

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 21: Two Weeks of Sweat, Sparks & Secret Stares

[1,636 words]

The next two weeks passed like a mixtape. Fast in places, slow in others, always just slightly out of sync.

Mornings began with pain. Reluctant, groggy pain.

Every sunrise started the same: the brutal chirp of Jorge's \$7 alarm clock (which sounded suspiciously like a dying goat), followed by the heavy groan of bodies that had not yet forgiven them for their newfound commitment to fitness. Bharath and Jorge, still bleary-eyed and half-zipped into their windcheaters, would grab their gym bags like they were being sent to war. There was no conversation on the way to the SAC gym, just a shared silence made sacred by mutual suffering.

Their mornings were powered by equal parts protein bars, campus tap water, and shame. The shame came mostly from the mirror-lined gym walls, reminders that other gym goers were somehow already ripped like demigods who'd stepped straight out of *Gladiator*. Jorge whispered conspiratorially one morning, "I think that dude's lats have abs."

Bharath nodded solemnly. "He flexed and I felt spiritually attacked."

But they kept going.

Each rep, each creaky shoulder press, each wobbly plank, each silently judgmental assisted pull-up. It wasn't just about getting stronger. It was about routine. About proving, if only to themselves, that they could commit. That they could show up.

Even when Jorge nearly face-planted during burpees. Even when Bharath accidentally did bicep curls on a leg machine. Even when they both reached for the last clean towel and almost reenacted a scene from a kung fu movie in slow motion.

They sweat. They cursed. They limped.

But they showed up.

Tyrel never joined. “My workout,” he declared proudly from the comfort of his throne (the dorm couch), “is walking from the fridge to the couch, bicep curling two cans of Coke, and dodging responsibility.” He had a different kind of discipline, a spiritual commitment to leisure. But like clockwork, when Bharath and Jorge returned, sweaty and broken, Tyrel would be there, arms outstretched like a preacher welcoming lost souls.

“Ayyy, the nerd squad returns! You boys out there gettin' biceps or just protein farts?”

“Little bit of both,” Jorge wheezed, flopping onto his bed like he'd been shot.

“Smells like someone's internal organs are rebelling,” Tyrel added, dramatically waving a pillow.

They'd laugh. Not because anything was funny, but because laughing hurt less than crying.

By midweek, Bharath could lift his arms without assistance, Jorge could squat without invoking divine mercy, and the assisted pull-up machine had begrudgingly removed another plate.

It was slow. It was painful. It was absurd. But they were doing it.

Together.

And in the shared ache of early mornings and sore evenings, something was forming, not just muscle, but momentum.

A rhythm.

A kind of ugly, sweaty, incredibly human magic.

Classes followed.

CS lectures. Discrete Math. Industrial Engineering. Calculus. Physics. Most students struggled to keep up. Bharath didn't.

It wasn't just that he understood the material, he absorbed it. Patterns made sense to him. Systems clicked into place like puzzle pieces he could already see forming. He asked sharp, specific questions. He finished labs early but never made a big deal out of it. When the professor gave the class a problem to solve, Bharath would tilt his head slightly, frown in thought, and then quietly raise his hand when everyone else was still rereading the first sentence.

But what truly set him apart was the way he shared that brilliance.

He didn't show off. He didn't preen. He never acted like he was smarter than the rest. Even though, clearly, he was. If anything, he seemed almost shy about it. Like intelligence was something he was lucky to have, not something he wore as armor.

He explained things gently. Kindly. He'd whisper sideways instructions to struggling classmates. Offer analogies about tacos and cricket and vending machines. He made people laugh and learn at the same time. And he never made them feel small.

Marisol noticed. She noticed everything.

Every day those two weeks, she had sat beside him. Not just because it was convenient, or because they were study partners now, or because it had become routine. But because something about being next to Bharath felt... right.

Safe, yes. But also weirdly exciting.

It was hard to put into words. There was a rhythm between them now. Jokes tossed back and forth without thinking, the way their legs bumped sometimes under the table and neither of them flinched away, the way she'd glance at him just to see if he was smiling at the same ridiculous part of the professor's lecture that made her laugh.

She couldn't explain why she felt so at ease. Or why she sometimes found herself watching him when she wasn't supposed to. She was intrigued by the way he frowned when he was deep in thought, or how his fingers tapped lightly against his notebook when he was trying to visualize a concept.

She couldn't explain why his silence didn't make her nervous. She couldn't explain why his awkwardness was kind of... adorable.

And then there was the gym.

Bharath wasn't out of shape. But he wasn't ripped either. There were guys on campus who walked around like they were auditioning for a Calvin Klein ad. Arms the size of Marisol's thighs and confidence that bordered on arrogance. She had dated boys like that in high school. Pretty, performative boys who looked good in pictures and were absolutely exhausting to be around.

Bharath wasn't like that.

He wasn't flashy. He wasn't loud. But every morning, without fail, he went to the gym with Jorge. Quiet. Focused. Determined.

When she teased him once. "Trying to get swole for someone special?" He would flush, duck his head, and mutter, "Just trying to be better."

And that? That stayed with her.

Because she realized: he wasn't doing it to impress anyone. He was doing it because he believed in showing up. Because effort mattered to him. Because discipline meant something. Because he was always trying. Not to prove, but to grow.

For someone like Marisol, who had grown up craving consistency, that kind of stability was unexpectedly sexy.

And he didn't even know it.

She found herself looking forward to every class. Not for the lectures, but for him. For the half-whispered jokes. For the way he sometimes passed her notes that were part explanation, part cartoon of a stick figure screaming "Recursion is pain!" For the way he always pulled out her chair without making a show of it. For the way he listened when she talked, really listened, like her thoughts mattered more than the grade they were chasing.

She'd learned more in two weeks beside Bharath than she had during her entire senior year. And not just about programming or calculus. About confidence. Patience. Quiet resilience.

And he never made her feel like she owed him for it.

He didn't hold it over her head. Didn't lord his intelligence. If anything, he acted like she was the one doing him a favor just by showing up.

He made it feel like her success was her own, even when he was the one guiding her to it.

That was new.

And it was dangerous.

Because she knew what desire felt like. She'd felt it for boys who were smooth-talking liars. She'd felt it in stolen kisses and late-night calls. She'd felt it and regretted it.

But this?

This wasn't a fire. This was a spark that had patience.

This was something that made her stomach flutter when he rubbed his chin while explaining matrix multiplication or stare at her with pride as she solved something based on what he just taught her.

This was something that made her want to reach across the table and fix the fold in his collar or made her forget to refresh her lip gloss because he wasn't looking at her lips. He was looking at her notes, trying to help her understand.

It wasn't sexual. Not yet. But it was absolutely desire.

She could see the way he looked at her, sometimes, when he thought she wasn't watching. That tiny pause. That flicker of admiration in his eyes. The way his voice dipped lower, more careful, when she leaned in close. He desired her. It was obvious.

And yet... he never took liberties.

Never tried to touch her unnecessarily. Never flirted too hard. Never even hinted that he thought their closeness meant anything more than friendship.

He still acted like he didn't believe a girl like her could ever want someone like him.

That made something tighten in her chest. Because he didn't know.

He didn't know that sometimes she walked a little slower between classes so their shoulders would brush. That sometimes she said something dumb just to hear him laugh. That when he explained a hard problem, she'd stop taking notes just to admire the focus on his face.

He didn't know that she was starting to replay their conversations at night. Didn't know that she'd started wearing her hair differently, higher ponytails, just because she liked the way he glanced at the curve of her neck when she leaned over her notes.

He didn't know that sometimes, just sometimes, she imagined what it would be like if he did reach out. Not because he thought he could, but because he finally realized he was wanted.

She wanted him to know. But she didn't want to break it.

Not yet.

Not when it was still forming. This fragile thing between them that wasn't quite a friendship and wasn't quite a crush but was somehow more real than either.

So she waited.

She teased him. Encouraged him. Laughed louder. Sat closer.

And hoped that someday soon, he'd see it.

He'd see her.

Not as someone friendly. Not as someone generous with her time.

But as someone who, in the space of one exhausting, magical, caffeinated, problem-set-filled week, was slowly starting to fall for him.

Not hard. Not fast. But honestly.

And for a girl like Marisol, who had always been told to guard her heart?

That was the most dangerous fall of all.

Because after two weeks of stolen glances and accidental touches... she was no longer sure she wanted to guard anything at all.

Especially not from him.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 22: Oh No! I Think I'm Falling for the Nerd

[1,521 words]

Marisol sat cross-legged on her bed, fresh out of a hot shower, her damp hair pulled into a lazy bun, donning her favorite tank top and shorts. Her laptop glowed beside her, playing a muted rerun of *FRIENDS*, but her attention wasn't on the screen. It hadn't been for the past twenty minutes.

Across the room, Mia lay sprawled on the floor on a faux fur rug, her glossy teen magazine tossed aside, her chin propped up in her hand. "So..." she said, smirking. "Are we just gonna pretend you're not obsessing?"

"I'm not obsessing," Marisol said, too quickly.

Mia raised a perfectly shaped brow. "Girl, you said the word 'gym' three times in two minutes. That's a new record."

Marisol groaned and flopped backward onto her pillow. "It's not even about the gym."

"So it's about him."

A beat. Then, softer, "Maybe."

Mia sat up. “Okay. Spill. Who is this mystery nerd turning you into a soap opera?”

Marisol smiled despite herself. “His name’s Bharath. He’s from India. CS major. Smart as hell. But not, like, obnoxious-smart.”

“Okay,” Mia said, intrigued. “Go on.”

“He’s just... different, Mia. He’s kind. Like, genuinely kind. And focused. You should see him in class. He doesn’t just know the material, he *gets* it. And then he helps the rest of us without making it feel like he’s helping. It’s like... he makes you feel smart even when you’re completely lost.”

Mia narrowed her eyes playfully. “That’s hot. In a weirdly tutor-y way.”

“It is!” Marisol sat up now, animated. “And it’s not just the brain stuff. Like, he’s been going to the gym every morning with Jorge. He’s not even out of shape. He just wants to improve. Quietly. Without announcing it to the world.”

Mia grinned. “So you’re into gym rats now?”

“No! I mean... he’s not even trying to get jacked to impress anyone. He just... shows up. Every day. No fuss. And it’s kinda...” She hesitated, cheeks pink. “Sexy.”

Mia burst out laughing. “Oh my god. My sister’s got it *bad*.”

Marisol rolled her eyes, but she was smiling too. “It’s not just that. He listens. Like, really listens. He doesn’t treat me like I owe him anything for being around me. And trust me, I’ve seen that look before. That transactional look. But Bharath? He doesn’t expect anything. Even when it’s obvious he... you know.”

Mia nodded, catching on. “He wants you.”

“Yeah. I can see it in his eyes sometimes,” Marisol said, quieter now. “But he never crosses a line. Never assumes.”

“That’s rare.”

“Right?” Marisol’s voice was hushed now, almost reverent. “It’s like... he respects the space between us. Even though we’re always together, in class, at lunch, study sessions... He still thinks I’m just being friendly. Like he’s convinced someone like me wouldn’t really be interested in someone like him.”

Mia tilted her head. “And are you?”

Marisol looked down at her hands. “That’s the thing. I don’t know how to explain it. He’s not the guy I thought I’d be drawn to. He’s quiet. He’s awkward. He tucks in his T-shirts sometimes. He actually does homework *before* it’s due. But...”

“But?”

“But when I’m with him, I feel... steady. Seen. I feel like I don’t have to perform. Like I can just be.”

Mia was silent for a long moment. Then: “You know what that sounds like?”

“What?”

“Someone who makes you feel safe *and* curious. And that’s a dangerous combo.”

Marisol laughed. “That’s terrifying.”

“Also,” Mia added slyly, “I’ve never seen you smile this much while talking about *anyone*. Not even when you had that weird Freddie Prince Jr. phase.”

“That was not a phase. And you were *also* obsessed.”

“True,” Mia admitted. “But you didn’t giggle like this.”

“I’m not giggling.”

“You are totally giggling.”

Marisol threw a pillow at her, but her face was warm, her heart even warmer. She flopped back onto her bed again, staring at the ceiling now.

After a while, Mia said softly, “You think he’s the real deal?”

“I think...” Marisol hesitated, then whispered, “I think I want to find out.”

Elsewhere on campus... Ayesha Patel was winning.

By every visible or intangible metric used to measure popularity, she was thriving.

By Friday afternoon, her name had already become shorthand for untouchable beauty and smooth social dominance. Not just among the Desi crowd, but across the campus green. Freshmen whispered about her. Upperclassmen noticed her. Even professors seemed to pause a second longer when she raised her hand, which she did just often enough to show she was sharp, but never enough to seem try-hard.

Gorgeous. Stylish. Effortlessly social. She walked through Georgia Tech like the sidewalks had been laid just for her.

There was always someone beside her. Usually the beautiful and elegant Zara, snapping gum and spouting the latest gossip like an over caffeinated news anchor. But the rest of her orbit rotated constantly. A tall engineering sophomore from UGA who drove a BMW. A smirking poli-sci major with a slick haircut and suspiciously manicured eyebrows. A film studies TA who quoted *Fight Club* like it was scripture.

Ayesha flitted from group to group with the ease of someone who had never learned to second-guess her welcome.

ISA meetings. Psychology club socials. Campus mixers. Thursday night bonfires. Friday evening football games. Her face was in every polaroid, her laughter in every dorm's retelling of "who was at that party." She had become a feature of Tech. Like the library steps or the greasy smell of Chick-fil-A.

And yet...

Sometimes, just sometimes, when the quad buzzed with energy, and the breeze tossed her hair just right, and her friends circled her like moths to flame... her eyes would flicker.

Not at the cameras. Not at the compliments.

At him. Bharath.

She never spoke to him again. Not since that morning in Calculus, when she'd laughed too loudly, said things she didn't quite mean, and watched Marisol throw down that casual little dagger of a comment in response.

He hadn't looked back since.

And *that*, more than anything, lodged in her ribs like a splinter.

She watched him from afar sometimes. Pretended not to. But she did.

She watched the way he leaned over to help classmates. Not to show off, not to gain anything... just to *help*. She watched how people slowly began sitting nearer to him in lecture halls, like he was becoming magnetic without trying. Watched how he walked with Marisol beside him, books in one hand, coffee in the other, laughing like he was home.

Marisol.

God, that girl.

Too pretty. Too sure of herself. And yet somehow *real*. There was a rawness to her Ayesha couldn't fake... couldn't even mimic. The way she brushed off the stares. The way she smiled without effort. The way she never needed to *own* a room because she *was* the room.

And Bharath looked at her like she was sunlight.

Ayesha remembered when he used to look at *her* like that.

It had only been a few minutes. That cab ride from the airport, that polite conversation about flights and majors and what they were most nervous about. But she'd seen it. That spark of admiration. That hope. That possibility.

And maybe... she'd liked it more than she realized at the time.

Zara had teased her once, not long after the Calculus lecture. They'd been lounging on the grass near the fountain, picking at fruit salad and watching some frat boys play frisbee shirtless.

"You sure he's not your type?" Zara asked, chewing on a grape.

Ayesha laughed. Light. Breezy. "Please. I've moved *way* past that cab ride."

But even then, the way her eyes darted toward the CS building told a different story.

Because the truth was: *She wasn't sure anymore.*

He wasn't rich. He wasn't flashy. He didn't own a car or a leather jacket or even good shoes.

But he had something else.

Something she hadn't noticed at first, or hadn't *valued*.

A quiet gravity. A kindness that didn't seek attention. A focus that wasn't performative. And something about the way he looked at Marisol made her chest feel tight in a way she couldn't explain.

It wasn't just jealousy. Not exactly.

It was... confusion.

Why *wasn't* he trying to win her over again?

Everyone else did. Guys *always* circled back. *Always* tried one more time. *Always* acted like her disinterest was a challenge to overcome.

But Bharath?

He'd vanished. Not literally... she saw him all the time. But emotionally? Socially?

He had disappeared from her attention like smoke.

And the worst part?

He didn't even seem angry. Or hurt. Or bitter.

He was just... living.

Without her.

Ayesha twirled her water bottle between her fingers, sitting alone on the stone bench near the library steps. Zara had run off to meet someone. The buzz of campus life swirled around her. Laughter, footsteps, the occasional honk from the street, but none of it touched her. Because across the green, just outside the dining hall, Marisol was laughing.

And Bharath was standing next to her, holding a book like he always did, nodding, listening, smiling like he belonged.

And Ayesha, the girl who had everything, suddenly felt like she had missed something important.

Something that wasn't interested in coming back. Not even for a second look.

And that?

That stung.

She capped her water bottle too tightly, stood, and walked off with perfect posture and a face set to "unbothered."

But inside?

Something small, something real, had cracked.

And she didn't know how to fix it. But watching him smile at someone else? That was starting to feel like the wound that wouldn't heal.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 23: Roommate Bonding at Smith 202 and Then... She Showed Up at the Door... and Everything Changed

[3,691 words]

Back in Smith 202, the weeks ended like it began. With junk food, banter, and LAN games.

Age of Empires now had a standing Thursday night spot. Ravi had finally figured out how to make siege engines. Jorge kept naming his villagers after Mexican and Colombian telenovela characters. Tyrel refused to build walls. Bharath dominated every match like a quiet god.

Between matches, they studied. Talked. Dreamed out loud.

And slowly, Georgia Tech began to feel like home for Bharath and his friends.

Saturday morning came quietly.

No alarms. No lectures. No trains and buses to catch.

It was the first morning all week that didn't demand anything from her. And *yet*, Marisol Rivera had never felt more restless.

She lay sprawled on her bed in a tank top and pajama shorts, one foot flat on the wall, flipping her pencil between her fingers like a bored magician. Her calculus notebook lay open beside her, but the formulas blurred together like they'd made a pact to sabotage her concentration.

And she knew why.

Her brain was full of someone else's voice.

"Imagine slope like acceleration," Bharath had said, tilting his head that way he always did when he was explaining something. "It's not just rise over run. It's how fast you're changing. Like a car."

It was absurd how that had stuck with her.

Not the math. Not the concept.

His voice. His face. His dumb analogies that somehow made everything click.

Marisol groaned, flipped over onto her stomach, and buried her face in the pillow.

God, what was wrong with her?

She wasn't fifteen. She didn't get crushes anymore. She didn't stare at her notes like they were a portal to someone else's eyes. She didn't miss someone this way, like a dull ache in her chest that she couldn't stretch out.

Most of the boys she'd dated in high school had been... well, exhausting. Charming in short bursts, attention-starved in long ones. They always wanted something. Always acted like she owed them for simply existing in their orbit.

Bharath wasn't like that.

He didn't orbit her. He didn't even seem aware there was an orbit to begin with.

And weirdly? That was part of the problem.

Because he didn't expect anything from her.

And that made her want to give him everything.

There was something deeply unfair about how comfortable he made her feel. Like he carried this aura of quiet care without knowing he did. Like he was an old soul who still double-checked his zippers and apologized for laughing too loud in class.

And maybe that was what made her want to scream into her pillow the most. That he didn't even know how desirable he was.

He wasn't flashy. He wasn't jacked (ok he was pretty decent). He didn't have tattoos or a fake accent or a perfectly curated playlist. But he was... grounded. Disarmingly stable. Even that ridiculous gym routine he kept with Jorge. Getting up every morning, deadlifting like he had something to prove to the gods. It wasn't for show. It was for himself.

That kind of focus? That kind of self-discipline?

Sexy

Marisol had never said that word about a guy who voluntarily skipped sugar and read Java manuals for fun. But there it was. Sexy.

And it wasn't just about the way he looked. Though... the way his forearms flexed when he adjusted his backpack was doing things to her equilibrium.

No, it was the way he talked to people. The way he lifted everyone around him.

She'd seen him do it with Ravi as he gently steered him through matrix problems like it was no big deal. She'd seen him let Jorge rant about math and then solve the whole set and still act like Jorge had done it himself.

And with her?

He never made her feel stupid. Not once.

Even when she asked the same question twice. Even when she doodled instead of solved. Even when she blanked out in the middle of a logical operator explanation and just stared at his mouth for longer than was reasonable.

He never smirked. Never condescended. Never used her confusion to feel smart.

He just helped.

And when she got something right?

He lit up like it was her win.

That did something to her. Deep in her chest. Like being seen for the first time by someone who wasn't trying to own the moment, but share it.

Marisol rolled onto her side and stared at the landline phone on her nightstand.

Pick it up. Put it down. Pick up again.

What if he was free?

What if he wasn't?

Did she care?

She tried to convince herself this was about the problem set. About the fact that she still didn't understand that nested loop question and that she needed to go over it before Monday.

But the truth? She just missed him.

Not in the way people said they missed a friend.

She missed his voice. His stupid examples. The way his hair curled slightly at the nape of his neck when he got sweaty. The way he never made a big deal about holding the door, but always did it anyway.

She missed the way her pulse sped up when he said her name.

God, she was in trouble.

Marisol stood, stretched, and tugged on her jeans. The comfy ones, not the ones she wore when she was trying. But halfway through brushing her hair, she stopped.

No.

She grabbed her fitted hoodie instead. The one he'd seen her in on Tuesday and had kind of blinked twice when she'd pulled it off mid-lecture.

No makeup.

Just earrings.

Effortless, but not invisible.

She was not going to call. That would be too obvious. She needed a reason to show up.

And then it hit her: the problem set.

Technically, they hadn't finished the last question as a group.

Perfect.

By the time Mia stumbled in the front door, groaning about parking lot turns and parallel torture, Marisol was already halfway down the driveway, backpack slung low, heart pounding for no logical reason.

Bharath lay flat on his stomach on the carpet of Room 202, his chin resting on a pillow, a half-eaten bag of trail mix wedged under his arm like a teddy bear. He'd meant to work. Really. The Discrete Math worksheet was open in front of him, half-scribbled with logic trees and half-buried under a GamePro magazine someone had tossed across the room.

But his brain had revolted.

His arms ached from the morning gym session. Jorge had decided they were now "men of steel," which apparently meant torturing their shoulders until they couldn't lift spoons. And even though Bharath had finally managed one unassisted pull-up, the high from that was long gone, replaced by the low buzz of exhaustion and something else he couldn't quite name.

So instead, they were watching reruns of *Xena: Warrior Princess* on the grainy dorm TV.

The colors were oversaturated, the action pure melodrama, and the audio slightly out of sync. It was glorious.

Jorge sat cross-legged on his bunk with a mixing bowl full of dry Froot Loops. Ravi had colonized Tyrel's beanbag and was loudly pretending not to enjoy the show. Tyrel himself - in his self-declared role as "cultural ambassador of cool" - stood behind them with his hands on his hips, narrating like it was Game 7 of the NBA Finals.

"See that move? +10 dexterity. You know Xena got that main character plot armor."

"She could kill you with her thighs," Jorge said reverently.

"Death by thighs," Ravi agreed. "An honorable death."

Bharath chuckled, but his heart wasn't in it.

His gaze flicked to the screen, then drifted, as it had all day, back to her.

Marisol.

It was stupid. He'd seen her just yesterday. They'd walked together from Industrial Engineering, talked about whether vending machines should be considered intelligent systems, laughed about that freshman who fell asleep mid-lecture and face planted into his calculator. He pretended that he hadn't noticed that he had almost walked her all the way to the MARTA station just so that he could spend a little more time with her. She had just given him a smile. Probably didn't want to create a scene.

But today?

Nothing.

No chit chat. No staring at her in secret admiring her beauty. Her graceful neck, her perfect face, her *gorgeous* smile. No shared classes and hallway marches to the next class. No shared lunches. *No Marisol.*

He hadn't realized how much her presence had stitched itself into his daily rhythm, until it was missing.

Now, his mind was on a loop: her pen tapping against her notebook when she was thinking. The way she chewed her lip while reading questions. How her eyes sparkled when she laughed at one of his jokes... even the dumb ones. Especially the dumb ones.

He *missed* her.

More than it made sense for a two-week-old friendship.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? He didn't *know* what it was. He didn't know what he was to her. A study partner? A funny distraction? Some exotic brown boy with good notes?

He wanted to believe it was more. But wanting was dangerous.

Ayesha had taught him that.

He could still hear her voice sometimes: the pointed comments, the snide tone, the public dismissal that hit like a slap. He remembered how excited he'd been after their shared cab ride. How flattered. How foolish.

He remembered thinking: maybe this is it. Maybe this is how my story starts.

Only it hadn't. It had ended before it began.

And now with Marisol...

God, he liked her. She was beautiful, yes... achingly so. But it wasn't just that. It was how she *saw* him. Not as a joke, or a nerdy sidekick, or some immigrant curiosity. She asked real questions. Listened. Laughed like she meant it. She didn't talk over him. She didn't patronize for knowing more about American culture than Ravi, Jorge or he did.

And she sat next to him. Every day. Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

But what if that's *all* it was?

What if he said something *stupid* and ruined it?

Someone as gorgeous as her must have a boyfriend. Some charming Latin god that could spout love poems on demand and dance like Ricky Martin. He hated him with a vengeance already. Bharath spent the next few minutes dreaming about what he would do to said boyfriend if he were to meet him. Accidentally push him into incoming traffic. Maybe ask him to stand underneath the window and drop something heavy on him. Regardless he deserved to die a *painful* death.

That still didn't help him win over Marisol though. He signed again. He thought back to all the charming things he wanted to tell Marisol like her legendary Latin lover. She would scream and jump into his arms allowing him to cup her incredible rear in his fingers and capture her bow shaped lips.

Ah daydreams! If only things worked out so easily. Even his Wild Stone cologne wasn't helping. Sometimes he even got the feeling that she didn't like the smell. Then he dismissed that thought immediately. Which girl *didn't* like Wild Stone? Look at the way women jumped on that man in the commercials. He needed another in and figure out a way to dispose of that Latin boyfriend ASAP.

So he stayed silent. Careful. Watching her from the corners of his gaze. Helping with her work. Letting his fingers brush hers only by accident. Letting his desire stay hidden where it was safe.

“Yo,” Jorge said, flicking a Cheerio at his head. “You good, Romeo?”

Bharath blinked. “Huh?”

“You’re staring at the TV like Xena owes you money.”

Bharath forced a smile. “Just... tired.”

“Man,” Tyrel said, flopping onto his back dramatically. “You are *tragic*. That girl’s into you like DMX is into barking, and you still out here acting like you in a Jane Austen novel dawg.”

“Yeah,” Ravi added. “All you need is a waistcoat and a pocket watch. Just confess your love during the harvest ball already.”

“I’m not...” Bharath began, but was cut off by a knock at the door.

Three heads snapped toward it.

The knock came again, lighter this time.

Jorge sat up straighter. “Did anyone order pizza?”

Tyrel shook his head. “I didn’t. And if it’s campus security, I didn’t do it.”

Ravi got up to check... and stopped dead.

He didn’t open the door.

Because the door had already opened.

Marisol stepped in.

And just like that, the air in Room 202 changed.

She was backlit by the hallway light, hoodie zipped halfway up, her dark hair tied in a casual ponytail. She had that effortless confidence, the kind that made you straighten your spine without realizing it. And in her hands?

A stack of papers.

Her eyes scanned the room, landing on Bharath, and she smiled.

“Hey,” she said.

Tyrel’s mouth actually dropped open.

Jorge whispered, “Is this real life?”

Ravi looked down at his socks, as if unsure if they were girl-worthy.

Bharath scrambled upright. “Uh. Hi. Come in.”

Marisol stepped in like she’d done it a hundred times, nodded politely to the others, and walked straight to Bharath.

“Discrete Math,” she said, lifting the papers. “I’m pretty sure the worksheet is written in Martian. You free?”

Bharath’s voice betrayed him. “Always.”

“Are you watching Xena: Warrior Princess?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at the TV.

Bharath nodded slowly.

She grinned. “Of course you are.”

Then she sat beside him. Just like that.

Like she belonged there.

And maybe... she did.

Marisol ended up staying.

What began as “just a quick problem set review” turned into her lounging cross-legged on Bharath’s bed like it was her personal throne. She was still in her hoodie and a pair of soft leggings that made at least two of the boys forget how breathing worked. She leaned back against the wall, nursing a soda she’d stolen from Tyrel’s stash and tossing perfectly timed sarcasm into the room like she’d been doing it for years.

“You seriously think Xena would lose to Lara Croft?” she asked Jorge, eyebrows raised.

“Lara’s got guns,” Jorge argued.

“They’ve both got guns dawg, big uns’,” cackled Tyrel. None of the other boys got it.

“Xena’s got a chakram and abs that could make Zeus rethink Olympus,” Marisol shot back ignoring Tyrel’s remark. “This isn’t even a debate.”

Ravi choked on his Sprite. “Okay, she’s terrifying and I love it.”

Tyrel nodded solemnly. “That’s not a woman. That’s a pantheon.”

Bharath sat stiffly in his chair, trying very hard not to spontaneously combust. He laughed when she said something funny, which was often, but it came out awkward, stilted. He nodded a little too much. Agreed a little too quickly. He looked like a man trying to remain calm while sitting on a live wire.

She kept nudging him with her foot.

At first, he thought it was by accident. The dorm was cramped. Her leg just bumped his sometimes.

But then it kept happening.

A gentle nudge when she made a joke. A playful tap when he said something nerdy. A slow stretch that just happened to brush her ankle against his shin and linger a little too long.

He tried not to think about it. Maybe she was just comfortable around him. Maybe it didn’t mean anything.

Meanwhile, Jorge was watching this unfold like it was the final round of a reality dating show.

From his perch on the bunk, he mouthed at Ravi: *She’s so into him*. Ravi mouthed back: *And he’s so oblivious*. Tyrel, lounging near the foot of the bed, just shook his head and whispered, *“This man is a walking tragedy.”*

Then, Marisol turned toward Bharath. “You know, for a guy who can explain partial derivatives like bedtime stories, you’re really bad at receiving compliments.”

He blinked. “Wait... you complimented me?”

She grinned. “Just now. With my eyes.”

“Oh.”

“See? Terrible.”

Ravi let out a noise that sounded like a dying squirrel and buried his face in a pillow.

Bharath blinked again, unsure how to respond. He glanced at Jorge, who immediately covered his mouth to stifle a laugh and muttered into his cereal, “Unreal.”

Marisol chuckled and leaned closer. "Let me guess. You think I'm just being nice."

Bharath scratched his chin. "I mean... you're nice to everyone."

"I'm not watching retro action heroines and eating gas station chips with *everyone*."

That shut him up. His cheeks flushed, but he didn't say anything. He just looked at the TV like it had suddenly started broadcasting answers to the universe.

Tyrel, who had been quietly eating jerky and judging from the sidelines, finally stood and clapped a hand on Jorge's shoulder. "*Emergency meeting. Hallway. Now.*"

They dragged Ravi with them, leaving Bharath and Marisol alone in the room.

In the hallway, Tyrel pointed a finger at Jorge like a courtroom lawyer. "You see this man? This man is *in danger* of fumbling the ball."

Ravi groaned. "She's funny, hot, smart, flirty, and she wants to *spend time with him*. On purpose!"

"He thinks she pities him," Jorge said. "Like he's a stray she adopted after Calculus."

Tyrel squinted. "You think we should help?"

"I think we *have* to help," Ravi said. "This is bigger than us now."

"So what's the plan?" Jorge asked.

Tyrel rubbed his chin. "Simple. We become his hype men. We gas him up, block the haters, and if we have to, we wingman like it's a war."

"Operation: Get Bharath Laid?" Ravi suggested.

"Operation: Get Bharath *Loved*," Jorge corrected with mock sincerity. "We are men of honor."

They high-fived on it. It took them a few seconds to figure out how to do it with all three involved but somehow it finally worked.

Back in the room, Marisol had shifted positions. She was now sprawled on her stomach across Bharath's bed, chin in her hands, her legs swinging behind her.

Bharath was still upright in his desk chair, doing his best impression of a particularly nervous statue.

She tilted her head. "You really don't see it, do you?"

He stammered. "See what? I didn't see anything hot. I mean anything beautiful. I mean... nothing... anything."

She smiled softly. "Never mind."

Just then, the door burst open and the guys marched back in with the kind of over-exaggerated energy that screamed *we talked about you while we were gone*.

Jorge dropped dramatically into his seat and said, "Yo, Marisol, did Bharath tell you how he crushed that Discrete Math quiz?"

Marisol blinked. "No."

"He aced it," Ravi added. "Top 5 in the class. Stone cold killer."

Bharath turned red. "Guys..."

"He also helped three other people pass," Tyrel said. "And fixed the TA's code bug. *During* office hours."

Marisol raised an eyebrow, visibly impressed.

"Why don't you ever brag about that?" she asked him.

Bharath shrugged. "It's just math."

She shook her head. "No. It's *hot* math."

The room collectively short-circuited.

Jorge hissed through his teeth. "That was a green light if I've ever seen one."

Ravi muttered, "I'd sell my future for that kind of comment."

Tyrel just whispered, "Lord give me patience."

But Bharath, bless his soul, just smiled bashfully and said, "It's... not that hard once you understand how to visualize it."

Marisol stared at him, half-amused, half-exasperated, but mostly... fondly.

He didn't see it.

Not yet.

But the rest of the room?

They saw everything.

And they were going to make damn sure he did too, sooner or later.

Because no way were they letting their boy fumble *the* Marisol Rivera.

Not on their watch.

—

Around noon, someone suggested lunch.

“The Varsity,” Tyrel said immediately. “No debates.”

“The what?” Bharath asked.

Tyrel’s eyes went wide. “Oh, hell no. You’re at Georgia Tech and you don’t know about The Varsity?”

“It’s... like Tech’s temple,” Marisol added. “A really greasy, loud temple.”

The walk was short. The Varsity loomed large like a retro cathedral of American cholesterol: neon signs, red uniforms, the smell of onion rings and diesel fumes from nearby North Avenue.

The Varsity table they crammed into was sticky, chrome-edged, and barely wide enough to fit all their trays. Tyrel sat at the end like a deposed king, glaring at Bharath and Jorge’s Subway sandwiches as if they had personally insulted Atlanta.

“I can’t believe this,” he muttered between bites of onion rings. “You came to the Temple of Grease and brought a lettuce wrap.”

“It’s spinach,” Bharath corrected meekly.

“Oh, well. Excuse me, Popeye.”

Marisol snorted into her drink. “To be fair, I warned you he was a cinnamon roll.”

“That ain’t a cinnamon roll. That’s rabbit food with ambition,” Tyrel said.

Ravi, halfway through his chili dog, pointed at Bharath dramatically. “You know what he is? He’s a mystery. Like, the kind of dude who meditates before exams and secretly knows how to kill a man with a USB cable.”

“He probably drinks warm water with turmeric before bed,” Jorge added. “Unironically.”

Bharath just chewed stoically, nodding. "Turmeric is anti-inflammatory and I don't know how you get to talk big with your Turkey sub. You're the one that didn't want to cheat on our diet."

Marisol tilted her head at him, amused. "You're full of surprises."

And there it was again... that light in her voice when she spoke to him. Not teasing exactly, but playful. Affectionate. The boys caught it immediately. Jorge raised an eyebrow. Ravi elbowed Tyrel under the table so hard he dropped a ring of onion.

Tyrel leaned toward her and after making sure that Bharath was sent to buy more onion rings and couldn't hear him, "Alright, I'm calling it. If you're gonna keep smiling like that around us, you need to sign a waiver."

Marisol raised an eyebrow. "A waiver?"

Ravi leaned in solemnly. "A friendship waiver. Because we're all officially giving up our shot with you. It's a great personal loss."

"I'm heartbroken," Tyrel said, clutching his chest. "But I'll recover... if you promise to hook us up with girls at least 90% as fine as you."

Marisol burst out laughing, nearly choking on her frosted orange.

"You guys are idiots."

"We prefer emotionally evolved gentlemen," Jorge said with a wink.

Marisol looked around the table at the chaos, the fries, the absolute nonsense and shook her head fondly. "Fine. But I want receipts. You each get one favor. Use it wisely."

"Done," Ravi said, slapping the table.

Tyrel nodded. "My future girlfriend better come with a soundtrack and a slow-motion intro."

Marisol raised her drink like a toast. "To the dumbest, most loyal wingmen I never asked for."

"To the queen of our gang," Jorge said. "May she keep making our boy smile like a total idiot."

Bharath blinked as he returned with more onion rings. "I'm not..."

"You are," they all said in unison.

Marisol didn't say anything. She just smiled again - softer this time - and nudged Bharath's leg under the table with her foot. He stiffened slightly, then gave her a sheepish smile and quickly looked down at his sandwich.

"Still think she's not into you?" Jorge whispered later as they left.

"She's just being nice. You remember Ayesha right? I don't want to make the same mistake again," Bharath mumbled.

Ravi sighed theatrically. "This is gonna take longer than expected."

Tyrel cracked his knuckles. "Don't worry. Operation Cinnamon Roll Seduction is now officially live."

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 24: Operation Cinnamon Roll Seduction is a Go!

[1,679 words]

After lunch at The Varsity, a battlefield of chili, grease, and food betrayal. The gang wandered over to the MARTA station, bellies full and bodies lazy with comfort food. The train clattered down the tracks, a rhythmic lullaby of steel and wind. They all slumped into seats, heads tilted, laughter ebbing and flowing in bursts as the city flickered past the windows.

"Time for a real Atlanta afternoon," Tyrel said, stretching dramatically. "You nerds are seeing history today."

"Are we going to the Coca-Cola museum?" Jorge asked, licking the powdered sugar off his fingers.

"No, fool. We're going to the park."

Centennial Olympic Park.

What had once been the epicenter of global athleticism was now a sanctuary of grass and light.

The scent of funnel cakes mingled with the click-clack of dog paws on pavement. Children screamed near the fountain where choreographed water jets leapt in time to tinny speakers. Tourists pointed disposable Kodaks at murals and plaques they didn't read. In the distance, Atlanta's skyline shimmered like a mirage. Glass and concrete flirting with the hazy Georgia sun.

Tyrel led the way, always the local history buff when it suited him. He stopped near the northern edge of the park, where modern signage explained more than anyone asked for. "That used to be the Olympic Stadium," he said, pointing in the direction of a sleek, white-paneled structure with corporate branding stamped across the glass.

Bharath squinted. "That's... it?"

"Yup. They tore it down, rebuilt, renamed, repurposed. It became Turner Field for the Braves, then Georgia State bought it for football. Now it's... hell, I don't even know. The bones are the same, but the soul? Gone."

Jorge stared. "You mean... the actual Olympic *stadium*? Like track and field finals, torch-lighting, *Ali lighting the cauldron* stadium?"

Tyrel nodded. "Right here, baby. All gone. This whole park? Was a giant parking lot back then."

Jorge let out a strangled noise and grabbed Ravi's shoulder. "*Dude*. This was supposed to be our photo spot!"

Ravi blinked. "Yeah! We were going to stand on the medal podiums! Pretend we won gold. Take shots with our shirts off."

"You don't *need* to take your shirts off..." Tyrel started.

"It was going to be *iconic*," Bharath said, heart sinking as he gazed across the green expanse where greats once ran. "I watched Atlanta '96 with my uncle. It was like... *my first Olympics*. My dad used to say India would win track medals one day, and I told him I'd be the first."

Jorge let out a loud sigh. "I *specifically* brought my Adidas windbreaker for this."

Ravi looked mournful. "I brought my tricolor flag. Was gonna drape it over my shoulders. *Victory stance*."

Bharath folded his arms, voice low with disbelief. "They just... *tore it down*? The stadium that crowned Olympic champions? Where Carl Lewis flew, where Donovan Bailey broke records?"

Tyrel shrugged. "That's America, man. If it ain't making money, tear it down. Build something shinier."

"I wanted to stand on the edge of the track," Bharath said, still in shock. "Close my eyes and imagine the roar of eighty thousand people. Pretend I just finished a 400m sprint and fell to my knees in prayer."

Jorge groaned. "I wanted to do the double fist pump. Chest heaving. Fake tears."

Ravi mumbled, "I was gonna wear my cricket whites and pretend I'd just won the Olympic final against Pakistan..."

"You *nerds*," Tyrel laughed. "Y'all were about to LARP the Olympics."

"*With our whole hearts*," Jorge declared.

"I had speeches ready!" Bharath said. "Gold medal acceptance. I was going to thank my imaginary coach and my high school sweetheart."

"You've *never* had a sweetheart," Jorge pointed out.

"Exactly. That's why it was emotional," Bharath replied.

They stood in silence for a moment, watching as a little boy ran past them in a fake Sonic costume, squealing as he chased bubbles through the air.

"Guess this is still a kind of legacy," Ravi murmured.

"Yeah," Bharath admitted, sighing. "Just not the one we came for."

Tyrel clapped him on the back. "You'll find another field to conquer, man. You already got your girls screaming your name. You're halfway there."

The boys laughed.

They wandered through the park, shoes crunching over gravel, passing joggers and bubble-gun vendors. Jorge tried feeding fries to a squirrel. Ravi almost bought a balloon hat. Tyrel attempted a cartwheel near a group of cheerleaders and pulled something in his back.

Bharath, meanwhile, walked quietly beside Marisol.

She hadn't left his side since they returned from The Varsity. She was unusually quiet. But not distant. Her hand kept brushing his. She didn't pull away when it did. And once, when a kid on a scooter nearly knocked into them, she grabbed his arm and didn't let go right away.

They came to a low stone wall facing the fountains. The kind with synchronized sprays and kids running barefoot through the arcs. Jorge tossed himself down dramatically and groaned. "I'm gonna die. I ate two chili dogs and a sub. I can feel them rearranging my DNA."

Ravi joined him. "I think I need a nap and a priest."

Tyrel was still trying to stretch his back. "I regret nothing."

Marisol and Bharath sat slightly apart, close to the grass, under the half-shade of a tulip poplar. It was quieter here. More intimate.

She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them, watching a toddler try (and fail) to climb one of the water spouts.

"You ever think we'd end up here?" she asked, chin resting on her knees.

"Where?" Bharath said, turning toward her. "Atlanta?"

"In general," she said softly. "Surrounded by people this weird. This different."

Bharath smiled faintly. "It feels kind of like a dream sometimes. Or like a movie. Not the glamorous kind. The low-budget kind that ends up winning awards."

She laughed. "You always say things like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you don't belong here. Like you're watching your own life from the outside."

He shrugged, eyes following the arc of the fountain. "Sometimes it feels that way. Like I accidentally bought the wrong ticket and ended up at someone else's party."

She was quiet for a moment. Then, with a slow exhale, she reached over and took his hand.

Her fingers slid between his like it was nothing. Like it was always supposed to happen.

Bharath froze.

She didn't look at him. Just kept staring ahead at the kids laughing in the water, like this meant nothing. Like she wasn't currently rearranging his entire neural network with five fingers and a thumb.

His heart kicked into a sprint. His palms were already sweaty. He almost pulled away. Not because he didn't want it, but because he didn't trust it.

She likes being close to people, he told himself. She's affectionate. That doesn't mean anything. She could be holding anyone's hand right now. Like that asshole of a Latin lover boyfriend. *Oh how I hate him!*

But she wasn't.

She was holding his hands.

And for a moment, he let himself believe it. Let himself feel the warmth of her skin, the light pressure of her grip, the way her thumb absently brushed his knuckle once... twice...

He looked down.

She was looking at him now. Right at him. No teasing. No coy smile. Just open, direct warmth.

And it broke something in him.

Because she wasn't mocking him. She wasn't just being kind.

She was trying to say something. Not with words, but with the simplicity of contact. With presence.

With want.

His throat went dry.

"Why *me*?" he asked, quietly. "Why are you here with me?"

She blinked. "Because I want to be."

"But I'm..." He paused. "I'm not..."

"Cool?" she offered. "Slick? American? Latino?"

He gave a small, embarrassed nod.

She rolled her eyes and squeezed his hand. "You're *real*, Bharath. You're *you*. And that? That's rare."

He wanted to believe her. God, he did.

But all he could think of was Ayesha. The way she laughed that first day. The way she looked through him now like he was invisible. The way she made him feel stupid for hoping.

What if Marisol changed too? What if this was just kindness? Or curiosity?

What if he misread her?

Again?

“You’re thinking too hard,” she said gently.

He blinked. “I just... don’t want to get it wrong.”

“You won’t,” she whispered.

Then she did something that made the world tilt on its axis.

She leaned her head lightly on his shoulder.

And sat there.

Not saying anything.

Just letting him hold that moment.

He didn’t move. Didn’t breathe. He didn’t want to change a thing.

Didn’t dare.

Across the way, Jorge nudged Ravi and whispered, “Oh my god. He’s still not making a move.”

“I swear,” Ravi whispered back, “if she touched me like that, I’d propose in five languages.”

Tyrel, chewing on the last of his fries, nodded solemnly. “We gotta step in.”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?” Jorge said.

“Operation: Wingman,” Ravi confirmed.

Back under the tree, Marisol murmured, “You’re not gonna explode or something, right?”

“I might,” Bharath said hoarsely trying to catch a breath without moving.

She smiled against his shoulder. “Then I’ll catch the pieces.”

Just then, Tyrel jogged up with a camera.

"GROUP PHOTO!" he bellowed. "Right now. You two. Front and center."

Bharath blinked. "What?"

"No questions. Jorge, make heart hands. Ravi, pretend to be jealous. Marisol, sit next to Bharath like you own him."

Ravi murmured, "I don't have to pretend man... I already hate Bharath."

Marisol stood and grabbed Bharath by the collar. "Up, nerd. You're being adopted by chaos."

He let her pull him to his feet.

And when they stood for the photo, her arm slung around his waist, his breath completely failing to regulate, the others all cheered like idiots.

Tyrel snapped the picture.

Then another. And another.

Jorge whispered to Marisol, "Just so you know, if you're taking him off the market, the rest of us demand compensation as we stipulated earlier."

"Like what?" she said, playing along.

"Set us up," Ravi said. "With someone hot. Hotter than you, ideally. Especially given all the emotional trauma of seeing you with him."

"That's a high bar," Tyrel muttered. "But we believe in you shawty."

Marisol laughed so hard she nearly dropped her drink. "You guys are disasters."

"Beautiful disasters," Jorge corrected.

They started walking again down a shaded path that wound through the park, their laughter trailing behind them like a ribbon in the wind.

Marisol didn't take Bharath's hand this time.

She didn't need to.

Because now he was walking just a little closer to her holding hers instead.

And for the first time, he wasn't afraid of what that meant.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 25: Let's get ready to paaarty!

[1,685 words]

As they strolled back from Centennial Park, Tyrel hung back slightly with Jorge and Ravi while Bharath and Marisol walked ahead, talking quietly.

Tyrel kept his voice low. "Alright. Operation Wake Up Dumbass is a go."

Ravi asked, "Why do you keep changing the name of the mission? It gets confusing."

Tyrel stared at Ravi.

Jorge smirked. "You think tonight's the night?"

Ravi shrugged. "If she holds his hand in the park and he still doesn't get it? We're going to have to spell it out in ASCII or Binary."

"She said yes to a frat party," Tyrel said. "With *him*. That's not subtle. Tonight, we close the deal."

"Bueno! Are we still playing wingman?" Jorge asked.

"We're doing more than that," Tyrel said. "We're clearing the dance floor, we're playing DJ, and if needed... we're faking emergencies so they get stuck together."

Ravi nodded solemnly. "For love. And future hot girlfriends."

Jorge added, "But mostly the hot girlfriends."

Tyrel grinned. "If we're giving up our chance with a dimepiece like Marisol, she better return the favor with interest."

From ahead, Marisol called over her shoulder, "You guys scheming back there or just walking that slow?"

"Stretching!" Tyrel called back. "Just admiring the sunset!"

“Mm-hmm,” she replied, clearly not buying it, but amused.

Bharath glanced back, confused. “Everything okay?”

“Perfect,” Tyrel said. “Tonight’s gonna be *legendary*.”

The sun was just beginning to mellow, casting long golden stripes across the quad as the gang spilled out of the MARTA station, legs tired from walking and laughter still fresh from the day at Centennial Park.

Tyrel pulled his cap lower and cracked his neck. “Alright, nerdlings,” he said, pausing in the middle of the sidewalk, “tonight, we go feral.”

Bharath blinked. “Feral?”

“Rush week, baby,” Tyrel grinned, slapping Jorge’s shoulder. “Zeta Psi’s throwin’ a rager. Supposed to be wild. DJs, jungle juice, maybe even a fire-breather.”

Jorge looked thrilled. “I’ve always wanted to see a drunk guy try that.”

Ravi snorted. “I still don’t even know what Rush Week is, man. It sounds like a Coke ad.”

Tyrel threw his arms around both of them. “Rush week is when the fraternities and sororities recruit. Frats throw huge parties to lure dumb freshmen with bad decisions. And guess what?”

“We’re the dumb freshmen?” Bharath guessed.

“Exactly,” Tyrel beamed. “But with style.”

Bharath exchanged a look with Jorge. “You sure this isn’t... too much?”

“Come on,” Jorge said. “It’s college! When are we ever gonna be this young and this stupid again?”

“I dunno,” Ravi said. “I was planning on being stupid for years.”

Behind them, Marisol adjusted the strap of her bag and raised an eyebrow. “You boys planning to get yourselves roofied or what?”

Tyrel turned with a wink. “We’re scouting the scene, miss. Gotta see what these frat guys think passes for charisma.”

“Chugging vodka and yelling ‘bro’ every five seconds?” Marisol offered. “Impressive.”

“You’re coming, right?” Jorge asked half-teasingly, winking at her.

Marisol winked. “Me? To a frat party?”

Tyrel winked back. “What, scared of the wild side?”

She gave him a knowing look, then glanced at Bharath, who was conspicuously silent, staring at Marisol’s hands in his with a dazed smile like they held the answer to all his existential questions.

“I don’t know,” she said slowly. “Sounds like I’d need a security detail.”

Tyrel gestured grandly. “Behold... your four bodyguards. Unarmed but dangerous. Ravi bites.”

Ravi gave a thumbs up. “More like bits. But confirmed.”

Everyone groaned at his bad computer science joke.

Marisol laughed, “You know what? Why not.”

Bharath looked up. “Wait... really?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never been to a frat party. And if I’m ever going to survive one, it’s with you guys. Plus...” She glanced at Bharath and smirked. “Gotta make sure someone doesn’t wander into the keg thinking it’s a urinal.”

“I would never...” Bharath began, horrified.

“Mm-hm,” she said, already looking for a payphone to call home.

As they waited for her to call home from a nearby phone, Tyrel leaned toward Jorge. “Did that just happen? Are we bringing *her* to *this*?”

Jorge nodded slowly. “God bless America.”

Marisol’s voice softened slightly as she spoke in Spanish to her mother. A moment later, she ended the call and returned to the boys. Bharath held her hands again causing her to blush.

“All good,” she said. “Told my mom I’m staying over at a friend’s place tonight.”

“Which isn’t technically a lie,” Ravi said. “We’re friends. Sort of.”

“You’re mascots,” she corrected. “Bharath is the only one keeping my faith in men alive.”

Bharath turned red immediately.

Tyrel clapped his hands. "Alright, squad. Go back, change into your party armor. Jeans, good shoes, no weird college tees. This ain't study hall."

"Wait," Jorge said. "There's a dress code?"

"It's not Sunday at the church, but you gotta look good enough that they don't bounce you at the door."

Ravi nodded solemnly. "I shall attempt not to look like a mathlete."

They split off in pairs, Marisol trailing behind the boys with Bharath as they walked back toward Smith Hall, her smile lingering just a little longer than usual when she looked into his eyes.

Saturday evening arrived like a buzz in the air. It was warm, electric, thick with the scent of cut grass and barbecue smoke drifting in from the frat row.

Back in Room 202 of Smith Hall, the boys stood in various states of wardrobe chaos.

"This shirt makes me look like a divorced uncle," Jorge groaned, holding up a bright red button-down.

"It's fine," Bharath said, tying his shoelaces.

"You're just saying that because *your* shirt fits," Jorge grumbled.

Ravi emerged from the shared bathroom, sniffing his armpits. "Should I go light on the cologne or... drown myself in it?"

"Don't worry. You've got Wild Stone on" said Bharath.

"Depends," Tyrel drawled from the futon, lounging in a crisp white tee, black jeans, and a gold chain that probably wasn't real. "You tryna impress or confess?"

"I'm just trying to not look like I'm applying for a scholarship," Ravi muttered.

Then, a knock at the door.

Bharath opened it.

And there she was.

Marisol.

Wearing a tucked-in tight black tank top, wide-leg high-waisted jean shorts, hoop earrings, and white sneakers. No makeup. Hair left loose over one shoulder. A denim jacket slung casually over the other shoulder. She looked like she'd just walked off the cover of an effortlessly cool magazine.

Bharath's jaw forgot gravity.

Jorge actually dropped his deodorant.

Ravi blinked twice, frozen.

Tyrel let out a long whistle as he tried to sit down and stand up at the same time. "Well, goddamn."

Marisol raised an eyebrow. "This is what peak male preparation looks like?"

Jorge recovered. "You're not even dressed up. How do you look like *that*?"

She smirked. "It's called style" as she fixed Bharath's collar without asking.

Tyrel clapped his hands. "Aight peepz. Let's roll out."

The group began to shuffle out of Room 202 with a chorus of jokes and bravado, but Bharath lingered. His hands fidgeted at the edge of his shirt, where Marisol's fingers had just been. His collar still held the ghost of her touch. It was casual, maybe, but it had sent something spiraling inside him. Something that had been trying to climb its way to the surface all week.

He turned, just as Marisol was about to follow the others out.

"Wait," he said, a little louder than intended.

She paused, half in the doorway, eyebrows lifted. "Yeah?"

His mouth opened, then closed again. But he forced himself to breathe. Forced himself to meet her eyes.

"You look... amazing," he said, voice lower now. "I mean, you always do, but tonight, it's like... I don't know. Like you're walking out of my dreams."

Marisol blinked. Her expression softened, just slightly. "That's new," she said, teasing. "Look at you flirting."

"I'm not good at it," Bharath said honestly. "But I wanted to say it anyway. Before we go."

She stepped fully back into the room and closed the door gently behind her, muffling the sounds of the hallway. "Say what?"

"That I like you," Bharath said, the words tumbling out now. They came out too fast to stop. "I mean, *really* like you. Not just as a study partner. Not just because you're funny or smart or gorgeous or... or because you're the only one who talks to me like I'm not some weirdo from another continent."

She tilted her head, studying him.

"I like being around you. I look forward to every class, every day because of you. And I know I've been... slow, maybe even clueless, but it's not because I don't feel something. I just didn't want to assume. Or scare you off."

Her lips parted slightly, but she said nothing. Not yet.

He took a step closer. "I don't just want to be your friend, Marisol. I mean, if that's all you want, I'll take it - because being near you is already more than I thought I deserved. But if there's even a chance that you feel something too..."

He swallowed, voice almost trembling now. "I want more. I want to see where this goes. I want to hold your hand without wondering if it's too much. I want to kiss you without pretending I'm just imagining it."

Her breath hitched. She looked at him like he'd just knocked the wind out of her.

"You're serious," she whispered.

"I've never been more serious about anything," he said. "You make me feel like I belong here. Like I'm more than just someone passing through."

A beat of silence.

Then Marisol crossed the space between them in two quick steps and stood on her toes, her hands resting lightly on his chest.

"Bharath," she said, her voice suddenly breathless. "I've been waiting for you to say something. All week."

He blinked. "You have?"

She smiled. "Of course I have. You really think I come around just to borrow your notes?"

"I don't know," he said, dazed. "I thought maybe you were just nice. Or... way out of my league."

“You’re an idiot,” she murmured, and leaned in - not to kiss him, but to press her forehead against his. “But you’re my idiot.”

The doorknob rattled. Tyrel’s voice echoed through the wood. “Wakey wakey. Y’all makin’ out in there or what?”

Marisol laughed softly, eyes still closed. “Soon,” she whispered, only for Bharath.

Then she stepped back, opened the door, and walked out like nothing had happened.

Bharath stood there for a second longer, heart pounding, soul on fire. Then he followed her out into the dusk, knowing with utter certainty that the night ahead would be nothing like he expected.

And maybe, just maybe, everything he wanted.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 26: Poor Decisions and Perfect Moments

[1,678 words]

They walked in a loose, excited formation down Techwood Drive, the Georgia Tech skyline looming golden in the background. The campus buzzed like a beehive, every path and quad crawling with students in party gear - tank tops, halters, heels, glitter, caps, Greek letters everywhere.

It was like walking into a movie set.

Lights blinked from every house along Ferst Drive. Music blared - everything from rap to rock to EDM. Students were already spilling out onto lawns with red Solo cups in hand, sitting on porches, standing on roofs, even playing beer pong on folding tables that had definitely seen better days.

“This,” Jorge whispered, “is not La Paz.”

“Or Delhi,” Ravi added, eyes wide.

“Welcome boys n girl,” Tyrel said, gesturing like a host on MTV Cribs, “to Fraternity Row.”

They passed by Sigma Alpha Epsilon, where a shirtless guy with six-pack abs was doing keg stands while the crowd counted aloud.

Further down, at Delta Chi, a DJ was set up on the balcony, spinning tracks over a thumping bass that vibrated the sidewalk.

At Kappa Alpha, girls in sparkly tops and heels posed for Polaroids next to a plastic flamingo that someone had spray-painted gold.

Marisol walked slightly ahead, unbothered by the attention she was getting, hanging on to Bharath. One guy actually tripped on the curb trying to get a second look at her.

Bharath walked with her, utterly mesmerized by the scenery.

“This is wild,” he muttered.

Marisol looked over her shoulder. “First frat party?”

“All of this is a first.”

“Well,” she said, flashing him a playful smile, “stick with me.”

She turned forward again, hips swaying slightly to the beat spilling out of the next house.

Jorge leaned in. “Dude. She *chose* to come with us. You seeing this?”

“I’m seeing it,” Bharath murmured. “I’m just not sure I believe it.”

Tyrel pointed toward a house up ahead - white columns, a neon beer sign in the window, and the muffled sound of *Biggie Smalls* shaking the windows.

“Zeta Psi baby,” he said. “Tonight, we party.”

Marisol turned around, walking backward now. “You boys ready to enter the lion’s den?”

Jorge fist-pumped.

Ravi looked terrified but nodded.

Bharath adjusted his collar.

Tyrel grinned. “Let’s go get our poor decisions on.”

And together, five first-years from five wildly different worlds walked up the steps toward the night that would change everything.

The bass thumped hard enough to shake the soles of their shoes.

Inside Zeta Psi, the air was thick with sweat, perfume, and the unmistakable stench of spilled beer. Strobe lights flickered in every corner. A makeshift bar had been set up in what looked like someone's dining room, and students swarmed around it like bees at a rave.

"This place smells like broken dreams and vodka," Ravi muttered.

"I'm home," Tyrel said, eyes gleaming.

Jorge grabbed a Solo cup and raised it in triumph. "To cultural assimilation!"

Bharath glanced around, mildly overwhelmed. The sheer number of bodies - dancing, shouting, laughing - felt like sensory overload.

"I'll be designated driver," he offered to no one in particular. "Or... designated shepherd."

Marisol looked over her shoulder at him. "You don't drink?"

He shrugged. "Never really felt the need. I'm already awkward and say weird things. I don't think alcohol would improve that."

Her smile curved. "That's... kinda hot."

He blinked. "What?"

"You're sober. Voluntarily. At a frat party. Surrounded by chaos. That's rare."

Bharath scratched his chin, sheepish. "I guess I just like remembering what I did the next day."

"You're like a unicorn," she said, eyes glinting. "Cute, steady, probably good at math."

He coughed. "I am good at math."

She leaned in, whispering in his ear, "That's the hottest thing I've heard all night."

He swallowed. Hard.

Across the room, Jorge was already mid-conversation with a fiery girl in a black halter top and a devilish smile.

"Camila," she said, with an accent that made Jorge straighten. "From Miami."

“Jorge. Bolivia. Sort of.”

They laughed, clinked cups, and disappeared into the growing dance crowd.

Tyrel had found the keg and was demonstrating the correct posture for a stand like he was coaching Olympic gymnasts.

“Back arched! Core tight! Drink like your scholarship depends on it!”

Ravi went up next, flailing like a drunk scarecrow, shouting, “Victory tastes like cheap beer and freedom!”

Marisol, meanwhile, stayed close to Bharath, her arm occasionally brushing his. She’d started off sipping cautiously from her drink. Something fizzy and pink. By her second cup, she was more animated, looser with her words. By the third, she was laughing harder than he’d ever seen, touching his chest when he didn’t even make a joke, leaning into his space without hesitation.

“Come on,” she said, dragging him into the hallway where the music was slightly less deafening. “You’re not allowed to just stand there being noble. Talk to me.”

“I am talking to you,” he said, amused.

“No. You’re *listening*. Big difference.”

Bharath chuckled. “Alright. What do you want to hear?”

She tilted her head, eyes mischievous. “Something true.”

He hesitated. Then said softly, “I didn’t think you’d come tonight. I thought maybe... you’d want to be around cooler people.”

She stared at him for a second too long.

Then stepped forward.

“And that,” she said, poking his chest gently, “is exactly why I *did* come.”

His breath caught.

“Also,” she added, “you’re the only guy here not trying to get me drunk, flirt with my best friend, or impress me with their internship at some startup no one’s heard of.”

“Should I be doing those things?”

“Nope,” she said, looping her fingers briefly through his. “Just keep being you.”

They stood there for a beat, music pulsing from the walls, muffled cheers from a beer pong match echoing down the hall.

He looked at her. She looked right back.

Neither moved.

But something had shifted.

Something unspoken - warm and deliberate - curling between them like smoke from a slow fire.

Then Jorge staggered in, arm around Camila, grinning like he'd just won the lottery.

"Best. Night. Ever."

Tyrel followed, Ravi on his shoulders like a victorious gladiator.

"Time to head out!" Tyrel bellowed.

Marisol squeezed Bharath's hand before letting go.

"Looks like the bodyguards are ready."

He nodded, trying to ignore the butterflies in his chest.

And as they walked back down the glowing, noisy length of Fraternity Row, Marisol stayed close - her shoulder brushing his, her eyes occasionally glancing his way.

And for the first time... Bharath let himself wonder if maybe, just maybe, she wasn't pretending.

By the time they reached the next house on Fraternity Row - Delta Tau Delta - the party was in full swing.

This one was louder, sweatier, darker. A DJ spun bass-heavy club remixes from a platform set up in the living room. The walls pulsed with light. Everything smelled like cheap beer, body spray, and too much cologne.

Jorge and Camila were already dancing by the time the others stepped in. She was laughing at something he whispered into her ear. Jorge winked at Bharath as they disappeared into the crush of people like they'd been dating for months.

Tyrel immediately found another keg.

“Y’all need hydration!” he declared, pointing at a punch bowl with a floating rubber duck and several unidentifiable fruits.

Ravi was no better. He had both arms around two frat guys he didn’t know, singing something off-key and swaying like a flag in the wind.

Marisol leaned into Bharath, shouting to be heard. “This place is insane!”

He laughed. “It’s like a movie.”

“No,” she shouted, “this is the USA.”

“USA! USA! USA! USA! USA! USA!”

The chant went viral.

Jorge, Ravi and Bharath paused looking at each other.

“Are Americans coordinated at birth to shout that at a moment’s notice?” whispered Bharath to Marisol who was chanting lustily.

A reggaeton beat dropped fast. It was sultry and pulsing.

Marisol grabbed Bharath’s wrist. “Come on.”

“Wait... what?”

“To the dance floor! Andele!”

“I don’t know how to...”

She was already pulling him into the crowd.

The room moved like a single organism. Sweat-slick bodies in sync, grinding, spinning, pulsing with rhythm. And in the center of it all, Marisol moved like she’d been born to the beat - hips fluid, arms raised, eyes glowing.

Bharath tried. He really tried.

He swayed awkwardly, tried mimicking the movements he’d seen in Bollywood movies, attempted a two-step that somehow involved both too much and too little footwork.

Marisol laughed, absolutely delighted.

“You dance like a confused penguin.”

"I *told* you...!"

"Doesn't matter," she said, grabbing both of his hands and placing them on her waist. "Just follow me."

She rolled her hips, slowly, guiding his hands with her body. His breath caught. The warmth of her skin through her top. The press of her back against his chest. The smell of her shampoo mixed with faint sweat and perfume.

He forgot to move. Forgot to blink.

She glanced over her shoulder, catching his dazed expression.

"Still breathing?"

"Barely."

"Good," she said, with a wicked smile. "Now move."

He did.

Badly.

But he did.

And she didn't let go.

Their bodies moved together, imperfect but close, heat and music rising like steam around them. She laughed again when he tried to turn her and nearly knocked into someone else, but she stayed pressed against him.

"You're the worst dancer I've ever seen," she whispered.

"I aim to impress."

And just when he felt like the world had shrunk to the size of her smile... he saw her.

Ayesha.

Across the room.

Her hair wild, eyes glassy. Surrounded by a group of guys - three, maybe four - all leaning in too close. One had his hand on her lower back. Another held out a drink.

She was laughing, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Something in Bharath's chest pulled.

She looked up - just once - and their eyes met across the room.

Something flickered.

Recognition. Regret.

Then one of the guys leaned in and whispered something in her ear, and she tilted her head, half-smirking.

Bharath looked away.

Marisol caught it all.

Her fingers curled around his shirt, gently tugging his attention back.

"Hey," she said, softly now, close to his ear. "Let her go."

He nodded, still a little shaken.

Marisol turned around fully, placing her hands on his shoulders.

"I'm here," she said simply.

And then she kissed his cheek slowly and deliberately. She let her lips linger for just a second too long.

"Focus on *now*."

Bharath exhaled, chest tight with something that wasn't quite desire - but wasn't far from it either.

The music changed. The lights pulsed gold. Around them, people blurred into shapes and color.

But Bharath only saw her.

Marisol was alive, electric, and radiant. She was the most beautiful girl in the world!

And just like that, Ayesha faded into the background.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 27: Fire on the Porch [18+]

[5,849 words]

The party kept moving from beer pong tables to living room dance-offs to half-sung karaoke in the backyard. But for Bharath and Marisol, time had slowed into its own rhythm.

The crowd had thinned just a little. Jorge had disappeared with Camila somewhere upstairs. Tyrel was holding court near the keg, telling exaggerated stories about his time “almost getting recruited by the Falcons.” Ravi was slouched on a porch bench, mumbling half in Hindi, half in English.

Marisol tugged Bharath’s hand.

“Come on,” she said. “Too many people. I need air.”

The music inside pounded like a second heartbeat - relentless, wild, sweaty. But out here, beyond the deck doors and beneath the canopy of cheap string lights, the night was quieter. Softer. Like a breath held too long.

Marisol led Bharath up the narrow wooden stairs, her fingers curled loosely around his wrist. He followed without question, eyes wide, still blinking at the sheer chaos of his first American frat party. She could feel the pulse at his wrist. It was beating fast. Nervous.

They reached the top landing, half-hidden from the main lawn by a tangle of ivy and shadows. A side nook. Private. Unclaimed.

She let go of his hand and leaned against the railing, staring out at the shimmer of the city beyond the trees. Her heart was doing a strange thing. Not racing exactly, but thrumming. Like anticipation stretched too thin.

Behind her, Bharath hovered awkwardly. Close, but not too close. His hands tucked in his pockets. His expression unreadable.

God, he was shy. And awkward. And impossibly cute.

And somehow, she couldn’t stop thinking about him.

Marisol turned slightly to face him, hip against the railing, watching as he tried to find something to do with his hands.

“I didn’t think you’d come tonight,” she said.

He smiled, small and uncertain. "I wasn't going to. But... I guess I didn't want to miss something."

She tilted her head. "What something?"

He hesitated, then shrugged. "You."

It wasn't smooth. It wasn't even intentional. But it hit her like a dart to the chest.

She stared at him. This quiet, clever Indian boy who danced like he was fighting gravity, who held doors open without thinking, who made no effort to impress anyone but somehow impressed her more than any man ever had.

"You know," she said, voice low, "I don't usually notice guys like you."

He blinked. "Guys like me?"

She nodded. "Smart. Serious. Sincere."

"Sincere sounds like a dig."

"It's not. It's rare." She stepped forward, her voice softer now. "Most guys... they see someone like me and forget how to blink."

He did blink at that... twice, rapidly. "I guess I'm not like most guys then." said Bharath more confidently

She smiled. "You didn't. Not really. You looked, sure. But you listened. You saw me."

"I'm not really good at..."

"Shhh."

She placed one hand gently on his chest.

The cotton of his shirt was damp with sweat from dancing, but beneath it, beneath all of it, was warmth, was safety, was the steady thrum of a heartbeat that seemed to answer her own. The music around them had faded into a kind of underwater echo. The low thud of a bassline, distant laughter from Mia's birthday party, the clink of a glass somewhere, all of it felt removed, muffled. Like the world had stepped back politely to give them this moment.

Bharath stood frozen, breathless, staring into her eyes like he didn't know if he was allowed to believe in miracles. Like he couldn't tell if this moment was real or something he'd dreamt one too many times to trust anymore.

His eyes locked onto hers, uncertain, but not afraid. Searching.

And then, Marisol did what felt inevitable.

She leaned in.

Slow. Deliberate. As if she was moving through honey. No rush. No panic. Just clarity.

Their lips met.

A soft press, light as a whisper.

And then...

Fire.

Not heat. Not lust. Something more primal. More sacred. Something that cracked through the fabric of the air and shot lightning through her limbs. A spark so sharp and sudden that she gasped against his mouth, jerking slightly back in surprise.

It was like someone had lit a match inside her soul.

Her breath stuttered, eyes fluttering open just enough to catch his expression.

His pupils were blown wide, lips parted, a flush blooming on his cheeks. He looked stunned. Not just in awe, but *transformed*. Like someone who had just stumbled through a door into an entirely different life.

"I... I don't know if I did that right," he whispered, voice low and hoarse.

Marisol let out a soft, breathless laugh. She hadn't expected that. God, he was so *earnest*. So pure in his confusion. So ready to be hers.

"You did," she murmured, and then her arms slid up, around his neck, anchoring him close.

And this time, *she* kissed *him*.

Deeper. Fuller.

And that's when the world really tilted.

Bharath responded instinctively, his hands finding the curve of her waist, then pausing there. Like he was touching something precious. His lips, tentative for only a moment, grew more confident with hers guiding the rhythm. Soft. Searching. Hungry in a way that wasn't greedy, but devotional.

He moved closer, as if pulled by a magnetic field that no physics textbook could explain.

It wasn't just kissing. It was *remembering*. Like this wasn't the first time. Like some part of them - ancient, eternal - had done this before.

And the connection?

It was absolute.

The kiss lit her up from the inside, made her toes curl and her stomach drop and her heart thunder like it was trying to escape. It flooded her with a dizzying cocktail of joy and panic and disbelief and overwhelming need. Need not just to be kissed - but to *know* him. To be known.

It was the best kiss of her life. Not because it was technically perfect, or because of any dramatic flair. But because of what it *meant*.

Because her body responded before her mind could even process it. Because it made every other kiss she'd ever experienced feel like a placeholder.

Because it felt like her soul had finally found the other half of its name.

She let out a sound. Something halfway between a whimper and a sigh, when his hand slid up her back, tentative but firm, grounding her. He wasn't pushing. He wasn't demanding. He was just *there*. With her. For her.

And then he made a sound too, deep in his throat. A helpless, reverent moan that made her knees buckle and her entire body sing. She clung to him like gravity didn't work the same anymore.

When they finally broke apart, they were both gasping for air, foreheads resting against each other like twin pillars holding up the same trembling roof.

Her fingers curled around the nape of his neck. His hand stayed at her waist, thumb brushing soft circles into her skin through the fabric.

Neither of them spoke.

They didn't *need* to.

It was written in the space between them. In their breaths. In the electricity that still lingered between their lips. In the wide, stunned eyes. In the way her smile curled, slow and awed, and how he looked at her like the sun had just risen for the first time.

And Bharath...

He felt something shift inside him. A tectonic, soul-deep realignment.

Gone was the uncertainty.

Gone was the awkward stammering in the face of her beauty, her fire, her strength.

Because now he *knew*.

She was his.

Not in the possessive way of conquest or claims, but in the quiet, sacred way of two souls that had waited lifetimes to find each other again.

She was his.

And he was hers.

That kiss had declared it. Sealed it. Etched it into the marrow of his bones.

He reached up with his good hand and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, marveling at how soft she was, how fiercely real.

“Marisol...” he said her name like a prayer.

She grinned weakly, eyes glassy, cheeks flushed. “Yeah?”

He swallowed, still winded. “You just... you changed something in me.”

She raised an eyebrow, cocky now in the way only Marisol could be. “About time.”

They both laughed, feeling light-headed and blissfully drunk on each other.

And something else bloomed then. A new posture in Bharath. A quiet boldness. A certainty that hadn't been there before.

He leaned in again, kissed her nose gently, then her cheekbone, slow and confident this time.

She touched her lips.

“Dios!” she whispered. “What was that?”

He looked dazed. “I... I don't know. This is my first real kiss.”

She couldn't stop staring at him.

This boy. This sweet, awkward boy who had no idea the kind of storm he'd just stirred up inside her. She stepped back half a pace, just to breathe.

"Okay," she said, voice a little unsteady. "I was not ready for that."

Bharath looked like he might apologize, so she grabbed his shirt and tugged him back in.

"No," she murmured, brushing her nose against his. "Don't overthink it. Just... do it again." He did. And this time, his hands found her lower back. Hers tangled in his hair. The kiss deepened, and so did the feeling. This sense that maybe, just maybe, something real had begun on this strange, chaotic, beer-stained night.

And Marisol?

She knew, with sudden terrifying certainty, that she needed to find out what this was. She kissed him again. Harder this time. With want. The electricity only became stronger. It seemed to originate from her lips and zipped straight to her core.

And this time, when her back hit the wood paneling and she pulled him in, Bharath didn't hesitate. He kissed her like he was learning to breathe all over again.

Her hands slid up into his hair. His arms wrapped around her waist. Their bodies pressed flush - and still it wasn't close enough.

She shifted, lifted herself, one leg curling around his hip as he instinctively caught her, back braced against the railing. She straddled him easily, weight balanced, thighs tight around his sides.

And she moved.

Slowly. Sensually.

Not frantic, but with teasing pressure that made his breath catch.

She rolled her hips against his, a gentle rhythm that sent sparks through every nerve in his body.

Her mouth traced his jaw. His hands splayed against the small of her back. She rocked again, their clothes the only thing separating them, but the heat was undeniable.

It wasn't rushed. It wasn't graphic.

But it was full of *feeling*.

Of hunger and chemistry and something that had been simmering for days now, igniting in a quiet corner of a wild Atlanta night.

They didn't speak.

There was no need.

Just lips, breath, fingers.

A moment drawn out like a held note - sweet, electric, just on the edge of unraveling.

When they finally slowed, Marisol rested her forehead against his, breath ragged.

"I don't usually do that," she whispered.

"I definitely don't," he said, trying to catch his breath.

They laughed together now. Breathless, still tangled, still flushed.

Then she kissed him once more. Softer this time and slowly climbed off his lap, fingers still interlaced with his.

"We should go back in," she said. "Before someone comes looking."

Bharath nodded.

But neither of them moved.

Marisol's fingers still curled around Bharath's, her breath warm on his skin, her eyes darker now - smoldering with something unguarded, something real.

She didn't move to go back inside.

Not yet.

Instead, she pulled his hand gently to her chest, flattening his palm against her heartbeat.

"Do you feel that?" she whispered.

He nodded, wide-eyed.

"You did that," she said.

His breath hitched. Her skin, even through the cotton of her top, was blazing. He felt the rise and fall beneath his fingertips. The press of her chest. The tension trembling under the surface.

Marisol bit her lip and leaned in, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered, "I've been thinking about this since Wednesday."

He shivered.

Her hand guided his lower, slipping beneath the edge of her top. Skin met skin. Soft, heated, impossibly smooth. His palm now cradled the curve of her waist, his thumb grazing upward. Her breathing hitched.

"I like the way you touch me," she murmured. "Carefully. Like you're not sure if you're allowed to want me."

Bharath opened his mouth and then closed it again, completely lost in the moment.

Marisol exhaled slowly and reached for his other hand, guiding it under her top. This time higher. Her eyes didn't leave his.

He felt the slope of her ribcage, the delicate flare above her waist. And then, warmth. A fuller curve. Soft and perfect.

She wasn't wearing a bra.

His fingertips brushed her breast and she arched just slightly into him.

"Touch me," she whispered, her voice low and trembling with restrained hunger. "I want to feel your hands on me."

Bharath cupped her gently, reverently, as though she were made of glass and starlight. His thumb brushed the hardened peak of her nipple, drawing a soft gasp from her lips.

"Madre de Dios!" she whispered, closing her eyes, pressing her body more firmly against his.

He swallowed, his pulse thundering.

"I am," he said hoarsely. "I can't believe this is real."

She smiled, eyes fluttering open. "It is. All of it. And you're making me feel..." She paused, searching for words. "Like I'm more than just something to be conquered. You make me feel... seen. Desired. Sexy. But safe."

His thumb stroked her again, marveling at how her breath caught every time he did. Her hands were tangled in his hair now, her body pressed so close he could feel every soft, sensual line of her against him.

She whispered, "I want you to keep worshipping me like that, Bharath."

And so he did.

He kissed her neck, her collarbone, the skin just above the neckline of her top. She tilted her head back, moaning softly, eyes fluttering shut as he explored her with growing confidence. His hands moved with care and increasing certainty, savoring every sigh, every arch, every whispered encouragement.

Time melted. There was only the sound of her breathing, the warmth of her skin, the flicker of porch light catching the sheen of sweat on her collarbone.

"I don't want to stop," she whispered, forehead pressed to his.

"Then don't," he murmured, breathless. "I'm here. All of me. For you."

She kissed him again - deeper, slower - her lips lingering like she was trying to memorize the taste of him.

It wasn't just lust anymore.

Marisol kissed him again, slower this time. Less frantic. More deliberate.

She pulled back just enough to look into his eyes to search them.

"You're sure you want this?" she asked, her voice low but steady.

Bharath nodded, breath catching. "I want... everything you're willing to give."

A small, knowing smile curved her lips. "Then listen."

She took his hands again gently and guided them under her top, back to where his palms could cradle her breasts. His fingers trembled, not from fear, but awe.

"Start here," she said, softly. "Don't rush. Just feel."

And he did.

He held her like she was sacred. His thumbs stroked upward in slow circles, tracing the warm curves with trembling devotion. Every motion earned a soft inhale from her, the kind that seemed to press deeper into his spine than his ears.

Her back arched slightly under his touch.

“Good,” she whispered. “Now your mouth.”

He blinked. “What do you mean?”

Marisol laughed softly, curling her arms around his neck, pulling him down toward her. “Use your mouth with your hands. Together. Explore.”

She tugged her top up - not all the way, just enough - revealing more of her to the quiet moonlight and to him.

The fabric lifted slowly.

Marisol’s fingers tugged her top up, not with the practiced seduction of a movie star, but with quiet confidence. The kind that came from trust, from the weight of everything they’d shared over the past week. From the knowing look in her eyes that said, *This is for you. I want you to see me.*

Bharath’s breath caught in his throat.

And then he saw her.

The moonlight filtered through the string lights and soft shadows of the porch above, illuminating the curves now exposed to the night air. Her breasts were full and perfect, real in a way that shattered every image he’d ever seen in glossy magazines or pixelated video stills. They were large, round and soft, the smooth rise and fall of her breath making them shift gently in the dim light.

Her nipples were dusky, caramel-colored, and drawn tight from the chill and anticipation. They stood proud, delicate and impossibly beautiful.

He had never seen anything so intimate in his life. Not like this. Not this close. Not with the weight of emotion wrapped around the moment like silk.

Bharath blinked, not even aware that his lips had parted, that his hands trembled slightly where they hovered by her waist.

Marisol smiled softly, watching his reaction. There was no embarrassment in her gaze. Only affection. “You’re looking at me like I’m a miracle,” she whispered.

He looked up, eyes wide and honest. “You are.”

Her smile faltered for a heartbeat, something tender flickering in her eyes. Like she wasn’t used to being seen like this. Not just admired. *Worshipped.*

Bharath reached out with both hands, slow and reverent, like approaching sacred ground. He cupped her gently feeling the weight, the warmth, the softness that made his heart stutter in his chest. His thumbs brushed across the curves, trembling as they slid up toward her nipples.

She sucked in a breath.

“You’re not going to break me,” she whispered, guiding his hands just slightly, encouraging him.

He nodded, even though his mind was still reeling.

Lowering his head, he kissed her just above her breast. A feather-light kiss. Then again, lower this time, letting his lips trail across her skin. Her scent surrounded him. Warm skin, faint citrus, and something uniquely *her* that made his knees weak.

And then, for the first time in his life, he took one nipple gently between his lips.

Marisol gasped. Not theatrically, not for effect, but because it was real. Because it mattered.

Bharath was overwhelmed.

The texture of her, the taste of her skin, the way her body arched into him instinctively. His hands splayed wider over her sides, one curling around to cradle the small of her back, the other supporting the base of her spine as she leaned into him.

He kissed her again slowly. Then a firmer suck. Then a flick of his tongue across her nipple, feeling it tighten against his mouth.

Marisol whimpered. “Oh... yes...”

It wasn’t just arousal. It was release. It was connection.

“Bharath...” she breathed, her hands now buried in his hair. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me.”

He pulled back slightly, chest heaving, lips still parted.

“I... I don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted.

“You’re doing everything right,” she said, brushing her thumb across his cheek. “You’re worshipping me. Not just... grabbing.”

“I wouldn’t know how to do anything else,” he said, voice raw. “You’re not... you’re not just anyone.”

Marisol exhaled shakily. "Say that again."

"You're not just anyone," he repeated, more certain this time. "You're... Marisol. I don't have the words. But I know I want to memorize every inch of you. Not just because I want you... but because I need to understand what made you trust me enough to share this."

Marisol leaned forward and kissed him again. The electricity still sent shivers down her spine.

When they parted reluctantly to draw a breath with a quiet, contented sigh. "That," she whispered, "was the best first time anyone has ever seen me."

Bharath was still dazed. His heart pounded in his ears. He didn't even know who he was before this.

And for the first time, he realized something with utter clarity.

He didn't just want her body. He wanted her. The woman who gave him this moment. The girl with the fire in her eyes and the softness behind her wit.

He kissed again. Then again, lower. His hands never left her, thumbs circling, palms cupping, his lips now following their lead.

She gasped softly when he found the right spot.

"God, Bharath... yes... just like that."

He eased her top higher, slowly, waiting for any sign of discomfort. But all he saw was her gaze - dark, intense, and hungry. She nodded once, just enough.

Her hands tangled in his hair again as he learned her with lips and tongue and touch. He wasn't fast. He wasn't aggressive. He was just... present. Every reaction from her guided him. Every sigh, every slight shiver became a cue.

"You're so soft," he whispered. "So warm."

"And you're so careful," she whispered back, voice cracking with pleasure. "Too careful."

He looked up, confused.

She bit her lip, guiding his hand until his palm covered her fully again. "Don't worship me like I'll break. Worship me like you can't get enough."

That unlocked something in him.

His mouth descended to her again. Her lips parted in a moan as he took her nipple into his mouth, tongue circling tentatively, then more confidently as her head dropped back with a breathless moan.

“Dios mío...” she gasped. “Yes... just like that.”

His hand cradled the weight of her other heavy yet firm breast, thumb brushing her nipple in time with the rhythm of his mouth. She squirmed under him, thighs tightening around his hips as he lavished her with focused, fascinated attention.

“You like this?” he asked, muffled against her skin.

“Too much,” she choked out. “I didn’t even know I could...”

Her voice faltered as her hips twitched under him, her back arching.

He looked up, startled. “Are you...?”

She covered her mouth, nodding shamelessly.

“Oh my god, Bharath,” she whispered, barely breathing. “You’re going to make me...”

She didn’t finish.

Her whole body clenched, her breath leaving her in short, high cries as she came just from his hands and mouth on her breasts. The sight alone left Bharath stunned. The way her body moved. The way her hands gripped his shoulders like she was holding on for dear life.

He hadn’t known it was possible. He hadn’t known *he* could do that.

“I’ve never...” she gasped when the tremors faded. “No one’s ever touched me like this. Like I matter. Like... I’m art.”

“You are,” he said hoarsely, his own hands still shaking from the weight of what he’d just witnessed.

Marisol collapsed back against the railing, still flushed, still panting, eyes wide with afterglow and disbelief.

“I didn’t know I could...” she began again, then laughed, half-dazed. “You’ve ruined me for every other guy.”

Bharath didn’t smile. Not fully.

He leaned forward, brushing her hair from her face, kissing the hollow of her throat with slow, reverent care. "I want to do that again. Make you feel that. Always."

She blinked at him, emotion flooding her gaze. "You mean that."

"I do," he whispered. "I want to know everything that makes you feel good. I want to learn you."

She trembled again, more from emotion than sensation this time. Her hands rose to cup his face. "You're dangerous," she whispered.

"No," he replied softly. "You make me brave."

And then she pulled him down for another kiss. Something had changed between them tonight.

The world was quiet but for the sound of Marisol's breath, still ragged, shallow, disbelieving.

She got up shakily and straddled him again resting her back on his chest now, wrapping herself with his arms. Her body trembled slightly in the aftermath of something she never thought she could experience this way - not from this, not like this.

She whispered against his neck, her voice laced with awe, "What the hell did you just do to me?"

Bharath was holding her like she might disappear. One hand still gently cupping the side of her breast, the other rubbing soothing circles over her lower back. His own breath was uneven, but his eyes were wide and reverent.

"I don't know," he said softly. "I was just... listening. To you. To your body."

She gave a shaky laugh and pulled back to look at him. Her cheeks were flushed, eyes luminous.

"No one's ever done that," she said.

He blinked. "Done what?"

"Listened," she said simply. "Touched me like I mattered. Like it was about me and not about... them."

Her fingers traced the curve of his jaw, then paused. Her other hand curled lightly over his forearm, grounding herself as she inhaled shakily.

“I’ve been to second base before. A few times. Every one of them rushed. Fumbled. Took before I could say no. Or gave up the second I didn’t melt instantly.”

She leaned in, brushing her lips across his. “But you... Bharath, I didn’t even know I could come from that. From just being touched like that.”

His lips parted in surprise. “You’ve never...”

She shook her head. “Not like that. Not from just... here.” She placed his hand gently over her heart, then lower, until it rested lightly between her thighs again. Over her shorts, the fabric still damp with her release.

“I want to show you more,” she said, her voice now barely above a whisper. “And I want you to see me. All of me.”

Bharath’s throat worked as he swallowed. His heart was thudding against his ribs like it was trying to answer her through touch alone.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded, the corners of her lips tilting in a trembling smile. “I’ve never been more sure about anything.”

And then she took his hand - trembling, reverent - and guided it beneath the waistband of her shorts.

His fingers found heat and wetness that stunned him. It was like discovering something sacred and terrifying... and beautiful.

“Is this... okay?” he asked, his voice shaking with both restraint and wonder.

She shivered. “More than okay. Keep going.”

And so he did.

But not blindly. Not hurriedly. Bharath moved like he was learning a language written only in the softness of her sighs and the tension in her thighs. Every tiny gasp, every hitch of her breath was a syllable. Every twitch of her hips, a line of verse. He was deciphering her body as if it held the meaning to something larger, and maybe it did. Maybe this was what devotion felt like when it was first given form.

She guided him gently at first, helping him find the rhythm she liked, slow, circling pressure, not too deep. He followed eagerly, adjusting at each of her tiny reactions, his fingers learning the delicate choreography of her pleasure.

“You’re so warm,” he murmured, his lips brushing her temple. “I didn’t know... I didn’t know it could feel like this.”

“Neither did I,” she whispered, biting her lip as her body arched into his hand. “I never even touched myself like this. Not really. Not enough to... you know.”

Bharath froze. “Wait... you’ve never...?”

“No. I never trusted anyone to...,” she said, her voice firm but shy. “Not where it felt like something worth doing. You’re... I don’t know what you’re doing to me.”

A thrill surged through him. She hadn’t just trusted him with her body. She’d trusted him with her discovery. Her first time truly *being* touched, inside and out.

He pulled her closer with his free arm, lips trailing reverently from her jaw to her throat. “I want to make this perfect for you,” he said, eyes closed as he moved his fingers with more intent, slowly slipping deeper now, curling slightly, listening as her hips responded.

Marisol clutched his shirt, her forehead dropping to his again. “You already have,” she whispered. “But... please don’t stop.”

So he didn’t.

He kept her pressed close, breathing with her, guiding her through the waves that built slow and deep. Her breaths grew ragged again, broken by tiny gasps and whimpers. Her body rocked against him in time, chasing the rhythm he’d created just for her.

She was utterly undone, yet more present than she’d ever been in her life.

When her next climax came, it stole her breath. She cried out into his shoulder, her body locking in tight pulses around his fingers as he held her through it. Her hands trembled, gripping his arms, fingernails digging into his biceps.

He whispered her name like a prayer. “I’ve got you Marisol. I’ve got you my Mari.”

And he did.

He held her as she came down, as her shudders softened into sighs and her heartbeat slowed. Her legs were still wrapped around him, shorts tugged halfway down her thighs, his hand still nestled gently where she was most tender.

They hadn’t even gotten undressed.

And yet she had come apart in his arms like never before.

She didn't say it right away. She couldn't. Not with her heart still pounding and her thighs still aching with the memory of how perfectly he had touched her. How reverently he had listened, followed, worshipped. It was too new. Too big. Too good.

Instead, she reached up and cupped his face, kissed him deeply and then pulled back, eyes glinting with mischief.

Her breath came in shallow bursts now, her body flushed and buzzing, every nerve ending lit like the edge of a live wire. She was still trembling slightly in his arms, though not from fear - no, it was the aftershocks, the weightless ache of pleasure so deep it felt like it had rewritten the way her body was wired.

And still... she wanted more.

Not because she was unsatisfied. Far from it, but because something primal had opened inside her. Something trusting and tender, wild and vulnerable. A door that only he had found the key to.

Her hand, still resting over his as it cupped the heat between her thighs, began to move. Slowly, with intention. She curled her fingers around his wrist and tugged it away for a moment, just enough to guide it back again. But this time, her other hand reached up and gently took hold of the hand he had on her waist.

"Here," she whispered, voice shaking. "Touch me here too."

She brought his palm up and laid it over her breast. Her shirt still clinging to her skin, thin and slightly damp, her nipple stiff beneath the fabric.

Bharath's breath hitched audibly.

She heard it. Felt the way his fingers froze, then trembled. Saw the awe in his eyes as he stared at her chest like it was sacred.

"I don't know if I..."

"Just follow me," she whispered. "You've already been perfect."

He exhaled shakily, then nodded.

Her hand over his, she helped him cup her breast properly, not roughly, not awkwardly, but with slow pressure, just enough to make her sigh. His thumb brushed over her through the cotton, and she gasped softly, arching into him.

"That," she murmured, "do that again."

He did. Again and again, until her breath grew heavy once more, her hips rocking instinctively against the hand now sliding back beneath her shorts. And then, oh god, he did both at once.

One hand massaging her breast, thumb flicking and circling until her nipple strained against the fabric. The other hand moving slowly between her thighs, slipping between folds now soaked, rhythmic and reverent.

Her head fell back, mouth open in a silent moan, her body caught in a wave of sensation that felt almost unreal.

“Bharath...” she whispered, and it wasn’t even a plea, just his name, full of wonder.

He was staring at her like she was performing a miracle in his lap.

“You’re... incredible,” he said breathlessly. “I didn’t know someone could feel like this. I didn’t know *you* could look like this...”

She laughed softly, lips parted in a breathless smile. “You’re doing it. That’s why.”

His fingers pressed deeper, and she jerked in response, grabbing his shoulders as her body began to spiral again.

“Oh god... don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

He didn’t.

He adjusted the way he stroked her, found the exact angle, the rhythm she couldn’t resist. His fingers at her core matched the rhythm of his palm over her breast, and the combination sent her hurtling toward another climax before she even had time to brace for it.

Her whole body arched as the wave hit. She moaned into his mouth when he kissed her, everything inside her clenching and trembling and flying apart.

And still he didn’t stop.

Even as she came down from the high, Bharath kept going, easing her into another climb. Slower this time. Cruel and sweet and deep.

“I can’t...” she whimpered. “Bharath, I can’t... again?”

“Yes,” he said, voice hoarse and gentle. “Yes, you can.”

And god help her... he was right.

The pleasure was building again, maddening now, layered on top of everything she had already felt. It wasn't just physical, it was something else. Something that felt like it was melting through her soul. Like he wasn't just touching her body, but her memories, her defenses, her shame, her old ghosts.

He was rewriting them all with every kiss, every press of his fingers, every murmured "I've got you."

When the third climax came, she sobbed. It was a ragged, open-throated sound that she muffled into his neck. Her entire body convulsed against his, and he held her through it like a lifeline.

She was still gasping, heart pounding, body weak.

She moved as if to stop, but he pulled her back. "No. Not yet. I want to see how far this can go."

Her eyes widened, a slow fire lighting behind them. She bit her lip and grinned, still breathless. "You're not tired, are you?" he asked smiling.

She huffed a stunned laugh. "No. God, no. Are you kidding me?"

And so he continued.

This time, he took her top off. Slowly. Reverently. Not in a rush, not with greed, but with awe. As if every inch of skin was a new continent he'd never known existed.

He kissed her chest as he explored, lips brushing the valley between her breasts, tongue flicking softly against her nipple before drawing it in, suckling gently. His hand never left her core, and the combination was too much.

She didn't even have time to warn him before she cried out again. This one sharper, more electric. Her hands clawed at his back, and he held her tighter, kissing her through it, anchoring her again.

And still, he didn't stop.

Again and again he brought her to the edge, then let her fall. Every climax softer than the last, until she was a melted puddle of limbs in his arms, drenched in sweat, heart stuttering.

Finally, finally, she reached up with trembling hands and cupped his face. "Stop. Please," she whispered. "I can't anymore. I'm... it's too much."

He pulled back instantly, worried. "Did I hurt you?"

“No,” she said, almost laughing. “You ruined me.”

And then she kissed him.

Her limbs draped over him like silk, her body humming, her soul singing.

Then they both just breathed in and out, wrapped around each other like truth and fire, like storm and calm, like the only thing that mattered in the world was the other.

The night air clung to Marisol’s skin like silk, damp with sweat, wild with adrenaline. She leaned her head against Bharath’s shoulder, breath still uneven, chest still fluttering. Her entire body buzzed. Her lips, her thighs, her fingertips... everything trembled in the aftermath.

She didn’t say it right away. She couldn’t. Not with her heart still pounding and her thighs still aching with the memory of how perfectly he had touched her. How reverently he had listened, followed, worshipped. It was too new. Too big. Too *good*.

But her kiss said everything.

She cupped his face, kissed him deeply... like a thank you, like a gift, like a promise. Then she pulled back, eyes glinting with mischief.

“Next time,” she whispered, lips brushing his cheek, “you’re getting *rewarded*.”

Bharath stared at her, stunned, heart thudding, lips swollen and still damp. He was light-headed. Weightless. Floating.

He nodded dumbly. “Okay.”

She laughed and tucked her hand into his. “Come on. We should find the others before they light something on fire.”

But neither of them moved just yet.

He was still cradling her, and she was still draped across his lap like something sacred - and maybe they both needed a few more seconds to simply exist in this bubble they’d made.

“Marisol?”

She glanced down, brushing a curl from his forehead. “Hmm?”

“Thank you.”

Her eyes softened. “For what?”

“For letting me be the one.”

The answer caught in her throat.

She pressed their foreheads together and whispered, “I think you were always going to be the one mi amor.”

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 28: Molecules, Rappers and Promises

[1,217 words]

The frat house lights were dimming behind them, the bass finally fading into a distant throb as the night edged toward morning. Atlanta’s air had cooled, carrying the faint scent of spilled beer, barbecue smoke, and cut grass. Bharath and Marisol walked side by side, shoulders brushing every few steps, their fingers laced loosely like it had always been this way.

They found Jorge first.

He was tangled with Camila on a rickety porch swing at the edge of the lawn, both flushed and grinning, hair a mess, clothes askew in that unmistakable post-makeout way. Jorge’s arm was slung around her shoulders; she was tracing lazy patterns on his chest.

Jorge didn’t even look up when they approached. “I’m crashing at her place,” he mumbled, voice thick with satisfaction and whatever he’d been drinking. “Don’t wait up.”

Bharath smirked, shaking his head. “Be safe, man.”

“I am the danger,” Jorge replied solemnly, eyes half-closed. He tried to salute but mostly just flopped his hand in the air.

Marisol nearly snorted, covering her mouth. “Smooth, Jorge. Real smooth.”

Camila laughed, pulling him closer. “He’s fine. I’ve got him.”

Bharath gave a mock salute. “Night, danger.”

They left the swing swaying gently behind them.

Next was Ravi.

He was swaying near the front steps like a flag in a breeze, holding up a half-empty Solo cup in a solo toast to no one in particular. His eyes were glassy, unfocused, but he lit up when he saw them.

“You ever think,” Ravi slurred, gesturing grandly at the sky, “How wild it is... that we’re like, molecules? Just... bouncing around. In space. But also here. Drinking. Molecules drinking molecules.”

Bharath bit back a laugh. “Deep thoughts, Ravi. Time to go.”

He looped an arm around Ravi’s waist before the philosopher could topple. Ravi leaned heavily into him, still mumbling.

“You’re a good man,” Ravi muttered, patting Bharath’s chest like he was petting a loyal dog. “A good... man. You’re my bhai! My actual bhai.”

“Yup. That’s me.” Bharath adjusted his grip. “Come on, molecule. Let’s get you home before you start reciting the periodic table.”

Marisol fell into step on Ravi’s other side, steadying him with a gentle hand on his elbow. She smiled at Bharath over Ravi’s head. The kind of smile that said this was the most natural thing in the world: shepherding drunk idiots at 2 a.m., together.

The walk back to Smith Hall felt longer than the trek to Fraternity Row had. Ravi alternated between profound drunken philosophy (“What if gravity is just the universe hugging us?”) and sudden bursts of affection (“Bharath, you’re like... the best import ever. Like mangoes. But better.”). Marisol laughed quietly at every line, her thumb brushing Bharath’s knuckles every time their hands swung close.

By the time they reached the dorm, Ravi was mostly upright only because Bharath and Marisol were holding him up. They maneuvered him through the quiet hallway, past closed doors and the faint hum of vending machines, into Room 202.

Jorge’s bed was closer. They collapsed Ravi onto it face-first. He groaned happily into the pillow.

“One down,” Bharath whispered.

Marisol nodded. “One very philosophical one to go.”

They still had to retrieve the last member of their fellowship.

Tyrel.

He was in the middle of the sidewalk outside another house, shirt half-unbuttoned, gold chain glinting under streetlights. A small crowd of girls from a nearby party had gathered across the street, catcalling and laughing as he performed.

“I got more rhymes than there’s cops at a Dunkin’ Donuts shop, sho’ nuff, I got props / From the kids on the Hill plus my mom and my pops / I came to get down, I came to get down / So get out your seat and jump around! Jump around! Jump up, jump up, and get down!”

His arms windmilled wildly. He nearly toppled but caught himself, pointing at the girls like they were his personal hype crew.

“Tyrel,” Bharath said firmly, stepping into his line of sight. “Dorm. Now.”

Tyrel blinked, mid-verse. “I am the dorm,” he declared, then burst into laughter so hard he folded forward and collapsed into Bharath’s arms.

Bharath caught him with a grunt. “Jesus, man. How much did you drink?”

“Enough to rap like my life depends on it,” Tyrel wheezed, still giggling.

Marisol helped hoist Tyrel’s other arm over her shoulder. “Come on, superstar. Show’s over.”

The three of them staggered up the stairs to Smith Hall like a very uncoordinated six-legged creature. Tyrel kept humming the chorus under his breath, occasionally shouting “Jump around!” at empty hallways.

Inside Room 202, they deposited Tyrel on his bed. He flopped dramatically, one arm flung out.

“You gotta put him on his side,” Marisol whispered, already moving to adjust him.

Bharath nodded, carefully rolling Tyrel so he faced the wall, breathing steady. He did the same for Ravi, who was now snoring softly into Jorge’s pillow. Both were out for the count—dead to the world.

“Mission accomplished,” Bharath said, brushing off his hands. He turned to Marisol, suddenly aware of how quiet the room was. Just the hum of the mini-fridge, the distant siren somewhere off-campus, and their breathing.

Marisol yawned, stretching her arms overhead. Her hoodie rode up just enough to reveal a sliver of smooth skin at her waist - the same skin he’d touched earlier, reverently, under string lights. Bharath’s breath caught.

She caught him looking. Her eyes softened, a small smile curving her lips.

“Stay with me?” he asked, quieter now. The words felt vulnerable in the dim room light.
“Just... sleep?”

She looked at him. The boy who had cradled her on a porch railing, kissed her like she was sacred, brought her to the edge and back with nothing but care and wonder. She stepped closer, fingers brushing his.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I want to.”

They climbed into his narrow dorm bed, laughing under their breath as limbs tangled and blankets fought them. Knees bumped, elbows poked, the mattress creaked in protest. But then they found it - that perfect place where her body molded against his, skin to skin where clothes had shifted, soul to soul in the quiet.

She faced him at first, then shifted to straddle his hips lightly, wrapping one leg around his waist, arms around his neck. She tugged the blanket over them both, cocooning them in warmth.

Their foreheads touched.

“Goodnight,” she whispered, breath warm against his lips.

“Marisol?” His voice was thick with everything the night had carried. “This is the greatest night of my life.”

She kissed him deeply with no rush. Just them, in the dark, tasting the afterglow of everything they’d shared.

When she pulled back, her voice was low, sultry, full of promise.

“It’s only going to get better.”

His hands slid up beneath her top again, reverent, but bolder now. He held her with slow possessiveness, fingers splaying wide, thumbs brushing softly.

She gasped, soft and sweet as she grew aroused beyond belief.

He met her gaze in the faint glow from the window.

“Mine,” he whispered, fierce and certain.

Something in her melted. Her breath hitched. Her back arched just slightly into his touch. She didn’t laugh. Didn’t tease. She pressed her forehead to his and whispered back,

“Yes. All yours. Only yours.”

The words weren't just agreement.

They were surrender. A promise. A beginning.

And as they finally drifted into sleep. They were tangled together in the quiet dark, hearts beating in time. Both of them knew, even if they couldn't say it out loud yet:

Something had begun tonight.

Something real.

Something neither of them would ever walk away from.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 29: He Unlocked Something in Her Last Night... This Morning He Broke Her Open [18+]

[2,360 words]

Marisol woke up with a start.

For a moment, the disorientation swallowed her whole.

She wasn't in her bed. She wasn't even sure where she *was*.

The ceiling above her was different from that of her room. It was plainer and lower. The air was unfamiliar, tinged with the faint scent of detergent, old textbooks, and the artificial chill of a dormitory vent. A dim amber glow blinked to life as her eyes found a red-lit clock on a nearby desk.

4:03 AM.

Her heart thudded in quiet panic. That quick, animal reaction to waking in an unknown place. Her body stiffened instinctively, mind racing through possibilities.

And then she felt it.

Not fear.

Warmth.

Not just the kind that came from heavy blankets or the residual heat of sleep. But something *deeper*. A living warmth that wrapped around her like a secret, cradled her like it knew exactly how she fit into its contours.

A body.

A breath against the back of her neck.

A strong arm looped tight around her waist, palm resting low on her belly. Another hand, wide, steady, embarrassingly perfect, cupped her large breast under her t-shirt, fingers spread possessively like they'd been molded just for this. Legs tangled with hers. A heartbeat against her spine.

Her own breath caught in her throat.

Bharath.

She was in *his* bed.

In *his* room.

With *him*.

The fear, the confusion, the what-the-hell-of-it-all drained from her like a tide pulling back into the sea.

And in its place came something so grounding, so unexpected, it made her chest ache.

She felt... safe.

Completely and irrationally safe.

It made no sense. She had known him for, what, two weeks? Twenty days at most? And yet, in this moment, in this strange bed with his hand over her heart and his chest rising and falling against her back, it felt like the only truth she had ever known.

Her lips curved into the pillow as the weight of him registered fully.

Bharath, in sleep, was all instinct and claim. His hold wasn't tentative. He wasn't shy about it. His body had molded to hers like they were puzzle pieces that had finally found their match. His hand on her breast wasn't lewd. It was just *there*, cradling her like he knew she needed it.

And, god help her, maybe she did.

She shifted slightly, testing the edges of her soreness. Her hips ached - a sweet, secret ache that made her bite her lip. Her skin felt oversensitized, kissed too many times, her nerve endings still remembering what it was like to unravel slowly in someone else's hands.

In his hands.

Images from last night floated back: his fingers finding her rhythm, his mouth whispering against her chest, the way his breath had caught every time she moaned his name. The way he had learned her like it was a sacred act.

She'd never known her body could feel like that.

She'd never let anyone get close enough to find out.

And Bharath, the quiet, awkward boy who still blushed when someone mentioned sex out loud, had brought her to the edge again and again, like he was *made* for her.

She exhaled slowly and tilted her head to the side, catching a glimpse of his face in the dim light.

He was still asleep, mouth parted, lashes resting against his cheeks, the faintest crease between his brows like he was still holding her even in his dreams. He looked younger in sleep. Unarmored. Unburdened.

Mine, he had whispered against her skin last night, voice low and raw.

She shivered.

Not from fear.

From memory.

She'd felt claimed. Seen. Touched... not just physically, but emotionally, spiritually. It hadn't been sex. They hadn't even gotten undressed. But it was the most intimate thing she'd ever experienced.

And now, hours later, his fingers were still resting on her breast like that word still lived in him.

Mine.

She turned her head just slightly and brushed her lips against his jaw. Once. Then again, slower. The roughness of his stubble made her smile.

“You’re a very good pillow,” she murmured.

He stirred.

Not fully awake, not yet, but enough for his arm to pull her closer. Enough for his thumb to graze absentmindedly over her nipple.

A tiny gasp escaped her lips.

She bit down on it, cheeks flushing. His hand wasn’t even moving deliberately. It was just there. But her body was still so sensitive, still *alive* from last night, that the contact sent heat straight through her again.

“You’re trouble,” she whispered into his skin.

But she didn’t pull away.

If anything, she leaned further into him, savoring the cradle of his body around hers.

She loved the contrast. Her curves against his lean frame, the feeling of his hips pressed snug to her backside, the light pressure of something hardening against her as her movement stirred him further from sleep.

She smiled wickedly to herself.

He’d been so reverent last night. So careful.

But she hadn’t missed the edge underneath it all. The way his grip had tightened when she climaxed. The way his mouth had gone hungry. The way he had growled that one word like it came from somewhere primal when he claimed her breasts before they slept.

She wanted *that* Bharath again. She wanted to coax him out. She wanted to unwrap him, slowly, until there was no hesitation left. And maybe, just maybe, she wanted to be claimed again.

With another slow breath, she rolled her hips back into him, just slightly. Just enough.

He groaned. Soft. Sleepy. But real.

His nose buried against her neck, and she felt the puff of warm air as he stirred fully now, his hand tightening over her breast in a slow, unconscious squeeze.

“Marisol...?” he mumbled groggily.

She turned in his arms, smiling as she slipped a hand into his hair and kissed his cheek.

“Morning, handsome.”

He blinked blearily at her, trying to catch up. “What time is it?”

“Too early. But just right.”

A pause.

And then a slow grin spread across his face as memory returned. “You’re still here.”

“I am,” she whispered. “And I’m not going anywhere.”

Not yet. She had questions. Doubts. Confusions. *Was this love? Was she being reckless?*

Maybe.

But in that moment, wrapped in the arms of the kindest, strangest, smartest boy she had ever met, Marisol didn’t need answers.

She just needed him. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep with him. Definitely hadn’t meant to stay. And waking up like *this*? Curled into his chest, held like something precious, his warm palm still cupping her breast like he never wanted to let go?

That hadn’t been in the plan either.

But here she was. Not flinching. Not doubting

In fact... she didn’t want to move. She’d never gone this far with a man before.

Not because there hadn’t been chances. God knew the boys in high school had tried. Smooth talkers. Athletes. Guys who looked at her like she was some kind of prize to unwrap and conquer. She often was called ice-princess because she kept turning them down.

But she never trusted them. Not one. Not until now.

Not until this strange, soft-spoken Indian boy with sleepy eyes and awkward shoulders had looked at her like she was holy had touched her like he *meant* it. Like her pleasure was a privilege, not a favor.

She didn’t know what love was. Not really. But *this*? This felt like the start of something that could be. A shift in the bed pulled her from her thoughts.

Bharath stirred behind her, his chest rising with a deeper inhale, the hand on her breast flexing just slightly as if waking up knew exactly where it had left off.

She smiled to herself, arching back ever so slightly into his touch.

A heartbeat later, his lips brushed the edge of her shoulder. Warm. Sleep-heavy. *Curious.*

“Mmm... morning,” he murmured, voice gravel-thick and barely awake.

“Hey,” she whispered back, unable to help the little grin that spread across her lips.

He didn't answer with words. Just pressed another kiss against her bare shoulder - then trailed one up to her neck. Then another.

His hand squeezed gently, thumb brushing across her nipple with unintentional precision.

Her breath hitched.

“Someone's awake,” she murmured.

His laugh was a low rumble against her back. “You're very motivating.”

“You sure you're not dreaming this?”

“If I am,” he whispered against her ear, “I don't want to wake up.”

She turned in his arms then, slowly, until she was facing him, chest to chest, leg sliding between his.

His eyes were still heavy-lidded, lashes thick against his cheeks, but the way he looked at her now... it wasn't innocent anymore.

It was hungry. Curious. Bolder than last night.

And *she liked it.*

“I thought you were the shy one,” she teased.

He shrugged, fingers curling around her waist, sliding under her hoodie again. “I think you broke something in me.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Broke?”

“Unlocked,” he corrected, voice rough. “Definitely unlocked.”

She laughed - soft, husky - and then gasped quietly as his mouth found the curve of her collarbone, lips parting to taste her skin like he'd missed it overnight.

“I could get used to this,” he murmured, lips moving across her collarbone with a reverence that sent shivers skimming down her spine.

Marisol’s breath caught. Her fingers slid into his thick, sleep-tousled hair as his mouth kept moving. Slow, steady, open kisses pressed into the dip of her clavicle, then just above the neckline of her sweatshirt. She tilted her head, offering him more. Not because he asked. But because he earned it.

“I think you already have,” she whispered, her voice breathy and teasing.

His smile against her skin was crooked, mischievous. “You... *really* don’t know what you’ve done to me.”

“Oh?” she asked, lips brushing his temple. “Do tell.”

“You taught me things last night,” he murmured. His hand slid down from her waist to the curve of her hip. “Things I didn’t know I was capable of.”

She arched into his touch. “I noticed.”

“I think,” he said, lifting his head to look into her eyes, “I need to remember those lessons.”

His voice was still low, but something in it had changed. A kind of tension behind the softness. Confidence, maybe. Or hunger barely restrained.

She felt her stomach twist with arousal.

“You need a refresher course?” she asked, eyes gleaming.

“Yeah,” he said, kissing her again. This time slow, deep, unhurried. “But I want to take my time.”

His hand pushed her top higher, bunching it just below her ribs. He lowered his head again, lips brushing the soft underside of one breast, then further up until her nipple met his mouth, already peaked, already aching.

Her back arched involuntarily.

“Oh...” she gasped, the word slipping out of her like steam.

He didn’t stop. He kissed, sucked, teased her softly with his tongue in ways that made her thighs clench and her breath shatter in waves.

She cradled his head to her chest, her fingers trembling now in his hair.

“Bharath,” she breathed, “oh my god... don’t stop.”

He didn’t.

His free hand cupped her other breast now, stroking it in rhythm with his mouth. He was learning her again. Rediscovering the paths he’d traced the night before, but slower, more deliberate. He was more confident this time, not just touching but *reading* her. Every sigh, every twitch, every tilt of her hips became a language they both understood.

“You feel so good,” he murmured against her skin.

She whimpered, hips grinding gently against his thigh. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me...”

“Then show me,” he said, voice rough with desire.

She took his hand again and slid it between them, under her waistband this time. Just barely. Just enough to let him feel the heat that was pooling there.

His fingers brushed just above her center and she gasped. Not just because of the touch, but because it felt... inevitable. Like every inch of her body had been waiting for this moment, this weight, this pressure, this slow teasing glide of his fingertips.

“Like this?” he asked softly.

She nodded, biting her lip.

“Slower... circle... there... Oh! Yes!”

Her hand was still guiding his, but her hips had a rhythm of their own now. He followed, obedient, focused, hungry to give her more. His fingers worked gently at first, then with growing confidence, alternating pressure with feather-soft strokes.

Her breaths came out in little gasps now, body trembling in his arms. “God, you’re learning so fast...”

He kissed her again, this time catching her moan with his mouth, and her climax hit like a wave crashing against the shore.

Her body shuddered, her thighs clenching, her breath held tight before it escaped in a soft, cracked cry against his lips.

“Oh fuck, Bharath... I...” she broke off, arching again as aftershocks rippled through her, sharp and sweet and unstoppable.

He didn’t stop.

He kept moving, fingers gentle but insistent, coaxing another from her before she could even catch her breath.

She gasped again, hands gripping his shoulders. "No, wait, I can't..."

But she could.

She *did*.

A second climax rolled through her like a thunderclap, pulling a sob from her throat. Not from pain, but pleasure too big to contain. Her eyes filled with tears she didn't understand. Her body couldn't stop shaking.

Bharath kissed her through it all, whispering soft nothings against her lips.

"You're beautiful... you're incredible... I've got you... I've got you."

And she broke again. A third wave. Raw and messy and perfect.

When it finally passed, she collapsed against him, face buried in his neck, breath coming in stuttering bursts.

He held her like something sacred. Not fragile. Just... cherished.

Neither spoke for a long time.

Then finally, still clinging to him, she whispered against his throat, "You didn't just remember... you *graduated*."

He chuckled, holding her tighter. "Do I get a certificate?"

"You get..." she kissed him once, then again, then deeper, "...anything you want."

He pulled her back just enough to look at her.

Her hair was a mess. Her cheeks were flushed. Her lips were kiss-swollen, her t-shirt half-off, her chest still heaving. And she had never looked more beautiful.

"I don't want anything," he said, voice trembling a little. "Except *you*."

Her eyes searched his face.

She saw no manipulation. No cocky smirk. No expectation.

Just want.

Raw, honest, gentle want.

And love. The kind that didn't need to speak its name yet, but was building in the quiet between their heartbeats.

She cupped his cheek, kissing him softly. "Then you already have me."

They lay there like that, wrapped around each other as if they were the only people in the world, the morning sun slipping through the dorm blinds like it too wanted to bask in what they'd just shared.

And for the first time in years, maybe ever, Marisol didn't wonder what came next.

She just knew.

This was the beginning of everything.

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Chapter 30: Under the Spray: Worship and a Quiet Vow [18+]

[1,354 words]

The world lay still that morning. It was early. Just 4:45 AM.

Even the Georgia Tech campus, typically alive with the low murmur of traffic, the distant shuffle of students, or the faint thump of bass from a cracked dorm window, felt hushed.

As if the universe had taken a breath.

And maybe that was just right.

Because for Bharath and Marisol, everything else had fallen away.

After a whispered, giggly dash to the shared showers, they'd found themselves behind the furthest curtain in the row, steam already thick in the air, the scent of soap and tile mingling with something warmer, more primal.

The door had clicked shut behind them, and Marisol had leaned back against the cold tile wall, grinning as she watched Bharath fumble with the knobs, trying to get the temperature just right without scalding them both.

It was the first time they were seeing each other fully naked.

And though they'd been skin-to-skin for hours the night before, this was different. The light was unforgiving. The space was stark. There was nowhere to hide.

Yet neither of them flinched.

Marisol stood tall and unashamed, her damp hair cascading down her back, framing a face that looked like the morning sun had made her its muse. She was a vision of soft power. Her full breasts swayed slightly with each breath, her waist cinched just enough to exaggerate the delicious curve of her hips, her thighs strong, her ass sculpted like something from a Renaissance sculpture.

Bharath didn't even try to pretend he wasn't staring.

"Oh my god," he whispered.

Marisol arched an eyebrow. "You noticing just now?"

He laughed, stunned, his voice dry. "I think I forgot how to blink."

She stepped forward, letting the water spray hit her shoulder, then trailed a finger slowly down his chest.

"Well," she said, glancing down with a smirk, "looks like *someone's* glad to see me."

Bharath flushed, but didn't move. Her eyes had landed on his shaft. Her eyes widened when she saw his thick, already stirring to life under her gaze.

"You're... really girthy," she murmured, almost to herself, fingers now brushing his hip. "That's going to be fun."

He made a strangled sound.

"Marisol..."

She grinned, kissed his jaw. "Relax. I said you were going to get rewarded, remember?"

"I... yeah. I remember."

His voice was raw now, his eyes glued to the water trickling down her breasts, over her belly, between her thighs. She was *divine*. She looked like a goddess made flesh in her

dripping, radiant visage. She looked... powerful. But there was softness there too. The way she tucked her wet hair behind her ears, the way her nipples hardened under the spray and she shivered, ever so slightly.

“Do you know what you look like right now?” he asked hoarsely.

She tilted her head. “Enlighten me.”

“Like femininity itself,” he whispered. “Like every temple sculpture I’ve ever seen, except alive. Better.”

Her expression softened. “That... that’s the most beautiful thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

He stepped closer, not touching her yet, just letting their breath mix with the mist. “I want to sculpt myself for you,” he said suddenly. “I want you to look at me the way I’m looking at you right now. I want to make you proud.”

She blinked. “Bharath...”

“I’m serious,” he said. “I’m going to the gym every day with Jorge. No excuses. I want you to drool. I want to be *yours* in every way.”

Marisol’s lips parted, caught between a laugh and something deeply moved.

“You already are mine, dumbass,” she said, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his neck. “But if you want to sculpt that hot little body of yours for me... go ahead. I’ll cheer you on.”

She kissed him.

Slow. Wet. Deep.

The water thundered behind them, cascading over their bodies as they pressed flush together for the first time. There was no fabric between them, nothing but skin and heat and months of aching need.

He reached for the soap, hands trembling, and began to lather her body like it was a ritual.

She leaned back against the tile, eyes fluttering closed as his palms slid over her collarbone, down the slope of her breasts. His thumbs circled her nipples, slick with suds, and she whimpered.

“You feel everything, don’t you?” he asked, amazed.

She nodded. "With you? Always."

He kept going. Down her ribs, her waist, her hips.

She spread her legs just slightly, enough for his fingers to slip between her thighs, teasing gently.

"Bharath..." she moaned.

He dropped to his knees.

Water poured over his back as he kissed up the inside of her thigh, his hands holding her steady by the hips. He was reverent again, but bolder now. Like he had permission to be both worshipper and explorer.

When his tongue found her, she moaned. Soft at first, then louder. He suckled gently, slowly, working her like he had studied her dreams.

She came fast. Too fast. Her palms flat against the wall behind them, legs shaking as she cried out his name. And still he held her, guided her down, kissed the tremors from her thighs as she rode it out.

When she opened her eyes again, he was rising, face flushed, lips wet.

"You taste like heaven," he said simply.

She laughed, breathless. "You're not allowed to say things like that unless you're prepared for me to jump you."

"Oh, I'm ready," he replied.

But she stopped him with a finger to his lips.

"Not today," she said, eyes twinkling. "I told you. You're getting *rewarded*. Not just teased."

"You call that teasing?" he asked, eyes wide.

She grinned, grabbed the shampoo bottle. "Turn around, Mr. Vow-to-the-Gym."

He obeyed, and she began to work the shampoo into his hair. Her fingers massaging his scalp, nails lightly scraping as he let out a low groan.

"That feels... unfairly good," he murmured.

"Good. Consider this your warm-up."

She rinsed him off, then traded places.

When he returned the favor, she went boneless.

He soaped her hair with gentle care, then lathered her neck, her shoulders, her arms. When he got to her back, he paused.

“You have the most incredible ass I’ve ever seen.”

She looked over her shoulder and smirked. “I know.”

He kissed one cheek, then the other, his hand trailing between them. She wiggled just slightly, teasing him, and he groaned.

“You’re going to kill me.”

“I’d make it a good death.”

Their playfulness slowed as he ran the washcloth down her thighs, her calves, kneeling once more to clean her feet. She rested her hands on his shoulders, and for a long, quiet moment, they just breathed.

The steam had turned the mirror foggy. Their skin was pink from the heat. The world outside was still quiet. But inside this shower, something enormous had shifted.

They were no longer a new couple fumbling through early passion.

They were something more.

“Marisol,” he said softly, standing.

She looked up.

“I meant what I said,” he whispered. “I’m going to become the man you dream about. I want to earn every inch of you. Every sigh. Every gasp.”

She cupped his face, kissed him tenderly.

“You already do,” she whispered. “But if you want to keep earning it... I won’t stop you.”

They kissed again, sweet and slow under the falling water, surrounded by heat and danger and morning light.

They dried off quickly, still laughing in whispers as they helped each other with towels and tiptoed back through the hallway like conspirators, Marisol in a borrowed Tech

hoodie that barely covered her shorts, Bharath brushing damp hair out of his face with a towel slung over his shoulder.

The moment they stepped back into his dorm room and the door shut behind them, he checked on Tyrel - still passed out, one arm flopping off the mattress like a broken puppet - and peeked into Jorge's bed with Ravi just long enough to confirm the snoring was deep and untroubled. They paused - looking at each other.

In the quiet that followed, neither of them said anything. Everything had already been said - through touch, through sweat, through water and whispered vows.

They were each other's now.

And neither of them was ever going to forget this morning.

"So we have some time to kill before we can get breakfast," said Bharath, smirking.

"Ay no! Whatever shall we do?" exclaimed Marisol dramatically.

Bharath tackled Marisol onto his bed, pulled the covers over themselves and went to work on Marisol with her squealing in pleasure.

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