these days. Catherine..." He paused, getting mixed feelings. "We've confirmed she's in Europe. You should tell Gabriel."

The mention of that name made Rebecca explode. "This is all your fault!"

"Yes," he said quietly. "I feel guilty about it."

"Save it! You can feel guilty for the rest of your life! How many sins does a person have to commit before they spend every day feeling guilty?" she snapped, hating that word.

Five years ago, he had married her out of guilt. During their entire marriage, the only thing he ever felt toward her was guilt, so he threw money at her to make up for it.

Then he hurt her all over again. And now, here came the guilt again. It was an endless cycle.

"Okay. I'm leaving. Stay safe." He walked away and disappeared into the night.

From the darkness behind her, a voice suddenly spoke. "He's gone. You're still staring?"

She turned to see Desmond walking toward her with a sullen expression.

"I wasn't staring at him," she tried to explain.

“Whether you were or not, why do you two keep running into each other?” He snatched the bag from her hands.” What did he bring you this time?”

She didn’t resist. He pulled out her purse, then started taking everything out.

“Why is he delivering your bag?” He held up her phone. “And why does he have your phone? You’ve been divorced for so long. Haven’t you cut all ties yet?” 1

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Chapter 516

That was the exact awkward conversation Rebecca didn’t want to have.

A wave of exhaustion washed over her. Even her voice sounded tired. “Did I tell you about the kidnapping? Did tell you I lost my bag and my phone?”

Desmond paused. “Even so, he didn’t have to bring it to you in person. A proper ex should disappear like they’re dead.”

Rebecca didn’t feel like explaining anymore. “What do you want me to do? I didn’t ask him to come.’

“You always say that. You didn’t ask him. You didn’t plan it... So, does that mean you two just have some special connection?” he blurted out.

Rebecca felt an old wound rip open again, fresh and bleeding. She had gone through so much pain to leave Vance behind. And now, Desmond was using that pain against her.

How could he say that?

She had thought he understood, having shown him every scar without holding back. She never expected those same scars would become weapons he used against her.

She offered no more explanations. She simply turned and started walking home.

Desmond panicked at her reaction. He ran after her and wrapped his arms around her from behind. “I’m sorry, babe. I’m so sorry.”

For the first time, she pushed against his hug.

He held on tighter, refusing to let go. “No, don’t do this to me. It breaks my heart. Don’t ignore me.”

She couldn’t break free, feeling suffocated in his embrace. “I told you from the beginning that I was married to Vance for five years. That fact isn’t going to change. If that bothers you this much, please think it over. I can handle whatever you decide.”

That was basically a breakup.

His embrace tightened further. “No, I don’t want that. I’m not bothered, really. I... just love you too much. I can’t stand you being close to anyone else.”

“I wasn’t close to him.”

“I know. He came to you, not the other way around. I’m sorry. I just lost it for a second. I swear, from now on, I’ll never act like this again.” He turned her around and pulled her against his chest. “I’m sorry. I just... love you so much.”

She closed her eyes in exhaustion, saying nothing.

“I made your favorite. Let’s go home and eat, okay?” He crouched down. “I’ll carry you, like when we were kids and dads gave shoulder rides.”

“No need.” She started walking ahead.

“I can handle it. I lift you in dance all the time. Come on!” He grabbed her hand again.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Babe...” He gave her those puppy-dog eyes again.

“Let’s just go home,” she said curtly, thinking of all the meals he cooked for her and all the times he had stayed by her side during recovery.

In this relationship, he really had given a lot. But something inside her had already been planted-a small seed of doubt.

Gabriel had once told her, “We don’t need you to get married again. Just stay happy.”

Jenny had told her, “Sweetheart, I don’t want you unhappy. Life is too short. Don’t waste your best years being miserable.”

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Chapter 517

Rebecca used to believe that as long as they loved each other, they could compromise, understand, and work through any non-deal-breaker problems. Now she wasn't so sure.

When they got home, she ate quickly, showered, and went straight to bed. She needed time to think and calm down. At least for that night, she wasn't ready to figure it all out.

The next morning, Desmond showed up with breakfast.

"I already ate," Rebecca told him.

She had made herself a simple bowl of milk and cereal with a small piece of toast.

"Are you still mad at me?" Desmond came over and hugged her. "Don't let problems fester overnight. Let's solve them right away."

She forced herself to stay calm. "Okay. Let's fix it. The way I see it, the only person you can really demand things from is yourself. I've never mistreated you. Every day with you, I've been completely devoted. But life is long, and the world is big. I can't only know you. I can't avoid interactions with other men, including Vance. They exist in this world, and if they suddenly appear one day, that's beyond my control."

"I understand. I was way out of line yesterday. I'm sorry." He shook her arm gently.

"I hope you really mean that," she said. "Trust is the foundation that lets two people stay together."

"I get it, babe. I'm sorry." He hugged her again. "So, can we go to the studio and rehearse now?"

She nodded. "Let's go."

In the troupe, Rebecca was mainly the choreographer, but she worked just as hard as everyone else. She demonstrated every movement herself, including the male lead parts.

On top of that, she still did her own training. Most days, she was so exhausted she could barely lift her feet.

Luckily, the dancers were all talented and motivated. They wanted to shine at the international festival, so they pushed themselves hard.

Rebecca watched every rehearsal closely. But today, at one point, Desmond suddenly disappeared.

She assumed he had gone to the bathroom and didn't think much of it. When they were about to run the whole piece from start to finish, he still wasn't back.

The understudy stepped in. "Desmond said he was going out to buy something."

Rebecca didn't wait. "Okay, you take his place for now."

She figured Desmond had probably run to the supermarket for groceries. Instead, he had gone to the cookie shop.

Vance was in the back, decorating a cake while Anna worked the front counter. He was halfway through piping the frosting when Anna walked in. "Someone is looking for you."

Her expression screamed trouble. Vance thought maybe a customer had a problem with an order, so he quickly wiped his hands and went out front, only to find Desmond standing there.

"Hi, is there something I can help you with?" Vance stayed polite.

After all, Desmond was Rebecca's current boyfriend. He wanted Desmond to treat her well.

Desmond looked around the shop, his eyes full of disdain. "How much for this place?"

"What?"

"Close the shop. I'll buy it."

Vance understood immediately.

Desmond loved dancing with all his heart, making people forget that he was the heir to a wealthy family.

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Chapter 518

"Does my shop bother you somehow?" Vance asked, still in his apron, chef hat, and mask.

"Yes," Desmond said brusquely. "Why did you open a shop right next to Rebecca's studio? Why a cookie shop? Because I make cakes for her all the time, and you want to compete with me?"

“That’s not it.” Vance gave a bitter smile. “This was my father’s storefront.”

“I’ll buy it,” Desmond said domineeringly. “I don’t care whose shop it was. I’m buying it!”

The words sounded familiar.

Back when Catherine had been rejected by some shops, she had shouted, “I can buy this dump if I want!”

Of course, Vance had been the one who would foot the bills. He hadn’t done that, but the boomerang still came back around.

He took off his chef’s gear. “Did Rebecca send you?”

“Yes!”

“No, she didn’t.”

Desmond’s lie was seen through, and his embarrassment turned into anger,

“She did! Do you have any idea how much trouble you’re causing her here? You’re her pain! Every time she sees you, the memories come back. If you have even a shred of conscience, can you think about her for once? Stay away from her! Be a proper ex!”

Vance let out a long sigh.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Just name your price. I’ll buy the place, and you move out!” Desmond shouted.

Vance turned to Anna. “Put up a sign. Everything in the shop is free today, A thank-you to all our customers for their support these past weeks.”

“What are you doing?” Desmond’s eyes narrowed.

“I’m closing the shop,” Vance said.

Desmond froze, not expecting it to be that easy.

“But...”

“I knew there’d be a ‘but.’ What tricks are you pulling now?”

“I’m closing the shop and not selling it to you. I’ll just leave it closed.”

Desmond thought about it, not caring about what happened to the shop. Vance staying out of sight was what mattered.

“Still...”

“Vance advised like a senior. “She doesn’t need you to do this for her.”

“What are you trying to say?” Desmond frowned.

“Loving someone is like tending a flower. You give it sunlight, rain, and room to breathe. If you smother the seed, it won’t grow.”

“You think you’re qualified to lecture me on how to love someone? After what you did to her? You don’t know the first thing about love.”

“Just because I hurt her, I finally learned.”

“What do you know? We’re both men. Don’t think I don’t see it. You’ve finally realized how great she is, right? You’ve finally figured out she’s the one worth loving? Let me tell you. You don’t get to think about that anymore!”

“I’m only reminding you. When she loves someone, she gives her whole heart. She’s not the type to play games. I may not have been a good husband, but I probably know her better than you do. You don’t need to act like this. She’s wonderful. Even without me, there will always be people who appreciate her. You can’t...”

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Chapter 519

A loud series of crashes cut off Vance’s words.

Desmond had spun into a roundhouse kick and swept every decorative item off the shelves onto the floor.

“I don’t need your advice! You’d better disappear by tomorrow!” he spat, storming out.

The floor was a mess.

Anna walked over and asked softly, “Are we really closing the shop?”

“Yeah.” Vance crouched down to clean up the broken pieces. “We’re done.”

Anna looked upset, but she helped him anyway. “But...”

In the end, she didn't finish the sentence.

That same day, the cookie shop put up the free-everything sign. Neighbors spread the word, and the shelves emptied in no time.

Some people asked where they were moving. Vance smiled and answered, "We might not reopen. Thank you for everything."

When Desmond got back to the rehearsal studio, the troupe was in the middle of a run-through. The understudy was covering his part.

"Babe, I'm back." Desmond flashed his usual sunny smile, gave Rebecca a quick hug, and called a stop to the rehearsal.

He turned to the understudy and said, "I've got it now."

Practice continued.

Rebecca walked over to the understudy and handed him a bottle of water. "You danced really well today."

The young dancer smiled shyly. "Thanks, Coach."

"Just call me Rebecca. I'm just a few years older and happen to organize people who love dancing." Rebecca smiled.

The undergraduate blushed a little. "But you really are amazing. Everyone admires you."

He didn't just mean her choreography. They had all watched her fight her injured leg every day, how much pain she endured, and how much sweat she poured out just to stand on stage again.

"You can all do better," she encouraged him, pointing at Desmond. "See him? He used to be the understudy, too. Keep working."

The young dancer looked inspired, knowing that she had perceived his thoughts. It wasn't that he minded being the understudy. It was the way Desmond treated everyone-distant and a little domineering.

"Keep going," Rebecca encouraged him again.

He nodded and went back to practicing on his own.

At noon, the dancers went to lunch. Rebecca and Desmond ate at a nearby café. She still had a rehabilitation session that afternoon.

“What were you talking to that understudy about today? Are you two close?” Desmond asked.

A tight string pulled inside Rebecca’s chest. “He’s part of the troupe. Of course, I know him. How else are we supposed to communicate, work together, or make the piece good?”

“He’s just the understudy. What’s there to work on?” Desmond pouted.

She felt a stab of discomfort. “Weren’t you one before?”

He paused. “Exactly because I used to be an understudy, I know what he’s thinking. Didn’t you see the way he looked at you? His eyes were shining, just like mine used to when I watched you.”

“So?” She started to think he was being ridiculous. “You think every man who talks to me is...”

She couldn’t even finish the sentence. It was too humiliating.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” He took her hand. “I just think you’re too nice to him. What if he falls for you the way I did?”

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Chapter 520

Desmond’s hand around hers felt like a shackle.

Rebecca felt sick. “Is this really fun for you? What kind of person do you think I am?”

Desmond panicked, shaking her arm gently. “I just... love you too much. I’m scared.”

Rebecca remembered what he had said that morning: “Don’t let problems fester overnight. Solve them right away.”

So, she forced herself to stay calm. “Desmond, this can’t continue. My life can’t revolve only around you. I need friends, a career, and coworkers. Men are going to exist in my world. If every time I talk to one, you assume something inappropriate is happening. It’s not going to work.”

His eyes dimmed. “I know. It’s my fault. Forgive me this once. I won’t do it again.”

She stared at him. “You’ve already said that more than once.”

“I swear.” He lowered his eyes. “This time I really mean it.”

“Let’s eat.” She didn’t want to drag the argument out any longer.

“Okay.” He squeezed her hand. “Babe, I really do love you.”

She managed a small smile. “I know.”

Starting a relationship was never easy. Hopefully, this was the last time, and there was still a way to fix it.

That afternoon, she went to the clinic for rehabilitation. Each session lasted two to three hours, and Desmond always stayed in the treatment room with her.

When they finished and stepped out, it was the time when the day-shift nurses were handing over to the night shift. Rebecca noticed every nurse coming on duty was carrying a bag of bread from Vance’s cookie shop.

She pretended not to notice. Otherwise, Desmond would make another scene.

But the night-shift nurses started talking excitedly to everyone in the hall.

“Hey, everyone, hurry to the cookie shop! They’re giving everything away for free today.”

“Yeah! We got there late, and only bread was left. All the pretty cakes were already gone.”

The day-shift nurses immediately asked, “Why free? Can we still make it if we go now?”

“There’s still a little left. Everyone’s been restrained about it. Nobody’s taking too much. They’re saving some for neighbors who haven’t heard yet.”

“Why are they doing this? Is it some promotion? How many days? If it’s tomorrow too, I’ll go early.”

“It’s not a promotion. They said they’re closing. Today is the last day, so everything is free.”

“What? Closing? Why?”

The day-shift nurses were shocked and started guessing.

Some said it was a shame because the cookie shop had the best bread and cakes in the neighborhood-the kind that tasted like home. Others wondered if business was bad. A few asked if they were moving locations.

Just then, the last night-shift nurse walked in carrying the biggest bag of bread. She muttered as she entered, “I was the last one and took everything that was left. The owner closed up and left.”

The day-shift nurses looked disappointed that they hadn’t had time to go.

“I’ll share some with you,” the night-shift nurse offered. “The shop really is closing. I heard from the old lady next door that someone went in this morning, caused a huge scene, told the owner he couldn’t stay open, and smashed a bunch of stuff.”

Desmond’s expression shifted at those words. He quickly urged Rebecca, “Babe, let’s go. We still have one more run-through to do.”

“Okay.” Rebecca acted like she hadn’t heard a thing.

She gathered her things, said goodbye to the doctor, and set up tomorrow’s appointment before they left.

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

Chapter 521

Flustered, Desmond grabbed her arm and tugged her forward. “Come on, let’s go. We come here every day. No need to say hi.”

Rebecca frowned at his strange reaction. “How can we just leave like that? That would be so rude.”

Desmond came from a prominent family. This kind of behavior didn’t match his usual polished upbringing. He had always been one of the politest people she knew.

Meanwhile, the nurses were still buzzing in the hallway. “Oh my God, who on earth did that? Didn’t the shop owner call the police?”

“No,” the night-shift nurse continued. “Their neighbor said it was some young guy who looked kind of familia She’d probably seen him around the street before. The kid went crazy, smashed up the shop, and then just walked out. The next thing anyone knew, there was a big ‘free giveaway’ sign hanging out front.”

Rebecca figured out something. She turned to look at Desmond, silently hoping her guess was wrong. He strode out without another word, and her heart sank.

He hadn't gone far; he was waiting for her just outside. Without a word, she walked back toward the rehearsal hall, and he trailed quietly behind her.

Once they reached the hall, Rebecca immediately started organizing the rehearsal. The Edinburgh International Festival was approaching fast, and their flights were already booked.

At this point, the only thing that mattered was rehearsal and delivering a flawless performance. When it finally ended, Rebecca stayed behind in the hall as usual and threw herself into extra practice.

She danced with raw intensity, as if venting all her frustration, pushing herself until she had exhausted every ounce of energy. She collapsed onto the floor, too drained to move.

It took her a while to catch her breath. When she finally gathered enough strength to head home, she realized Desmond hadn't waited for her this time.

There was no offer of a ride, no message, nothing at all. By the time she reached the school gate, there was still no sign of him.

Honestly, he was the one who had insisted they shouldn't let problems fester overnight and should solve them immediately. Yet here he was, doing exactly what he preached against.

Did she have to be the one to smooth things over again? She had just pushed her body to its absolute limit. Now she was both mentally and physically exhausted.

She felt too drained to keep coaxing him repeatedly with no end in sight.

Standing at the gate, she scanned the area for the bodyguards, Gabriel had arranged for her. A car soon pulled up and stopped right in front of her.

It was Aaron, her regular bodyguard, with another man in the passenger seat. They usually kept a low profile so they wouldn't disrupt her daily life, but the moment she needed them, they were always there.

"Were you looking for us, Ms. Perry?" Aaron asked, sensing something was off.

She nodded. "Yeah. Let's go home."

The passenger-side bodyguard quickly got out and opened the back door for her. She climbed in, leaned against the seat, and fell asleep almost instantly.

The drive home was short. When the car stopped, she was still sound asleep. The two bodyguards exchanged glances, unsure whether they should wake her.

“Ms. Perry, we’re home,” Aaron said softly, turning around.

Rebecca stirred groggily and opened her eyes. The sight of Aaron brought her back to reality, and she remembered Desmond had been upset and hadn’t come to pick her up.

“Thanks, guys.” She opened the car door to get out.

“With pleasure,” Aaron replied quickly, stepping out and holding the door open for her.

She had overdone it with extra practice; now her legs were sore. The moment her feet touched the ground, she nearly stumbled. Aaron caught her arm with lightning reflexes.

Behind the curtains of the house right next door, someone watched the entire scene unfold.

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

Chapter 522

“Ms. Perry, are you okay? Let me help you,” Aaron offered.

Gabriel’s bodyguards were all highly trained. They wore long shirts and gloves, so even when supporting her arm, they never touched her skin directly.

Rebecca didn’t want to trouble anyone and waved him off. “I’m fine.”

But after just a couple more steps, her legs-still numb from exhaustion and from being curled up in the car- gave out again.

Aaron quickly steadied her and murmured something to the other bodyguard. Rebecca didn’t catch his words.

By the time they reached her front door, the numbness had finally faded. She told them Aaron was all right now. That was when the second bodyguard came back, holding a massage gun in his hand.

Aaron took it from his partner and handed it to Rebecca. “We use these after every training session to loosen up the muscles. It’s been fully disinfected, so you can use it without worries.”

He paused, then added, “Do you know how to use it?”

She accepted it without hesitation. “I do. Thank you.”

“Call us if you need anything,” he said.

She nodded, unlocked the door, and stepped inside.

Once home, she used the massage gun on herself for a while until the soreness eased. Only then did she remember that there was no dinner waiting. Desmond was still sulking and hadn’t cooked anything.

She threw together a simple pasta with whatever she had in the fridge—eggs, tomatoes, and bacon. It turned out quite tasty.

Utterly exhausted, she went to bed early and quickly fell asleep. The next morning, she woke up late and realized it was almost time for rehearsal.

She quickly grabbed a slice of bread on her way out and took hurried bites as she rushed outside.

Desmond was standing at her yard gate. She let out a small breath of relief and started to speak, but he stared at the bread in her hand and spoke with heavy sarcasm. “Whoa! Isn’t that Vance’s bread? Oh, wait, ex-Vance brand.”

The mockery got under her skin. She shoved the bread toward him, “Look for yourself! What bread is it?”

It was the bread Desmond had baked. He knew that, but he couldn’t stop himself from spitting venom. “Too bad, huh? His shop is closed now. Guess you won’t be eating any more of it.”

“Desmond!” she snapped, feeling suffocated. “This is really getting old. How many times have you sworn this was the absolute last fight about this? Every single time is the last time, right? And have I eaten anything from his shop? You know perfectly well I haven’t. Even when the clinic staff bought one of his cakes for Dr. Davidson’s birthday, I didn’t have a single bite!”

“Must’ve been hard on you,” he muttered. “Go ahead and eat it if you want.”

Her chest tightened. Her hand flew up, ready to slap him, but she stopped herself at the last second.

“You want to hit me? For your ex-husband? Then why don’t you just go back to him?” he scoffed.

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Her vision blurred with rage. She nearly lost her balance.

Was this really something Desmond would say? Was this the man she knew? How could the same person be so different when he was just a friend versus her boyfriend?

“We’re going to rehearsal,” she said, fighting back her anger. “I’ve already said everything I need to say. Right now, the only thing that matters is rehearsal and the festival. We’ll talk about everything else after the show.”

“What exactly did you say?” Desmond exploded, shouting at her. “Yeah, I shut down his shop, so what? You said that you couldn’t control him showing up around you, so I made sure he disappeared and stayed far away. What’s wrong with that? And now, you’re mad at me for it?”

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

Chapter 523

Rebecca spun around to face him. “I’m not mad about the shop. I just think everyone deserves their own space. We should focus on living our own lives and let other people live theirs. Vance has had nothing to do with me since the day I divorced him. I don’t know how many times I’ve had to say that.”

“He shouldn’t be around you!” Desmond snapped. “He shouldn’t be buzzing around you like some damn fly! And you’re fighting with me over him? Whose girlfriend are you supposed to be?”

“Did I start a fight? Yesterday, you walked out without a word and shut me out.” Rebecca tried hard to keep her voice steady. “I was just shocked. I couldn’t believe you would do something like that. It was an invasion of someone else’s space.”

“I invaded his space, so what? You said he means nothing to you anymore. So, why are you mad now?” Desmond fumed.

Rebecca didn’t know what to say. It was only morning, and she already felt drained.

“Desmond,” she said, making one last attempt, “everyone needs their own space. It doesn’t matter whether we’re talking about Vance, you, or me. Any relationship without breathing room will eventually suffocate the people in it.”

“I don’t get it,” he said. “You can talk to me about space all you want, but what does Vance’s space have to do with you?”

She reasoned, “I never said it does. Can we please focus on the actual issue instead of making everything personal?”

He countered, “But you are making it personal! You got mad the second his shop closed!”

“Forget it. Let’s just go to rehearsal.” She gave up and started to walk away.

Halfway across the yard, she realized he wasn’t following her.

“You don’t need me to drive you anymore,” he said, his voice dripping with bitterness. “You seemed pretty comfortable with the bodyguard last night. No space issues there, right?”

Her temper finally flared. “What about the bodyguard and me?”

“They ride you home, catch you when you almost fall, and give you a massage. Pretty nice, isn’t it?” he scoffed, full of grievance.

He hadn’t slept all night thinking about it, and she was just fine.

“I...” She suddenly saw no point in explaining herself. “Think whatever you want.”

She walked out onto the street. Aaron was standing by the car, looking hesitant. He had assumed she and Desmond had made up, so he wasn’t sure if she still needed a ride.

But the next second, Rebecca climbed straight into the backseat.

Desmond showed up just as rehearsal was about to begin. Rebecca had already decided that if he didn’t come, she would have to use the understudy again.

At least, he understood what mattered most. Even so, they fell into a full-blown cold war.

After every rehearsal, he left immediately, no longer waiting for her, picking her up, or cooking for her. He even stopped accompanying her to rehab sessions.

She didn’t know what he was trying to prove, but she began to wonder: Just because she was a few years older than him and had been married once before, did she always have to be the one coaxing him?

The rehearsals were incredibly intense. The entire troupe was working together as one, determined to shine at the Edinburgh International Festival. No one could afford to slack off.

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

Chapter 524

Desmond continued to rehearse seriously. He simply came and went on his own now, no longer walking in or out with Rebecca. And he wasn't waiting for her or driving her home in the evenings.

Rebecca gradually got used to the new routine. Every night after she finished practicing alone, she would walk to the road outside the school and wait. The bodyguard's car always appeared right on time.

That day was the final rehearsal before their flight to Edinburgh. She didn't keep the dancers long. In the afternoon, they simply walked through the blocking once.

Then she sent everyone home early so they could rest before catching their flight the next morning. Desmond left with the rest of the cast.

She packed up her things and headed to the rehab clinic as usual. She planned to grab a quick coffee and something to eat at the nearby café. Before she even stepped inside, she spotted Desmond and Willow through the large glass window.

They were sitting face-to-face, heads close together, talking in low voices. The instant she appeared, Desmond's gaze flicked in her direction. She wasn't sure whether he had seen her, but he gave no sign of acknowledgment.

She didn't go in. Instead, she went straight to the clinic.

After finishing rehab, she returned to the rehearsal hall and did the recovery exercises alone. By the time she was done, it was already late.

She figured Desmond wouldn't be picking her up, so she slung her bag over her shoulder and started walking toward the campus gate.

She never expected to run into four drunk guys just before she reached the street.

"Hey!" they whistled. "Hey, sweetheart! You often walk home alone like this? Don't you get lonely?"

Her heart lurched as she realized these people had been watching her. She quickened her pace and pulled out her phone, preparing to call Aaron.

“Don’t let her make that call! Grab her!” one shouted.

She ran as fast as she could, but she couldn’t outrun the four big men. They caught her and started dragging her away in the opposite direction.

She screamed a few times before a rough hand clamped over her mouth. A wave of helpless terror washed over her.

She had finished earlier than usual. If it had been later, Aaron and the others might have sensed that something was wrong.

They dragged her into an empty classroom. By then, her bag, her phone, and her dance clothes had all been torn off and scattered along the way. Her T-shirt was ripped at the collar from the way they had pinned her down while she fought desperately.

She fought with everything she had. She ran between desks and chairs, grabbing and throwing anything within reach.

But she was outnumbered. They eventually slammed her down onto a desk.

She screamed with the last of her strength. “Let me go! Help!”

Disgusting faces hovered over her. Filthy hands yanked at her clothes and pants. She was truly in despair until a furious voice cut through the air. “Let her go!”

The repulsive face above her suddenly disappeared, replaced by Vance’s. In the middle of her terror, she froze for a split second.

Vance turned, shielding her with his body, and roared at the four men, “Get out of here right now! The police are on their way!”

Rebecca snapped back to reality and saw hope of escaping. But the four men didn’t take Vance seriously at all.

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

Chapter 525

The four men sneered, telling Vance not to butt in with his slim build.

Vance was tall and lean, and over the past year, he had grown even thinner. In a real fight, he stood no chance against four grown men. Still, he positioned himself firmly between them and Rebecca.

“Run at any opening,” he told her urgently. “As fast as you can.”

Rebecca managed to stand, but her entire body was trembling. She stayed behind him, ready to bolt the moment a gap appeared, knowing she would only be a burden if she remained.

Getting out and calling Aaron or the police was the only way to save them both. But it was not easy for two people to outmaneuver four.

Every time she spotted an opening and tried to dash for it, one of the men would block her path. Finally, the four charged at once. One knocked the chair out of Vance’s hands, while two others grabbed him, and the fourth lunged around him straight for Rebecca.

In the nick of time, Vance spun around and shielded her with every inch of his body. Fists and kicks rained down mercilessly on him.

“Vance!” Rebecca cried out in alarm.

“Don’t worry, they’re not going to kill me,” he grunted through gritted teeth, covering her as he tried to edge them both toward the door. “Hold on. They’ll be here any second!”

Something hot dripped onto her neck. At first, she didn’t realize what it was. Then a drop landed on her arm, and she saw it was blood.

“Vance...”

“I’m fine, don’t worry.”

Another trickle of blood fell, and then a sharp scream rang out. It belonged to one of four men.

Vance heard it, too. He turned with her still wrapped in his arms and saw that Aaron and the other bodyguards had finally arrived.

“They’re here. We’re safe now.” He quickly moved them both aside.

Aaron and his team were professionals. They subdued the four men in seconds and immediately called the police.

Only then did Vance finally let Rebecca go.

They were both wearing black T-shirts, so the blood barely showed. Even now, his nose was still bleeding.

She reached out and held her hand under his chin. Warm blood dripped steadily into her palm.

He awkwardly turned his head away. "It's nothing. Just a nosebleed. I'll stuff in some cotton. Aaron, you got any cotton balls or tissues in the car? Let me plug it up."

Aaron gave him a long, meaningful look. "Yeah."

"Let's get to the car," Vance said quickly.

Rebecca sat in the car, still reeling from the raw terror of the attack and the dramatic rescue. She couldn't process everything that had just happened.

Aaron handed Vance the cotton balls. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

He shook his head. "It's fine. Take Rebecca home first. She had a bad scare tonight. She needs to rest."

And so, Aaron drove straight to her house.

"Okay, we're here," Vance said once they pulled up. "You can get out now."

Rebecca was still in a daze, her body trembling slightly.

Vance got out and walked around to open her door. "Come on. Look, I'm perfectly fine, Go inside and get some sleep. I'll head home and rest, too."

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Chapter 526

Aaron stepped out of the car as well. Only then did Rebecca climb out, steadying herself on the door.

"Vance..." She finally found her voice again. "How did you happen to be there?"

He shrugged without saying anything.

"Tell me!" She burst out.

With two cotton balls stuffed in his nose and his face badly swollen, he looked almost ridiculous.

“I told you, the whole thing started because of me,” he sighed. “Catherine is in Europe now, and I’m worried about your safety. Desmond hasn’t been picking you up, so...”

So, while she had been rehearsing in the evenings, he had been quietly patrolling the campus and the surrounding streets.

He had never imagined something bad would really happen. It must have scared her deeply. There had been blood all over her neck earlier, and a smear remained by her ear that hadn’t come off.

He reached out and gently wiped it, but the dried blood stayed put. “It’s dry now. Go inside, wash up, and get some sleep. Have Aaron stay with you at the house.”

She frowned, staring at him.

He waved it off. “You don’t have to worry about me. Consider it my repayment. You know I owe you so much that I could ever make it right. This is nothing.”

“I wasn’t worried about you,” she said, turning toward the house. “And stop smiling. It looks terrible.”

The smile immediately faded from his swollen face.

Aaron handed the car keys to the bodyguard so he could ride Vance home. “Remember to pick us up tomorrow morning. Ms. Perry has a nine o’clock flight.”

He then walked Rebecca inside.

Vance didn’t wait for them to reach the door. He climbed into the car as fast as he could. The second the door shut, he couldn’t hold it in anymore.

He grabbed the wad of tissues Aaron had given him, pressed it to his mouth, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. The white tissues turned bright red.

The bodyguard, who had just opened the driver’s door, jumped in shock. “Sir, do you need me to send you to the hospital?”

Vance leaned back against the seat, fighting the searing pain rolling through his body. “Yes, please. And don’t tell her. She’ll worry.”

The car sped off into the night, and the curtains in the house next door dropped back into place. Desmond stepped away from the window and sank onto the sofa, looking deflated.

Denise couldn't stand it. "What are you thinking? You stopped picking her up, walking her home, and taking care of her. And now, you're hiding here spying on her? What is that supposed to mean?"

Desmond snorted. "She doesn't need me anymore. I've been gone for just a few days, and she's already running back to her ex."

"That's a pretty ugly way to put it," Denise said, clearly disgusted. "Don't you think you're being too harsh? How is she running back to her ex? Maybe he was just giving her a ride. It's dark out there, and it's not safe around here. You didn't show up, and now you're mad that someone else did?"

"She has those bodyguards," he grunted. "Why does she need her ex to give her rides? And did you see him touch her face just now?"

"So what? Maybe there was something on her face. How can you not trust her? If so, why are you even with her?"

"How can I trust her? I stop showing up for a few days, and she lets the bodyguard stay overnight in her house!" he growled. "The bodyguard is a guy. Don't tell me they're just hanging out!"

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

Chapter 527

Denise lost it. "You're out of your mind! I can understand you suspecting her with her ex, but the bodyguard, too? That's way over the line!"

Desmond faltered. "I'm not saying she's messing around. But if she cared about how it looked, she wouldn't let a guy stay overnight in her house. Even if I believe her, other people are going to get the wrong idea."

"Other people? Who cares? You're the only one getting the wrong idea! I'm not, and her ex surely isn't!" Denise didn't want to argue anymore. She just warned him, "Keep this up, and you're going to lose her!"

Rebecca was badly shaken by the attack. Nightmares haunted her all night.

She woke up screaming each time. Luckily, Aaron was right outside. "Ms. Perry, I'm here. You're safe. Don't be afraid."

He had already reported the incident to Gabriel, who had given new orders. From now on, they would follow those instructions exactly, and tomorrow they would even send extra people to Edinburgh.

After a restless night, Rebecca woke up early the next morning. Her bags were already packed. Aaron carried her suitcase, and the car was waiting outside.

As she climbed in, she glanced at the house next door. There were no sounds. She had no idea whether Desmond had left for the airport or not.

Aaron drove them straight to the airport. The dance troupe members arrived one by one and started lining up to board.

Rebecca did a quick headcount and found two people were missing: Desmond and Willow.

“Coach, they’re not here yet?” The dancers were getting visibly anxious.

They were about to take off, and the leads were nowhere to be seen. There was no time for personal drama. Rebecca started calling Desmond, and another called Willow.

Desmond’s phone went straight to voicemail, while Willow picked up.

“Willow says they’re on their way and will make it. She tells us to board first, and Desmond is with her,” the dancer reported.

“Good,” Rebecca said. “Everyone, line up and board.”

At least, the two weren’t completely out of reach. Desmond was probably still sulking and refusing to answer her.

They landed at noon, and the schedule was tight. The hotel check-in was immediately followed by a rehearsal.

Rebecca wasn’t at her best because she hadn’t slept much last night. But as the supervisor, she had to keep an eye on both the performance and everyone’s safety.

Fortunately, the show wasn’t until the day after tomorrow. They still had two full days to adjust and rehearse.

By the afternoon, Desmond and Willow still hadn’t arrived. Rebecca tried contacting them again with no success.

“Maybe they switched flights and are still in the air?” one dancer guessed.

With the two leads missing, Rebecca started to get seriously worried. With no other choice, she had the male understudy step in and walk the female lead’s blocking herself.

The next day was another full rehearsal, but the two leads were still missing.

The dancer who had been contacting Willow reported, “Willow says something came up yesterday, and they missed the flight. They’ll be here today.”

By then, Rebecca realized it wasn’t incidental at all. It was deliberate.

Once again, she had the understudy take the male lead’s role.

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

Chapter 528

Every member of the troupe was only about 20 years old, but they had all spent more than a decade training. They understood the sweat, the injuries, and the deep respect the stage demanded.

The performance would be happening tomorrow, but the leads were still not there. Everyone knew what that meant.

If they couldn’t run the show properly today, how were they supposed to perform tomorrow on a new stage without messing up the blocking?

These were the leads. In the worst-case scenario, they would be letting down the entire troupe after all the hard work and injuries everyone had endured.

But no one spelled it out since Desmond was the coach’s boyfriend. This was the last run-through, and for a moment, all eyes were on her.

Rebecca looked at the anxious faces in front of her and made a hard decision. Turning to the understudy, she said, “You’ll be on tomorrow’s show. You ready?”

The young man froze in shock.

“Are you ready?” Rebecca asked again, louder this time.

He hesitated for half a second, then answered loudly, “Yes!”

Rebecca nodded, secretly deciding to let him take the role from now on.

But what about the female lead? The troupe was still new, and they hadn't found a solid female understudy yet. They had pinned a lot of hope on Willow-at least for this Edinburgh performance.

Rebecca had planned to start training a proper female understudy after this show. But now...

"Coach, why don't you do it?" one dancer suggested quietly.

"Yeah, Coach. You choreographed the whole thing. No one knows it better. And you've recovered well lately."

"Plus, you've been walking the part in every rehearsal."

Rebecca nodded. "All right. Let's do one final run-through."

She was nervous because she had only walked the blocking so far and had not danced the full piece at performance level. She had always thought of herself as the temporary stand-in, assuming Willow would show up.

If today's run-through went badly, tomorrow's show would be a disaster. So, she gave it everything she had.

Thanks to all the relentless practice she had kept up and thanks to every ache, every drop of sweat, and every hardship she had endured, she managed to dance the entire piece flawlessly.

When the run-through finished, the whole troupe erupted in enthusiastic applause. Rebecca stood there drenched in sweat. Memories of Desmond training with her flashed through her mind, and a sharp pang of bitterness rose in her chest.

Yes, she could do it. But why did things have to end up like this? Was it so hard for two people to simply be together?

The next day was the actual performance. In the afternoon, they arrived at the theater, did their makeup, and got ready.

Desmond and Willow still hadn't shown up. But everyone was so focused on the final preparations that they pushed the issue to the back of their minds.

Right now, the performance was everything. This was the first time their dance drama was being shown to the world.

In fact, Desmond and Willow had already arrived. They were waiting just outside the hall, expecting Rebecca to come beg them one last time.

Willow started to panic. “The coach still hasn’t sent anyone to get us. What if she doesn’t let us perform?”

“No way,” Desmond said confidently. “She’ll come. Can anyone in the troupe replace us? Does my understudy dance half as well as I do? If he did, he wouldn’t be the understudy. And you? They still haven’t even found a female understudy. You’re irreplaceable.”

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

Chapter 529

Willow wanted to believe me, but she was still uneasy. “I think we’ve made our point. Let’s past go in we wait any longer, we miss the whole thing

#*

“We’ve held out this long. We should stick to the end.” Desmond was determined to make Roberta he was

“What if she doesn’t call us? What if she decides not to bring us back?” Willow grew auxions with each second ticking by and the fact that her phone remained silent.

“Relax. You know Rebecca. She cares about this dance more than anything. There’s no chance she’d let it flop. She someone call us any minute now.” Desmond knew exactly how much the piece meant to Rebecca

Pressuring her with the show was the surest way to get what he wanted. She would never let the performance tall

The sky grew dark, and the audience started filing in. Still, neither of their phores rang, Willow coulde’t take it anymore called the dancer who had been contacting her the past couple of days, but there was to answer.

“They must be busy with makeup. We’re screwed. I never should have listened to you,” she grumbled in despatc

Desmond gave her a cold look. “You weren’t saying that when you took those Hermes bags, were you?

She fell silent.

“It’s fine. They can’t do the show without us. The whole thing is probably going to fall apart. They’ll announce a or cancellation any minute. Come on, let’s go inside and watch,” he said, following the audience into the hall

Willow had no choice but to trail after him, and they sat in the very last row. The show hadn’t started yet; the curtain down.

“No sign of cancellation?” she whispered.

He checked his watch. “Just wait. It’s not time yet.”

Suddenly, the curtain rose, and stage lights flooded the space. Bilingual subtitles appeared on the screens on both stage. The performance had begun.

Willow nearly lost it, pinching his arm. “Look! They didn’t cancel it!”

Desmond was surprised, too. The leads were missing, and they were still going? But then, he calmed down, waiting for to crash and burn.

The male lead entered. Sure enough, it was the understudy

Desmond sneered. “Dancing like a total amateur, and he thinks he can handle the radic

Willow disagreed, knowing the understudy was dancing well. As a “deer”, he had a row, boyish mergy that eit free an unpolished.

She was more worried about the female lead because there was no understily for her. She was and by St all, she had poured so much effort into this piece, tog.

She burst into tears the moment Rebecca stepped onto the

“It’s Rebeccal she whispered

Inside, she was cheering, “She’s doing it herself. Yir ve get thua, Desmond snorted, “Going on by herself she going to pen the He caught himself and rephrased. Her top havari rully he and yet th

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

Chapter 530

Willow’s eyes narrowed. “It sounds like you don’t want frer to succeed at all.”

Desmond frowned. “How am I not rooting for her? I love her more than anyone else in the world. I’ve given up so much for her. and I came all the way here to study abroad for her. I could have gone home and taken over the family business instead. She loves dance, so I did everything within my power to help her get back on stage. She used to be incredible. The dance world should have a star with her name on it. I just...”

“You’re just being selfish,” Willow said quietly, regretting her moment of greed.

Desmond had told her it would just make Rebecca sweat a little. He had never said they should wait until the actual performance started.

Now her heart was entirely with Rebecca. Hopefully, Rebecca could carry the whole show and let this dance drama, which she had worked so hard on, shine the way it deserved.

Willow sat there with one hand pressed to her chest, living every leap and turning right along with the dancers on stage. When the final note sounded and the piece ended, she let out a deep breath, sweating as much as the performers.

It was perfect. The thunderous applause from the international audience proved its success.

Sitting beside her was a foreigner who didn’t know much about the source material. He flipped through the program and asked her about the framework of the show.

She gladly explained the story to him. When she finished and turned back, Desmond’s seat was empty.

At some point, he had stood up and left. For a moment, she felt lost and didn’t know where to go. She probably couldn’t go back to the troupe anymore.

Desmond had gone backstage to wait for Rebecca.

The dancers returned after the curtain call, buzzing with excitement and joy over the huge success and the audience’s roaring response. The moment they saw Desmond sitting backstage, all that happy energy froze solid.

Everyone went quiet, hurrying to their stations to remove makeup and change. Rebecca came back with the understudy, both riding the high of the successful show.

The young dancer was glowing. “Coach, I did it! I really did it!”

“Yeah, everyone was incredible tonight!” Rebecca grinned, her joy bigger than anyone else’s.

She wanted to shout to the whole world, “I, Rebecca Perry, can dance again! Swallow is back on stage! [

Then a figure stepped into their path, and the understudy's smile froze. He greeted Desmold, then hurried off to change

Rebecca's smile disappeared as well. "You finally showed up."

"You sound like you were hoping I wouldn't," Desmond responded darkly

Rebecca was speechless. Why wouldn't she want him to show up? His role was crucial in the entice piece Why would she wants, him gone?

She had called and texted him countless times these past few days, but he had simply ignored her And now, he had the 19 t accuse her?

With members of the troupe all there, starting an argument there would be ugly. She took a broth, waland sat down to remove her makeup

Desmond hovered on the side.

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The other dancers felt the tension and quickly finished up, slipping out one by one. Some didn't even bother taking their makeup off.

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

Chapter 531

Backstage, only two people remained.

While removing her headdress and makeup, Rebecca tried to find the right words to begin.

Desmond spoke first, his voice low and haunting "You don't love me at all."

Her hand paused on her earring for a moment before she continued removing it.

“You didn’t even care that I disappeared,” he added.

She finally set the earring on the table and turned around. “I didn’t care about you? Why don’t you check your phone and see how many missed calls you have?”

He looked down. “You only wanted me back so I could finish the dance.”

“Can we stop acting like children?” she said seriously. “I can’t even imagine how someone who claims to love dance could disregard the stage, disregard everyone’s hard work, and just skip the performance without a single word. Do you realize how irresponsible that behavior was?”

“I didn’t skip it. I was there the whole time, waiting outside all afternoon,” he protested, sounding aggrieved. “If you had just called me one more time, I would have come running. But you didn’t. Our relationship isn’t even worth one extra call to you.”

She closed her eyes, feeling utterly exhausted. “During yesterday’s final rehearsal, I already gave up on you. Without a proper run-through, how could you possibly have performed?”

“How do you know I didn’t rehearse?” he countered. “Willow and I went up after everyone else left. We did our own run- through! I’ve been preparing for your show the entire time. You just wouldn’t coax me a little more. You didn’t trust that I would show up when it mattered most!”

She threw her hands up, feeling helpless. In truth, she had been hired of this for a long time. She didn’t even have the energy left to figure out how he had convinced Willow to skip with him.

“If this is your way of loving me, I’m sorry, but I can’t handle it. We should break up,” she said firmly, though her heart ached

She had survived a painful marriage and finally found the courage to love again. Back then, Desmond had truly shown her sincerity. She just hadn’t expected that sincerity to weigh so heavily.

His face went ashen. “You want to break up with me? I’m the only son in my family. For you, I gave up inheriting the faulty business and came all the way here to study abroad just to be with you. And now, you’re saying you want to break up?”

Rebecca’s heart twisted with pain. See? This was exactly what she had feared the most.

When Desmond had first decided to study abroad, she had asked him whether he was coming for himself or for her. If it were for her, she couldn't bear the responsibility of someone else's entire future.

"I did it all for you." Those words were what she dreaded most.

That single sentence could turn deep love into resentment. She had paid an enormous price for loving Vance, but during their marriage, she had never once said, "I did this for you."

Because love wasn't a bargaining chip or an act of charity. Everything she had done for him had been voluntary. There was need to hold voluntary love over someone's head.

"I remember asking you that question back then, and my answer is still the same. I can't take on your future. You should go home and be the heir you were meant to be," she said.

He looked deeply wounded. "I know why you're doing this. You're back with Vance, den

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Chapter 532

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The accusation left Rebecca's mind blank.

She and Vance were back together? Where on earth had Desmond gotten that idea?

"Aren't you?" He looked heartbroken. "I stopped picking you up, and Vance stepped in, right? You two were touching each other right outside your yard."

She understood then that he was talking about the night when she had nearly been attacked by the drunk men. Vance had taken her home and wiped the blood from her face, but to Desmond, it had become "touching each other."

By this point, the false accusation no longer bothered her. A far more terrifying emotion had taken hold-fear.

His attention felt like a cold snake lurking in the shadows, secretly watching and monitoring her every move.

“The way you’re acting now terrifies me,” she said, then walked out of the dressing room.

He tried to follow, but in the doorway, Aaron and another bodyguard blocked his path.

“What are you doing?” Desmond glared. “I’m chasing my girlfriend! Get out of the way!”

“I’m sorry, but we’re just doing our job,” Aaron said evenly, standing ramrod straight. “You should stay away from Ms. Perry from now on.”

“Did she order this? That’s impossible!”

“Mr. Rossi did.”

“Gabriel? No way! Why?”

Aaron knew the reason but would not speak out of turn. His duty was to follow orders, and right now, that meant staying close to Rebecca.

Gabriel had made it clear that they shouldn’t let her be out of their sight. Desmond couldn’t understand why Gabriel would interfere in what he saw as a simple quarrel.

Rebecca returned to the hotel and ran into someone in the lobby. Willow rushed over, looking hesitant.

Rebecca felt a pang of disappointment. She had placed high hopes on Willow without even preparing a solid understudy

“Coach...” Willow finally spoke, her face flushed. “Congratulations on the successful performance.”

Rebecca waited for her to continue.

Willow burned with shame. “I’m sorry. I made a terrible mistake.”

Her behavior had been outrageous, and there was probably no way back to the troupe. She had no nerve left to return

Still, she felt obliged to tell the truth so Rebecca would at least understand what kind of person Desmond really was

“It was Desmond who wanted to show you how important he and I were to the troupe,” she said honestly. “To make a point, he asked me to show up late and skip the rehearsal with him. Said you’d beg us to come back.”

“And you just listened to him?” Rebecca frowned, already knowing Desmond’s plan.

Still, she was shocked that Willow had gone along with it.

Willow lowered her head. “It was my vanity. He gave me three Hermes bags..

Rebecca understood perfectly.

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“Please tell everyone who worked so hard on this production that I’m sorry. I let everyone down. Thankfully, the show was a success, or else I would never forgive myself,” Willow said, tears glistening in her eyes.

“I never expected Desmond to actually skip the performance. Right before it started, he was still hoping the show would fail or be forced to cancel. Even though my morals were corrupted, I am a dancer at heart. I thought that, out of respect for the stage, we would at least go on.”

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

Chapter 533

Desmond’s voice cut through the air. “What nonsense are you talking about?”

“I’m not talking nonsense! Not a single word!” Willow shot back. “I told you so many times that we should just return to the troupe, but you kept saying no. You insisted on waiting until the very last moment. Said the coach couldn’t do it without us and that she would come begging.”

Desmond was livid. “Did I say it exactly like that?”

“You said even worse! Right before the show started, you were gloating, saying it would be postponed, canceled, or a total disaster! Yes, you were hoping the performance would fail just to prove how important you are!” Willow spilled everything in one breath.

“You...” Desmond seethed.

Willow quickly hid behind Rebecca. Aaron and three other bodyguards instantly closed in.

Desmond looked helpless. “I’m not going to hit anyone. Rebecca, in your eyes, am I the kind of man who would resort to violence?”

“You’re not...” Rebecca took a deep breath. “This ends here. From now on, we’ll handle everything according to the contracts. Aaron.”

“Yes.”

“Call the lawyer. Have him take care of the remaining matters.”

“Understood.”

Desmond looked at her in horror. “What does that mean? You’re bringing a lawyer into our relationship?”

“No,” Rebecca said calmly. “Our personal relationship doesn’t need a lawyer. They’ll be handling the agreement you signed with the troupe, clause by clause.”

She had treated the troupe as a serious venture. When founding it, she had followed Gabriel’s advice and had everyone sign contracts.

She hadn’t originally planned to make Desmond sign one. It had been more of a playful gesture between them. Luckily, he had signed it, too.

With that, she walked toward the elevator under the escort of the bodyguards.

“Coach!” Willow called after her.

Rebecca paused.

“I know you might not believe me, but today, I am truly proud of our troupe and American classical dance. I feel honored to have been part of it, even briefly. When I was explaining the performance to the foreigners earlier, my heart was racing with excitement.” Willow spoke quickly.

“I know I don’t deserve to stay with the troupe anymore, but I won’t give up dancing. I hope there will be another chance for me to share the stage with you someday.”

Rebecca thought for a moment and said simply, “Keep working hard.”

Everything was governed by contracts. No matter how talented Willow was, the rules applied equally.

Experience was sometimes the best teacher. Rebecca hoped this incident would help Willow figure out what she truly wanted.

The stage or luxury bags. Those were her life choices. As long as she had no regrets, that was enough.

Ch 534

“I will, Coach!” Willow said loudly.

“What about me?” Desmond chimed in. “What about our personal relationship?”

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

Chapter 534

“I already told you. It’s over,” Rebecca replied, leaving quickly with the bodyguards.

Desmond watched, burning with anger and unwillingness. His phone rang, interrupting his thoughts.

“Have you seen the news? The other night, some thugs attacked an American student and got caught. Look at this girl. Is it Rebecca?” Denise said.

Desmond took out his phone and read the article. The girl’s face was blurred in the photo, but she was wearing a black T-shirt. The man beside her was also in black. Their silhouettes were unmistakable.

There was also a picture of her getting into the car. Although the license plate wasn’t visible, the model and color matched the one Aaron and the team usually drove.

So, that night when Vance had taken her home, it was because she had been attacked. And he hadn’t been there for her.

“Rebecca!” He ran to the elevator, but it had already gone up.

He started calling her, and she answered.

He poured out a frantic apology. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know something like that happened that night. It was my fault. I shouldn’t have sulked and refused to pick you up. I shouldn’t have mocked you and Vance. I thought... I was wrong. I had no idea what was going on.”

He kept on talking, but there was only silence on the other end. He blinked. “Babe, are you listening?”

“It’s too late,” Rebecca finally said.

“What do you mean? Are you blaming me for not being there when you were in danger? I really didn’t know. I thought with Aaron and the others around, you’d be safe.”

“No. I’m not blaming you for not being there. I just don’t want to be with someone who has no sense of responsibility.”

She had never blamed him for not being there during the attack. No one could guard another person 24/7. Accidents happened; that wasn’t the issue.

But if a dancer couldn’t even show responsibility toward the stage, how could he be responsible toward the people in his life? This was a major international performance, yet he had thrown a tantrum, refused to show up even after multiple requests, and put everyone’s hard work at risk.

How could anyone trust him as someone worth relying on? She hung up and refused to answer any more of his calls.

The performance not only created a sensation at the Edinburgh Festival but, in today’s hyper-connected world, quickly went viral online.

A short clip of the soaring finale spread like wildfire, sparking a trending topic: [Can Americans fly?]

Someone even uncovered the story of the female lead, who had once suffered a severe injury and was nearly told she would never dance again, yet through sheer willpower and countless hours of grueling practice, had fought her way back to the stage she loved.

Deer Cry became a massive hit, and Rebecca became a sensation.

The entire Classic of Mountains and Seas concept exploded in popularity. People began eagerly anticipating the rest of the series.

In short, this year’s festival belonged to Rebecca’s troupe and American classical dance. Because of the overwhelming demand, they ended up adding several more performances, all of which sold out.

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

Chapter 535

While Rebecca was leaping and soaring like a graceful deer on the Edinburgh stage, Vance sat in a hospital room in Paris, watching the performance videos.

She was so beautiful and talented. In the videos, she looked exactly like the lively, sprite-like girl she had been in high school.

This was who she truly was and who she was always meant to be. She wasn't a bird with broken wings or a caged canary. She had always been a forest elf—light, agile, vibrant, and full of life.

The moment she appeared beside an ordinary man like him, she lit up his world. He watched the videos over and over, asking himself again and again, “Vance Bradford, how could you have brought yourself to hurt such a beautiful elf?”

Now the elf had flown back to the forest and would never return to him. Yet somehow, he felt that it was right.

“May you fly toward what you love, without hesitation or doubt. May your heart lead you across boundless starry skies,” he muttered.

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Anna walked in with a stern expression. Ever since the night he had been injured, her face had remained tight with disapproval

“Mr. Bradford, you cannot let yourself get hurt and bleed again!”

He put his phone away obediently.

“I understand.”

“You had internal bleeding!”

“It's stopped now, hasn't it?”

“The doctor said there can't be a next time. Really, there can't.”

He smiled again and showed her the phone.

“Look how beautiful she is. It’s a shame I couldn’t see it live.”

“So what? She’s not yours anymore.”

He gazed at the woman on the screen and smiled.

“But I’m still proud of her.”

“Wait, why is she dancing the female lead? Didn’t they have another dancer?”

“Yeah, I was wondering the same thing. Why wasn’t it Willow? And the understudy took the male lead’s role. Look.”

“Indeed... Did they fight?”

Vance thought about Desmond’s recent behavior and shook his head.

When Rebecca returned from Edinburgh to Paris, Gabriel came to pick her up personally.

The entire dance troupe was on the same flight, including Willow and Desmond. The two of them had flown over on a separate flight but were returning on the same one as everyone else.

Gabriel had brought a whole fleet of cars to pick them up. He also arranged a celebration party to lighten up the mood.

Desmond walked at the back of the group, his eyes fixed longingly on Rebecca, who was walking in front with Gabriel’s arm around her shoulders.

He started to follow, but Willow grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “What? You want to go, too? How do you have the nerve?”

He blinked. “Why can’t I go?”

“It’s a celebration party! Do you even know what that means?” Willow scoffed. “What did you contribute to the performance?”

“I...” He stared in the direction the troupe had gone. Finally, he snorted, “You’re no different. Did you contribute anything?”

“I didn’t, which is why I have the sense to stay away and not embarrass myself. You, on the other hand, have zero self- awareness,” she said, heading toward the baggage claim.

Desmond muttered, “How did I not contribute? I’m the male lead and her boyfriend. I’m her true male lead.”

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

Chapter 536

After the celebration party, Rebecca went back to Kaitlyn's house with Gabriel.

Josette and Kaitlyn complained that she hadn't told them she was performing. They would have gone to cheer her on in person.

Rebecca didn't want Josette to worry about the problems within the troupe, so she simply said, "I wanted to surprise you."

She would have many more opportunities to perform in the future anyway.

She had originally planned to give the troupe members a few days off, but to her surprise, they were all so motivated that the next day, their social media was filled with practice videos.

Rebecca felt inspired and decided not to slack off. After spending a short time with her family, she returned to the troupe.

She went back after dinner the following evening. By the time Aaron and the others dropped her off at the house near campus it was already dark.

Except for the soft glow of the streetlights, everything was quiet.

The moment she stepped out of the car, a soft click sounded, as if she had triggered a switch. Warm golden lights began to glow one by one across her front yard. Small ground lamps were arranged in the shape of a giant heart that filled the entire space.

In the center of the heart were hundreds of roses. Music started playing; it was the exact piece from their dance drama.

Desmond stood in the middle of the heart-shaped rose arrangement, wearing that familiar, deeply affectionate smile. His eyes were moist as he looked at her hopefully and held out a large bouquet of Scottish green roses.

"My female lead, congratulations on your successful performance," he declared.

Rebecca stood frozen in place, staring at the extravagant scene and the man standing in the center of the roses. A wave of exhaustion washed over her like icy vines wrapping around her chest, squeezing until she could barely breathe.

She walked forward slowly, ignoring his outstretched hand and the roses at his feet and in his arms. Her gaze locked directly on his face. “Desmond, I already told you. We broke up.”

His smile froze for a split second. Then he acted as if he had heard a harmless joke. “Babe, are you still mad at me? See? I came to apologize and celebrate with you.”

“I’m not mad at you,” she interrupted in a flat tone. “This is a decision I made after careful thought. We’re done.”

He slowly lowered his hand, forcing a smile. “Don’t say things like that. I messed up, but it was because I love you so much. Let’s go inside and talk, okay?”

He moved to hug her as he always had, but she stepped back. At the same time, Aaron and the others closed in tightly around her, making it impossible for Desmond to approach.

“Please take all of this down,” Rebecca said, walking

She passed by Desmond and went up the stairs around the heart-shaped lights and roses.

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“Rebecca!” His voice suddenly rose sharply behind her as she entered the house.

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do you mean by that? Are you just going to burn the bridge after

She never expected him to say something like that. Her heart twisted painfully as she turned around. “Do you even hear yourself?”

He threw the bouquet to the ground, his eyes filled with agitation. “How much have I given up for you? I found the therapist for you, accompanied you to every rehab session, and helped you revise the rehab plan over and over.”

He paused and sighed. “I left my home and came to this godforsaken place just to be with you and help you stand in the spotlight again. I gave up so much, and now you want to throw me away? Without me, there would be no you today!”

Click to get, it

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

Chapter 537

Desmond no longer addressed her softly. The gentle, shy exterior he had always worn disappeared, revealing the obsessive, possessive core beneath.

Rebecca stared at him in horror, momentarily at a loss for words. Aaron quickly ushered her inside the house and stood guard at the door, watching Desmond with sharp eyes.

Desmond stomped on every rose and ground lamp in the yard, crushing the flowers into a pulpy mess and smashing the lights until none were still glowing. Only then did he storm back to his house next door.

Denise had witnessed everything from inside. She looked at him in disbelief. “You’re really scaring me right now!”

He glanced at her. “Denise, do me a favor.”

The next day, Rebecca went to the clinic as usual for the therapy and rehab sessions.

But when she saw Archer, Desmond’s words suddenly echoed in her mind.

“I found the therapist for you, accompanied you to every rehab, and helped revise your rehab plan. I gave up so much to help you stand in the spotlight again...”

During the session, she lost her balance on the equipment and fell. Images of Desmond accompanying her through rehab flashed through her mind, along with his voice.

“I gave up so much for you...”

Because of the new injury, she couldn’t go to the afternoon rehearsal. Aaron took her to the hospital for X-rays and examinations.

Luckily, nothing was broken, but she was told to avoid intense activity for at least a week. She had to post a notice in the troupe group chat, saying she would be resting at home.

She had just lain down when her phone buzzed with a message from Desmond. Just seeing his name now filled her with fear.

With trembling hands, she opened the message and found a terrifying emoji followed by a string of voice notes.

She played one. His voice came out almost demonic.

“I gave up so much for you. How can you do this to me? I gave up so much for you. How can you do this to me?”

Her head began to throb as if an iron band were tightening around her skull. She threw the phone across the room and curled up on the bed, clutching her head.

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A haunting voice rang out right beside her. “Rebecca, I gave up so much for you. How can you do this to me?”

She nearly screamed. She had thrown her phone away. Why was the voice still there? She opened her eyes and saw Desmond standing right beside her bed.

He was holding a bouquet of lilies and smiling at her with an eerie expression.

“I brought the wrong flowers yesterday. Lilies are the proper ones for an apology. I’m sorry, Babe. I sincerely apologize. Please forgive me, okay?”

It clicked then that he had a key to her house. He must have snuck in and hidden somewhere while she was out.

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Aar...” She was terrified and tried to call Aaron.

Desmond’s hand shot out and clamped over her mouth. The heavy, cloying scent of lilies filled her nose, making it hard to breathe.

His body pressed down on her as he whispered in her ear, “Babe, we’re the closest people in the world. Why would you call Aaron? To hit me? How could you bear to do that?”

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

Chapter 538

Rebecca struggled desperately, but Desmond pinned her down tightly. His eyes above her seemed to glow with a destructive light as he repeated those words.

“I gave up so much for you. How are you going to repay me? How can you burn the bridge and throw me away? Would you even be where you are today without me?”

“Tell me. Who helped you out of the darkness? Who helped you return to the stage? Who gave up a billion. -dollar family fortune to come to this place and be your male lead? Now that you’ve found a younger male lead, you don’t need me anymore? How can you be so heartless?”

She shook her head frantically, but it was useless. Desmond’s eyes were glowing with a sharp, manic intensity she couldn’t understand.

“Babe, say we’re not breaking up. Say it! Say you love me. Come on! Say it, and I’ll let you go. The only way you can repay me is by giving me your whole life. Do you understand?”

Her mouth was covered so tightly that she couldn’t utter a sound. Tears welled up in her eyes.

“You’re going to be this stubborn? You can’t! Babe, you’re mine. Do you know how much I love you? I would give up everything for you. Do you understand?”

He suddenly lowered his head, trying to force a kiss on her. The tight grip hurt, and the overwhelming scent of lilies mixed with his uncontrolled rage made her stomach churn.

Right before his lips touched hers, she used every ounce of strength she had, jerked her head to the side, and freed one hand.

A crisp, loud slap landed across his face. Time seemed to freeze. All his movements stopped.

He remained leaning over her, his head turned to the side. A clear handprint rapidly bloomed on his left cheek.

“Help! Aaron!” Rebecca scrambled off the bed, screaming, “Help! Somebody, help!”

Aaron and the other bodyguards burst through the door. They had never imagined danger could reach her, even with them standing guard outside.

They subdued Desmond in no time. Rebecca limped and half-ran, crying as she fled toward the living room.

The loud commotion alerted Denise, who rushed over from next door and collided with Rebecca. “Rebecca, what happened?” Denise helped her up and tried to hold her.

Rebecca was now terrified of anyone connected to the Schroeder family. She pushed Denise away in panic and backed into a corner.

Denise saw Aaron and the others dragging Desmond out of the bedroom and immediately understood.

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

Chapter 539

Desmond was taken away. The only thing lingering in the air was the sickeningly sweet scent of lilies

Rebecca sat on the floor, hugging her knees as large tears rolled down her cheeks.

After handing Desmond over to Denise, Aaron reported the incident to Gabriel and received instructions to take Rebecca back to Kaitlyn's house.

Rebecca didn't want Josette to worry, so she forced a smile and said she had sprained her ankle during rehab and needed to rest at home.

Josette immediately helped her to bed and went to prepare nourishing food. The bedroom door closed, and she broke down.

She wanted to rest, but she couldn't sleep. Desmond's voice kept echoing in her mind like a curse.

"I gave up so much for you. The only way you can repay me is by spending your whole life with me... your whole life with me... only your whole life..."

Every time she started to drift off, that voice would explode inside her skull, causing unbearable headaches. She became terrified of her phone. Every time it rang, she would jump as if electrocuted, her heart leaping into her throat.

When the demonic voice woke her again, her phone rang at the same time. She grabbed it without looking and hurled it against the wall.

The phone hit the floor and finally went silent. She bit down on the blanket, wanting to cry but too afraid to make a sound.

Gabriel came home that evening, immediately checking on her. Under the blanket, her cheeks were streaked with tears. She looked completely broken.

"Becky," he said softly, sitting beside her.

"Gabe." She quickly sat up, forcing a smile. "You had time to come home for dinner today?"

He sighed at her stubborn effort to appear strong even in this state. “Silly girl, do you think we’re all blind? Grandma and my mother are worried sick. They just didn’t want to disturb your rest.”

She had only been pretending. Once he pointed it out, she couldn’t keep up the act and lowered her head. “Aaron told me everything,” he said gently, smoothing her hair. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve got you covered. From now on, you’ll stay here. Aaron and the team will drive you back and forth every day.”

She looked up at him blankly, her voice filled with pain. “Do I have to marry Desmond to repay him for everything he’s done?”

“What repayment?” Gabriel asked, finally seeing the sheer terror in her eyes.

“Without him, there would be no me today. He found the therapist and accompanied me to every rehab session. He gave up inheriting the family business to study with me and be the male lead in my show. Without him, I would never have returned to the stage...”

She repeated Desmond’s words mechanically, tears streaming down her face. “Isn’t that right? I owe him. I can never repay him, can I?”

“Who told you that?” His heart ached.

He pulled her head gently against his shoulder and patted her back. “Marriage isn’t about favors or debts. No one has to marry anyone.”

She shook her head in anguish. “Then how do I repay him for everything he did for me? I can’t. I have nothing to give him in return. I wish I just owed him money. No matter how much it was, there would be an end to it.

“But with feelings, the only way to repay them is with a lifetime. I shouldn’t have fallen in love again. I really shouldn’t have.”

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

Chapter 540

“Listen,” Gabriel said, patting her back with firm, steady strokes. “First, love is not a transaction. There is no such thing as ‘repaying’ or ‘not being able to repay’. Second, what he calls giving up so much

If the goal was to trap you or control you, then it wasn't a genuine sacrifice. It was an investment and a deal. Love is never a deal."

Rebecca lay against his shoulder, tears continuing to stream, as his words began to untangle some of the knots in her heart.

"Third, and most important," his voice softened with deep tenderness, "do you remember what I told you before? I only want you to be happy.

"So, ask yourself honestly. Are you happy now? He said there would be no you on stage without him. He was wrong. What brought you back to the stage was yourself."

His words struck her like a hammer.

"It was the pain you endured during rehab, the sweat you poured out in the rehearsal hall, and your courage to stand up again that got you back on stage. No matter what anyone else did, none of it would have mattered without that," he added.

"But..." she sobbed, still trying to argue.

The "truths" Desmond had drilled into her mind were trying to fight back.

"You don't need to spend your entire life repaying anyone's so-called kindness," he said gently but firmly. Your happiness and feelings are the only things that matter. If what he gave you was pain, suffocation, and self-doubt, that wasn't love. It was harm."

At those words, her emotions gradually calmed.

"Don't be afraid. I will be right here with you," Gabriel murmured, patting her back like he was comforting a child. "He won't be able to get close to you anymore."

Perhaps because she had been under such intense mental strain lately, his voice felt like a gentle lullaby. She sobbed softly in his arms and finally drifted off to sleep.

But the moment he tried to lay her back down on the bed, she woke up again. The haunting voice came rushing back.

"Without me, there would be no you today. How are you going to repay everything I've done for you? The only way you can repay me is by spending your whole life with me!"

Rebecca woke from the nightmare in terror, her eyes tightly shut. "No... No... Go away... Go away..."

She could no longer be left alone, so Gabriel, Josette, and Kaitlyn took turns staying with her. She barely ate anything, losing a lot of weight in just a few days.

Chapter!

Gabriel knew this couldn't continue. After discussing it with the others, he decided to bring in a psychologist. But Rebecca was resistant to the idea and refused to cooperate.

"It's my fault." Gabriel said regretfully. "I didn't investigate Desmond's background properly. He has always been obsessive. His family mentioned that Rebecca was his savior. Even back then, he showed unhealthy psychological tendencies.

"The reason isn't clear, but during that time, he was the understudy, rehearsing and performing with her. He became sunny and positive again. That's why he kept liking her. When he went to Soliaridge to dance, he hadn't actually seen her, but the obsession remained."

"What do we do now?" Kaitlyn asked worriedly. "We can keep him away from her and protect her, but the more we isolate her, the worse this might get."

Gabriel shook his head. "We can only take it slowly."

His phone rang just then. It was Vance calling.

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

Chapter 541

Gabriel furrowed his brow, wondering why Vance was calling at a time like this, but he answered in the end. Vance's voice came through the time. "G... Mr. Perry."

Gabriel's frown deepened. "What is that?"

"I'm sorry to call out of the blue," Vance said, "but I want to confirm Rebecca's condition. Is she okay?"

Gabriel's eyes narrowed. "How do you know something's wrong?"

"I guessed," Vance replied. "She hasn't been to the clinic for several days, and she hasn't shown up for rehearsal either. None of the dancers knows what's going on. After such a successful performance, she should be even more passionate about practicing So, either she's sick, or..."

"You know her pretty well, don't you?" Gabriel asked, seeing a chance.

He had been mostly absent from Rebecca's life growing up, so he knew his limitations.

Vance, on the other hand, had known her for over a decade despite his infidelity. They were classmates for three years and married for five years. Perhaps he had a way to reach her heart.

"I know her better than most," Vance replied. "Better than Desmond, that's for sure."

Gabriel let out a mocking laugh. "You have the nerve to say that?"

Vance's tone grew hesitant. "Yes, I was a jerk. But after I woke up, I'm still the one who understands her best. Is she broken? And not just ordinary heartbreak."

He was so certain because Rebecca had always been resilient. Even growing up in that kind of family, she had been like a blade of grass in the gale—never truly broken. Even the deep wounds he had inflicted on her during their five years of marriage had never crushed her determination to move forward.

But now, because of Desmond, she had stopped dancing and going to rehab. That could only mean one thing: the hurt she was experiencing now was even worse than what he had done to her. He couldn't even imagine what kind of damage could wound her to this extent.

Gabriel was silent for a moment. "She isn't doing well right now. She is trapped in some kind of mental loop. No matter what we say, she won't listen. Do you have any ideas?"

"A mental loop?" Vance wasn't entirely sure what that meant. "What about a psychologist?"

"She refuses."

"May I try?"

Met with Gabriel's hesitation, Vance added quickly, "Don't worry. I only want her to get better. I have no inappropriate intentions. You know I have a girlfriend now."

Gabriel snorted. "A marriage certificate couldn't stop you from cheating. You think a girlfriend will?"

Vance sounded a little embarrassed. "Once bitten, twice shy. Making some mistakes once is bad enough."

When he was a child, the teachers always said that admitting one's mistakes and correcting them made one a good kid. Only after growing up did he realize that some mistakes, once committed, could never be undone.

“I haven’t hidden anything from Anna. She knows everything. This time is the same,” he said solemnly.

“Fine.” Gabriel nodded, already at his wits’ end. No amount of money could buy the right solution here. “Come and try. If you can help Rebecca break out of this loop, we’ll bury the hatchet. But...”

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

Chapter 542

“I understand,” Vance said quickly. “I will never try to win her back. I know I can never be part of her life again.” “You’re smarter than I thought. Come over,” Gabriel said.

When Vance arrived at the Perrys’ house, driven by Gabriel’s chauffeur, the first thing he saw was Josette’s worried face.

He hadn’t seen her in a long time, his heart twisting painfully. The old lady had once loved him so dearly, and he had genuinely planned to take good care of her in her later years.

“Grandma, I came to see Rebecca,” he said, crouching in front of her.

Josette already knew his purpose from Gabriel. Seeing him like this made her heart ache terribly as well. She had once pinned all her hopes on him, believing he would make Rebecca happy. No one had expected things to come to this.

“Go ahead,” she said, feeling both resentment and reluctance.

She couldn’t ignore the things he had done, but Rebecca needed his help now.

Vance followed Gabriel upstairs. The bedroom door was tightly shut.

“My mom is inside with her,” Gabriel explained. “She can’t be left alone, and she won’t open the door for anyone.”

Vance nodded.

“You go in. I’ll stay out here. Too many people might overwhelm her.” Gabriel opened the door for him.

The room had a small sitting area, then the bedroom beyond.

Vance was dressed neatly, with slightly tousled short hair falling over his forehead. His eyes carried a cool, quiet intensity behind the strands.

The moment he stepped inside, he saw Rebecca half-propped against the headboard, her eyes vacant and her face deathly pale. In just a few days, she looked like a completely different person from the vibrant woman who had shone on the Edinburgh stage.

Staring blankly into space, she suddenly noticed his presence and started to panic. She burrowed deeper into the covers, shouting, “Don’t come over! Don’t come over! He’ll see you and say something again! Go away!”

Vance was stunned.

Gabriel rushed inside and yanked him back out. “This isn’t working! Forget it! You’re scaring her!”

He dragged Vance all the way downstairs and urged him to leave quickly.

“That’s all the more reason I can’t leave now.” Vance planted his feet firmly. “Rebecca’s condition is far more serious than we imagined. I’m staying, no matter what. I’d rather have her scream at me, hit me, or even want to kill me than watch her hide.”

But Gabriel no longer trusted him. “What can you do?”

“We have to try something.” Vance thought of Rebecca’s earlier reaction. “Desmond is a damn monster. I knew this would happen. I just didn’t realize it had gotten this bad.”

“You know? Then why didn’t you say so earlier?” Gabriel frowned, tempted to punch him.

And he had the nerve to call Desmond a demon. He wasn’t any better.

Vance then told the story of Desmond forcing him to close the cookie house and his advice that loving someone was like tending a flower.

“Loving someone is like tending a flower.” Gabriel chewed over those words. “You seem to understand everything, yet you did it anyway.”

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

Chapter 543

Vance no longer bothered defending himself, He frowned, thinking about how to help Rebecca stabilize her emotions. At the very least, she needed to steep through the night properly.

He picked a large bunch of leaves and arranged with Josette, Kaitlyn, and Gabriel that if Rebecca showed even the slightest restlessness while sleeping, they should notify kim immediately.

Although Gabriel was skeptical of the method, they were willing to try anything at this point.

At ten o'clock that night, Rebecca had been asleep for about half an hour. The entire house was deathly quiet. No one dared make a sound, afraid of waking her.

But suddenly, a police siren wailed past on the street.

In her sleep, Rebecca's whole body tensed. In the dream, Desmond's face loomed larger and larger as he demanded, "How are you going to repay me? I've given up so much for you. How are you going to repay me?"

Her chest tightened, and her breathing grew rapid. Then, out of nowhere, the sound of someone blowing on leaves drifted in

It was the melody of the Motherland. It sounded so awful that Desmond's face suddenly vanished from her dream.

The scene shifted to the rehearsal room in high school. Their district was holding a competition, and she was choreographing a dance to Motherland.

Those boys were so annoying. They blew so loudly that they drowned out her music. She couldn't even hear the rhythm

She ran to the window. Outside, the sunset painted the sky in fiery red. Somewhere nearby, gardenias were blooming, and their fresh scent floated into the early summer evening.

"Hey! Can you guys stop blowing? I can't hear my music!" She had been ready to scold them, but in the end, she held back.

They were holding a bag of popsicles and waved it at her. "Want an ice pop?"

For that sake, she let them off.

The leaves kept blowing, the music played, and the gardenia scent continued drifting through the open window. She danced and practiced in that fragrant air while the sunset spread like a golden quilt outside.

This was the summer she was 16. She jumped, turned, and tumbled, feeling like she had danced for a very long time until the music finally stopped and she was exhausted.

Watching over her, Kaitlyn almost cried with joy. From ten o'clock until four in the morning, Rebecca had slept soundly for six straight hours without moving.

When she began to frown and toss again, Kaitlyn immediately texted Vance. The sound of leaves blowing started once more, and Rebecca slipped back into a peaceful sleep.

She slept another six hours, waking naturally at ten in the morning. By then, the person sitting in her room had changed to Gabriel.

She caught a faint gardenia scent in the room. She breathed it in and realized why she had dreamed of so many high school memories.

Back then, the campus had gardenias in summer and osmanthus in autumn. The rehearsal room always smelled sweet when she danced.

Gabriel nodded, watching her wake up naturally. "That jerk knows a thing or two. ***

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

Chapter 544

Vance hadn't slept a wink all night, afraid of missing any signal from Kaitlyn or Gabriel. The gardenia -scented diffuser in Rebecca's room had also been his suggestion.

Finally, it was working.

The next step was to get Rebecca out of her room during the day. She needed to move to exhaust her energy so she could sleep soundly at night.

They had originally wanted her to dance, but Gabriel refused, worried it might trigger painful memories.

Josette stepped in, peeking in from the doorway and quickly ducking back out.

"Grandma? Is something wrong?" Gabriel asked, then turned to Rebecca. "I'll go check."

He stepped out and returned a few minutes later.

"What's wrong?"

“Oh. Grandma asked me how to write an apology letter.”

“Why does she need to apologize? To whom?”

“Well, today is supposed to be the day she and a few local families get together. Now she’s not going, so she wants to send over some desserts and write an apology letter.”

“Why isn’t she going?”

Rebecca knew how much she wanted Josette to have her own friends and enjoy life here in a foreign country.

He fell silent, but she understood immediately.

“Let her go ahead. I’ll be fine by myself.”

“It’s not because of you. She doesn’t feel completely comfortable going alone. My mother was supposed to go with her, but something urgent came up. And I have to go to the office. So, Grandma decided to let it pass.”

Rebecca realized right away that, with both Kaitlyn and Gabriel unavailable, Josette was simply worried about leaving her home alone.

She thought about how, for the past several days, she had barely left the house and needed constant company. The three of them had taken turns staying with her, putting so many things on hold.

“When is the gathering? I’ll go with her,” she said.

Gabriel pretended to be surprised. “Really? Grandma has a lot of tasks. She has to do the shopping in the morning, then cook and bake with her friends in the afternoon. That’s why she wanted to write an apology letter. Are you sure you can handle it?”

She nodded, “Yeah.”

He smiled, recalling Vance’s earlier suggestion about using her kindness. That day, Rebecca was so exhausted that her limbs were sore.

In the morning, they went grocery shopping. Even with Aaron and the others accompanying them, she still had to walk everywhere. They bought so many different items that they practically toured the entire market multiple times.

“Are you tired, sweetheart?” Josette asked with concern. “It’s our turn to do the shopping for the gathering this time.”

“Not at all,” Rebecca reassured her.

But in the afternoon, when they cooked together for nearly 20 people—making fresh pizza, bread, and cakes the stand mixers weren't enough: She kneaded the dough until her arms ached.

She had only had a cup of celine that morning and a glass of juice at the market at noon, insisting she wasn't hungry. Yet that evening, she ended up devouring a farge steak, half a pizza, and a pile of other foods

They didn't get home until eight o'clock. She took a shower and fell straight into bed, too tired to care whether anyone was staying in the room with her.

That night, she once again faintly heard leaves being blown and caught the faint scent of gardenias. She slept soundly through the night.

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

Chapter 545

The next few days, Rebecca stayed busy.

She had never realized just how rich and fulfilling Josette's life was. Josette's only real issue was that her French wasn't fluent enough for free conversation, but otherwise her days were wonderfully full.

She accompanied Josette to one of Kaitlyn's company product shows because one of the designs featured Josette's embroidery ideas.

Josette didn't have formal design training, but she knew a great deal about embroidery and ancient jewelry. She had many creative ideas, and Kaitlyn helped turn them into reality.

Josette was supposed to go on stage that day, but Kaitlyn was busy with the show, asking Rebecca to handle Josette's outfit and makeup.

That alone required quite a bit of work. Rebecca helped Josette choose a gown, did her makeup, styled her hair, and got herself ready, too. Then she spent the afternoon at the show with Josette and attended the evening banquet.

By the end, her high heels had her feet aching so badly she could barely walk. Once again, the moment she got home, she collapsed into bed and fell asleep.

Gabriel had a product event aimed at the American community. The scheduled host couldn't make it because of a flight issue, so Gabriel handed the job to Rebecca.

She spent the day memorizing lines, looking up words in the dictionary, and consulting AI because many of the professional terms were so specialized that she didn't even understand them. But she didn't want to bother Gabriel with every single word since he was so busy.

That night, she dreamed she was still translating and reciting host lines. Surrounded by the gardenia scent, she didn't even notice the sound of the leaves. The pressure felt like she was back in high school, preparing for finals.

The next day on stage, she was incredibly nervous, terrified of messing things up. That night, she came home and fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow.

Another day, she went with Josette to the ranch. Only then did she learn that Gabriel's family operated ranches.

Josette wanted to watch the cows being milked, so they spent the whole day running around the ranch. In the evening, Gabriel and Kaitlyn joined them, and they had a barbecue together.

Rebecca ate until her stomach was full. That night, breathing in the fresh air that smelled of earth and grass, she slept straight through until morning.

She was unaware that someone else had come that night as well, though he never showed himself in front of her. He had come prepared to blow on the leaves if needed. But that night, it wasn't necessary.

She slept too deeply and sweetly, and she woke up early the next morning. Josette was still sound asleep, probably tired from the past few days. Even the noise Rebecca made didn't wake her.

Rebecca kept thinking about the pregnant cow and wanted to check. As she walked past their cabin and headed toward the back, she heard Gabriel talking to someone whose voice sounded so familiar.

"What's wrong? How did you get diarrhea?"

"My stomach is a little upset."

"It wasn't because I gave you that cold meat last night, was it?"

"Probably... Yeah."

“You really don’t hold back. How are you feeling? Do you need me to rush you to the hospital? How many times did you get up last night?”

“No need. I took medicine will pass.”

“All right. Anyway, thank you for this. Rebecca finally tnade it out of that dark spiral.”

“You’re welcome.”

Rebecca understood then that everything had been deliberately arranged. The gardenia diffuser hadn’t appeared in her room by accident, and the sound of leaves hadn’t been a dream.

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

Chapter 547

“You can still scold me. That means you’re doing better,” Vance said playfully,

Rebecca raised an eyebrow.

Ever since their divorce, this man had become oddly annoying.

Back when she had held him up like he was the center of her universe and spoiled hita endlessly, he had never taken her feelings seriously. Now he was acting in ways she couldn’t quite understand.

“It was you who blew on the leaves those nights, right?” she asked.

“Well...” He hesitated for a second, then lowered his head. “Yeah.”

He waited for her to scold him, but she stayed silent.

He looked up, uncertain. “What’s wrong?”

“It sounded awful,” she said. “You guys were blowing like that back in high school. Don’t you have any self-awareness?”

“Well...” he chuckled, “apparently not.”

“Don’t tell me you thought you were musical geniuses,” she said, genuinely puzzled by their confidence

“We... were pretty proud of ourselves,” he admitted with a sheepish grin. “Being able to play a tune on a leaf? That’s cool, right? We even used to compete to see who could blow the loudest.”

No wonder the sound had drowned out her music.

“Rebecca,” he continued, leaning back in his chair just like she was, “I don’t know if it’s because I’m getting older, but lately, I’ve been missing our younger days more and more.

“I keep thinking about high school and about playing basketball with Jethro, Darren, and the others on the team. And you... came to almost every game. Even guarded our clothes and bags for us.”

“When did I...”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice. You never talked much; you just stood quietly by our pile of clothes and backpacks, watching the games. I remember one time a clumsy guy almost stepped on our stuff. You protected the pile like a mother hen and told him to be careful.”

She narrowed her eyes, recalling it. Maybe she had, but that was a long time ago.

“You’re not even 30 yet, and you’re already talking about getting old,” she snorted. “Good thing Josette and Kaitlyn aren’t here, or they’d scold you.”

“Mental age has nothing to do with actual age,” he chuckled. “This past year, it feels like I’ve aged ten years—no, 20, maybe even 30. I feel like an old man at the end of his days.”

She didn’t like the atmosphere and started to get up, but he continued, “I brought Darren’s diary with me. His parents let me read it. I’m planning to follow in his footsteps and visit all the places he went.”

She sat back down. “What’s the point of that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe there isn’t one.” He shook his head. “Sometimes when you reach a certain point and have nothing left to chase, you just follow your heart.”

She frowned. “Stop talking like you’re on your deathbed.”

He looked up at the moon. “I’ve never seen stars and moonlight more beautiful than that night.”

Her heart skipped a beat, but she snorted. “You’re imagining things. When the moon is that bright, the stars aren’t visible.” His gaze grew distant. “In my heart, they were

She didn’t know what to say.

“Do you want to come with me?” he asked suddenly. “You haven’t started school yet anyway. Why don’t we go together and see all the places Darren visited?”

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

Chapter 548

“Does Anna know about fits? Rebecca mocked him. “You’re weird. Do you have some kind of obsession with your exes?” Vance glanced at her and gave a bitter smile. “She knows. I haven’t hidden anything from her.”

“Of course. You’ve always been shamelessly open about your affairs. Back when you were with Catherine, you didn’t hide anything from me either.” She stood up, ready to go inside.

“Rebecca.”

“What else?”

“Do you still hate me?”

That question struck like a sudden tornado, stirring up 12 years of buried memories. Sweetness, bitterness, joy, and pain all surged together.

If this had been in the past, she would have looked him in the eye and said coldly, “I don’t.”

She would have told him and herself that they were now strangers. True release meant feeling neither love nor hate, because even hate required energy.

She turned back, her voice as clear and light as the summer wind across the ranch. “I don’t hate you anymore.”

It was true. And it took no effort at all. The past had become as light as drifting clouds.

He nodded. “Good. But you did hate me once, right?”

She thought about it seriously and nodded.

Only after truly letting go could she admit that she had hated him/While she was still hating, she hadn’t dared face it, afraid that the word would reveal her weakness and that in the quiet of the night, the emotions would come rushing back.

“Because you gave me your youth and your health, but I never gave you the same love in return?” he asked under the moonlight.

She tried hard to recall, remembering that when she had saved him, it had been pure impulse and courage.

Later, when she was injured and accepted that she might never dance again, she had never expected repayment from him. She had never thought of marrying him.

If he hadn’t proposed, none of what followed would have happened. When she saved him, it might have been because she loved him, but it might also have simply been instinct..

Her voice carried a misty softness. “Actually, I thought about it later. If it had been a child, an old person, or any stranger on the street, I probably would have pushed them out of the way, too. It just happened to be you.”

“So, what you hated wasn’t that you paid such a huge price. It was what I did,” he said.

“Yes.” She was candid. “I could have accepted that you didn’t love me. Six years ago, if you hadn’t proposed, I wouldn’t have hated you, because marriage isn’t repayment. If during our five years of marriage, at any point, you had told me the truth, I wouldn’t have blamed you. At least, we both tried. Marriage isn’t something you force.”

She paused and added, “When Catherine came back, if you had told me your true love had returned and you wanted a divorce, I might have been sad for a while, but I wouldn’t have hated you. After all, marriage isn’t bondage.

“We could have parted peacefully and wished each other well. Isn’t that what people say? People marry for happiness, and they divorce for happiness, too. Both of us had the right to end it.”

She sighed. “Marriage is about living happily together. What I hated was that you trampled on what I cherished. You lied to me, hurt me, and belittled me just so another woman could gloat.”

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

Chapter 549

Vance heard her out, then said “So you see.”

“What?” Rebecca blinked.

“You already know everything. Marriage isn’t repayment or something forced. It isn’t bondage but about living happily together.

**

She was stunned.

He stood up and walked over to her. “You need to believe in yourself. You’re right. No matter who you marry, it should be to live happily with that person. If not, either person has the right to end it. If the other person refuses, that’s their problem, not yours. You did nothing wrong.”

So, that was where he had been leading her all along.

“True love means wanting to give them the very best you have and still feeling it’s not enough. It’s not about keeping score and expecting repayment. That isn’t love. Don’t you agree?” His eyes gleamed in the night.

“That was how I used to talk in business: I invested so much money in you, and this is the result you gave me? But marriage isn’t business.”

Gabriel had said similar things before, but at the time, her mind had been too clouded. Now the words felt crystal clear.

“Vance,” she said, staring at a mosquito on his neck, “do you regret divorcing me and losing everything?”

He smiled faintly, saying nothing.

“What does that mean? You do regret it?” She frowned. “All this effort these past few days... was it to take everything back?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Would you give it back?”

“I’ll give you...” she slapped the mosquito on his neck, “a slap!”

She ran off immediately, looking at the dead mosquito under the light. The fat thing was now smeared across her hand, full of Vance’s blood.

He watched her retreating figure with a smile.

How could he regret it? Love always left one feeling like they hadn’t given enough. He only regretted not cherishing her. But unfortunately, there was no chance to start over.

His neck itched. He scratched it and felt a swelling bump.

“Rebecca, you will always be the best!” he shouted after her.

That night, Rebecca slept soundly again. She didn’t hear any sounds, not even Vance blowing on leaves.

The next morning, she woke early, but someone had woken even earlier. When she stepped out of the cabin, both Gabriel and Vance were already gone.

Kaitlyn had work at the company, so they couldn’t hide at the ranch forever. It was time to go back and face reality.

A piece of paper was pinned to the post with a thumbtack. On it was a quick sketch of a girl dancing, and below it a line of words: [For the best girl.]

The date was written underneath, along with a little sun to show the weather was clear

After breakfast, Aaron drove Rebecca, Kaitlyn, and Josette back to the city.

They had been away for several days, and a pile of mail and magazines had accumulated. Kaitlyn got off midway to go straight to the company, leaving Rebecca and Josette to sort through the letters together.

There were various bills and a few letters. Josette moved quickly and tried to snatch them from Rebecca’s hands, but she had already seen the sender’s name.

These past few days, she hadn’t used her phone or computer, so messages and emails couldn’t reach her. And Desmond had retorted to writing letters.

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

Chapter 550

Josette treated the letters like poisonous snakes, refusing to let her see them.

“Grandma, it’s okay,” Rebecca said, reaching out. “Only by facing it can I truly move right?”

Josette hesitated for a moment before nervously handing over the letters. Rebecca opened them one by one and read every word carefully.

Desmond apologized and reminisced about many of their past happy moments. He also asked what more he could do to win her back. Hadn’t he already given enough?

“Given“. Her stomach churned at that word.

She picked up the glass of ice water in front of her and drank it all in one go, forcing the nausea down. Only after she had read every letter did Josette, who had been watching her intently, finally relax.

“I told you I’m fine,” Rebecca reassured her.

Gabriel called, saying that Desmond’s parents had come and wanted the two families to have dinner together. He asked if she was willing to go.

Rebecca had a good impression of Desmond’s parents. She didn’t know what their purpose was this time, but after thinking it over, she decided to face them.

No matter what, they needed proper closure. Besides, she trusted that Gabriel wouldn’t put her in danger.

Gabriel supported the idea and said both he and Kaitlyn would accompany her. That evening, she went to the appointed restaurant.

When they arrived, Desmond and his parents were already there.

Joyce was as elegant and graceful as ever. When she saw Rebecca, she offered a perfectly measured smile.

Desmond sat between his parents. He looked thinner, his face a little pale, his gaze lowered. He seemed much more subdued and distant.

“You’re here. Please sit,” Joyce said warmly.

“Thank you,” Rebecca replied politely.

The three of them sat down across from the Schroeders. The rims of Desmond’s eyes reddened. But with his parents present, he only said softly, “Rebecca.”

“Hi, Desmond,” Gabriel greeted him.

The two families sat down to dinner with polite, careful conversation. They exchanged pleasantries for quite a while, but there was a subtle tension in the air.

No one brought up the real reason for the meeting until Joyce gave a soft sigh. Her gaze moved between Rebecca and Desmond before she gently broached the subject.

“Rebecca, the main reason for this dinner is... we wanted to say a proper goodbye. We plan to take Desmond back home. The family business is busy, and Tracy can’t handle everything alone,” she said.

Sean broke his silence and spoke with quiet authority. "Let the past stay in the past. Young people are bound to be impulsive. Once he's back, we'll have him start at the bottom of the company to build some discipline and put aside any inappropriate thoughts."

Joyce's words were indirect, using the family business as an excuse, while her husband was more straightforward, though still polite.

This was both a statement to Desmond and a clear line drawn for Rebecca. It meant Desmond would not continue to bother her, and she should let go as well. There would be no further entanglement between them.

Desmond looked up at Rebecca, then lowered his head again.