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

Chapter 601

Gabriel placed his hands on Rebecca's shoulders and pulled her into a gentle hug.

No words were needed. Some questions simply didn't have easy answers, and sometimes silence was the kindest response.

Vance's situation wasn't optimistic. From Anna, Rebecca learned he had suffered internal organ rupture and multiple fractures in his lower body.

She hoped his injuries were no worse than the bodyguards'—just broken bones that would heal—nothing like the damage that had once affected her ability to walk

She wanted to visit him. Although he was in the ICU, the hospital still allowed visiting hours. The problem was that she was only his ex-wife.

That day, while heading to the hospital to see the two bodyguards, she worked up the courage to call Anna

“Would it be okay if I came with you during afternoon visiting hours to see Vance?”

“I-I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, then I...” Rebecca felt a wave of awkwardness and didn’t push. As the ex-wife, she indeed shouldn’t show too much concern. She whispered, “I just feel really sorry.”

“Let’s wait until he’s better and out of the ICU. I’ll let you know then.”

“Alright.”

After the call ended, Rebecca stood holding her phone, unaware that Josette had walked up to her side.

“Becky...” Josette called gently.

Rebecca quickly composed herself. “Grandma, are you ready? Let’s go.”

Josette wanted to visit the injured young men in the hospital. The kind-hearted elder had been worried about them and had prepared nourishing soup.

“I don’t know what they can eat right now, but we’ll bring some anyway,” she said, packing the soup in containers.

Rebecca’s heart sank again. The two bodyguards could eat most things by now, but Vance...

They left the house with extra caution, traveling in three cars filled with bodyguards. Sant and the other bodyguards were in separate VIP rooms arranged by Gabriel.

One was in orthopedics, and the other in general surgery.

Josette had brought different soups: nourishing chicken soup for Sant’s gunshot wound and restorative soup for the other bodyguard’s fractures. She had also prepared beautifully arranged fresh fruit.

Both young men were stunned. Having rarely tasted this kind of soup, they couldn’t stop once they started and finished an entire container each.

Josette smiled with relief, graciously looked at them, and asked worriedly if their wounds still hurt. The two strapping young men quickly shook their heads.

“If you like it, I’ll bring more tomorrow,” she said, feeling grateful for their protection.

The two bodyguards were deeply touched.

Rebecca and Josette stayed in each room for a while, then left. From the looks of it, both men were recovering well and would likely be discharged in a few days.

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

Chapter 602

The ICU had glass walls. When they arrived, Anna had just finished her visit and was stepping out. Anna looked surprised to see them, then a flicker of panic crossed her face. She walked over and asked, "What brings you guys here?" Her eyes darted toward the doctor's office. Rebecca explained, "I came to visit my bodyguards and thought I'd ask the doctor about Vance's condition. Also..." She was also worried about the medical bills. ICU care was expensive. When they divorced, Vance had given her almost all his money. Later, he had donated most of his father’s inheritance, and his shop had been forced to close.

She had no idea how much he had left or whether he had proper insurance here! The more she thought about it, the more uneasy she felt.

She decided to at least take care of the medical bills.

Anna's expression shifted slightly. "Did you find the doctor yet?"

Rebecca shook her head. "I just got here. I haven't spoken to anyone yet."

Anna then led Rebecca and Josette over to see Vance-through the glass only. He lay motionless, deeply unconscious and looking lifeless.

"He was badly hurt, so he needs to stay in the ICU for now," Anna said. "But the doctor said his condition is stable today. If nothing goes wrong, he should be able to move to a regular room in a few days."

Rebecca stared at the man behind the glass and felt the world tilt/He didn't look nearly as stable as Anna claimed. His injuries seemed far worse than hers had ever been.

"Anna," Rebecca took a shaky breath, "is that really true?"

"Yeah. Right now, I just want him to get better quickly. We still have so many things we haven't done yet," Anna replied, gazing at him.

A faint light shone in her eyes. Whether it was hope or tears, Rebecca couldn't tell.

"I..." Rebecca fumbled for words, but nothing felt appropriate given her position. Her chest felt painfully tight. In the end, she could only manage, "If you need anything at all, please tell me."

"Okay." Anna nodded.

It wouldn't look right to linger too long when they couldn't even enter the room, so after standing there for a while, Rebecca and Josette left.

Josette, with her lifetime of experience, sensed Anna had downplayed the situation. She suggested quietly, "We should talk to the doctor."

"Okay," Rebecca agreed, having the same feeling.

She asked Josette to wait outside, worried the news might be too harsh, but Josette insisted, "You kids don't always have to hide things from me. Keeping me in the dark worries me more."

Rebecca compromised, and they both entered the office. The doctor's explanation was roughly the same as Anna's. Rebecca didn't notice that while she asked questions, the doctor kept glancing in the doorway, where Anna was standing.

Relieved, Rebecca said goodbye to Anna at the door, then quietly found a nurse and paid Vance's hospital bills.

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

Chapter 603

On the way home, Josette was much relieved. However, the moment they arrived back at the house, tension returned.

Desmond was standing right outside. Rebecca was still in the car when he rushed into the middle of the driveway, blocking their path.

"Rebecca!" he shouted, slapping the car window.

He seemed certain she was inside.

"I'll go check," said the new bodyguard Gabriel had assigned, who was sitting in the passenger seat.

Rebecca nodded. "Find out what he wants."

After the bodyguard got out, she cracked her window just enough to hear their conversation.

"Is Rebecca in the car? Ask her to step out and talk to me," Desmond said urgently.

"You can tell me. I'll pass on the words," the bodyguard replied firmly.

"You?" Desmond's tone dripped with disdain. "You can speak on her behalf?"

"Yes," the bodyguard answered curtly.

Desmond grew irritated and moved to slap the window again. "Rebecca, I know you're in there. I have something important to tell you."

"Ms. Perry orders me to pass on your words." The bodyguard stepped between him and the car.

"Anything?" Desmond snapped. "What about private matters? Can you handle those, too?"

Rebecca frowned and glanced at Josette. The latter patted her hand reassuringly. Rebecca was about to roll the window down when the bodyguard answered, “Yes. I’ll decide on Mr. Rossi’s behalf exactly how hard to beat you.”

Desmond pointed at him. “Does your boss know how arrogant you are? If you delay this, can you take responsibility?”

Rebecca opened the window just a little wider so her voice could carry. “Desmond.”

Desmond’s face lit up, and he pushed the bodyguard aside. “She called me!”

But she was still behind the window. Only part of her forehead was visible.

“Just say what you need to say,” she said.

Desmond choked up. “You won’t even see me anymore?”

She sighed. “There is no need for this.”

“I flew here overnight from home the same day I heard the news-just to protect you. And you won’t even see me?” His voice was thick with grievance.

His tone reminded her of how he used to look at her with those puppy-dog eyes. The phrase “for you” made her chest tighten again.

“If you really have something important to tell me, then say it. If you just come to say these things, then I’m going inside,” she said.

“Don’t!” He pressed his hand against the glass and leaned close, desperate to see her.

He spotted Josette on the far side. “Grandma, hello.”

Josette smiled kindly. “Hello, dear. Happy New Year.”

His eyes burned. In this family, maybe she was the only one who would still wish him a Happy New Year.

“Rebecca,” he continued, voice cracking, “I was the first to find out Catherine wanted to harm you. She approached Margaret, tried to stir up hatred, and even hired someone to kill you.

“Margaret ignored her. As soon as I learned about it, I flew straight here to protect you. I didn’t expect Vance to beat me to it.”

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

Chapter 604

Desmond continned desperately, “How much wish it were me lying in that hospital bed right now! Then maybe you’d feel sorry or grateful for me. Maybe you’d take me back.”

The familiar craze burned in his eyes, but Rebecca felt a wave of suffocation. She wearily raised the window a little higher, blocking his eyes from view.

“It’s not like that,” she said tiredly. “Since we’ve alreatly broken up, I genuinely hope you can move forward with your life and stop looking back.”

“No!” he cried out. “That’s not true! You’ve forgiven Vance, haven’t you? You visit him and worry about him, don’t you? You used to hate him so much, and now you feel sorry for him. Why wasn’t it me who saved you? Why?”

Each “why” was punctuated by his slapping the car window. Rebecca felt the familiar throbbing start in her temples.

Josette wrapped her arms around her, gently patting her back, and called out to Desmond. Her voice was gentle but carried a calming strength.

The throbbing in Rebecca’s temples eased.

Outside, Desmond choked with sobs. “I truly love Becky. Do you believe me?”

“I do.” Josette nodded.

Desmond seemed to have found a kindred spirit. He sobbed so hard he could barely breathe. “I would give anything for her. I’d die for her. I really love her so much.”

“Child,” Josette sighed softly. “I know you’re a good boy. But when you love someone, you don’t die for them.”

Desmond froze, and his sobbing stopped.

Rebecca lifted her head from Josette’s arms, thought for a moment, and lowered the window halfway. Her eyes met his bloodshot ones.

“Rebecca...” he murmured sadly.

“Desmond.” Her voice lost its earlier edge.

Maybe it was Josette’s gentle presence, but something in her had softened. She looked at his young face, realizing that ever since breaking up, they had never had a proper conversation.

“I thought you’d never want to see me again,” he sobbed, even the tip of his nose flushed.

“I heard everything you said,” she said gently. “Josette is right. Truly loving someone doesn’t mean dying for them. It means living well for them.”

“Living well?” He froze, still thinking dying was more heroic.

“Yes, living well,” she enunciated. “Because living is much harder than dying. Think about it. If a girl loved you deeply and then you were gone, every time she missed you, she could never see you again.

“Every time she needed you, you could never answer. For the rest of her life, she would have to face the world alone, carrying the pain of losing the person she loved. If you really loved someone, how could you bear to die and leave her with that?”

He was stunned.

“So, Desmond,” she continued, “stop talking so casually about dying. Living well is more important than anything. Only by living well can you truly love someone, walk with her through a long life, and give her the strength to face the world without suffering.”

The recklessness in his eyes was replaced by confusion. “But the person I love is you.”

She shook her head. “Have you ever considered that maybe you don’t actually love me? Maybe you only love the version of me you created in your head?

“Many years ago, when you needed someone to fill the hole in your heart, you happened to meet me. I became your obsession. Over the years, you kept idealizing me.

“Then, because you couldn’t have me, you stubbornly held on. Have you ever thought that if you took off the filter and saw the real me, you might be disappointed?”

“But you are exactly like the person I imagined.” His eyes grew misty. “Gentle, understanding...”

He couldn’t go on, and she smiled bitterly. “See? Gentle and understanding. Just those two words already make me feel tired.”

He looked lost. “Aren’t you?”

“I was like that when I was with you. But that’s because...” She lowered her gaze as memories flooded back. “Because I felt like you were a happy, innocent boy who needed me to be that way. You know, I could never say no when you looked at me with those innocent eyes.”

Not interesting at all.

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

Chapter 607

The next day, Denise sent her a message: [My brother is flying back home this afternoon, and I’m going with hin to spend the holiday. Happy New Year! See you around!]

Rebecca: [Happy New Year!]

For several days, Gabriel didn’t come home. He only to tell everyone hot to worry he was busy outside]

Rebecca figured he was dealing with Catherine.

Sure enough, one night Gabriel finally returned looking unusually disheveled. His stubble had grown out, and the glasses he usually wore for appearances were missing. He looked nothing like his usual polished/self.

“It’s over. Everything has been taken care of,” he said after showering and shaving, then explained everything that had happened over the past few days.

It turned out Catherine had been caught on the same day Desmond came to find Rebecca. The person behind her was someone powerful.

Gabriel wouldn’t reveal the man’s name.

He only told her, “Catherine had something on him. She ran away and made it back to the States, where he stay.

couldn’t reach her. But then, she got into trouble and couldn’t

“She sent out a signal, and he helped her escape back to Europe. She’s been using that leverage to exploit his power, including hiring someone to harm you.”

“Is that person very dangerous?” Rebecca asked.

“To ordinary people, yes. But to me, he’s manageable. Everything has been resolved now. You can relax,’ reassured her.

But she couldn’t fully relax, looking at him with worry.

He ruffled her hair. “Come on, don’t look at me like that. I’m a law-abiding citizen. I would never do anything illegal.”

With that promise, she finally felt relieved.

“The New Year is almost here. Any wishes?” he continued. “Tell me what you want. I’ll buy it for you.”

“I just want everyone to be safe and sound,” she replied earnestly.

“That’s a given.” He nodded. “From now on, there won’t be any more storms. By the way, Josette mentioned something we need to do for the New Year. Let’s help her tomorrow.”

While they were busy preparing for a lively New Year celebration, Vance was still in the hospital.

Since the day she had gone to pay his hospital bills, Rebecca hadn’t visited him again. She continued visiting the two bodyguards, but she never went back to the ICU area.

On New Year’s Eve, Josette suggested visiting the two injured bodyguards and livening up the mood. She prepared gifts and delicacies.

Rebecca noticed there were four boxes, which didn’t make sense. Even counting Vance, there were only three people.

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

Chapter 608

Vance was awake, but his face was ghastly pale.

Over the past two years, he had grown painfully thin so thin that the blanket lay flat over him, barely rising at all. He looked worn down and hollow.

But his eyes lit up the moment he saw the two.

“Grandma...” His voice trembled.

When they got closer, Rebecca realized the glitter in his eyes was from unshed tears.

Josette leaned in and asked softly, “Does it hurt?”

The rims of his eyes reddened. “No, it doesn’t.”

Josette didn’t mention anything painful. She simply smiled and placed the homemade dishes on the bedside table. “It’s the New Year, and I made some Soliaridge specialties. This time of year, you need something warm and familiar.”

“Thank you,” Vance said hoarsely.

“Silly child, if it hurts too much, you don’t have to talk. I understand,” she said gently, then took out a box and placed it on the table. “It’s New Year’s Eve today. Everyone gets a little gift. May you have a long, healthy, and prosperous life.”

Vance couldn’t hold it in anymore. His eyes squeezed shut, tears slipping out from the corners.

“Thank you. I’ll be okay,” he murmured, his lips trembling.

Just saying that short sentence seemed to drain all his strength.

Josette dabbed at his eyes with a soft tissue. “Don’t be sad, child. Get better. I’ll cook for you again.”

“Yeah.” He didn’t dare open his eyes to look at her or the person standing behind her.

Josette took out another box and handed it to Anna. “Sweetheart, this is for you. May good things come your way in the new year.”

Anna looked at Vance, who gave a slight nod. Only then did she accept it and thank Josette.

“I’ll go wash these,” Anna said, picking up the empty plates before stepping out.

There was a sink right in the room, and she didn’t need to leave. Her intention couldn’t have been clearer. She was giving them space.

Josette followed. “I’ll go help her.”

And just like that, only Rebecca and Vance were left in the room.

She had stayed behind Josette, avoiding facing him directly. Now she couldn’t hide anymore, but words still failed her. Memories of the past 12 years came rushing back. They surged and dipped like a roller coaster.

He looked at her and, strangely, grew calmer. He forced a small smile. “Why are you looking down? Do I look that terrible now?”!

She shook her head.

“Help me check the box. See what Josette has got for me,” he said suddenly.

At all times, he cared about that? Then she realized that he was trying to lighten the mood, so she played along You’d better not complain if it’s not fancy enough.”

They both avoided the heavy things, falling into an almost nostalgic rhythm. It felt like they were back in their childhood-curious about what was inside a gift box and sneaking a peek.

He winked. “Take a look.”

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

Chapter 609

Rebecca opened the box as he asked.

“So, what is inside?” Vance struggled to speak.

He must have been in a lot of pain. Every word seemed difficult, yet he refused to stay silent.

Rebecca frowned. “If you’re not feeling well, stop talking.”

He smiled, but the movement clearly hurt. He winced a little. “How can I not talk? I want to.”

Inside were a couple of gift cards, a handwritten note, and a few small, carefully chosen items. She held them up. Gift cards, and look, she even wrote you a note. Satisfied?”

“Yeah.” His gaze softened. “She’s still so thoughtful, always planning and picking things out herself. I remember some years, everything was even matched-same theme, same wrapping.”

That was just how Josette did things. It was her quiet sense of ritual.

Rebecca carefully put everything back.

“If I give her gifts for the New Year, would that be crossing a line?” he asked.

Her fingers paused.

During their five years of marriage, Vance had always been generous. Every holiday, he gave Josette thoughtful, often lavish gifts, and he sent her money every month without fail.

And he made sure she was taken care of.

Her brief hesitation made him misunderstand. His voice lowered. “I just want to show my regards. I won’t bring anything for you anymore. That wouldn’t be appropriate.”

Rebecca set the box down, not expecting those words from him. For a moment, memories of past holidays at Josette’s house surfaced both Vance and Josette indulging her, always making sure she received something special.

“How much money do you have left?” she suddenly asked.

“What, still interested in my finances?” he said playfully.

She rolled her eyes. “Who’s interested in your money? I just...”

She just didn’t want him to end up with nothing.

“Maybe...” She hesitated, trying to find the right words.

“No need.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“I’m fine.”

Rebecca was speechless, but the heavy mood had loosened considerably.

She relaxed a bit and said, “When you’re discharged, you should try the therapy at the clinic. Doesn’t it take months to heal from injuries like this? Let Dr. Davidson check on you and see if there’s a better plan.’

“Sure,” he agreed readily.

Having gone through something similar herself, she hesitated again. “Can I take a look?”

“No,” he refused quickly.

She frowned. “You don’t even know what I want to look at.”

“I’m not wearing pants.”

“I… just want to see how bad your injuries are. I’ve been through this myself and know what to look for.”

“Didn’t you already ask Anna and the doctor? Besides, I’m in the hospital. The doctors will handle everything They know more than you.”

She grabbed her bag. “Fine. You’ve said enough already. If that’s how it is, I’ll go.”

He was still too weak, especially after just coming out of the ICU. With her here, he kept forcing himself to talk and wouldn’t rest properly.

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

Chapter 610

Are you mad?” Vance asked, grabbing her hand.

Rebecca looked down.

The man lying in the bed was frighteningly thin. His lips were bluish, and his eyes were sunken. His bony hand reached out from under the blanket, weakly holding onto her fingers.

She gently pulled her hand free and tucked his back under the collapsed in an instant.

The light mood he had been forcing

“How did you get so thin?” Her nose stung, and the emotions she had

“Why are you crying?” He brushed it off. “The food here is terrible holding back threatened to spill over

That’s all.”

“Then why didn’t you just…” She stopped herself from asking him why he had come all the way here.

Wouldn’t it have been better to stay in the States? Then she remembered Anna was there. Of course, he had to come.

She changed direction. “You can cook, can’t you? Or just hire someone to make proper meals.”

“Too much trouble,” he said with a strained smile. “I’m fine like this. Losing a little weight isn’t bad. I’m almost 30. I don’t want a potbelly.”

“Potbelly?” That familiar ache tightened in her chest again. “You’re skin and bones already.”

He hesitated, his emotion rising and falling before fading away. He couldn’t bring himself to ask if she was worried about him.

In the end, he only managed a bitter smile. “I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.

“Don’t flatter yourself. Do I look worried?” she sighed. “And seriously, stop smiling.”

If he kept doing that, his wound might tear open.

“Is it that bad?” he asked.

She lowered her gaze. “Do you want the truth or a lie?”

He thought for a second. “A lie. My mental state’s a little fragile right now.”

“Not bad,” she said quickly.

Vance was confused. It could be not bad but hard to look at.

His skin had always been pale; now it was almost gray with a faint bluish tint. Dark shadows pooled under his eyes. His cheeks had hollowed out, and there were even a few strands of gray in his hair.

He wasn’t even 30 yet. No one would call him ugly, but no one could bear to look too long either. Every extra second made their chests tighten.

How had that cool and vibrant young man become like this?

Over the past couple of days, Rebecca had looked up information about ICU recovery. Many patients came out drastically thinner, looking years older. But still... She couldn’t stop thinking about how they had ended up like this.

“Get better,” she said quietly. “Tell me if there’s anything you want to eat.”

“What, trying to fatten me up? I just managed to lose a few pounds.”

Will you shut up?”

Just then, there was movement outside. He glanced at the door and muttered, “Grandma.”

Josette and Anna had returned.

“Grandma,” Vance said softly, almost like a child complaining, “I’m sick, and Rebecca is still being mean to me

Rebecca was speechless. When had she been mean? He hadn’t changed after all, complaining to Josette about her at every opportunity.

Josette walked over and gently patted his shoulder. “Child, what would you like to eat? I’ll bring it for you tomorrow.”

Vance thought for a moment. “I want pasta.”

The same kind he used to eat every time he visited her house.

“Alright, I’ll make them for you.” Josette stroked his face. “We’ll head back now. Take a good rest. Once you’re better, you and Anna should come over often. I’ll make sure you both put some weight back on.”

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

Chapter 611

Older people always cherished the idea of raising children to be plump and healthy.

Vance rubbed his cheek against Josette’s palm, his eyes glistening brighter with unshed tears. His pale, grayish lips trembled. “Okay.”

“Good,” Josette said solemnly. “Listen to the doctors, Anna, and me.”

Vance nodded.

Only then did Josette and Rebecca leave the room. Rebecca wasn’t sure if it was her imagination, but both Josette and Anna seemed different now.

Josette’s eyes held a quiet, steely determination, and when they had passed each other in the doorway, Anna had traces of tears on her face.

Rebecca looked back and only saw Anna’s back. The girl stood by Vance’s bed, blocking him from view.

“Grandma,” Rebecca started, “did you say something to Anna?”

Josette nodded. “Yeah.”

“What did you say?” Rebecca pressed, anxiety creeping into her voice. “Was it about Vance’s injury? Is it serious?”

Otherwise, why would Anna be crying?

“It’s not too bad,” Josette replied. “He’s already out of the ICU, which means improvement. The doctor said he’ll keep getting better.”

That aligned with what the doctor had told them earlier in his office.

“Are you really going to cook for him?” Rebecca asked.

“He got hurt while saving us, after all,” Josette sighed. “Gabriel will cover all the medical bills and has hired a caregiver. But the grudges between Vance and us run too deep.

“At this point, I just want to let it all go. This is my personal decision. You don’t have to get involved. Just follow your heart. In fact, I don’t want you to get too close to him. He already has Anna now.” 1

Rebecca murmured in agreement, but an uneasy feeling settled deep in her chest.

It was New Year’s Eve, so the family was busy preparing the holiday feast.

Josette had done most of the prep work early that morning, such as processing vegetables and simmering soup.

When they arrived home, Kaitlyn was directing the chef in the kitchen, while Gabriel held a tablet, studying recipes and offering suggestions.

Kaitlyn’s intuitive, experience-based cooking style clashed with his precise, lab-like attention to measurements and steps.

The poor chef stood between them, looking helpless.

Josette watched their argument and chuckled. “What’s this? A cooking seminar?”

“We were just worried you wouldn’t make it back in time to supervise dinner, so we got started first,” Kaitlyn explained.

“You two think you’re so clever,” Josette teased. “One’s a designer, and the other’s a PhD. What, you need a committee meeting to make dinner?”

The mother and son both burst into laughter.

The atmosphere in the house was warm and festive. Rebecca laughed and celebrated with everyone. They enjoyed the evening together and watched the holiday broadcast on the international channel.

As the youngest in the family, she received their gifts first.

“Alright, staying up late is for grown-ups. Kids get their gifts and go to bed,” Josette said, telling that she was forcing her cheerfulness.

Rebecca had prepared thoughtful gifts for the three of them. After handing them out, she followed Josette’s advice and went upstairs.

The voices and music from downstairs faded away, as if behind a thick fog. Once her world grew quiet, her mood plummeted. All the fake energy drained away.

She lay on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling, her heart clenched tight like it was trapped in a vise.

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

Chapter 612

Rebecca scrolled mindlessly through videos on her phone, but nothing registered.

She didn’t know what she was waiting for, but nothing came in the end. She drifted off to sleep, still clutching the phone.

She dreamed of the whole city being covered in fresh holiday decorations. It was New Year’s Eve. She had left Josette’s house carrying half a roasted chicken, heading to find Vance.

It was Vance’s first New Year after losing his grandmother. The old lady had passed away not long ago.

The weather was bitterly cold. Staying outside too long felt like standing in a freezer-much like the look in Vance’s eyes lately.

Vance and his grandmother lived in a large house-the only thing his father had left him. Rebecca had been there once and remembered the way.

But on this night when every house glowed with lights, Vance's home was dark.

She could imagine the lonely young wolf licking his wounds in the darkness while the rest of the world celebrated.

She thought he had exiled himself to the night. But she was wrong.

She rang the doorbell for a long time, but no one answered. She wondered if he was at a relative's house, but that was impossible.

He had no relatives, and even if he did, his pride would never let him show up looking broken. She wondered if he was at a classmate's place, but that was even less likely. His self-respect wouldn't allow anyone to see him like that.

She could only hope he had found somewhere warm to spend the holiday. Holding the roasted chicken, she headed back and ran into someone else at the intersection.

"Hey," Darren greeted her with a big grin. "Looking for Vance?"

She nodded.

"Whoa, what's that? Smells amazing," he sniffed.

She opened the bag to show him, and he took it without hesitation. "Looks delicious!"

She didn't try to snatch it back. It was better to let him eat it than to let it go to waste.

"I know where Vance is," he said, biting into the chicken.

She looked at him, puzzled.

"Come with me!" He led her to an empty lot.

There in the darkness, Vance and a girl were sitting on the steps, lighting sparklers. In the sparkling light, the girl laughed brightly.

It was the first time young Rebecca had seen Catherine Welch, but the dreaming Rebecca knew exactly who she was. The scene hurt her deeply both in the dream and in reality.

The young Rebecca felt the sting of budding love being crushed before it could bloom. All she remembered was Darren chewing on the chicken, walking circles with her.

The pain woke her from the dream. Her pillow was soaked with tears. Not just because of Catherine or that New Year's Eve with the sparklers, but because of the 12 turbulent years that followed.

If her connection with Vance had ended that night, would everything that came after have never happened? If she could start over, she would rather that none of it had ever begun.

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

Chapter 613

Rebecca tossed and turned, her dreams filled with high school. She woke up but dreamed again. Only in the early morning hours did she finally sleep deeply.

She woke up close to noon.

Downstairs, Josette had already packed lunch for the hospital visit. She had even prepared a French meal in case Anna wasn't used to American food.

"Grandma, why didn't you wake me?" Rebecca said, coming down the stairs.

If she hadn't woken up, Josette might have left alone.

A shadow of worry crossed Josette's face for a split second. "No worries. Visiting him is something I want to do.

"Wait for me. I'll come along," Rebecca said quickly.

She guessed that Josette was doing this because Vance had risked his life to save them, just as Rebecca had once saved him. But he had saved more than just Josette; he had saved her, too.

When they arrived at the hospital, the ward door was closed. Anna opened it as a knock, only to panic at the sight of Rebecca and quickly pull it shut.

"Vance is having his dressing changed," she stammered.

The moment the door opened, Rebecca glimpsed a doctor in a white coat bent over the bed. It really was a dressing change.

"How is he today?" Rebecca asked from the doorway.

"He is doing okay," Anna replied shakily.

The conversation died there. Rebecca lowered her head and waited quietly outside. A long while later, the doctor came out and said the wound was healing well.

The tension in Rebecca's chest eased a little. But when they entered the room, Vance looked even paler than yesterday.

The blanket covered him completely. Seeing her dazed expression, he managed a small smile. "What's with that face? It just hurt a bit when they changed the dressing."

Hurt a bit? She had been there before and understood what it felt like.

Seven years ago, she had lain in a hospital bed just like this, forcing smiles and telling him, "It doesn't hurt. I'm fine. Don't worry."

In fact, she had been in agony.

She didn't say much. Most of the time, she stood at a distance, watching. The caregiver raised the head of the bed so he could eat.

Josette had brought many delicacies, including the pasta he liked. To keep it from getting soggy, she had packed the chicken broth and pasta separately. Now, pouring the hot broth over the pasta made a great dish.

But for a patient, even delicious food could feel like a burden. He could only finish half a plate. After resting for a while, he asked for a few more bites, as if he didn't want to disappoint Josette.

Then he shook his head, looking utterly exhausted. The rims of Josette's eyes reddened. She set the plate down and left the untouched portions for Anna.

Then they left him to rest.

"You don't have to come tomorrow, 11 Vance called after them. "I can't eat much right now anyway. When I'm better, I'll come over. Even if Grandma doesn't cook for me, I'll beg until she does. I can be pretty shameless when I want to be."

He tried to sound lighthearted, but the pain twisted his features.

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

Chapter 614

People always said there was no true empathy in this world. But there was. Right now, Rebecca understood Vance perfectly. Seven years ago, she had done the same thing, constantly saying, "It doesn't hurt. I'll get better. Don't worry."

In truth, it had hurt badly, and she had been terrified.

Vance looked at Josette and then at Rebecca with pleading eyes. “Please, don’t come anymore. I don’t want you to see me so helpless and defeated. When I’m better, I’ll show up looking sharp and strong.”

Josette sighed. “Alright.”

“Becky?” He turned to Rebecca.

She took a deep breath, fighting the sting in her nose, and nodded.

“Promise me you’ll call when you’re discharged,” Josette said solemnly. “I’ll come pick you up and treat you to a good meal.”

He nodded. “I will. I promise.”

From that day on, neither of them visited the hospital again.

A few days later, Sant and the other bodyguard were discharged. But there was still no news from Vance.

Before they knew it, two weeks had passed.

While eating vanilla custard one evening, Josette muttered, “We should be eating these, but he’s still recovering. They might be hard to digest.”

“Don’t worry,” Gabriel said. “I’ve had people check on him. Sent food and gifts.”

Josette nodded.

That night, Rebecca dreamed again.

Lately, she had kept dreaming of high school. Forgotten people and events returned with vivid clarity, as if she were living them. Each time she woke up, she felt disoriented about time and place.

Another ten days or so had passed. School was starting again, and the dance troupe would resume rehearsals. She was going to get busy.

Before that, she wanted to visit the hospital. Even though she knew Gabriel was covering the bills, Vance had been there too long.

Or perhaps she was simply restless and making excuses. She just needed to know how he was doing, even if it were through the doctor.

So, the day before classes resumed, she went to the hospital. At the nurses‘ station, they told her the patient had already been discharged.

“Discharged?” Her heart sank.

She turned and ran out, telling the bodyguard to drive straight to Vance’s house. She knew where it was; she had picked Anna up there before.

On the way, she texted Anna, but there was no reply. She called, but Anna’s phone was off. Panic surged over her like a tidal wave.

When they reached the townhouse, she jumped out before the car even stopped. The gate was locked. She climbed over the fence, rang the doorbell, and pounded on the front door.

No one answered.

The commotion brought out a neighbor. “Hey, are you looking for Vance?”

“Yes. Has he come back?” Rebecca said anxiously.

The neighbor shook his head. “No. He hasn’t been home in a long time- 20 or 30 days? I can’t remember exactly.”

Rebecca felt a wave of utter despair. That was exactly the duration of Vance’s hospital stay, but he hadn’t come home. He had vanished.

“Thank you,” she mumbled, weakly leaning against the fence.

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

Chapter 615

“Ms. Perry?” The bodyguard bad climbed over, too, noticing her expression.

All strength seemed to drain from Rebecca’s body. She slid down the fence until she was sitting on the ground.

When the bodyguard called out to her again, she hugged her knees and burst into tears. All the pent–up stress poured out at once.

She cursed inwardly, “Vance, you bastard! You broke your word again. You said you’d let us know when you were discharged. Can’t I trust you even once?”

But she knew exactly why he had left without a word. He must have been in very bad shape.

Something occurred to her, and she abruptly looked up. These bodyguards, as Gabriel's trusted people, might know something.

"How much did Vance's hospital stay cost?" she asked.

The lead bodyguard paused. "I don't know."

"What did Gabriel tell you?"

"He... Nothing. My job is to protect you."

"I understand." Rebecca sighed, knowing these well-trained men would not reveal anything without Gabriel's order.

She decided to ask him herself.

Gabriel came home late that night, startled to see Rebecca sitting on the second-floor stairs.

"Becky? What are you doing here?"

"Gabe, do you know what happened to Vance?"

He sat down beside her and remained silent.

"Did you see him when he was discharged?"

Gabriel glanced at her and let out a long sigh. "No. The hospital called me after he had left."

"He just disappeared? Even Anna is unreachable. That's unbelievable." Rebecca thought of all the inconsistencies.

"I've been badly injured before. The only reason I would have left without telling anyone back then was that I thought I wasn't going to make it. I would have slipped away quietly so Vance wouldn't know."

Gabriel put an arm around her shoulders. "Not every question in life has an answer. Leave it to tine."

"I'm so confused right now," she said blankly. "I'm sorry for keeping you up. Go get some rest. I'll go to bed too."

“Don’t overthink it,” he reassured her. “I’ll have someone look into it tomorrow.”

She nodded and returned to her room. The gardenia scent there had never changed. She fell asleep surrounded by its clean fragrance.

Someone seemed to be calling out, “Rebecca!”

She turned and saw the winter campus. Her senior-year self was sitting under the basketball hoop, lost in thought.

The person calling out to her was Jenny. The girl grabbed her hand and started running. “Hurry! Vance is fighting Darren Horton from Class 5!”

“Darren Horton? Have they ever fought?” Rebecca had no memory of it.

In the dream, her viewpoint followed the two girls, but halfway there, the dance teacher pulled Rebecca away for practice.

Jenny continued alone, and Rebecca’s viewpoint stayed with her.

By the time she arrived, the fight was already over. It was impossible to tell who had won.

Darren was pointing at Vance’s retreating back and shouting, “If you ever treat Rebecca badly, I will never forgive you!”

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

Chapter 616

Rebecca woke up from the dream. Lying in the faint gardenia scent, she couldn’t recall that scene from high school.

“Why did Vance fight Darren? And why did Darren warn him like that?”

She didn’t know whether she had simply forgotten or whether it had never happened. But if it had never happened, why did it appear so vividly in her dreams?

She was supposed to go to school that day. She thought it was still early until she checked the time. It was already three in the afternoon.

Startled, she hurried downstairs and found Josette was already planning dinner.

“Grandma, how did I sleep so long?” she said, knowing she had to miss school that day.

“Yes, you did.” Josette turned around. “Kaitlyn said you’ve been exhausted lately and told us not to wake you.”

She wasn’t tired, just dreaming too much.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? Are you feeling unwell?” Josette asked with concern.

Rebecca shook her head. “No. I was supposed to go to school. Guess I’ll go tomorrow.”

That night, she set multiple alarms every five minutes. The next morning, she finally got up on time, but she had dreamed all night again.

Being back at school put her closer to Vance’s house. She tried visiting again, but the same neighbor gave the same answer.

She went to his cookie shop. It was locked, with a thick layer of dust on the door and windowsill. She remembered he had promised to come to the clinic for therapy once he was discharged.

Even though she suspected he might break his word again, she still went to the clinic on the slim chance he might show up.

Sure enough, the doctor said he had never seen him. Rebecca stood outside the clinic, feeling whipped by helpless anger and frustration. She sat on the edge of the flowerbed for a long time, unable to recover.

The troupe had resumed full rehearsals. After the long winter break, everyone sighed about their rusty skills, then threw themselves into training with great energy.

The intense physical exhaustion left Rebecca little time to think about anything else. At night, back in her house near campus, she sat alone by the fireplace with all the lights on. The world outside was completely still.

She fell asleep on the rug. Because she had pushed so hard during the day, she fell asleep quickly and slipped straight into another dream.

It was high school again. A psychologist had come to class and asked them to draw a house-

hearts.

any house, or the house in their

Rebecca drew a cookie house. As a child, she had loved fairy tales and envied the witch who lived in a house made of cookies and chocolate. She imagined being able to bite the table when she got hungry.

Vance, who was the group leader and the monitor, came to collect the drawings. He looked at her drawing and sneered, ” Childish.”

She felt upset and lowered her eyes. It stung when the boy she liked dismissed something she cherished. But that afternoon, a piece of chocolate appeared on her desk.

She took it and quietly asked Vance, “Did you give this to me?”

He glanced over. “Would I do something that childish?”

She felt disappointed, but the chocolate was sweet.

Inside the dream, a voice inside her shouted, “Cookie house! Cookie house!”

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

Chapter 617

In the shouting, Rebecca Stirred awake. The first thing she did was pull on her shoes and run outside.

She raced all the way to the dusty cookie shop, stared at the closed chocolate–colored door, covered her face, and let the tears pour through her fingers.

There were some things she had long forgotten. A casual class assignment. A random doodle...

Why did it have to be like this? They had agreed that after the divorce, they would be strangers and never see each other again.

She muttered, “Vance, I really hoped we could just be strangers. You don’t have to do anything more for me. Go find your own happiness. If only I had never liked you in the first place, then none of the later stories would have happened.”

From that day on, she never saw Vance again. Yet she never forgot his face, because every few days he appeared in her dreams, along with their old classmates and long–ago events.

Reliving those years in her dreams was so mentally exhausting that she became incredibly sleepy. She had trouble waking up in the mornings and once slept for two full days on one weekend.

Her family grew worried and took her for every test imaginable, but nothing was wrong.

The most frightening episode came during summer break after a tour. She slept for five straight days and woke up in the hospital.

Her family had been terrified and rushed her there. Even the commotion of being moved hadn't woken her. Still, the hospital found nothing abnormal.

When awake, her body functioned perfectly. She could even perform demanding, high-intensity routines.

Her family advised her to pause her studies until they figured out what was wrong. They were afraid she might fall asleep somewhere on campus without anyone knowing.

It happened a couple more times over the summer, but the problem eased once school started. She didn't stop her studies. Facing everyone's concern, she promised to come home every night with bodyguards escorting her.

Only then did they agree to let her continue. Fortunately, she didn't need to go to campus every day. Because she had research to do.

Gabriel arranged a female bodyguard who could stay with her around the clock.

Under their careful protection, Rebecca made it through year after year. On the day she received her doctorate, the whole family attended her graduation and took photos with her.

That same year, her dance troupe gained international recognition. She began seriously considering whether to stay in Europe or return to the States.

Whatever she decided, she planned to go back to Soliaridge first and visit her old high school. After all, all her dreams had been about those three years.

First, she needed to pack. Most things in the house near campus could stay, but some important items needed sorting

She visited Archer and the others at the clinic. This goodbye might last a long time.

An impulse drove her to see the cookie shop one last time. She never expected to run into Anna there.

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

Chapter 618

Anna stood in front of the cookie shop, staring at the closed display window.

The shop looked even dirtier than last time. Rain had turned the dust into muddy streaks that covered everything.

Anna watched for a while, then started wiping it with a paper towel. But years of grime couldn't be cleaned easily.

"Anna," Rebecca called out.

Anna shivered before turning around with a strained smile. "It's you."

"You are back?" Rebecca tried to calm her racing heart.

"Yes," Anna replied. "I came back a long time ago."

"A long time ago?" Rebecca muttered, confused. "How long?"

Had she and Vance split up? Or had they returned together?

"Soon after Vance was discharged," she replied.

Rebecca stood frozen, unsure of how to ask Anna about the details. She managed, "Is his recovery not going well?"

She wondered if his leg had been left with a permanent issue like hers, or worse. That might explain why Anna had left him.

Anna looked down. "No, it's manageable."

Rebecca breathed a sigh of relief. But why had Anna come back alone? Where was Vance?

Anna looked up, her eyes full of quiet pain. "Actually, I wasn't his girlfriend." 1

"What?" Rebecca's mind went blank.

“I was just…” Anna paused, swallowing her words, then gestured at the cookie shop. “He needed staff for the shop. I was just hired help. He paid me double, so I would pretend to be his girlfriend in front of you.”

“What? Why?” Shock left Rebecca unable to think straight, but before she could finish, she understood.

Of course. Because she had said they would be strangers from then on.

“He said he wanted to be near you,” Anna murmured, a trace of resentment in her eyes.

Rebecca understood the look. “You like him, don’t you?”

Anna didn’t answer. After a long moment, she smiled bitterly, her eyes shimmering. “It doesn’t matter.”

But one thing still didn’t sit right with Rebecca. If Anna were only an employee, why had she followed him everywhere?

“Goodbye, Rebecca,” Anna said, turning to leave.

“Wait! Can you tell me where he is?” Rebecca called after her.

Anna turned back and shook her head. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Didn’t he tell you anything about where he was going?”

“He did.”

Rebecca’s spirits lifted. “Where?”

“He said he was going to find that person.” Anna made a writing gesture. “The one who wrote the diary.”

“Darren Horton?”

“Yes.”

“But…” Darren was gone. Rebecca’s mind spun. “Please be clear. Did he mean he was going to retrace Darren’s travel route, or…

She couldn’t finish the sentence. It couldn’t be that He must have meant the route.

“I don’t know,” Anna replied. “That’s what he said. He told me not to follow him anymore.”

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

Chapter 619

Rebecca stood on the sidewalk as people streamed past. She stared at the chocolate-colored window, feeling empty inside.

Later, the bodyguard came to take her home. Even as she walked away, she still felt hollow, as if her body had become weightless.

In the car, the low hum of the engine sounded like a white noise that made her feel even more detached. She closed her eyes. If not for her phone suddenly ringing, she might have fallen asleep.

It was Heather, now the troupe's assistant director and her most reliable helper.

"Rebecca, are you really going back to the States? I wanted to go over the autumn performance schedule with you."

"Yes, probably in the next few days. The plan we discussed last time was good. Send me any changes."

"Got it. I'll send them now."

Rebecca reviewed the file in the car, made a few adjustments, and told Heather to proceed with the updated version.

Heather: [When are you going back?]

Rebecca was stumped. She typed and deleted her reply twice before answering vaguely: [Not sure yet. I'll have to leave the troupe in your hands for now. I'll contact you as soon as I'm back in Soliaridge.]

Heather: [Safe travels.]

The conversation helped pass the ride. Rebecca dozed a little and soon arrived home.

These past few days, the main topic at home had been her decision to return to the States. When she and Josette had first arrived, Kaitlyn had suggested immigration options.

At the time, they were worried Josette might not adapt or might miss home, so they had left it open- ended.

Years later, Josette had settled in fine. At the same time, Gabriel's company had grown significantly. He had now spent half the year there and, despite growing up in Europe, preferred life back in the States.

So, the final choice came down to what Rebecca and Josette wanted.

Gabriel was home that day. He had promised to investigate Vance's whereabouts, but even with all his resources, he had found nothing.

It was as if the man had vanished from the earth. In an era of big data and advanced Al, how could someone simply disappear?

The first thing Gabriel said was, "We found Anna."

He was too sharp. One look at her face told him she already knew. They shared a brief, understanding silence. Neither had any new useful information.

"Gabe," Rebecca said before going upstairs, "Anna told me she was never Vance's girlfriend."

Gabriel didn't reply. His silence confirmed he already knew.

I'm going up to change." Rebecca went to her room, showered, put on pajamas, and lay down for a nap.

People were contradictory creatures. There had been a time when she feared she couldn't fall asleep. Now she feared falling asleep the moment she hit the pillow.

From experience, falling asleep too easily usually meant it would be hard to wake up. She slipped into another dream. This time, it was different.

School had just let out, and a basketball game had just finished. She held a bottle of water as Vance and the other boys from the team walked toward her.

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

Chapter 620

The Vance in front of her had never been so vivid.

Rebecca could see the faint stubble on his chin, the tiny beads of sweat on his brows catching the golden light of the setting sun.

In previous dreams, she had been an observer. This time, it was first-person. She stood right in front of Vance.

“Aren’t you going to give me the water? What are you spacing out for?” Vance said.

She snapped back, realizing she had been gripping the bottle tightly.

“Because she’s staring at me!” Another boy came up behind Vance with a cheeky grin and slung an arm around his shoulders.

It was Darren. This was the first time Rebecca had looked closely at him. Back in high school, he hadn’t been an important figure, so she had never paid him much attention.

So, this was what he looked like.

Their eyes met. For some reason, she saw something strangely familiar in his gaze.

“What are you two looking at?” Vance frowned, glancing between them.

“Nothing. I’m thirsty.” Darren reached out and snatched the bottle from her hand.

“That’s my water!” Vance protested.

Darren shook the bottle. “Does it have your name on it? Call it and see if it answers.”

“It’s in her hand. Who else could it be for?” Vance clenched his teeth. “You?”

“Yep!” Darren grinned, then spoke to the bottle. “Darren’s water, say something!”

He shifted and answered in a high-pitched tone, “Here, master! Your water is right here.”

Rebecca was speechless, not expecting boys at that age to be so childish. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and walked away.

It was the weekend. She was heading to Josette’s house.

Walking the familiar route, she felt a surreal yet intensely real sensation. It was hard to believe this was only a dream. She could even feel the slight pain when her sneaker stepped on a small pebble.

When she reached the familiar bus stop and the sweet smell of roasted sweet potatoes drifted from the nearby stand, her confusion deepened.

“Rebecca,” someone called out.

She looked sideways and saw Darren standing there, waving the bottle. “Thanks for the water.”

She blinked. “You take the bus too?”

“Yeah!” He nodded. Tm going to a friend’s place

She had nothing more to say.

When the bus came, she hopped on as usual, while Darren got on right behind her. She glanced back and he looked surprised.

“You take this line too? Where do you live?”

“Syliaview.”

It was out in the suburbs. This route went straight there.

“Oh.” Darren didn’t say more.

He pulled out a handheld game console and started playing. Sitting in front of him, Rebecca watched the scenery pass by, but her mind was in turmoil.

When the bus reached the end of the line, she stood up and realized Darren was still on board, focused on his game.

“Your friend lives out here? This is the last stop,” she said, puzzled.

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

Chapter 621

Darren smacked his forehead. “Shoot! I got so caught up in the game that I missed my stop.

Rebecca shrugged, getting off the bus. To her surprise, Darren followed right behind her. She had already walked a good distance before she heard footsteps jogging to catch up.

He wore a helpless, slightly sheepish expression. “My friend just called and said he had to leave suddenly. I’ve got nowhere to go now. Any chance I could come to your place for dinner?”

Rebecca blinked. “Why don’t you just go home?”

“If I go home, I’ll be alone,” Darren said with a cheeky grin. “My parents are overseas on business again.” Rebecca was lost for words. But then, she remembered that Darren had died in real life. His parents, who were in international trade, had taken him abroad for college right after high school.

A pang of sympathy hit her, even in the dream. “Fine. Come with me.”

Darren’s face lit up with genuine delight, and he immediately fell into step beside her. She soon discovered that he was surprisingly entertaining.

He could get excited over the smallest things. He always wore his emotions on his sleeve and had a naturally sweet way with words. By the end of dinner, he had Josette beaming from ear to ear, laughing heartily.

When it grew dark, he knew better than to overstay his welcome. He thanked them warmly and took the bus back by himself.

“Becky, is this a new classmate of yours?” Josette asked curiously. “I don’t remember seeing him at the parent-teacher meeting.”

Rebecca knew exactly what worry lay behind the question. “He’s from the class next door. He came looking for a friend today but couldn’t find them. His parents are often away from home.”

“Oh.” Josette nodded and didn’t press further.

In her previous dreams, the scenes had always taken place at school. This was the first time she had seen her grandmother at this age. Josette had not yet suffered that terrible abuse and still looked energetic and healthy.

“Grandma…” Rebecca leaned into her arms. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“You always know how to act cute,” Josette chuckled.

Rebecca’s heart pounded as she lay in the familiar embrace and breathed in the faint scent of soap on Josette’s clothes. It felt far too real, like she had truly gone back to high school. How could she be talking so naturally with Josette inside a dream?

That night, surrounded by Josette’s comforting presence, she fell asleep. She thought if she woke up in her Paris home, this would simply be an especially vivid dream.

What woke her was the barking of a dog from somewhere in the village-the same sound she remembered from back then.

She opened her eyes and found herself lying in bed alone. Josette had already gotten up and was probably making breakfast.

Rebecca sat up and looked around. The fragrance of flowers in the yard, the morning breeze, and the aroma of food from the kitchen all felt incredibly sharp and vivid. Who could dream of this level of detail?

“Becky? You’re awake? Come eat breakfast. I made your favorite pasta with meat sauce,” Josette said with a smile.

Rebecca sat there stunned for a long time.

Just like that, a whole week passed. When she stood at the school bus stop again, waiting to go home, she finally started to believe this wasn’t a dream.

By this time, web novels already existed. She had read stories about rebirth and time travel. Maybe somehow, she had become one of those characters.

While she was lost in thought, someone suddenly appeared in front of her.

“Hey, what’s been going on with you this week?” Vance asked.

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

Chapter 622

Rebecca looked at the boy, feeling both familiar and distant.

The familiar part was his refined features and cool expression. The strange part was the questioning look in his usually indifferent eyes-a look that suggested there were still things in this world he cared about.

“What do you mean?” she asked back.

This week, she really had been out of it. She was trapped in this dream and couldn’t wake up.

She had thought that since her longest sleep before had lasted five days, she would simply wait it out. Now five days had passed, and she was still here.

So, of course, she had been drifting through the week in a daze. Had she really taken over her younger self’s body? Was she unable to go back?

“You’ve been ignoring me when I talk to you, but you’re all smiles with Darren from the next class. What are you doing?” Vance’s voice carried an inexplicable edge of irritation.

She was baffled. “When have I been chatting and laughing with Darren?”

“Last Monday!” he replied with a frown. “You two came to school together. He even bragged about going to your house for dinner. When did you two get so close?”

She involuntarily stepped back, unsettled by his fiery attitude. In high school, Vance always had that annoying look as if he was the only one sober and everyone else was an idiot.

“We didn’t come to school together,” she replied thoughtfully. “We just happened to meet at the gate.”

“Happened to meet? And he just happened to have dinner at your house, too?” Vance pressed aggressively.

She paused, then nodded. “Yeah, it indeed was a coincidence.”

They had coincidentally taken the same bus, and Darren’s friend had coincidentally stood him up.

Vance’s eyes held clear mockery. “You think I’m stupid?”

The bus arrived. As she moved to board, Vance grabbed her backpack.

“What?” she looked back.

“Stay away from Darren,” he demanded.

“Why?” She frowned, jarred by his strange behavior.

“He’s not a good guy. He has bad intentions,” Vance said.

She felt even more off-balance. “Aren’t you two friends? Why are you talking about him like that?”

“Just listen to me, okay?” he paused, his gaze turning cold. “Do you trust him more than me?”

“Why should I listen to either of you?” She frowned. “Can’t I listen to myself?”

She pulled her backpack free and got on the bus.

As the familiar scenery passed by, her brows remained tightly knitted. The earlier conversation with Vance had never happened in her original high school days.

“What is going on? Have I really gone back in time?”

She had read plenty of those novels, but she still found it hard to believe it was happening to her. This state continued for nearly a month, and she was still there.

She began to waver. “Maybe, I have truly returned to the past. Would everything really start over like in those stories?”

She still had doubts, but she started thinking about what she would do if this were real. All the ups and downs of the next ten-plus years had stemmed from her stubborn feelings for Vance.

If she could start over, she would not fall for him again. And if he had never met Catherine, many later tragedies might have been avoided.

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

Chapter 623

So, whether this was real or not, there were two things kebecca had to do.

One was to stop her younger self from liking Vance. The other was to stop Vance from Hiking Catherine.

That way, he wouldn’t spiral after losing Catherine. She wouldn’t get into a car accident trying to save him. They wouldn’t get married, and he wouldn’t have to save her later.

Even if it was just a dream, she would do her best every single day she spent in it. Who knew? She might really rewrite history.

Her dreams over the past few days had jumped around–sometimes before graduation, sometimes during Vance’s grandmother’s illness, and sometimes right at the start of freshman year.

This time, she had returned to an earlier stage when nothing major had happened. Vance’s grandmother wasn’t sick, and Catherine hadn’t appeared yet. There was still time to change things.

The arts–science stream selection was coming up soon. In the original timeline, she had stupidly chosen the science stream even though she wanted to pursue arts, so she could be in the same class as Vance.

She knew the college admission system had changed in later years, but in this era, the division between arts and science was strict. Many dance academies and programs didn't accept science students.

She had chosen it anyway, quietly doing her research. Since Vance planned to attend a local university in Soliaridge, she figured she could find an arts program there that accepted science students.

But everyone knew how limiting that choice was.

Her dance teachers had been shocked because it cut her off from the top program at the prestigious Arelmoor Dance Academy.

But she had insisted.

If she could do it over, she wouldn't make the same mistake. She would firmly choose arts. So, when Josette asked her that weekend, she answered without hesitation, "I'm choosing arts

Josette would support whatever she picked and had only asked to chat. As the two of them were talking, her phone buzzed with a message.

Darren: [We're going to be in the same class!]

Of course, he had chosen arts, too.

At the start of the next week, she ran into Darren outside the school again. He called out to her and ran over. "Rebecca, why didn't you reply to my message? We're about to be classmates!"

Everyone had assumed a dance student like her would naturally choose arts. But in the original timeline, she had shocked everyone by picking science.

"When you asked, I hadn't decided yet, so I forgot to reply," she explained.

"So, what did you pick? It's decided, right?" Darren looked at her with an expression that said there was only one possible answer.

"Of course, she picked science," a voice cut in.

Vance pushed his way between them.

Darren looked amused. “You want her to pick science when she dances?”

“Why not? Science isn’t forbidden for dancers,” Vance shot back.

“You’re being too selfish!” Darre countered. “Do you know how much harder it is for a dancer to get into a good program on the science track? How can you ruin her future just for your desires?”

Vance stiffened.

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

Chapter 624

Vance’s face cycled through different shades.

Embarrassed and unable to back down, he finally lashed out. “Rebecca and I will figure out our plans. What does it have to do with you?”

“No,” Darren shot back. “This is her own business. It has nothing to do with you or me. She dances so well and has won so many awards. She should aim for the best dance academy and the top performance program No one has the right to stop her.”

“When did I ever stop her from going to the best school?” Vance thundered.

“Making her choose science automatically limits her options for schools and majors!” Darren boored.

Vance’s chest heaved with fury. He fought to control his temper and spoke to Rebecca in a low voice. “Whether you choose arts or science is your own decision. Don’t let outsiders influence you.”

“I’m an outsider?” Darren laughed.

Vance gave him a disdainful look and walked off.

Rebecca watched their argument in confusion. Both boys were acting strangely.

In her original high school days, Darren hadn’t been close enough to her to interfere with such a big decision. And back then, Vance had never cared what stream she chose.

What was going on with them now? Just this alone made her believe she was still dreaming. Things like this would never happen in reality.

After Vance left, Darren walked beside her at her pace, looking in a good mood. “By the way, Rebecca, my parents just sent me some allowance. To thank you for that dinner, let me treat you to a meal.”

She was still distracted. “Are we eating cicada nymphs or locusts?”

Judging by the timing, they should have already gone bug-hunting together recently.

But he looked startled. “Why would we eat that stuff? It’s gross!”

Rebecca was stunned but didn’t press the matter. After all, this was a dream–everything could be different. So far, she had already changed things dramatically.

She spent the walk wondering why the dream differed so much from her memories. It was probably a projection of her inner thoughts.

Because she had liked Vance in high school, the dream showed him getting angry over her stream choice. Because she had thought about Darren a lot recently and even buried his belongings under an old camphor tree, the dream made him close to her.

“As for the bugs... since I hate eating them, Darren doesn’t either in the dream? That must be it. But if this really is a dream, when would I wake up?”

She looked dejected and kept sighing.

“Hey, don’t be upset,” Darren said. “If you really want to eat that stuff, just tell me where to find it. I’ll go with you.”

“I don’t want to eat it.”

“Then is it because of the stream selection?”

She shook her head. If this dream continued, she wouldn’t choose the same stream as Vance.

Thinking of Darren’s eventual fate, she turned to him. “What about you? What are your plans? Are you going abroad for college?

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

Chapter 625

If possible, Rebecca wanted to persuade Darren not to go overseas. Maybe that would prevent his early death, though it felt like overstepping.

Darren shook his head. “I’m not planning to go abroad. I’ll attend a domestic university. Didn’t I tell you? I chose arts. We’re going to be classmates.”

Soon, it was time for the official stream selection.

Ever since the confrontation at the school gate, Vance had stopped speaking to Rebecca. When collecting homework, he would take it from her desk without a word.

The teenage Rebecca would have been heartbroken. She had lived and died by Vance’s moods. But now she was over 30. She only hoped that if they could start over, they would both be better off staying far apart from the beginning.

So, when he stayed silent, she did too. In fact, she felt relieved that they were drifting apart.

As the end of the term approached and it was time to submit their stream intention forms, everyone was discussing their choices.

Some were still struggling, and others were upset because their wishes clashed with their parents‘ expectations.

Her desk mate slumped over the desk. “Rebecca, you’re so lucky. You don’t have to worry at all–just pick arts.”

That was the usual path for dance students back then.

“Who says so?” Jenny turned around from the front seat. “Rebecca has already decided to pick science.”

Her desk mate was shocked. “For real? A dance student picking science? Your options will be so limited!”

Picking science had been her old plan; she hadn’t yet told Jenny about the change. She was about to explain that she would choose arts when a voice came from behind.

“People with real ability aren’t afraid of choices. You can only attend one university anyway. Why so many options?” Vance said.

After days of ignoring her, he finally spoke.

More than ten years ago, the lovestruck Rebecca had chosen science for his sake, even risking not ending up in the same class. She had filled in the form without hesitation, planning to attend a local university that accepted science students for a few performance programs.

Later, heartbroken, she had applied to schools in Arelmoor, but only directing programs that accepted science students.

Once in college, with almost no chance to transfer to performance, she had worked incredibly hard, relying on years of training and perfect proportions to win first place in every competition before finally getting approval to switch majors.

Only she knew how difficult and exhausting that journey had been. So, if she could choose again, she would take the smoother, more natural path.

“I plan to...” She started to explain when Vance walked up to her desk. “Where’s your form? Let me see it.”

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

Chapter 626

Rebecca didn’t want to showin

The form had been handed out a while ago. Her old self had filled in science, and she hadn’t changed it yet.

Vance frowned at her hesitation. “Take it out. We have to submit it soon. You didn’t really... listen to Darren, did you?” “Darren? What did he say?” Jenny asked curiously.

Rebecca glanced at Jenny and decided not to explain right then.

“I thought about it, and I’m going to...” She was about to say “arts” when Vance suddenly yanked her backpack away.

She reached to grab it back. “What are you doing?”

But he had already pulled out the folder. Her form was right on top, clearly visible through the transparent sleeve: science.

The corner of his mouth curved up slightly. He returned the backpack, took the form out, and said, “Submit it.”

“No!” she said quickly. “My parents haven’t signed it yet.”

He checked and saw the parent signature line was still blank. He hesitated, then handed it back.

The form was due that week, but since Rebecca had only arrived in this dream recently, she had forgotten. She arranged with the home teacher to submit it two days late on the weekend.

The home teacher agreed, since Friday or next Monday made little difference.

Vance didn’t ask again until the next Monday. “Did you submit it?”

“I did.” She had turned it in early that morning, after changing science to arts.

Vance said nothing more and left.

Later, she overheard him talking to Darren. “Rebecca has already submitted science. There’s no way she’d pick arts. You thought too much.”

“So what?” Darren retorted. “It only proves how selfish you are.”

“You have the nerve to call me selfish? Pushing her toward arts isn’t selfish?”

“What do you take her for? A sidekick? A pet? Someone to play with when you’re happy and kick aside when you’re not?”

“What does it have to do with you? She likes me!”

Rebecca turned to walk away.

So, Vance had always known she liked him. Of course. A teenage girl’s feelings, no matter how well hidden, couldn’t stay completely invisible.

Yet even knowing that, he had still gone after Catherine after graduation and applied to the same schools as her.

That was ancient history now. The grievances between them had long been worn away by time. In this dream, they should just stay far apart.

She hadn’t expected she would still have to take exams in the dream, though. It had been over ten years since her college graduation.

Fortunately, the qualifying exams were already done, or she was worried she might not even pass.

Her final scores were far from ideal. Literature was nearly perfect, but everything else was mediocre–especially science, which she had completely forgotten.

On the other hand, her arts subjects benefited from her later studies in art history and doctoral research. Her history and geography knowledge were solid, so while not outstanding, the scores weren't disastrous.

The last day of the term was for checking class assignments and receiving final grades. As soon as she went through the school gate, Rebecca saw Vance standing with a dark expression right in her path.

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

Chapter 627

Rebecca had a bad feeling. But Vance had already spotted her, and his eyes showed no intention of letting her pass.

She walked over reluctantly. Vance was holding a copy of the entire class's score sheet. As the monitor, he would have seen all the results first.

"Look at this," he said, pointing at her scores. "Look at how you did! You didn't pass a single science subject?"

She had nothing to say. It had been over ten years since she last touched this material. How could she remember it? Back then, she had struggled with science anyway; she had only chosen it for his sake.

"If you keep slipping like this, how are you going to get into college? Even as a dance student, with grades this bad, you won't make it," he lectured, sounding like the homeroom teacher.

"I know. I'll work harder from now on," she muttered, walking past him.

That day, the class assignments would be posted on the bulletin board.

"Wait! Where are you rushing off to?" Vance caught up. "Got a date with someone?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

He pointed at the score sheet again. "Why did you do so well in literature? You used to score half at best!**

“Can’t I improve?” She couldn’t tell him she was now a PhD who had lived in France for years.

“Are you planning to study abroad with Darren?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Good. Don’t listen to him. Studying abroad isn’t something every family can afford. Darren’s family does international trade, so they can support him, but you should know your family situation.”

Even though she had already experienced the worst of him during their marriage, the words still stung. The current Vance shared a key trait with the man she had been married to: arrogant, superior, and condescending.

Darren had been right about Vance treating her like a pet, playing with her when he was happy and kicking her aside when he was not.

Their five years of marriage had been exactly like that. He had kept her in a golden cage, giving her the best materially, but only coming home when it suited him. He never believed she could fly on her own.

“Thanks for the reminder. I know how to make my own choices,” she said evenly, walking past him toward the bulletin board. He followed, still convinced she would be in the science class.

He kept on chattering, “With these grades, you won’t get into the experimental class. Whose fault is that? You didn’t work hard. But it’s okay; there’s still time. Come find me for tutoring. I’ll help you catch up so you can be in the same class as me... Jenny.”

He paused and added, “Don’t slack off. Don’t listen to Darren’s nonsense. Start learning during summer break. The school has summer classes. After class every day, give your homework to Jenny and me to check. And I’ll give you extra assignments.

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

Chapter 628

“Good thing your foundation wasn’t too bad. If you work hard...” Vance continued as they reached the bulletin board.

It was already surrounded by students chattering about which class everyone was in. Cheers erupted whenever good friends ended up together.

Rebecca ignored the science section and went straight to the arts list.

“Hey, where are you going?” Vance started, then suddenly realized something and followed her.

On the list for the Arts Experimental Class 1, he saw Rebecca’s name.

“You lied to me?” His voice carried a chill that felt icy even in the summer heat.

Then silence. By the time she turned around, he was already gone.

Darren walked over, laughing. “Rebecca, we really are in the same class!”

His name was also on the Arts Experimental Class 1 list.

“I’ll treat you to dinner today to celebrate!” he exclaimed.

She didn’t agree.

Darren always talked about owing her a meal, but it wasn’t really a big deal. Besides, her parents had called, telling her to join them at a restaurant that evening to celebrate the stream selection and set an example for Emmett.

She didn’t go, aware of the scheme behind that meal. The same thing happened in the original timeline.

They had barely paid attention to her growing up. Whenever they reached out, it was never for anything good.

She hung up the phone, finished her school matters, and went to Josette’s house. She still had a few days to spend with her grandmother before summer classes started.

She never expected an uninvited guest. They had just finished cooking and were about to eat when footsteps sounded outside.

“Mom! Mom!” Soren shouted.

After more than a decade, Rebecca saw her father again, but all she could think of was how he had abused Josette. Hatred surged inside her.

Soren walked in with Adeline and sat down without ceremony. There were only two dishes, but the couple quickly devoured most of the meat.

Rebecca angrily cleared both plates away.

“What are you doing, you wretch? Soren cursed.

Josette scowled. “What did you just say?”

“I said she...” Soren caught himself at Adeline’s signal, finally remembering the purpose of their visit.

Rebecca stepped protectively in front of Josette and laughed coldly. “He called me a wretch. I wonder who gave birth to me?”

“How dare you talk back!” Soren slammed his fork down.

The teenage Rebecca would have been terrified. But the current Rebecca wasn’t afraid at all.

If he hit her, she would hit back. If she couldn’t win, she’d grab a chair or a plate. In the worst case, there were knives in the kitchen.

She had no problem going crazy if needed. But Soren held back. Pulled by Adeline, he sat down with a dark expression. “Becky, why would you say that about yourself” Adeline mediated,

“When did I say it about myself? Rebecca snorted. “He called me a wretch. I just wanted to know why.”

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

Chapter 629

Soren struggled to hold back his anger. Whatever they wanted that day must be something big. Adeline tried to smooth things over. “Your dad didn’t mean it that way. If just slipped out ”

“Slipped out? That’s how you talk about your own child? Is that how a father should act?” Josette questioned, pulling Rebecca protectively into her arms. “You two should leave. I didn’t cook for you. Ga eat at your own home.”

“We didn’t come to scold Becky,” Adeline said hurriedly. “We have great news for her.”

Unimpressed, Josette firmly pointed at the door and told them to leave.

“Important guests are coming. Why are you kicking us out?” Soren said impatiently. “You think I want to come to this countryside place? It’s because... this stubborn girl refused to go to the restaurant. They set up a really big spread for her.”

He had almost called her a wretch again. Still, it wasn’t anything nice.

“Important guests?” Josette sneered, holding Rebecca even tighter. “They can’t be good people. You should leave I can’t entertain them.”

Soren threw down his knife. “You don’t know what is good for you! Think about who’s going to support you in your old age! Leave yourself a way out!”

“You...” Josette had never expected anything from him, but those words still hurt her feelings. “You ingrate!”

Rebecca knew this heartless man wouldn’t support Josette. Worse, he would later torment Josette viciously. The image of Josette lying helpless in filth flashed through her mind, and pain stabbed through her like needles.

“She doesn’t need you to support her!” Rebecca declared.

She led Josette into the inner room, locked the door, and walked calmly into the kitchen. Soren assumed she had given in and was going to fetch more food.

It was better this way, keeping Josette locked up so she wouldn’t cause trouble later.

“Becky, there isn’t enough food. Make more dishes. Can’t look bad in front of the guests,” Soren said, shaking his leg smugly.

Rebecca sneered and walked out of the kitchen with her hands behind her back.

“Did you hear me? Make more dishes. The big boss is coming,” Soren added.

Rebecca knew exactly who he was talking about. It was the village contractor, whose son was about the same age as her. The sleazy blond guy wanted to be engaged to her.

Soren had taken the contractor’s money and tried to force her into it, saying, “Girls get married anyway. Even if you get into college, you might not find a better match.”

The dinner invitation had been for the engagement. Back then, she had gone along with it. They had talked about being friends first and building feelings.

They had even urged her to study with the guy and tutor him. But he turned out to be a drug addict.

She stared at her overbearing father, her eyes glinting with coldness. “More dishes? Sure. Get me the ingredients.”

She pulled the knife out of her back and hacked at him.

Soren was taken aback. By the time he reacted, the blade was already flashing toward him. His legs went weak, and the stool tipped over, bringing him down to the floor.

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

Chapter 630

The fall saved Soren. The blade whistled past his scalp.

He scrambled away on all fours, oursing and screaming, “Murder! She’s trying to murder me!”

Josette pounded on the door desperately, begging Rebecca not to do anything reckless.

But this was a dream. There was nothing to be afraid of. And even if she had gone back to high school like in those novels, she didn’t care.

Living an extra lifetime was already a win. This time, she would take revenge on everyone who deserved it.

As she chased the screaming Soren and Adeline around the room, someone rushed in and grabbed her tightly from behind, seizing the hand holding the knife.

“Don’t be rash, Rebecca! Calm down!” Darren said. “Don’t worry. I’m here to help. Put down the knife and leave it to me. His voice was gentle yet carried a surprising strength.

“Listen to me and let go.” Sensing her strength fading, he spoke even more softly as he pried the knife from her hand.

He quickly stepped in front of her and slammed the knife into the table. “If you don’t want to die, get out right now!”

The blade sank deep with a loud thud, the metal ringing faintly.

“Who... the hell are you?” Soren shook like a leaf.

Darren pulled the knife out and waved it. “If you ever treat Rebecca badly again, see how many strikes you can take!”

Soren, who had started to get up, collapsed again. Adeline was nowhere to be seen, having slipped out the moment Darren rushed in.

Noises sounded outside. It was her speaking excitedly with someone.

Rebecca sneered, knowing exactly who was coming. The man Adeline kept praising was the village contractor, Dario Strickland.

Soon, the man arrived with his family.

Adeline smiled obsequiously. “The guests are here!”

Soren scrambled up as if seeing his savior. He hurried over, bowing and scraping.

Dario looked at the scene inside. “What’s going on here?”

“Well, they were making apple pie,” Soren stammered with a flattering smile. “Adeline said she’d make the filling but wasn’t careful with the knife. Good thing I dodged fast.”

Dario glanced at Rebecca. “Your daughter knows how to make apple pie?”

“Yes, she is very capable. She’s helped her grandma with chores since she was little. She is sensible and well–behaved,” Adeline said quickly.

This scene was all too familiar to Rebecca. Back then, at the fancy restaurant, Adeline had introduced her the same way, painting her as virtuous, capable, quiet, and hardworking, like a butcher praising the quality of her meat to get a higher price.

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

Chapter 631

Dario nodded with obvious satisfaction. But Darren, standing protectively beside Rebecca, fixed her with a strange, intense stare.

Even inside the dream, she felt deeply embarrassed. At this moment, she was nothing more than merchandise her parents had placed on the chopping block, waiting to be sold to the highest bidder.

Darren had probably never witnessed anything like this before.

From the second he walked in, the contractor's son, Casper Strickland, had been leering at her. Darren noticed immediately and stepped forward to shield her, earning a glare from Casper.

Darren glared back, unflinching.

Josette remained trapped in the inner room, unaware of the unfolding chaos. She pounded desperately on the door. "Open up! Becky! Don't be reckless!"

"What's going on there?" Dario frowned.

"My mom is sick and resting. The door got locked by accident," Soren said, leaning closer to Dario and lowering his voice. "It might be contagious. Better not let her out."

Adeline jumped in smoothly. "She caught it wandering around outside. It's not hereditary."

Only then did Dario relax. His attention shifted back to Rebecca. "I hear you're preparing for the SATs. Studying dance, right? That must cost a fortune."

He pulled out a bank card and continued generously, "Here's one million dollars. Take it for tutoring and professional training. Don't skimp on anything."

Soren's hand shot out eagerly to grab the card. In one swift, decisive motion, Darren yanked the kitchen knife from the table and slammed it down, slicing the card in two.

"No!" Soren cried out, snatching up the half card with shaking hands. "You..."

Darren gave a cold, mocking laugh. "There you go. $500,000 is still pretty good."

Soren almost blacked out with rage. With the card destroyed, he would get nothing.

Dario's expression darkened. "Who is this kid?"

He didn't recall ever seeing the boy around the village,

Darren tossed the remaining half of the card at him. "One million is that impressive? Who are you insulting?"

"This is between adults. Kids should stay out of it," Dario said dismissively, assuming Darren was some relative of the Perry family.

The four adults then launched into their well–rehearsed pitch–how Casper and Rebecca should become friends first, study together, have her tutor him, and apply universities side by side.

Since Dario had promised one million dollars for the engagement, it would still be paid despite the ruined card. They insisted on drafting a written agreement–just a folk custom with no legal standing, but something to hold onto in case Soren tried to back out later.

Søren had no intention of backing out, ready to sign it as soon as possible.

“Whoever signs it can get engaged. Whoever takes the money can get engaged,” Rebecca said, staring at him coldly.

Those were the same words she had uttered in the original timeline. With Dario present, Soren grew bolder. They had a knife, so what

He glared back. “What’s wrong with this match? Do you know how wealthy the Strickland family is? You’d live like a queen!

“You don’t have to get married right away; you’re still going to college. You can tie the knot after graduation. Casper is such a fine young man.”

On cue, Casper flashed Rebecca a sleazy smile.

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

Chapter 632

Adeline eagerly pulled Casper forward. “Look how handsome and fashionable he is. What a great boy!” Handsome? Fashionable? Great boy?

Rebecca’s face stayed ice–cold. “If he is such a great catch, why don’t you marry him?”

Adeline was rendered speechless. Casper’s expression shifted, and so did his parents‘

Soren tried to salvage the situation, bowing slightly toward Dario. “My daughter is just too focused on her studies right now. She’s worried this will distract her. I’ll talk to her later and set her straight.”

“It won’t affect her studies,” Casper said quickly. “I’ll study with her.”

Dario looked thoroughly displeased. “Let’s leave it here for today.”

He turned to leave with his family.

“Stay for dinner,” Soren said quickly, then remembered there were only two dishes, and they had been put away. “We can eat at the restaurant at the village entrance. My treat.”

“Right! We’ll be family soon,” Adeline echoed, turning to Rebecca. “Becky, come on. Let’s go together.”

Rebecca had no intention of going anywhere with them, nor was she letting them walk away so easily. This nightmare had to end today, once and for all.

She had her own plan ready, but Darren beat her to it.

“What exactly do you people mean?” Though still a teenager, his voice carried a surprising weight of authority. “You sit here over one meal and casually talk about selling Rebecca off?”

All eyes in the room snapped to him.

Bolstered by the numbers on his side, Soren grew arrogant. “What do you want, kid? Watch yourself, or I’ll report you to the school! You’ll get punished and expelled!”

Darren’s gaze turned razor–sharp. “Go ahead. Go tell the school that Rebecca isn’t even an adult yet, and you’re trying to sell her off as someone’s wife. Let’s see if they call the police!”

Soren pointed at him, shaking with rage. “You little bastard! You think I have no influence in this village? Say one more word and see if you can walk out of here in one piece!”

“You want a piece of me?” Darren sneered. “Bring it on! If I get hurt, crippled, or killed, everyone here will be held accountable!”

People feared those who had nothing to lose more than those holding knives.

Soren began wavering, while Dario frowned. “Who is this kid to your family?”

Soren was momentarily stumped, then a malicious grin spread across his face. “Kid, you like Rebecca, don’t you?‘ I understand young folks like you, but don’t be so impulsive.

“You’re still young and don’t understand how the world works. The Strickland family is simply beyond your reach.” “Money?” Darren unstrapped the expensive watch from his wrist and tossed it onto the table with a clatter.

Dario’s eyes narrowed, recognizing the brand. The watch alone was worth more than the engagement gift he had offered. “Who are you? Who are your parents?” Dario asked in a low, curious voice.

“Not worth mentioning,” Darren snorted. “There are plenty of rich people in Soliaridge. Money is the most insignificant thing in the world.”

Dariu’s heart sank. He might have stumbled upon the son of a truly powerful family.

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

Chapter 633

Adeline eagerly pulled Casper forward. “Look how handsome and fashionable he is. What a great boy!”

Handsome? Fashionable? Great boy?

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Dario’s heart sank. He might have stumbled upon the son of a truly powerful family.

Rebecca’s defiance had already irritated Dario and left him disgusted with the Perry family. Now, with Darren’s unexpected intervention, he began to resitate.

But his son refused to accept it. Casper started throwing a tantrum with his mother, who glared at Dario.

He sighed. “Alright, let’s end it here for today. We talk about this another day.”

Darren held up his phone. “I’ve recorded everything. If you continue with this illegal nonsense, I’ll post the video online. You’ll become infamous, and the police will come knocking.”

Daric’s expression shifted, but he had far more to lose than just public embarrassment, Before he could react, Rebecca stepped out from behind Darren.

“And while you’re at it, make sure to include the part about him doing drugs too,” she said, her voice calm and steely.

The room fell deathly silent. The Stricklands turned ghostly pale.

“How... How did you know?” Casper’s mother nearly collapsed.

Dario’s impression of the Perry family became even worse. Soren was a middle-aged troublemaker, hardly fit to be in-laws. But Casper had taken a strange liking to Rebecca and promised that if she would study with him, he would study hard, enter university, and marry her in a few years.

It was only for Casper’s sake that he had swallowed his disgust and come to talk. And now, he was being threatened.

Darren looked just as stunned as the others. He quickly moved in front of Rebecca. “Why don’t we call the police right now and upload everything immediately!”

“Soren Perry, your family is too high-class for us!” Dario spluttered, storming out with his family.

Soren desperately chased after them, but they had gotten into their car and sped away.

Returning, he jabbed at Rebecca’s nose. “You ungrateful thing! They came with good intentions. What are you acting so high and mighty? You think you’re too good for them?”

Adeline joined in. “So young and already learning how to seduce men! We found you a good match, and you’re not satisfied? You’d rather go out and hook up on your own?”

As their insults grew uglier and more vicious, Darren’s expression darkened dangerously. menacingly.

When Adeline spat the word “seduce,” he turned, yanked the knife from the table, and waved it menacingly. “You want to try how sharp this blade is?”

Adeline shrieked and stumbled backward, knocking Soren to the ground. Something heavy struck her back. She screamed, turning to see Josette charging forward with a hoe. The blow to her back had come from the blunt side of the tool.

“Murder! She’s trying to murder us!” Adeline wailed.

The hoe had originally been aimed at Soren. Because Adeline knocked him down, it landed on her instead. Fortunately, it was the back of the hoe, or it would have torn flesh.

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

Chapter 634

Josette didn’t stop there. She kept swinging the hoe, chasing Soren, who scrambled away on all fours, crying and screaming for mercy.

Adeline forgot her pain and fled with his in terror.

Josette stood firmly at the courtyard gate, hoe in hand, and shouted at their retreating backs, “If you two animals ever dare to scheme against Becky again, I’ll show you no mercy!”

Worried about her grandmother, Rebecca rushed outside. Josette’s fierce, protective declaration sent a powerful wave of warmth through her even within the dream.

She ran over and hugged Josette tightly from behind, pressing her face against her shoulder. “Grandma, they’re gone.”

Josette turned, set down the hoe, and pulled Rebecca into a fierce embrace, tears shining in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Becky. I failed to teach your father properly.”

Rebecca shook her head. “It’s not your fault, Grandma.”

Josette had raised Kaitlyn, too, who turned out so exceptional.

“Don’t worry,” Josette said, her voice thick with emotion. “I’ll protect you.”

Those simple, heartfelt words broke something open inside Rebecca. Tears stung her eyes. Everything felt so painfully, vividly real.

At this moment, she no longer believed she was dreaming. Perhaps she truly had traveled back in time.

Darren stood quietly on the side, watching the two embrace. The deepening night melted into his dark eyes, glinting with quiet, protective light.

Once they calmed down, Josette took Rebecca's hand and walked over to Darren with a warm, though strained, smile. "Young man, thank you. You haven't eaten yet, have you? I'll make something fresh for you two right now."

"I'll help," Darren offered eagerly.

"No need. Becky doesn't need to help either. I can manage," she said softly, going into the kitchen.

Both Rebecca and Darren could feel her distress. The sight pained Rebecca deeply and strengthened her will to leave this toxic place as soon as possible.

She opened the door to Josette's room and discovered Josette had climbed out the window to come to heqrescue. Josette must have been frantic.

Barred from the kitchen, she and Darren sat on the steps in the courtyard as night fell completely. She hugged her knees under the light and could feel Darren watching her.

He must have been wondering about her family. It was hard to believe something like that had happened in the modern era, but that was what her parents were like.

In the original timeline, things had been even worse. She hadn't known how low they could sink. When they called her to dinner, she had gone.

The conversation had been the same, and they had locked her in a room with Casper.

She had fought desperately, smashing a wine bottle over his head to escape. During her flight, she ran into Vance at the restaurant.

He had asked what was wrong. She had only said she met bad people. Her clothes had been torn. The bleeding Casper had chased after her, shouting all kinds of filthy insults.

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

Chapter 635

Vance had recorded a video suhis phone while shielding her. When Casper lunged, Vance beat him up.

Rebecca had been terrified, but she had also recorded audio.

During dinner, her parents had discussed the engagement. She had been furious, but she was too young and inexperienced to lash out in front of her father. /

Instead, she had secretly recorded their conversation on her phone, capturing everything, including Casper's attempts to take advantage of her.

The phone had been safely tucked away in her pocket and later had played a crucial role in resolving the situation.

After Vance drove Casper away, she couldn't bring herself to tell him that her parents had arranged the whole thing. Her family was far more disgusting than his.

So, he had never known how awful they truly were. Even after marriage, he had treated them with courtesy.

She had told him many times about their greed, but he had just thought he owed her and decided to compensate for everything. As a result, they had often bypassed her and gone straight to him to get what they wanted.

That day, Darren had witnessed the entire ugly scene.

They weren't even that close. She didn't know how to face the shame of having her darkest family secret exposed to a classmate she barely knew.

"I'm sorry," Darren said suddenly. "I didn't know they were like this. How could they do something like this to you?"

She turned to look at him. If there had been even a trace of disdain in his eyes, she would have gone inside immediately. With a family like that, she wasn't surprised that he might judge her, but he didn't.

There was only warmth and sincerity in his eyes. Yet that kindness hurt far more than contempt ever could. If he had looked down on her, she could have armored herself and pulled away,

But this gentle warmth slowly softened the hard shell she had built around herself.

She turned toward the blooming roses in the yard, her voice catching. "If I told you my parents have done even worse things, would you believe me?"

"I do," he replied without hesitation. After a pause, he added, "From now on, let me be your blade."

Her heart skipped a beat, and she looked at him again.

In the dim night, the evening breeze tousled the short hair on his forehead, shadowing his eyes. She couldn't read his expression clearly, but his voice was steady and resolute. "You've carried too much by yourself. Let me handle the heavy parts from now on."

Even after experiencing it once before, she was touched by those words. She had stood alone, shouldering everything.

Other people's youth was full of color and sunshine, while hers was marked by undercurrents of fear and anxiety.

In the warm evening breeze of that summer night, he gently wiped the bitter tears from the corners of her eyes. The gesture felt so natural, as if he had done it for her many times before.

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

Chapter 636

Josette fried fresh green beans and baked a fragrant glazed ham with creamy mashed potatoes. Darren ate two big helpings, then leaned back in his chais, rubbing his stomach.

"Thank you very much for the meal," he burped. "Grandma Josette, your cooking is incredible. Can I pay for board and come eat here often?"

Rebecca found his satisfied expression strangely familiar.

"Don't talk about money," Josette chuckled. "If you like it, just come whenever you want."

"I'm serious," Darren said earnestly. "I usually eat at restaurants or the cafeteria. Compared to your food, what I've been eating is nothing special."

Rebecca could vouch for that. "His parents travel a lot for business, both domestically and abroad. He eats cafeteria food during the week and restaurant meals on weekends."

"That won't do," Josette said immediately. "Come eat here whenever you have time. Eating out constantly isn't good for a growing boy."

"Great! Thanks, Grandma Josette!" Darren beamed with delight.

Rebecca glanced at him again. The easy, affectionate way he interacted with Josette felt remarkably familiar.

It was very late after dinner, so they invited Darren to stay the night.

Once Josette and Darren had gone to bed, Rebecca opened her email and calculated Kaitlyn's and Gabriel's current ages.

Gabriel should still be in college and hadn't yet taken over Rossi Enterprises. Kaitlyn should still be a design director at a fashion company and hadn't started her own brand yet.

A drastic change would soon happen in the Rossi family. Even so, she believed they would be better off in Europe. Her parents were simply not human.

She sent him an email -a move that was ten years ahead of the original timeline.

At this point, the young Rebecca didn't know Gabriel personally, but the current Rebecca remembered his email address.

"Would it be awkward? Would Gabriel find it strange?" she wondered, having no idea what he was like at this age.

She expected him to be busy and wouldn't respond until the next day. But to her surprise, her phone buzzed with an email notification just half an hour later.

It was a reply from him. As she read the email, she couldn't help but feel impressed.

From a young age, Gabriel had shown signs of being capable, and it was no surprise that he would go on to manage the family's vast business.

His response was clear, concise, and decisive, showcasing his ability to tackle the issue at hand.

He apologized for not knowing about their situation sooner and outlined two plans for her to discuss with Josette.

Firstly, he offered to arrange for them to move abroad immediately, providing a detailed list of required documents. Secondly, if Josette wasn't willing to move, he would ensure their safety.

He recommended the first option, even if it meant staying abroad temporarily. The email was devoid of unnecessary words, yet it addressed all her concerns. If there were a real–life Doraemon, he would be it.

Rebecca had no intention of studying abroad for her undergraduate degree. She had spent ten years learning American dance, and her goal was to attend the Arelmoor Dance Academy.

However, she genuinely hoped that Josette could join Kaitlyn in Europe as soon as possible. With Kaitlyn's encouragement, Josette would discover new passions in life.

If she could join Kaitlyn now, Josette might have a chance to create something new and fulfilling in her golden years.

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

Chapter 637

Rebecca replied again, explaining she needed Josette and Kaitlyn to speak first.

Gabriel responded quickly, telling her not to worry and that she could rely on him. Rebecca found it hard to believe that he trusted her just based on a single email

This was the first time she had ever contacted him in the new timeline. But regardless of why he believed her, she had complete faith in him. With Gabriel intervening in their lives ahead of schedule, everything would turn out differently.

The next day, Rebecca headed to school for dance practice. She repeatedly urged Josette to keep the doors locked and not open them for anyone.

"Don't worry. If he dares come back, he'll get struck by lightning," Josette reassured her.

Soren truly deserved to be struck by lightning.

Rebecca then asked their neighbors to keep an eye on Josette and call her if anything happened.

They had lived in the neighborhood for years and always had a good relationship with the neighbors. Plus, the neighbors hadn't moved to the city yet, so they readily agreed to her request.

Rebecca went to practice, while Darren went to play basketball. They ended up at school at the same time. As they passed the basketball court, a ball flew straight toward them.

"Watch out!" Darren pushed her aside.

The ball slammed hard into his shoulder. Rebecca saw the angry red imprint and turned to see who had thrown it. Vance picked up the basketball from the ground and spun it casually on his fingertip.

‘Are you crazy? What if you hit Rebecca?” Darren yelled.

“Weren’t you there to save her?” Vance glanced at Darren, then looked at Rebecca with a roguish smirk. “You got your hero moment.”

“You did it on purpose?” Darren seethed.

A flicker of something unreadable passed through Vance’s eyes. His smirk deepened. “So what?”

“Do you know how much that hurts? What if it had hit her head?” Darren snapped, ready to punch him.

Rebecca tugged at Darren’s shirt. He immediately calmed down and apologized, “Sorry. Did I scare you?

She shook her head. She just didn’t want anyone to fight because of her. She hoped they both would have bright futures.

“Aren’t you two friends? Don’t fight over small things,” she said, carrying a calmness that seemed impervious to any storm. Go play your game. I’m off to dance.”

Vance watched her walk away as all his hostility, roguishness, and defiance melted away. He turned, dribbled the ball, and drove toward the hoop.

Amidst his teammates‘ cheers, he sank a perfect three–pointer. But when he looked back, the girl who used to clap for him from the sidelines was gone.

It was as if she had suddenly grown cold toward everything and everyone, except for Darren.

Vance threw the ball at Darren. “Your turn.”

The two gave their all on the court. By halftime, they were both bruised and battered.

Their teammates were baffled. “What are you two doing? Is this a basketball game or a fight? Are you mortal enemies or something?”

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

Chapter 638

Vance didn’t reply. He grabbed his clothes and left.

Darren watched, then smiled at his teammates. “Of course not. We’re friends. Super close.”

His gaze followed Vance’s retreating figure, laden with unspoken meaning.

Rebecca practiced with her instructor in the morning and had studio classes in the afternoon. Since the school cafeteria was closed on Sundays, she stopped at her usual pasta shop near the gate.

The basketball court was long empty. The boys had dispersed after playing. As soon as her food was served, someone sat down across from her.

“Can I have one pasta with meat sauce, please?” Vance said to the shop owner.

Rebecca nearly choked on her first bite. She looked up to see him staring at her fritently. She stayed composed and continued eating.

Vance couldn’t hold back. “Rebecca...”

“Hmm?” She seemed unaffected, still eating her pasta, a fine sheen of sweat forming on her forehead.

“You’ve changed,” he said.

She paused, then looked up with a small smile. “Isn’t it normal for people to think differently at different stages of life?”

“But... You didn’t use to say things like that. You said...” He trailed off.

During the New Year of her freshman year, she had written in a card to him: [Vance, I hope we’ll be friends forever.]

He had replied coolly at the time: [This is no ‘forever‘ in my world]

Rebecca hadn’t understood then. She’d just thought he probably didn’t want to be friends with her forever.

It had hurt a little, but there was no rule that if she liked someone, they had to like her back. So, she had buried her feelings deeper, never mentioning that word again.

“Are we still friends forever?” Vance suddenly asked.

So, he still remembered that.

“Yes, we are,” she replied. “But no one knows what tomorrow holds? It’s better not to say ‘forever‘ lightly.”

His eyes dimmed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean…” she sighed. “Friends are fellow travelers on the same road for a while. Life has its turning points. After the next one, you never know who you’ll be walking with.”

He gave a bitter laugh. “So, you’ve already found a new travel companion?”

She paused without looking up, then said softly, “Yes.”

“You…” He was momentarily lost for words.

“Isn’t it how it is?” she said quietly. “From now on, you’ll be in science class, and I’ll be in arts. We’ll each make new friends. We won’t even be on the same floor. And once we go to university…”

“Enough!” he interrupted, “You’re right. It’s my fault. It’s my fault for believing in some stupid promise. Don’t worry; I have no other intentions.

“Since you broke the promise first, I no longer owe you anything. It’s a relief to have no obligations.”

He stood up and left as the shop owner called out repeatedly, “Hey, your pasta is ready!”

Under the early summer sun, the tall figure walked farther and farther away, never looking back.

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

Chapter 639

Rebecca looked at the helpless shop owner. “I’ll settle his bill.”

“That won’t do. You’re a student too,” the shop owner said. “It’s fine. I’ll wait for my grandson.”

Just then, someone rushed in like a gust of wind, slapped 50 dollars on the table, pointed at Rebecca, and said, “That covers both our meals.”

He ran off without waiting for change.

“Well...” The owner was at a loss.

Rebecca quietly finished her pasta. The owner gave her the change, “He’s your classmate, right? Please give this back to him. We serve students and don’t overcharge them.”

Rebecca paused. “Okay, I’ll return it to him.”

She thought she wouldn’t see Vance again until Monday. But after finishing her dance practice at the studio, she ran into him down stairs in a newly opened cake shop.

She had planned to buy some cupcakes for Josette, who loved eating sweet and soft treats. She then remembered that it was the same place her parents had tricked her into. That was why Vance had timely rescued her.

After his irresponsible father abandoned him, the young and stubborn Vance started working part–time on weekends and during his free time to earn money.

Later, she learned that his part–time jobs were not just about earning money but also about gaining experience.

While other senior students were battling in the sea of exercises, he not only kept up with his studies but also managed a restaurant, which reportedly earned a good income.

Later, when he went to university, he sold the restaurant, accumulating his first funds for entrepreneurship.

He was completely independent, having made his way in the world without relying on his family. However, she didn’t know that he had also worked at a cake shop.

At this point, he was just a teenager, with the inexplicable pride and sensitivity of adolescence. So, when he saw Rebecca, he wanted to hide, as if not wanting her to see his current situation.

However, just as he took his first step, he felt that since she had already seen him, running away would be even more embarrassing. He stood still, pretending not to recognize her.

Rebecca took a tray and tongs, picked out the cakes Josette liked, and brought them to the counter.

Vance rang her up with cold indifference. “$58.”

She paid for the cakes, then pushed the change from the pasta shop toward him.

“What is this?” He couldn’t keep pretending anymore.

“It’s the change from the pasta shop,” she explained.

“It’s my treat. I’m not that poor.”

“I know. This is the change for both meals. Thank you for the treat.

He paused, then shrugged. “You’re welcome. Consider it repayment.”

“Repayment?”

“Yes. I ate your pumpkin pie on Halloween, and I bought you pasta. We’re even now.”

She hadn’t expected him to settle the score this way. She had remembered that Halloween, with its bright golden osmanthus and fragrant scent, for a long time.

This approach wasn’t bad, though. She had planned to stop liking him and to have no further close interactions with him anyway.

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

Chapter 640

Rebecca took the cakes. “Okay”

Vance blinked. “What?”

“You said we’re even,” Rebecca replied calmly “You ate my pumpkin pie, and I ate your pasta. We don’t owe each other anything now. That’s good.”

Emotions swirled in his striking eyes.

Perhaps the 16–year–old Rebecca had fallen for the same–aged Vance because, on some sunny day, she had stumbled into those limpid eyes. But his eyes rarely rippled for anyone or anything; he looked at everyone with that same calm detachment.

Yet at this moment, they churned with complex emotions–annoyance, frustration, unwillingness, restraint, and something deeper she couldn’t quite name.

“Do you have no heart?” he said through gritted teeth.

She touched her chest. This was the first time anyone had said that to her, but she offered no explanation. As she looked at the vibrant, stubborn teenage boy before her, her eyes suddenly burned.

In real life, she was already in her thirties. They had both weathered storms and hardships. In the end, she still didn't know whether she and he would be parted by life or death.

If everything could start over, how comforting it would be to see such a vibrant life!

"I'm going home. Thank you." She raised the paper bag in her hand. As a gift, Vance had put a few sample macarons in her bag. My grandma will love these colorful treats."

She turned and left the shop. Outside, the setting sun was blinding. For some reason, tears suddenly streamed down her face.

The rebirth stories she had read were always driven by powerful obsessions. Had she returned because of her own, or someone else's?

Whoever it belonged to, she hoped with all her heart that this was real -so everyone could live their lives fully this time, and pass away peacefully in old age instead of disappearing too soon or vanishing without a trace.

A voice came from behind her. "Why are you crying?"

Vance had followed her out and appeared before her so abruptly that she didn't have time to wipe her tears.

He was holding the bag of dance clothes she had forgotten. His voice softened considerably. "What's wing?"

She no longer tried to hide it. The tears kept falling–not from any single sorrow, but simply from the overwhelming emotion of seeing such a vibrant life standing before her again.

After experiencing all the ups and downs, she realized that the breath of life was the most touching. Vance's eyes gleamed with helplessness, and behind it, a spark of warmth.

"Those were just angry words," he muttered. "Don't take them to heart. Whether you choose arts or science..."

He paused, forcing the words out. "We're still friends. Hey, why are you crying so much? It's okay. I'll tutor you in math later. Arts students still have to take it, right? Let's stop saying angry things, okay?"

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

Chapter 641

Rebecca's voice wavered. "You should head back. I'm fine."

That image flashed through her mind again–Vance lying in that hospital bed, his face drained of life yet still forcing a weak smile at her and Josette. The memory hit her hard, making her emotions surge.

In the warm glow of the setting sun, the young Vance reached out and gently ruffled her hair. "It's not that big a deal. We'll get there, one way or another."

She instinctively stepped back.

He simply opened his palm, revealing a tiny scrap of paper. "It was stuck in your hair."

"Oh, thanks." She had misunderstood him.

He waved. "I've got to get back to work. See you tomorrow."

She stood there, eager to ask what he meant by "one way or another," but he kept urging her to leave. "Go home before it gets dark. Let's talk at school tomorrow."

He turned and jogged back toward the bakery. She watched him disappear through the shop door, then turned and headed to the subway station.

"Fine. We'll talk later," she muttered.

Vance finished his shift at eleven that night. He took the subway home and didn't walk through the front door until midnight.

His grandmother had left dinner for him, keeping it warm in the kitchen. Hearing the door, Irene Bradford came out of her room and asked with concern, "Why are you even later than usual today?"

"I was at the library studying and lost track of time," Vance lied, keeping his bakery job hidden from her.

He had eaten some toast earlier, but his stomach was still growling. He carried the plate out and dug in with obvious enjoyment.

Irene sat across from him, watching with a gentle smile. These quiet moments were precious. Vance was always busy with school, and on weekends, he went out “to study.”

It was rare for them to spend time together.

“How’s studying going lately? Getting intense?” she asked, making conversation.

“It’s okay.” He swallowed a mouthful of food.

“Take it slowly.” She poured him a glass of water. “You need to take care of yourself. Don’t skimp on meals at school. Stay nourished. Don’t worry about anything. I’ve saved enough for your college years.”

“Yeah.” Vance kept his head down.

He knew her plans, but that was her retirement pension. He couldn’t bring himself to use that money.

“Grandma,” he said in a negotiating tone, “why don’t we sell this house and buy a smaller one? It’s just the two of us anyway.‘ “How so?” Irene reasoned. “You’ll get married someday and have kids. This place will be lively then.”

Vance thought about it. “Then we won’t sell it.”

This house carried too many of her memories. He had no right to dispose of it like that.

Irene’s smile grew warmer. She could already imagine him growing up, going to college, getting married, and having children

By then, this old house would become lively again. She just didn’t know if she would still be around to see it. “Why the sudden thought of selling the house she asked curiously.

“It’s nothing,” Vance paused. “Candma, if I go to college in Atelmoor, would you come with me?”

Irene finally figured out the intention behind that question. Vance wanted to leave Soliaridge.

“Of course,” she agreed without pressing.

She understood that a boy’s desire to attend a certain school ultimately boiled down to two reasons. It was either for his future or for a girl.

Whichever it was, she supported him.

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

Chapter 642

Vance had always been sensible and hardworking, but his parents were unreliable, abandoning him to run off abroad.

Irene planned to stick to him, but her health was failing. She didn't know how much longer she could accompany him. In any case, she would never hold him back from chasing his future or the girl he liked.

She only hoped he could live a peaceful life with someone who loved, supported, and grew old with him. Her smile remained, but her vision gradually blurred.

"Grandma, take good care of yourself. I'll take you to Arelmoor to climb the monuments and watch the flag-raising someday," Vance said earnestly.

"That sounds wonderful. I can't wait," she agreed happily.

The results from her recent checkup were far from positive, but she kept them hidden from him. Unaware of any of this, Vance chatted with her enthusiastically for a while about Arelmoor before going to his room.

Back home, Rebecca suddenly thought of something.

In the original timeline, Vance's grandmother passed away during their senior year of high school. If they had discovered her illness earlier and treated it in time, she might have survived.

Then Vance wouldn't have to stay in the hospital or meet Catherine there. Everything would be changed.

The thought drove Rebecca to search for information about Irene's illness late into the night. What she discovered was an unexpected, heaven-sent surprise.

A knock on the door interrupted her research. Her first thought was that her parents had come to cause trouble again. Then she realized they had never been so mild.

"Who could it be?" Puzzled, she turned on the light.

Josette came out at the sound. They nervously opened the door together, only to see Kaitlyn and Gabriel standing outside.

Rebecca was thrilled to see them again. It felt like they had only been apart a few days.

“Aunt Kaitlyn, Gabe!” she exclaimed, staring at them intently.

Kaitlyn looked a bit younger than she did in the present, but the difference wasn’t big. Gabriel, however, looked so fresh and youthful, like a college student.

She couldn’t help chuckling, forgetting this was their first meeting in this timeline. Gabriel was baffled by her reaction but managed a polite smile. “Becky, right? Do I look that funny?”

She came to her senses and quickly explained, “No, sorry. I just didn’t expect you to be so handsome.”

Gabriel laughed along, while Josette was surprised that her daughter had returned without notice. But anyway, she was overjoyed, warmly inviting them inside.

After receiving Rebecca’s email, Kaitlyn and Gabriel had discussed it before immediately booking the flights home.

Josette looked at Kaitlyn lovingly. They hugged tightly and cried in each other’s arms before sheepishly explaining to the younger ones that those were tears of joy.

“I’m sorry, Mom. Coming back is just one plane ticket away, but...” Kaitlyn trailed off.

They were always busy, but if they truly wanted to return, they could have made the time.

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

Chapter 643

It was destined to be a sleepless night.

The four were excited to see eachother and sat down to chat. Josette brought out snacks and fruit. The atmosphere was even livelier than during the holidays.

Rebecca had built a deep bond with Kaitlyn and Gabriel during her years abroad. Seeing them again made her incredibly happy, but she couldn’t stay up talking forever.

She had classes tomorrow, so Josette eventually shooed her off to bed.

The next morning, she woke up to the sound of conversation in the kitchen. Josette kept urging Kaitlyn to rest, but the latter insisted on staying.

“These are memories from my childhood. Nostalgic! I haven’t had your pasta with meat sauce in years,” Kaitlyn gushed.

Rebecca thought of the kitchen in Paris and chuckled. Despite having chefs, the two would still cook hometown dishes together

Kaitlyn spotted her. “Becky, come eat. After breakfast, Gabe will drive you to school.”

“It’s fine. I can go by myself,” Rebecca replied.

It was still early. She wanted him to sleep more after staying up so late.

“He’s up anyway, watering the flowers outside,” Kaitlyn explained.

“Gabe watering flowers?” Rebecca blinked.

Outside, Gabriel was holding the hose, his clothes soaked.

“Gabe, are you watering the flowers or yourself?” She burst into laughter, having never seen him so disheveled.

Even on his ranch, he had been composed. The natural warmth and familiarity in the way she looked at him didn’t escape Gabriel’s notice, but he didn’t mind.

He simply thought she was outgoing and friendly. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have emailed him out of the blue.

He had always been cautious because of the scheming in the Rossi family, but he trusted his mother, willing to get close to anyone she approved of.

Breakfast was pasta with meat sauce again, just as Kaitlyn wanted. Rebecca loved it too, and she knew Gabriel did as well. She still remembered the amazed look on his face the first time he tasted it.

While eating, she kept stealing glances at him. Sure enough, his expression was full of amazeinent.

Then he said the same line, “So, this is what pasta with meat sauce is supposed to taste like. It’s completely different from what my mom makes!”

“The ingredients abroad are different, and so are the cookers.” Kaitlyn shrugged. “How could it taste the same?”

“This dish has carried too much burden all these years,” Gabriel joked sanctimoniously.

Kaitlyn itched to spank him.

Rebecca watched their interactions with amusement. Only the three of them had ever given her the warmth of home. She loved the atmosphere when they were together.

After breakfast, Gabriel offered to ride her to school. Outside, several cars were parked with people inside his bodyguards, of course. The young heir of the Rossi family never traveled without protection.

“We came in a hurry, and these are rentals from the airport. I’ll buy a few proper ones,” Gabriel explained, opening the car door.

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

Chapter 644

That was Gabriel’s typical style. He dropped her off at the school gate.

Final exams had ended, and summer break had started. But Rebecca had signed up for summer classes like a lot of the other students had, so the campus was still bustling.

She searched for Vance in the crowd, planning to remind him of getting his grandmother a checkup early. But saying it directl felt strange.

She saw him walking with another boy and hurried over, pretending to pass by.

“Rebecca!” he called out. “Why are you running so fast?”

She turned around. “Oh, I didn’t notice you.”

The boy beside Vance spoke. “Those dark circles are really bad. Did you stay up night playing games?”

Rebecca did get dark circles when she didn’t sleep well. But his comment gave her an idea.

“I really didn’t sleep well last night because an old lady in our neighborhood got sick,” she lamented, making up a story. “So, any elderly person shows abnormal symptoms, they really need to go to the hospital for a checkup.”

She sighed. “This old lady had symptoms before, losing weight really fast. People like to keep fit, but if someone suddenly lose a lot of weight, it’s a warning sign. Also...”

She listed all the early symptoms of Irene’s illness that she could remember. Vance’s expression shifted the moment she mentioned sudden weight loss. With every new symptom, his face grew paler.

Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore. He told his classmate, “Cover for me with the teacher. I just remembered something at home.”

“Okay,” the boy muttered in confusion.

Later, Rebecca learned about Vance’s absence from Jenny and sighed in relief. He’d do anything for the person he cared about most.

Vance went home and didn’t find his grandmother. Earlier in the morning, she had asked what he wanted for dinner and said she would go buy groceries. Maybe she was out shopping.

Rebecca’s words echoed in his mind, and he grew uneasy. He called her repeatedly, but Irene didn’t pick pp. He searched all the nearby supermarkets and grocery stores, but she wasn’t there.

Irene hadn’t gone grocery shopping at all. She had gone to the hospital.

She had never expected to get this illness. She had thought any discomfort was just because of old age until the community held free checkups for seniors.

The doctor had suggested further tests and left her a number. Last week, she went in and received the diagnosis. She knew anything with the word “cancer” was hard to cure.

The doctor, whose last name was Horton, had suggested hospitalization. She had refused, unwilling to waste money or trouble her grandson. But the doctor had been persistent and called again, finally persuading her.

By the time Vance got home, she was already at the hospital.

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

Chapter 645

Blake Horton was a retired doctor who had returned to work. This time, he reviewed more test results with Irene and laid out the surgical plan.

“This condition usually doesn’t show obvious sytuptoms. By the time you notice something’s wrong, it’s often late stage. You’re quite lucky that we caught it early. Surgery should give you a good prognosis,” he said.

Irene’s eyes lit up with hope. “Really? Can cancer be cured?”

“We don’t have to fear cancer anymore,” Blake said. “Whether it can be cured depends on many factors, but we can say the prognosis looks promising.”

“You mean you can’t guarantee the result?” Irene began to waver again.

Blake patiently explained the pathology and surgical plan in detail, including the risks and possible outcomes after surgery.

Irene understood doctors couldn’t make absolute promises. After hesitating for a long time, she decided that she would have the surgery.

If it didn’t go well, she would leave this world earlier and not burden Vance. But if she were lucky, she could accompany him for many more years until he had his own family and new warmth. Otherwise, he would be too lonely in this world.

“Okay. I’ll have surgery. Please schedule it as soon as possible,” she said with sudden determination.

Then she left to prepare for admission the next day. By then, it was already noon. Unaware Vance had come home, she ate something outside, bought groceries, and planned to cook a nice meal for him.

She would make up a story of going on a trip with her old friends while she had the surgery. With everything planned out, she returned home at three o’clock.

The moment she stepped in, Vance jumped out anxiously. “Grandma, where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

Irene was surprised. “Why are you home? Shouldn’t you be in class?”

He studied her carefully. “How have you been feeling lately? Let me take you for a checkup.”

“I’m fine.” She brushed it off. “The community did health screenings for seniors not long ago. My report was perfectly fine.”

“Really?” Vance was doubtful. “Let me see it.”

“Take these groceries to the kitchen first. I’ll find it for you later.” She handed him the bags.

“Okay.” He felt bad that she had carried so much and quickly took them inside.

Irene pretended to look around, then gave him a wrinkled report. “It got a bit crumpled.”

He looked it over carefully. It seemed fine. Relieved, he checked the time, realizing it was too late for afternoon classes.

“We’re off this afternoon,” he lied, unwilling to make her worry.

‘Alright. I’ll make you something good tonight,” she said with a grin, but deep down, she was anxious about the upcoming surgery.

That evening, she prepared a lavish meal since it might be her last dinner with Vance.

They would enjoy it to the fullest.

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

Chapter 646

Irene cooked all of Vance’s favorite dishes that evening. They even shared some soda.

While they were eating, she told him she was planning to go on a short trip with some old friends and asked if he would be okay taking care of himself for a few days.

Vance’s face lit up. He had always hoped his grandmother could enjoy her later years freely and happily, without being tied down by him.

“Of course, Grandma!” he agreed immediately. “I’m not a kid anymore. I can take care of myself.”

Irene gently smiled at him.

In the hospital’s residential building, Dr. Blake Horton had a visitor.

Darren arrived with a cheerful grin, carrying a box of Blake’s favorite pastries. Blake snorted at the sight. “Nothing good comes without a price.”

“Grandpa Blake, come on. I really did come just to see you,” Darren chuckled.

Blake was Darren's grandfather's younger brother.

"You rascal!" Blake laughed. "I've already taken care of everything. The old lady will be admitted tomorrow. After this, don't come bother me again. You're like a fly buzzing around my head and giving me a headache."

"You're talking nonsense again!" His wife came over and scolded him. "It's a good thing our kid isn't petty. Anyone else would've been driven sick by your attitude."

"It's fine, Grandma Cheryl. He is just teasing me," Darren grinned.

"Who's teasing you?" Blake snorted. "You think a box of pastries is enough to settle it?"

Darren stroked his chin. "Then how about I play a few more games of chess with you?"

Blake's eyes brightened instantly. "That's more like it."

"About his grandmother... I'll need you to help arrange a caregiver, too. My classmate is still in school and doesn't have time to take care of her. Can we get four caregivers?" Darren probed, observing Blake's expression.

Blake's eyes narrowed, and Darren quickly added, "I'll pay for everything. Won't let you spend a dime."

"Obviously! When did I ever say I would cover it?" Blake gave him a light knock on the head with his pen. "You wish!"

"Then..." Darren rubbed his head.

"Four caregivers? That's impossible. The ward isn't that big, and there are other patients. If four caregivers crowd in, there won't be room for anyone else," Blake said.

"Don't pick up those extravagant habits. Having money doesn't mean you show off like that. The hospital has clear rules for how many caregivers are allowed per patient. We follow the regulations."

"Yes, Grandpa Blake!" Darren said happily.

Blake set up the chessboard, but his brow furrowed. "How did you know that old lady was sick? She didn't show any obvious symptoms."

Darren paused. "I heard about it from my classmate."

"Your classmate didn't know anything," Blake snorted. "The old lady asked us to keep it for him."

“Wall.” Harren’s eyes swiveled. “Maybe both sides are just trying to protect each other with white lies? The grandriva don’t want him to know, and the grandson wants to keep ti from her that he has found out

It made some sense, and Blake didn’t dwell on it. He changed the subje–t, “I told you to study medicine. You have the talent to be a doctor, but you refuse to do it.“*

“How could I ever compare to you? I might just become a mediocre doctor and ruin your good name. So, shall we play chest

Blake nodded. “Admission tomorrow. Surgery the day after.”

“Thank you, Grandpa Blake!” Darren said loudly, full of gratitude.

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

Chapter 647

Irene had arranged ever fees in advance.

herself for the morning surgery. The caregiver was ready, and she paid the hospital and surgery

When the caregiver asked why her family wasn’t showing up, frene waved it off. “They’re all boy. It’s a minor procedure. I don’t want to trouble them.”

The caregiver sighed, knowing this was hardly a minor procedure. Without another word, she helped the nurse wheel frene toward the operating room.

At the door, someone waited. Irene recognized him as Vance’s classinate, Darren Horton.

“Child, what are you doing here?” she asked, then remembered the doctor had the same last name. “Is Dr. Horton your...”

“He’s a relative,” Darren replied. “I found out from him that you’re having surgery today. Vance is my friend. I know you have your reasons for not telling him. I’ll stay and keep you company.”

Irene’s eyes grew moist. “Thank you, but you should go to class.”

“It’s fine. Vance’s grandma is my grandma, too. Go on in,” he said, taking her hand. “I’ll be wareng right here for you to come out. You’ll be okay.”

Her hand slipped from his grasp, but in that last moment before she let go, he felt her fingers tighten ever so slightly.

She looked up and smiled at him. In the split–second, she.sensed something warm and strangely familiar, as if she had known those eyes forever. Before she could look closer, the gurney moved forward, and the operating room doors closed.

Darren and the caregiver waited outside.

Time passed slowly. Suddenly, heavy running footsteps echoed down the quiet hallway. Someone came rushing over, breathing hard.

Darren stared at Vance in shock. “How did you get here?”

Vance opened his mouth but couldn’t speak.

That morning, he ran into one of his grandmother’s old friends and casually asked why she wasn’t traveling along. That was when he learned there was no trip at all. Irene had lied to him.

He went to the community center, then to the community hospital, pleading to see her medical records. Only then did he learn about the free senior health screening and trace everything to this hospital and today’s surgery.

He couldn’t understand how Darren knew about it when even he, her own grandson, had been kept in the dark. And Darren was there waiting outside the operating room.

Darren forced a smile. “My great–uncle is the doctor treating your grandma, so I...”

Before he could finish, Vance stepped forward, pulled him into a tight hug, and whispered, “Thank you, my brother.”

Darren stiffened, then patted his back. “Let’s pray for your grandma together. She’s going to be fine.”

“Yeah.” Vance nodded. “I’ll thank you properly later.”

“No worries,” Darren said, pulling him to sit down.

It was a major surgery. Irene was taken in that morning, and by noon, she still hadn’t come out.

At first, Vance managed to stay calm, but as the hours dragged on with no news, he grew increasingly restless and began pacing the waiting area.

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

Chapter 648

After several laps, Vance suddenly turned and early collided with Darren, who was also pacing.

He noticed that Darren looked just as visibly anxious as he was.

Darren cleared his throat. “Sorry, I almost ran into you. I’ft worried foo. My great–uncle is the lead surgeon: If anything goes wrong... No, no. Your grandma is going to come out just fine.”

Vance understood his concern. If anything went wrong, he wouldn’t know how to face Vance. He was overthinking it. After what he had done today, he would be Vance’s friend for life.

“No matter what happens,” Vance said seriously, “I owe you a big one.”

Darren paused. “Let’s wait until she comes out.”

Vance nodded. “Okay.”

They both fell into a heavy silence, but every second felt like torture. Eight hours later, Blake finally emerged from the operating room. The two boys rushed over together.

He looked tired but relieved. “The surgery was a success.‘

Joy exploded across both their faces; their eyes shone with emotion. From now on, it was all about recovery.

When Irene woke up, she urged them to go back to school. “The caregiver is here. She’s very responsible, kind, and patient. You two should focus on your studies.

“If you stay here, I’ll feel uneasy and won’t recover well. And don’t worry about groceries or cooking.”

Although Vance was still reluctant, under his grandmother’s repeated insistence, he finally left the hospital with Darren.

On the way out, Vance thanked Darren once again. “I know this kind of illness is usually discovered too late. My grandma was lucky that it was caught during the community screening and that your great–uncle performed the surgery.”

The sun in midsummer was blindingly bright, making Darren squint. The green leaves of the parasol trees shone along the street.

“To be honest, there aren’t that many coincidences in this world. Most of the time, someone made them happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“I asked my great–uncle to do the community screening and the surgery. You don’t need to thank me. I have my condition, though. I just hope you won’t hate me later.”

“Whatever the conditions are, tell me.”

Vance was ready to agree to anything. How would he hate Darren, who had saved Irene’s life?

Darren shook his head. “There is no rush. Wait until your grandma stabilizes.”

Although Irene kept telling Vance not to visit and to focus on school, he still went to the hospital every spare moment.

Rebecca noticed how busy and exhausted he looked, knowing that his grandmother had been hospitalized, which was much earlier than the original timeline.

She hoped Irene would recover fully this time, though she wouldn’t go to the hospital to visit.

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

Chapter 649

Vance eventually ran into Rebecca on campus. By then, his grandmother had been recovering for a week.

He looked noticeably worn out. Irene was the most important person in his life. Even with a caregiver, he visited every day, eager to spend more time with her and bring her the things she could eat.

School, part–time job, and hospital visits stretched him thin. He had never been talkative, and now he was even quieter.

Still, things were different this time. Rebecca remembered how, in the original senior year, he had been consumed by gray despair.

The person she loved most in the world was about to pass away, and there was nothing he could do. Rebecca could fully understand that feeling. In her own life, her grandma and she had only had each other.

That was why she had secretly helped him back then. Now, although he looked tired, there was no dead- eyed hopelessness in his gaze.

It was raining that day. They met on the stairs of the teaching building. Vance hadn't brought an umbrella and came running up. His hair was wet and plastered to his forehead, making his eyes look especially bright.

"Rebecca?" His face lit up. "Heading to dance practice?"

"Yes." She hesitated, then asked, "I heard your grandmother is in the hospital. How is she?"

"She's doing well," he replied, his tired face softening with relief. "She is recovering nicely. The doctor says she can be discharged after a few more days of observation."

"That's great. I wish her a speedy recovery," Rebecca said sincerely.

That was a normal pleasantry. Even a stranger on the street would say that to a patient. But Vance seemed genuinely happy to hear it. "Thank you."

She blinked, not understanding his gratitude. She hadn't done anything concrete.

"I'm off to dance. You should... head to class." She looked at his soaked hair and uniform, swallowing the urge to tell him to change.

Some habits from taking care of him for five years were simply ingrained too deeply.

"Yeah." He hurried to the classroom.

Rebecca didn't know why the surgery had happened earlier this time, but it aligned perfectly with her goals. She wondered if this was a dream after all. Only in a dream could all the imperfections of reality be fixed so neatly.

Vance had no spare clothes, so he borrowed a basketball jersey from Jethro and changed in the locker room across his desk, flipping through Vance's notebook, varsity admission trends from previous years. prise What are you analying this fory

Got to assess my chances and plan my direction, Vance said, closing the notebook.

My way they was stunned Waren’t you planning to attend one of the schools here in Soliaridge? Akys this notebook all about schools in Areimoor?”

From what Jethro knew of him, Vance had a strong chance of getting into a top–tier school in Arelmoor. But he had always decided against leaving Soliaridge because he needed to care for his grandma.

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

Chapter 650

Now Vance was suddenly looking at schools in Arelmoor, which surprised Jethro deeply.

He put the notebook away casually. "My grandma says the country is so big. She's never really seen its mountains and rivers or watched the flag-raising ceremony. So, I'm planning to take her with me to college in Arelmoor."

Jethro couldn't follow that logic. "You can go sightseeing and watch the flag-raising during vacation. Why move there permanently?"

"You wouldn't get it," Vance said, shooing him off his seat.

"I really don't," Jethro muttered as he walked away. "And you said we'd go to the same college. Liar."

Vance suddenly thought of something and called after him, "Jethro, are you free during these time slots next week?"

He circled several slots on his schedule.

"Basketball?" Jethro assumed he was too busy with his grandmother's hospitalization. "It's fine. We've got it covered."

"Not that," Vance said. "During these times, can you check Rebecca's math and French homework and tests? Go over anything she doesn't understand with her."

"Wait, what? You want me to skip basketball to tutor her?" Jethro's mind was blown. "What is going on between you two?"

"I took her money," Vance said simply.

"Huh?" Jethro misunderstood again.

He knew Vance did part-time work outside school, but Vance was very proud. If someone discovered his financial struggles, he'd feel awful.

Plus, his grandma was in the hospital, which must have cost a lot. So, it made sense that he was tutoring Rebecca to earn money.

"I'll pay you by the hour," Vance added. "Whatever she paid me, I'll give you the same amount. Consider it subbing for me."

Jethro hesitated. "I can just help out. You don't need to pay me."

They were close friends, after all. Besides, Vance was short on money right now.

"By the way, tutoring one student or two is basically the same," Jethro suggested. "Why not take on more students and earn extra?"

"I don't have the time."

"Fine..."

A few days later, after dance practice, Rebecca found Jethro squatting outside the studio.

"Jethro? What are you doing here?" She looked around, unsure who he was waiting for.

"Waiting for you." Jethro plopped down on the ground. "Right here works. The stone tables outside are too hot."

He pulled out a set of practice papers and handed them over. "Do this. I picked the questions. One hour."

Rebecca was baffled. "What is this about?"

"I'm supposed to go over problems with you." Jethro pointed at the papers. "How can I explain if you don't do them first? Today we'll do math. Tomorrow, I'll come back for French."

"Wait. I don't understand. Why are you doing this?"

"Vance sent me," Jethro explained impatiently. "Just start writing. I still have to report progress to him. And don't think you can slack off just because his grandma is in the hospital."

Jethro was determined to be even stricter than Vance so as not to fail his trust.