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

Chapter 651

Rebecca ended up getting cornered by Jethro outside the dance studio, forced to endure a full half hour of him bellowing explanations at her.

By the time he finally ran out of steam, she was still in a daze.

"Do you get it now?" Jethro's voice was hoarse, his throat nearly on fire.

Rebecca frowned. "Why are you yelling about something this simple?"

"If it's so simple, why didn't you answer a single question?" he growled. "The whole sheet is blank!"

"Why should I do it just because you tell me to?" she shot back. "This is ridiculous."

"It's not me. Vance told me to do this!" he said firmly, not taking no for an answer.

Rebecca found the whole situation even more absurd. "He's your boss, not mine!"

She shoved the test papers back into his hands. "I don't need tutoring. Thanks anyway."

"Hey! Wait!" Jethro shouted after her as she walked away.

She ignored him and kept going. Jethro mistook her action for her plea to have Vance tutor her in person. That wouldn't do. Vance was far too busy right now.

He wouldn't be a worthy friend if he couldn't help lighten the load. He spent the whole night reflecting on why Rebecca had rejected his help, then concluded that he had probably been too aggressive.

The next day, Jethro showed up outside the dance studio again, this time with a French worksheet and a cup of bubble tea.

Rebecca tried to flee at the sight of him, but he practically shoved the tea into her face. Bubble tea back then was still made with non-dairy creamer, but it tasted good—a nostalgic flavor of the era.

He handed her the worksheet, his attitude much gentler this time. "Please, just do this set for me. Otherwise, I don't know how to explain it to Vance."

He looked genuinely pleading.

Rebecca sipped the bubble tea. Since she had already accepted the drink, refusing felt awkward. She picked up the pen, took another sip, and started working through the questions.

He watched from the side. His expression shifted from relief to wide-eyed astonishment and then complete disbelief. His mouth hung open wide enough to fit an egg.

When she finished, she shoved the papers back into his hands. "It's done, but seriously, don't come tutor me anymore."

He scanned the worksheet at lightning speed, eager to ask if she had looked up the answers. In the end, he held back, knowing he couldn't accuse her without proof.

But with solid knowledge like this, why was Vance even asking him to tutor her? He needed to report back.

Vance had no idea that Jethro's first attempt at tutoring had been a crushing failure. At that moment, he was walking out of the hospital with Darren, who had been visiting Irene almost as often.

Vance felt deeply grateful and touched. "You mentioned you had conditions. Let's hear them."

He had already made up his mind. He'd go through thick and thin to meet them.

"Alright." Darren nodded. "I want you not to apply to any universities in Arelmoor."

Vance's heart jolted. "You mean..."

He immediately figured out what Darren was thinking, but he didn't want to believe it.

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

Chapter 652

The innocent crushes of youth were writing someone's name secretly in your textbook only to quietly erase it or having your breathing falter when they walked past the window while blaming the loud cicadas outside.

The two boys, still young and green, saw restraint, struggle, and passion reflected in each other's eyes—but no surrender.In the end, Vance looked away first. His eyelids lowered slightly, hiding the turbulent emotions in his deep eyes. I'm sorry, Darren. I can agree to anything else, but not this.*

Darren didn't push further. "Then tell me, what in your life can you give up? And what can't? I helped you, and I want something in return. But I don't want garbage."

Vance thought for a moment, then smiled with faint melancholy. He realized he didn't have much to offer.

"Pretty much anything," he said quietly, "except two people."

"Which two?" Darren asked.

"My grandmother." Vance paused, not saying the second name out loud. "And the other one... you already know."

Darren didn't ask again. They both understood who it was.

"Darren," Vance continued, "I understand how you feel, but some things can't happen just because one person wants them. It takes two, right?"

"How do you know she doesn't want it?" Darren's tone was equally certain.

"I'm more confident about this than I am about getting into any university."

"Fine. Then let's wait and see."

"Alright."

They left the hospital together, walking side by side like the best of friends, showing no sign of between them.

The next day at school, Vance came prepared to pay Jethro for the two tutoring sessions. Jethro refused the money outright and looked dejected.

"What's wrong?" Vance asked, noticing his expression.

"Nothing." Jethro shook his head. "How is your grandma doing?"

Vance relaxed. "Getting better every day. She should be discharged next week.

"That's great." Jethro paused. "About your birthday is it fine with us coming over to your place

Vance hesitated. He had always been aloof and didn't like having classmates over if i werent for basketball, he probably wouldn't have made many friends at all

"We wanted to visit your grandma at the hospital, but we were worried about disturbing her res way, we can see her at home without causing trouble. We'll handle everything ourselves Jets sart earnestly.

"We should also invite the ones who went to the arts class. Once school starts agam, we'll have fewer chances to hang out. They might drift away once they're in a different class."

That last point made Vance's eyelids twitch slightly.

He finally agreed, "Alright."

Jethro lit up. "I'll plan the birthday party! You don't have to lift a finger!"

The word "birthday" stirred a faint sense of anticipation in Vance's heart. In the past, only his grandmother ever remembered his birthday.

By chance, Jethro had seen it while filling out forms. Being the party type, he insisted on throwing a celebration for Vance.

Vance knew that someone else remembered his birthday. He also knew that two months ago, Rebecca had already started preparing a gift for him.

He had no idea what it was yet, but she had asked him what color he liked. He had answered, "Blue"

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

Chapter 653

Rebecca stared blankly at the calendar on her desk.

One date had been circled. She understood well what it meant: Vance's birthday.

The old Rebecca, the one who had been foolishly infatuated with him, had quietly carved her secret crush into these tiny details. She had even started preparing his birthday gift two months in advance.

On her desk sat the half–finished gift: a crystal ball she had been making herself. She had carefully created a scene inside–a universe of stars against a deep blue night sky, brilliant and magnificent.

She had wanted to tell the lonely boy that in this vast world, there were millions of stars keeping him company. Perhaps one of them was her.

Back then, she had liked spending endless time and effort on beautiful but meaningless things. Looking back now, the stone she had once carved with a moon and osmanthus flowers seemed silly and self–indulgent.

In the original timeline, she had given him the crystal ball. But during their five years of marriage, she had never once seen it in her life.

For him, it had just been a childish toy. After receiving it, he went through college and started a business. Who knew where it had ended up?

Since the gift had no real value and everything was starting over, there was no need for it to appear again. She sat down and continued to work on it, not for Vance but for herself.

As for his birthday, she would simply pretend she had forgotten. But while she tried to forget, someone else remembered

The next day, right after class, Jethro came running from the science class into their classroom.

Rebecca now got nervous whenever she saw him, thanks to the tutoring trauma. She tried to slip away, but he blocked her path.

She assumed he was going to shove another worksheet at her, but instead, he waved Darren over and spoke mysteriously. “In a few days, it’s Vance’s birthday. We’re throwing a party at his house. You guys should come!”

“A birthday party?” Rebecca blinked.

Vance had never done anything so lively before. What had changed him?

“I might not have time,” she instinctively refused.

Jethro wasn’t convinced. “What’s holding you up? Is it so important?”

“Dance practice. My teacher is strict.”

“It’s in the evening. You’re still going to dance then?” Jethro wouldn’t take no for an answer from either of them. “We’re not inviting many people–just the two of you from the

arts class. Plus, it's a chance to visit his grandma. We never went to see her in the hospital."

"I'll be there," Darres agreed.

"Good," Jethro grinned. "Rebecca, you have to come too. No excuses. Don't worry. I won't tutor your during the party.

Before Rebecca could protest, he had already dashed off.

"Tutoring? What's that?" Darren asked curiously.

Rebecca shook her head. "I don't know what's gotten into him. He suddenly decided to tutor me, it was torture.

"If you have any questions, we can study together," Darren offered. "They aren't in the arts class anyway. Going up and down the stairs would be inconvenient."

She nodded. "Yeah, I already told him not to bother. I can handle it myself."

After delivering the invitation, Jethro flew back to report to Vance. "Done! Both Rebecca and Darren said they were coming. By the way, do you know what gift Rebecca is preparing for you?"

Jethro winked mysteriously.

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

Chapter 654

Vance had no idea, only knowing she was preparing something.

On the evening of Irene's last day in the hospital, after school, jethro slung an arm around Vance's shoulders. "It's the day after tomorrow. I've got everything ready. We're heading straight to your place after school."

"Alright," Vance hummed.

Jethro wore an expression that said he was bursting to spila secret. "Vance..."

He grinned mysteriously, pulling Vance closer and whispering, "Don't let it show when I tell you, okay?"

“What?” Vance remained composed, spotting Darren standing under a camphor tree downstairs.

“Rebecca has got a gift for you!” Jethro enthused, gesturing with his hands. “I saw what she was making!”

Vance raised an eyebrow. “What was it?”

“A universe crystal ball!” Jethro slapped his arm. “For real, I saw her working on it! That was two months ago, before we split into different classes.

“I saw her sketching and buying tons of materials. I looked it up; this thing can project onto the ceiling. It’s sophisticated, and she’s making it by hand.”

“You should change your name to Nosy Parker,” Vance snorted. “Is there anything you don’t know? How do you know it’s for me?”

“Because I saw the base. She engraved those words: Happy Birthday! Who else could it be for?” Jethro’s eyes glittered. “Don’t you think she put a lot of thought into it?”

Vance wasn’t impressed. “Girls just like making these fancy but useless things.”

“Be honest, man. Are you guys…” Jethro clicked his tongue and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“How is that possible?” Vance cut him off. “Don’t overthink it. We are just regular classmates. That’s all.”

Jethro’s enthusiasm was dampened. “Alright.”

Sensing something, he turned around and saw Rebecca standing just one step behind them. It was so embarrassing that he wished the ground could open and swallow him.

Vance, lost in his thoughts, noticed Jethro’s strange reaction and turned as well.

“Hey.” Rebecca waved at them. “Vance, has your grandma been discharged yet?”

“Tomorrow,” he answered stiffly, as if he didn’t want to talk to her.

She understood his embarrassment perfectly.

At this stage, Vance didn’t like her. When Jethro asked if there was something between them, Vance had denied it mundiale. Now that she might have overheard that awkward conversation, his expression was even colder.

She considered saying something to smooth things over, like implying she hadn't heard anything. But that would be self-betraying.

Right then, Darren waved at her from under the tree. "Rebecca!"

"Darren?" She ran past Jethro and straight over to him. "Why did you rush out of the classroom so fast earlier?

Vance's expression darkened as he watched her trot toward Darren like a cheerful deer.

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

Chapter 655

Under the cedar tree, Darren pulled out two tickets. "Take a look. What are these?"

Rebecca's eyes lit up. "Wow! Tickets to Mrs. Lemke's performance?"

Darren nodded.

"How did you..." Rebecca was thrilled.

This was her respected dance teacher–the one who had discovered her talent at the dance academy, supported her after her injury, and stood by her during the cyberbullying scandal.

In the original timeline, Lauren had stopped performing and focused on teaching. Rebecca had missed the era of her shining on stage. These two tickets were God–sent.

Her smile sparkled in the summer sunlight. "How did you know I admire Mrs. Lemke?"

Darren tilted his head. "I didn't. I just saw that she's with the Arelmoor Dance Troupe. Isn't that your dream school? So, I booked these."

And they were the best seats. If he hadn't booked early, they would have been impossible to get.

Rebecca's eyes glowed. "So, that's why you rushed out earlier?"

"Yeah!" Darren's smile was as bright as summer's day. "The delivery notification came through."

Holding the tickets, Rebecca couldn't contain herement. "It's tonight. I..."

Darren had planned everything. "We can grab dinner nearby, then head over. There's plenty of time."

"Great! Let's go!" Rebecca exclaimed, pulling out her phone. "Let me transfer the money for the tickets."

Darren paused. "Okay."

She tapped on her phone to make the transfer, and he just looked at her. Their shadows stretched across the ground in the setting sun.

Vance stood on the steps, watching the two figures disappear into the distance. He remained motionless and silent for a long time.

A classmate behind him called out, "Hey, Vance, why are you still here?"

Only then did he snap out of it. "Sorry."

"What are you looking at?" Jethro followed his gaze to see Rebecca and Darren walking away.

"Nothing," Vance said quietly, "I thought I saw a plane fly by."

Before Jethro could react, he added, "I'm going to the hospital. "

"Oh..." Jethro felt the atmosphere had turned strangely awkward, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it

Vance left through the back gate, in the opposite direction from Rebecca. As he walked away, he couldn't help glancing back the same moment, Darren also looked back.

The sunlight was blinding, and the distance too great. Neither could see the other's expression

This was the most special performance Rebecca had ever watched.

In real life, she was already in her thirties mentally and had been through countless ups and downs. Seeing the young Lauren on stage filled her with a surreal, profound emotion.

The performance was full of youth, passion, and power. The energy in the dance moved her deeply. Sitting in the audience, she couldn't help but shed tears.

After the curtain call, she went up on stage to present a huge bouquet she had prepared. The young Lauren, who didn't recognize her, was a bit flustered seeing her smiling through tears.

"Mrs. Lemke," Rebecca said, embarrassed, "you danced so beautifully. I was so touched!"

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

Chapter 656

Lauren smiled at her. "Thank you.

There wasn't much time to talk on stage. Rebecca had to step down, hoping she would see Lauren again on the academy cam one day.

Outside the theater, the night breeze cooled the turbulent emotions in her heart. Looking at Darren beside her, she felt a little embarrassed crying like that in front of him.

"I..." The rims of her eyes were still red. "That was embarrassing."

"Not at all," he said. Under the streetlights, his eyes looked soft and misty. "Being moved by something you're truly passionate about is admirable."

It was the first time Rebecca had heard someone describe crying as something so great. She couldn't help laughing. "Darren, you really know what to say."

He shook his head. "I mean it. It's rare for someone to have a passion they're devoted to, let alone be moved to tears by it. I really envy you."

"If you keep talking like that, I'm going to get a big head," she said with a grin.

"You deserve to be proud!" he said sincerely.

She began thinking more about who he really was. He had his own passions. He loved observing the world, measuring it with his footsteps, and recording it with his eyes.

But besides that? Did he have any other deep loves?

"What's your dream?" she asked, curious about what else he pursued.

"Me..." Darren smiled. "My biggest wish is to live somewhere up north where it snows in winter. A house with big floor–to- ceiling windows so I can see the snow outside.

“My family and I would sit by the fireplace, stew meat, drink wine, and watch the snow fall.”

Rebecca’s mind flashed back to her days in Ireland. She stared at him, searching his eyes for any clues.

Darren smiled at her. “What? Do you think my dream is too plain?”

“No...” She grabbed his arm. “I was just thinking that fireplaces are popular abroad. Are you planning to go overseas eventually?

“Not necessarily,” he said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Have you ever been to a place like that? The way you describe it sounds like you’ve experienced it before.”

“You know I’m often alone.” He shrugged. “On holidays or birthdays, it’s usually just me. I think fire has the power to bring people together. Everyone likes gathering in warm places, right?

“In books and plays, fireplaces always represent warmth. I imagine what it would feel like for a whole family to sit around one It doesn’t matter where–domestic or abroad. Wherever my family is, that’s where I want to be.

Rebecca felt that Darren and Vance were truly very different.

Vance was often alone, too, but he buried his loneliness deep and armored himselt with coldness and silence. Darien, on the other hand, never denied his loneliness.

“If that’s your dream, you must hold onto it and stay with your family forever, she said softly

He shouldn’t go driving around the world alone again. Exploration, after all, could also be a form of loneliness.

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

Chapter 657

After the performance, Darren walked Rebecca home.

Gabriel picked her up for school these days. She had texted him earlier about the show. But during the performance, she had left her phone and bag in a locker outside the theater.

By the time they came out, both her and Darren's phones were dead.

Darren didn't feel comfortable letting her take the bus home alone so late, so he accompanied her. He was already very familiar with this route anyway.

Luckily, cash payments hadn't been completely replaced by digital ones yet. They took the bus home using coins.

When they arrived, Josette and Kaitlyn were both waiting anxiously by the courtyard gate. The moment they saw her, they breathed huge sighs of relief.

"You're finally back! Gabe went out looking for you. Your phone was off."

"Where is he?" Rebecca asked, not seeing Gabriel

"He's out searching everywhere," Kaitlyn said.

Rebecca felt guilty. "I'm sorry. My phone died."

"No worries. We're family," Kaitlyn said quickly, but her eyes scanned Darren like searchlights.

"Hi, guys," Darren greeted them naturally.

"This is my classmate. We went to the performance together, and he saw me home," Rebecca explained.

"Thank you, young man," Kaitlyn said with a warm smile. "It's hot out here. Come inside and have some mung bean soup."

"It's getting late. I should..." Darren declined.

"No rush," Kaitlyn insisted, ushering him into the house. "Wait until my son gets back. He can give you a ride home. You've come all the way here on such a hot day. How could we not invite you in?"

On the coffee table sat the half–finished universe crystal ball.

"It's beautiful!" Darren exclaimed.

"I was just making it for fun," Rebecca explained

Originally meant for Vance, it had become something for herself, and then Gabriel had started working on it during his free time. With Gabriel in full vacation mode, the crystal ball was nearly finished.

“Can I play with it?” Darren asked.

Rebecca nodded.

He grew more and more fond of it. When he left, be took it with him.

To Rebecca, it was now just an unimportant toy. Since the materials had already been bought, it would be wasteful to leave them unused. If he liked it, he could have it.

After Darren left, Kaitlyn and Josette “interrogated” her.

Kaitlyn, having lived in France for a long time, was open–minded about high school relationships and was simply curious. But Josette was anxious.

Rebecca had to reassure her grandmother repeatedly before she was finally allowed to escape to her room.

Behind her, Josette spoke to Kaitlyn. “How can I feel at ease going abroad with you? What about Becky? Girls at this age are nothing but worry.”

It seemed Kaitlyn and Gabriel had already started trying to convince Josette to move abroad. But clearly, they hadn’t succeeded yet.

Rebecca didn’t want to attend Vance’s birthday party.

Her goal regarding him remained unchanged: she would not fall in love with him again, and she would prevent him from meeting Catherine.

She was going to cut off all the roots of their mutual pain.

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

Chapter 658

Now that Irene had undergone surgery much earlier, Vance probably wouldn’t encounter Catherine anymore.

Rebecca's only remaining goal was to keep her distance from him. But she failed when Jethro, Jenny, and several other former classmates came straight to the arts classroom to block her and Darren.

"Shall we?" Darren asked.

He had always planned to attend anyway. For their friendship on the basketball court alone, he would not miss Vance's birthday.

The others did their best to convince her.

"Rebecca, we're not in the same class anymore. It's hard for us to get together. This is a rare chance!"

"Yeah. You're always either in class or at dance practice. It's hard to even bump into you in the cafeteria."

"It's not just a birthday party. Jethro wants everyone to hang out."

Besides Vance, she still had friends like Jenny in this world. But if she were going, she should at least prepare a gift.

"What are you guys getting him?" she asked.

"We're pooling money for a cake," Jenny replied. "And since his grandma just had surgery, we'll buy some get–well gifts, too."

Rebecca thought that was a good idea. "Count me in."

"Sure," Jenny agreed readily.

The group went to Vance's house together. The cake they had pooled money for was carried by

Darren.

Jethro opened the door with a big grin. "You guys are finally here! Wow, this looks amazing!"

"We bought it together," Jenny said, gesturing to the group.

"Got it. I'll tell Vance," Jethro enthused.

His eyes flicked toward Rebecca, noting that her hands were empty. He frowned slightly as he placed the cake on the table.

Vance showed up afterward, leading the group to visit Irene, who was resting in her room. Rebecca walked at the very back. Back then, she had pretended to be a volunteer and taken care of Irene for a long time. In her memories, the old lady had been twisted by pain, her consciousness often fading.

Now, though still weak after surgery, Irene looked sober and gracious. Her image was completely different from that of the frail old woman Rebecca once knew.

Rebecca smiled with relief, happy with the results. She hoped this wasn't a dream and that everyone truly got a second chance.

"Thank you all for coming to see me and celebrating Vance's birthday," Irene said softly." Sweetheart, take them to have fun. Don't let my illness spoil the mood."

Before Vance could reply, Darren spoke up. "It's fine, Mrs. Bradford. You're all better now."

He really had a gift for making people happy.

"You're right." Irene nodded with a smile. "Alright. You kids go have fun."

The group left the room cheerfully, but Rebecca had a strange feeling that Vance had been staring at her the whole time.

When she turned to meet his gaze, he looked away.

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

Chapter 659

Since Irene had just been discharged and was resting at home, Jethro, the self-appointed planner of the party, decided not to do anything noisy inside the house.

Instead, they set up a barbecue in the courtyard. The grill was ready, and the smell of burning charcoal filled the air.

Before grilling, Jethro suggested lighting the candles first.

The cake they had pooled money for was opened. It was a standard fruit cake from the bakery, beautifully decorated and delicious-looking.

After they sang the birthday song, everyone urged Vance to make a wish. He involuntarily glanced at Rebecca, who stood between Jenny and Darren, smiling normally.

"Make a wish," Jenny urged him.

"Okay." Vance closed his eyes and crossed his fingers.

After making his wish, he opened his eyes and blew out the candles.

Amid the applause, Jethro asked, "What did you wish for?"

Vance quietly cut the cake without answering.

"Duh, obviously for his grandma to be healthy," Jenny said. "And why are you even asking? Don't you know you're not supposed to say your wish out loud?"

"What?" Jethro's eyes widened. "In that case, how can other people hear it and help make it come true?"

Everyone looked at him in confusion.

"For example, if I wish for a new computer, how will my parents or grandparents know if I don't say it out loud?" Jethro said seriously, only to receive a round of head smacks from the group.

The atmosphere in the room was lively and joyful. Only Rebecca and Vance smiled faintly at the chaos.

Rebecca acted like that because she had been through so many ups and downs. Vance's reason? Unknown.

"Alright, guys. Don't disturb the old lady. Let's go outside and grill meat!" Jethro rubbed his head and dashed out, followed by the others.

He watched Jenny pull Rebecca outside, his eyes dimming at her empty hands.

They were all students. Pooling money for a cake or giving a nice notebook was a typical birthday gift. But for someone special, there would always be something different.

Outside, there was a loud sizzle as Jethro placed the first batch of meat on the grill. The aroma instantly filled the air.

Standing across from Vance, Darren said, "Aren't you going out?"

"I am." Vance hid his disappointment. "I'll cut the cake and bring it out. You go ahead and join them."

Darren nodded. "Let me know if you need help."

Vance looked at him, trying to say something, but held back in the end.

"No matter what, we'll always be friends," Darren said seriously. "Nothing can change that."

Vance nodded. "Of course."

Darren took a small gift box out of his bag and slid it across the table. "This is for you."

Vance was surprised.

"I didn't chip in for the cake," Darren explained. "So, happy birthday!"

Vance received a special gift anyway. "Thank you."

Given their relationship, there was no need to pool money or worry about gifts.

"I'll head out." Darren went to sit with the others in the courtyard.

When Vance carried the sliced cake outside, Jethro was enthusiastically grilling silkworm pupae, the oil crackling and popping loudly.

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

Chapter 660

Jethro was trying to convince everyone how delicious they were, but he received zero support. Jenny had already moved far away in disgust.

Rebecca glanced at Darren. “You don’t like these?”

Darren shook his head vigorously. “Absolutely not!”

Did silkworm chrysalises really have any fundamental difference from cicada nymphs, locusts, and the like? Rebecca didn’t know the answer.

When Vance came over, there were no seats left next to Rebecca. Darren sat on one side of her and Jenny on the other, so he sat down directly across from her.

At that point, Rebecca was holding a few skewers of leeks in her hands. Vance grabbed a large bunch of beef skewers and started grilling with the group.

“Hey, do you even know how to do this?” Jethro asked, thinking that Vance was above such mundane, smoky activities.

Vance ignored him, sprinkling a generous amount of cumin on the meat. The aroma instantly intensified.

Watching Vance skillfully flip the skewers, Jethro nodded. “Looks like you know what you’re doing.”

“You really can’t keep your mouth shut even when eating,” Vance said.

He might not have grilled before, but he had seen it done. Plus, he had worked in a restaurant, which Jethro knew about.

Jethro remembered that fact and shut his mouth. Vance didn’t like people knowing about his part–time jobs. Even Jethro found it hard to accept that someone as proud and aloof as Vance had to hustle for money at such a young age.

That was why he had blurted out that question without thinking. Fortunately, the overall atmosphere remained cheerful.

Amid the smoke and fire, everyone was laughing and chatting. Vance focused on his grilling. When the first batch was ready, he handed it to Jethro. “Here. Thanks for all your hard work today.”

“Man!” Jethro was deeply moved and ate the skewer straight from his hand.

Vance handed out the rest to the others. The group was surprised by his sudden enthusiasm. After all, he had always been an iceberg.

He gave a helpless smile. “Am I really that wooden in your eyes? You all came to celebrate my birthday. As the host, it’s only right that I prepare food for you.”

He was reserved by nature and kept people at a distance. It didn’t mean he didn’t understand basic social etiquette.

Finally, he handed the last two skewers to Rebecca. She was eating her leeks when she saw his fair fingers covered in chili powder and cumin.

Even though she had spent many years with him in the original timeline, the scene still felt strangely jarring. These hands were meant for typing on keyboards, flipping through contracts, and signing documents.

The strong, elegant signature that came from these hands carried the aura of snowy mountains, not the smell of cumin and chili.

In fact, she knew he could cook. He had cooked for Catherine and later for Anna. But she had never seen him with greasy, garlicky hands like this. He had always carried himself like a Michelin chef.

“Here, it’s beef,” he said.

The noisy backyard suddenly fell quiet. Everyone was watching the two of them. The only sound left was the sizzling of meat on the grill.

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

Chapter 661

Rebecca quickly took the two skewers of beef from his hands. “Thanks.”

Vance had specifically said beef. She knew why.

There had been one time when she, Jenny, and a few other classmates were buying grilled skewers from a street cart outside school. Vance had been there, too.

She had casually mentioned, “I want beef, not lamb. I don like the gamey smell.”

He had an excellent memory. After all, he was one of the top students in their grade. It all depended on whether he wanted to remember.

They had been married for five years, yet she felt like he had never remembered her preferences. So, why did fre remember now? She bit into the meat. It was a little dry and overcooked. His cooking skills weren’t that great yet at this age.

But that night, he seemed unusually interested in grilling. He kept working nonstop, never eating any himself. No matter what he grilled, the last portion always ended up in her hands.

When he finally handed her a grilled sardine, she waved him off. “I’m full. Thanks. I can’t eat anymore.”

She was already stuffed and simply held the fish without taking a bite.

Jenny and Jethro immediately started heckling. “We’re still hungry! Grill some more squid!”

Vance stood up. “I’m going to wash my hands.‘

“Hey, Rebecca’s not eating, so you stop? You can’t play favorites like that!” Jethro blurted out.

Vance paused. “What are you talking about? I’m going to wash some fruit. We’ve eaten so much grilled meat. Aren’t you guys thirsty? Fruit will help cut through the grease.”

He wasn’t a talkative person. Explaining too much only revealed his unease. Luckily, they were all teenagers with relatively simple minds. No one, Rebecca included, picked up on it.

She never imagined that he had spent the entire evening grilling just to give everything to her. She didn’t have that kind of confidence. She knew very clearly that at this point, he did not like her. He had never liked her.

As for why he had suddenly changed aft their divorce, it was probably because Catherine had disappointed him so deeply that he finally remembered his ex–wife, who had lived with him day after day.

There might have been love, but it came so much later that she would rather he had never loved her at all.

She held the fish, hesitating. Her stomach was too full of meat and felt greasy, but throwing it away would be wasteful. She decided to wait until he brought out fruit, eat some to settle her stomach, and then continue.

But her hesitation was obvious. Darren noticed. “Can’t finish it?”

“I’ll eat it later.”

“Don’t force yourself. Give it to me.”

“Huh?”

She hadn’t bitten into it yet, so it was fine.

“Your stomach is small anyway. Eating too much at night will make you feel heavy on the way home. Just give it to me.

“Alright.” She passed him the skewer. “I haven’t bitten it.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He brushed it off.

Vance came out carrying a large basin full of assorted fruits and saw Darren eating the sardine. Rebecca was smiling at him.

The basin tilted, and several grapes rolled out without Vance noticing.

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

Chapter 662

“Vance, the grapes are falling! Jethro rushed over and took the basin from him. “Was it too full? Too heavy?”

“Yeah,” Vance answered distractedly.

He squatted down to pick up the grapes, but his peripheral vision kept drifting to the other side. In the right light, Rebecca’s smile at Darren seemed to glow.

It reminded him of that afternoon under the camphor tree in front of the teaching building. She had rushed toward Darren like a deer with that same smile.

“These got dirty. Should we throw them away?” Jethro moved to his side, blocking his view.

“Yeah.” Vance tossed the spoiled grapes into the trash, then returned to his seat as if nothing had happened.

By now, everyone had eaten their fill, but it was still early. So, Jethro suggested playing games.

Some wanted to play poker, while others suggested idioms or poetry chains. In the end, they settled on the classic Truth or Dare -Jethro’s choice.

“We came out to have fun!” he exclaimed. “Who wants to recite poetry and idioms? That’s exhausting. Let’s play something simple, brainless, and exciting.”

They didn’t have any props, so they used a phone for music and passed around a small melon from the fruit basin. In the first few rounds, the melon kept landing on Jethro, Jenny, and the others.

Crushes at this age were still shy and hidden, but the game gave everyone an outlet. Almost all the questions revolved around romance.

Both Jenny and Jethro were asked if they liked anyone. Jenny answered confidently that she didn't.

Jethro hemmed and hawed, and under the pressure of a dare, finally admitted, "Yes."

Jenny tried to ask who it was, but Jethro turned red and shouted, "That's the second question! Aren't we only allowed to ask one?

"Wow, Jethro is blushing? That's rare!" Jenny laughed loudly.

"Are we playing or not?" Jethro vowed revenge.

The game continued. This time, when the music stopped, the melon landed squarely in Vance's hands.

"Finally! The birthday boy gets his turn!" Jenny exclaimed. Drawing from experience, she asked directly, "Vance, who's the girl you like?"

Vance stayed silent for a moment. "I choose Dare."

Jenny and Jethro screamed, "Ah! He does like someone!"

"Man, you have a secret! Tell us who she is!"

"Dare!" Vance repeated, dampening their spirit.

"Fine," Jenny sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"The Dare is... you have to skip turning in your math homework once!" Jenny deliberately emphasized "math" because their math teacher was extremely strict.

Anyone who missed an assignment had to stand during class. Vance was a model student who had never once missed homework or been punished. The idea of him standing as punishment would be huge gossip for the whole grade.

Could someone as proud and self–respecting as him allow himself to be punished like that?

"Think twice. You can still change your mind," Jenny added.

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

Chapter 663

“Yeah. You’ll be like a monkey in a zoo. The whole grade will come to watch you. Imagine how embarrassing that would be,” Jethro echoed.

For a moment, everyone except Rebecca and Darten started trying to persuade Vance.

“Why are you guys more anxious about me getting punished than I am?” Vance said decisively. “I choose Dare.”

“Alright.” Jethro and Jenny sat back defeated.

But they refused to give up. They kept playing with determination, trying to make the melon fand on Vance again. Finally, after several rounds, they succeeded.

“Is the girl you like in our class?” Jethro asked quickly.

Vance answered just as fast. “No.”

Now, even Rebecca wondered who it was. He had liked Catherine, but he hadn’t met her yet in this timeline.

She then brushed it off. As long as it wasn’t Catherine or her, that was fine. She simply wished him and whoever he liked a long and peaceful life together.

Jethro swallowed the follow–up question. “Who is it?”

He gritted his teeth and kept playing. But this time, no matter when the music stopped, the melon never landed on Vance again. Once, it landed on Rebecca.

Jenny, being Rebecca’s best friend, naturally wouldn’t ask anything embarrassing. She jumped in first. “What university do you dream of attending?”

The question was met with boos and protests for playing favorites.

Amused, Rebecca answered slowly, “Arelmoor Dance Academy.”

Everyone groaned. “Boring! Jenny, you can’t protect her like that!”

“Fine. You all just want to know who I like the most, right?” Rebecca said.

Jethro’s attention was instantly captured. “Yeah! You’re willing to answer? You really like someone?”

“Why not?” she said generously. “Of course, I do.”

Darren and Vance turned to look at her at the same time.

“Is he here right now?” Jethro asked, narrowing the scope.

“Yes,” Rebecca answered openly.

Jethro’s gaze immediately locked onto Vance, his eyes sparkling with gossip. “Do you dare say who it is?”

“Yes.” Rebecca shrugged. “I’ll confess right now.”

Vance’s hands at his sides clenched into fists.

Rebecca reached over and draped her arm around Jenny’s shoulders. “The person I like the most is obviously the one who always protects me!”

She planted a kiss on Jenny’s cheek, making Jenny beam with happiness.

“You…” Jethro was rendered speechless. “You’re cheating! Jenny’s a girl!”

“you didn’t ask if it was a boy or a girl,” Jenny chimed in “You only asked who she liked the most.”

Jethro scratched his head, defeated.

“Alright, that’s enough for tonight. We still have school tomorrow, and Mrs. Bradford just got out of the hospital. We shouldn’t stay too late and disturb her rest,” Darren said, standing up.

“Yeah, let’s head home. We still have homework to do,” Jenny said, turning to Varice. “Don’t forget your dare. You’re not turning in math homework tomorrow.”

Everyone quickly cleaned up the courtyard, said goodbye to Vance, and left. The once lively backyard suddenly fell quiet.

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

Chapter 664

Vance went inside and checked on trene first. She was already asleep, a gentle smile on her face even in her dreams.

He smiled softly, then went to his room and took a shower.

The gift Darren had given him sat on his desk. It was the only real gift he had received this birthday besides the group cake.

Of course, he didn't care whether his classmates gave him presents. What bothered him was that he had waited until everyone left, but the so–called universe crystal ball never appeared

The weather had been good that day. In the courtyard, one could see a sky full of stars. The hotse had been filled with laughter and voices like never before, yet his heart still felt a hollow emptiness he didn't know how to fill

Darren's gift was packed in a small box. He opened it and froze.

It was a custom keychain—the kind one could order online. It was a simple item, but the design was frat ordinary.

After staring at it for a while, he put it back into the box and placed the box in his drawer. Then he sat there in a daze before finally going to bed.

The next day at school, Jethro was still puzzling over something. Unable to hold it in, he asked Vance, "Didn't Rebecca give you a gift yesterday?"

The empty spot in Vance's heart ached, but his expression grew even colder. "Didn't she chip in for the cake?"

"No, I mean..." Jethro faltered. "Maybe I saw it wrong."

Right then, a classmate exclaimed, "Guys, let's go to the arts class heard there's a cool crystal ball that can project a universe onto the ceiling."

"Universe? Crystal ball?" Jethro muttered, dragging Vance along. "That's it! Let's go watch!"

The curtains in the arts experimental class were drawn, making the room dim. On Darren's desk sat a crystal ball with a universe scene inside it. Earth and countless shining stars were floating in liquid.

"Darren, didn't you say it could show the Big Dipper?" a classmate said. "Show us!"

Darren turned it on, transforming the ceiling into a deep blue expanse. A blue Earth floated within it, the Milky Way glittered, and the Big Dipper was clearly visible.

"Wow, this is so beautiful!" the students marveled. "How does it work?"

“Let Rebecca explain. She designed it,” Darren said.

He had simply finished the final assembly and brought it to school today to show the result.

“Huh?” Rebecca smiled. “I don’t have that kind of skill. I followed an online tutorial. I’ll send you the link.”

“Can you make other scenes, too?”

“Of course.”

Everyone was amazed by the crystal ball’s magic. The empty spot in Vance’s heart finally collapsed.

“No way,” Jethro muttered. “She gave the crystal ball to Darren?”

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

Chapter 665

The moment the words left his mouth, Jethro realized his mistake.

He turned and hurriedly explained to Vance, “Maybe I saw wrong I’m sorry. 1..”

Vance walked away without waiting for him to finish

Jethro felt terrible, blaming himself for speaking out of turn. But he clearly remembered seeing, Va base of that crystal ball. It couldn’t have been meant for Dazen.

He rushed over to Darren. “Let me see this!”

He picked up the crystal ball and quickly checked the base. It was completely blank.

“How is that possible?” he muttered, then put it down and ran off.

He sprinted back to class, where Vance was sitting perfectly straight, working on problems.

“Vance...” He approached, no longer playful. “I’m sorry. I just checked. It’s not the same crystal ball.”

A sharp voice cut through. “Vance Bradford!”

Jethro turned around to see the math teacher arriving.

“Come here!” The teacher pointed at Vance.

Jethro groaned, knowing this was the consequence of last night’s game. He felt genuinely sorry for Vance.

Not only had his birthday gift disappeared, but now Vance was going to be scolded by the teacher. Jethro really regretted ever suggesting that game.

For a top student like Vance, being made to stand as punishment was horrible. It was different for someone like Jethro, who was used to it.

“It’s fine.” Vance put down his pen calmly and followed the math teacher to the office.

He remained standing for the rest of the classes that day. It drew countless curious glances from students in other classes, all whispering and gossiping.

Guilt drove Jethro to go to the math teacher and plead for Vance, who had actually done the homework. He confessed everything, admitting it was his fault for suggesting the game.

Unfortunately, his honesty didn’t save Vance. It only led the teacher to punish him, too. He ended up standing right next to his friend.

Jenny felt bad and wanted to stand with them. Jethro simply shooed her away. “Go back to your seat. Or people will say the two of us can’t even handle it and have to drag a girl into it.”

Jenny hesitated, then offered to treat them to a meal as compensation.

“It has to be something good,” Jethro agreed. “A feast on the weekend.”

“No problem!” Jenny promised, patting her chest.

The two boys stood through the classes until school let out. Jethro exaggeratedly limped around, but the moment his basketball teammates called, he perked up.

Then he remembered Vance and turned back. “How are you holding up? Can you still play? You’re not like me, you’ve never been punished before. You’re delicate.”

Vance stood tall and walked steadily. “I’m fine, but I don’t have time today.”

He slung his bag over his shoulder and left quickly for his shift at the bakery. At the same time, Rebecca headed off to the dance studio.

At the school gate, he spotted her getting on the bus.

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

Chapter 666

Vance quickened his steps and got on the same bus.

It was rush hour, so the bus was crowded. Rebecca got squeezed into the middle, while Vance ended up near the front.

Several rows of people separated them. Unless they looked deliberately, they couldn't see each other. So, Rebecca had no idea he was on the bus.

Vance could only catch occasional glimpses of her profile when the bus turned. She had gotten quite tan this summer, but it made her facial features look more defined.

She was no longer like a timid rabbit. The setting sun cast a golden glow on her profile and made her shine.

Some passengers got off, and the crowd loosened a bit. Vance moved closer in her direction until only two or three people separated them.

More passengers got on, pushing him even nearer. She still didn't notice him and continued staring out the window.

He began to zone out, too, interrupted by a commotion. Rebecca's clear, crisp voice rang out. "What are you doing? Take it out right now!"

Vance's attention snapped to her. He quickly pushed through the crowd and heard an arrogant man shouting, "What am I doing? Don't talk nonsense!"

"I saw you stealing! You still want to deny it?" Her voice carried undiminished force.

"Accusing people randomly can get you beaten!" The man in baggy work pants rolled up his sleeves and charged toward her.

Vance squeezed through the last obstacles and stepped between them, shielding Rebecca behind him. He stared coldly at the man. "What do you want?"

Though young, he was half a head taller than the man.

The man faltered but kept up his tough act. "Kid, you'd better stay out of this!"

"What did you steal? Hand it over!" Vance demanded, grabbing his wrist.

"He stole this lady's phone!" Rebecca stepped forward and pointed at an elderly woman nearby.

The old lady checked her pocket. Sure enough, her phone was gone.

"Madam, give me the number," Rebecca said, taking out her phone. "I'll dial it, and we'll know if he stole it."

The old lady quickly recited her number. The man panicked and struggled, trying to break free from Vance's grip.

When he failed, he shouted, "Hey, stop the bus! I'm getting off!"

Rebecca had already dialed. A phone started ringing somewhere on the man.

"Listen! It's ringing on you! Hand over the phone!" Rebecca shouted.

The man glowered at her. "That's my phone! What's wrong with me getting calls from people who need to reach me?"

"Then answer it! Pull it out and answer! Let's see who's calling you. See if it's my number!" Rebecca pressed.

The man didn't dare pick up. He scrambled for an excuse. "I don't want to answer. It's a spam call. I have every right not to pick up."

"Then take it out and check if the missed call was from me." Rebecca jabbed a finger at his trouser pocket, where the phone's signal light kept flashing.

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

Chapter 667

By now, everyone on the bus understood what was happening. The man had definitely stolen the old lady’s phone.

The passengers immediately supported Rebecca and demanded that he produce the phone.

“Please give me back my phone,” the old lady begged anxiously. “It has many photos of my children.”

The man panicked but stubbornly held on. “I said I didn’t take it! What do you want? Search me? That’s illegal! And you!” He glared at Vance. “You’ve already caused me physical harm’m going to sue you!”

“Great!” Vance wasn’t intimidated. “Go ahead and sue me. Please open the door. We’re getting off to find a place where you can sue me.”

“Where?” The man tried to break free while Vance was distracted, but his grip was like a vise.

“To the police station!” Vance said. “Weren’t you going to sue me for physical Harm? Let’s go together right now!”

The man started to lose his nerve. “Fine, let’s go! Open the door! Let me off!”

He planned to escape once they got off. His opponent was just a student, after all.

But the other passengers started clamoring, “We’re all going to the police station!”

Only then did the man truly panic.

The driver turned a corner and announced, “And here we are at the police station! Let’s get off and report this!”

Sure enough, the police station was right outside.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll handle this with him. Please continue with the other passengers,” Vance called out.

“No way! You’re still a kid. We can’t let you handle a thief alone. We’re all going,” a middle–aged man declared, waving his hand.

“Yeah, let’s all go!” The passengers all agreed.

The man had nowhere to run, nor could he pretend anymore. The police checked the phone and confirmed it belonged to the old lady.

The case was straightforward and didn’t take long. The driver soon continued the route with everyone back on board. The old lady thanked Rebecca and Vance profusely.

Soon, they got off at their stop.

The bakery and dance studio were in the same building. It would take a few minutes‘ walk to get there.

Vance finally got a chance to speak to her. “You’ve got quite the nerve to catch a thief alone. I never realized that about you before.”

Of course, he wasn’t denying her kindness and sense of justice. It was just that she had really changed a lot. The old Rebecca would have chosen a safer, more cautious approach instead of confronting the thief head–on.

“How could I have stayed silent?” she said. “Could you have ignored it?”

He shook his head. Of course not, but...

“Aren’t you scared?” he asked.

The girl he knew had always been like a cautious snail, carefully extending her antennae to test the world. The slightest movement could make her retreat.

He hadn’t known that when he wasn’t around, she could be this bold.

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

Chapter 668

“There were so many people on the bus. What was there to be afraid of?” Rebecca said matter–of–factly.

The road was lined with sycamore trees and bustling crowds. They walked through the throng in silence.

“Rebecca...” Vance tried several times to speak, but waves of people kept interrupting. By the time they reached the building, he still hadn’t gotten the chance. /

Rebecca had no idea he wanted to talk. At the bakery entrance, she waved. “Bye, I’m heading up.”

He watched her leave, swallowing the words he wanted to say.

Rebecca finished dance practice two hours later. She had arranged for Gabriel to pick her up, but he got stuck in traffic and would arrive in 20 minutes.

She debated whether to wait on the sidewalk or go back into the building to browse the mall. When stre turned around, Vance was seen standing behind her.

“Are you off work?” she asked casually.

“Almost,” he said, gazing at the fine beads of sweat on her forehead.

She had tied her hair into a high bun, revealing her slender neck. She looked as elegant as a white swan.

“Waiting for your ride?” He had noticed her checking her phone earlier.

“Yeah.”

“When will it arrive?”

“In around 20 minutes.”

“Then come inside and sit for a while. It’s too out here.”

He invited her into the shop. The heat had made her nose tip/sweaty.

“Alright...”

It was the hottest time of day. Even though the sun had set, the ground radiated heat like a steamer.

She followed Vance into the bakery. Not wanting to take the air conditioning for free, she picked up a tray and started selecting bread.

Since Kaitlyn and Gabriel were home and liked bread, she didn’t mind buying extra.

There were no other customers in the shop, and Vance was the only staff member. He followed her, watching as she placed loaves on the tray.

“Rebecca...”

“Hm?”

She continued choosing, remembering Kaitlyn and Gabriel’s preferences. Kaitlyn liked croissants. Gabriel was disciplined and liked eating the healthier, less tasty options.

“You like these?” Vance was surprised to see her choosing the dry, bland kinds popular with dieters.

“No, these are for my family.”

“O–kay.”

That was a relief. Otherwise, he would have doubted if the person in front of him was really Rebecca.

“Though actually, we should eat these, too. We can add grilled chicken breast and broccoli for a low–carb, high–protein meal,” she said while continuing to select.”

Vance didn’t follow up. His mind wasn’t on the conversation.

“Rebecca…” He finally decided to say what was on his mind. “The other day I went to your classroom and saw Darren’s crystal ball.”

Rebecca’s hand holding the bread stiffened slightly.

“It’s beautiful. Must have taken a lot of time,” he probed.

“They’re just fancy but useless things,” she replied casually, then realized those words might be misleading.

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

Chapter 669

They carried a strange hint of spite. Rebecca hoped Vance wouldn't misunderstand.

She hadn't said it because of what she overheard him and Jethro talking about that day. She had simply been influenced by Vance, who had always viewed her thoughtful gifts as fancy but useless.

It led to her using the same words.

"That day..." They spoke at the same time.

Rebecca wanted to clarify that she hadn't said it because of what she overheard. Vance wanted to ask if she had heard them.

She suddenly felt there was no need to explain anymore. Carrying the tray to the checkout, she said, "Ring me up."

All of Vance's words were blocked by that sentence. He scanned and packed each loaf. When the total appeared on the screen, a strong sense of unwillingness surged in his heart.

He hated that their relationship had somehow become that of customer and seller. He didn't even know when it had started or why.

"The crystal ball was originally meant for me, right?" The words finally spilled out when the unwillingness reached its peak.

Rebecca had already bagged the bread. She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No."

He laughed, not believing her for a second. He was usually indifferent to everything. He laughed like that only when he was truly hurting.

The tip of his nose stung with bitterness. "I know it was. I just want to know why."

"What?" Rebecca checked her phone. Gabriel should be arriving soon.

"Why did you suddenly change?" He didn't understand.

Where was the girl who had carefully given him five dollars to tutor her? Where was the girl who would excitedly pick up a beautiful fallen leaf, turn it into a bookmark with pretty handwriting, and give it to him?

Where had she gone? Who had stolen her away?

She gave a vague answer. "Because I finally know what I want."

She wanted him to live a healthy, safe, and peaceful life. She wished both of them well. Maybe one day, when they were old, we would bump into each other on the street and casually say, "Hi, old classmate."

But she couldn't tell him.

"Can you tell me?" Vance grabbed the bag she was holding, afraid she would leave in the next second.

But she really couldn't tell him.

"You want to join Arelmoor Dance Academy, right?" he pressed, refusing to let go.

Rebecca nodded, a bit confused about where he was going with this. Was this the so-called "regret arc" happening early?

That was indeed her plan. She had already told him, hadn't she?

"No problem," he said. "Then go to Arelmoor."

Rebecca was totally lost.

"I only know..." he paused.

They used to have this conversation before, but it hadn't gone the way he hoped. Maybe he hadn't been clear enough.

He continued, "I only know that I've never changed. So, please don't change either."

Vance was a reserved person. Getting him to say what was in his heart was nearly impossible. It was especially so when he was in high school.

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

Chapter 670

But Rebecca was already in her thirties mentally.

She had experienced every kind of passionate love and hatred. There was nothing she couldn’t say.

“Vance,” she said frankly, “I don’t like guessing games. Maybe I’ve misunderstood what you mean, but based on my understanding, I want to tell you one thing. The old Rebecca might have liked you, but I don’t.”

The light in Vance’s eyes dimmed rapidly. She wasn’t mistaken after all.

It was a shame. Why did he always fall for her after she stopped loving him?

“Why?” he demanded stubbornly, trying to get to the bottom of it.

“I already told you,” she replied. “I now know what I want. And you’re not it.”

Right then, her phone lit up with a message from Gabriel. He had arrived and asked her to come out.

“I’m leaving,” she said, walking out of the bakery.

His gaze remained fixed on her as she walked to the roadside and got into the passenger seat of a luxury car. Through the window, he could vaguely see a young man driving.

His pride stopped him from chasing after her for an explanation, but the question haunted him all the way home. “Is it because I have nothing right now?”

Back home, he pulled a poetry collection from the shelf. Inside was a bookmark made from a neatly pressed sycamore leaf. Written on it in black ink was: [o wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being.]

He tucked the bookmark into his collection of European poetry, right on the page of John Keats‘ On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.

The line printed on the read: [Silent, upon a peak in Darien.]

He once thought this line was a perfect portrait of his life: solitary with few companions. He picked up a pen and wrote after the original line: [We will climb that peak together.]

The added words were in a completely different handwriting. For some reason, they suddenly looked glaring. There was no way to erase what had been written, though.

In the end, he crossed out the word “together.”

Life was originally about ascending the tall building alone, floor after floor.

Rebecca had returned home, carrying her large bag of bread.

Josette couldn’t understand Gabriel’s taste and asked Kaitlyn, “Is all the bread abroad as hard as bricks?”

Her expression was full of pity for Gabriel. “My grandson has suffered so much. He’s never had anything good to eat and enjoys chewing on bricks.”

Her words amused everyone. Gabriel joked, “Yes, Grandma. Nothing abroad tastes as good as what you make. Since I came back, I’ve already gained five pounds!”

Josette loved hearing that. From the first time she saw Gabriel, she thought he was too thin and had been working hard to fatten him up. She was finally seeing some results, only for Rebecca to bring home more “bricks.”

“Why are you eating bricks again?” Josette touched the hard bread in the bag and sighed.

“Grandma,” Gabriel said, “if you don’t go abroad with my mom and me, we’ll have no choice but to keep eating bricks. After getting used to your delicacies here, how will we survive on food abroad?”

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

Chapter 671

The conversation about taking Josette abroad came up again, but josette remained firm in her refusal–she couldn't bear to leave Rebecca behind.

No matter how Rebecca explained that she would finish her undergraduate degree in the States before joining them, or how she insisted she was perfectly capable of living independently, Josette simply shook her head.

Gabriel promised he would arrange everything so Rebecca would face no difficulties or dangers. Still, Josette refused.

Eventually, both Kaitlyn and Gabriel accepted they wouldn't be able to change her mind. So, Gabriel made other plans. For days, he had been scouting properties around Soliaridge.

"We've found a house we like," he said. "We'll go see it tomorrow. If Grandma approves, we'll buy it immediately."

Rebecca asked where it was. When Gabriel gave the address, she froze because it was the same villa he had bought in the original timeline. Now they were getting it ahead of schedule.

When Josette heard it was an enormous villa, she waved her hands in protest. "That won't do. A place that big is wasted on me. I'm used to suburban life; it's convenient for growing things."

"The new house has plenty of space for you to plant flowers and vegetables," Gabriel explained. "Besides, it won't just be you and Becky. My mom and I will move in there, too."

Josette's eyes lit up. "You're staying?"

"I think the investment climate here is excellent right now," Gabriel explained to Kaitlyn. "I'm seriously considering opening a U.S. branch."

He turned back to Josette. "So, I'll be returning often."

There would also be drivers, bodyguards, chefs, and gardeners plenty of staff to keep the household running smoothly.

“Mom,” Kaitlyn started, sitting next to Josette, “this is my way of showing my filial piety. You’ve worked so hard over the years. Since Gabriel is considering investing here, it makes sense for him to have a proper home base.”

Josette finally nodded. “All right, then. But don’t put my name on the deed. Whoever buys it should be the legal owner.”

“Alright.” Kaitlyn nodded happily.

With that, Josette’s living arrangements were settled. Rebecca would move in with her.

With Gabriel’s careful planning, Rebecca no longer had to fear her greedy parents trying to exploit her nor worry that Josette would ever suffer abuse again.

If this truly was a second chance, then every person and every event seemed to be moving in a better direction.

When Rebecca went to bed that night, a deep sense of peace settled over her. She slept soundly and sweetly.

Outside, however, a violent rainstorm raged.

While Vance drifted off, murmuring the line “O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,” the wind and rain began to howl.

It poured all night. Sycamore leaves were battered down, and gardenias in Josette’s yard lay scattered across the ground. The rain released their rich fragrance into the air, filling the night with an intoxicating floral scent.

A summer rain like this was perfect for sleeping. Cradled in that sweet perfume, Rebecca didn’t want to wake up. But she had class in the morning.

“Becky? Becky?” Kaitlyn’s voice seemed to be calling her.

Het alarm must not have gone off. Her eyelids felt impossibly heavy. She really didn’t want to get up. Yet she forced her eyes open at Kaitlyn’s repeated calls.

“She’s awake!” Kaitlyn exclaimed joyfully.

Rebecca was still a bit disoriented when she heard Kaitlyn shout, “Gabe! Becky is awake! Quick, call the doctor!”

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

Chapter 672

"Call the doctor?" Rebecca blinked. "Why? I'm not sick."

The sweet scent of gardenias still lingered as she stared at the ceiling. Suddenly, everything clicked: she wasn't in Soliaridge.

She had returned to the present. "So, has it all just been a long dream?"

As she lay there dazed, Josette and Gabriel rushed in.

Josette's face lit up with relief. "You're finally awake, sweetheart! You gave me such a fright."

"Sorry, Grandma," Rebecca muttered, her voice hoarse from sleeping for too long.

"It's okay. You're awake now," Josette said, patting her hand. "How are you feeling right now? Uncomfortable?"

Rebecca shook her head, just feeling profoundly tired. It was like the heavy, lingering fatigue of sleeping too long on a summer afternoon.

"Just relax," Josette said softly. "If you're hungry, I will make something for you."

Rebecca wasn't hungry. She looked up to see a half-full IV bag beside the bed and realized her family had been keeping her nourished the whole time.

"How long was I asleep this time?" she asked, losing track of time.

Josette hesitated, clearly trying not to alarm her. "Not too long. Just a few days."

"A few days?" Rebecca blinked.

It had felt like years inside the dream.

The doctor arrived half an hour later and performed a quick exam. Once done, he said, "Preliminarily, she appears fine, but I still recommend a full hospital check-up."

"Thank you," Gabriel said, escorting the doctor out.

Kaitlyn and Josette sat on either side of the bed, having mixed feelings. They were relieved Rebecca was awake, but they were also puzzled by her strange condition.

Gabriel returned and stood by the bed with a worried look.

Rebecca looked at them and smiled. "You don't all have to stand there like you're paying respect to a body."

"Nonsense!" Josette scolded, raising her hand as if to swat Rebecca but gently patting her cheek instead.

Gabriel felt helpless. "That mouth of yours... If you're not going to say what you want to eat, then don't talk at all."

"You're a Ph.D., Gabe, a scientist turned businessman," Rebecca teased. "You're supposed to be a materialist. Don't be superstitious."

"The end of science is mysticism," he retorted, lightly flicking her forehead. "If you keep talking nonsense, I'll have to help zip your mouth."

She grabbed his hand. "Can I have some brick-hard salmon?"

He chuckled, understanding that joke. When Josette first arrived in France, she had often complained that the breakfast bread was as tough as a brick.

"Forget it. You need something soft. I'll have the chef make oatmeal or a nice, thick soup," he said, heading downstairs.

Rebecca closed her eyes. Dreams and reality tangled chaotically in her mind. Which was real? Which was the dream?

"Becky, are you still tired? Don't fall asleep again," Kaitlyn whispered anxiously.

Rebecca understood that they were terrified she would slip back into that deep, unnatural sleep. She promised, "Okay. I won't sleep. I'll take a bath and go downstairs to eat."

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

Chapter 673

Only later did Reber ca learn she had slept for three full months. That was even longer than the time she had spent inside the dreain

At first, her family had rushed her to the hospital in a panic. A month of tests revealed nothing abnormal, and she required no life support, so they brought her home.

But she had remained on a nutrient drip. Kaitlyn, Josette, and a private nurse had taken turns massaging her limbs and turning her to prevent bedsores.

Aside from being unconscious, she had been perfectly healthy, simply sleeping peacefully for months.

She had even become something of a legend at the hospital. The nurses called her "Sleeping Beauty." Wfren she returned for follow–up exams, word spread instantly: "The Sleeping Beauty woke up!"

After the tests confirmed everything was normal, a nurse congratulated her and asked with a grin, "So, did a prince kiss you awake?"

Rebecca could only laugh helplessly. There had been a boy in her dream, but he was no fairy–tale prince.

Her family had kept her phone charged. In three months, countless messages had piled up.

The dance troupe had sent the most at first. Later, after Gabriel or Kaitlyn explained the situation, Heather sent one message: [Coach, don't worry. I've got the troupe covered. We'll be ready when you wake up!]

After that, nothing more came directly to her. Her first call was naturally to the dance troupe.

Heather's joy was audible when she answered. She gave a full report on everything that had happened in the past few months.

All the performance plans Rebecca had made before falling asleep had gone ahead smoothly. Heather was already working on new projects and had accepted an invitation to Ireland for an exchange performance next week.

Rebecca had maintained strong ties with Irish dance circles ever since her first trip there with her mentor. They exchanged performances at least once a year, sometimes more.

She could go with them. But the moment she mentioned Ireland, Kaitlyn and Gabriel both groaned.

"Can't you just stay put for once?" Kaitlyn was worried. "What if something happens again?"

"It will be fine. I'll take Jessica with me," Rebecca pleaded.

Jessica was a female bodyguard assigned by Gabriel. She followed Rebecca 24/7.

“I can’t stay cooped up here forever,” Rebecca reasoned, hugging Kaitlyn. “That’s no different from sleeping.”

In the end, they reluctantly agreed.

Rebecca’s life slowly returned to normal.

Though her body had remained healthy during the three–month sleep, her dancing had suffered from a lack of practice. As soon as the hospital cleared her, she headed back to the studio to train with the troupe.

Even after completing her PhD, she had kept the troupe based at the old university campus. When she reappeared in the familiar neighborhood, everyone welcomed her warmly.

She also met Denise again for afternoon tea in her garden. They caught up on the past three months.

“My brother is going to be a dad,” Denise said, pouting.

“What’s wrong?” Rebecca chuckled. “Aren’t you happy to be an aunt?”

“It’s complicated,” Denise sighed, “Well, she Anally got her way.”

Her feelings were mixed. Part of her still felt Desmond hadn’t made Rebecca happy, but another part genuinely liked Rebecca and had once hoped she would become family.

On one hand, she felt Desmond hadn’t brought Rebecca happiness during their time together. On the other hand, she’d grown to genuinely like Rebecca and secretly wished she could become family.

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

Chapter 674

In the end, reason prevailed: Lebecca was too good to be burt.

“But they really are a good match,” Denise admitted, unable to deny that the two were both possessive and clingy. “They should just lock each other down.”

Anyone else would suffer if paired with either of them. Only together did they perfectly balance each other’s intensity.

The afternoon tea was warm and pleasant.

Although she had only been “away” for three months, Rebecca felt as if decades had passed. The friends she saw and the news she heard felt like echoes from a previous life.

Knowing Desmond was doing well brought her quiet relief.

She visited Archer at the clinic and shared her condition. It was something he had never encountered before.

“What were your brain cells doing during those three months?” he asked, deeply fascinated. “Were you conscious at all?”

Rebecca was unsure how to explain that she had lived through her high–school years again, as if reliving her past life.

Archer sensed her hesitation. “Whenever you’re ready to talk about it, I’m here. I don’t have a treatment, but I suspect it’s far more than simple sleep.”

Rebecca recalled Gabriel’s words about the end of science being mysticism. She thought that if she were to return to her dreams again, she would visit a church.

For the rest of the week, she focused on dance practice and catching up with friends. Life gradually settled back into its rhythm.

She also took her time responding to the numerous emails that had accumulated in her inbox. Just two days before her trip to Ireland, she stumbled upon an email from two months ago.

The email address was something she couldn’t be more familiar with.

“From Vance, who has been missing for so long?” A voice screamed in her mind as she opened the email.

It was a digital birthday card. She checked the date and confirmed it was indeed her birthday, which she had spent asleep.

“Vance, where are you now?” she wondered aloud, rushing to the study with her phone. “Gabe, I have news about Vance Help me track him.”

Gabriel looked at her with a mixture of confusion and caution. “You know?”

“Yes, look,” she said, showing him the email. “Can you trace the IP address?”

“Uh...” Gabriel hesitated before nodding. “Yeah, sure.”

The next day, he told her that the IP was in Ireland.

“What?” she yelped. “He has been living in Ireland all this time?”

It made sense. She regretted not realizing that sooner. Fortunately, she was heading to Ireland soon.

She asked for the exact address. Gabriel sighed but gave it to her.

She had experienced so many ups and downs and even traversed her past life in that dream. Now she was uncertain about her feelings.

Did she hate him? Not as fiercely as before.

Did she need to see him? Yes. That answer was absolute.

She wondered what he was like now. Had he recovered? Or was he still struggling, like she had been, to regain his full functionality?

He had promised to visit Archer for rehabilitation If his legs didn’t heal properly. The fact that he had never done so spoke volumes.

Was it a good or bad sign?

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

Chapter 675

On the flight to Ireland, Rebecca's heart was wound tight.

After the initial surge of excitement, unease crept in. Years had passed since Vance disappeared without a word.

She had visited Ireland many times during that period, aside from the times she was asleep, yet she had never found the slightest trace of him.

"Anything on your mind?" Heather nudged her from the next seat.

"Huh?" Rebecca snapped back to reality.

"The flight attendants are serving meals," Heather reminded her.

"Sorry," Rebecca apologized to the attendant standing beside her. He took the menu, glanced at it, and handed it back. "A glass of water, please."

"You look like you're carrying the weight of the world," Heather said with concern.

"Yeah," Rebecca admitted. "Let's talk about it when we land."

At least this time, she had a specific address to go to. She wouldn't be searching aimlessly.

After landing, the troupe checked into their accommodations. They had one rest day before rehearsals.

Heather took the troupe to practice. Rebecca didn't participate this time due to her three-month hiatus. She spent the day with Jessica instead, following the address they had.

"Jessica, do you think he's here?" Rebecca's voice trembled with nerves.

Her mind was a jumble, with images of 17-year-old Vance clashing with the man she had seen on the hospital bed. She wasn't sure how to react if he were in shambles.

"We'll find out," Jessica replied professionally.

Rebecca sighed at that response.

Jessica sighed too. "You know, no news is good news."

Rebecca turned sharply. "Wait. Did Gabriel say anything to you?"

"No, no," Jessica denied quickly. "I just thought maybe Mr. Bradford was living well somewhere. I mean, he emailed you. That's something."

"Yeah." Rebecca nodded.

The address wasn't far from their accommodation. After a short drive, they arrived at a family-run guesthouse. Rebecca followed Jessica inside, looking puzzled.

The landlord, a bearded man, was tapping out a rhythm behind the counter. As they entered, he got up and asked, "Ladies, need to check in?"

"Hi, I'm trying to find someone," Rebecca said, writing down Vance's information on a piece of paper. "Did this person stay here two months ago on this date?"

"I'm sorry, Miss." The landlord waved his hand. "But we can't disclose our guests' information."

"Right." Rebecca pulled out a photo of Vance. "Can you at least tell me if you've seen this man before?"

The landlord studied it for a moment, then nodded confidently. "Yes, I have. That's something I can confirm."

"Really?" Rebecca's face lit up. "Are you sure it's him?"

"Absolutely," the landlord said with certainty. "The American with a leg issue. Hard to forget."

Rebecca believed him just based on that point. Vance's leg issue resulted from that accident years back. She just couldn't figure out why he hadn't gone to find Archer.

She had told Archer about his situation.

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

Chapter 676

It looked like Vance was fine, since he had shown up here just two months ago. He was just having a little trouble walking. That was already good news for Rebecca.

Even if she didn’t know his exact location, at least he was still alive and moving through the world. As jessica said, no news was good news

“Jessica?” Tears spilled down Rebecca’s cheeks.

The landlord was taken aback. “Are you alright, Miss?”

“I’m fine.” Rebecca nodded vigorously. “I’m great, thanks!”

She didn’t need to reunite with Vance romantically. After everything she had endured, she simply wanted everyone she had once cared about to be living well.

Although Vance’s whereabouts were still a mystery, at least there were signs of him passing through. At least he was still alive and, just like Jessica said, living somewhere in a corner. That was all that mattered.

“Did he say where he was going?” Rebecca remembered that Vance had always wanted to follow in Darren’s footsteps.

Thinking of that name brought back the vivid image of the boy in her dream. If she had a few more dreams like that and woke up again, she would probably lose her mind.

The landlord shook his head. “I’ve no idea. He just said he was going on a trip.”

“Okay, thanks,” Rebecca said gratefully.

Her effort paid off after all.

Turning to Jessica, she said, “Let’s go back.”

As their car pulled away, the landlord started making a phone call. “Hello, they came by. Yeah, I handled their questions well. No slips. You’re welcome.”

The next day was the performance. Although Rebecca couldn’t take the stage, she could still help with the behind–the–scenes work.

The troupe had built a solid fanbase in Ireland; the show was a resounding success. Thunderous applause filled the theater as the final curtain fell.

Heather took her bow and invited Rebecca onto the stage.

The fans were already familiar with her name and face, and the applause grew even more fervent. Rebecca scanned the sea of faces, her gaze sweeping across the warmly lit rows.

She couldn’t make out individual features in the distance, but she had always possessed an almost supernatural sense for him- years of performances where she had felt his quiet gaze even when she couldn’t see him.

If he were still in Ireland and had seen the posters, would he have come? But unfortunately, she didn’t feel his presence this time.

Later, while cataloging the flowers left at the stage door, she checked every bouquet and card. But no familiar handwriting was in sight.

He must have left Ireland. She wondered where he was at that moment.

The troupe performed for three days and flew back to Paris. Preparations for the Edinburgh Festival were already underway- new choreography and intense rehearsals. Life was ramping up again.

Rebecca couldn’t shake a growing anxiety. What if she fell asleep again? What if this time it lasted longer than three months?

She even began thinking about making a will.

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

Chapter 677

Rebecca lived each day as if it might be her last.

She transferred full authority over the dance troupe to Heather, recording detailed videos of every piece she had choreographed for Edinburgh–the full routines and close–ups of key movements.

If she slipped away again, the troupe wouldn't be left scrambling.

She met with a lawyer and drew up a formal will, disposing of her assets if she never woke up. Having already lost three months to sleep, she feared an even longer absence and refused to leave her loved ones unprepared.

She deliberately slowed her pace. Aside from necessary rehearsals, she stopped rushing around and spent as much time as possible with Josette and Kaitlyn.

The thought of disappearing and never seeing her grandmother's face again in this life was unbearable.

The countdown had begun. It felt hauntingly familiar. She had done this once before–during the final days of her marriage to Vance.

Back then, every painful day had a clear end date, and she had known she was walking toward something better.

This time was different. She was already living in relative peace and beauty, yet she was counting down toward an unknown moment when she might simply vanish. The uncertainty was the worst part.

She was like a runner in a race against time, determined to finish everything before time ran out. She was lucky, making it from summer to autumn.

The Edinburgh Festival went off without a hitch. Autumn gave way to winter. Christmas lights twinkled across Paris, and another New Year arrived. She remained awake through it all.

Gabriel insisted on monthly hospital visits. Rebecca knew the doctors couldn't diagnose her condition, but she went anyway, smiling as she handed over perfectly normal test results to reassure her family.

Living each day as potentially her last made one thing crystal/clear. She had to give the people who loved her peace of mind.

Around this time, the family began discussing a trip back to Soliaridge for the New Year. Josette hadn't been home in a long time. Plans to settle back in the States had been delayed by Rebecca's long sleep. Now they decided a holiday visit was the perfect first step.

Before the trip, Rebecca went for a check–up, accompanied by Gabriel. She never expected to run into Vance's former attending doctor in the hospital lobby.

Gabriel was still parking the car when she stepped inside. The doctor was walking toward ber, and she greeted him warmly. The doctor didn't remember her until she mentioned Vance, the young American, who had been injured in a car accident, along with two other injured individuals. One was also in a car accident, and the other had a gunshot wound.

It took a detailed recounting before recognition dawned on the doctor's face.

In fact, their encounter was like running into a stranger on the street, but there was a peculiar longing that people experienced,

When they had been obsessively trying to find out what had become of someone but were left without any answers or anyone to turn to, the moment they met someone they could talk to about it, they couldn't help but want to hear that person's name spoken aloud.

They longed to hear it repeated again and again.

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

Chapter 678

Rebecca was in that pattern.

The doctor finally remembered her after she gave such a detailed description, as cases

Nike that were rare in his career.

"You're..."

"Uh... his friend."

Rebecca didn't know how to explain her relationship with Vance, but the doctor's face softened with understanding. "Are you two married?"

He assumed that the patient must have had a strong bond with her, as she still looked grateful after several years.

Rebecca realized the doctor had mistaken her for Anna. With the passage of time, the doctor might remember his patients vividly, but he tended to forget or mix up their family members.

For some unknown reason, she didn't correct the doctor or deny the assumption. She simply said, "It's great to see you again. Thank you for everything you did for him."

"Unfortunately, we couldn't save his legs," the doctor sighed. "You're truly remarkable to have stood by him through something like that.

Rebecca was stunned by the revelation.

Oblivious, the doctor continued, "As a surgeon, I..."

"Rebecca!" A loud voice interrupted their conversation.

Rebecca turned around to see Gabriel approaching them.

"Hi," Gabriel greeted the doctor. "I'm her cousin. I've brought her here for a check–up."

The doctor was busy and had only chatted with Rebecca out of politeness. Now that Gabriel had intervened, he said goodbye and returned to his duties.

Rebecca felt lost.

"Let's go. I've already made an appointment." Gabriel led her to the examination room.

Rebecca cooperated fully with the examination. The doctor confirmed that her physical indicators were normal

On the way out, she finally broke her silence. "Gabe, are you hiding something from me?"

His steps faltered.

"You handled his admission and discharge paperwork. You have to know something," she pressed.

He hesitated. "I'm sorry."

She shook her head and clutched his arm. “Don’t apologize. You’ve done nothing but take care of me. You’re one of the kindest, people in the world to me. How could I ever blame you?”

He managed a small, pained simile and brushed a hand over her hair you?”

‘No matter what, lying is wrong. What did the doctor tell

“You need to tell me what really happened to Vance,” she insisted. “He promised Grandina and me that he would come for her cooking once he was discharged.

“He loved her dishes. If it weren’t a serious situation, he wouldn’t have broken that promise.

Those small, persistent doubts had been gnawing at the back of her toind for weeks, but she’d clung to the fragile hope that he was alright.

She would rather believe he was alive and well, tucked away in some quiet corner of the world out of her reach, than keep second -guessing every tiny detail that didn’t add up.

“He asked me to keep it from you,” Gabriel sighed. “He didn’t want you to feel sad or guilty.”

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

Chapter 679

Rebecca’s hand instinctively clutched the muscles on his arm.

“He lost his legs,” Gabriel whispered.

“I knew something was wrong,” Rebecca said, then let out a strange little laugh. “The landlord said he was just having trouble walking.”

“It’s indeed trouble, in a way.” Gabriel struggled to get the words out.

“So, what exactly happened?” Rebecca clung to his arm, almost being dragged along as they walked.

Gabriel had never sounded so hesitant. His voice dropped to nearly a whisper. “His legs are gone.”

She stopped walking.

“Becky, are you all right?” He shook her shoulders, worry etched across his face.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She looked up and forced a smile. “I just want to know what happened to him and where he is. That’s all.”

Gabriel’s heart twisted at her expression. He pulled her into a tight embrace. “Let’s go home and talk about it, okay?”

He had anticipated that she would eventually find out the truth and had prepared for various reactions from her, such as crying, locking herself up, getting mad, or smashing things. But he had never expected her to smile.

Now he was at a loss for what to do. Moreover, it seemed she had learned part of the truth from the doctor. If she knew the whole story, how would she react? He dared not think about it.

He quickly led her to the parking lot, opened the car door, and bundled her inside. The bodyguards tensed up at the scene and stood on guard.

Gabriel shook his head. “Just drive us home.‘

As the car sped off, Rebecca didn’t look at Gabriel again. She kept staring out the window instead, ignoring his attempt to talk. “Becky, talk to me. You’re making me worried like this,” he pleaded, unwilling to force her to turn around.

“I’m fine,” she murmured. “I just wanted to know what happened to him. Now that I have, it’s okay.” Her voice grew smaller and smaller until it faded entirely. He called out to her, but she didn’t respond again. Unable to hold back anymore, he reached over and grabbed her shoulders. “Let me see your face, okay?**

Met with her silence, he gently turned her shoulder, exerting more strength only when she didn’t resist. Her face was drenched in silent tears–falling steadily without a sound.

“Cry it out. It’s okay,” he soothed her, holding her close. “I know you’re upset, but Vance made this decision just to prevent you from being sad.”

He used to hate that man so much, but now he felt speechless.

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

Chapter 680

Rebecca's tears soaked through Gabriel's shirt

He kept reassuring her, telling her to let it out, but she couldn't make a sound. Only the tears kept streaming down her face. After a long time, she finally found her voice. "I'm not sad, really. Look, I'm smiling, aren't I?"

She struggled to get out of his embrace, pushing her hair aside to reveal her entire face. The tear–streaked grimace was even more heartbreaking than open sobbing.

Gabriel's eyes stung. He drew her back into his arms. "You don't have to smile for me. Cry, scream, or do whatever you need. I'm here with you."

He held her like that until they arrived home. Rebecca had composed herself outwardly only those swollen eyes and damp hair betrayed her.

Josette was in the kitchen overseeing dinner. Kaitlyn wasn't back yet.

"I'm going upstairs to wash my face and rest a bit," she told Gabriel evenly.

"Okay." He nodded, trying to follow her.

She turned back to stop him. "Just out of the hospital, I need a bath, too. I'll be fine."

"Alright. Call me if you need anything," he said.

Still uneasy, he stood guard outside her room. Ten minutes passed, then 20, and half an hour... There was no sound from inside.

"Becky?" He knocked, but there was no response. He grew anxious. "Becky? I'm coming in!"

The silence continued. Losing no time, he called Jessica, who burst open the door.

Rebecca was found lying on the bed, fully dressed and sleeping deeply. She wasn't washing her face or having a bath at all.

The scene was all too familiar to Gabriel. No one could tell how long she would sleep this time.

He quickly called the doctor, who performed a check–up and followed the usual routine: preparing nutritional supplements and advising them to take good care of the patient, with instructions to rush her to the hospital at the first sign of any abnormality.

Gabriel's shoulders sagged as he sat by the bed, unsure if she would still be upset in her sleep.

Rebecca felt a crushing pain in her chest. The noise around her grated on her nerves.

"Go, go, go! Push harder!" someone shouted.

Rebecca stirred, frowning.

"She is awake!"

She opened her eyes to see Jenny's youthful, teenage face. It looked like she had fallen asleep again and returned to the dreamt

The school PA system blared, "Go for it, athletes! Go!"

It sounded like a sports meet.

"How are you feeling?" Jenny asked with concern

"What happened?" Rebecca smelled the faint tang of antiseptic

She looked around and realized they were in the school infirmary.

"You passed out from heatstroke during the meet," Jenny explained. "Feeling better now?"

Rebecca nodded slowly. "okay"

She didn't feel any symptoms of heatstroke, just a severe pain in her chest.

The loudspeaker crackled again. "Vance, go! You're almost there!"

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

Chapter 681

Rebecca's mind was still reeling from the anguish that had left her gasping for breath in Paris. The moment she heard the name, she bolted.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jenny chased after her. "You just woke up from heatstroke. Don't go running out into the sun!"

Rebecca was oblivious, her ears filled with the loudspeaker's chant of urging Vance to go on. She ran all the way to the athletic field.

The long-distance race had reached its final lap and the final sprint. A crowd of students clustered at the finish line, ready to catch and support their classmates.

Rebecca reached the line just as Vance came into view, leading the pack.

The 17-year-old boy had strong, healthy legs. He was chasing the wind, his movements agile and athletic. The basketball forward and long-distance running champion wasn't some broken man who was all washed up and had trouble walking.

As the runners closed in, the cheers swelled. The voice from the loudspeaker rose above the roar, urging him on. Vance shot forward like an arrow, his speed increasing with every step.

As he drew closer, Rebecca could see his sweat-dampened hair flying and the soaked basketball jersey clinging to his chest.

The image of that frail man in the hospital begging her and Josette not to visit flashed violently against the vibrant, sunlit boy racing toward her. They overlapped when his face was right in front of her.

The tears she had held back in Paris finally broke free, but no sound came out of her mouth. She just stared at him and silently cried.

The 30-year-old Rebecca was trapped in that body. In the original timeline, she would have hugged him and cried her heart out, regardless of their marital status.

But this version of him was 17, still in high school, and the entire student body was watching the sports festival on the field. Her tears had already drawn glances.

She was not even in his class; she had no ground to stand on the finish line waiting for him. His classmates were already there, offering him water and clothes, even steadying him.

Cheers erupted everywhere.

"Keep moving! Don't stop cold!"

"Here, have some water to replenish your electrolytes."

"First place! Way to go!"

The loudspeaker kept booming. "Vance Bradford, GOAT!"

Vance accepted the water and a towel, waved off helping hands, and walked straight to Rebecca. His eyes, bright from the run, sparkled like stars. “Why are you crying?”

He wore basketball shorts. Below them were the healthy, muscular legs she knew so well.

As she looked down at them, fresh tears surged.

He looked completely lost. “What’s wrong?”

His classmates were still calling him. A girl’s voice drifted over the crowd. “Vance...”

Rebecca blocked it all out. In her world, there were only his legs.

“Let’s go,” he said after a sip of water.

She had been crying since Paris, through sleep and waking. Her head was buzzing, making it impossible for her to think straight or register that he was speaking to her.

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

Chapter 682

Vance took a couple of steps forward, then realized Rebecca wasn't following.

He walked back and repeated, "Let's go."

Only then did Rebecca snap out of her daze and realize he was talking to her. Wiping away her tears, she followed him. She wiped her face and trailed after him.

Behind them, whispers rippled through the crowd.

"What's going on?"

"Why is Rebecca crying?"

"No idea."

"Are they close?"

"They were in the same class before. Do you think they might..."

"Nah, they barely talked."

Rebecca paid no attention to their gossip. Her eyes stayed fixed on Vance's legs. The muscles made them appear long and straight.

He led her to a small shaved-ice shop near the school gate and pointed at an empty table. "Sit."

She didn't move.

"No? I'll sit then," he said, sliding into the inner seat.

She sat down beside him, not across from him as one might expect for a conversation. He looked at her quizzically but didn't press the issue, given her emotional state.

He turned to the shop owner and ordered a cup of iced coffee. Turning to Rebecca, he asked, "Want some shaved ice?"

She didn't feel like eating anything.

Vance shrugged and ordered again. "And one shaved ice, please."

Once everything was served, he placed the shaved ice in front of her. "Now, can you tell me what's wrong? Why are you crying like that?"

She couldn't verbalize what was troubling her.

"Is everything okay? Unhappy about anything?" he continued, slowly stirring his iced coffee.

Unhappy? That didn't even begin to cover it.

"Come on," he sighed. "I couldn't have offended you that badly. You haven't spoken to me in a whole year."

Ignoring him for a year? This thought flashed through her mind, but the year didn't seem to matter. She kept her head down, her gaze still fixed on his legs.

He noticed. "You've been staring at my legs forever. Is something wrong with them?"

Mentioning that brought fresh tears to her eyes.

"You..." he trailed off as her hand reached under the table and gripped the muscle of his thigh.

That took him aback. His first instinct was to brush her hand away.

Rebecca's thought process was different; this was real. She was touching the texture of his muscles, so warm and elastic. This couldn't be a dream.

The broken Vance in Paris was the dream. The real Vance was right here, whole and breathing.

Her mind was a mess. She could no longer distinguish dreams from reality.

After he brushed her hand away, she started crying again, almost hyperventilating. With a helpless sigh, he took her hand back and placed it on his leg, lowering his voice.

"Fine, fine. Touch it if you need to. Just stop crying. Or at least tell me why you're crying."

It couldn't be because she wanted to touch his leg, could it? Since when did she develop this habit?

She still felt the sensation of his muscle—firm, warm, and pulsing with life.

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

Chapter 683

Tears streamed down Rebecca’s face. “You’re really here, aren’t you? This is the real you.”

The 17-year-old boy couldn’t understand the weight behind her words. He answered gently, “Yeah, I’m right here.”

He pulled out the tissue and wiped away her tears, his voice softening further. “I’ve always been here.

You stopped looking for me.”

She shook her head. That wasn’t the answer she needed.

“Vance, I’m lost,” she said, her voice cracking. “I can’t find the answer I’m looking for.”

Tell me what you’re looking for. I’ll help you. Crying won’t solve anything. The shaved ice is melting. If you’re not going to eat it, I will.” He paused, then added, “Aren’t you happy living in that new house? Anyone bothering you?”

She had no idea what house he meant-probably the one her brother bought. But that wasn’t until a year later. By then, she and Josette should have already moved in. 1

“No, none of that.” She clapped both hands over her face, catching the tears. “You disappeared. I couldn’t find you anywhere. I wanted to come back and look for you.”

“I’m right here. I didn’t disappear.” He curled his fingers around her wrists, gently prying her hands away from her face. “You can come back anytime. I won’t go anywhere.”

She stared at his youthful face, her words trapped in her throat.

“C’mon, take a bite,” he said, holding the spoon out to her. “It will make you feel better.”

When she didn’t move, he glanced around. Except for the shop owner, there was no one else around them. So, he scooped a spoonful of shaved ice and held it to her lips. “Just this once. Don’t get used to it.

The cool sweetness hit her tongue, confirming the reality of the moment and scrambling her thoughts even more. She could see the faint stubble on his jaw, her eyes burning with tears all over again.

“Hey, don’t cry, I’ll do this for you again. One more bite, alright?” He had no temper left and just kept bringing the spoon of shaved ice to her mouth.

“Rebecca!”

“Vance!”

At the voices, Vance yanked the spoon back so fast he nearly dropped it.

Jenny and Jethro came up.

“You two snuck off to eat ice and left us hunting all over!” Jethro plopped down across from Vance and spotted what they were eating. “Shaved ice for me too! Jenny?”

“Iced coffee.” Jenny sat down across from Rebecca and immediately noticed the tear stains. She blinked, glancing between the two. “Vance, did you bully her again?”

Vance’s head throbbed, but he had never been talkative, let alone explaining himself. He just ducked his head and sipped coffee.

Rebecca wiped her face. “No, I just wasn’t feeling well.”

“From heatstroke?” Jenny asked worriedly. “You passed out on the field. Scared the hell out of me.”

“Passed out?” Vance looked up sharply. “That’s why you’re upset?”

She might as well go with that since she had no way to explain the truth anyway. She nodded vaguely. My head aches, and I can't catch my breath."

That was from crying.

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

Chapter 684

"Let's get you to the hospital," Vance offered, getting up.

"I'm fine now," Rebecca said quickly, picking up the spoon. "The cold stuff helped you a lot."

Jethro's shaved ice and Jenny's iced coffee were served. The four of them sat together eating their cold treats.

Jenny brought up their plans for the next day. "Tomorrow is Saturday. As we agreed, we're heading to Lakeside Church. You two are not bailing on me this time."

"Lakeside Church?" Rebecca echoed.

"Yep!" Jenny's eyes brightened. "Come with us. It's been forever since you joined anything."

Just earlier, Vance mentioned Rebecca hadn't spoken to him in a year. She had no idea what had happened in her absence, but Lakeside Church was where she had once consecrated Darren's stone.

She wanted to go check it out if she could wake up here tomorrow morning.

"Call me in the morning," she replied.

If she weren't here tomorrow, everything would not be under her control.

"Great!" Jenny beamed. "As long as you're feeling up to it tomorrow, we'll go."

"What are you guys even going to church for?" Rebecca probed.

Jenny leaned in and whispered mysteriously, "It's senior year, duh. My mom made me go.

Rebecca snuck a glance at Vance, wondering if he believed in that, too. They didn't stay in the ice shop for long. After finishing their treats, they returned to campus.

The field day was still going on, and once it wrapped up, they all had to head back to their own classes.

Jenny walked Rebecca back. "It's too hot out there. Just rest here until your classmates come back."

"Alright, thanks," Rebecca agreed.

She'd only just gotten back here and needed some quiet time to sort through her thoughts.

"Alright, I'm heading back. Call you tomorrow."

"Cool"

Once alone, Rebecca slumped down in her seat. The emotions from the other timeline crashed over her again.

The two boys headed back to their class. Jethro stared at Vance, curious. "What's going on? How did you end up with Rebecca at the ice shop?"

"Yeah," Vance hummed noncommittally.

*Come on, you know how crazy the rumors are getting about her." He trailed off, hesitating. "You haven't in forever, yet the second she cries, you ditch everyone and take off with her. Everyone's confused."

"She was crying so hard," Vance said, his expression neutral. "I was worried she'd hurt herself."

"Bullshit," Jethro snorted. "Whatever, though. She is our old friend. What on earth is going on with her?"

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

Chapter 685

In the quiet classroom, Rebecca confirmed the Timeline: first semester of senior year, during the autumn sports day one of the few chances for seniors to breathe.

It was the last day, and there was no evening study hall. Once the events ended, the students were dismissed and looked forward to a full weekend.

They were overjoyed, cheering and celebrating.

Rebecca checked her belongings. Her backpack and phone had been replaced with new ones. She wasn't even sure if her phone number had changed as well.

Her frequent contacts were Josette, Gabriel, Kaitlyn, Jenny, and Aaron.

"Aaron? I met him so early?"

Chats with Darren were plentiful, but Vance wasn't in recent contact. She looked him up in her address book and discovered a blank chat history.

He hadn't enabled his social media profile, so she couldn't see his side. According to him, she had ignored him for a year. Now the blank chat history was proof.

She accidentally sent an emoji while checking. No notification popped up, meaning he wasn't blocked. He hadn't responded, probably not seeing it yet, so she quickly unsent it.

After school, Aaron texted: [Miss Perry, I've arrived. Time to dance.]

Given the routine, he had to be already waiting for her at the school gate. She slung her backpack over her shoulder and hurried out.

"Rebecca!" Jenny called after her, making a phone gesture. "Tomorrow!"

"Okay!" Rebecca gestured back from a distance, then quickened her pace. She wondered if she was still practicing at the same studio.

Jenny was walking with the two boys. "Can your shop make vegan pastries for tomorrow, Vance?"

"Yeah, no problem."

"By the way, I have something to do at home today, so I won't be watching you guys play basketball. Are you still playing today? Don't you feel like you've had enough exercise?"

She was puzzled by their energy levels, especially Vance's. He had just gone for a long run in the afternoon.

"Homework can be skipped some days, but basketball is a must," Jethro said.

"Alright, you guys go ahead," Jenny said. "I'll head home. Vance, don't forget the vegan pastries."

She slung her backpack over her shoulder and ran off.

Jethro looked at Vance quizzically. “You’re going tomorrow? You said you were busy with something important at the shop.

“Yeah,” Vance said calmly. “I’ll handle the shop thing some other day.”

“Okay,” Jethro said, sounding pleased. Having someone else along would make the trip more fun.

He thought of Rebecca again. “Why did Rebecca suddenly join us again? She hadn’t hung out with us in a year.”

“I’ve no idea,” Vance said in the same calm tone. “Because of Jenny, I guess.”

“Probably so.” Jethro nodded. “Even though she’s not with us all the time, she and Jenny are still good friends. You’re not bothered by that, are you?”

“What?”

“By Rebecca joining us tomorrow.”

Vance had a strong sense of boundaries after all. If someofre wasn’t part of their circle, he would immediately distance himself.

“It’s fine,” Vance replied gruffly. “Stop yapping. Let’s get ready to play basketball.”

Rebecca rushed to the school gate, only to realize she didn’t know Gabriel’s car piate number. As she stood there, scanning the surroundings, a car started flashing its hazard lights.

She walked over hesitantly and found Aaron behind the wheel. It was a much younger version than she remembered, wearing studded earrings.

His image took her aback. The security guards would probably chase him away fe moment he neared school, but one thing remained unchanged: he spoke little.

He drove quietly, their interaction as smooth as ever. Finally, the car pulled up at the building where she used to dance.

“Miss Perry, here we are. I’ll pick you up in two hours.”

“Okay.”

“Dance attire.”

Aaron handed her the bag she had forgotten about.

“Want me to bring you something to eat?”

“No... thanks. Not hungry today.”

She was still trying to figure out the current situation.

So far, many things had changed. Kaitlyn and Gabriel had appeared ahead of schedule. Judging from this one day, she seemed to be doing okay.

Otherwise, given her previous personality, she wouldn’t have asked Aaron to bring her food.

Aaron parked outside the bakery where Vance used to work. Rebecca got out and took a look, noticing that it was no longer a bakery.

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

Chapter 686

It looked like Vance no longer worked at fire bakery. So much had changed in just one year.

Rebecca went upstairs to the studio. Luckily, the place and the coaches were still the same. They greeted her warmly and told her to get ready.

Two hours later, Aaron came to pick her up, handing her a cup of hot cocea. It was her favorite and what she normally had hirm bring her.

Her mood that day was at rock bottom. After learning about Vance’s condition in Paris, she had cried until she fainted and crossed into this timeline.

For a long time afterward, she had remained dazed, almost unable to think. The dancing exhausted her yet somehow cleared her mind a little.

Yet the heavy stone pressing on her chest refused to lift. The image of Vance’s rhissing legs weighed off her like an anchor. That untouched cup of sweet drink stayed clutched in her hand until they arrived home.

It was the same villa bought by Gabriel. This time, with more preparation, the entire interior had been gutted and redesigned in Gabriel’s signature style.

Neither Kaitlyn nor Gabriel was home. They had been flying between Soliaridge and Paris all year and were currently abroad.

But the villa was fully staffed with security, gardeners, chefs, and maids, Josette's safety was no longer a concern.

The old lady was waiting with warm food. She smiled at Rebecca, but her expression quickly changed. "What's wrong. sweetheart? You don't look happy."

"I'm just tired," Rebecca said quickly. "We had a field day, and then I went to dance."

Josette brought out all the dishes. "Eat up and get some rest."

Even with hired help, she still insisted on looking after Rebecca herself.

"Okay." Rebecca's thoughts were a chaotic mess, her mood turbulent.

But no matter which world she was in, she never wanted Josette to worry. So, she forced herself to eat, then claimed exhaustion and went upstairs.

She'd half-expected her room to be changed, but it was the same as she remembered. That saved her embarrassment.

She showered and climbed into bed, hoping she'd wake up in her Paris home the next morning. If obsession was what allowed her to travel between timelines, surely her desperate wish to return would bring her back.

She was disappointed.

The next morning, she woke up early, only to find herself still in her Soliaridge bedroom and 17-year-old body. Jenny's call came right on cue. "Becky, are you up? We're getting ready to head out. Where should we meet?"

Rebecca wasn't sure of their current routine. "Aren't we meeting at school?"

"Nah. Vance is driving straight over. Is it cool if we come pick you up?"

"He has a car?"

"Yeah. Would it be okay for us to come to your place?" Jenny's tone was a bit cautious. It felt distant. "Or could your family drop off at the highway exit out of town? We can just wait for you there."

you

"It's fine. I can leave right now." Rebecca got up immediately.

Aaron drove her: When they reached the highway entrance, the others were already waiting. Aaron parked behind them and got out to carry her backpack.

Jenny froze at the sight of him.

“Do you really not need me to drive you all?” Aaron asked, ever dutiful

“It’s okay,” Rebecca reassured him. “We’re going to church and coming back the same day. It’s perfectly safe.”

“Alright then.” He handed her the backpack. “Keep your phone charged. I put fwo power banks in your bag.”

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

Chapter 687

“Okay,” Rebecca said, grabbing her backpack. The two power banks really made it heavy.

In the car ahead, Jethro’s eyes widened as he stared through the rearview mirror “That’s the guy who picks Rebecca up every day? He’s...”

Vance stared at the rearview mirror, his jaw light.

“Do you think he’s a bad guy?” Jethro sounded worried. “You know the rumors going around school...”

Before he could finish, Rebecca and Jenny got into the car.

There was a driver. Vance sat in the passenger seat, while Jethro was on the other side of the backseat. Jenny took the middle seat so Rebecca could sit by the window.

The moment they were settled, Jenny exclaimed, “Oh my God, Rebecca! Who was that guy? He’s hot!”

“He’s... an employee at my cousin’s company,” Rebecca replied cautiously, unsure what her younger self had toid everyone.

Jenny’s fingers dug into her arm. “He’s gorgeous! You should have asked him to come along. I was dying over here. How could you just let him leave? You totally didn’t get me there.”

Rebecca was lost for words, and Jethro couldn't take it anymore. "Jenny, calm down!"

"What's the matter? Who doesn't love looking at handsome guys?" Jenny shot back.

"Is that what you call handsome?" Jethro scoffed. "The discipline office would drag you in for that."

"You're such a bumpkin," Jenny huffed, then turned back to Rebecca. "Next time he picks you up, tell him I want another look."

"That's crazy." Jethro felt helpless.

Jenny ignored him, pinching Rebecca's arm regretfully. "Is he the one who picks you up every day? If only I had known, I would have gone to school with you every day!"

"Sometimes, it's him," Rebecca replied, not really knowing.

"I don't care. I'm going with you next week," Jenny declared.

"Have you lost your mind?" Jethro scolded.

"What's wrong with me?" Jenny snapped back. "Can't I just look? Mind your own business!"

Their bickering continued the entire way. Only when Vance finally told them to shut up did they quiet down.

Before noon, they arrived at Lakeside Church. At that time, it was still a functioning church, not yet a tourist attraction. The road was lined with simple farmhouses, not yet converted into inns or souvenir shops.

They got out at the entrance. Jenny had brought a backpack and two large bags. Oblivious, Jethro jumped out of the car and started walking ahead.

Vance stopped him. "Don't you need to carry some stuff?"

Jethro remembered then that, as a guy, he was supposed to help the girls. As he took the bags from Jenny, he couldn't resist teasing her, "Looks like I'm more useful than those pretty boys, huh?"

Jenny was a fan of many celebrities and had a whole book filled with their pictures. She shot back immediately.

Vance ignored them. He walked over to Rebecca and took the backpack from her. "I'll carry it."

Her backpack was heavy with power banks, snacks, and water inside, but he effortlessly slung it over his shoulder.

Has eyes drifted again to his legs. At that age, he mostly wore athletic wear, which made him look even more youthful and energetic compared to his later suits

She couldn't imagine flinse powerful legs were just gone The thought made the world fade around her. All she could see was the 30 year old Vance in the hospital bed pale, weak, and forcing a smile.

"Grandma, Rebecca, please don't come see me anymore.

A gentle thud brought her back to reality. She rubbed her head and looked up to see Vance's chest right in front of her.

"S Sorry," she stuttered.

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

Chapter 688

Vance remained silent, looking down at her.

"Does it hurt?" Rebecca said, embarrassed by how strange she must seem.

Only she knew the secret in her heart, and it was something she could never clarify in this world.

He stared at her for a while, then turned and continued toward the mountain gate without a word. Jenny and Jethro were already waiting.

"What took you guys so long?" Jethro complained, loaded down with bags.

"Be a man and stop whining," Jenny teased him.

Before they could start arguing again, Vance silenced them. "Not here."

Jenny shot Jethro a sharp look but shut up anyway.

"Should we eat some of this stuff first? It will lighten the load. Aren't you guys hungry?" Jethro opened one of the bags, handed out water bottles, and pulled out two boxes of pastries.

“You two share that one.” Jenny took one box and turned to Rebecca. “It’s from Vance’s shop. You’ve never tried his stuff before, have you?”

“Of course not,” Jethro chimed in. “She hasn’t hung out with us in a whole year.”

“Vance’s restaurant?” Rebecca paused, then remembered they were in high school now.

Vance had mortgaged his family’s big house to the bank and opened a restaurant during the summer between his sophomore and junior years. She remembered it had been done in his grandmother’s name because he wasn’t 18 yet.

So, was he still running his business like he used to?

“Come on, try them!” Jenny urged. “Ever since he opened that restaurant, Jethro and I have been his free taste-testers. We’ve had our fair share of questionable dishes. Tell him what’s not good so he can improve.”

Rebecca opened the box to find assorted pastries neatly arranged inside. She picked one at random, took a bite, and found it delicious. It was not too sweet, with a subtle aroma.

She wasn’t surprised, though, since she had been his taste-tester back in the day, trying countless dishes for him.

At 16, Vance started working in restaurants to gain experience. By 17, he had opened his own shop, which quickly became a trendy hotspot. The journey was the same in both worlds.

The success of his restaurant could be attributed to his delectable dishes. However, he didn’t stick to the “celebrity chef” route; instead, he sold the restaurant at the peak of its popularity and cashed out.

“How is it?” Jenny asked, her eyes sparkling.

Jethro also watched, but Vance seemed rather indifferent, focused on examining the tickets and guidelines in his hand.

“It’s good,” Rebecca said sincerely.

Even after more than a decade, his pastries remained delicious.

“Let’s head in,” Vance said quietly, leading them through the gate.

After Jenny finished her prayers, they wandered the church grounds. Rebecca drifted alone toward the ancient camphor tree. If was the same tree under which she had, ten years later, buried a stone.

A priest was sweeping the ground, and upon closer inspection, she realized it was the same one who had helped her bury the stone.

As she returned from the future, everyone had become younger, but this priest remained unchanged. Perhaps she had been staring at him for too long, as he eventually noticed her.

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

Chapter 689

“Can I help you, Miss?” the priest asked.

Just then, the bell wasn’t scheduled to be rung at this hour, yet for some reason, the deep peal of a church bell echoed through the grounds.

Rebecca paused, feeling as though she’d been transported back to the stone-burying day. The bell’s soft tones had hung in the air just like now, and the low murmur of prayer had filled the halls.

“Sir,” she said softly. “If I told you I came here ten years from now, would you believe me?”

The priest was holding a broom, his eyes seeming to see right through to the core of all human troubles. He didn’t look even a little surprised by her almost unhinged words, only smiling gently. “Have you run into some unsolvable problem?”

“There’s someone I can’t find anymore, but he’s still here,” she mumbled, unsure if the priest could even understand her rambling, nonsensical words.

The priest maintained his smile. “Miss, everyone has their own destiny. He is where he is meant to be.”

“You mean...” Rebecca’s voice started to tremble.

“His path is his own choice.” The priest’s expression was full of warmth. “You don’t need to cling so tightly.”

“But...” Rebecca couldn’t accept this. “But I need to find him. I need to...”

“And when you find him, what will you do?” said the priest.

Rebecca was stunned, having never thought of that.

Ever since she'd found out the hard truth, she'd been panicking nonstop. All she could think about was finding Vance. She'd never stopped to think about what she'd do afterward, not even what she'd say to him.

"Perhaps it is better to wait quietly," the priest continued. "Let time reveal the answer."

"Will I be able to see him again?" Rebecca was terrified the priest would leave before she got her answer.

"Aren't you seeing him every single day?" the priest said meaningfully.

The words hit her like a thunderclap. It seemed he had perfectly understood what she was talking about. At the same time, the bell peal rang in her ears and shook her to the core.

Tears poured down her face. Through her blurred vision, a figure in sportswear approached.

Vance stopped in front of her, staring at her tearful face. For a long time, neither of them spoke. Only the sounds of the bell pealing and rustling leaves filled the air.

Finally, he sighed softly and reached out, roughly wiping her tears with his warm, dry fingers. He rubbed so hard her cheeks stung, but his face slowly came into focus.

"Can you tell me what is going on?" he asked, staring at her flushed face.

"I..." She gazed at the young face in front of her, her words caught tightly in her throat. In the end, fresh tears spilled over, and she started crying again. "Why did I stop talking to you?"

He paused, then laughed helplessly. "You're asking me? Who am I supposed to ask?"

He wiped at her tears again, even harder this time. "What are you crying about? You're the one who ignored me for a whole year.

The bell peal faded away.

The priest picked up his broom and started walking away. A young novice came up to tell him, "Sir, a guest is waiting for you."

The priest set down his broom and walked toward his room. A young man sitting by the window smiled at him. "Sir, I brought some good tea today."

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

Chapter 690

After leaving the church, they hiked the nearby mountain trail. Rebecca and Jenny walked arm in arm, chatting quietly.

“We’re planning to grab dinner at Vance’s restaurant later,” Jenny said. “Wanna join us?”

“Sure, why not?” Rebecca agreed readily.

Jenny’s eyes widened in shock. “You agreed? Just like that?”

“Is that weird?”

“You used to refuse no matter how much we begged. Did you and Vance finally make up? What kind of fight lasts a whole year?”

Rebecca shook her head. She had no idea what her younger self had done.

“Vance’s restaurant was supposed to be a secret only our little group knew about,” Jenny continued. “Somehow word got out, and now he’s like a campus idol. I’ve had so many gifts and letters dropped off for him. People beg me to pass them along.”

“He was always popular,” Rebecca said with a small smile.

Vance had that icy, standoffish aura and a short fuse to boot. But he was devastatingly good-looking, pulled straight A’s, and was the star of every sports team. No surprise, half the girls at school were head over heels for him.

“That’s not the same.” Jenny shook her head. “Before, no matter who crushed on him, he couldn’t have cared less. Now there’s this new transfer student, Catherine Welch, and he’s just...”

Rebecca froze mid-step. No matter what changed, it seemed she couldn’t escape Catherine.

Jenny noticed her expression and blinked. “You didn’t know?”

Rebecca remained silent, having no idea if this version of her even knew who Catherine was.

Jenny paid it no mind. She’d been bursting to dump all this tea for ages. “She’s the most popular girl in our science track, the one who was yelling encouragement for Vance over the loudspeaker on sports day.

“You didn’t pick up on that? Oh right, you passed out from heatstroke. Whatever. You’re gonna see her at the restaurant tonight.

Rebecca's eyes went wide. "She works at Vance's restaurant?"

Rebecca's stomach twisted. In the original timeline, Vance and Catherine had only met at the hospital. Now they had at school and in the restaurant?

She'd prayed hard for Vance's grandma to get better as fast as possible, so he would never run into Catherine. Now, all her effort had been for nothing.

Was it acting as some kind of catalyst for their relationship? Were they getting closer? Did they have even more chances to be together now?

"You're upset about it too, aren't you?" Jenny huffed. "I don't like that girl anyway. Vance and Jethro are both acting like total idiots, running around after her like she's got them wrapped around her finger."

Sure enough, Rebecca ran into Catherine at the restaurant that night.

It was still in the same spot, with the same decor, the same menu, and even the same name as before. The only difference was that Catherine was there, working behind the counter.

The second Catherine spotted the four of them walking in, she acted like she owned the place, cheerfully showing them to their seats and taking their orders.

When she got to Rebecca, she smiled and said, "Rebecca from the arts class, right? This is your first time eating here? Telline what you'd like. I already know what everyone else prefers."

Jenny fired away. "This isn't your store. What we order is none of your business.

"Jenny!" Jethro and Vance said unison, their voices sharp with surprise.

Rebecca caught a familiar whiff in the air. It was exactly like how Vance, Aiden, and Lucas had rushed to Catherine's defense whenever anyone said something mean to her.

What kind of cruel curse was this?

Catherine shrank back at Jenny's sharp jab, standing off to the side, all meek and quiet. "I'm sorry. I'm just used to saying that. If it bugs you, I won't say it anymore."

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

Chapter 691

“It’s fine. You didn’t say anything wrong. You work here and represent the shop,” Vance soothed her. “You don’t need to wait on us. These guys are all old friends of mine. Go ahead and take care of the other tables.”

“Yeah, alright.” Catherine sobbed a little before walking away.

Rebecca knew this routine all too well. Jenny was about to get chewed out.

Sure enough, Jethro jumped in. “Jenny, why are you always so harsh to Catherine? She hasn’t done anything to you. She is always friendly.”

Jenny gave a cold laugh. “The fact that you’re defending her right now proves she’s not so friendly.”

“What kind of logic is that?” Jethro sulked.

“You don’t get it because you’re clueless. I get it because I know exactly how to full the same fake–sweet act,” Jenny shot back.

Jethro threw up his hand. “You don’t have to insult yourself just to win an argument against me, you know.”

“I’m stating facts!” Jenny grabbed a large appetizer and took a big bite.

“Vance, Rebecca, back me up here. Isn’t Jenny being totally unreasonable?” Jethro appealed.

Vance finally spoke. “Is it really worth fighting over something so small?”

“Exactly!” Jethro perked up, grinning smugly as he turned to Rebecca. “Rebecca, you weigh in.”

“Me?” Rebecca twirled the cup in her hands. “I have very firm principles.”

Jethro brightened. “Go on.”

“My rule is simple: I stand by the people who stand by me. I back my friends whether they’re right or wrong.” Rebecca thought of everything that had happened before.

“Of course, if you guys think someone else is better, you’re free to side with them. We don’t care, but you can’t have it both ways. Once you do that, our friendship ends.”

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Jenny clapped enthusiastically. “Why do you think I’m so upset? We’ve been classmates for years, and you guys keep ragging on me just because of some random outsider. I can’t put up with that.”

Jethro deflated when he didn’t get the support he wanted. “Come on... friendships take time to build. Maybe Catherine will become good friends with all of us eventually.

“Next week, Vance and Catherine are doing the French speech contest together. It’d be good for them to support each other.”

Jenny turned to Vance, scoffing, “Are you missing an arm or a leg? You need someone to look after you?”

That throwaway line struck a chord deep in Rebecca’s chest. She quickly composed herself and asked, “French speech contest? What’s the selection criteria for that?”

She was confident that no one in the entire grade could beat her on that subject.

“The teachers just picked her without even any tryouts! It’s so unfair!” Jenny said.

“Go fight for the spot!” Jethro sneered. “If you spoke better French.”

Rebecca stayed quiet for the rest of the meal.

After dinner, Aaron came to pick her up. Jenny was still mad at Jethro, so she didn’t hang around with the two guys. Instead, she tagged along with Rebecca to get a ride back.

In the car, Jenny was still fuming. “Catherine is such a fake sweet girl, always putting on a nice face and talking shit behind your back. She’s been trying to drive a wedge between me, Vance, and Jethro this whole time! How can anyone be stupid enough to fall for her act?”

“Then we’re keeping her out of the circle,” Rebecca said firmly.

She had shifted the course of events, but Catherine had still shown up. She was terrified that things would play out the same between Catherine and Vance.

She would end up losing the use of her leg, and Vance would meet a terrible fate, too.

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

Chapter 692

The news that Vance and Catherine would be representing the school in the French speech contest hadn't been officially announced, but it had already spread like wildfire among the seniors.

Some didn't care. Others said Vance was the top student, so it made sense. A few questioned the fairness of the selection.

The controversy eventually blew up on the school forum, causing a major şţir. In the end, the school authorities denied the rumor and announced they would hold a proper school wide competition that Friday.

Each class could enter up to two students. The top two overall would represent the school.

Rebecca signed up without hesitation, determined to be one of the selected participants.

To be honest, not many students, especially seniors, were enthusiastic about a speech competition with no real stakes or benefits. If there were a prestigious award or college admission advantages, they might have shown interest.

Alternatively, if it were an art or sports–related competition, some students might see it as an opportunity to have fun. But an unsponsored French speech contest? Most saw it as a waste of time.

In Rebecca's class, only two students signed up. Darren was one of the top students in the liberal arts track, so no one was surprised. But Rebecca?

Her classmates whispered behind her back. Several friends came over, questioning why she bothered to participate.

Rebecca knew they all thought she wouldn't stand a chance. She had seen her past self's grades from the previous year, which were average for a senior student.

She could likely get into a decent college with her academic scores, and her art skills were more than sufficient.

Her friends were concerned. "Rebecca, you shouldn't have signed up. It will just give them more ammunition."

"Who are they?" Rebecca asked. "What are they saying about me?

Her friends hesitated, then urged her, "Just don't participate. If you lose, it will be humiliating."

Rebecca wasn't afraid of gossip or losing. She smiled. "Thanks for worrying, but I've got this."

Perhaps her past self would be afraid. Now she wondered if her past self had kept a diary or something, so she could understand what had happened during that year.

Later in the bathroom, she overheard exactly the kind of talk her friends had warned her about. A group of girls walked in while she was in a stall.

“Did you guys hear that Rebecca Perry, the dancer from the arts class, signed up for the speech competition?” one of them said.

Loud laughter erupted.

“Does she even know the entire alphabet? Can she even spell a single word?”

The group erupted into another round of laughter. Rebecca recalled that she hadn’t had any conflicts with these girls in either of her past timelines.

Due to her family background, she was introverted and focused solely on dance. Why would these girls have such animosity toward her?

Instead of avoiding the situation, she opened the stall door and walked out.

The girls were washing their hands. Their eyes widened at the sight of her.

One of them stuttered, “Y–You...”

There were five girls, including Catherine. She looked startled for a split second, then quickly recovered.

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

Chapter 693

Catherine’s eyes flashed with panic for a moment. Then she put on a smile and said warmly, “Hi, Rebecca!”

She sounded perfectly at ease, as if she had never talked behind Rebecca’s back. Rebecca didn’t want to argue with them in the bathroom. She simply walked out.

Later in the cafeteria, she ran into Catherine again

Catherine waved at her like they were old friends, walking right up to her with a bright, practiced smile. “Rebecca, why are you ignoring me? Did you misunderstand what we were saying earlier?”

“What did you say?” Rebecca asked back.

Catherine paused, then laughed it off and reached for Rebecca’s hand. “We weren’t being mean. It’s just that a lot of people have biases against arts students.

“We were only looking out for you. Since Vance and I are both competing anyway, I thought we could practice scripts together.”

Rebecca pushed her hand away. “No, thanks.”

Catherine yelped dramatically, clutching her wrist as if it hurt terribly. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she whimpered, “I really wanted to be friends with you. If you don’t want to, that’s okay. I won’t bother you anymore.”

Rebecca knew this routine all too well. There was no way she’d put on this much of a dramatic performance if there wasn’t an audience.

Sure enough, Vance was standing right behind her. He must have seen the whole thing play out.

If she weren’t wrong, Catherine was going to pull her classic two–faced act and say something like, “Vance, don’t be mad at Rebecca. She didn’t mean it; I was too careless.”

As expected, she turned her tearful eyes toward him and whined, “Vance, it’s my fault. I just wanted to be friends with Rebecca. Don’t be mad...”

Rebecca stared at Vance, and tears began rolling down her cheeks. He froze, and so did Catherine, clearly not expecting this turn of events.

Without saying a word, Rebecca grabbed her lunchbox and ran out of the cafeteria.

“Rebecca!” Vance chased after her.

She ran across the campus quad while desperately thinking of every sad thing she could to keep the tears flowing.

He finally caught up under the old osmanthus tree. He stepped in front of her, looking at her tear–streaked face and puffy eyes.

Rebecca caught her own distorted reflection in the curved metal of her lunchbox. Huh. Not half bad. She’d sold the whole crying act well.

“What’s wrong?” he sighed.

“Don’t bother asking,” she whispered. “I told you before. I’ve always got my people’s backs over being right. So, ask yourself right now. Who do you believe? If it’s her, then stay away from me.”

He glowered at her, sparks practically flying out of his eyes.

“I’m leaving. Don’t follow me. It wouldn’t be nice if a teacher caught us like this,” she said, turning to walk away.

He blocked her path once again, looking like he was about to blow a gasket. “Who do I believe? You tell me. I just chased after you to this place. Touch your heart and ask yourself.”

In the original timeline, Rebecca had lost every single confrontation with Catherine.

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

Chapter 694

This time, Rebecca was taking a gamble.

If she lost, she’d switch up her strategy on the spot. Right now, it was hard to tell if she’d come out on top, but there was zero chance she’d lose.

After a long stare–down, Vance asked, “Why did you suddenly sign up for the speech contest?”

“Aren’t you going to ask what happened in the cafeteria? Rebecca asked back.

He stayed silent and finally wavered under her constant stare. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Doesn’t matter?”

“You’ve never cried like that before. What’s going on with you lately?”

Rebecca thought back. In all the time they had known each other, she had always been calm and reserved. No extreme highs or breakdowns.

“What if I said I don’t like Catherine and don’t want her near you?” she said bluntly.

That wasn't the kind of thing a girl her age would say out loud.

Vance looked amused and skeptical. "Rebecca, we haven't spoken in a whole year."

He pointed that out again, like it was some unspoken rule that two people who haven't talked in a year shouldn't be saying stuff that intimate.

He continued, "Did Jenny say something to you?"

Rebecca figured it out then. He thought she was sticking up for Jenny, who had made it crystal clear she hated Catherine. The two of them snapped at each other every time they crossed paths.

"You want to know why I signed up for the speech contest?" she said.

He looked at her, waiting for the answer.

She continued, "I'm going to beat you. And Catherine too."

He looked helplessly amused again. Clearly, he didn't believe her.

"If you really want this spot, I can drop out," he offered. "I'll talk to the teacher. You and Catherine can go together."

His French teacher was the head of the grade and the French language department. As a star student, he had the clout to make that offer.

Rebecca shook her head. "Let's compete fair and square. There's already more than just the two of us signed up now."

"Why are you being like this?" He looked totally confused.

In his mind, she was taking her biggest weakness and running headfirst into a brick wall. He was sure she had no shot at winning. "Your French skills..."

He didn't finish.

"What's wrong with my French skills?" Rebecca laughed sharply. "You think even Catherine can beat me?"

His silence was confirmation.

"Let's make a bet."

"On the speech contest?"

“Yeah. If I win, you have to promise me one thòng.”

“You’re not gonna ask me to fire Catherine, are you?”

“Exactly.”

“You’re out of your mind! Both of you.”

“You scared?”

Vance was a proud man who naturally couldn’t take such provocation. With his grades, there was basically zero chance he’d lose to her.

“Fine, I accept,” he said, unblinking. “But if you lose, you have to promise me one thing. Bets go both ways.”

“Sure, what do you want?”

“I… will tell you later. Just don’t go back on your word.”

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

Chapter 695

Hardly anyone believed Rebecca could win.

When Jenny found out, she showed up with an armful of French reference books.

“Girl, if you’re competing, it’s like I’m competing,” she said emotionally. “The two of us together can definitely take down Catherine!”

Her hatred for Catherine was undisguised.

She had come to help write the speech. Rebecca found it hilarious. Out of the entire grade, including the teachers, the only person who believed she could beat Catherine in the speech contest was Jenny.

Well, Darren did too.

“You have that much faith in me?” Rebecca asked.

“You’re pretty.” Jenny nodded.

Rebecca froze, and Jenny laughed. “Just kidding. No matter what you do, I’ll support you unconditionally. Right now, let’s write the speech.”

“I have already finished it.”

“Then I’ll help you practice.”

Rebecca pointed at her throat. “My voice is already hoarse. If you really want to help, buy me bubble tea.”

Jenny dashed off immediately.

Darren came over and sat in front of her. “All set?”

Rebecca nodded.

“I was going to offer to look at your draft, but it seems unnecessary. And since I’m technically your competitor, maybe I should avoid the appearance of impropriety?” he joked.

“No worries,” she chuckled, knowing he was genuinely concerned. “I’ve already finished writing and memorized the whole thing.”

Jenny returned a moment later with two cups of bubble tea, handing one to Rebecca. When she saw Darren, she clutched her cup tighter. “Didn’t buy one for you. If you want one, go buy it yourself.”

“I’ll buy both of you drinks after school,” he said with a smile, vacating the seat for her.

Jenny sat down mysteriously, pulled a folded sheet out of her pocket, and whispered, “Vance just slipped this to me for you. I don’t know what it is. Take a look.”

She handed the paper to Rebecca. Even though she was dying of curiosity, she had enough self–respect not to sneak a peek.

Rebecca unfolded it and found it was a French speech draft about the future. It was grand and insightful.

She showed it to Jenny, who nodded after reading it. “He has a heart after all. I thought he had been corrupted by Catherine, siding with her all the time.”

“Just how close are they?” Rebecca asked curiously.

“Except for the boys‘ bathroom, she follows him everywhere,” Jenny grumbled. “And that idiot Jethro is always helping her out.

“How did they even become friends?” Rebecca asked again.

Given Vance’s slow–to–warm personality, it seemed impossible for him to accept a new friend so quickly, especially a female transfer student.

“Vance’s grandmother has monthly checkups,” Jenny sighed. “Well, Catherine’s mother just happened to be the new doctor transferred to that hospital. That’s how they met.”

Rebecca felt like she’d been hit over the head.

It was still the hospital and the old lady. The wheel of fate was turning and couldn’t be stopped.

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

Chapter 696

Her mother got transferred to work at the hospital in this district, so Catherine smoothly transferred to the local high school.

Rebecca didn’t know if it had anything to do with her younger self ignoring Vance for a whole year. If that was the case, she understood it completely.

She had walked the same painful path before, and after one too many disappointments, walking away had been the only right call.

On the day of the speech contest, Rebecca and Darren represented their class in the competitor drawing area.

Rebecca drew the last slot, while Catherine drew the third.

“You ready?” Darren sat down next to her. He’d drawn the seventh.

Rebecca nodded with a smile.

At that moment, Vance, who had drawn the second slot, was on stage giving his speech. His French was fluent and pleasant, carrying the natural cadence of a gifted student.

Though he was usually aloof, his delivery was passionate and inspiring. He had a way of getting the crowd fired up. That was why he could build such a successful career so young.

He had a knack for talking investors into backing his ventures just by spinning a compelling, persuasive vision.

His speech ended with enthusiastic applause.

Then it was Catherine's turn to go on stage. She had great grades, or she wouldn't have ended up as Vance's college classmate. Her spoken French was her strong suit, and her speech was titled "Us in 20 Years."

Rebecca's head started ringing. She was sure Catherine had seen her speech draft and stolen her idea.

Her own speech was titled "Us in Ten Years."

She'd traveled back from more than ten years in the future, and the decade ahead was a time she'd lived through herself.

Ten years wasn't an eternity, but it wasn't short either. She'd written down every big and tiny change she knew would happen in that period in vivid, fun detail.

But no matter how good it was, with Catherine's speech going first, hers would just look like a copycat. It didn't even matter what they said anymore.

Darren noticed her pale face and asked, "You okay?"

She shook her head. There was no time to explain, and no one would believe her anyway.

And she couldn't accuse Catherine of stealing her idea because she had no proof. It would only backfire, and everyone would call her a liar.

Catherine finished her speech with a triumphant look and shot a provocative glance straight at Rebecca in the waiting area.

Rebecca lowered her gaze, knowing it was intentional, as the fourth and fifth presenters went up one after the other.

"I'm up next," Darren said. "I'll be waiting for your good news."

Rebecca nodded and quietly ran through her speech in her head one more time. The speeches were scored on the spot, with each contestant's score announced right after the next person finished speaking.

By the time the sixth presenter finished, Vance and Catherine were still in first and second place, respectively.

The moment Darren opened his mouth, the entire auditorium was stunned.

Vance and Catherine were already top-tier among the school's best students. Their pronunciation was perfect, their delivery flawlessly fluent.

But Darren's voice was as smooth and clear as that of a professional broadcast anchor. It was flawless with a subtle Paris lilt, winning everyone over in an instant.

Even Rebecca, who'd lived in Paris for years and was sensitive to accents, was impressed. It was the kind of fluency that only came from years spent abroad.

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

Chapter 697

On second thought, Rebecca realized what was going on.

Darren's parents ran an import-export business, so it made sense that he had picked up such excellent French from them.

There were no surprises in the scoring. Darren shot straight to first place, breaking the previous ranking. Vande took second, and Catherine placed third.

If only the top two contestants would advance, Catherine would be eliminated.

Watching Catherine's dejected expression, Rebecca felt a wave of relief, as if a heavy burden had finally been lifted from her chest. None of the remaining contestants managed to change the ranking until it was/Rebecca's turn.

When she walked to the waiting area backstage, she once again met Catherine's hostile, challenging glare. / Rebecca gave her a small, cool smile and whispered, "Stealing my topic didn't do you much good, did it?"

Catherine's face darkened with anger. She looked ready to explode but quickly forced a cold, mocking laugh. " Rehashing someone else's material is even more pathetic. I lost to Darren fair and square, but you have no chance of beating me."

"We'll see about that," Rebecca replied with a smile, focusing on preparing for her presentation.

The second Catherine spotted Vance walking over, her expression flipped on a dime. "Good luck, Rebecca!"

Vance stopped right in front of Rebecca.

She frowned. “I’m up to compete next. What’s up?”

The last thing she needed was for him to mess with her mood and throw off her performance.

“Don’t stress.” Vance’s face was stony, sounding like a stern dean. “Just speak from the heart. My offer still stands. If you really want to make it to the city finals, I can step down.”

That sounded condescending.

“You can step down, but not because you’re giving me the spot,” Rebecca enunciated. “It’s because I beat you.”

Catherine immediately jumped in, pretending to defend Vance. “Rebecca, come on. He is just looking out for you. Do you have to be so mean?”

“None of your business!” Rebecca snapped, totally getting why Jenny hated this girl so much.

“Did I say something wrong?” Catherine sobbed. “I’m sorry. I was just trying to help. I didn’t mean to....”

Rebecca had seen this fake–crying act far too many times in another timeline.

She clicked her tongue. “Your eyes water so easily. You should go to the hospital and get them checked. Maybe you have pink eye or something. You’re standing so close to Vance. Aren’t you afraid of infecting him?”

Catherine’s face flushed crimson. She stepped back hurriedly from Vance. “No, I didn’t...”

The contestant on stage wrapped up their speech, and the announcer called out to Rebecca.

“My turn.” She walked onto the stage with her head held high, her posture straight and confident. Her voice rang out clearly as she announced her speech title, “What If I Lost My Leg One Day?”

Catherine’s face went deathly pale. Rebecca caught the reaction from the corner of her eye and shot a taunting look right back at her.

In fact, she had prepared two speech drafts. The “Us in Ten Years” draft had been deliberately leaked. If Catherine had been decent and fair, Rebecca would have used it for this round and saved the leg speech for the city finals.

But Catherine had lived up to expectations and stolen the idea, forcing Rebecca to switch. Yet Rebecca hadn't noticed that Darren's expression had also changed dramatically when he heard the new title.

She had no time to worry about anyone else. She poured her entire heart and soul into her presentation.

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

Chapter 698

Rebecca spoke with the same long-term expat accent as Darren, even with the same Paris lilt and fluency that made Vance frown deeply.

He knew Rebecca had relatives living in France, but it had only been a year. How could her spoken French have become this fluent?

Her speech, titled "If I Lose My Leg Someday", wasn't hypothetical. She was speaking from lived experience.

There were no flowery phrases or fancy vocabulary, no melodramatic self-pity, and no empty slogans-just plain, straightforward language that dissected the experience of losing a leg in raw, meticulous detail.

No one could quite pinpoint what moved them so deeply; they only knew that the entire hall fell completely silent, with only Rebecca's voice echoing through the space.

Halfway through, many people had tears in their eyes. By the latter half, the passion, defiance against fate, refusal to surrender, and forward-driving power in her words set everyone's blood on fire.

Thunderous applause erupted. Many people, the panel of judges included, were crying. Without a doubt, Rebecca received the highest score in the entire competition. The one ranking behind her was Darren.

As they returned to the classroom building, Rebecca walked past Catherine, whose eyes burned with resentment.

"Rebecca, you're sneaky! You tricked me!" Catherine spat.

"I'm sure more than one person knew my original topic, but only you fell for it." Rebecca shrugged. "That's your problem. My trick only works on petty people, not decent ones."

Jenny came running out of the science class group, threw her arms around Rebecca, and spun her in a circle. “Girl, you’re incredible! I knew you would win!”

Only this silly, loyal girl would have believed in her so completely.

Rebecca slung an arm around Jenny’s shoulders, and the two of them headed toward the academic building, laughing and discussing stopping at the corner snack stand after school. Jenny offered to treat her and celebrate her win.

Rebecca was in such a good mood that she arrived at the snack stand early after school. But those showing up later were not only Jenny but also two tagalongs.

“Can’t shake them off,” Jenny sighed. “My treat, but they’re paying.”

“If we’re getting snacks, we should go to Vance’s shop,” Jethro said. “Why give business to someone else?”

“Eat if you want and get lost if you don’t. I’m in a great mood today, so I won’t argue with you,” Jenny snorted, slinging an arm around Rebecca’s shoulders. “Today you’re the champion. Just sit back and let me serve you.”

She headed straight for the counter. Jethro followed her, clamoring for sausages. That left just Vance and Rebecca sitting across from each other at the booth.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Vance started.

Rebecca swirled the glass of soda in her hand, taking a sip. “What?”

“You leaked your speech topic to ensnare Catherine,” Vance said, ever so perceptive.

“Yeah, so what?” Rebecca snickered. “Why didn’t you fall for it? Why didn’t you pick the same topic?”

Vance was momentarily speechless.

“So, why are you bringing it up now?” Rebecca twirled the glass in her hand. “Are you here to stick up for her? To get revenge? What’s the catch? Do I need to apologize to her?”

These were all familiar moves Vance had pulled many times before.

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

Chapter 699

Catherine was always right in Vance's mind, and Rebecca always needed to apologize.

So, Rebecca had every reason to think that he had come to stand up for Catherine again. She waited for him to speak.

Sitting across from her, Vance showed a helpless expression. "Why do you always treat me like an enemy?"

She stayed silent, recalling how he had always been like that in another timeline. Seeing Jenny and Jethro returning with the food, he muttered "petty tricks" under his breath and dropped the subject.

"What were you two talking about?" Jenny plopped down in the seat next to Rebecca, practically buzzing with glee. "Reliving how Rebecca crushed you in the speech contest?"

Her smug little expression was so funny that even Vance's lips curved slightly.

"Sure was," he said with meaningful undertones. "I was asking her for tips on how she nailed that perfect Paris accent.'

Jenny's eyes went starry instantly. "It really was gorgeous! Everyone said it sounded like singing. Rebecca, when did your French get so good?"

Rebecca smiled. "I practiced it in my dreams."

Jethro, ever the honest one, helped her out. "Her cousin and aunt live abroad long–term, right? She must have practiced with them."

It was a perfectly reasonable explanation, and both Vance and Jenny had thought the same.

"Vance," Jenny grinned, "you made a bet with Rebecca, didn't you?"

Vance nodded, showing no intention of reneging. "I underestimated her. A bet is a bet. I'll honor it."

Jenny let out a long sigh of relief, as if she had just won a tough battle.

In the end, Vance paid the bill.

Jenny tried to comfort him. "You already lost the contest and must have been upset enough. Rebecca and I originally planned to celebrate without you, but you insisted on coming. Now you're even paying. That's too generous of you."

Vance sighed. “Am I such a petty, terrible person to you guys?”

“We’re cool then,” Jenny said, feeling much better.

They still had evening self-study. Full from the snacks, Jenny and Rebecca went for a walk around the sports field while the two boys went their own way.

Jenny linked arms with Rebecca and sighed emotionally.

“We really needed you to step in.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know how many times I’ve gone head-to-head with Catherine? I lose every single time. I can’t even get

Vance to expel her, let alone take my side. He’s so biased, but the second you stepped in, he caved.”

“I only did it because of the bet. He agreed to it himself. A man can’t go back on his word, right?”

“Not just that. You don’t know how many times Vance asked me before the contest whether your speech was ready. He made me show it to him and listen to your practice until you had every line memorized perfectly. He was genuinely worried about you.”

The two girls walked lap after lap around the track. Only when evening study was about to start did they head back to the academic building, still giddy from their win.

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

Chapter 700

By then, most students had already entered their classrooms, and the building was quiet. Just as Rebecca and Jenny were about to run upstairs, they heard familiar voices coming from behind the staircase on the first floor.

Both girls stopped in their tracks as they recognized the voice of Catherine, who was sobbing uncontrollably.

“This competition was really important to me. Actually, every competition is crucial... If my mom didn’t know I had qualified, it would have been fine. But now she knows, and I

can't go. I'll be in serious trouble. I had to participate no matter what. That's why I was so scared Rebecca would beat me."

Vance's calm voice sounded next. "You knew her French was very good?"

"I–I guessed. She was so insistent on signing up, and she has relatives abroad, so I thought she must be good. Maybe her speech was even written by them." Catherine sobbed so hard she could barely speak coherently.

"No, it wasn't."

"What?"

"She wrote it herself."

"I–I was just saying. Who wrote it doesn't matter. I just really cared about this competition, and you're not letting me work at your restaurant because of that?"

Her crying grew louder, but Vance's tone was unyielding.

"The reason doesn't matter."

Given his personality, he naturally wouldn't mention the bet with Rebecca.

"So, what am I supposed to do?" Catherine said bitterly. "I lost the competition, and now I've lost my job too."

Before Vance could answer, a group of boys who were about to be late rushed up the stairs, their footsteps thundering. The conversation was interrupted.

"Let's head back to class first," he said.

Rebecca and Jenny exchanged a glance and proceeded upstairs, pretending they hadn't heard the footsteps of Vance and Catherine behind them.

Jenny was thrilled, thinking they had finally gotten rid of Catherine, but Rebecca had a nagging feeling that it might not be so easy.

Still, she told herself she might be overthinking it. Many things were different in this world.

As it turned out, her intuition was correct.

The next day was the weekend.

Jenny insisted on dragging Rebecca to Vance's restaurant for a big meal. For her, this was nothing unusual, as she and Jethro visited Vance's place almost every week.

But Rebecca had distanced herself from the two boys for the past year and rarely went. Even Darren, who had once been Vance's close friend and benefactor, seldom visited anymore.

Now that Rebecca had returned from the other timeline and her relationship with Vance seemed repaired, Jenny wanted to bring her along everywhere.

It was during this visit that Rebecca discovered Vance's duplicity. Catherine had indeed been removed from his restaurant, but she had simply moved to the shop right next door.