

Five Years of Marriage to Mr. Bradford

Chapter 91

Catherine was a hot mess, tears streaking her face. “Vance, drop it. I’ll turn myself in. Don’t fight with Rebecca because of me. I hate seeing you two at odds. All I’ve ever wanted is for everyone to be happy.”

Turning to Rebecca, she added, “This is on me. Chew me out, slap me around, or light me on fire if it evens the score. Just leave him out of it.”

Rebecca watched Catherine’s performance with icy detachment, silently acknowledging how masterful Catherine’s acting truly was

“Why would I scold or hit you? I’m no criminal,” she said coolly, pointing at the door. “You said you’d turn yourself in. Go ahead.”

Catherine went stock-still, not expecting Rebecca to call her bluff.

“Well? Aren’t you leaving? Or was that all smoke and mirrors?” Rebecca pushed, standing her ground.

Vance rubbed his temples, frustration carving deep lines in his brow. “Rebecca, dial it back. You’re coming on too strong.”

“Am I?” she shot back. “She volunteered. If she’s backing out now, what else could it be but a performance?”

“Okay, I’ll go,” Catherine wailed, spinning on her heel and storming out.

“Cathy! Hold up!” Vance bolted after her, skidding to a stop at the door. He doubled back, words rushing out. “She’s got too much pride to handle this kind of humiliation. She might do something rash to herself. I’ll check on her and be right back.”

Rebecca watched him dash off, a bitter chuckle slipping out. His panic over Catherine’s departure spoke volumes. He couldn’t even finish his sentence before chasing after Catherine, his voice trailing off with his pounding footsteps down the hall.

Perched on the hospital bed, Rebecca felt a nagging ache in her chest. She was the one who’d almost gone up in smoke, with Catherine the top suspect. But his priorities still tilted toward Catherine.

It looked like nothing would knock Catherine off her pedestal in his heart.

Hesitating no more, Rebecca headed straight to the police station, where she laid out every grisly detail at Vance's company: the conference room fire that brought in the firefighters, the phone video of the sliced wires, the doctor's note on her allergy, and the stubborn rash from the mango juice.

She also submitted her emergency call records, including the one pickup from the front desk with audio proof. As for who snipped the wires and bolted the door, the hallway cameras would reveal the truth—if the tapes were still around. She had faith the police would get to the bottom of it.

Report filed and slip in hand, she went home. Her passport was back in her possession, so she rescheduled her visa appointment, swallowed some allergy medication, and collapsed into bed early. 1

She mentally scrubbed Vance's name clean from her thoughts, not giving a hoot if he'd tracked down Catherine or what went down next. The police would sort her out eventually.

All Rebecca wanted now was to focus on her own well-being.

The ordeal had been overwhelming. Even though she had walked into the trap knowingly, escaping that fire had drained her body and spirit.

She conked out the second her head hit the pillow, oblivious to Vance's return. Had he not disturbed her the next morning, she might never have known.

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Vance yanked the curtains wide, sunlight blasting in and blinding her.

He perched on the bed's edge, his voice laced with that familiar, deceptive gentleness. "Rise and shine, sleepyhead. I bought pizza for you."

Rebecca blinked in confusion. Had yesterday's nightmare been just a bad dream? His next words shattered the illusion.

He reached to turn her face toward him. "Come on, let me check if the allergy has subsided."

She rolled away, hopped out of bed, and made a beeline for the bathroom. While brushing her teeth, she mapped out her day.

The visa holdup left her with free time on her hands. Since she'd be jetting off abroad soon, she decided to visit Josette, who would surely miss her when she was gone.

Today marked Day 15 in her countdown to leaving Vance.

Freshened up, she stepped out to see him parked at the dining table. At this hour, he should've been long gone to the office. In five years, he'd never stuck around for a lazy breakfast.

With him in the way, she nixed eating there. Instead, she decided to grab coffee downstairs, then head to Josette's for the signature pasta. Just thinking about it made her mouth water.

She grabbed a bag, stuffing in her visa essentials. It was better to stash them at Josette's for safekeeping. When the time came, she could bolt from there.

"Where are you going?" Vance called out. "No breakfast?"

"Not your concern," she replied, heading for the door.

"I got stuff you like," he stressed.

"Madam," Nancy chimed told me. I could've beaming unusually. "Mr. Bradford went out early to get your favorite Neapolitan pizza. You never ed some up. He sure knows your tastes"

Rebecca figured out Nancy's glow. Vance showing rare concern for Rebecca must have thrilled her.

But what was d his out-of-the-blue kindness?

"Aren't you off to work?" she asked.

The real meaning? "Aren't you going to coddle Cathy?"

He threw up his hands. "Even workhorses need rest. My vacation starts today."

She frowned, wondering what games he was playing. If he lounged at home, her visa runs would get tricky.

But she relaxed quickly, not believing he'd stay home all the time. Vacations never kept him idle there.

He got up from the table and strolled over, his eyes warm with that old familiar charm. "That brow wrinkling then smoothing out-what's up? Mad that I never take breaks to hang with you?"

He resembled the version of himself from before Catherine, but even that wasn't worth pining over.

"You're overthinking," she said, slipping on her shoes.

"Wherever you're going, count me in," he insisted. "Let's have breakfast first. Didn't you crave Neapolitan pizza? I drove half an hour into town this morning to grab it."

She thanked him but did not stick around. She had savored Neapolitan pizza alone days ago, no longer needing his company,

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When expectations for someone faded, so did the heartache.

Rebecca grabbed her bag and headed out. Vance tagged along. "Where exactly?"

Getting no reply, he spun to Nancy. "Do you know where she's going?"

Nancy looked just as clueless.

Vance grabbed the car keys and stepped into the elevator right behind her. Rebecca noticed the stubble on his chin. "Don't you have better things to do?"

For five years, he'd never shadowed her like this. It felt downright weird.

"I'm on vacation, remember?" he replied.

The elevator doors closed, and she asked flatly, "So, did Catherine turn herself in?"

He paused, his finger hovering over the button. She sneered and said nothing more. Apparently, it was all talk and no action.

It didn't matter. She had already reported everything to the police.

Dodging the question, he suggested, "Josette loves those pastries from Blissful Treats, right? Let's swing by and grab some. Then pick up groceries and have dinner at her place?"

"Sure," she replied blandly.

He eyed her suspiciously, but thinking back to her usual easygoing vibe, he figured maybe she'd dropped it for real. Or his absence last night had fire under her, making her fight to win him back.

Aiden's advice echoed in his mind. "You've coddled her too much. She put her life on the line for you. She's supposed to be head over heels, not you chasing her tail. You're her whole world. Crash elsewhere for a few nights, and she'll beg like before."

That was true. Rebecca's

In high school, Ai ran deep, and he knew it.

teased him with a paper scrawled in his name, wondering who the admirer was.

He had no clue. Too many girls fawned on him, and one scribble meant zilch.

Post-marriage, he came home late one night to find Rebecca asleep at the table. A French worksheet lay beneath her elbow, etched with his name.

It clicked then that the mystery admirer was her. No wonder she'd risked her life for him. With love that intense, how could she really bail? Or shrug off his absences?

"Rebecca." He clasped her hand. "That day I took your passport, I was actually planning to..."

The elevator dinged, doors parting to the underground parking lot. She yanked free, stepped out, and limped her way forward.

He furrowed his brow, following. As he suggested, they bought pastries first. Heading for groceries, she demurred. "No need. Josette's ingredients beat supermarket fare."

She simply didn't want to go to the supermarket. The fall she had taken years ago had hurt too much for her to revisit. "Alright, then let's go," he agreed.

But soon, she realized they weren't headed to Josette's house.

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"Where are you taking me?" Rebecca demanded, frowning.

Vance drove on silently, then murmured, "You'll see soon."

Her hand pressed down against the car door. “No dice. Take me to Josette’s, or drop me off.”

“Rebecca!” Vance slammed on the brakes, fearing she’d jump.

As she gripped the handle, he leaned over, pinning her hand. “Why so on edge? Don’t you trust me anymore?”

“Should I?” she sneered.

She had nearly died in that fire, and trust had been shattered.

His eyes flickered, his brows knitting together. “I know your thoughts, but no matter my flaws, I’d never harm you.”

So, he knew he was flawed.

In the confined car, his grip was tight, his body pressing close. The air was thick with his scent, and that unfamiliar smell of shampoo made her sick.

She held her breath, shoving with her free hand. He stilled, gazing at her.

“Vance, you...” Before she could finish, his face descended abruptly.

She dodged, his lips grazing her cheek instead.

“Stop this!” she warned she pressed nearer, pulled her right hand back, and trapped her fully.

“Why?” he whispered, his lips trailing to her neck. “We’ve been married for five years. Isn’t it time we had a child?”

She was stunned, not expecting him to suddenly want a child after five years. Half a month earlier, she’d have wept joyfully. Now it was too late-

Cifully so.

“I don’t want a child.

Marital still rape,” she hissed. “You’d better stop right now!”

Undeterred, he kissed her cheek again, then whispered in her ear, “Not here, of course. Our child deserves better than a car.”

The scent of his shampoo permeated the car, and suddenly, the air felt suffocating. Twisting away, she held her breath and snarled, “Keep your filthy hands off! Don’t breathe your dirt near me!”

Expecting rage, she got playfulness. He leaned closer and pinched her ear. “Are you jealous? Think I stayed with Cathy last night?”

Chuckling, he retreated to his seat. “I stayed at a hotel. Don’t imagine things.”

She cranked the window to let in some fresh air and took several deep breaths. The discomfort eased, and her mind cleared.

Jealous? That was ridiculous, but she couldn’t bother explaining. He wouldn’t believe it anyway.

He was convinced that she was still madly in love with him and that no matter how deeply he hurt her, she’d endure it.

He didn’t know the truth would dawn in half a month.

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Vance started the car again, still off-course from Josette’s.

“I’m showing you a house,” he explained. “I took your passport yesterday to buy it in your name.”

Her eyes narrowed. “A house?”

“Your parents want to buy one for Emmett’s wedding, right?” he replied.

“They approached you again?” she asked suspiciously.

He didn’t answer, but silence was acquiescence.

She pressed, “When? Why hide it from me?”

He glanced at her, a sly smile playing on his lips. “You’re intimidating. They didn’t dare tell you.”

His playfulness was uncalled for, and it grated on her nerves. And that was her family, perpetually undermining her and making her look bad before Vance.

“Stop gifting houses to everyone,” she sulked. “You’re not their cash cow. Don’t let them exploit you.”

But he seemed to be oblivious, continuing his tangent. “Didn’t expect your fire. Scared me that day at their place.”

What did that have to do with anything?

“Vance! You...”

“Fine, not anyone’s cash cow. I’m doing this for you, though. I know you: tough exterior and soft heart. Planning to buy a house for Emmett yesterday? With that little money you saved from your allowance? Saving up like that couldn’t have been easy, so keep it and treat yourself to something nice instead.”

Did he truly believe that he had all figured out? And did he think her intentions yesterday had been sincere? It had merely been a white lie, nothing

She considered explaining that years was far more than a little.

“Isn’t it true? You sold those

it’s been hard for her to save up and that the money he had given her over the past five years. Upon second thought, she decided it was wiser to keep her financial details private.

and jewelry to help fund it. Why put yourself through all that unnecessary hassle? If you ever need cash, you only have to say the word.”

She was speechless. Selling her belongings to buy a house for Emmett? This guy really needed to snap out of whatever delusion he was under.

“Regarding this property,” he continued without missing a beat, “I’ll go ahead and purchase it, but it’s going to be registered solely in your name. As I recall, your parents’ current place is already under Emmett’s name. If they want to add their names to a deed or handle any transfers, they can sort that out with the existing one. This new house belongs entirely to you, and you get to decide who lives in it.”

All the sharp comebacks she had ready suddenly faded from her mind. After a brief pause, she chose to let them remain unspoken.

If he was so insistent on gifting it to her, she had no objections. Extra assets were always a welcome addition.

As his lawful wife, she would be entitled to half of his fortune in the event of a divorce. She hadn’t originally intended to pursue any more of his wealth, but she certainly wouldn’t turn down something that was being offered to her on a silver platter.

Getting no rebuttal from her, he heaved a sigh of relief and smiled with satisfaction, as it he had just successfully defused a major crisis.

Rebecca quickly read between the lines. If the house he had considered yesterday was primarily intended for Emmett's wedding, then this one served an additional purpose.

It was meant as compensation, a calculated gesture to persuade her to back off from pursuing the case against Catherine. That was his wishful thinking.

She would gladly accept the house while continuing to press forward with the legal action regardless.

Vance had already coordinated all the details with the sales agent. The property had been carefully selected and was ready for viewing.

It turned out to be a detached villa situated in a prime neighborhood, with a price tag that clearly reflected its considerable value.

"It features three levels complete with a built-in elevator," Vance described, holding her hand firmly as he guided her through a thorough tour of each floor. "No matter who ends up residing here, it will be incredibly convenient for you to visit whenever you like. The views are unobstructed from both the front and the back. It's the best spot in the entire development, positioned overlooking the artificial lake. From the terrace, the scenery is absolutely breathtaking."

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"This truly is our premier location, situated right along the lakeside," the agent chimed in with enthusiasm. "During the warmer months, swans migrate in. The epitome of pure bliss and serenity."

Vance guided Rebecca out onto the terrace, allowing her to admire the expansive view.

The lake's damp breeze enveloped her like a refreshing embrace, carrying with it the invigorating aroma of nearby trees and freshly cut grass. She drew in a deep breath, finding the atmosphere genuinely restorative.

"What do you think? Like it?" he asked, still holding her hand.

She glanced down at his fingers laced over hers. Given just how perfectly the house suited her tastes, she decided she could overlook the gesture for now.

She nodded, and his sense of contentment deepened.

“I like it quite a bit myself,” he said. “Perhaps once the renovations are completed, we could even make it our primary residence. As for the setup intended for Emmett’s wedding, we can always figure that out at a later time.”

Rebecca’s thoughts began to swirl with practical ideas, such as how to best divide the first-floor yard into dedicated sections for vegetable gardening. Josette would absolutely thrive in a place like this, finding immense joy in tending to her little plot of land.

Naturally, whatever Vance was saying in the background barely registered with her.

“Let’s check the interior layout one more time,” he proposed, eager to inspect the layout further.

“Hmm... the first floor includes convenient bedroom, which would be ideal for Josette, considering how stairs can become increasingly difficult for her as she ages,” he mused aloud while carefully exploring the space.

Rebecca nodded emphatically, fully on board with the idea.

He happened to notice her eager agreement during a sideways glance. “So, you approve of that particular plan? We’ll just need to find a way to talk her into moving in with us.”

He thought quite far ahead, but she wasn’t impressed, just rolling her eyes.

When they reached the second floor, he pointed out the master bedroom and a children’s room. “We could turn the third floor into a study area. The nanny will have her own room. What do you think?”

“Sounds great.” Rebecca nodded. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

In her personal version of the plan, however, the master room would not have him in it. As for the children’s room, she probably wouldn’t be getting married again or having kids.

He squeezed her hand and smiled faintly. “Great.”

It certainly was great, all things considered. She couldn’t help but imagine the look on his face when he eventually realized that no spot in this villa had been allocated for him. A spark of wicked anticipation began to flare up inside her.

“Then it’s settled,” he said, turning to the agent. “Let’s proceed with the paperwork.”

He immediately signed the contract and paid in full. With all the necessary documents completed, he led her back to the car, and they finally set off on the proper route toward Josette’s house.

In the passenger seat, she inspected her hand that had turned red from his earlier grip. For the villa's sake, she didn't fuss over

She began to mull over just how perfect the location was for Josette's retirement years. Equipped with smart technology throughout the community, any health emergency could be addressed instantly through a simple button press that connected directly to the management team for immediate assistance.

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When she was abroad, this setup would allow her to worry far less about Josette's well-being. Come the time for their inevitable divorce, she resolved that she would battle for ownership of this villa at all costs.

As for their existing home? She wanted absolutely no part of it moving forward.

Even though it was legally titled in her name, Catherine's lingering presence seemed to permeate every corner. If it were awarded to her in the settlement, she would sell it without a second thought.

Throughout the remainder of the drive, her mind buzzed with ideas for the decor, customized to suit both her own preferences and those of Josette.

Now and then, Vance would toss out various renovation suggestions, but she vetoed every one of them. There was no way she would allow herself to live under the shadow of Catherine's influence once again.

"Don't worry about it. I want to decorate it myself," she said.

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"Alright," Vance replied, sounding quite cheerful.

His upbeat vibe persisted all the way until they arrived at Josette's door, where she was preparing lunch.

The table was modestly set with oatmeal, salad, and fresh greens. Upon seeing them enter, she appeared startled and a bit flustered, hastily gathering up the dishes to clear them away.

“What brings you here at this hour? Have you eaten yet? I’ll cook something for you guys,” she said.

Reberca surveyed the unassuming meal spread out before her, which stood in such stark contrast to the elaborate and abundant spreads that Josette always prepared whenever she came to visit.

“Grandma, how can you settle for eating something like this?” she asked.

Josette grabbed the dishes in a hurry, almost as if trying to hide them. “I’m just finishing up some leftovers from breakfast. It’d be a waste to throw it away. This isn’t how I usually eat.”

Rebecca wasn’t convinced, and her mouth twisted into a pronounced pout of disapproval.

“Alright, drop that look,” Josette teased. “I’ll fix something delicious for you right now. Just hang tight for a little while!”

She grabbed the plates and scurried into the kitchen.

A deep sense of sadness welled up inside Rebecca. She knew deep down that this meager meal wasn’t just an occasional occurrence.

Vance set down the gifts, then sidled over to her with a hint of amusement. “It’s fascinating how you seem to revert to being a little kid every single time we step through her door.”

Wordless, she followed Josette into the kitchen, where the latter had already opened the refrigerator and was pulling out some fresh meat, holding it up like irrefutable proof. “See? Just bought these cuts today, planning to use them for dinner. But of course, you had to catch me dealing with leftovers.”

Rebecca remained unconvinced, and her mood was visible on her face.

“You silly child,” Josette chuckled. “Forget it. You must be starving. What would you like to eat?”

“Pasta with meat sauce,” Rebecca mumbled.

“Sure,” Josette drawled. “Go wait outside. It will be ready soon.”

Rebecca didn’t move. “Let me help you.”

“It’s fine,” Josette declined. “I’m not old enough to need help in the kitchen. The doctor said that at my age, I need to move around more. Go on and wait outside.”

“Let me help,” a voice interjected from behind them.

Vance had come in, too.

Josette chuckled, “It’s alright. You wouldn’t even know where to begin with something like this.”

“Actually, I make great pastas,” he said, easing the meat out of her grasp. “I cooked plenty for myself back in my younger days.”

“Younger days?” Josette laughed. “You’re not old now.”

“I mean, I’m not a spoiled kid,” he chuckled. “I can do it all, so why don’t you go and chat with Rebecca for a bit? She misses you a lot.”

Rebecca didn’t put up any argument, instead pulling Josette along with her toward the living room.

Josette hesitated. “Are we really going to leave him to handle it all on his own?”

Rebecca nodded. “Yeah. Take a seat. I’ll peel some grapes for you.”

At home, Vance had never cooked once. A man of his stature didn’t typically prepare meals for others, but Rebecca knew her culinary skills were good.

It all went back to their high school days, during a class-organized picnic outing. While their classmates had frolicked along the riverbank, Vance had remained remarkably steady, methodically building a stove out of stacked stones, kindling a fire, and starting to cook.

She had discovered later on that his family was quite wealthy, but they had been largely absent from his life. He had learned to handle everything on his own from a young age.

He always appeared neat, clean, composed, and resilient. That day at the picnic had marked the only occasion when she had ever seen him in a disheveled state.

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Vance certainly knew his way around a kitchen, but outdoor settings were a different story.

Starting a fire proved to be his greatest hurdle. Even after his face was caked in layers of soot and ash, success continued to elude him.

Rebecca was different. Her summers spent back in the village had taught her a wide array of practical skills—from kindling fires and climbing trees to hunting for eggs alongside her friends from the area. She had done it all.

Positioned in the group adjacent to his, she eventually couldn't bear to watch him falter any longer. Stepping in to help, she cleared out the clogged stove and successfully kindled a blaze.

He gazed at the lively flames dancing before him, appearing momentarily dazed. Perhaps he was keenly aware of his messy, unkempt state that he didn't even utter a word of thanks.

But after that, he settled into a rhythm. The way he cooked proved his genuine expertise in home cooking, and that was the only time she had ever tasted his cooking.

Their group was decent enough to recognize that the success of the meal largely depended on him, so they rewarded him with a drumstick.

But rather than keeping it for himself, he dropped it onto her plate as he walked by her group. That little gesture made her heart skip a beat.

The drumstick seemed to gleam before her like some kind of precious treasure. She barely dared to touch it at first. Just staring at it felt overwhelmingly intense.

In the end, it took her a full half-hour to nibble it away bit by bit, savoring each morsel without ever truly registering the flavor.

That was one of the few connections she had shared with him.

That very night, her dreams were filled with images of him: his face streaked with soot, his fingers deftly chopping vegetables, and the intensely focused expression he wore while cooking.

The following day in class, she found herself staring at his back from her seat, absentmindedly scrawling his name across an entire page of her notebook. The paper eventually vanished, but those characters were forever carved deep within her heart.

She once mentioned that she had asked him a question in class. She really had, though he might have long since forgotten.

It occurred right after a parent-teacher meeting, when the teacher publicly listed the names of students whose parents had been absent. She was one of those called out.

Coincidentally, so was he, and they ended up standing outside as punishment alongside her and a few other boys from the class.

The boys grumbled among themselves about the various reasons behind their parents' absences. Many admitted to deliberately hiding their poor grades to avoid scoldings at home.

Vance wasn't in that category.

"Vance, you ranked first in the exam. Why didn't your parents show up?" one curious boy asked. "If I had grades anywhere near yours, forget just my parents, my grandparents would be fighting over who gets to attend the meeting. The seven of them would come together."

Rebecca blinked in surprise. "But that would only add up to six people. Where does the seventh come from?"

"My dog counts, too," replied the boy.

Rebecca laughed, momentarily forgetting the sting of her situation. The other students soon piled on with similar questions. "Vance, with scores like yours, why would your parents skip the meeting entirely?"

"They're dead," he replied in a flat, emotionless tone.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the group immediately, but Rebecca could sense that it was a lie. If it had been true, he wouldn't have phrased it in such a casual and dismissive manner.

That afternoon after class, she inadvertently witnessed something deeply private, which gave her a glimpse of the answer to her unasked questions.

He was positioned at the school's back gate, tucked away in a shadowed corner, when a luxury car pulled up beside him. The window rolled down, and a wad of cash was hurled at his face.

The bills were scattered across the ground. From inside the car, a finger jabbed out accusingly. "All you care about is money! Take it and be done, you worthless leech!"

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Rebecca was shocked by the situation in his family.

Defiant as ever, he made no move to pick up any of the scattered money. His voice came out icy. "Save it! From now on, touch a cent of your money!"

He turned on his heel and began to walk away.

I won't

The person in the car jumped out and chased after him, shouting, "Oh yeah? If you're so capable and independent, then don't come crawling back for more! Let's see just how long you last on your own!"

The sunset bathed him in a warm, golden glow as he let out a cold laugh, refusing to turn back. "Don't worry about me. I'll find myself a sugar mom long before I ever consider begging from you again."

Those raw and unfiltered words left Rebecca reeling. She had heard similar venomous remarks before from her mother.

Adeline would rant about how raising her was nothing but a waste of food and resources, even suggesting on occasion that she might as well sell herself to make it worthwhile.

Those vicious tirades had always crushed Rebecca's spirit, filling her with overwhelming shame and despair that made her wish she had never been born at all.

In those moments, she would bite down hard on her lip until it bled, just to stem the flood of tears threatening to escape.

But for Vance to utter something like that about himself? The depth of pain he must have been feeling in that instant was unimaginable.

The fading twilight linked the two of them in that moment, casting its light on the shared shadows lurking within their souls.

Somehow, a surge of courage welled up inside her. She approached him and support you!"

ke seriously. "Vance, don't look for anyone to

Was it merely an illusion brought on by the dimming light? For a brief second, she thought she saw his eyes gleam with something wet and unspoken.

Whatever it was vanished almost instantly. He averted his gaze, sneering, "Are you offering to support me instead?"

She immediately went mute, unable to form a response.

That was his rawest and most vulnerable moment. Even years later, it remained unmatched in its intensity.

As he brushed past her, he left behind a lingering wake of his fresh, boyish scent.

The next day, she mustered the nerve to approach him with a challenging math problem in hand. He glanced at her, remaining silent for a long time.

Expecting a rejection, she hung her head low. Finally, he snatched her scratch paper from her grasp, proceeding to diagram and explain the solution step by step throughout the entire break period.

Only when he finished did he ask, “Do you get it now?”

“Yes.” She nodded, tossing him five dollars and running off.

That was all she could spare from her limited pocket money. Like him, she was also largely neglected by her parents as a child.

To ease Josette’s financial burden, she secretly took on dishwashing shifts at a small eatery near the school. She worked during the peak lunch and dinner hours, starting when she turned 16.

She had earned that money through her own efforts. As she tossed the cash down and bolted away, she was clueless about Vance’s expression or reaction behind her.

That same afternoon, he cornered her on the stairs leading up to the girls’ dormitory. He stood beneath the shade of a sycamore tree, with sunlight filtering through the leaves and casting dappled patterns across his form.

She climbed the steps slowly, keeping her eyes fixed firmly downward, as his voice resonated from above. “Why are you avoiding looking up at me?”

The heat of the sun scorched relentlessly that day. Her face flushed deeply as words utterly failed her.

“You seemed so brave when you were offering to support me,” he sneered.

She buried her head even lower, stammering, “I-I wasn’t trying to...”

Suddenly, the five-dollar bill was thrust before her eyes. “Isn’t this exactly that? You really think five bucks is enough to buy my time?”

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In a way, Vance wasn't entirely wrong.

"I just wanted to ask for your help with solving the problems," Rebecca clarified.

"Same difference," he interrupted.

Before she could say more, the money found its way back into her pocket, and he breezed past her, leaving behind a teasing remark. "I haven't sunk that low just yet, you know."

That casual exchange was his subtle acknowledgment of the fact that she had once sought his help with her studies. He likely only recalled it in a vague sense, without any of the surrounding context or details.

She alone clung to the memories of those turbulent yet resolute days—times when they had witnessed each other's lowest moments and deepest struggles.

But then again, such experiences were merely the dark stains in their youthful memories. Perhaps it was for the best that they remained forgotten.

"Rebecca..." Josette whispered, effectively snapping her out of the reverie. "Does he know about it yet?"

Rebecca glanced at Vance's silhouette in the kitchen and shook her head. "I'm not ready to tell him yet, but I will."

Josette tenderly stroked Rebecca's hair. "I will back you in whatever you decide. Just make sure you're happy above all else."

"Grandma..." Rebecca felt a wave of warmth flood her eyes as she leaned against Josette's shoulder.

Vance soon emerged from the kitchen, carrying the steaming pasta. Rebecca was still nestled snugly against Josette.

He set the dishes down, watching the tender moment. "Time for lunch."

The aroma rising from the pasta was rich and inviting, filling the air with an enticing heat that promised deliciousness.

Rebecca had only had a cup of coffee earlier, which she had picked up while buying pastries for Josette, and after spending considerable time viewing the house, she was now starving.

She gently guided Josette over to the dining table to settle in. She had to admit that the pasta was really good. Vance had even made a side of chili oil to go with it, and as he mixed it in, he asked Josette, "How does it taste?"

Josette's eyes crinkled as she praised it enthusiastically. He then shifted his attention to Rebecca, seemingly awaiting her verdict as well.

She took a bite, savoring the sweetness of the sauce. "It's decent enough. If your business ever tanks, you could always open a pasta shop to fall back on."

Josette blinked, caught off guard by the remark.

Vance let out a resigned sigh. "You see what I mean? Rebecca is always rooting for my company to flop spectacularly."

Was he really complaining about her now?

"Vance!" She shot him a glare.

"Look at that, Grandma," he continued playfully. "I always thought she was meek, but she has become so fierce lately." Josette laughed awkwardly. "All I wish for is your happiness."

"We're doing just fine," Vance reassured her, glancing at Rebecca. "We went to see the new house today. When we move in, you'll come live with us."

Josette observed Rebecca's expression, realizing Vance remained clueless about her plans.

Chop

Lunch was finished soon, and Vance stood up to collect the plates.

When Josette tried to stop him, he said, "You have no idea how happy I'd be if I could cook for my grandma and help her clean the dishes."

The air grew heavy with unspoken emotion. He had once had a loving grandmother, vowing as a young boy to take good care of her when he grew up, but by the time adulthood arrived, she was no longer there to receive his devotion.

"Sometimes, I envy Rebecca for having such a wonderful grandmother who loves her so much," he confided to Josette in the kitchen.

Reberca stayed in the living room, with the lively chirping of summer cicadas filling the air, as his words sliced through the ambient noise—cool and clear. 3