

CLUTCH AND RELEASE

CHAPTER 1

"That will be 12.49," Emmie said after scanning the bottled coffee and muffin a half-sober customer had brought to the counter. She fought the urge to cover her nose with her hand as the stench of alcohol fumed from his person. Without a word, the customer dropped the exact amount on the counter before making his way out of the store without so much as a glance.

Although the customer's lack of manners ignited a flame of annoyance in her, Emmie could not help but stare with envy as the customer made his way out of the convenience store. Judging by his formal attire, Emmie deduced he was on his way to work after a fun night out with friends. She imagined that after grabbing a quick breakfast at the convenience store, the customer was going to take a ten-minute walk to his workplace, which was probably located among the numerous high-rise buildings not far from the store. The man was then to take an elevator to the fifth floor and make his way to his corner office, which had an amazing view of the city below, where he would enjoy his quick bite before attending the morning briefing.

That was the life that Emmie had been dreaming of for as long as she could remember. To be a regular office worker who earned a decent salary every month, affording her to pay her bills on time, and still having some money left over to save or splurge on herself.

Turning her attention to her textbook and notes located at the left end of the counter, Emmie could feel a surge of motivation shoot through her veins. "Just a few more months until you can live like him," Emmie whispered to herself as she resumed her studying.

Most of the students around Emmie in her field of study viewed university as a normal, mundane thing that occurred in a person's life. To them, higher education was just a societal obligation and, above all, an excuse to move as far away from their parents as possible with the intention of fulfilling their ever-growing desire for a life free from their reins. To live as recklessly as their youth called them to without needing to answer to anyone.

However, to Emmie, university was her one and only get-out-of-poverty ticket. University was the only chance she had to a life that didn't require her to work three jobs while studying full-time just so she could afford to go to school while still supporting her family back home. The last two and a half years had been pure hell for Emmie, but her blood, sweat, and tears had landed her less than six months away from her dream. Her dream to graduate and get a full-time corporate job.

Nevertheless, every dream has its obstacles, and Emmie's obstacle was calling her at that very moment. All the motivation and determination she had been feeling two seconds ago evaporated faster than steam into the air. As her ringtone drew on longer and longer, Emmie could only stare at the caller ID as the weight of her life's burden made her hands immobile. Her phone finally stopped ringing after what felt like forever, but instead of feeling relief, guilt and shame occupied her heart.

Covering her face with her hands, Emmie huffed an exasperated breath. The suffocating trance of guilt and shame was interrupted by an alarm ringing on her phone, reminding her that her shift was over. On cue, the employee for the following shift walked in, relieving her from her nine-hour graveyard shift. It was six in the morning, so she took her time making the thirty-minute walk back to campus.

The hours between six and eight in the morning were the only time Emmie had to herself. The only two hours in her day that did not require her to be anywhere or do anything. Normally, she used this time to study or complete pending assignments, but the taunting memory of the call from earlier sat patiently at the back of her mind, waiting to be acknowledged so it could bring a dark cloud over her head. For the duration of her walk to campus, Emmie drew her mind blank to avoid thinking at all, forcing herself to focus on the cracked pavement below her.

Her attempt to avoid the matter had almost been completely successful until she felt her phone vibrate in the left pocket of her sweatpants, causing her to stagger in her steps. Emmie did not need to check her phone to know who had sent her a message. There was only one person who would send her a message so early in the morning. The same person who would call her so early in the morning.

The phone in her pocket burned a hole through the fabric of her sweatpants and onto her skin as the weight of her life's burden made her hands too heavy to reach for her phone.

"I'll call her back after class," Emmie whispered to herself in hopes that it would alleviate a fraction of the guilt that had now made its way to her heart.

Upon reaching campus, Emmie rushed to the nearest bathroom where she washed her face, hoping the cold water would wash away her guilt as it did her face. A girl rushed into the bathroom soon after her and placed a small makeup bag on the sink next to Emmie's as she dried her face with the inside of her sweatshirt.

The girl stood tall, exuding the aura and elegance of a supermodel. She began to dig through her bag until she pulled out a makeup brush and foundation, and Emmie could not help but stare as the girl swiftly applied the product to her face and then moved on to the next step in her makeup routine.

The guilt that had been tightening her heart morphed into envy as she watched the girl next to her, through the mirror, flawlessly apply eyeliner, mascara, and lip tint on her eyes and lips respectively. The envy hardened her heart as Emmie averted her gaze from the girl to herself. Unlike the girl next to her, Emmie's skin was dull and lifeless, her hair was flat and oily, having not been washed in over a week. And if she remembered correctly, Emmie had been wearing that outfit for three days straight, and her nose could no longer decipher the smell stuck to her body.

Turning her face to inspect the girl directly, Emmie noticed how every strand of hair was perfectly curled to frame her face, her outfit was simple but screamed expensive, her makeup was flawless, and she smelled like what one would assume the Garden of Eden smelled like.

The girl, noticing Emmie's eyes on her, let out an embarrassed laugh. "I tried to pull a 'I woke up like this' look today, but then I found out my future husband is no campus today."

Emmie forced herself to chuckle along with her and smile, but the girl's words felt like daggers to her heart. Emmie had never had the privilege to stress about boys or her appearance because her stress derived from whether she would be able to earn enough to meet her and her family's basic needs.

Making her way out of the bathroom, Emmie could not help but let out a cynical huffed laugh to herself. Who knew that selfishness and envy were the antidote for guilt and shame.

Arriving at an empty lecture hall with an hour until class began, Emmie placed her right cheek directly onto the cold surface of the desk in front of her. She closed her eyes, hoping a nap would be enough to energize her and put her mind at ease from the mixture of thoughts raging through her mind. But despite having not slept in almost twenty-four hours, sleep was nowhere to be found.

Before she knew it, the lecture hall buzzed with chatter as students filled the hall, something that had become non-existent a month into the second semester. The normally empty seats were filled with students, most of whom Emmie had never seen before.

The back entrance door opened and closed with a loud bang as Professor Landsburg walked to the podium at the centre of the makeshift stage. The chatter died down as Professor Landsburg spoke with sarcasm dripping from his words, "I had almost forgotten this class had more than thirty students."

A few students let out soft chuckles in response, but most, including Emmie herself, avoided eye contact to hide their criminality. Emmie had truly wanted to attend all her classes, but her catalogue of part-time gigs to make extra cash made her almost never present during lectures. That and the fact that Professor Landsburg's teaching

comprised of him reading off the same slides he would make available to them after class.

"I know you are all here to hear about the last and final assignment of this module, so let me just get right to it."

Professor Landsburg's PowerPoint presentation loaded onto the screen, prompting everyone to pick up their pens or station their fingers above their keyboard.

"For your final assignment, you will be required to write a five-thousand-word report on any research topic in the hospitality industry. You will then be required to do a five-minute presentation on your report."

Emmie, as well as other students around her, let out a sigh of relief. Professor Landsburg was known for his difficult assignments, most of which involved having to work at a hospitality institution for a month for an in-person investigation. Emmie had been stressing over how she would fit in an in-person investigation into her already packed schedule, hence hearing that all she had to do was write and present a report felt like a weight lifted off her shoulders.

But the thing about Emmie's life was that nothing ever happened easily for her. It was as if life had made it its mission to make Emmie's life miserable in every aspect of the word. She always had to work harder than everyone else. When others had to walk a mile, life made her sprint ten. When others got lemons to make lemonade, life squeezed lemon juice right into her eyes. Whenever Emmie seemed to receive a stroke of luck, it always turned out to be a bolt of lightning.

"To make the workload bearable, I have put you all in pairs. You can find out who your partner is from the email I sent before class."

Groans sounded from every corner of the hall.

"Lastly," Professor Landsburg continued, "for all of you who think you can make your partner do all the work and slap your name on it at the end, note that everyone is required to keep a daily log of the work you complete alone and with your partner. Anyone found uncooperative will immediately fail. I will be generous enough to give you sixty days to complete the assignment."

Emmie sank into the uncomfortable plastic chair bolted to the floor as she felt the weight that had just been lifted off her shoulders triple in mass, making it difficult for her to sit up straight. How was she going to do all this? Emmie barely had enough time to sleep with studying, her other assignments, and her three jobs taking up twenty hours of her day. How was she going to find the time to work with someone else on her obscene timetable?

"I can see a lot of you are panicking right now," Professor Landsburg said, almost directly to Emmie, "so instead of teaching today, I will give you this time to find your partners and start working on your assignments. If you have any questions, feel free to email me."

With that, Professor Landsburg made his exit from the same door he had previously entered from, as though he had not just thrown a bomb onto Emmie's life. Instantaneously, the chattering around her ensued, but Emmie could only let out an exasperated sigh.

With just under six months to graduation, Emmie thought all the heavy lifting was over and that it would be smooth sailing from here on out. She could practically hear life mockingly laugh at her. The vibration of her phone pulled her out of her parade of self-pity.

One of the part-timers bailed last minute. Can you cover their shift?

-Calvin

Any other day, Emmie would have jumped at the opportunity to work an extra shift. But after the grenade Professor Landsburg had just thrown, for the first time ever, Emmie decided to turn down the offer. However, her eyes landed on the message she forgot she was avoiding.

I'm sorry to do this to you again, but can you please send us some money so we can cover some bills. The restaurant didn't do so well this month, and we are short for some expenses. I know that you're probably struggling too, but help us out this one time. Any amount will do. I'm sorry to do this to you again, but I promise to pay you back next month. Love you.

-Mom

"Of course, it's about money," Emmie mumbled to herself, "If you know I'm struggling too, why are you still asking me for money?" Annoyance and defeat consumed her as she got up from her seat and made her way to the campus café.

With every step she took, her annoyance turned into anger as her mind recited the text message repeatedly. "Why would you even bother promising to pay me back when we both know you never will?" she said as venom laced her thoughts. But as fast as her rage filled her head, sympathy and pity replaced them. "If she came and asked me for help, that means things are really bad back home." The original guilt from earlier came back as she remembered what it was like back home.

Emmie remembered all the times when the money they had and the expenses that awaited them did not balance out. She remembered how her parents would sometimes have to choose between food or electricity, water or rent. She also remembered how terrible it had been for her at those ever-occurring times and how

tough it must be for her siblings back home. Transferring the remainder of her bank balance to her mother's account, Emmie sent her mother a text message:

That's all I have. Hope it helps.

Within minutes, her mother had replied, expressing her utmost gratitude for her generosity, but all Emmie could think about was how she would survive until her next paycheck.

As she clocked in at the campus café, the manager profusely thanked her for saving him once again. She began to understand why he was so grateful as the two of them frantically worked through the morning rush hour. While dealing with the unnecessarily complicated coffee orders of picky customers, Emmie did not notice the constant vibration of her phone from incoming calls.

Only two hours later, when the morning rush had died down, did Emmie see the three missed calls from an unknown number. Calling the unknown number back, the call was answered in seconds.

"Hello?" said a deep male voice.

"Who is this?" she asked bluntly. "Shouldn't you greet first when you call someone."

Already annoyed by the events of the day, Emmie asked again, "Who is this?"

The man at the other end of the call remained silent. At that moment, just as she was about to end the call, a man holding his phone to his ear walked through the café doors. As he approached the counter, his lips moved to the sound of the voice she heard through the phone.

"I am Marcus, your assigned partner for Professor Landsburg's assignment."

Marcus stood in front of the counter, directly opposite her, looking up at the menu hanging from the ceiling. He shifted his gaze down to Emmie when she said, "Oh... hi."

Emmie and Marcus stood still, staring at each other with their phones still pressed to their ears. As she stared at him, she could not help but notice how attractive he was, and the longer Emmie looked at him, the more attractive he became.

Marcus was a mountain of a man with golden brown skin. His aura emitted confidence and dominance as he stood in perfect posture with perfectly squared shoulders. He was dressed simply in a navy-blue polo shirt with light khaki pants, but

his simplicity screamed wealth. That and the watch a blind man would be able to tell was ridiculously expensive.

Having grown up with barely anything of value, Emmie had always felt inferior to others, especially those that appeared to be much wealthier than her. But over the years, she had taught herself not to cower to anyone just because she was less fortunate than them, since having less money than someone is not something she should be ashamed of.

But standing in front of Marcus, all the self-confidence she had built over the years flew out the window. Her mind began to remember the dishevelled state of her hair, her bare and probably dry skin, and her old lint-covered sweats covered by an apron.

Emmie's insecurities screamed torment in her head until Marcus' voice pulled her out of it, "Are you Emmie Vasha?", he said, removing his phone from his ear and ending the call.

Emmie could only nod as she did the same. Marcus extended his hand towards her as he continued, "I am Marcus Barclay, your partner for the research assignment for Professor Landsburg's class. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Reluctantly, Emmie stretched her hand out towards him and could not bring herself to fully grasp it, embarrassed at how clammy her hands were. She pulled her hand out of his grasp after two shakes and softly mumbled, "Nice to meet you too."

Emmie could not bring herself to look at Marcus in his eyes; he had a strong, unwavering gaze that made it hard for her to hold eye contact.

"So, the first step in working together on this project would be to create a foundation. When will you be done working here so we can have our first meeting?" His voice was strong and assertive, oozing complete confidence in himself, which only made her feel smaller.

In her pursuit to avoid any contact with Marcus, Emmie caught her reflection in the mirror on the wall facing her. The disgust in her behaviour toward Marcus, whom she had only met a minute ago, made her nauseous.

Sure, she was a lot less fortunate than Marcus, but Emmie was not going to allow herself to feel inferior to others just because of her social class. At the end of the day, the only difference between them was money; other than that, they were just the same.

Standing up straight and squaring her shoulders, Emmie forced herself to look directly into Marcus' eyes and match his assertiveness as she spoke. "Unfortunately, I have a shift at the campus library after this."

Emmie could see the gear wheels turn in Marcus' head as he pondered on her words. As the light bulb over his head turned on, Marcus said, "What time do you

finish your shift at the library? The location itself is perfect for our meeting, so we can meet there.

“Six thirty p.m.”

Emmie could see frustration grow on Marcus’ face. She sucked in her cheeks to avoid laughing out loud. In Marcus’ defence, Emmie knew that if she was in his shoes, she would be frustrated with herself too.

An awkward silence fell upon them as Marcus tried to figure out what to say in response, and Emmie stood there shifting on her feet, waiting for him to speak. When Marcus showed no sign of speaking, Emmie finally broke the silence and said, “How about to communicate over email in the meantime? We can figure out the logistics of the assignment via email, then take it from there.”

Emmie offered Marcus a tight-lipped smile with her slightly raised eyebrows as she waited for his response. As before, Marcus took a moment to ponder Emmie’s proposition before agreeing with her, “That works for me. I’ll contact you soon,” he said with his face showing neutral emotion.

“Okay, I’ll be sure to reply promptly.

After they both gave each other nods of agreement, Emmie watched as Marcus made his way out of the café. She giggled at the fact that Marcus had left without getting the drink he had initially come to the café for. Soon after he was out of sight, she felt her phone buzz in her apron, prompting her to check it. The unknown number from before had texted her, and the message read:

"This is my number. I hope we will be able to work well together."

- Marcus

Although at first glance, it seemed like a simple, friendly message from her partner, Emmie could not help but get the feeling that he was almost warning her not to mess up, like a parent’s warning to their child.

CHAPTER 2

The sound of a knock of the door forced Marcus to look up his laptop. He was surprised to see that the sunny, cloud-filled blue sky that was beaming sunlight into his apartment had now become a black sky with a vast display of stars and streetlights. Upon seeing the time on his wristwatch, Marcus realised it was already eight in the evening meaning he had once again been struck in his work trance for the last six hours.

His body instinctively began to stretch as his muscles screamed in anguish due to their lack of movement in the last six hours. As Marcus shaped his spine into a c-shape to relieve tension accumulated from sitting, the knocking on his door reoccurred, reminding him why he had been drawn from his work in the first place.

With slow and dragged steps, Marcus strolled towards his apartment door knowing full well who was standing on the other side of the door without having to use the peep hole. George, his one if not only friend, let himself in, as soon as Marcus opened the door, not wanting to waste time with unnecessary pleasantries. Without missing a beat, George said, as he propped himself onto Marcus' couch, "Go get dressed, we are going out."

It was only then when Marcus noticed that George's customary sophisticated mostly formal-casual look had been upgraded to a completely formal attire. His dark hair had a little more gel than usual, sleeked back into a modernised Elvis hairdo. Closing the door behind him, Marcus said, "I'm busy."

"If you were actually busy, you would not have answered the door." George countered with a smug smile plastered on his face.

"I don't want to go." Marcus said more honestly.

"I just need three hours of your time. There is a small cocktail party happening at the Country club tonight and I heard my future adviser will be there. I must go."

"Then go alone."

"If I could, I wouldn't be here right now," George said with an eye roll, "I need to look extra good tonight, and I need you there to make that happen."

The ego boost made Marcus contemplate accompanying George, even though he did not really want to. It had been a while since Marcus had gone out and even though it would be more business— for George more than himself— than pleasure, he knew how important it was for George to get the right advisor for law school next year. Marcus was about to accept the party invitation until George said something that made him stick to his original stance.

"Plus, I heard Chloe might be there."

Marcus remained silent for moment, contemplating the right words to say that would not reveal his discomfort toward the topic of Chloe. After seconds of internal deliberation, Marcus summoned the most nonchalant tone he could master as he said, "That does not change my mind."

"Okay fine. Can you please just do it for me. I'll owe you one."

George flattered his eyes as he slightly pouted his lips in a failed attempt to win sympathy votes. "I'll go if you stop doing that with your face. It's revolting." Marcus' face cringed in disgust. Walking toward his PC, he continued, "Let me check my inbox first then I'll go get changed."

Inbox still empty. The only thing Marcus hate about school was group work. Through his many years of education, he had encountered almost every type of student there was in group work. The most common type of student in a group work setting was one who did next to nothing and expected to sail through on other people's work. The one type he had never encountered was the committed and dedicated student who went above and beyond to do the work right and excel, probably because he always taken the role of said student.

Marcus had hoped that his last group assignment would be with someone who would actually do the work with him, but his empty inbox told him he would be working alone once again. With a depleted sigh, Marcus switched off his PC and went to get changed.

Arriving to the party, all Marcus could focus on was his disappointment and frustration of having to work on his final assignment alone. And the practically scripted conversations he had with other guests at the party did not help pull him out of his fixation on the assignment, or rather, his uncooperative partner.

Standing alone at a table located in a deserted corner, Marcus sipped on his water whilst deep in thought. He was drawn out of his trance when he felt the gentle tap of a finger on his left shoulder.

Chloe stood behind him with a nervous smile, a glass of champagne in each hand. Marcus internally groaned as he had been so caught up by thoughts of his assignment that he had forgotten to avoid Chloe. Now the two of them stood face to face in a deserted area with no possibility of a swift and smooth escape.

"Hey, long time no see." Chloe began after Marcus made no attempt to start the conversation. Her heart raced as she stood before him. It hadn't been that long since she had last seen him, but Chloe could not stop the butterflies swarming in her stomach.

"Hello." Marcus said attempting to be cordial.

When Marcus remained silent, Chloe spoke up again, "Here, I brought you a drink." she handed him a glass of champagne.

"No thank you, I drove here.", he replied as he took a sip of his water.

Chloe became visibly disappointed, her shoulders slightly slumped down along with her gaze. But a flicker of hope shined in her eyes as she returned her gaze to his and said, "I haven't seen you since I came back from my exchange program. I looked for you campus but couldn't find you. I thought you would be at the brunch our parents had last week but you weren't"

"I couldn't make it. I was out of town." Marcus cut her off. All he wanted was for that conversation to end. But all Chloe wanted was to talk to him longer. She tried once more to ignite an interest in him to converse with her, but Marcus cut her off.

"Look," He continued, "I have to get going but, uhm, welcome back." Marcus forced a small smile before turning on his way to search for George. He did not have to turn to Chloe to see her teary eyes and limp body as that image had been imprinted in his head from all the times, he has rejected her unsolicited advances.

Finding George in the sea of black-jacketed, hair slicked men was not a difficult task to complete as all Marcus had to do was follow the room-echoing laugh to find his willy. George was in the middle of a conversation when Marcus interrupted them to speak to him.

"Have you spoken to your future advisor yet?" Marcus whispered to prevent those close to them from over hearing. George gave Marcus a confused look as he hummed affirmation in repose.

"Good, I'm leaving" Without waiting for George's response, Marcus turned on his heel and made his way to the exit and George scurried behind him while saying rushed goodbyes to the other guests at the party.

The car ride back was silent, the air too thick to take in, and George shifted awkwardly in his seat not knowing what to say. Clearing his throat, George hesitantly began, "I saw you speaking to Chloe earlier."

The car remained quiet as Marcus made no attempt to speak. As George was about to speak again, Marcus averted the topic completely, "My fuel is running low. Let's fill up at the petrol station over there," referring to the petrol station a few meters ahead.

Defeated, George dropped the topic too as they pulled into the petrol station. It was almost three am and the petrol station was completely deserted, save for the few workers working the graveyard shift.

After speaking to the petrol attendant, Marcus got out of the car and made his way into the convenience store, grabbing a bottle of water and a box of pain killers.

Approaching the counter, he found the cashier crouched over a pile of books at the left end of the counter.

The cashier did not notice his presence as he stood at the counter. The sound of Marcus clearing his throat caught the cashier's attention, making her look up from her books. She mumbled a quick apology as she made her way to the cash register and scanned his items. Marcus watched the cashier work, and he could not help but find her familiar.

She stood at an average height, her unruly and frizzy curly hair framing her face in a carefree cascade. Her pigmented skin, though appearing a touch dull and dry, held a unique radiance. Her clothes, though shabby, couldn't conceal the subtle beauty that emanated from her. "That will be 20.99" she said not even attempting to look at him directly.

"Emmie? Emmie Vasha?" Marcus questioned, causing the cashier to finally look up at him. Marcus could see the gears in her head turn as Emmie tried to figure out who he was and how he knew her. A minute of silence past as Emmie continued to stare at him in pure confusion.

This in turn heightened Marcus' already sour mood. "Of course, she does not remember me." Marcus said out loud to himself. "She clearly has no intentions to work on the assignment at all."

Annoyance displayed itself on his face as he tapped his card on the card machine to pay for his items. Without thought, Marcus spat out, "You know the type of person I hate most? Lazy people who leech of other people's hard work."

Not waiting for a response, Marcus stormed out of the convenience store, exiting the store angrier than he was when he entered. The tension in the remainder of the car ride was thick enough to slice through with a knife and George could feel the fumes raging from Marcus.

When Marcus arrived home, the first thing he did was switch on his PC so that he could write Professor Landsberg a lengthy email about how he could not work with his assigned partner due to negligence on her end.

Upon opening his email, a notification pop-up indicating a new email had arrived. It was none than Emmie Vasha. A smug chuckle exited his lips as Marcus assumed she was most likely apologising profusely and begging for a second chance. However, his smug look quickly dropped as he read the email.

Hello Marcus

Thank you for your email. I would first like to apologise for my late reply. I had a pretty hectic day today, as is most of my days, but I promise I will work hard and diligently on this assignment going forward. I just ask that you be

understanding of my always hectic schedule, but as I said, I will make sure to do my best on this assignment. Thank you in advance for your understanding.

I read your ideas and I think they are great; they just need a bit of tweaking. For the main topic, I think it would be good to add...

-Emmie Vasha

Delivered at 22:34

Marcus slumped in his seat in embarrassment at the realisation of what he had just done. Flashbacks of the words he had said to her replayed in his head cause the cringe of embarrassment to tighten in his stomach. It was not so much his words but the sheer disgust he had on his face that was the nail to the coffin.

Reading further into her email, Marcus could clearly see that Emmie was in fact not a lazy slacker who planned on getting a free ride on his hard work but that she was as dedicated to the assignment as he was. He groaned in internal anguish at the thought of having to face her again. At this point, he would still have to email Professor Landsberg for a partner switch request but this time, the reason would be his own stupidity.

Getting up from his desk chair, Marcus contemplated driving back to the convenience store to apologise but the idea seemed slightly over kill. Should he just text her? Call maybe?

Weaving his fingers into his hair, Marcus balled his fists together, attempting to pull his hair out as if the act would erase that moment from the world. Taking a deep breath, Marcus decided that the best course of action would be to wait until tomorrow to solve the problem. He had already made a fool of himself today, there was no need to make it worse.

CHAPTER 3

It took Emmie a while to recognize Marcus after their bizarre confrontation during her graveyard shift. She couldn't understand why he would say something like that to her in the first place. Sure, it had taken her a while to reply to his email, but that did not warrant him insulting her as though she had committed some grave sin.

As she mulled over the incident, her anger grew. How dare he insult her when he barely knew her? Did Marcus look down on her because she clearly came from a different, less privileged background than his? Did he consider her lazy just because she was poor? After all, according to the rich, all poor people are lazy; otherwise, they would not be poor.

Emmie's frustration intensified, and she pushed a book cart through the library at an impulsive speed. She was so lost in her thoughts that she didn't notice a girl in the middle of the aisle until it was almost too late. Her abrupt stop caused the books to fall off the cart and nearly knocked the girl over.

"Oh my goodness," Emmie exclaimed frantically, "I am so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Watch where you're going," the girl rightfully scolded. After checking herself for injuries, the girl's scowl softened, and a spark of recognition appeared in her eyes.

"It's the bathroom girl," the girl said with a hint of enthusiasm. It took Emmie a moment to recognize her too, and when she did, embarrassment washed over her.

"I'm so sorry," Emmie said as she knelt down to collect the fallen books. "I should have watched where I was going."

The girl mirrored her actions, helping her pick up the books. "It's okay, don't sweat it."

An awkward silence stretched between them, mainly for Emmie, who was too flustered to say anything other than an apology.

"I'm Chloe, by the way," the girl said, stretching out her hand toward Emmie after they'd picked up the books. Emmie glanced at Chloe's perfectly manicured nails before reluctantly extending her own hand.

"I'm Emmie."

"Emmie, such a pretty name," Chloe smiled sweetly at Emmie. "It's nice to meet you, Emmie."

A blush spread across Emmie's cheeks, and she suddenly felt shy after receiving an unexpected compliment. Compliments from people unrelated to her were rare, mainly because of her less fortunate circumstances, making Chloe's compliment hit harder than it should have.

Chloe held back a giggle, amused by how easily she could make Emmie blush. She wasn't trying to manipulate Emmie, but it entertained her to know that it wouldn't take much effort if she wanted to. Chloe took in Emmie's appearance and surmised that Emmie was a typical girl from a disadvantaged background, someone who likely had few friends and lacked self-esteem or confidence. She appeared to be the type of person who needed someone like Chloe to add value to their life.

"Well, I'll see you around, I guess," Chloe said, flashing her pageant-worthy smile that could win over anyone. "If we bump into each other again, let's be friends." She could feel Emmie's eyes on her as she walked away, and the attention titillated her ego.

"Friends," Emmie mumbled to herself. The concept had become foreign to her. It wasn't always like that, but her lifestyle had made it difficult for her to maintain friendships, leaving her without any friends. The idea of becoming friends with Chloe entertained her for a while, but as her shift ended, Emmie was reminded of the Marcus ordeal.

Now that she had calmed down slightly, Emmie decided to handle the situation as cordially as possible. After all, they would have to work together for a while, so it would be best not to create bad blood between them. However, she was not going to let Marcus off the hook either. Thus, in a lengthy email, Emmie expressed her displeasure with his insult and, more importantly, his lack of effort to rectify the situation and apologize to her. However, a new email appeared in her inbox before she could press send.

Hello,

Can we meet? I'll come wherever you are.

-Marcus

It was seven p.m., and he was asking to meet? Emmie reread the email, bewildered by the audacity to ask her to meet so late in the day. But then again, she had previously informed him of her unusual schedule. Emmie sent him her location and waited for him to arrive.

The library was now empty, save for a few people scattered in different corners. She did not notice Marcus approaching her table until he pulled out the chair across from hers.

"Hey," he said awkwardly as he sat.

"Hey," she matched his energy.

Although he had been the one to request the meeting, Marcus had no clue what to say. Despite being in the wrong in this situation, embarrassment and a dent to his pride made it difficult for him to formulate an apology. Apologising wasn't something he was used to, so he attempted to get it over with.

Marcus reached into his bag and pulled out a slab of chocolate. He extended it toward her, and when Emmie made no attempt to accept it, he placed it before her. "I would like to apologise for my behaviour earlier. It was uncalled for, and I am sorry."

Emmie looked down at the chocolate, unsure whether to be touched by the gesture or repulsed by his feeble attempt to bribe her. Emmie didn't like being given things, regardless of their size. It always felt like a handout, which in most cases, it was.

Growing anxious due to Emmie's lack of reaction, Marcus nervously said, "I wasn't sure what you would like, so I just got the most expensive one I could find."

"You didn't have to, but thank you," Emmie said, pushing the chocolate back toward Marcus. "All is forgiven," she added with a small smile. Marcus visibly relaxed as his body became less rigid, and he let out a sigh of relief. This moment of vulnerability and awkwardness amused Emmie, who imagined how stressful it must have been for him. At the sound of her giggle, Marcus cleared his throat to mask the embarrassment creeping onto his cheeks.

"But please do accept the token of my apology," Marcus pushed the chocolate back toward Emmie.

"A token is not necessary; your apology was enough." Emmie pushed the chocolate back in direction.

Their fingers brushed against each other for a split moment, and Marcus felt a spark jolt through his fingertips. His parents had taught him that an apology should be accompanied by a gift, and the magnitude of the gift should correspond to the apology's seriousness. Throughout his life, people had always gladly received his apology gifts with open arms. In fact, Marcus often felt like some people intentionally created disputes with him just so he would have to apologise to them. However, seeing Emmie content with just his words gave him a peculiar feeling in his chest.

"So, can we start over?" Marcus asked, to which Emmie simply responded with a nod. The two of them began to work on their assignment, assigning tasks for each person to complete individually and those they would work on together.

"So, at what time are you available to meet for the parts we have to complete together?" Emmie became wary because her schedule had always been a source of conflict when it came to group work. Marcus looked at her expectantly as she pondered what to say.

"My schedule is a bit... hectic," Emmie trailed off, searching for the right word.

When Marcus furrowed his eyebrows in confusion, Emmie decided that it was best to be upfront. "I work three jobs, and the only time I'm not working is between six and eight in the morning and evening."

Marcus thought deeply, and the longer he took to respond, the more Emmie worried about his reaction. The worst he could do was request a partner change, but she still dreaded the thought of having to work alone. Marcus finally directed his gaze back to hers and asked, "If you're only free between six and eight in the evening, does that mean you have to be at work at eight?"

"Yep," Emmie replied, still waiting for the bomb to drop.

"It's currently seven forty," said Marcus.

The two of them stared blankly at each other as Emmie's gears turned in her head, trying to decipher what he was getting at. Then, suddenly, Emmie let out a gasp as her hands flew to cover her mouth.

"My shift starts in twenty minutes!" she exclaimed frantically. She hurriedly got up from her seat and began packing up her books. Marcus mirrored her actions.

"How far is your workplace from here?" he asked.

"It's only a thirty-minute walk, fifteen if I run," Emmie replied. She stopped to look at him and continued, "I have to run now; can we continue our meeting through email?"

"Sure-"

"Okay, bye." Emmie sprinted toward the door and glanced at the clock above the exit. She had only fifteen minutes left before her shift started. Emmie could already picture the death glare she would receive from the store manager, who couldn't leave until she arrived. The earful that awaited her made her consider not going at all, but her bank balance ridiculed her for such a thought. Suddenly, as if life had taken her playful thoughts seriously, Emmie felt a force pull her back.

The abrupt halt created a force that pulled her backward, and her back collided with a hard surface. Emmie lifted her head to find Marcus looking down at her. Marcus's hand held the handle at the top of Emmie's backpack, stopping her from moving forward. Only now did Emmie notice the height difference between them; he had a good twenty centimetres on her.

Remembering the urgent situation at hand, Emmie was about to protest his actions when he said, "Let me give you a ride; it will be faster," guiding her to his car parked right in front of the library.

Too flustered to protest, Emmie let Marcus lead her to his car and into the passenger seat. Marcus closed the passenger door and made his way to the driver's seat. Emmie let her eyes wander around the car's interior. She suddenly realized how wealthy he really was. The interior was covered in black leather with sleek silver

accents. But what truly emphasised the car's extravagant status was the Mercedes logo at the centre of the steering wheel. Emmie felt uncomfortable and inferior as Marcus started the car and began to drive.

"Are you going to the convenience store I saw you at last time?" he asked innocently, but his words felt like a blow to her pride. Emmie hummed in response, feeling too low to use her words. As her eyes dropped down to her shoes, she noticed how out of place her white-turned-beige battered sneakers looked on the brand-new-looking floor mats with the car's brand embroidered on them. Emmie spiralled into a pit of inferiority until Marcus's words pulled her out.

"Do you always walk to work when it's this dark?" There was genuine concern in his words. The streets were dark, with streetlights dimly illuminating the surroundings.

"Only during winter. The rest of the year it's still light out," Emmie replied, trying to sound casual. "Nice car, by the way."

Deep down, Emmie had only made that remark in hopes that he would tell her it wasn't his car. Her feelings of inferiority toward him would be less intense if it were his parents' or a close relative's car—anyone but him. But, of course, he replied, "Thanks."

Marcus pulled up in front of the convenience store, leaving her with two minutes to spare before her shift started. Wanting to quickly escape his ego-crushing presence, Emmie said a quick thank you and goodbye before exiting the car.

Thankfully, the store manager was not too upset about Emmie's almost-late arrival and let her off with just a stern look. Settling herself at the counter, Emmie put on her work vest, which displayed the store's green and purple colours, and proceeded to continue her schoolwork.

A small knock on the counter pulled her out of her books. Lo and behold, Marcus once again stood before her. "I figured if you aren't busy, we could continue our meeting."

Emmie stared at him blankly, and he nervously added, "Since you're already doing your schoolwork anyway." He pointed to the books in front of her.

Not sure what else to say, Emmie gestured for him to grab a stool from the eating area in the store and join her by the counter. The two of them worked together for another two hours before saying their goodbyes.

As she watched Marcus leave the store and drive off, Emmie couldn't help but feel jealous of his life. He seemed to live without worry or stress, not having to fret about tuition, accommodations, or where his next meal would come from. Marcus appeared to be someone who only had champagne problems.

Emmie watched the clock, eagerly waiting for it to strike midnight. The moment it did, she got up from her stool behind the counter and made her way to the food section. Inspecting the expiration date of each item, Emmie removed all the items that had passed their expiration date. Once finished, she filtered through the items, taking the ones she liked and placed them in her bag, disposing of the rest. Grocery shopping - check.

CHAPTER 4

The next four weeks flew by as Marcus and Emmie worked on their assignment. At least twice a week, Marcus would join Emmie at the library after her shift to work together. On some occasions, he would stay a while after dropping her off at the convenience store, even if it was just to continue their conversation.

Marcus had grown to enjoy Emmie's company. Perhaps it was because he could be himself around her. The only thing Emmie needed and wanted from him was his partnership on their assignment, and nothing else. It was such a relief for him to finally have someone who didn't want him for his money or family name. Marcus found himself drawn to the light and unimportant conversations they had in between their meetings.

On one particular Saturday evening, Marcus yearned for such a conversation. George had called him early, inviting him to yet another cocktail party. However, the thought of participating in superficial conversations, whose sole purpose was either to gain something from the other party or prove oneself better than the others, repulsed him.

It was nine in the evening, and Marcus knew Emmie was working at the convenience store. All he wanted was a dose of tranquillity he could only get from being with Emmie. He thought of texting her first, but his fingers froze over his keyboard, unsure of what excuse to use that wouldn't make him appear strange.

Should he ask her if she was working? No, because he already knew the answer, and Emmie probably knew that he knew. Or maybe he could ask her if he could come hang out with her for a while? But that would only make him look odd— who would want to hang out at a convenience store at nine p.m. while she was working?

When his phone screen turned black, Marcus saw his reflection. The sight of his face at that moment made his stomach recoil in disgust. What was he even doing? Why would he want to see her on a Saturday night? He should be out with his friends, not stressing over trivial matters like what to text Emmie. He should be at the cocktail party with George.

With the internal conflict resolved, Marcus changed into a suitable outfit and made his way out of his apartment. Once in his car, he began driving towards the country club where the party was being hosted. However, after a few minutes of driving, Marcus found himself parked outside the convenience store.

"I'm just here to grab a bottle of water before the party," he said to justify his actions. "It is important to stay hydrated at all times," he whispered to himself as he entered the store.

Marcus expected to find Emmie sitting behind the counter, deeply focused on a pile of books as she usually was. However, he was surprised to find no one there. The

pile of books was present in their usual corner, but Emmie was nowhere to be seen. Then, out of nowhere, a soft groan sounded from behind the counter.

As Marcus approached the counter, the groans became louder, and when he peered over the counter, he saw Emmie curled up on the floor with her arms clutched to her abdomen.

In a panic, Marcus jumped over the counter, shouting her name. Emmie did not respond to his call. He sat next to her on the floor, gently lifted her head onto his lap. He lightly shook her shoulder, trying to get her to respond, but her eyes were closed shut in pain.

"An ambulance. I need to call an ambulance," Marcus said, not knowing what else to do. But as he was reaching for his phone in his pocket, Emmie placed her hand on his, restraining his movement. In a low and weak voice, Emmie whispered, "No hospital, I need to finish my shift."

"You shouldn't be worrying about work right now; you need to see a doctor," Marcus unintentionally shouted in frustration.

"I'm fine," Emmie countered as she attempted to sit up. "I don't need to see a doctor. I just need a few painkillers, and I'll be fine," she continued, trying to mask her pain.

Marcus had deduced that Emmie was a financially struggling student, but he didn't think it was bad enough for her to endure such pain for such little money.

He watched in pity as Emmie pulled herself to stand up while excessively groaning. Whatever pocket change she would earn from this one shift probably meant her livelihood.

Defeated, Marcus went back to the other side of the counter. He grabbed a bottle of water and a bottle of painkillers and placed the two items on the counter. He watched sympathetically as Emmie scanned the two items and placed them in a bag at a slow pace.

"That will be 20.99," she said, her voice barely audible. Marcus paid for the items, then proceeded to open the bottle of painkillers. He took her hand in his and placed two pills in her palm, guiding her hand to her mouth to help her swallow the pills. Marcus opened the bottle of water and handed it to her as she swallowed the pills.

A few seconds later, Emmie began to wobble in place, as if she was about to faint, prompting Marcus to again jump over the counter to hold her.

"I think I need to lay down for a bit," Emmie whispered as she leaned her body against his for support.

"Where do you want me to take you?" he asked, trying to hold back any remarks about going to the hospital.

"The back room," she whispered as her eyes began to shut.

Picking her up bridal style, Marcus carried her through the door behind them, where he found a small couch at the end of the small, dimly lit room. He gently placed her on the couch, making sure to rest her head properly on the armrest so she wouldn't wake with a sore neck.

Taking a step back, Marcus watched her as she slept, noting that even in sleep, she still clung to her stomach in pain. He removed his jacket and draped it over her body before going back to the counter.

Standing in front of the cash register, his hand naturally averted to his hips as he wondered how the cash register worked. As a person who considered himself tech-savvy, he figured the machine couldn't be that hard to understand. It was almost eleven p.m., and Marcus was confident that no one would visit the store this late at night.

Nonetheless, in a cruel twist of fate, a group of intoxicated people stumbled into the store in need of more alcohol, cigarettes, and protection. It took one of the drunken customers who had previously worked a cashier to show him how it worked after his numerous failed attempts.

At two a.m., the store and the streets that surrounded it were eerily dark and quiet. Marcus checked on Emmie to make sure she was still breathing before stationing himself at the counter with nothing to do besides fidget on his phone.

Bored of scrolling through his phone, Marcus looked out the glass wall and came to realise how dangerous it was for Emmie to sit in an unguarded store that had easy access to goods and cash. Anyone could easily walk into the store and rob the place. Anyone could easily harm her and escape, and worst of all, she had nothing to protect and defend herself with, which weirdly made him feel a feeling he could not clearly identify.

From eight p.m. until six in the morning, Emmie sat behind this counter like an open target. All alone, save for the two attendants who worked the petrol station outside. However, in an emergency, even they would render useless.

These thoughts loomed in his mind as the clock ticked away, and before he knew it, it was six a.m., and the worker for the next shift arrived, relieving Emmie from hers. Marcus entered the breakroom, and he found Emmie still sound asleep on the couch. But as he walked closer to her, he noticed beads of sweat dripping down her forehead.

She was slightly trembling, and when he felt the side of her neck, she was burning hot. Panic ensued in him again, and when he shook her in an attempt to wake her, she could barely open her eyes or mouth to speak.

"That's it, I'm taking you to a hospital," Marcus said while picking her up bridal style. Emmie placed her hand on his chest and clenched his shirt into a fist as she weakly whispered. "No hospital."

Frustration filled him as he said, "Why not? Your shift is over, and it's a Sunday. I'm taking you to see a doctor whether you like it or not."

Emmie continued to weakly beg him not to take her to the hospital as Marcus made his way out of the store and to his car. He placed her in the passenger seat and lowered the seat so she could rest comfortably. "Why don't you want to go to the hospital? You're clearly in tremendous pain and urgently need medical assistance, so why are you still refusing?" The thought that her refusal could be because she had to go to work drove him up the wall.

"Yes, making money is important, but it should not be more important than your health," Marcus insisted.

Emmie said nothing for a few seconds before whispering in an even lower voice than before, "I can't afford to pay for the hospital bill."

Marcus felt his heart sink. She did not want to go to a hospital, despite the tremendous pain she was experiencing because she couldn't afford it. Silenced by his guilt of the assumptions he had made not long ago, Marcus put the seatbelt in place before closing the door and made his way to the driver's seat.

After buckling up, he turned to Emmie and found that she had once again fallen asleep. Turning his car on, Marcus drove to his apartment, where he placed her on his bed in the upstairs of his loft.

He placed his hand on her forehead and found it warmer than before. His frustration had now transformed into helplessness as he did not know what to do. The obvious solution had been shut down, leaving him clueless on what to do next.

He looked back to her balled-up body, emitting groans of pain even in its unconscious state. Fishing his phone from his pocket, Marcus scrolled through his contacts, hoping to find someone who could help.

Then his eyes landed on Dr. Smith, lighting a bulb over his head. Emmie said she could not go to the hospital, but she never said anything about a doctor coming to see her.

In less than an hour, Dr. Smith was hunched over Emmie, inspecting her condition with his nurse standing next to him, assisting him with his equipment. After a while, Dr. Smith stood straight as he removed the stethoscope from Emmie's chest.

"This is one of the worst cases of self-neglect I have ever seen," Dr. Smith said, turning to Marcus.

"Your..." the doctor trailed off before deciding on which term to use, "friend here is severely sleep-deprived and malnourished. From my surface level examination, I conclude her lack of sleep has weakened her immune system, which allowed her poor diet to cause severe to mild food poisoning, explaining the fever and sweating. I'll give her an IV drip and some medication, and she should be okay after some rest. But I strongly suggest she gets a full check-up soon, just to make sure there are no underlying problems."

Marcus waited downstairs as the nurse changed and treated Emmie, pondering on the words Dr. Smith had said. He remembered how light she felt in his arms. She probably did not have enough time to eat or sleep with having to study full time while working three different jobs.

The more Marcus thought about Emmie's situation, the more protective and defensive he felt toward her. He was pulled out of his thoughts by the sound of Dr. Smith and the nurse descending downstairs.

"Thank you again for coming on such short notice. You can invoice me personally for your fees," Marcus said, leading them to the door. "One more thing," he said before they left, "Please keep this visit to yourself; I don't want my mother hearing about this." The doctor blankly looked at him, informing him that his mother was most probably aware of this visit.

Not wanting to stress about that yet, Marcus made his way back upstairs and found Emmie lying more peacefully in his bed with her right hand hooked up to an IV drip. He sat on the edge of the bed, stroking loose strands of hair behind her ear, as a feeling overwhelmed his heart. Marcus was not sure if it was pity, compassion, or proactiveness, but he knew that feeling made him want to shield her from all the burdens that had led her to this state.

Leaving Emmie's side, Marcus prepared a pot of chicken soup for her to have when she woke up. If Dr. Smith said she was malnourished, Marcus would have to start feeding her. Although he had never cooked before, how hard could following a recipe be?

As he plated the soup into a bowl, Marcus heard his phone ring from the other side of the room. The time to stress had now arrived as his mother's contact displayed on the screen. With a deep breath to calm his nerves, Marcus answered the call. "Hello, mother. How are you?" he said, trying to sound as neutral as possible.

"Hello Marcus. It seems like the only time I can speak to you is if I call you first," she remarked. The call had not even reached the thirty-second mark, and his mother was already picking a fight.

"I apologize for that. I have been preoccupied with my assignments," he said, trying

to keep the peace for as long as he could.

"Of course, I know, dear. I just wish you would call me first sometimes. But that's not why I called," she said, her voice sounding perky as she spoke. "Come over for dinner. It has been far too long."

Although it sounded like a request, he knew it was a command. Marcus desperately wanted to stay and wait for Emmie to wake. He had so many questions to ask, so much he wanted answers to. Nonetheless, he knew refusing to go would add fuel to whatever fire was brewing in his mother's head.

Signing in defeat, Marcus agreed to go to his parents' house for dinner. "Splendid," his mother exclaimed, "Be here by six. I have a special guest waiting for you. Don't be late." She chimed before hanging up.

Marcus was too preoccupied with concern about leaving Emmie alone to question the guest his mother had mentioned.

Emmie was still deeply asleep when he checked on her. Removing the finished IV drip from her arm, Marcus made sure she was tucked in and settled before changing into a more formal attire and leaving. He left a note for her to read when she woke up, but Marcus secretly wished that she would still be here when he returned.

CHAPTER 5

Emmie's eyes fluttered open as her body slowly began to awaken. She stretched her arms into the air, feeling well-rested and rejuvenated. She let out a contented yawn, not recalling the last time she had slept for so long. The bed was soft yet firm, and spacious enough to sprawl out like a starfish. The duvet was light and soft, enveloping her in just the right amount of warmth.

This setting was a stark contrast to the one she had in her dorm. The bed there was so old that the wires inside it were protruding, making her feel as if she were lying on a bed of nails. It felt like a luxury to sleep on such a comfortable bed.

Then it hit her. Emmie was not lying in her own bed. She couldn't even remember returning to her dorm after her shift at the convenience store. The last thing Emmie remembered was being in excruciating pain while Marcus fed her painkillers. Sitting up, Emmie scanned the room, but it was barely illuminated due to the drawn curtains. She concluded that it was evening, as no light seeped through the curtains.

Using her hands to feel around, Emmie's hand landed on a flat, hard surface. She felt a cord connected to what she assumed was a switch, and upon pressing it, a lamp illuminated the room. The light allowed Emmie to observe her surroundings. It was a simple room with a comfortable bed, a single-seat couch, and a stool in one corner, and a chest of drawers in another. Emmie then noticed a note stuck to the lamp that read:

I had to step out for a bit, not sure when I will get back. Make sure to take your medication after you eat. I left a bowl of soup in the microwave.

-Marcus

Memories of the events of the last twenty-four hours came flooding back. Although her memories after passing out at the convenience store were hazy, she could piece together how she had ended up here. She remembered Marcus covering her with his jacket as she slept on the breakroom couch. She remembered Marcus insisting on taking her to the hospital and what she had said to change his mind. She remembered him carrying her in and out of his apartment elevator, up a flight of stairs, and laying her on this bed. She also recalled a man, whom she heard Marcus refer to as Dr. Smith, treating her.

Emmie's face flushed with embarrassment now that she knew how she had ended up at his place. She couldn't believe that Marcus had seen her in that state and had helped her. It hurt her pride that he now knew about her financial struggles. While it

might not have been a well-kept secret, she despised the fact that she had been in her most vulnerable and weakest state, and Marcus had witnessed it all.

Emmie felt grateful toward Marcus because, had he not shown up at that moment, she couldn't even imagine where she would be right now. However, her gratitude couldn't mend her bruised ego and shattered pride. She had to leave before he returned.

The digital alarm clock on the nightstand showed it was six thirty, which was a relief because she had enough time to make it to her shift at the convenience store. Her neatly folded clothes lay on the chest of drawers, which she changed back into. Emmie could smell the fabric softener as soon as she picked them up, something she had never used before.

Her pride suffered even more at the thought of him witnessing the state of her clothes. Like most of her possessions, they were well past their prime with sewed up wholes and tears all over. Emmie grabbed her phone and medication from the bedside table, as well as her bag next to it, and rushed downstairs. She went straight for the door but stopped before turning the handle.

Even though she was embarrassed beyond measure, Marcus had helped her selflessly. She could tell from his note that he hoped she would wait for him. Even though she couldn't bring herself to wait, the least she could do was thank him.

Turning on her heels, Emmie headed to the kitchen and took the soup from the microwave. Still feeling the pressure to leave quickly, Emmie drank the soup straight from the bowl as though she were drinking water. She recoiled after her first gulp, finding the soup bitter and inedible. However, the thought of Marcus returning forced her to swallow the rest, despite its unpleasant taste.

She made sure to wash and place the bowl on the drying rack before writing a 'thank you' note and pasting it on the kitchen counter. With no other option, Emmie left the apartment door unlocked, saying a quick prayer in hopes that he wouldn't get robbed.

The sun had set, and the moon and stars had taken over the sky. Being a Sunday evening, the streets were almost empty, save for the occasional passing cars. Left alone with her thoughts, Emmie contemplated what Marcus had done for her. Even though she had no money, she had to find a way to repay him.

One of the worst feelings in the world is the sense of being indebted to someone, and right now, that feeling gnawed at Emmie's stomach. The debt she and her family owed to people had always given creditors the right to trample on their lives. So even though Emmie was almost certain Marcus wouldn't use her debt to his advantage, she didn't want to leave it to chance.

The only way she could think of returning the favour was by completing the rest of the assignment alone. It seemed fair, and she hoped Marcus would accept payments for the doctor's treatment in instalments.

Her phone vibrated with an incoming call. It was her youngest sister, Debra, calling her. Not in the mood to take the call, Emmie sent it to voicemail without a second thought. After all, it was her family's fault that she was in such a mess to begin with, and Debra was probably calling her to ask her for money.

Standing before the large wooden door, Marcus took a deep breath, hoping it would magically give him the courage to knock. His fisted hand froze just inches from the door's surface. Inhaling once more, Marcus attempted to knock, but the door swung open before he could, revealing his mother- Fiona Barclay- on the other side.

Her raised eyebrows and derisive tone stung, "Dinner will start and finish before you knock on the door." Leaving the door open, Fiona turned and walked away, not bothering to invite Marcus inside. He followed her with heavy steps.

Fiona embodied the essence of a middle-aged wealthy housewife, an embodiment of old money. Her aura exuded elegance and status, something she was keenly aware of and made sure everyone else was aware of too.

"You haven't visited us in over six months," Fiona stated matter-of-factly.

"School has kept me occupied," Marcus replied, although the truth was, he had no desire to see his parents.

Fiona sensed his excuse was feeble but chose not to press the matter further, as a more important topic was at hand. "You have a special guest," she said, walking into the guest living room.

Before Marcus could ask about the guest, his question was answered when he found Chloe sitting in the living room, sipping on a glass of wine. Her head lifted toward him as Fiona announced his arrival, "Look who has finally decided to join us, Henry and Chloe."

His father, Henry, did not bother to look up from his tablet, but Chloe stood up with a large smile on her face.

Although Henry was Marcus' father, they were essentially strangers. He was a reserved and stoic man who only paid attention to his son when he had done something wrong.

Marcus had always considered himself nothing like his parents. While they were elitists who looked down on almost everyone, he thought of himself as humbler and egalitarian. Their lives revolved around their wealth and high social status, whereas Marcus had broader ambitions. The only thing he shared with his parents was their golden melanin, great height, and gorgeous features.

The two women motioned for Marcus to take a seat next to Chloe.

"I thought you said it was a family dinner," Marcus remarked, taking a seat on a single couch across from his parents and next to Chloe. Chloe's smile wavered

slightly, but she maintained her composure.

"It is a family dinner, son. Chloe will soon be a part of this family," Fiona corrected, smugly.

Marcus clenched his teeth to prevent himself from getting into another argument on this matter. His goal was to get through the dinner and out of there as quickly as possible, and any argument would only delay his escape.

The conversation was halted when the maid came in and informed them that dinner was served, and they headed to the dining room. At first, everything was going smoothly. Mainly because Marcus took no part in the conversation and left Chloe and Fiona monopolise the dinner conversation. All was well until Fiona asked the dreaded question.

"When will the wedding be, right after graduation, or are you two planning on waiting a while?" Fiona asked, sipping her wine.

Chloe eagerly answered the question, placing her hand on top of Marcus', who had been forced to sit next to her. "As much as I want to get married right away, I was hoping to wait a bit. Maybe six months, just so we can establish our relationship firs-

"What relationship?" Marcus asked, pulling his hand from beneath hers. Chloe stared at him, dumbfounded, prompting him to ask again, "I said, what relationship, Chloe?"

For the first time that evening, Henry spoke up, "The relationship between BC Hospitality and Douglas Construction," without lifting his eyes from his plate.

"Since when did that involve me?" Marcus asked, clenching his fist around the napkin laid on his lap.

"Since you were conceived," Henry replied, unmoved.

Tension hung in the air as everyone remained silent, with Henry's words echoing in the room. Unfazed or perhaps deliberately obtuse, Chloe's annoyingly chipper voice, accompanied by her perpetual smile, chimed in, "When you put it like that, Mr. Barclay, it makes our relationship sound like fate."

Fiona clapped her hands together in delight, affirming the ridiculous statement.

Unable to tolerate their presence any longer, Marcus rose from his seat and made his way to the front door to leave. In the background, he heard Fiona call for him to return and his father's indifferent voice advising her to let him go because he was acting like a child.

As he walked out the front door and to his car, Chloe's hand grasped his forearm, forcing him to halt. "Where are you going? You can't just leave during dinner."

Marcus looked down at her puppy-dog eyes, which he had grown to despise. While harsh words hovered on the tip of his tongue, he reminded himself that his quarrel

was not with her but with his parents. Shifting his arm from her hold, Marcus continued walking to his car, got in, and drove off. In his rear-view mirror, he saw Chloe still standing in the driveway, watching him drive further and further away.

At that moment, all Marcus wanted was to escape, to be away from the life he had never chosen but had been thrust into, as his father had said, since before he was born. Marcus wanted to be away from everyone and everything associated with his world, which had led him to Emmie.

Standing in front of the glass wall that provided view into the store, Marcus watched her stock the shelves. He chuckled at his accurate prediction that she had left his place and gone to work, despite her condition. Subconsciously, he found solace in her leading him away from his apartment because both it and his car had become reminders of the 'remuneration' he received for relinquishing his life to his parents.

Emmie must not have heard Marcus walk into the store, as she was startled and let out a small scream when he crouched down next to her.

"Did I scare you?" He joked, feeling the anger and stress imposed on him by his parents dissipating.

"Next time, make some noise when you approach me," Emmie replied, placing her hand over her heart to calm it down.

"How are you feeling?" He stopped himself from berating her for returning to work so soon. She clearly hadn't fully recovered yet, but he was beginning to understand that her situation didn't afford her the luxury of taking time off to rest.

"Much better, thanks to you. Thank you... for everything." Emmie avoided meeting his eyes, feeling too embarrassed to look directly at him.

"Anytime," he genuinely replied.

A comfortable silence enveloped them as Emmie resumed stocking the shelves, and Marcus assisted her. Even though no words were spoken, it was comforting just being next to her. Perhaps it was because Marcus felt no pressure from her.

Disappointment washed over Marcus when they finished their task, as Marcus no longer had an excuse to stay. Checking his watch, he noticed it was only a few minutes past midnight, but he still didn't want to go home. As he racked his brain, trying to think of an excuse to linger, Emmie suddenly said, "Would you like a drink?"

Marcus nodded slowly in response, not entirely sure what this entailed but preferring whatever it was leading to over returning home. He followed her closely, like a lost puppy, as Emmie retrieved two cans of soda from the store's fridge, paid for them at the counter, and led him to a bar and stools at the back end of the store. Emmie patted the seat next to hers, which he gladly occupied. As Marcus opened the can and took his first sip, Emmie began to speak, gazing at the dimly lit street ahead.

"I'm the oldest of four children, and as you can tell, I come from a financially challenged family." Marcus sat frozen with the can at his lips, not knowing what to do or say. Instead of looking directly at her, he watched her from her reflection on the window.

"As soon as I turned five, my parents upgraded me from being the firstborn to being the third parent, and since then, I've had a mountain of family responsibilities on my back. My father expected me to shoulder financial and parental responsibilities from the age of sixteen and pressured me to drop out of school. He refused to contribute a cent toward my school fees because he believed I would marry an educated man, rendering my own education unnecessary. Instead, he wanted me to work to support my younger brother financially, as he believed he would ultimately provide for the family."

Emmie's head drooped, and she chuckled to herself. Marcus refrained from looking directly at her, afraid that doing so would cause her to stop sharing her story. Instead, he continued to observe her through her reflection on the window.

"I secretly applied for university with my mother's help, and fortunately, I received a scholarship that covered my tuition and provided me with an allowance. Everything was going well until this year. Due to budget cuts, my scholarship now only covers half my tuition, which is still a substantial amount. But I now have to make up the rest of it, in addition to the money I send back home every month. That's why I'm working three jobs just to scrape by. But honestly, I'm proud of myself for getting this far on my own."

Emmie paused for a moment, gazing at her hands clutching the can of soda. Her voice grew softer as she continued, "So that's my story. I hope you don't think less of me because of it."

Marcus sat in awe, unable to fully express his admiration for her strength and resilience. While her story was undoubtedly challenging, he was amazed by how she had persevered through it all. He realized that he and most people he knew would have likely given up after facing the first obstacle. He couldn't help but admire Emmie's willpower and independence, traits that set her apart from the privileged individuals he had been surrounded by his entire life.

Still in awe, Marcus whispered without realizing, "You really are admirable, Emmie Vasha."

Emmie turned her head away from him, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. That was the most meaningful compliment she had ever received, and it took great effort to prevent her eyes from welling up with tears of joy.

Marcus, too, felt a sense of embarrassment for expressing his thoughts out loud. He turned his gaze back to the street ahead and cleared his throat, attempting to dispel the growing awkwardness. Taking a sip from his can, he asked, "Why did you tell me

your story?" He was genuinely curious about her motivation for sharing her story without any prompting.

"I figured you were dying to ask me a million questions, but you didn't. For some reason, that made me want to tell you my story. Well that, and I wanted you to know how amazing of a person I am."

Their harmonious laughter filled the store, creating a warm and comfortable atmosphere that seemed to melt away any lingering negative feelings Marcus had accumulated from the dinner with his parents and Chloe.

"But on a serious note, can I pay you back for the doctor's treatment with very small instalments? I'm even willing to do the rest of the assignment on my own as a token of my gratitude."

"You don't have to. You don't owe me anything."

"Please, I feel extremely indebted to you and this will make me much better."

Marcus paused for a second, thinking of how he could get her to agree on not paying him back. In the short time he had known Emmie, Marcus had learned how unnecessarily stubborn she was. But there was no way he was going to accept any money from her. Not after what she had told him about her life but mostly because that money meant nothing to him.

"Why don't we do this, put this on my IOU tab and I'll redeem it when I need something from you." Marcus smiled at himself for coming up the idea.

"Can't I just pay you back?" Emmie asked sceptically.

Marcus shook his head, "This is much more valuable to me."

It was Emmie's turn to ponder on his words for a second before she responded, "Fine, you have a deal."

The smile on his face broadened.

Marcus and Emmie spent the rest of the early morning conversing about trivial matters, and Marcus made two surprising discoveries about himself. First, contrary to what he had believed for most of his life, he was a talkative person with plenty to say. Second, he loved the sound of Emmie's laughter.

As they watched the sun rise, they realized how quickly time had passed. Soon, the employee for the next shift arrived to relieve Emmie of her duties. They stood beside Marcus's car, reluctant to part ways.

"Where's your dorm? Let me give you a ride," Marcus offered, hoping she would agree to let him drive her.

Emmie took a moment to consider his offer before surprising him by saying yes. Hungry and sleep deprived as he was, Marcus couldn't wipe the smile off his face as he drove Emmie to her dorm. He was simply happy to spend time with her.

CHAPTER 6

Emmie entered her dorm for the first time in three days. The shoe-box-sized room-containing a single bed, a tiny desk and chair, and an even smaller closet- felt more cramped than usual after having been in Marcus' apartment.

Emmie decided to brave the communal dorm showers, despite the lack of hot water, to wash her hair since she couldn't remember the last time she had done so. After getting dressed and packing her bag, Emmie made her way out of the dormitory, only to be surprised to find Marcus standing next to his car in the exact same spot where he had dropped her off earlier. Had it not been for his change of clothes, Emmie would have thought he never left.

Sensing her eyes on him, Marcus looked up from his phone and instantly smiled when their eyes met. Emmie hesitantly walked toward him, confused about why he was standing there.

"I came back to remind you to take your medication," he said, as if reading her thoughts.

"And a text wouldn't have been sufficient?" she asked, still unable to understand why he had come back.

Still sporting a smile, Marcus shook his head and said, "You can't take your medication on an empty stomach," drawing her attention to the small brown paper bag in his hand that she hadn't noticed before.

"Hurry before we are late for class," he continued before she could say anything else.

Once in the car, Marcus handed her the paper bag, which she discovered contained a tray of small sandwiches.

Normally, this kind of gesture annoyed Emmie because it felt like pity charity, and she was tired of being a charity case. But for some reason, when it came from Marcus, it warmed her heart. Not being able to look directly at him for fear he would notice the growing blush on her face, Emmie mumbled a thank you as she stared at the sandwiches on her lap. The sandwiches were colourful, layered with meats, cheese, and various vegetables, but unlike normal sandwiches, they were cut into the shapes of flowers.

Emmie must have been staring at them for a while because Marcus asked, "Why aren't you eating? Are they not to your liking?" Emmie hurriedly spoke, sensing the disappointment in his voice, "No, it's not that. They just look too pretty to eat," admiring the crust-free flower-designed sandwiches.

Marcus chuckled at her response, averting his gaze from the road ahead to steal a glance at her. His hand unconsciously landed on the back of her head, softly

caressing her hair. "If you like them that much, I'll make sure to buy them for you again."

Emmie internally sighed in relief as she bit into a sandwich, grateful that she had washed her hair earlier.

Now parked in the campus parking lot, Marcus took a sandwich from the tray, and they sat in comfortable silence, enjoying the breakfast sandwiches, while the music from the radio filled the car.

Five minutes before class was set to start, Emmie and Marcus made their way to the lecture hall. As the lecture hall came into view, Marcus noticed Chloe standing next to the entrance with her eyes roaming around the hall in search of someone, specifically him.

Chloe looked effortlessly gorgeous, dressed from head to toe in a simple yet designer dress with a cute pair of sandals to match. Her hair and makeup looked natural, but Marcus knew it took effort to look that perfectly natural. Compared to the put-together Chloe, Emmie couldn't hold a candle, clad in faded jeans, a white tee, a checkered shirt, and once-white sneakers. In the natural order of life, Chloe definitely looked better standing next to Marcus. But Marcus would pick Emmie over the seemingly perfect Chloe any day.

Chloe spotted Marcus in the crowd, and her eyes instantly lit up. She had made great efforts to find out his class schedule just so she could ask him to join her for lunch afterward. Chloe was well aware that Marcus was not very fond of her, but she believed that was only because Marcus did not know her yet. Chloe was confident that once she and Marcus spent some time together, he would come to like her more.

Marcus had always disliked his predestined relationship with Chloe because it was imposed on him by his parents. It was his youthful rebellion that made Marcus hate her and the idea of being in a relationship with her. Nevertheless, Chloe was confident that once Marcus got to know her, his instinct to oppose his parents would be overshadowed by his liking of her.

Her happiness was short-lived when she noticed the girl who walked closely next to him, her eyes looking down at her phone. At first, Chloe consoled herself, thinking they were two individuals who happened to be walking in the same direction in the crowded hallway. However, that theory was debunked when Marcus placed his hand on the girl's back, guiding her into the lecture hall, and maintained a heated stare with Chloe. "Come on, class is about to start."

Chloe clenched her fists to restrain herself from throwing away the etiquette training her parents had forced her to receive. What bothered her most wasn't the fact that Marcus was with another girl but rather the girl in question.

Seated side by side in the lecture hall, Emmie could feel the tension radiating from Marcus. Stealing a glance at him, Emmie noticed his clenched jaw, scrunched eyebrows, and the lasers shooting out of his eyes toward the open space before him. Emmie tried to figure out the cause of his sudden shift in mood but came up blank.

When Marcus turned his head to face her, feeling her gaze on him, his face softened. Leaning closer to her ear, he whispered, "Don't forget your medication," his smile having returned to his face as he pulled back.

Concluding that she had hallucinated the mood shift from Marcus, Emmie brushed it off and took her medication, prescribed by the doctor. As Professor Landsburg took the podium, Emmie's eyelids grew heavy, the drowsiness side effect of the medication starting to kick in.

Marcus noticed Emmie battling her drowsiness and whispered to her when the lecturer wasn't looking, "You can sleep if you need to. I'll share my notes with you."

Shaking her head in hopes of staying awake, she whispered back, "No, it's fine. I can fight it."

Less than two minutes later, Emmie was out cold, and Marcus gently placed his bag under her head as a pillow, stifling a laughter threatening to erupt.

Emmie was gently shaken out of her sleep by Marcus once the lecture had ended. She woke up in a daze, confused about who and where she was. Marcus's snicker echoed through the now-empty lecture hall, save for the few students still lingering around. She stared at him in further confusion as he failed to control his laughter.

"What?" she asked, only for him to say a quick "nothing" in between laughs. With a huge smile on his face, he changed the topic by asking, "Do you want a ride to the café?"

She shook her head in response as they got up from their seats. "I need the fresh air to help wake up."

Marcus pursed his lips together, trying to contain his laughter, as they headed to the door. However, before she could question the cause of his laughter, his laughter died, and his smile dropped before a forced and rigid smile covered up his scowl. "You can leave first; I'll see you later at the library."

Marcus walked her to the door, blocking her view of the culprit of his shift in mood, and held the door open for her. She was surprised when Marcus closed the door behind her instead of walking out with her. However, her curiosity was pushed aside as her shift at the campus café forced her to walk away without further inspection.

The walk to the campus café felt longer than usual as she continued to fight the urge to go back to the lecture hall. But all thoughts of that were pushed aside as Emmie noticed the snickers from everyone she passed.

"What's wrong with your face?" Calvin asked as she walked into the cafe's employee room. Confused by his remark, Emmie looked at a nearby mirror and finally understood the reason for all the weird looks, snickers, and remarks she had received on the walk to the cafe, but most importantly, Marcus's fit of laughter.

Her eyes were bloodshot red with large eye boogers sticking in the corners. But worst of all, a large zip imprint ran across her face from Marcus's bag turned makeshift pillow.

Playfully enraged, Emmie reached for her phone in her back pocket, planning to call Marcus at that very moment to give him an earful for letting her walk around like that. But her playful anger quickly simmered down when she remembered his eagerness to make her leave his presence. So, out of her growing subconscious desire to be close to Marcus, Emmie opted for a text message instead.

Sleep with one eye open from now on.

Once Emmie was out of sight and the lecture hall was empty, Marcus approached the visibly annoyed Chloe. Her arms were crossed, and her gaze narrowed at his every move, with fury dancing in her eyes.

"What are you still doing here?" He said through clenched teeth to refrain himself from losing his temper.

Chloe chuckled sadistically. "I've known you since we were five years old, and all this time I thought you had no sense of humour and were incapable of being compassionate in a relationship—"

"Since when were we in a relationship?" Marcus interrupted, repeating the question she always failed to answer.

Chloe let out a sigh and averted her gaze as she spoke. "Our parents are meeting for dinner tonight at my house. They want us to join them."

This was exactly what Marcus had aimed to avoid at all costs. But before he could make a flimsy excuse for his inability to attend, Chloe continued, "And before you

think otherwise, it's not an invitation, it's a summon."

His left eyebrow rose. "My mother didn't tell me anything about a dinner tonight."

"That's because she wanted me to tell you," Chloe replied without missing a beat. "Your mother was hoping we could smooth things over after what happened at the last dinner."

Marcus lifted his face to the ceiling, letting out an exasperated sigh. His mother's persistence, despite his explicit objections, was becoming exhausting.

"Dinner is at seven, so pick me up at five thirty."

Not waiting for a response, Chloe stormed out of the lecture hall, which gave Marcus no opportunity to get a word in. He knew there was nothing he could do or say to get out of the dinner.

Then he remembered his arrangement to meet Emmie after her shift at the library. The logical course of action would be to cancel on her, to inform her he could not make it to their meeting. But a part of him hoped that, by some sheer miracle, he would no longer have to attend the dinner. For all he knew, an asteroid could fall on the Douglas' home. By that logic, there would be no dinner to attend and therefore no reason to excuse himself from the meeting.

CHAPTER 7

Marcus was a zombie, dragging himself from task to task with no energy or motivation in his movements. It was already five-thirty, and he sat in his car parked outside Chloe's off-campus apartment, impeccably dressed in a suit and tie, waiting for Chloe to descend.

He waited for a while, with no sign of Chloe making an appearance. A seed of hope sprouted within him, praying she'd be a no-show, allowing him to escape to the library. However, his hope was crushed when the passenger door opened and slammed shut.

"You know, a chivalrous gentleman picks the girl up from her door. He doesn't wait outside like a common taxi."

Her remark met with no response. "Even my chauffeur knows to do that," she mumbled to herself, just loud enough for Marcus to hear.

The ride to the Douglas residence was long and quiet. Chloe was too exasperated to speak, and Marcus showed no interest in engaging in conversation with her. She hadn't intended for their time together to be like this. Chloe had never wanted these moments with Marcus to be forced, filled with stifling tension and discomfort, but here they were. It wasn't her fault, truly not. It was entirely the fault of that low-life Emmie, forcing Chloe and Marcus into deafening silence as they drove to her parents' house.

It infuriated Chloe to see Marcus treat Emmie with love and affection, emotions he had never once shown her. Chloe couldn't fathom how the two had become so close, let alone acquainted. It dawned on Chloe that maybe Emmie was not the insignificant, inferior girl she'd initially thought. She never expected Emmie to have the audacity to pursue someone so far out of her league her neck couldn't look up that high. However, that wouldn't stop Chloe from protecting what was hers.

Standing at the front door upon their arrival, Chloe forcibly linked her arm with Marcus' after ringing the doorbell. Marcus attempted to unlink them, unable to tolerate any physical contact with Chloe. The door suddenly opened, revealing Stefanie Douglas, Chloe's mother. Stefanie gorgeous and curvaceous woman who clearly married for money.

"Oh, my goodness," Stefanie exclaimed. "What a pleasant surprise."

Marcus looked down at Chloe, puzzled. She refused to acknowledge his questioning stare. Stefanie shouted into her vast, echoing foyer, "Edward, Fiona, Henry, you have to come see this."

The sound of Fiona's heels echoed on the marble floors as they approached the foyer.

"Stefanie, you sly fox, you didn't mention the kids would be joining us this evening," Fiona beamed as she reached the front door.

"That's because I did not plan for them to be," Stefanie mirrored Fiona's smile. "Let me notify the cooks and servers to add two more plates. Don't just stand at the door; come in, come in." Stefanie motioned with her hands before dashing away to the kitchen.

Marcus dropped his head as he snickered sadistically to himself, realizing how he had been played. Chloe didn't dare look at him as she shamelessly led him into the dining room, their arms still interlocked, where additional plate settings were being arranged.

"What a pleasant surprise," Edward, Chloe's father—a short, chubby man who looked more like a pimp than a businessman—exclaimed as everyone took their seats. The women in the room concurred with his words.

The entire dinner conversation revolved around how great a couple Marcus and Chloe made and how lovely it was for the soon-to-be family to be gathered impromptu. Chloe played her role as the bride-to-be flawlessly, wearing her pageant smile, accommodating all suggestions about the wedding and honeymoon, and acting affectionate every time Marcus' name was mentioned. She made multiple attempts to place her hand on his hand, arm, or leg, but Marcus retreated from her touch at every attempt.

Dinner felt endless, yet it ended swiftly. Probably because Marcus had decided to follow his father's "cheat codes" and abstain from engaging in any conversation throughout the evening. As they prepared to leave, Fiona hugged him, an act that seldom occurred, and whispered in his ear how happy she was that he had come to his senses about marrying Chloe. If it weren't for his mother's rare display of affection, Marcus would have made it clear that it wasn't the case. However, Fiona's embrace was worth playing along for a short while.

The drive back was as quiet as the drive there, but this time, tension hung thick in the air. The streets were empty, with only a few cars in sight. Marcus seized the opportunity to speed through the roads, overtaking every car in his path. Before he knew it, he pulled up in front of Chloe's apartment building.

"I apologize for lying to you, but I don't regret it," Chloe finally addressed the elephant in the car.

"I'm already drained from tonight, so can we not do this right now?" Marcus pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"I just wanted to remind you that our arranged marriage isn't something you can easily back out of. Whether you like it or not, we are getting married next year, eleven months from now. So, whatever you have with that girl or whatever you want to happen will never happen."

Chloe unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the passenger door. As she turned to leave, she gave Marcus one last look. "For your sake, mine, and whatever that girl means to you, end it now, and I won't make a fuss. We wouldn't want your parents to catch wind of this." Chloe slammed the door behind her, leaving traces of her fragrance lingering in his car.

With Marcus a no-show and her text messages unanswered, Emmie's phone remained glued to her hand as she restocked inventory at the convenience store. Each vibration prompted her to frantically check her phone, only to be disappointed that it wasn't Marcus. Emmie had not realized it yet, but she was developing a growing attachment to Marcus, one that could cause more trouble than it was worth.

Just before midnight, Emmie's phone rang. She checked to see if it was Marcus calling, but although it wasn't, she was still pleasantly surprised to see her sister Ashley calling.

As soon as she answered the call, Ashley spoke, "Two months, three weeks, and five days. That's how long it's been since we last spoke, and not once did you try reach out first. I appreciate the love, sis."

"I've been busy," Emmie tried to defend herself, realizing how much she had missed her sister.

"We're all busy, Ems, yet I still make an effort." Ashley's words stung in Emmie's ears. "Plus, you never answer when we call. I'm surprised you picked up today."

Yes, she was busy with school and her three jobs, but secretly, Emmie knew that the reason she rarely called or answered calls from home was that every time she did, she'd end up having to send them money, whether they directly asked for it or not.

"Anyway, that's not why I called. Are you still coming to Debra's sixteenth birthday on Saturday?"

Emmie had completely forgotten about her youngest sister's upcoming birthday. "Don't tell me you forgot?" Ashley asked in disbelief when Emmie didn't respond. It struck Emmie how neglectful she had been as a big sister to her younger siblings.

Although Emmie was overwhelmed by the financial responsibility of supporting her younger siblings, she realised that their needs went beyond just monetary assistance. It dawned on her that she had been unintentionally neglecting her siblings, who depended on her not only for financial stability but also for emotional support. Emmie's resentment towards their circumstances had overshadowed her desire to maintain a strong relationship with her siblings.

Overwhelmed with guilt, Emmie shamelessly said, "Of course, I'll be there. There's no way I'd forget Debra's sixteenth birthday. I was literally thinking about what gift to get her." She hoped her lie wasn't too obvious.

"Oh, that's easy. She's in her fan girl phase, so anything K-pop will do, but Twice merch will make her the happiest."

"Debra's into K-pop? Wasn't she making fun of it not so long ago?"

"Yeah, well, you haven't been available for a while. A lot of things have happened."

A piercing pain struck Emmie in the chest, "Well, I'm here now. Fill me in on everything that's happened, don't leave out a thing."

For the rest of the evening, Emmie and Ashley stayed on the phone, chatting about everything that had happened, from Alex finding a hair strand on his chest to Debra's newfound Korean obsession. They talked about how the family business was barely staying afloat and how their mom and dad were grateful for the money Emmie sent them every month but felt guilty for the burden they were causing her.

Emmie realised she wasn't the only one struggling, the entire family was. A fact she had easily forgotten due to her distance from home. She had forgotten how hard the day-to-day life was, which caused her to villainise her parents and detach herself from the people who loved her deeply. Fortunately, it wasn't too late for her to change that.

Marcus was beyond upset. He despised the fact that the high he had started his day with had crashed down before he could savour it. Driving away from Chloe's apartment building, Marcus loosened his tie, feeling suffocated, not only by it but by his life in general.

The day's events reminded him that his life wasn't his own; it belonged to his parents and Chloe. At moments like these, it felt like there was nothing he could do about it. Marcus drove to his refuge, the only person who made him feel at ease. He parked in his usual spot but sat in his car instead of going inside, watching Emmie through the glass wall.

She held her phone to her ear, smiling from ear to ear as she spoke. Marcus fixated on her every move: how her head fell back when she laughed, and how she gestured with her hands when she spoke enthusiastically. He could feel the warmth radiating from her, despite the distance and the glass wall between them—a warmth he never wanted her to lose, but a warmth his parents could easily take away.

This put Marcus in a dilemma. He didn't want to involve Emmie in the mess of his life, but he also didn't want to let her go. In the two months Emmie had been in his life, Marcus had grown so attached to her that he couldn't imagine life without her. It might sound overly dramatic, but that's how he felt. In those two months, Marcus had

found peace and tranquillity he'd never known before, making him realize how stifling his life was prior.

So, the predicament was whether Marcus would give in to his selfishness and hold onto Emmie, regardless of the potential consequences, or heed the true nature of his affection and let her go.

CHAPTER 8

His inability to choose a stance plagued him through the night and remained with Marcus the following morning as he sat in the lecture hall, waiting for the class to start. Marcus was so consumed by his internal debate that he did not notice Emmie taking a seat next to him. He felt a tap on his left shoulder, only to find no one there, and as he turned to his right, Emmie's finger dug into his right cheek.

Emmie giggled at the bewildered Marcus who had fallen for her trick. The unsuspecting victim of her childish prank felt his heart race from being close to the adorable perpetrator who couldn't stop smiling from ear to ear.

"What's got you so deep in thought that you didn't notice me sit next to you?" Emmie asked as her giggles subsided.

In no way could Marcus be truthful about the cause of his absent-mindedness, so he simply replied, "You know, the same old school stuff."

Emmie nodded in agreement before she began unpacking her stationery for the class, avoiding eye contact with Marcus. "So, what happened last night?"

He tried to read her expression to identify what was going through her head, but Emmie kept her face practically buried in her backpack as she waited for his answer.

"Sorry about that. I suddenly had to go home yesterday." The lie slipped from his mouth before he could stop it. But, in his defence, it wasn't a complete lie since he had seen his parents the night before.

"It's cool, no problem." Emmie decided against questioning why he hadn't responded to her text messages.

The lecturer walked in, ending the conversation between them. All Emmie could focus on as the monotone voice of the lecturer droned on was the subtle yet noticeable shift in Marcus's demeanour. Twenty-four hours earlier, Marcus had tended to her as she slept through the lecture. But if Emmie didn't know any better, she would strongly deny that the same Marcus sat next to her this morning, rigid and stoic.

After class, Marcus and Emmie discussed their assignment in the now empty lecture hall.

"Everything is pretty much done; all we have to do is finish our presentation. We can complete the finishing touches on our own for the remainder of the week and have our final meeting on Saturday afternoon." Marcus' tone conveyed an air of formality, as if he were addressing a colleague and not a friend.

"I can't do Saturday afternoon. What about the morning, after my shift at the convenience store?" Emmie feigned ignorance about his change in demeanour.

"Sounds good to me."

Normally, Marcus would have offered to drive or walk Emmie to the campus café, but his unresolved inner conflict made him reluctant to be in her presence. "I'll get going now," Marcus said, packing up his things. "I'll see you Saturday morning."

Marcus left before Emmie had a chance to say her goodbyes, leaving her baffled by his behaviour. It hurt Marcus to leave her like that, but he needed the distance to make a decision on what he was going next.

The few days leading up to Saturday were harder than he had imagined. It felt like withdrawal for an Emmie addiction. The days dragged on, and Marcus felt like he was going insane. This should have made his decision much simpler, but it only made it harder. The depth of his attachment to Emmie made him want to forsake it all, but on the other hand, the depth of his attachment to Emmie also made him afraid of what his parents could do to her.

On Saturday morning, Marcus arrived at the convenience store at exactly six a.m. He found Emmie sitting with her books and laptop already out at the eating area at the back of the store, unlike her usual spot at the check-out counter. When he stood at a distance away from her, Marcus watched her as she stared at something on her laptop screen. Despite her dishevelled hair, unfaltering posture, and rumpled clothes, he couldn't help but admire the raw beauty that shone from her.

The women around him were always impeccably groomed, with not a single strand of hair out of place. However, to him, they did not come close to matching Emmie's beauty. But it's not like he could do anything about it, even if he wanted to. He had to hold back until the presentation on Monday, and then their business together would be done.

The two of them worked for almost three hours, finalising the details of their assignment and presentation. As Emmie stretched her arms and body, she glanced at the time on her phone screen, and in shock, abruptly stood up mid-yawn and began packing her things. "I need to go; see you on Monday," she said before dashing toward the door.

Instinctively, Marcus packed up his things and ran after her. "Emmie," he shouted as she ran further from the store, but she didn't turn or stop at the call of her name. Marcus got to his car and managed to catch up to her. Slowing the car's speed to match her pace, Marcus lowered his window. "Do you need a lift?"

Emmie was visibly out of breath, and her eyes alternated between looking at him and the street ahead. "Sure," she said, getting into the car after he stopped beside her.

"Why are you in such a rush so early in the morning?"

"I have a bus to catch," Emmie said, still huffing and puffing as she tried to catch her breath.

"Are you going somewhere far?" Marcus's ears perked up in interest.

"Yeah, I'm going back home," her breathing finally settled down. "It's my youngest sister's sixteenth birthday." An affectionate smile appeared on her face, showing affection toward her sibling.

"You should have told me you had such important plans; I wouldn't have kept you for so long," he said, feeling responsible for her lateness.

"I didn't expect us to be at it for so long." She said glancing at her watch.

They arrived at her dorm building a few minutes later and Emmie wasted no time to exit the car after saying a quick thank you. Marcus watched her run into the dorm building but couldn't bring himself to leave.

Thirty minutes later, Emmie ran out of the building, looking like he had never seen her before. In the months that Marcus had known Emmie, her uniform consisted of jeans or sweatpants, a t-shirt, a hoodie, and sneakers, with her hair bundled into a messy bun at the top of her head.

But as she approached the car, she was wearing a white summer dress that ended just above her knees, paired with gold strappy sandals. Her hair thick curls flowed down her back with great volume and shine. Marcus had never seen an angel before, but at that moment, he was certain she was just that. He got out of the car as she walked closer to him.

"What are you still doing here?" she asked in confusion.

"Hop in, let me give you a lift to the bus terminal," he said, walking toward the passenger seat and opening the door for her. Emmie looked like she was about to refuse, but after looking at the time on her watch, she got into the car with no complaint.

Emmie had less than twenty minutes left before the bus was set to depart, and the bus terminal was a good forty minutes away. Marcus sped through the empty Saturday morning streets and managed to get there in less than thirty minutes. Unfortunately, the bus had already departed.

"I never pegged the buses around here to be punctual," Emmie mumbled to herself with disappointment in her voice.

They stood at the kiosk, Emmie speaking to one of the workers while Marcus stood next to her, holding her fairly large overnight bag, watching her try to negotiate for a free ticket on the next bus.

"I apologize, ma'am, but you will have to buy a new ticket for the next bus, even if you missed the previous one," the polite worker explained.

"Okay, can I at least get a refund?" she said, sporting puppy eyes, hoping to draw sympathy from the worker's lifeless eyes.

"No refunds allowed for buses that have already departed."

In defeat, Emmie moved from the front of the line and sat on a bench next to the kiosk. Marcus watched as Emmie opened her bank app and mentally calculated if she could afford to buy a ticket for the next bus. The pitiful sight prompted him to ask, "How far is your house from here?"

"About four hours," she replied, not looking away from her phone.

"Let me drive you."

Emmie paused for a moment before turning her head to look at Marcus, questioning his offer. "Why?" she asked in total disbelief.

"I mean, it is technically my fault that you missed your bus. I ran the meeting longer than it should have been. So, let me take responsibility."

Without hesitation, she said, "You don't have to do that; I'll figure out-" Her phone ringing interrupted her.

"Good morning, birthday girl," a beaming smile appeared on her face. "Of course, I'll be there; I promised I wouldn't miss it... in four hours... yes, I have your gift... okay, see you later. Bye."

As soon as she ended the call, Emmie turned to Marcus. "Does the offer still stand?" she asked hesitantly.

"Of course, let's go."

When they got in the car, Emmie entered her home address on the GPS, and they began their three-hour journey to Emmie's house.

"You look nice, by the way," Marcus blurted out as they settled in his car, "Beautiful, actually."

"Thank you," Emmie responded in a small voice, a blush creeping onto her face. Watching her from his side eye, Marcus chuckled to himself as he turned on the radio, letting the music fill the silence in the car.

CHAPTER 9

Within four hours, Marcus was driving into Emmie's neighbourhood, a township on the outskirts of the city. In the past, it had been an affluent locale, housing the upper-middle class. However, over time, the wealthier residents moved out, and less fortunate fokes— who were unable to maintain the buildings and houses— moved in.

Though Emmie's mother had tried to improve their house's appearance, striving to restore its once-pristine state, their tight budget couldn't share the same vision. Thus, the house in which Emmie had grown up sported peeling paint, rusted windowpanes, and a few unrepaired broken windows, along with old wooden doors that would hardly withstand any contact.

Emmie had considered asking Marcus to drop her off a few streets away from her house, hoping to not only to shield him from realizing the disparity in their pairing but also to spare herself the daunting task of answering her family's questions about Marcus. But it was too late. Emmie had not thought of this before entering her exact address into the GPS.

During their time together, Emmie had witnessed Marcus's lavish lifestyle, from the luxurious car to the opulent apartment, every facet of his life exuding old-money affluence. The sight of her modest house, as Marcus drove down the street, filled her with an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. She scrutinized every inch of his face, hoping to discern his reaction to her dilapidated home. Surprisingly, she saw no traces of disdain or pity, just a neutral expression, as though her family's house was no different from his campus apartment. Emmie's heart fluttered, relieved that Marcus did not consider her beneath him. Or at least he didn't should it.

She hurried to move quickly, hoping her family would not notice the car parked next to their house. However, her hope disintegrated when her siblings rushed out of the gate as soon as Marcus parked. She watched from behind the tinted car window as her three siblings lined up next to the car. Alex was in awe of it, Debra ecstatic about its presence, and Ashley perplexed by it being there. Hesitantly, Emmie stepped out of the car, uncertain of what excuse might satisfy their curiosity.

"H-heh guys," she said hesitantly. But before her siblings could begin their interrogation, Marcus stepped out of the car, walked around, and stood beside Emmie, holding her duffle bag. Their jaws dropped one by one as the towering Marcus loomed before them.

"Since when did you have a boyfriend?" Debra, who resembled the cutest teddy bear, gushed, unable to contain her curiosity.

"Boyfriend? He looks like a man with high standards," Alex, a lanky ten-year-old with pre-teen acne, chimed in as he walked past the two toward the car, inspecting it up close.

Emmie lifted her arm to swat Alex on the back of his head but stopped mid-swing when she noticed Marcus's amused gaze following her movements. She cleared her throat as she awkwardly stroked the back of her head.

"Thank you so much for the ride; I really appreciate it," she said, hoping Marcus would discern from her tone that he should leave. It was bad enough that her siblings had seen them, and Emmie did not want her parents to witness this scene too. But of course, life had other plans for Emmie. Her parents walked out of the house gate before anyone had moved an inch.

"Why are you stopping your sister at the gate? If you're dying to catch up, do it inside," her mother, Rebecca— a slender woman who appeared so delicate that she might break if held too tightly— remarked, causing her father, Stanley, to walk into her. Stanley, a rough-looking middle-aged man whose hairline was receding at an alarming rate, rubbed his forehead in annoyance at his wife's abrupt stop. But before he could voice his annoyance, Stanley's words got stuck in his throat at the sight of Marcus.

The entire Vasha family stood in front of the house gate, staring at Marcus in confusion while Alex continued walking around Marcus's car in awe of it.

"Hello, I'm Marcus, a friend of Emmie," Marcus began when no one bothered to break the growing silence. "I gave her a lift from school because I made her miss her bus. I couldn't let her miss the birthday celebration she had been anticipating the whole week." He smiled down at Debra, winking at her, causing her to audibly shriek. Marcus remained unfazed by the intense scrutiny of the onlookers. "Really?" Rebecca questioned with disbelief. "That was very kind of you."

"What were you two doing so early in the morning?" Stanley asked distastefully.

"Dad!" Emmie shouted, "Please don't." She used her annoyance to conceal the blush threatening to overtake her face.

Marcus handed Emmie her bag. "I should get going."

"Oh no, you just got here," Debra whined.

"If you don't mind, you can stay for lunch," Rebecca offered, hoping to appease the birthday girl. "You must be tired from the drive. Take a short rest before hitting the road again."

Marcus glanced at Emmie, searching for a cue on what to do. She laser focused her eyes on his, hoping to send him a telepathic message with her eyes to decline the offer. Unfortunately, it got lost in translation as Marcus unexpectedly said, "I would love to."

Earlier that morning, Emmie would never have imagined that Marcus would end up sitting at the dining room table, which had pieces of cardboard wedged under two of its legs to prevent it from wobbling. Seated there with her and her family, Emmie noticed how out of place Marcus looked in their old and dull house. Marcus radiated an aura of brightness and class, while Emmie's house and family seemed to exude poverty.

Emmie's inferiority complex toward Marcus deepened as her mother plated the food – a seven-coloured plate of rice, fried chicken, gravy, and an assortment of salads and sides, a meal her family considered a luxury for special occasions. However, Marcus was probably used to multiple-course feasts prepared by a chef and served by servers, making their humble meal seem like peasant food in comparison.

But to Emmie's relief, Marcus seemed to genuinely enjoy the simple food, taking hearty bites and even going for seconds. As he joked and laughed with her siblings, he managed to help Rebecca overcome her initial shock at his presence and treat him like a long-time family friend. Stanley, on the other hand, remained silent throughout the entire lunch, his eyes locked on the food on his plate, only occasionally shooting cold glares at Marcus whenever he spoke.

Nearly everyone had finished their plates when Stanley's voice broke the silence, "So, Matthew, how do you know my daughter?"

Everyone at the table quietened down as Stanley initiated the mandatory fatherly interrogation of any male associated with his daughter. Marcus replied diplomatically, "We were paired together for a class assignment, and it's Marcus."

Emmie cringed into her seat with embarrassment as her father continued, "What is your relationship with my daughter?"

Her sisters snickered, and Rebecca mumbled to her husband to stop.

"We are currently friends at the moment, sir."

Emmie's eyes shot toward Marcus, as did Ashley's and Debra's before shifting their gazes to each other. Debra's eyes bulged in excitement, and Ashley's eyebrows danced mischievously with a sly smirk accompanying them. Had Marcus really said they were 'currently friends,' implying that it might change into something more? Her heart raced as a blush spread across her face.

"What are you planning to do after you graduate?" Stanley continued, snapping Emmie out of her daze.

"The plan is to work for the family business," Marcus replied, still unfazed by her father's hostility.

"And what business does your family run?"

"Dad!" Emmie finally interjected, "That's enough."

"What did I do? I was simply trying to get to know the guy a little better," Stanley feigned innocence. Turning to Marcus, he continued, "Do you have an issue with that, Mark?"

"It's Marcus, and not at all, sir." His voice trailed off before he continued, "My father runs a business in hospitality."

Emmie's eyes widened at this revelation. Marcus was clearly on the wealthier side of life, but she had never imagined they owned their own business. The look on her father's face indicated that the questions were far from over.

"Right, if we're all finished eating, shall we clean up and move on to the presents?" Emmie suggested to change the topic from the uncomfortable conversation.

Debra's face lit up at the mention of presents, and she hurried everyone from their chairs into the living room, where a small pile consisting of four gifts awaited on the coffee table. Emmie expected Marcus to take this opportunity to excuse himself and leave, but she was surprised to see him obediently follow Debra into the living room and sit where she directed him.

Gathered around the severely scratched coffee table, everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to the beaming Debra. During the song, Emmie's attention shifted to Marcus, who sang along with everyone in the most cheerful state she had ever seen him. He seemed to be genuinely appeared to be enjoying himself, something she never would have expected.

Debra stood before everyone once the song had finished. "First, I want to thank everyone for coming this afternoon to celebrate my sixteenth birthday with me," she said, giving a ninety-degree bow before everyone. Emmie, Ashley, and even Marcus seemed accustomed to her Korean culture obsession phase. "Now, let's open some presents," she said giddily as she sat on the floor to start unwrapping her gifts.

The first gift was a homemade card from Alex with five coupons for him to complete her chores, probably made under their mother's command. Rebecca gifted her a cute dress with shoes to go along with it. Even though it was signed "Mom and Dad," everyone knowing Stanley had no contribution in it. Ashley wisely gifted Debra money.

Emmie's present was the last to be opened. Debra excitedly removed the decorative paper from the top of the gift bag and let out a loud shriek as she pulled out a Twice light stick. Debra's gaze alternated between Emmie and the light stick, in complete disbelief, her mouth frozen wide open.

"Ashley told me your favourite group is Twice. It's not brand new, but it works perfectly fine," Emmie said, feeling a surge of pride as Debra sat in stunned silence. Debra tackled her into a hug, filling Emmie with warmth and pride for making her sister so happy.

"Thank you so much, I love it," Debra exclaimed into Emmie's neck. "My friends are

going to be so jealous when they see this." Debra hurriedly rushed into her bedroom to call her friends.

Rebecca looked at Emmie with a grateful smile and mouthed a thank you. Growing up, Emmie and Ashley rarely received gifts on their birthdays, and when they did, they were usually inexpensive toys or clothes from the local discount or thrift store despite how hard Rebecca tried to do something special. Stanley, on the other hand, cared little for birthdays and gifts. To him, the roof over their heads and food in their stomachs were gifts enough.

As Emmie stood from her seat, Alex motioned for her to come closer to him. Leaning in, he whispered into her ear, "Just so you know, I'm into Marvel these days, mostly Iron Man, but anything Marvel will do."

Unable to contain her laughter, Emmie whispered back, "Your birthday is in seven months."

"I just thought you should know," he said coolly.

"And what if your preferences change within those seven months?" Emmie could see the gears turning in Alex's head as he contemplated her words.

"If anything changes, I'll call you," Alex replied. Emmie could no longer hold back her laughter. She ruffled his short hair and planted a kiss on his forehead, which he promptly wiped away. "No problem, bud," she said before Alex scurried off to sit next to Marcus.

Once again, Emmie expected Marcus to excuse himself and leave, but to her surprise, she found Marcus and Alex engaged in a vivid conversation about cars.

In the kitchen, Ashley and Rebecca were doing the dishes. "You should go rest, Mama. I'll help Ashley," Emmie said, taking the plates from Rebecca's hands.

"No, go rest. You must be tired from the drive here," Rebecca insisted, pulling the plates back to herself. This back-and-forth continued until Ashley intervened.

"Or you both can do the dishes, and I can go rest. Problem solved."

Rebecca scoffed at her second daughter before leaving the kitchen. When Ashley was certain their mother was completely out of earshot, she turned to Emmie dramatically.

"Who is he, and what is he doing here?" A devious grin spread across her face as she eagerly waited for Emmie's response.

"I already told you. He is my partner on a class assignment, and he gave me a ride because I missed my bus."

"Don't give me that nonsense you told Mom and Dad. Be honest, I want the real story."

"I am being honest."

"Since when does a guy drive his classmate to her family home almost four hours away? What's going on between you two? Are you dating?"

"No, we're not," Emmie gently slapped Ashley's shoulder. "We're just classmates."

"Romantic classmates," Ashley teased, shimming her shoulders.

"Ashley, stop. I said it's not like that." A blush spread on Emmie's face.

Ashley gasped, covering her mouth with her hands, and her eyes grew wide. "You like him, don't you?" Emmie stayed silent, not denying Ashley's assertion. The smile returned to Ashley's face, and it was her turn to slap Emmie's shoulder. "What a pleasant surprise. Emmie likes a boy."

"I already told you he isn't my boyfriend—"

"Yet." When Emmie raised her eyebrow in confusion, Ashley explained, "I think he likes you too."

"No, he doesn't," Emmie said more to herself than to Ashley.

"Yes, he does. I noticed him glancing at you every few minutes. You should have seen the smile on his face when you gave Debra her present. And you heard the man earlier, you are 'currently' friends." Ashley giggled.

"This isn't like the romance novels you're constantly reading. You're probably just overanalysing everything."

"Maybe. Or maybe all the romance novels I've read have given me the skills to help me identify the gaze of a person who is in love," Ashley spoke with dramatic flair, raising her eyebrows at Emmie.

"Stop spouting nonsense and finish washing the dishes," Emmie said, more to herself than to Ashley, to prevent the improbable claims from going to her head.

Ashley dropped the subject and changed the topic entirely. But Emmie couldn't seem to focus on anything she was saying, as her mind could only think about Ashley's words. There was no way Marcus felt anything for her beyond the feelings one harbours toward a classmate. Sure, they had grown close over the months, but that was it. They were just friendly classmates, at least according to Marcus.

After they finished doing the dishes and returned to the living room, they found Marcus, Debra, and Alex engrossed in an intense game of Crazy Eight. Noticing their entrance, Debra whined, "You two are in, Marcus is out."

Marcus huffed in playful annoyance, dramatically slapping his card onto the table and folding his arms. "If you explained the rules of the game properly, maybe I would be able to play properly."

Debra slammed her cards on the table even more dramatically than Marcus. "My explanation isn't the problem, you just suck at cards," prompting laughter to fill the room.

For the rest of the day, the five of them played numerous card games and board games, and before they knew it, it was already seven in the evening.

"I think Marcus should sleepover tonight. It's too late for him to drive back," Rebecca suggested, glancing at the time. Before Emmie could protest, Marcus accepted her mother's suggestion and agreed to spend the night.

By eleven in the evening, everyone had turned in for the night. Her parents were in their bedroom, her sisters in theirs, and Alex had made a makeshift bed on the living room floor to sleep next to Marcus.

As Emmie made her way to the bedroom after brushing her teeth, she noticed Marcus wasn't lying next to Alex, and the back door was open. Stepping outside, she found Marcus seated on the veranda, gazing at the stars above. She joined him, and they sat in silence for a while before he turned his face toward her, "Thank you for inviting me to stay."

"I never invited you to stay," she replied, to humour him, which worked as he let out a short chuckle.

"Thank you for not making me leave."

They sat in a comfortable silence, with the soft spring wind dancing on their skin.

"You know, I've never been to a birthday party like this before," Marcus said.

"You've never had a birthday party before?" she asked, surprised. It was hard to believe that someone like Marcus had never had or been to a birthday party.

"I've had and been to birthday parties, just not one like this," Marcus replied. Emmie hung her head in shame, thinking he was about to look down on her and her family's means. But she was surprised when he continued, "This is the first birthday party where I actually had fun. All the birthday party I've been to or hosted were less about the person's birthday and more about the business and networking that could be done at them. This is the first time I have felt such warmth and love at a birthday party, let alone in a home."

For the first time in her life, Emmie felt sympathy for someone other than herself or her family. She had always found her situation more pitiable than others and had never felt sympathy for anyone else. She never imagined she would feel sympathy for someone like Marcus, someone who seemed to have no problems at all. But Marcus's problems were like sunshine and rainbows compared to hers. His worries almost sounded like a spoiled kid's tantrums compared to hers. Nevertheless, Emmie chose to comfort him because all pain was pain, regardless of how insignificant it might seem to her.

She placed her hand on top of his. "I'm glad you got to experience it."

Marcus entwined her hand with his, his thumb gently stroking the back of her hand. "You always seem to be my source of relief." His voice like a whisper in the wind.

Emmie's eyes met Marcus's, and they held each other's gaze for what felt like an eternity. The strokes of his thumb on the back of her hand sent electric tingles through her body, creating a magnetic force that pulled their faces closer together.

Their heads tilted like two puzzle pieces, looking to become one. With their lips just millimetres apart, the magnetic force halted, requiring one of them to take the final leap and close the distance.

Emmie hesitated, unable to bring herself to take the last leap, hoping Marcus would make the move. But after seconds of no movement from either of them, Emmie disappointedly pulled away from Marcus.

Now separated, Marcus removed his hand from hers and turned his head away, clearing his throat.

"Good night," Emmie muttered under her breath before scurrying off to her sister's room.

As she lay in bed, embarrassment and disappointment consumed her. She felt embarrassed about what had almost happened and disappointed about what had not. She found herself disappointed in Marcus for not taking that final, small leap, but she couldn't blame him, as she couldn't take it either.

CHAPTER 10

"It was nice seeing you again," Rebecca exclaimed warmly as she embraced Emmie in a tight hug. The Sunday morning sun bathed the scene in gentle light as Marcus and Emmie prepared to hit the road for their journey back to the city. Emmie shared heartfelt embraces with her mother and sisters, even coaxing Alex into a reluctant hug. A quick wave to her father received a nod in response.

"Don't forget to take some leftover cake," Ashley handed Emmie a plastic bag containing an old ice cream tub repurposed as a lunchbox.

"Don't be a stranger," Debra added as the two settled into the car.

As they drove away, Emmie watched her parents in the rearview mirror, returning to the house while her siblings stood in the middle of the road, waving goodbye.

Inside the car, a stifling tension filled the air. Since their near-kiss the previous night, Emmie had been avoiding any eye contact with Marcus. She wouldn't even glance in his direction when they exchanged a few words. Marcus, too, was grappling with embarrassment and his own lack of courage.

Contrary to Emmie's assumptions, Marcus had wanted nothing more than to feel his lips against hers last night. However, he was plagued by inexperience, unsure of how to complete the task. Admitting he'd never kissed a girl before was a blow to his ego. His hesitation wasn't about a lack of desire; it was about a lack of know-how.

Marcus had been mentally calculating the angle at which their lips should meet, but his mathematical skills were questionable. This resulted in his hesitancy, creating the impression that he didn't want to kiss her. He wished he could have been the charismatic lead in a romance novel who can take charge by pulling Emmie into an intense, passionate kiss when she tried to walk away. But his inexperience held him back, fearing he'd make a fool of himself and worsen the situation.

The four-hour drive passed in oppressive silence, coming to an end as Marcus parked outside Emmie's dormitory. She thanked him and bid a swift farewell before hurrying into her dormitory.

Monday morning arrived, and it was presentation day. Everyone had traded their usual casual attire for a more formal look, including Emmie, who swapped her jeans and sweatpants for a white long-sleeved button-up shirt and black trousers. Professor Landsberg called for volunteers, and to Marcus' surprise, Emmie volunteered for them to present first. It stung a little, as he felt she were in a hurry to end the only connection between them.

Their presentation went smoothly, but it left Marcus with a bitter aftertaste as he watched Emmie leave the lecture hall. He felt like it might be the last time he'd see her.

But was that a good thing? Emmie had entered his life, and Marcus couldn't deny the emotions she'd stirred within him. Perhaps it was best that their business together had concluded. Now, he could focus on ending the unwanted engagement with Chloe, attend tiresome social gatherings, and regain control of his sleeping schedule.

However, despite the benefits of their assignment ending, Marcus found himself sitting on his couch that evening, staring at the clock above the TV as it struck 8 p.m. "She's just started her shift at the convenience store," he mumbled. The urge to rush to her side had become a habit, and Marcus had to fight the impulse.

Fed up with his own behaviour, Marcus decided to call a friend he hadn't spoken to in a while.

"What a surprise," George sarcastically answered the call. "You never call me first."

"Well, I've missed you," Marcus teased, earning a chuckle from George,

"Feeling up to a drink or two tonight?"

George had a condition known as itchy feet between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., making him the perfect distraction. Marcus convinced himself that this was what he needed – a distraction from his thoughts about Emmie. Ironically, intoxication only made him think of her more, especially the almost-kiss they'd shared.

No longer sober enough to filter his words, Marcus began to confide in George, pouring out his heart. He even went as far as to mention what Chloe had said about his parents not approving of a relationship with Emmie.

George looked at Marcus, slumped over the bar counter, with his scotch in hand, and couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of it. "Marcus, let me ask you one thing. Are you planning on marrying this Emmie girl?"

Marcus scoffed, "Marriage? Why would I be thinking about marriage? I've only just met her."

George clapped his hands, "Exactly my point. If you're not planning on marrying her, why worry about your parents' approval?"

Marcus sat up, gears turning in his head.

"Marcus, you and I have been burdened with certain responsibilities due to our parents' wealth, like arranged marriages for financial gain. But that doesn't mean we can't have our fun." George slung his arm around Marcus' shoulders.

All this time, Marcus had been considering his relationship with Emmie far too

seriously. He thought he had to be fully committed from the start. In reality, he couldn't predict if their relationship would develop beyond its current state. The revelation eased his mind and allowed him to see things clearly. It was now fifteen minutes until midnight, and he only wanted to go to Emmie and tell her everything he'd been holding back.

"George, I think I have to go.

"Good luck with your newfound freedom," George saluted his glass as Marcus hurried for the exit.

An anxious Marcus stood outside the bar, debating the fastest way to reach Emmie. He was too drunk to drive, and waiting for a chauffeur or a taxi would take too long. Running was his only option. Without considering the distance, he began to sprint through the streets. Alcohol, a racing heart, and adrenaline carried him to Emmie.

As the clock struck midnight, Marcus walked into the convenience store. Emmie was hunched over a stack of books at the counter, absorbed in her reading. She didn't realize Marcus's presence until he stood directly in front of her.

Emmie looked up at him, her face a mix of confusion and concern at his sudden appearance. Through short, breathless words, he said, "You really need to be more alert during your night shift."

"What are you doing here?" Her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Marcus let out a small chuckle despite his inebriation, further adding to her confusion. "Have you been drinking?" she asked, leaning in to smell his breath.

"Maybe... just a little," Marcus replied with a pinch of his thumb and index finger, squinting his eyes. "I had a couple...or maybe a few... or eight glasses of scotch, but that's not the point."

"You're drunk Marcus. I'll call you a taxi to take you home." Annoyance laced her words.

Emmie reached for her phone, but Marcus grasped her hand to stop her. He pulled her as close as the counter allowed.

"I've missed you," he mumbled into her hair.

Emmie remained motionless, not sure how to react as Marcus continued to speak against her neck.

"I've missed talking to you, coming to see you at work, just being around you. I'm sorry for being a jerk to you for the past few days. I've been in my peelings."

All the alcohol he'd consumed was taking its toll. His speech became slurred and incomprehensible, and soon, Marcus fell asleep with his arms still wrapped around her and his face nuzzled in her neck.

Emmie suddenly felt a heavy weight as Marcus's body slumped. She managed to avert falling under his weight with the help of the counter. Emmie laid Marcus's unconscious body on the counter and attempted to wake him through vigorous shaking, shouting, and slapping, but he showed no signs of stirring.

With no other option while on the clock and unable to leave her post, she moved him to the backroom couch, hoping he would wake by the end of her shift. Carrying Marcus's large frame was out of the question, so she pulled and dragged him across the floor until he was on the couch, where he slept peacefully for the remainder of the night. Whereas, Emmie could no longer focus on anything else.

Emmie's shift came to an end, but Marcus remained passed out. With the assistance of a taxi, she managed to get him back to his apartment. The security personnel carried him to his apartment, placed him on the couch, and Emmie removed his shoes, jacket, and belt.

Emmie looked down at him, unable to tear her gaze away from his peaceful expression. It was only now, as Marcus slept, that she became aware of the tension that usually lined his face but had now melted away in his sleep. Her eyes scanned his face and halted on his lips, images of their near-kiss replaying in her mind.

Emmie had come to accept her feelings for Marcus for some time now and was content with not pursuing them in any way. Because deep down she knew it would not work between them. She knew the burdens she carried would make it hard for her to ever be in a relationship with anyone. And most importantly, Emmie knew Marcus would never go for someone as lowly as her. He proved this fact to her with their almost kiss.

But her stance only lasted when she was away from him. Out of sight, out of mind. When she was with him, her heart would tell her to forsake it all and just allow herself to pursue her feelings for him. And in all honesty, she would undoubtedly make that choice if he asked her to. Emmie still lacked the willpower to fight the feelings that surged through her body whenever she was near him. The only reason she had been able to hold back is because of Marcus' hesitancy.

The feelings Marcus held for her had become as clear as day to, but so had his conflict regarding said feelings. From his relaxed demeanour whenever he was with her with and his willingness to drive four to her parents' home for her sake but only for him to pull away when their lips were millimetres apart. And as much as Emmie hated to admit, she understood the reasoning behind his action. Because how can a guy like him, a guy with everything, fall for a girl like her, a girl with nothing.

For the rest of the day, Emmie was in a sombre mood, confronted with the realisation that her feelings for Marcus might never be expressed. Her feelings were like a seed planted in rocky ground, sprouting but never given the chance to take root and grow.

However, a glimmer of hope still flickered in her heart. A delusional flicker of hope, stemming from Marcus' drunken actions, kept Emmie's attention focused on every male in her vicinity and every notification on her phone, hoping it would be Marcus.

Each time the café door opened or someone walked toward her in the library, Emmie's heart quickened, anticipating it was Marcus. She kept her phone glued to her hand, fearing she'd miss a call or text from him.

As her shift at the convenience store began, and still no sign or message from Marcus, her disappointment grew. Her unrealistic hope had convinced her that Marcus had come to see her in a moment of boldness, thanks to alcohol, to express his feelings. It turned out that intoxication had only made him forget their assignment had ended, the only reason he'd come to see her at such hours.

At that moment, her phone rang, and she answered without checking the caller ID.

"Hello?" Her hope brightened, only to be crushed when her mother's voice sounded on the other end.

"Hello, sweetie. How have you been?"

Emmie was not sure whether to laugh or the cry. To laugh at how pathetic she had allowed herself to become or cry because it was not Marcus who had called her. "I'm fine, Ma. How's everything at home?"

"Everything is good here. And how's that friend of yours? What was his name again? Marcus, was it?"

"He's doing well, I guess," Emmie tried to hide her despair.

"He seems like a nice young man," Rebecca enthused. "He'd make such a nice son-in-law."

"It's not like that, Ma."

"I never said he'd be my son-in-law, I meant a son-in-law in general." Emmie could hear her mother trying to hold back her laughter. "Anyway, you should bring him over again. Your brother has grown fond of him. He hasn't stopped talking about 'Marcus said this' and 'Marcus did that' since you guys left."

The wound in Emmie's heart deepened.

"He won't be coming again, Ma. Our assignment ended, so we won't be seeing each other anymore."

"Oh, uhm... okay. That's fine too."

An awkward silence hung between them, and Emmie could faintly hear her father in the background.

"Is that Emmie?"

"Do you want to speak to her?" her mother asked.

"Put her on speaker," Stanley's voice grew clearer.

Emmie stifled a groan as her father took the call.

"What are your plans after graduation? Have you applied for any jobs yet?"

"I'm still looking for a job. I've applied to several companies but haven't heard anything back yet." Emmie moved the phone away from her ear, being familiar with the lecture that was coming her way.

"You still haven't found a job?" Stanley began. "Then what's the point of getting a degree if it can't even get you a job? Do you know how much this family is relying on you to get a job...."

Emmie tuned out as Stanley continued his recurring lecture, which was always directed at her. She had become so accustomed to her father seeing her as the family's financial provider that his harsh words no longer stung as they once did. Emmie had learned not to argue back and let her father vent so that the lecture would end quickly.

With Marcus now seemingly out of her life, Emmie had no distractions from her responsibilities. With finals approaching, she needed to figure out what she would do after graduation.