

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 41: Claimed [18+]

[3,857 words]

The room was dim, the late afternoon light slipping through the blinds in soft golden slants. A breeze stirred the thin curtain, the hum of the boxy AC filling the silence with a constant, lazy drone.

Bharath lay behind Marisol, spooned around her like she was the only shape he'd ever been meant to hold.

His hand was under her borrowed Tech hoodie, fingers moving slowly, worshipfully, over the soft weight of her breasts, occasionally rolling one nipple between his fingertips just to hear her breath hitch. She wasn't wearing a bra, and it was driving him quietly mad.

She smelled like summer skin and shampoo. Like home.

His mouth pressed against the curve of her shoulder, then higher. Her neck, her cheek, her temple. Small, open kisses between long exhales.

Neither of them had said anything in a while.

They hadn't needed to.

But then, quietly... so quietly he almost missed it.

Marisol murmured, "Can I tell you something?"

"Always," he whispered, his thumb now lazily stroking her bare skin in slow, widening circles.

She hesitated. Then said, "Did you like watching me controlling Sarah? Exposing her to you?"

His hand stilled.

But only for a beat.

Then it moved again, softer now - like he didn't want to spook her.

"I've never done that before, you know," Marisol continued. "I am doing things that I've never done before with anyone. You are my first... everything. Somehow... just being around you makes me do insane things. I don't know why. It's just... crazy. Something... different."

"Well you could have fooled me," Bharath said, chuckling. "You almost blew my mind."

"You know that I'm not into her right?" Marisol turned in his arms and looked at him beseechingly. "I... I just want to make you happy. In any way that you want. You didn't answer the question. Did you find that hot?"

"It was the hottest thing I've ever seen, but I only need you, Mari," said Bharath guardedly.

"I... I don't want you to think I'm weird or into anyone else. But you. This morning, when I saw Sarah watching us... it just made me so hot! I mean... something in me just pictured you with her. And instead of getting angry or jealous, I wanted it. I wanted to see her with you. Doing all the things I talked about when I exposed her to you. I wanted to see you wreck her like you do to me. I wanted to join in. Am I weird, Bharath?"

Bharath didn't answer with words.

But Marisol felt him.

All of him.

Pressed against her lower back, thick and hard and rising fast under the thin barrier of his sweats.

She grinned into the pillow.

"Well. That's an answer."

He groaned softly, burying his face into her hair. "I can't help it. You're talking about you, me, and her. In bed. Together. Don't you know that's the ultimate dream for any guy?"

"Well well..." Marisol said, teasing. "Looks like someone approves. But Bharath... Sarah is different. It's not just physical with her. It's emotional too. I think there's something there."

He kissed the back of her shoulder, voice muffled. "Did you feel it too?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I did. It was... strange. But not in a bad way. I felt like we were already something. Like a bond was forming even though no one asked for it."

Bharath exhaled against her skin. "And you're okay with that?"

"I don't know what I am," she admitted. "I'm not bi or lesbian, Bharath. Not really. But I didn't feel weird holding her. Or letting her hold me even when we were half naked. I felt safe. And... open."

She shifted slightly, reaching behind her to touch his thigh. "But here's the thing. None of this happens without you. If something ever happens, ever, it only happens with your full consent. And your heart is in the right place."

He pressed a long, slow kiss to the side of her neck. "You're mine," he murmured.

She smiled. "And I'll never forget that."

He squeezed her breast gently, then ran his hand back down to her stomach, resting there.

"So what do we do?" she asked quietly.

Bharath was quiet for a long moment, his hand still warm against her skin.

He didn't know what to say.

Part of him still felt like the boy who'd flown to the US with a suitcase full of software dreams and Bollywood fantasies. A boy who'd never even kissed a girl before three weeks ago. Who thought "love" was something abstract, delayed, something you'd grow into slowly.

And now? He was here. With a gorgeous girl Marisol in his arms. After saving a stranger. After seeing that same stranger... differently.

What scared him wasn't the arousal. Or the attraction.

It was the feeling that maybe his heart wasn't built like he thought. Maybe it could stretch. That maybe, in some impossible way, he could love more than one woman. Not as a betrayal of the first, but as an expansion of the soul.

But was that even real? Was it fair? Was he strong enough to hold that kind of love, without breaking it?

"I'm scared," he whispered, voice rough.

Marisol turned slightly, brow furrowed. "Of what?"

"Of doing this wrong," he said. "Of hurting you. Of being too much. Or not enough."

She kissed his chest softly. "Then we go slow. Together."

She traced her fingers lightly along his arm, guiding him back to the moment.

"I told her the truth," Marisol said. "That I belong to you. And that nothing happens unless you want it too. I gave her a choice. But I made it clear that I'm not going anywhere."

His heart pounded against her back. She could feel it, strong and steady.

Then he whispered, "And what if I want it? Someday?"

Marisol turned in his arms just enough to look him in the eyes.

"Then we take our time," she said. "And we do it right."

He nodded, lips brushing her temple, but his hand - slow, teasing - was already slipping beneath the hem of her top. She arched slightly, surprised at her own need. How alive she still felt under his fingertips.

"Wait," he said, voice dropping to that low, commanding register she craved. The shy, gentle Bharath everyone else knew vanished the moment they were alone like this. In his place was the lion. Marisol loved that duality more than words could capture: the same man who spoke softly in class could make her tremble with a single look.

"You did say you belong to me," he murmured.

Her lips curled. "I did."

"Like... entirely?" His fingers dragged up the slope of her spine, feather-light, raising goosebumps in their wake. "Every part?"

"Mmhmm."

He kissed the curve of her shoulder, then lower, toward her collarbone. "Even this part?"

She laughed breathily. "That's my shoulder."

"Yes," he said, mock-serious. "But is it mine?"

She rolled her eyes, biting her lip. "If I say yes, what does that get me?"

"Everything I want to give you." His mouth grazed her clavicle. "Can I kiss it again?"

"Yes."

He did... slowly. The kiss lingered, warm and open-mouthed, teeth grazing just enough to make her shiver.

“And what about...” his fingers brushed along her ribs, just under her breasts. “This part? Right here?”

She sucked in a breath. “Yours.”

“Can I touch it?”

“You’re already touching it,” she whispered.

He grinned, dark and knowing. “But I want permission.”

“You don’t need”

“I want it,” he said. “Say it.”

She blushed but whispered, “You can touch it.”

His hand slid up, cupping her through her shirt, thumb circling over fabric and skin until her nipple hardened to a sharp peak. Her breath hitched.

“And these?” he murmured, shifting so he hovered slightly over her, one knee slipping between her thighs. “These gorgeous breasts that I think about way too often?”

Marisol laughed, flushed. “You’re obsessed.”

“Of course I am.” His thumb brushed her nipple through the fabric. “They’re perfect. But are they mine?”

She bit her bottom lip, voice hitching. “Yes.”

“Say it.”

“They’re yours.”

“Can I take your shirt off?”

“Yes.”

He peeled the fabric over her head slowly. Her hair spilled across the pillow. Her chest, full and soft, heaved with every breath, nipples already taut from cool air and his voice alone.

“God,” he breathed. “You know in our temples they carve women with breasts like yours. I used to think they were fantasy. Now I know better.”

“You say the sweetest things, Bharath.”

His palm settled warm against her bare breast. He kissed the underside, then the top, then sucked the nipple deep into his mouth. He sucked hard enough to pull a sharp cry from her throat, gentle enough to make her melt. He released it with a wet pop, then moved to the other side, sucking and biting softly until dark red marks bloomed across the upper swell of both breasts. He always left marks there; it was his thing, his quiet claiming, and Marisol loved the way they looked the next day. Proof she was his.

“Still mine?” he asked, voice rough.

She whimpered. “Yes.”

He moved lower, kissing a slow path down her sternum, then back up to the marked skin, tracing the hickeys with his tongue until she was writhing.

He pulled back just enough to look at her. “I want to find every place that makes you shake. Every spot that makes you wetter. Will you let me?”

Her thighs pressed together instinctively. “Yes.”

He smiled - slow, predatory. “Good girl.”

He kissed down her ribs, testing with lips and tongue. When he found the sensitive dip just below her breast she arched hard, a sharp gasp escaping. He lingered there, sucking lightly until she was writhing.

“Here?” he murmured.

“Si!”

He noted it, filed it away, then continued downward. Over her stomach. Along the curve of her hip. He nipped the soft skin just above her waistband and she jolted.

“Sensitive,” he observed, voice rough with satisfaction.

“Very.”

He tugged her shorts and underwear down in one slow motion, baring her completely. She lifted her hips to help, thighs trembling.

“Look at you,” he breathed, spreading her legs gently. “So wet already. Just from me touching you.”

She whimpered, embarrassed and aroused in equal measure.

He kissed the inside of her thigh, then higher, breathing hot against her folds. "Can I taste you?"

"Please."

His tongue dragged through her in one long, slow stroke. Marisol's back bowed off the bed, a broken moan tearing from her throat.

He explored her like a man mapping sacred ground. Circling her clit with the flat of his tongue, then flicking the tip, then sucking gently. When her hips bucked he pinned them down with one forearm, holding her open while he learned exactly how much pressure, how much speed, made her thighs shake hardest.

"Right there," she gasped. "Don't stop... please don't stop"

He didn't. He licked and sucked and hummed until she shattered, thighs clamping around his head, fingers yanking his hair, crying his name as she came hard against his mouth.

When she finally collapsed, chest heaving, he crawled back up her body and kissed her deeply, letting her taste herself on his tongue.

Bharath kissed her once more, slow and deep, letting her taste the salt and sweetness of her own release on his tongue. When he finally pulled back, Marisol's eyes were glassy, her lips swollen and parted.

He traced a fingertip down the center of her chest, between the fresh red marks he'd left on the upper curves of her breasts.

"Turn over," he whispered.

Marisol blinked up at him, still dazed from the orgasm. "What?"

His voice stayed low, that commanding edge she loved so much threading through the gentleness. "I want to see your back. All of you."

A small tremor ran through her. This felt different. More exposed, more vulnerable. She'd never lain completely bare on her stomach for anyone, never let someone study the parts of her body she usually kept turned away. But the way Bharath was looking at her now - dark, and hungry, made her want to give him everything.

She swallowed. "Okay."

She rolled slowly onto her stomach, folding her arms under her cheek, legs slightly parted. The cool air kissed the backs of her thighs, the small of her back, the cleft between her cheeks. She felt suddenly, thrillingly naked in a way she hadn't before.

Bharath exhaled roughly behind her.

For a long moment he didn't touch her. He just looked.

She could feel his gaze moving over her like a physical thing. Down the graceful dip of her spine, the subtle flare of her hips, the full roundness of her ass. Heat bloomed under his attention.

"You're so beautiful," he said, almost to himself. "I don't even know where to start."

Marisol turned her head just enough to catch his eye. "Anywhere. Everywhere."

He settled on his knees beside her. His hands hovered for a second, trembling slightly. He was nervous too, she realized. This was new for him as well. The shy boy who'd barely kissed anyone three weeks ago was gone in these moments, replaced by someone bolder, but even the lion inside him still felt the weight of firsts.

His palms finally settled on her shoulder blades, warm and careful. He smoothed them down the length of her back in long, slow strokes, mapping the curve of her spine with his thumbs. When he reached the small of her back he paused, fingers splaying wide, pressing gently into the dimples above her ass.

Marisol sighed, melting into the mattress.

"Here?" he murmured, circling those little hollows with the pads of his thumbs.

She shivered. "Yes... that feels good."

He leaned down and kissed the spot he'd just touched. It was soft, open-mouthed, lingering. Then again. And again. Each kiss sent tiny sparks racing up her spine.

He moved lower, palms gliding over the full curves of her ass, kneading lightly, worshipfully. She arched her back without thinking, offering more of herself.

Bharath groaned low in his throat.

He parted her cheeks gently with his thumbs, exposing her completely. Marisol's breath caught. No one had ever looked at her there, let alone touched her. The vulnerability hit her like a wave. It was scary, thrilling and overwhelming all at the same time.

"Bharath..." Her voice was small.

He paused instantly. "Too much?"

"No," she whispered quickly. "Just... new. I've never..."

"Me neither," he admitted, voice rough with honesty. "I don't want to hurt you. Or scare you."

She reached back blindly, finding his wrist. "You won't. I trust you."

He exhaled shakily. "Tell me to stop if it's too much. Promise?"

"I promise."

He kissed the small of her back again. Once. Twice. Then let his thumbs trace slow circles around the tight ring of her ass. No pressure, no pushing inside. Just gentle, teasing rimming with the soft pads of his fingers.

Marisol's entire body jolted.

"Oh"

He froze. "Good or bad?"

"Good," she gasped. "Really good. Keep going."

He did. Slow, careful circles, barely touching, just enough to make every nerve light up. Wetness gathered between her thighs again, slick and hot. She rocked back instinctively, seeking more.

"You like that," he said, voice dark with discovery.

"Yes. God, yes."

He kept the motion steady, watching her reaction, show her hips lifted, how her breath came in short, needy pants, how her fingers curled into the sheets. When he pressed just a fraction firmer, tracing the sensitive skin right at the entrance without breaching, she moaned brokenly into the pillow.

"I think..." she panted, "I think I could come like this."

His cock throbbed against her thigh. "Then come for me."

He didn't speed up. Didn't push inside. He simply kept those slow, maddening circles, letting the anticipation and openness build until her whole body tensed, thighs trembling, back arching sharply.

She came with a muffled cry, hips grinding back against his hand, inner walls pulsing around nothing. Slickness coated her thighs. Tears pricked her eyes from the intensity of it.

Bharath kissed her spine over and over as she shook through the aftershocks. Soft, soothing kisses along every vertebra.

When she finally went limp, he gathered her close, rolling them so she was tucked against his chest again, blanket pulled over them both.

“You okay?” he whispered, voice thick.

She nodded against his throat, still trembling. “More than okay. That was... I didn’t know I could feel that.”

He kissed her forehead. “We’ll go slow with everything. No rush.”

She smiled, sleepy and sated. “I want to learn more. With you. When we’re ready.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” he promised.

He reached for his hoodie again to cover her, but Marisol stopped him.

Marisol stopped his hand gently, fingers curling around his wrist. “Wait, mi amor. You’ve been so good with me. Now it’s my turn.”

Bharath raised an eyebrow, a slow, surprised smile curving his mouth. “Your turn?”

She nodded, pushing lightly at his shoulder until he eased onto his back. He let her guide him without resistance, arms falling to his sides, watching her with that quiet intensity that always made her pulse kick up. The blanket slipped down to his hips, leaving his chest bare. She was careful. Always careful. Now mindful of the six neat stitches low on his abdomen, still pink and tender from the knife that had grazed him saving Sarah. No sudden movements, no pressure there. She straddled his thighs high enough to keep her weight off the wound, settling just above him so she could feel the heat radiating from his body.

She leaned down and kissed him once. Slow, deep, letting him taste the lingering salt of her own release on her tongue then sat back up, hands braced on his chest, careful to avoid the bandaged line.

“I heard something from a girl in my dorm,” she said, voice low and a little shy. “She said guys lose their minds over this. I want to try it. With you.”

He swallowed visibly, Adam’s apple bobbing. “What is it?”

She didn't answer right away. Instead she reached for the hem of his t-shirt and tugged it up. He lifted his arms to help, letting her pull it off and toss it aside. Then her hands went to the waistband of his sweatpants. She hooked her fingers under the elastic and dragged them down just enough to free him completely.

His cock sprang up, thick and flushed, the head already beading again despite how recently he'd come. Marisol's breath caught at the sight. She wrapped her hand around the base. It was warm, velvet-hard, pulsing in her grip and gave one slow, firm stroke.

Bharath groaned low, hips jerking once before he caught himself, careful not to pull at his stitches.

She smiled, small and wicked, then leaned forward.

Cupping her breasts in both hands, she pressed them together around his length. The soft, heavy weight enveloped him completely, her nipples brushing against his shaft as she slid upward, then down again. The friction was imperfect. Warm and slick from her spit and his pre-cum, but not tight enough to be ideal. Yet the visual alone was devastating.

Bharath's eyes locked on the sight: her full breasts wrapped around him, sliding up and down, the dark red marks he'd left earlier stark against her golden skin, her nipples dragging along his shaft with every pass. Cum from before still clung faintly to the inner curves, making the valley shiny and obscene.

"Fuck, Mari..." His voice was wrecked.

She moved slowly at first, watching his face. How his jaw clenched, how his hands fisted the sheets without pulling too hard, how his chest rose and fell in harsh, uneven breaths. The slide wasn't perfect; her breasts were too soft for real friction, but the image of them enveloping him, of her looking down at him while she worked, was mind-blowing.

"You like watching your cock disappear between my tits, don't you?" she murmured, voice husky. "Look how hard you are... leaking all over me already. You love marking me here, don't you? Painting my breasts with your cum like I'm yours to claim."

Bharath's hips twitched upward, a low groan tearing from his throat. "Yes... fuck, keep talking like that."

She sped up a little, squeezing her breasts tighter around him, letting her thumbs brush over her own nipples as she moved. Pre-cum leaked steadily now, making the valley slick and shiny.

"I can feel you throbbing," she whispered, leaning down so her breath ghosted over the head on the next upstroke. "You're so close already... you want to come all over these

tits you love so much? Want to see your cum dripping down my nipples? Want to watch me lick every drop off like the good girl I am for you?"

He bucked harder, breath sawing. "Mari... fuck... yes"

She dragged her tongue across the head on the upstroke, tasting salt and heat. He groaned like he'd been punched, hips jerking before he forced himself still, protecting the stitches.

"Warn me again," she whispered. "Tell me where you want to finish."

His eyes snapped to hers, dark and desperate. "Your breasts. Please... right there."

She smiled, slow and pleased. "Then do it. Come for me, papi. Cover my tits. Make them yours."

She kept moving. Faster now, breasts sliding slick and tight around him until his whole body tensed, muscles locking, breath sawing in and out.

"Mari... fuck... now!"

He came with a broken groan, hips jerking up as thick ropes of cum painted her breasts. The first spurt hit high, streaking across the upper swell and one nipple; the next landed lower, pooling in the valley between them; more followed, warm and copious, until her chest glistened with him. He kept pulsing, smaller spurts dripping down the inner curves, marking her in the most intimate way.

Marisol didn't flinch. She kept her breasts pressed together until he was spent, until his hips stopped twitching and his breathing slowed to harsh pants.

Then slowly, deliberately... She released him.

Bharath watched, dazed and wrecked, as she lifted one breast to her mouth and licked a thick stripe through the mess, collecting it on her tongue. She swallowed, eyes locked on his. Then the other breast. Another long, deliberate lick, tongue swirling around her marked nipple, gathering every drop she could reach.

When her tongue couldn't get it all, she used her fingers, scooping the warm cum from the valley between her breasts, bringing it to her lips, sucking her fingers clean with soft, obscene sounds. She did it again. And again. Until her chest was mostly clean, only faint shiny streaks remained.

Bharath groaned low and wrecked, cock twitching against his stomach even though he'd just finished.

"You're fucking insane," he rasped.

She chuckled, low and satisfied, licking the last trace from her thumb. “Only for you.”

He reached for her immediately, pulling her down so she sprawled carefully across his chest, mindful of the stitches.

After a minute he reached blindly for his hoodie again. The one she’d been wearing earlier and tugged it over her head. The fabric settled around her, oversized and soft, covering the last traces of what they’d done.

Marisol laughed softly against his neck. “Clothes already? You’re no fun.”

He wrapped his arms around her, voice rough but tender. “The others are gonna be back soon. And this” he traced a finger over one fading mark on her breast, then pulled the hoodie higher to cover it. “This is only for me. No one else gets to see you like this. Ever.”

She melted against him, all teasing gone, replaced by something soft and aching.

“Good,” she whispered. “Because I only want you to see me like this.”

He kissed her forehead, then her temple, then the corner of her mouth.

“Mine,” he said quietly.

“Yours,” she answered.

They stayed tangled together under the blanket, listening to the building slowly wake up around them footsteps in the hallway, keys jingling, distant voices calling across the quad.

Neither of them moved to get up.

Not yet.

There was nowhere else they wanted to be.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 42: Thug Life and Stitches

[1,138 words]

The door burst open like it had been kicked in, and in strolled Jorge and Tyrel, loud and still half-hyped from campus buzz.

“Yo! Smith 202 lives!” Tyrel declared, tossing his bag onto the chair. “Look who finally made it back.”

Jorge leaned against the dresser, arching a brow. “You skipped all your classes, bro. You sick or just in post-coital recovery?”

Bharath, still lounging on his bed in fresh sweats and a bandaged side, raised his hands in mock surrender.

“I got stabbed.”

Both of them stared.

“Wait... what?” Tyrel said, grinning like he misheard.

Bharath shrugged. “There was a mugging last night. I stepped in. Got stabbed by some muggers.”

Jorge blinked. “Are you serious?”

Bharath pulled up his shirt just enough to show the fresh white gauze peeking out from beneath the wrap.

“Holy shit,” Jorge said, crossing the room in three steps. “You’re serious!”

“Wait, wait, wait... back it up,” Tyrel said, dropping onto the couch like it was popcorn time. “You got stabbed? Where? When? How many people? Did you kill someone?”

“No one died,” Bharath said flatly. “Two guys jumped a girl near the MARTA station. I yelled, they got in my face, it got messy.”

Tyrel was still staring at the bandage like it was a battle medal. “You don’t even look like a guy who’d throw down.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Damn,” Tyrel said, eyes wide. “You living that thug life now dawg.”

Bharath blinked. "I'm what?"

"Thug. Life." Tyrel repeated, gesturing like it explained everything. "You out here dodging blades, saving damsels, probably wearing a durag next week."

"I don't know what a 'thug life' is," Bharath said, deadpan.

Jorge laughed. "It's not you, man. Trust me."

Tyrel leaned back, arms behind his head. "Nah, this man's a gangsta now. Getting stabbed and still making out with his girl an hour later? Respect."

Bharath rubbed his forehead. "Please stop."

Marisol, who had been curled against Bharath's side under the blanket, finally lifted her head and fixed Tyrel with a look.

"First of all," she said sweetly, "he wasn't 'making out' with me an hour later. He was resting. Second, if you call him a gangsta one more time I'm going to make you eat that couch cushion."

Tyrel threw up his hands. "I'm just saying! Man's got stitches and still got you glued to him like Velcro. Y'all are stuck together 24/7."

Jorge snorted. "Seriously. I've seen less PDA from newlyweds. You two ever come up for air?"

Marisol smiled, slow and dangerous. "Jealous, Jorge?"

"Extremely," he shot back without missing a beat. "I want someone to look at me the way Bharath looks at you. Like you hung the moon and the stars and also invented pizza."

Bharath's face went brick red. He buried it in Marisol's hair.

Marisol laughed, delighted. "See? That's how you get a man to blush. Keep going."

Tyrel grinned. "Nah, for real though. How'd it even happen? You just... jumped in?"

Bharath exhaled, shifting carefully so the stitches didn't pull. "Yeah. Two guys, one with a knife. They had her cornered. I couldn't just walk by."

Jorge whistled low. "Unarmed?"

Bharath nodded. "I saw a metal pole on the ground. It was some kind of construction scrap. I grabbed it, yelled and charged. They turned on me. Knife guy got a swipe in

when I was swinging the pole and caught him in the arm. The other one bolted. I chased them off, made sure the girl was okay. Cops showed up pretty quick after that.”

Tyrel sat forward. “You chased them? With a pole? Like some kinda action movie shit?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Bharath said quickly. “I was scared out of my mind. I just... reacted.”

Marisol cut in, voice firm. “Don’t downplay it, mi amor. He jumped in unarmed against two grown ass men. One was armed. While everyone else walked past, Bharath charged in. He took a knife to the side and still chased them away so the girl could get to safety. That’s not ‘reacting.’ That’s heroic.”

Bharath ducked his head. “Mari...”

“No,” she said, turning to him. “You don’t get to be modest about this. You almost died saving someone. Own it.”

Jorge looked between them, impressed. “Que carajo! So what happened to the girl?”

Marisol and Bharath exchanged a quick glance.

“The cops took her statement,” Bharath said evenly. “She was shaken up. That’s all I know.”

Jorge nodded slowly. “Respect, man. That’s real.”

Tyrel raised his Coke can. “To Bharath. For not dying and still pulling the hottest girl on campus.”

Marisol rolled her eyes but clinked her water bottle against his can anyway.

The mood lightened after that. They made jokes about Bharath’s new “street cred,” Tyrel trying (and failing) to teach him what “thug life” really meant, Jorge offering to draw a comic of “Pole-Wielding Bharath vs. Knife Guy.” Bharath laughed along, mostly to keep them from asking more questions.

Eventually Marisol glanced at her watch and sighed.

“I should go,” she said quietly. “My mom’s going to kill me. I haven’t been home since Saturday. I called her when you got stabbed, but I haven’t talked to her since.”

Bharath’s face softened. “You sure you’re okay to go by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine.” She leaned down and kissed him... slow, lingering, right in front of the guys. The guys made fake kissing noises till Bharath and Marisol broke apart laughing.

"Stop it you losers," said Marisol, throwing a pillow at Jorge.

"Don't mind them. They're just jealous, chellam. Come here," said Bharath. He turned Marisol's face and kissed her deeply.

Tyrel whistled low. Jorge pretended to fan himself.

Marisol pulled back, smirking at them. "Keep it in your pants, boys. He's taken."

She stood, smoothing her hoodie, then turned back to Bharath. The teasing fell away.

"Call me when you wake up tomorrow," she said softly. "Promise?"

"Promise."

She kissed him one more time. This time it was gentler. Then she headed for the door.

"Love you," she said over her shoulder.

"Love you too."

The door clicked shut behind her.

Silence settled for a beat.

Then Tyrel spoke.

"Bro. You're so whipped. You said you love her? Already?"

Jorge snorted. "Understatement of the century."

Bharath just smiled contently and leaned back against the pillows.

"Yeah," he said quietly. "I know."

Tyrel grabbed the controller. "Alright, enough romance. Time for some shooting games son. Now. You're on my team so you can't suck. To your computers boys. We gotta take advantage of all this bandwidth we have in the dorms. T1 baby!"

Jorge helped Bharath down from the bed. "You good to play with stitches?"

"I'll manage."

They booted up their computers. The trash talk started almost immediately. Tyrel yelling about headshots, Jorge complaining about lag, Ravi showing up late and immediately getting roasted.

Bharath played quietly, smiling every time he got a kill, laughing when Tyrel screamed after dying to a grenade.

It was normal.

It was good.

And underneath it all, he carried two secrets close:

The girl he'd saved.

And the girl who'd saved him right back.

He didn't talk about either one.

Not tonight.

Tonight was just friends, games, and the quiet certainty that tomorrow he'd wake up and call Marisol.

And that was enough.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 43: I'm not a child anymore Mamá

[1,999 words]

Marisol stepped quietly into her house just after sunset.

The porch light buzzed above her, casting a cone of dim gold over the peeling paint and sun-warmed brick. The living room glowed softly inside, warm lamplight spilling over the beige carpet and the family photos perched above the mantel. For a fleeting moment, it felt like a dream, returning to this world after the one she'd just come from.

But the moment she closed the door behind her, a voice rang out like thunder.

"Marisol Alicia Rivera!"

She winced. Her full name. Death sentence level.

“Ola, Mamá...”

Her mother was already in the hallway, eyes blazing, apron still on over her work blouse, her arms crossed in fury and something worse - fear.

“It’s Monday night,” Maria snapped. “You left for the party Saturday. You didn’t come home. You didn’t call. Not one damn word! ¿Qué carajo pasó? Are you insane?”

“I’m okay,” Marisol said quickly, her hands raised in surrender. “I swear. Nothing bad happened.”

“You think that matters to me?” her mother shot back, voice shaking. “You think I slept? I called your friends. Your dorm. Angela said you stayed with her, but she didn’t know where you were Sunday. I was two seconds from calling the police!”

Marisol’s heart pinched. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“THEN WHY DID YOU VANISH?” her mother shouted. “Tell me. Right now.”

Marisol dropped her bag by the couch. Her voice, when she spoke, was softer. “Can we sit?”

Maria stared at her, jaw locked, but the shift in her daughter’s tone was enough to cut through the heat. Slowly, she nodded.

They sat. The same couch they’d watched telenovelas on when Marisol was little. The same couch where she’d cried after Mia’s broken arm, or after their father left.

Marisol exhaled and said quietly, “I met someone.”

Maria blinked. “Someone?”

“A boy,” Marisol clarified. “Well, not a boy. A man. His name’s Bharath. He’s a freshman too. From India. He’s here on full scholarship. You’ll love him Mamá. He’s smart, sweet, respectful, and...” She smiled, small and helpless. “I think he might be the one.”

Maria recoiled like the air had been sucked from the room. “Marisol.”

“I know it sounds fast...”

“Fast?” Maria scoffed. “Mija, you’ve known him for how long? Two weeks? And you disappear for days with him? What do you even know about this boy?”

“I know what I felt in his arms,” Marisol said quietly. “And I know I’ve never felt that safe before. Ever.”

Her mother's face softened for half a heartbeat, but then hardened again. "Safe doesn't mean smart. This is reckless, Marisol. Dangerous."

"It didn't feel dangerous," Marisol replied. "It felt... inevitable."

Maria stood up, pacing now. "No. You're eighteen. You don't know what love is. You think some soft words and a few kisses mean fate? That's not how this works. That's not how people stay. I know. You think I didn't love your father? I did. With everything I had. And he still walked out that door before Mia could walk."

She turned away, one hand trembling against her temple. "I was just a girl... barely older than you are now... with two babies and no job, no degree, and a heart shattered so badly I didn't think it would beat again."

Marisol's anger faltered.

Maria swallowed hard. "So when I see you falling this fast, giving yourself to someone who could disappear tomorrow, don't you dare think I'm just being harsh. I'm scared, mija. I'm terrified. Because I know what it's like to love a man so much you forget where you end and he begins... and then wake up alone."

Her voice cracked on the last words. She turned away quickly.

Marisol stood now too, her tone less firm. "Then explain it to me. Explain what does count, mamá. A ring? A job? A checklist? Because if you want that kind of love for me - cold, transactional, polite - I can't give you that. I don't want it."

"You don't even know him," Maria hissed. "You know how he treats you when you're glowing and pretty. What about when you're not? When you're sick, or scared, or angry? You think this boy's going to hold you through that too?"

"Yes," Marisol said simply. "Because he already has."

Maria's breath hitched. "You slept with him."

Marisol's jaw clenched. "Yes."

"You let a boy you just met... "

"He's not a boy," Marisol cut in. "He's kind. He's gentle. He's awkward as hell and probably the most respectful man I've ever met. And when I was with him, I wasn't afraid. Not once. I was seen. I was wanted. For all of me."

Maria's eyes glistened now with unshed tears. "You're still a child."

"No," Marisol whispered. "I haven't been a child since Dad left."

Silence.

It landed heavy between them.

Maria folded her arms tight across her chest, like she could keep the world from shifting under her feet.

“I raised you better than this,” she said finally. “You don’t just give yourself away.”

“I didn’t,” Marisol said. “I chose. I gave. Because I love him.”

“Love, Dios!” her mother scoffed again. “After fifteen days? Twenty?”

Marisol’s eyes filled now too. “After a year of feeling numb. After years of never letting anyone in. After always being the strong one. He’s the first person who made me feel like I could let go. And I wanted to. That means something.”

From the hallway, just behind the cracked door frame, Mia stood frozen.

She hadn’t meant to eavesdrop... not at first. She’d heard the yelling and crept down the hall expecting the usual mother-daughter fireworks. But what she found instead?

Was something else.

Marisol’s voice was thick now. “He doesn’t touch me like I’m something to conquer. He touches me like I’m his. Like he can’t believe he’s allowed. And when I let go, when I gave him everything - I didn’t feel used. I felt worshipped.”

Maria’s breath was coming in sharp pulls now. “You’re going to get hurt.”

“Maybe,” Marisol said. “But I’d rather risk that than go through life never feeling what I felt this weekend.”

“Do you even know his last name?”

“Yes,” Marisol snapped. “He wants to be a software engineer. He calls his mother almost every day. He doesn’t drink. He’s never had sex before. He...”

Maria held up a hand, horrified. “Too much information.”

But it was too late. Mia’s heart was racing. Her ears burned. Not from disgust. From something else.

Her sister had said the word worshipped. Not loved. Not liked.

Worshipped.

Marisol had never even had sex with a boy before. And here she was, flushed and radiant and still humming with some deep magic - as if she'd walked through fire and come back shining.

Is that what it's supposed to feel like? To be touched like you're precious?

Mia swallowed hard.

"I need to meet him," Maria said again, her voice lower now. "If you're serious - really serious - then he sits at this table. He meets my eyes. He tells me who he is. And he respects our home."

"He will," Marisol said. "Gladly."

Maria wiped her eyes. "And if he doesn't?"

"Then he's not the man I think he is."

A pause.

Then, softly, Maria added, "Just... promise me you're being careful."

"I am," Marisol said. "With everything. But my heart's not afraid of him."

Behind the door, Mia pressed a hand to her chest. Her heart was racing. And it wasn't from fear.

It was from something else - something hot and tangled and unfamiliar.

She hadn't meant to listen. It started as curiosity. Marisol never got into screaming matches with Mamá. That was *her* job. Marisol was always the composed one - the ice queen, calm and controlled, the girl who never let anyone see her crack.

But tonight? She had cracked. And what came out had shaken something loose in Mia.

She stepped back from the hallway quietly, barefoot on the cool floorboards, and slipped into her room without a sound. The door clicked shut behind her like the sealing of a confession.

She stood still for a moment. Just breathing. Then the mirror above her dresser caught her in its frame - all legs and curves and flawless skin, her t-shirt slipping from one shoulder like it had been choreographed.

At seventeen, Mia Rivera looked like everything boys dreamed about. And she knew it. So did the rest of the world.

Ex-head cheerleader. Queen of her high school. Voted “Best Smile” and “Most Likely to Break Hearts” in the same week. She walked the halls like they belonged to her - and they did. Boys froze when she passed. Teachers tread carefully around her. Girls copied her lipstick shade and her scrunchie colors and prayed to whatever gods ruled teenage cool that Mia wouldn’t cut them with one of her slow, pitying smiles.

She had power. But tonight, she felt powerless.

She sat slowly on the edge of her bed, her hands clasped between her knees, elbows resting on her thighs like she was bracing for a truth she hadn’t asked to hear.

What Marisol had said - it kept echoing. *He made me feel safe. He made me feel seen. I belong to him.*

That word again. *Belonged*. Mia didn’t know if she wanted to belong to anyone. But the way Marisol said it... it hadn’t sounded weak. It had sounded like freedom.

And it had done something to her.

She’d always thought her sister was the odd one out. Marisol, with her cool detachment and withering comebacks, who once turned down the star quarterback and didn’t even flinch when he almost cried. Mia used to laugh at her. Quietly. Now she wasn’t laughing.

Because Marisol hadn’t sounded like someone caught in a stupid crush. She’d sounded *undone*. Unraveled. Like something in her had come loose for the first time in years - and she *liked* it.

And Mia... Mia had never felt that.

Sure, she’d been kissed. Groped. Whispered about.

She was the ultimate male fantasy. Never the girl someone worshipped - not someone who was thought of as more than a doll.

Marisol was talking about a guy who - by all accounts - should’ve been forgettable. Some awkward Indian nerd from Georgia Tech. Probably wore the same jeans every day and read sci-fi books with dorky covers.

And yet... He had made Marisol *melt*.

He’d never even had sex before. How did that work? How does a boy who’s never even *done it* get a girl like Marisol to *surrender* like that?

Mia hugged her knees to her chest and stared at the floor. It didn’t make sense. But it *felt* true.

She thought of her father - *Ricardo* - and how he'd left them. How she was barely crawling and Marisol was still in pigtails when he walked out. Another woman. Another life. Another excuse.

Mamá had raised them alone. Worked shifts at whatever job she could find and cleaned houses when the bills stacked too high. There were months when the electricity flickered like it was trying to make a decision. Years when new clothes were a fantasy.

Mia remembered the screaming. The quiet nights. The way Marisol always acted older than she had to.

And Mia remembered how safe Marisol made *her* feel. When Mamá collapsed into bed from exhaustion. When the fridge echoed with too much space. When she asked, once, what their dad had looked like.

Marisol had been the protector. Always.

But tonight, she had protected *him*. This Bharath. This strange, awkward boy who'd walked into their lives and flipped Marisol upside down like it was the easiest thing in the world. It was not just sex. Not just attention. But that feeling. That *tether*. That ache in Marisol's voice when she said she *wasn't afraid*.

No one had ever made Mia feel that way.

All those boys - Caleb, Jordan, Eli - they were all just noise. They wanted her because everyone else did. Because she looked like a prize. But none of them had ever *seen her*.

Not the scared part. Not the girl who still wondered if she'd been enough to make Ricardo stay. Not the girl who smiled for the cameras but cried when Mamá forgot her birthday because of a double shift.

Mia wiped her cheek, suddenly damp. She hadn't even realized she was crying.

And why, in her golden, perfect life... did she suddenly feel like the one who was missing out?

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 44: Atlanta Batman

[1,187 words]

The dining hall smelled of burnt toast and overcooked hash browns, but Bharath didn't care. He was hungry. Sore, but ravenous. He limped slightly as he reached their usual table and found Jorge already there, towel draped around his neck, still glistening from his early morning gym session.

"Look who finally showed up," Jorge said, grinning. "We thought you were dead."

Bharath dropped his tray on the table with a grunt. "Close enough."

Jorge took one look at him and narrowed his eyes. "You're skipping the gym again?"

Bharath winced as he sat. "I got stabbed, Jorge."

"Is that your new excuse?" Jorge smirked. "Next you'll tell me you rescued a princess and slayed a dragon."

"Close," Bharath muttered through a mouthful of eggs.

Tyrel sauntered over, plopping a folded newspaper onto the table with the grace of a magician revealing his finale.

"Page three," he said dramatically. "You're famous."

Bharath raised an eyebrow. Jorge leaned in, unfolding the copy of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* with a flourish. A headline on the page read:

MUGGING INTERRUPTED NEAR MIDTOWN STATION - UNKNOWN GOOD SAMARITAN INTERVENES

Below it, a blurred photo of flashing lights, yellow tape, and an ambulance van.

"No names?" Bharath asked, relieved.

"Nope," Tyrel said. "But the reporter called the guy a 'quiet, Indian student who vanished before reporters arrived.' Sound like anyone we know?"

Bharath groaned.

"Atlanta Batman," Tyrel declared, holding out a fist for Jorge, who bumped it with a grin.

Ravi arrived late, sliding into the seat beside Bharath with a frown.

"You should've told me, man," he said. "Jorge filled me in. You really okay?"

"I'm fine. Just a little sore."

"You're nuts," Ravi muttered. "I mean, respect bhai - but you are nuts."

"Totalmente!," Jorge said. "I go to the gym for twenty minutes and Bharath's out here earning vigilante status."

"Dude's skipping biceps to fight crime," Tyrel added. "Respect dawg."

"Can we not turn this into an origin story?" Bharath sighed. "I didn't vanish into the shadows. I got taken to the ER."

"Did you at least wear a cape?" Tyrel asked.

"Or tights?" Jorge grinned.

"Guys," Ravi said, shaking his head, "he literally got stitched up for this."

They gave him a moment's silence as a mark of respect.

Tyrel took a bite of his breakfast sausage and said with his mouth full, "Atlanta Batman. I'm printing t-shirts."

Bharath rolled his eyes but couldn't help the grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Maybe he *had* done something wild. Maybe for once, he didn't feel like the awkward foreign kid tagging along.

As the bell tower began its ten-minute warning chime, trays clattered and chairs scraped back. The boys stood up, grabbing their bags.

"Take it easy," Jorge said, clapping him on the back. "No heroics till Friday."

"No promises," Bharath said with a shrug.

Tyrel winked. "Keep the city safe, Batman."

As they walked out toward campus under the soft Atlanta morning sun, Bharath let himself enjoy the warmth - not just from the light, but from the laughter, the teasing, the sense that these were his people now.

Bharath walked a little slower than the rest, letting Jorge and Tyrel's chatter fade into the background as they veered off toward their lecture halls. Ravi tossed him a backward wave and disappeared into the crowd.

And just like that, he was alone again. Backpack slung over one shoulder, sun at his back, stitches tugging gently with each step.

He tugged the hoodie tighter across his chest and exhaled.

Atlanta Batman.

The words made him smile. Not because he believed them. But because, for once, he felt like the people around him weren't laughing *at* him for his clothes or his accent - they were celebrating him. Like he mattered. Like he had done something that proved he belonged.

He didn't feel like a hero.

He still flinched when he replayed the moment - the glint of the blade, the sound of Sarah's scream, the blur of motion as he swung that pole harder than he'd ever swung a cricket bat back home.

But then he thought of Marisol's voice in his ear. The way she'd whispered *I love you* like it was a vow. The way she had looked at him afterward - not like he was reckless, but like he was hers.

And Sarah.

The way her hands had trembled when she passed him tea. The way her eyes had gone soft with something that wasn't just gratitude.

That... scared him.

He hadn't done anything. Hadn't even thought anything noble - just reacted like a teenager who'd seen two goddesses in front of him.

But even as he told himself that, something uneasy twisted in his stomach.

Was that true?

Or was he just trying to nullify a feeling he wasn't ready to face?

He pressed a hand to his forehead.

He was in love with Marisol. He *knew* that. Every part of him sang for her - her laugh, her warmth, the way she looked at him like he was made of more than flesh and mistake. She had given herself to him without fear. Said she belonged to him.

And yet... when Sarah had curled into him, when her cheek brushed his chest and her leg slung over his hip, his body had betrayed him. Not in malice. Not even in intent. But in reflex.

Was that normal?

Or was he cheating, even in thought?

The word struck like a slap. He winced. *What kind of man gets aroused by someone else the morning after his girlfriend says "I love you"?* What did that say about him?

He'd never been in love before. Never been with anyone. He didn't have rules for this. Amma and Appa had loved each other deeply - but their world was clearer, older. Bound by dharma and duty. You married once, and that was it. You didn't lie with one woman while dreaming of another.

But this wasn't dreaming. Not really.

It had just... happened.

Still, he couldn't shake the shame. Marisol made him feel like a man. Like someone worthy of devotion. And now, here he was, blood still warm from the way *Sarah* had looked curled beside them.

He didn't *want* to want Sarah. He didn't want to disrespect Marisol, even in silence. But part of him - the part that remembered the way Sarah had looked at him while stirring pancake batter, lips parted, gaze soft - couldn't lie. Something had shifted. A current had passed between them.

He buried his face in his hands. His stomach turned.

What's wrong with me?

Or... was there nothing wrong at all?

Could it be that his heart - so unused to being seen, held, wanted - was just overflowing? That love didn't always mean *less* for someone else, but something... *more*?

He didn't know. And that scared him more than anything.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he muttered aloud.

There was something real forming. He didn't know what to name it. Didn't know how to carry it. But it was there - humming just under the surface of things.

For most of his life, Bharath had felt like a background character. The quiet kid. The nerd. The foreigner trying to keep up.

Now?

He wasn't sure who he was becoming.

But for the first time in a long time, he wanted to find out.

He adjusted his strap, pulled his Walkman headphones over one ear, and let the hum of Atlanta swallow him again.

Whatever came next... he'd be ready.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 45: My Mother Wants to Meet You

[1,969 words]

Bharath leaned against the low wall outside the CoC building, the early buzz of campus life milling around him. He shifted his weight from foot to foot, his bandaged side still aching, but his mind elsewhere entirely.

He was nervous.

Not about class.

About her.

And then, like some karmic reward for surviving the previous 48 hours, there she was - Marisol - walking up the stone path like she owned the sidewalk and the sun. A short black skirt swayed around her hips. A fitted tee hugged her in all the right places. Her hair was wild, her earrings catching the light like little warnings.

Bharath's mouth went dry.

Students turned to look. One guy practically walked into a trash can.

And then she was in his arms.

She kissed him before he could speak - hungry, public, unapologetic. Her hands were in his hair. His were at her waist, then sliding lower, then stopping just short of danger.

A few feet away, someone wolf-whistled.

“Jesus Christ,” someone else muttered. “Get a room.”

Marisol pulled away, flushed and radiant, and turned toward the voice. “Get me one,” she said sweetly, then turned back to Bharath with a satisfied smirk.

He stared at her, dazed. “You’re... dressed to destroy me.”

“That was the idea,” she said, straightening his collar like a challenge. “You’re healing, not dead.”

“Barely.”

They started walking toward the CS building, still holding hands.

“Also,” she said casually, “you’re coming home with me tonight.”

Bharath nearly tripped. “Wait - what?”

“My mom wants to meet you.”

He stopped in his tracks. “*Your mother?*”

“Yes,” she said with a smile too wide to be reassuring. “I told her about us.”

“All of... us?”

She nodded. “Everything.”

Bharath stared at the pavement. “Marisol, that’s... a lot.”

“I know,” she said. “But she’s old-school. She worries. You disappeared with me for a whole weekend, and I didn’t come home till Monday night. If I don’t bring you home, she’s going to assume you’re either married to someone else or planning a murder-suicide.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“She’s going to love you.”

“You don’t know that.”

Marisol’s face softened. She stopped, stepping in front of him. “Hey. It’s just dinner. You’ve done harder things. You got stabbed.”

“Exactly. I’ve met knives. I haven’t met Latina mothers.”

She laughed - not unkindly. “It’ll be okay. You’re polite. You’re smart. You’re respectful. You’re...” She tilted her head. “Weirdly formal, which she’ll like.”

Bharath still looked uneasy. “What if I mess it up?”

“You won’t,” she said. “Just... be honest. Be you. And maybe don’t bring up Star Trek.”

He cracked a reluctant smile. “Noted.”

They resumed walking, her fingers squeezing his lightly.

Up ahead, Ravi and Jorge were waiting near the lecture hall doors.

“Finally!” Jorge called. “We thought you two eloped.”

“Or died of horniness,” Ravi added.

Bharath waved them off. “We’re here, aren’t we?”

“Barely,” Marisol muttered under her breath, brushing imaginary creases from her skirt.

“Damn, Marisol,” Jorge said as they approached. “You’re dressing like the semester’s already over.”

Marisol smirked. “Maybe it is. For me.”

Ravi leaned toward Bharath. “You ready for class today? Or is your girl keeping you too... *occupied?*”

Bharath didn’t answer - just shot him a look halfway between embarrassment and wonder.

Ravi whistled. “This man’s gone.”

They all laughed and walked into the lecture hall, but Bharath’s nerves lingered.

Tonight, he was going to meet her family. So soon!

And somehow, that felt scarier than any knife.

The lecture hall buzzed with the low thrum of fluorescent lights, keyboard taps, and the occasional click of a pen. Professor Matthis was already halfway into a spiel about inheritance hierarchies and polymorphism, gesturing wildly at a Java class diagram projected on the screen.

And Bharath?

Bharath was drowning.

Not in the syntax. Not in the code.

In *her*.

Marisol sat exactly one seat away from him, her legs crossed, her spiral notebook tilted just so, her pen moving with casual grace. The hem of her black skirt kept sliding up just a bit more each time she shifted, and Bharath couldn't stop looking. Or rather, *glancing*, then immediately forcing his eyes back to the whiteboard. Then failing. Repeating. Dying.

She looked... unfair.

Hair loose, lips glossed, earrings swinging with every scribble. And then there was her chest - contained only technically by the snug fitted tee she'd knotted slightly at the side. He'd *seen* those breasts last night. *Touched* them. *Tasted* them.

His mouth remembered more than he wanted it to at 10:12 AM.

A little whisper of memory stirred at the base of his spine.

Stop it. Focus.

He turned back to the board.

Something about classes extending other classes. A diagram. Circles. Arrows. Words.

"Bharath."

He blinked. Ravi was nudging him. "What's 'method overloading' again?"

Bharath opened his mouth.

Nothing came out.

Ravi stared.

So did Jorge, from the other side.

“Hermano,” Jorge whispered, frowning. “Are you high?”

Bharath shook his head violently. “No. No - just... tired.”

Ravi looked unconvinced. “Bhai, you’re never tired. You’re usually *three pages* ahead of the professor. You didn’t even open your laptop.”

Bharath blinked. He hadn’t. It was still zipped in his bag.

Shit.

Marisol leaned slightly toward him, breath warm at his ear. “You okay, *baby?*”

He swallowed hard. *Baby*. The word hit him square in the chest.

“I’m fine,” he muttered, already turning red.

She gave him a knowing smile. “You sure? You seem... distracted.”

Distracted? She was the *distraction*. Sitting there like a fever dream in a skirt, skin still glowing from his hands the night before.

And now her mom wanted to meet him?

He tried to focus on the board again.

“Let’s define a class hierarchy,” the professor droned. “Dog extends Animal. Cat extends Animal. But Cat can override `Speak()` differently...”

Speak?

He couldn’t even breathe right now.

In his peripheral vision, Marisol uncapped her lip balm and ran it slowly across her mouth.

Bharath's leg bounced under the desk like it was trying to flee the building.

“Hermano,” Jorge hissed. “Explain this stuff. Please. I’m lost.”

Bharath stared at the slide. The words blurred.

“...We can override a method from the superclass if we use the same signature - ”

He could *recite* this in his sleep.

But not today.

His brain was full of soft moans and black lace and the way Marisol arched when he bit her nipple just right.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’ll send notes later.”

Ravi looked genuinely worried now. “Oh mere bhai. What’s happening? You’re *never* off.”

Bharath dropped his head into his hands. “I think I’m broken.”

Jorge leaned in. “Is it the stabbing?”

“No,” Bharath said flatly. “It’s her *breasts*.”

Both of them went still. They looked at her.

And then, together: “Fair.”

They backed off for now.

But Bharath sat through the rest of the class hearing *none* of it. Just the soft, echoing whisper of Marisol’s breath in his ear the night before. Just her fingers curled in his hair. Her body pressed against him like she belonged there. Like they were already something inevitable.

He was in love.

He was overwhelmed.

And he was one dinner away from being cross-examined by a Latina mother who probably thought he was either a nerdy rebound or a future problem. He had taken her virginity. It wasn’t the kind of thing a person could apologize for and return back if they were not happy about it.

His pen hovered over his blank notebook.

Inheritance, abstraction, polymorphism?

Not today.

Today he was fighting the battle of hormones vs. survival.

Bharath shuffled behind Marisol like a shell-shocked soldier.

His backpack hung lopsided on one shoulder. His eyes were glazed. His hair - usually tidy - was sticking up in odd places from all the times he'd run his hands through it during class. Jorge had stopped talking to him altogether. Ravi just muttered "*desi Casanova's glitching*" under his breath.

Marisol glanced back and frowned. "Mi amor, qué pasó?"

No response.

She stopped walking. Bharath nearly bumped into her.

"Okay. What's going on with you?"

He blinked slowly, like he was just now seeing her. "What?"

"You're not okay," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "You didn't speak for an entire hour. You didn't even correct the professor when he mixed up compile-time and runtime polymorphism."

He groaned softly. "Please don't say *polymorphism* right now."

Marisol blinked, confused.

"Mi amor," she said more gently, stepping in closer. "Is this about... tonight? Meeting my mom?"

Bharath's stomach twisted. "Maybe."

She reached up, brushing his cheek with her knuckles. "It's going to be okay. My mom's tough but fair. She just wants to look into your soul and make sure you're not going to ruin her daughter's life."

He gave her a look. "You're not helping."

Marisol smiled sympathetically. "Okay, okay. Then let's make a deal."

She leaned in, lowering her voice to a purr. "We skip lunch. Find somewhere private. You use my body to relieve all that tension you're carrying."

Bharath inhaled sharply - audibly.

His eyes widened, and his backpack *actually slipped off* his shoulder and hit the ground.

"W-what?" he croaked.

Marisol arched an eyebrow, clearly enjoying herself. "I'm serious. You're clearly wound up. And it's *my* fault, isn't it? Walking in here looking all edible - " she gestured vaguely at her own figure " - and then talking about moms and dinner and God knows what else."

He swallowed hard, backing up a step. "You're trying to kill me."

She laughed. "No. Just trying to make my man function again."

"I'm barely functioning as it is!"

"Oh, I *noticed*," she said sweetly. "You were staring at the whiteboard like it was a vision from the Bible."

"I was trying *not* to picture your breasts in my mouth during a lecture about *Java classes!*"

Marisol's eyes glittered. "And were you successful?"

He gave her a helpless look.

She sighed dramatically, then kissed him - quick and hard.

He staggered again, grabbing a bike rack for balance. "Okay. You've *definitely* broken me."

She leaned in close, whispering against his ear. "Physics next. You better pull it together before I start thinking I need to punish you."

Bharath whimpered.

She winked. "Now walk. And maybe think about *anything* that isn't under my clothes. Like my panties."

"That only made things worse! Why would you say that?"

As she turned and strode off toward the physics building, hips swaying slightly, Bharath stood there in the middle of the quad - dazed, flushed, half-erect, and convinced he had no hope of surviving the rest of the day.

The lecture hall was only half full. Most of the class sat near the back, hoping to avoid the professor's eye - a wiry man with a permanent scowl and a voice that sounded like he gargled chalk every morning.

Bharath sat near the front. That had been the rule. "Focus zone." "No distractions."

Today, he was in *hell*.

Because next to him - legs crossed high, skirt somehow shorter than he remembered it being this morning - sat Marisol, taking *zero* notes.

Instead, she was leaning back in her chair, casually chewing on the end of her pen, eyes fixed on the board as if she were paying attention.

Her left hand, however, was under the table.

On his thigh occasionally rubbing his cock when she felt no one was looking.

Bharath's pencil twitched mid-equation.

A warm squeeze.

Bharath jerked upright in his seat, eyes wide.

Marisol's hand *moved higher*.

He coughed, choking slightly, then reached for his water bottle and missed.

She giggled soundlessly beside him.

Then slid a folded scrap of paper toward his elbow.

He looked at it like it was radioactive.

Then, cautiously, opened it.

"Still thinking about my breasts? Or are you onto thighs now?"

"PS: I'm not wearing panties."

He nearly died.

His leg hit the underside of the table. His chair made a sound like a wounded animal.

A few heads turned.

Bharath smiled weakly. "Sorry. Just... excited about... atoms."

Marisol's eyes glittered with wicked delight.

The professor continued his lecture, oblivious to the emotional carnage happening in row four.

Bharath dug into his notes, desperately pretending to care about displacement.

Focus. Focus. You've done this before. You aced physics back home.

But then Marisol leaned in - slow, deliberate - letting her breath warm his ear.

"I'm going to ruin you after dinner," she whispered.

He closed his eyes and *physically* whimpered.

And still - somehow - took down perfect notes on projectile motion, friction coefficients, and thermal equilibrium.

Because he was Bharath.

And no amount of under-the-desk hand play, sexy whispers, or "no panties" declarations was going to break him.

Outwardly.

Inwardly? He was already planning revenge.

Sweet, thorough, utterly depraved revenge.

And she had *no idea* what she had just unleashed.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 46: Sacred Tuesdays [18+]

[2,705 words]

The moment the final bell rang for physics, Bharath snapped his notebook shut with a sharp clap. Marisol's latest note still burned a hole in his pocket.

He stood and turned to face her.

Marisol was already grinning, that shameless, wicked grin she wore when she knew she'd won.

But it slipped the moment she saw his face.

Bharath wasn't flushed with embarrassment. He wasn't ducking his head or stammering or trying to laugh it off like usual. His jaw was tight, his eyes dark, his posture calm and tall and... dangerous.

"This," he said quietly, stepping close, "won't do."

He'd spent the whole day reeling - from pain, from lust, from the way she walked and laughed and whispered filth like it was gospel. But somewhere between the second note and the third class, something had shifted. It wasn't just teasing anymore. It wasn't just flirtation. It was a challenge. A dare. She was showing him who he could be. And it was time he answered.

Enough.

He straightened, the ache in his abdomen forgotten, his breath steadying. No more flustered nerd. No more running. She wanted the man behind the hunger?

Then he'd show her exactly what she'd unleashed.

Marisol's heart thudded at the tone of his voice.

"What won't?" she asked, playful - but there was a tremble in it now.

Bharath didn't answer with words. He just stared at her - really stared - until she felt heat bloom between her thighs.

She swallowed hard. Her voice dropped. "Bharath..."

"You've been teasing me all morning," he said, low and even. "Touching me under the table. Whispering filth in my ear. Making me imagine things I have no business imagining during class."

Marisol's tongue darted out to wet her lips.

"You deserved it," she whispered. "You left me starving all night."

Bharath stepped forward again - so close she had to tilt her head up to meet his eyes.

"You're not going to walk away from this," he said softly. "You're going to follow me. Right now. And I'm going to make sure you understand exactly what teasing your man gets you."

Her breath caught.

She felt her knees go weak.

And then - without a single objection - she followed.

Down the quiet hallway. Past the vending machines. Her body thrummed with arousal and awe.

No one said a word. No one passed them. The dorms were deserted during class hours, and the further they walked, the more she felt like prey being led into a trap she wanted desperately to fall into.

Every step he took was confident. Steady. Focused.

And it was turning her on more than she could say.

By the time he pushed open the door to the dorm room and gestured her inside, she was wet through her skirt, breath short and chest heaving.

The moment the door shut, Marisol turned to him, expecting a kiss.

But Bharath didn't kiss her.

Not yet.

He just looked at her - slow and deliberate, like a man weighing the meal he was about to feast on.

Marisol shivered.

"Bharath," she whispered, voice ragged, "you're scaring me."

"Good," he replied, stepping forward.

The dorm door shut with a final *click*, sealing them off from the rest of the world. Bharath turned the lock without looking, his eyes still pinned to her like she was the only thing in the universe.

Marisol stood just inside, her back to the desk, her heart hammering.

He didn't touch her.

Not yet.

He stalked closer - one slow step at a time - like a man on the hunt.

She couldn't breathe. Her thighs pressed together instinctively.

“You think you can drive me mad,” he said softly, circling her now, his hand brushing the arch of her back, the swell of her ass, the curve of her neck. “Touching me in class. Watching me squirm. Knowing I couldn’t do anything.”

She whimpered. “It was fun.”

“You wore *that* skirt and no panties to physics,” he continued, voice dark silk. “Sat next to me like butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth. Passed me notes about how wet you were.”

“Bharath...”

“You want to be teased?” he growled, now behind her. “I’ll show you teasing.”

His lips ghosted over her ear.

“I’m going to make you beg to be fucked,” he whispered. “I’m going to make you cry for it. And I won’t give it to you until you scream my name.”

Marisol trembled.

Her voice came out high and needy. “Please...”

“Not yet,” he said.

And then - finally - he spun her around, motioned for her to get onto the desk, and pulled her t-shirt over her head in one fluid motion.

Bharath’s breath caught as her tee came free and fluttered to the floor. No bra. Just her. Glorious, golden, bare.

Her breasts were full and perfect, tipped with dusky caramel nipples already pebbling in the cool air. His hands moved on instinct - reverent, aching - cupping the softness with a groan.

“Por Dios...” Marisol gasped, her spine arching into him.

He didn’t speak.

His mouth was too busy.

He leaned in and closed his lips around her right nipple, tongue flicking, drawing a deep, broken moan from her chest. She squirmed against the desk, grabbing at his shoulders, nails digging in. His other hand worked her left breast, thumb circling slow, maddening patterns.

Then he switched.

Left to mouth, right to hand. Tongue and teeth and breath - until she was shivering.

“Bharath... mi amor...” she breathed. “I can’t take it...”

“Yes you can,” he said between kisses. “You wanted to play games? This is what you earned.”

He nipped at the soft curve just beneath her breast, then sucked hard, letting the hickey bloom beneath his mouth.

She cried out. Then again. And again.

He marked her like a starving man - red and purple constellations scattered across her chest, the swells of her breasts, the tender skin beneath her collarbones.

Her moans grew desperate. Wet.

Then suddenly - without warning - she cried out, thighs snapping tight around his hips, hands flying to the edge of the desk.

“Ay coño! ¡Estoy viniendo!” she gasped.

Bharath froze, eyes wide. She was *climaxing* - just from his mouth, his hands, his worship.

She was dripping. Quaking. And she hadn’t even been touched between her legs.

“Marisol...”

“Don’t stop,” she begged, her voice breaking. “Please, papi... I can’t... I don’t...”

She didn’t finish. Her body seized again, another wave slamming into her, this time harder. Her toes curled, her hands fisted in his hair, and her entire body shook as she came again.

Bharath felt her pulse fluttering against his lips - tasted her sweat, her scent, her surrender - and nearly came untouched himself.

“You’re so sensitive,” he whispered, mouth brushing the curve beneath her breast again. “So perfect. So mine.”

“Yours,” she panted, her chest still rising and falling in waves. “Only yours.”

He kissed her throat.

Then her shoulder.

Then back to her breasts, slower now, pressing his face between them like he was praying.

She stroked his hair with trembling fingers.

“Where did you come from?” she whispered. “Who *are* you?”

Bharath looked up, his eyes dark with desire and something else - something deeper.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “But you bring it out in me.”

She smiled - dazed, radiant - and leaned down to kiss him.

When she pulled back, her voice was low and raw.

“Then claim me, Bharath. All of me. Flip me over. Take me. Right now.”

He didn’t need another word.

Bharath pulled back slowly, his lips still tingling from her skin, his heart thundering against his ribs.

He hadn't moved inside her yet.

Hadn't even reached for her center again.

And already she had come-just from his touch and his voice.

He stared at her body, flushed and trembling against the desk, her legs parted slightly, breath still shallow. Her skirt had ridden high on her hips, caught around her waist like an invitation. She looked like a fever dream. A goddess unraveling.

And then his eyes dropped lower.

To *that*.

He had never considered himself much of an ass man - not like Tyrel or Jorge who made it their mission to rate every girl in the cafeteria. He’d always liked curves, sure. But this...?

Marisol’s ass was sculpted. Firm and lush and heart-shaped, her tan skin glowing with a soft sheen of sweat. The way she bent slightly forward against the desk made it even more prominent - like a painting. Like a dare.

He reached out.

Just to touch.

She gasped as his palm cupped one cheek, kneading slowly, possessively.

“Bharath...?” she asked, breath hitching.

“Wow...” he murmured. “You’re perfect!”

He switched to Tamil without thinking, the words breaking like heat under his breath. *Oh God... how did I never see this beauty before?*

Then, without warning, he brought his palm down in a firm, resounding *smack*.

Marisol let out a strangled cry.

Not pain.

Shock. Lust.

Her whole body buckled forward, thighs trembling.

He watched the pink bloom across her cheek - watched her hips twitch and rock in response.

“You like that,” he said, stunned.

“Again,” she rasped, her fingers white-knuckled on the desk’s edge. “*Otra vez. Por favor...*”

He didn’t hesitate.

Another slap. A little harder.

Then again.

And again.

Each impact echoed in the empty dorm, each one followed by Marisol’s ragged whimpers and gasped curses. Her hips bucked. Her knees went weak.

She was dripping now - thighs slick, trembling, almost vibrating from how overwhelmed she was.

Bharath couldn’t believe it.

She had teased him all morning. Tortured him.

And now?

She was begging to be spanked.

“Tell me what you need,” he growled, one hand caressing the fresh heat blooming on her backside.

“I need *you*,” she sobbed. “I need to be taken. Owned. Ruined by you.”

She was panting now, her voice hitching with every word.

“This - this thing you do to me - *carajo*, I never knew I needed it. But I do. I *need* it. Every day. Before you fuck me.”

He stepped closer, letting her feel how hard he still was, grinding slightly against her wet folds.

Her moan was sinful.

He leaned in, whispering against her ear.

“I’m going to give it to you. All of it. You don’t know what you’ve started.”

She shivered.

“Then finish it,” she whispered.

And that was all the permission he needed.

Bharath’s fingers curled around her hips with possession, reverence, and just a touch of vengeance. Not cruel - but claiming. He’d never thought of himself as dominant. But now? With her bent over before him, slick and trembling, her trust spread open like a gift... something ancient and electric stirred deep in his chest. He thrust almost all of himself into her tight snatch in just one push.

He pulled out almost completely, just to hear her gasp - just to make her body clench with need - and then he slammed back in with such force that the desk legs rattled and Marisol screamed into her forearm.

“Hijo de puta!” she sobbed, shaking. “Where did *that* come from?”

Bharath felt a twinge in his abdomen as his wound reminded him that it was still around and fresh. However, he couldn’t stop now. Not with this goddess laid out in front of him. She felt too good.

He gritted his teeth, driving forward again, the slap of skin echoing through the empty dorm. "You teased me. All day. Did you think I wouldn't answer?"

"Papi..." she whined, clutching the desk edge. "I didn't know it'd make you this *hot*."

He leaned in over her, one hand curling in her hair, pulling her upright just enough to whisper against her ear:

"You want *hot*, Marisol? Then take it."

And he gave it to her - hard, deep, relentless.

Every thrust was calculated. Devastating. Not frantic, not wild, but driven. Intentional. Like he was carving his name into her body, stroke by stroke. And somehow, impossibly, he knew *exactly* how to angle his hips, how to roll his pelvis so that he hit the softest, deepest spot inside her every single time.

"Ay, coño! *Fuck*, Bharath!" she wailed, legs starting to tremble. "How the fuck are you this good?!"

He didn't answer.

Because he didn't know. He grunted through the sudden sharp pains he felt every time he thrust into her. He didn't care though. He just felt it. Her. Every squeeze of her walls, every shift in her breath, every gasp, moan, and tremble. It was like his body had been made to learn hers - like every kiss and brush of fingers until now had been training for this.

He reached around and grabbed her breast, now heavy and flushed with arousal, kneading it roughly. Then he leaned forward, biting her shoulder, dragging his tongue along her back.

"I don't know how," he admitted in Tamil, low and ragged, "but I can't stop. *Nee en iravum pakalum, en moochum uyirum.* (*You are my day and night, my breath and soul*)"

"Say it again," she panted. "Even if I don't understand - say it."

He did. In Tamil. In gasps. In reverence. His mother tongue rolled over her like a chant as he drove into her from behind, hips snapping, thighs slapping against hers with a punishing rhythm.

Marisol was gone.

Just *gone*.

She wasn't even forming words anymore - just broken, high-pitched cries, mouth open, eyes wild, face slick with sweat. Every inch of her skin burned. Every nerve ending buzzed. Her body didn't belong to her anymore - it belonged to him. To the boy who had saved a stranger, who looked at her like she was made of stars, who was now fucking her like he was going to rewrite her *soul*.

"I'm gonna come again," she whimpered, collapsing forward, one hand clawing the desk, the other reaching behind to grab his wrist. *"Don't stop... please, don't stop..."*

He didn't.

He drove her into her second orgasm with the same brutal rhythm, then slowed - just enough to feel her flutter and clamp around him, just enough to hear the ragged *jputa madre!* as her body seized and melted under his.

When she started to whimper from overstimulation, he pulled out - only to drop to his knees.

She barely registered the shift before his hands were spreading her open, and then -

"Ayyy, Dios!" she screamed.

His tongue.

Hot. Unrelenting. Circling her clit in slow, devastating patterns. His grip on her hips was tight, holding her steady as she writhed.

"Papi no, no, too much - "

But she didn't stop him.

Couldn't.

He feasted on her like she was holy. Like she was dessert. Like she was *his*.

Marisol bucked, hips shaking violently. *"I can't - I'm gonna - Bharath...!"*

She came again. Harder than before. Her vision went white. Her voice broke. Her thighs trembled uncontrollably as she collapsed onto the desk, sobbing his name like it was a mantra.

Bharath rose slowly behind her, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, cock still painfully hard.

He bent over her again, lips grazing her ear.

“I’m not done.”

And before she could speak, he was inside her again - deeper this time, slower now, every inch dragging along her raw, trembling walls.

It wasn’t punishment anymore.

It was worship.

He kissed her spine, her shoulder blades, her neck. He whispered soft Tamil prayers she didn’t understand. And every word melted her a little more.

By the time he began to move again, she was limp in his arms. Putty. Owned.

“Marisol...” he gasped. “I’m close...”

“Inside papi,” she moaned. “Please... fill me up. I need it. *I need you*. Don’t worry, I’m safe.”

That undid him.

He wrapped his arms around her and gave a final thrust - deep, shaking, helpless - and spilled into her with a broken, guttural cry.

They collapsed.

Both of them shaking. Drenched in sweat. Shattered.

They lay tangled across the bed, her back to his chest, his arms cradling her as if she were made of glass.

Silence.

Only breath.

Only the hum of the fan.

And then, softly:

“I’ve never...” Marisol whispered. “I’ve never felt like that. Ever. I thought our first time was amazing. But this was just...”

He kissed her shoulder. “Neither have I.”

“You were... *incredible*.” She turned to face him, eyes wet. “That wasn’t just sex, Bharath. You *broke* me.”

He touched her cheek. "You're not broken. You're beautiful."

She laughed. Then curled into his chest. "So... is this a one-time thing?"

He raised a brow. "You want it to be?"

Her face went wicked. "Hell no."

"Then... Tuesdays?"

"Minimum," she grinned. "We'll... experiment with other days. At least 3 times a day."

"Scientific method," he murmured.

"Exactly. We gather data."

She looked at him, eyes softening. "But you're okay with this? With *you* like this?"

He took a breath. "I think... this is still me. Just... another part. One you showed me."

"I want to see it again," she said, voice husky.

"You will," he promised.

They stayed like that - sticky, sore, satisfied - until the sound of voices in the hallway reminded them reality existed.

But the tradition had begun.

Tuesdays were now sacred.

And they had so many more to come.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 47: Worth It

[1,738 words]

They lay tangled together on the narrow dorm bed, breathing hard, skin slick with sweat and the lingering scent of their shared intensity. Marisol's head rested on Bharath's chest, rising and falling with each of his steady breaths. Her fingers traced lazy, soothing patterns over his ribs, careful now to avoid the bandaged side.

"That was..." she started, then dissolved into a soft, breathless laugh. "I do not have words right now."

Bharath pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her hair. "Neither do I. My brain is still rebooting."

"You were different," she murmured, voice warm and fond. "Not bad different. Really good different. Like you discovered this whole confident, take-charge version of yourself hiding under all the shy smiles."

He considered that for a moment, one hand stroking slow circles on her back. "Maybe I did. Or maybe you coaxed it out of me. You have that effect, you know. Like you see parts of people no one else bothers to look for."

She tilted her head up to meet his eyes, her own soft and shining. "I like this side of you. The one who knows exactly what he wants and goes after it. It is hot. But I also love the sweet, thoughtful Bharath who brings me chai when I am stressed and remembers my favorite playlist."

"I like both versions too," he admitted quietly. "I am still figuring out how to balance them. The dom in bed feels... freeing. But I never want to lose the part that just wants to hold your hand and talk about stars until three in the morning."

"We will figure it out together," she promised, pressing a light kiss to his collarbone. "No rush. We have time."

As the heady post-orgasm glow began to fade, Bharath's breath hitched again, not from lingering pleasure but from a sharper twinge deep in his side. He shifted slightly and winced before he could hide it.

Marisol felt the change instantly. She propped herself up on one elbow, frowning. "Wait. What was that?"

Bharath tried for a casual smile. "Nothing. Just a little sore."

"Sore where exactly?"

He pointed vaguely toward his ribs.

Marisol sat up like she had been shocked. "Your stitches? Bharath!"

"I think they are fine," he said, attempting nonchalance.

"You think?" she hissed, already reaching for the hem of his hoodie. "You got stabbed two days ago, you absolute idiot! We just had what basically counts as Olympic-level sex and you did not think to mention your side hurts?"

He grunted softly as she carefully lifted the fabric and peeled back the gauze wrap with gentle fingers.

No fresh blood stained the padding, thank goodness. But the skin around the incision looked red and angry, slightly swollen at the edges.

"No tearing," she muttered, inspecting from every angle like a tiny, worried doctor. "No bleeding. But you are officially a moron. Here, take the painkillers you are supposed to take right now."

She rummaged in his bedside drawer, found the bottle, shook out a tablet, and handed it to him along with a half-empty water bottle.

He swallowed obediently, then tried to grin through the discomfort. "Can I still be your satisfied moron?"

Marisol stared at him for a long beat. Then she broke into a reluctant laugh, pressing one hand to her forehead. "You are so lucky you did not bust a stitch. I would have killed you myself if you had."

"Worth it," he said without hesitation.

"Do not even start..."

"Marisol." He caught her hand gently and tugged her back down beside him. "If seeing you come undone like that means I end up with a few extra stitches? I will take them. Gladly. Every single time."

She looked at him - her reckless romantic, her tender fool - and sighed deeply, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "Well, your manhood is officially on timeout until this wound heals properly. Gentle lovemaking only from now on. Understood?"

He pretended to think it over, lips pursed dramatically. "Hmm. Can I still whisper filthy things in your ear while I slowly play with your body? Very gently?"

"Only if you want me to tease you mercilessly in public again," she shot back, eyes sparkling.

His grin widened instantly. "Deal. I accept those terms."

She rolled her eyes fondly but reached for his discarded sweatshirt anyway. She tugged it over her head, the fabric swallowing her frame, the sleeves dangling past her fingertips. Underneath she still wore only her thin tank top, the dark love bites blooming across her chest and collarbones like secret constellations.

"I am keeping this," she declared. "Payment for every damn mark you left on me."

Bharath looked at her with her ruffled curls, glowing skin, fierce and soft all at once, and felt his heart do that ridiculous flip again. "You can keep whatever you want. You make everything look better than anyone else ever could."

They lingered a little longer, trading soft kisses and quiet laughter, until Marisol's stomach growled loudly enough to make them both crack up.

"Okay, okay," she said, sitting up again. "We skipped lunch completely. I am starving. And you need actual food in you before you pass out from low blood sugar and heroics."

"Fair," he agreed. "Cafeteria?"

"Yeah. I feel like pizza after that session. Pizza Hut?"

"Done."

They dressed slowly, him moving carefully, her hovering like a protective shadow, and stepped out of the dorm hand in hand. Her curls were still wild and untamed, his steps a fraction slower than usual. But the post-sex haze had lifted into something warm and content. His body ached in multiple places, yet he had never felt more grounded.

As they walked across campus toward the east gate, a few heads turned. Some people smirked knowingly. A couple of whispers followed them. Bharath did not care in the slightest. Let them stare. She was beside him, fingers laced through his, wearing his sweatshirt like a badge of honor. That was all that mattered.

They bought their pizza, walked out of the Student center cafeteria and found a shady bench nearby and sat close, shoulders touching, sharing bites and laughing when sauce dripped onto his chin.

Halfway through, Marisol exclaimed, "Shoot! "I was supposed to do yoga with Sarah this morning before class. I completely forgot in all the... chaos. I didn't even call her today. Did you?"

Bharath swallowed his bite. "Nope. I didn't. I thought you may have already gone today. So I didn't think about it."

"Yeah. But after last night at my mom's and then... everything today, I skipped it. I feel bad. I should check on her."

He nodded, expression softening. "How do you think she is doing? After the whole thing with her ex and the police report?"

Marisol sighed, picking at a piece of pizza. "I do not know. She seemed okay when we talked yesterday, but you know how she is. Always says she is fine even when she is not. I want to make sure she is really alright. Maybe call her tonight? If she says yes, I can go over tomorrow morning for yoga. We can talk properly then."

"That sounds perfect," he said gently. "She trusts you. And honestly, after what you both went through that night... having you there might help more than anything."

Marisol leaned her head on his shoulder for a moment. "You are sweet. You know that?"

"Only for you," he teased, but his voice was warm.

Just then, a familiar voice called out from across the path.

"Oi! Lovebirds! You finally emerged from the cave?"

Jorge jogged over, Ravi trailing behind him with a knowing smirk. Jorge's grin was enormous.

"We thought maybe you two had spontaneously combusted in there," Jorge said, plopping down on the grass in front of them. "Where'd you go after lunch? No lunch? Rumors are flying, my friend."

Ravi sat more carefully, eyeing Bharath. "You okay, man? You are moving like you fought a bear."

Bharath chuckled. "Close. I fought gravity and lost a little."

Marisol snorted. "He reinjured his side being an overachiever. I grounded him."

Jorge cackled. "Grounded? Like, no recess? Harsh, Mari."

"Not grounded," Bharath corrected mildly. "Just... restricted activities. Doctor's orders via very strict girlfriend."

Ravi raised an eyebrow at Marisol. "You are scary when you are protective. I like it."

She winked. "Good. Someone has to keep this one alive."

They fell into easy chatter with Jorge recounting a disastrous group project presentation, Ravi complaining about his latest coding bug that refused to die. Marisol

teased them both mercilessly while feeding Bharath another bite of pizza when his hands were full holding the paper plate.

At one point Jorge leaned in conspiratorially. "So... Tuesdays, huh? We all know now. The whole floor is placing bets on how long before you two get caught making out in the library again."

Marisol laughed brightly. "Tell them to mind their own business. Or join the queue."

Bharath just shook his head, amused. "You all have too much free time."

"Jealousy," Jorge declared. "Pure jealousy. You found the coolest girl on campus and now you are insufferable."

Marisol bumped Bharath's shoulder. "He was always a little insufferable. I just make it cute."

They lingered until the sun dipped lower, the conversation light and full of teasing. When it was finally time to head back for afternoon classes, Jorge and Ravi waved them off with exaggerated salutes.

"Take care of the patient, nurse!" Jorge called.

"Always," Marisol replied, linking her arm through Bharath's.

As they walked slowly toward the lecture hall, hand in hand again, Bharath glanced down at her.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"For what?"

"For everything. For caring about my dumb stitches. For making me laugh. For... being you."

She squeezed his hand. "You are welcome. But you are stuck with me now. No take-backs."

"Would not dream of it."

They slipped into physics class just in time, taking their usual seats. This time there were no teasing notes, no sneaky touches. Just Marisol's hand resting lightly on his knee under the table and a shared look that held something deeper than desire—something steady, warm, and full of promise.

When the professor launched into projectile motion, Bharath sat up straight, pen moving smoothly across the page. His mind felt clear, focused. The fog of pain and lust had cleared, replaced by quiet certainty.

He caught Ravi glancing over once, half-worried, half-curious.

Bharath gave him a small, calm nod.

I am okay, the nod said.

Better than okay.

And as Marisol leaned into him just slightly, warm and solid beside him, Bharath felt the pieces of his future settle into place with a soft, satisfying click.

They had their sacred Tuesdays now.

But the real truth, the one that made his chest ache in the best way, was simpler.

Every single moment with her felt sacred.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 48: Before the door opens

[1,220 words]

Bharath stood in front of the mirror, fidgeting with the collar of his only clean button-down shirt. His hair was neatly combed, his shoes were shined, and there was a new, visible bandage peeking out under his sleeve - a reminder of both his recent heroics and his complete lack of sense.

Behind him, the room buzzed with chaotic support.

“You sure you don’t want to wear cologne?” Jorge asked, spraying something citrusy in the air. “Nothing strong. Just... enough to say ‘I won’t knock up your daughter in the kitchen.’”

“I have Wild Stone, macha.”

“That ain’t cologne,” Ravi muttered.

“Better than showing up smelling like panic sweat.”

“I don’t smell like - ” Bharath started.

“You smell fine, man,” Tyrel cut in, tossing a baseball cap aside. “But *that*” - he pointed dramatically at Bharath’s anxious pacing - “that’s what’s gonna get you eaten alive.”

Bharath turned to them, arms stiff at his sides. “She’s Cuban. She’s Catholic. She works three jobs. And Marisol disappeared for *two days* and came back saying I’m ‘the one.’ She’s going to hate me. I really hope my Wild Stone works for me.”

“So what you’re saying is,” Jorge deadpanned, “you’re deeply screwed.”

“*Ayyo swamy, (Oh God!)*” Bharath muttered under his breath.

Ravi stood and clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Listen. This isn’t about impressing her mom. This is about showing her you’re the same Bharath that Marisol fell for. Which is to say: kind, respectful, brave, and apparently capable of satisfying a Latina woman who once said *she’d rather die than date an engineering major.*”

“Wait, what? When did she say that?”

“Long story. You broke her streak,” Jorge said. “We’re all proud.”

Tyrel stepped forward, jingling something in his hand.

“Here,” he said, dropping a pair of jangling keys into Bharath’s palm.

Bharath blinked. “What’s this?”

“My truck. Marisol can drive. If things go south, you two can bounce faster than her mama can light a votive candle.”

Jorge raised a brow. “You’re lending him the *pickup*?”

Tyrel nodded solemnly. “If he survives la jefa, he’s earned it.”

Bharath stared at the keys like they might self-destruct. “I don’t even know how to *unlock* your truck.”

“She does,” Tyrel grinned. “And it’s full of gas. Just don’t scratch her. That’s my *main* girl.”

“Thanks,” Bharath said faintly.

“You got this, man,” Ravi added. “Just remember: eye contact. Firm handshake. No nervous jokes about mango juice or Star Trek.”

Bharath groaned. “Why would you say that out loud?”

“Because I know you,” Ravi grinned. “And I’ve seen the way you look when you panic. It’s the same face you made when the cafeteria ran out of your favorite cereal.”

“Not helping.”

Jorge crossed his arms. “Final checklist. Shirt ironed?”

“Yep.”

“Teeth brushed?”

“Obviously.”

“Condoms *not* in your wallet?”

“What?!”

“Just checking.”

Tyrel laughed, slapping Bharath on the back. “Go getter, tiger. And if it goes bad - don’t come back. We can’t take your shame.”

Bharath gave them a withering look. Then inhaled deep.

He glanced at his reflection again, then at the keys in his hand. The girl he loved was waiting downstairs. Her mother was waiting on the other side of town.

He was going in.

“Wish me luck,” he muttered.

“Don’t need it,” Ravi said, smiling. “You’re Bharath. You’ve already won.”

The engine of Tyrel’s pickup growled low as they turned off the expressway onto the familiar neighborhood streets of Marisol’s part of town - the old brick ranch homes, the cracked sidewalks, the occasional whirr of a child’s bicycle wheel spinning out of sight.

Marisol gripped the wheel like it was trying to escape her.

Her hair was up in a high ponytail now, earrings swaying with every sharp turn, her tank top hidden under a light jacket - one she hadn't stopped adjusting since they got in the truck.

"Okay," she said, voice fast and tight. "First of all, don't call her *señora*. That makes her feel old. Just call her 'ma'am' or maybe 'Mrs. Rivera' ... but *not* if she corrects you."

Bharath opened his mouth.

"And don't talk too much about India at first. She'll ask, but don't lead with it. She gets weird about cultural stuff - *not racist*, just... cautious."

"Okay..."

"And sit up straight. But not like... robot straight. Like confident straight. But still humble. Like you've done nothing wrong."

"I did nothing wrong."

"But she doesn't know that!" Marisol snapped, eyes darting from the road to him and back again. "She thinks I've been holed up with a boy who could be a drug dealer or a *pyramid scheme recruiter*, and you're just - *so nice* that it's going to look fake."

Bharath blinked. "A pyramid scheme...?"

"*Also*, if she offers *cafecito*, say yes. But don't actually drink more than a sip unless you want to ascend to the astral plane. That shit is nuclear."

"Should I bring up that I got stabbed...?"

"No! *Absolutely not*. Are you insane?! That makes you look reckless. *Romantic*, but reckless."

"Right. Okay."

"And she might talk to you in Spanish. Just nod if you don't understand. Don't try to speak back unless it's an emergency or she starts praying out loud."

There was a pause. Then:

"Do I nod like... respectfully?"

"Oh my *God*, yes, but not like a bobblehead. Just..."

She slammed the brakes a little too hard at a red light. Bharath lurched forward and caught himself on the dashboard. He looked at her - really looked.

Her cheeks were flushed, eyes wide, breathing too fast.

This wasn't just nerves.

This was full-blown panic.

He reached over and gently took one of her hands off the steering wheel, lacing his fingers through hers. She resisted for a second, then let her hand rest in his.

"Marisol," he said quietly.

She didn't look at him.

He leaned closer.

"Chellam," he whispered. "Look at me."

Her eyes finally met his, uncertain and shimmering.

"You're the bravest woman I've ever met," he said. "You fight for what you want. You protect who you love. You see people. And tonight, *I* get to show your family how much I love you. That's all that matters."

Her lips parted in a tremble.

Before she could overthink again, he leaned in and kissed her.

Not hungrily. Not teasingly.

Just soft. Present. Real.

A kiss meant to slow the world.

She melted into it like she was made for that moment - like her panic had been waiting for permission to dissolve.

When he pulled back, she was smiling.

"Goddamn," she breathed. "You really do have a gift for shutting me up."

He kissed her forehead. "I'm going to be fine. *We* are going to be fine."

She nodded, still dazed. "Yeah. Yeah, we are."

Then she blinked. "Wait... did you just call me *chellam* again?"

Bharath smirked, brushing a thumb along her jaw. “You remembered.”

Her voice dropped, flustered again. “I don’t know what it means, but it makes my knees weak.”

He grinned wider. “Good. It means darling or sweetheart.”

“Oh! I like that!”

As the light turned green, she squeezed his hand once more before letting go and returning both to the wheel - her breathing now steadier, her shoulders finally dropping.

“Okay,” she said, voice lighter. “But if she breaks out the rosary, we’re out. Deal?”

“Deal.”

They drove on, toward a meeting neither of them were quite ready for, but both were willing to face, for each other.

However, Marisol felt a rising dread as they neared her house. She wasn’t just worried about whether her mother would approve. She was terrified of what it would mean if she didn’t - not just for Bharath, but for everything they were building together. And for once, she didn’t feel like rebelling. She just wanted them to meet, to see what she saw.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 49: So What Are Your Intentions?

[1,497 words]

The truck idled in the narrow driveway, tires crunching against gravel. Marisol sat behind the wheel, chewing her lower lip, her knee bouncing with nervous energy.

Bharath sat beside her in the passenger seat, hands folded neatly in his lap, heart pounding but face composed.

The house in front of them was painted a fading sky blue, the trim carefully whitewashed. A Virgin Mary statue peeked from between overgrown ferns on the porch, framed by sun-bleached wind chimes that barely stirred in the evening air. A tangle of

ivy climbed up one side of the mailbox, which leaned slightly forward like it was tired too.

Marisol took a deep breath. "Okay. Ground rules."

Bharath blinked. "Again? Didn't you tell me a bunch of stuff already?"

She turned to him sharply, brown eyes wide. "Yes! Number one: Do not try to be charming. My mom's immune. It'll make her suspicious. Number two: don't talk too much. She hates guys who ramble. And number three - "

"I won't touch you unless she tells me I can," Bharath said, voice completely serious.

Marisol blinked. "Wait, what?"

He gave her a lopsided smile. "I've seen enough Tamil movies. Angry mothers are worse than goons with knives."

Despite herself, she laughed.

Then a beat passed. Her smile faded. Her hand crept toward his.

"I just... I don't want her to think I'm being reckless," she said, suddenly small. "That you're just some phase."

Bharath reached over and took her hand in his.

"I'm not."

For a moment, his mind flicked back - to Amma setting out mango thogayal on a steel plate, to Appa waiting to speak until everyone had been served. Love in his house had never been loud. But it had always been steady. Present. Earned.

He didn't know if he could live up to that kind of dignity. But he was going to try.

She looked at him for a long moment. Then slowly nodded.

They stepped out of the truck, gravel crunching underfoot, and made their way up the porch stairs. Marisol's hand found his again. Tightly, this time.

She rang the bell.

A few seconds passed. Then the door opened.

Maria Rivera stood there in the entryway, silhouetted against the warm yellow light of the hallway.

She looked tired. Like the kind of tired that never quite went away. Her eyes - sharp, dark, and skeptical - landed on Bharath first. He saw the subtle scan. Shoes. Shirt. Posture. Clean-shaven. Not a smirk in sight.

Her worry sat on her shoulders like armor.

Bharath's mouth opened before his brain could fully intervene.

"You're... very beautiful, ma'am," he said.

Marisol let out a tiny gasp, her fingers tightening around his.

But Bharath didn't notice. Or rather, he did - but not the way most guys would.

He wasn't flirting. Not even trying to impress.

His voice was soft. Sincere. Eyes wide with the same reverence he had the first time he saw a lit temple gopuram at dusk.

"It's just... when I saw Marisol for the first time, I thought she had the kind of face you don't forget. I didn't understand it then. But now I do. She looks like you."

Maria blinked.

Once.

Then again.

The muscles around her mouth twitched - like something inside her had softened, uninvited - before her walls slammed back up behind her eyes.

"Come in," she said curtly, stepping aside.

Bharath bowed slightly as he entered. "Thank you."

Marisol followed him slowly, heart hammering, her brain reeling from what just happened.

Because that face. That exact stunned-not-stunned look on her mother's face...

That was the same one Marisol herself had worn the night at the Hispanic mixer.

No game. No charm.

Just... truth.

Just the way he saw the world.

She had been braced for awkwardness. For stiff introductions and muttered pleasantries. But somehow, Bharath had disarmed the fiercest woman she knew with a single sentence - not by being clever.

By being *himself*.

And just like that, she remembered why she fell so hard for him in the first place.

Not because he chased her.

But because when she stopped running... he was *already there*, waiting. Seeing her. And now - somehow - her mother had caught a glimpse of that too.

She watched the boy walk past her, head slightly bowed, back straight, shoes still clean despite of Atlanta's cracked sidewalks.

Indian. That's what Marisol had said.

But if she didn't already know? He could've passed for Cuban. Or Colombian. Maybe even Puerto Rican if he didn't open his mouth.

Still - she could tell. Something about his eyes. Quiet. Watching. Too *still* for an eighteen-year-old.

No boy that polite wasn't hiding something. Or had been broken.

That put her on edge.

She closed the door behind them and followed them into the living room, watching the way he stood by the sofa - like he was waiting for permission to sit. Like he'd been taught to show respect before assuming comfort.

That made her pause.

She'd seen boys that her dated her daughters or hoped to date them walk into her house with their chests puffed out, their words soaked in cologne and swagger, ready to perform. Smooth ones. Flashy ones. Empty ones.

This one?

He looked like he didn't know *how* to perform. Although his cologne did smell funky and not in a good way.

And worse - he didn't even look like he *wanted* to perform.

Maria crossed her arms and stayed by the archway, eyes flicking to Marisol.

Her daughter. Her first. Her miracle. Her lioness. The reason she pulled double shifts and ate cereal for dinner and still had the nerve to dream of a retirement she'd never afford.

Marisol - who once climbed the roof at age ten just to prove girls could fly.

Now standing next to this stranger with her fingers laced in his like they were made that way.

Maria's stomach tightened.

She didn't want her daughter to fall the way she had. To give her soul to someone who'd leave once the charm ran out. She didn't raise her to become somebody's "ride or die" when she was born to be *somebody*.

Still...

The boy's words echoed in her ear:

"You're very beautiful, ma'am....When I saw Marisol for the first time, I thought she had the kind of face you don't forget. I didn't understand it then. But now I do. She looks like you."

She'd been ready to shut him down. Had her polite smile and flat 'gracias' loaded and ready.

But he caught her off guard - not by being clever. By being honest.

And honesty was harder to ignore.

She didn't like it.

Not because it felt wrong.

But because it felt real.

And that was more dangerous.

Maria sat down stiffly in the armchair, the springs sighing under her. She adjusted the cushion under her elbow, watching the boy from the corner of her eye.

He was still standing.

Marisol nudged him. He sat.

His hands were folded.

Posture perfect.

Eyes on her.

Too good. No boy is that good at eighteen unless he was trained for it. Or broken by something.

Or both.

Time to find out which.

“You said your name is... Bah-rath?” she said, carefully shaping the syllables.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said immediately, nodding. “Bharath. Almost like ‘Barack’ but with a ‘th’ at the end like the ‘th’ in wrath.”

He smiled nervously.

She didn’t smile back.

“I’ve never met someone from India before,” she said.

He nodded again. “It’s my first time out of Chennai. That’s my home city.”

“Long way to come.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And you came here alone?”

He nodded, then added, “With a scholarship. Full ride. Computer science.”

Marisol beamed beside him.

Maria didn’t look at her.

She looked at him.

“You’re smart then.”

He opened his mouth, hesitated, then said softly: “I work hard. That’s what my father taught me.”

Maria didn’t expect that. She softened for half a second. Then remembered her role.

“So what are your intentions with my daughter?”

The question came out fast. Like a knife flicked from a belt.

Bharath froze for half a heartbeat. Then sat up straighter.

“I love her,” he said. Just like that.

Maria blinked.

No pause. No stutter. Just three words spoken with the clarity of a confession.

Her throat went tight, but she forced her face to stay blank.

“Those are big words for someone you’ve known for a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s still true. I didn’t even need those extra weeks to know I loved her.”

He wasn’t smiling now. He was just... still. Calm in a way that made her nervous.

“I don’t want to take her away or something like that,” he added, quietly. “Or distract her from her goals. I just want to be with her. Help her however I can.”

Maria looked at Marisol, who was no longer smiling. Just watching Bharath like she wanted to memorize him.

Maria cleared her throat. Then leaned forward, elbows on knees.

“I raised my daughters to be strong,” she said. “Not to be someone’s dream girl. Not to chase fairy tales. And definitely not to lose themselves in a boy.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bharath said.

“Can you promise me,” Maria said slowly, “that if she chooses you, she doesn’t stop choosing *herself* too?”

Bharath’s voice was firm.

“I would never let her forget who she is.”

Maria stared at him.

He didn’t blink. He didn’t waver. He meant it. And that, more than anything else, terrified her. Because it meant he might actually be worth her daughter’s heart.

And that meant... Maria couldn’t protect her the way she used to.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 50: And What Happens After Love?

[1,813 words]

Maria had made arroz con pollo because it was her fallback - a dish that meant “welcome” in her house without her having to say the word.

The rice steamed golden in its pot. The chicken was tender, seasoned just right with cumin, garlic, and lime. She served it generously.

But when she placed the plate in front of Bharath, she noticed the flicker.

Not hesitation. Not disgust. Just a pause - quick as a blink - as if his body caught itself from moving forward.

She narrowed her eyes. “Something wrong?”

Bharath looked up, surprised. “Oh - no, ma’am. I mean - yes, ma’am. Just...” He gently pushed the chicken aside. “I don’t eat meat.”

Maria blinked. “You’re vegetarian?”

“Yes, ma’am. My entire family is. It’s part cultural, part religious. I should’ve said something earlier.”

He looked genuinely apologetic.

Maria, caught off guard, scoffed. “You eat *no* meat?”

He shook his head. “No ma’am. No chicken, no beef, no fish. I do eat dairy and eggs.”

Maria looked at Marisol. “You didn’t think to mention this?”

Marisol shrugged. “I forgot. It’s not a big deal.”

“It *is* a big deal,” Maria snapped, gesturing at the plate. “This is how we live, Marisol. We cook meat. Every major family tradition we have has meat at the center.”

Bharath looked down respectfully. "I understand, ma'am. And I want to respect your home. This smells amazing. I just... I can't eat it."

There was no judgment in his tone. Just quiet apology.

Maria studied him - the way he didn't shrink but also didn't fight. The way his fork drifted toward the beans and rice without complaint. The way he smiled as he bit into the fried plantains.

"You're going to have a hard time here," she said. "In this country. In this house."

"That's possible," Bharath said, then turned to Marisol. "But I'm not alone."

Marisol squeezed his hand under the table.

Maria exhaled. "Food's one thing. What about everything else? You come from completely different worlds. What happens when religion comes up? Or politics? Or how to raise children? These things don't just... disappear."

Marisol rolled her eyes. "Mamá, *por favor*. You're acting like we're planning a wedding next week."

Maria fixed her with a look. "You think I'm being ridiculous?"

"Yes!" Marisol burst out. "You're turning this into a problem before there *is* one."

Bharath touched her hand gently. "Marisol..."

She looked at him, already defiant, ready to fight for him.

But then his voice, calm and steady, broke through.

"Your mom isn't wrong."

Both women stared at him.

Bharath continued. "She's asking real questions. Hard ones. And they matter. Because these are the kinds of things that break couples apart later. And if we care about each other, we should be ready to talk about them."

Marisol's mouth opened. Then closed.

Maria tilted her head quizzically, studying the boy again.

Did this boy just make Marisol back down from an argument with a few words?! Her Marisol? The girl who never liked to lose an argument with anyone? What just happened here?

“But,” Bharath added, looking back at Maria, “I believe those are conversations we have to work through - me and her. Together.”

His voice remained soft but steady. “My parents will have their thoughts. You’ll have yours. But when it comes to decisions - about life, about family, about what kind of people we want to be - it will be between me and Marisol.”

Maria didn’t say anything for a long time.

Then she leaned back in her chair, folding her arms.

“You always speak like that?” she asked.

Bharath blinked. “Ma’am?”

“Like you’re making declarations in court.”

He flushed. “I don’t mean to. I just... I think about these things.”

“And you’ll really be okay not eating meat at every party? Every holiday? You’ll be okay if she brings home pork and fries it right next to you?”

“I’ve shared a fridge with Jorge, ma’am. I think I’ll survive.”

That drew a snort from Marisol and a reluctant twitch of Maria’s lips.

“Smartass,” Maria muttered.

“Trying, ma’am,” Bharath replied, deadpan.

The table was quiet for a beat. Then Maria spoke again, quieter this time.

“You say these things now. But love doesn’t solve everything. What happens when life gets hard? When you fight? When the shine wears off?”

Marisol reached for Bharath’s hand again.

He didn’t look away from Maria.

“I didn’t come here for easy. I came here to build something with her - step by step”. It just so happened that I was fortunate enough to meet her. And now I want a future with her.”

Maria looked at her daughter, at the way Marisol's eyes had gone soft and her thumb stroked the back of Bharath's hand. This boy - awkward and careful - had made her daughter look truly happy for the first time in years. A girl as she was supposed to be and not the guarded woman life had made her into despite her tender age.

Maria stared at him for another long moment. Part of her still wanted to push him out. Say *thank you for coming* and lock the door behind him. But another part - the quieter, older part - remembered what it felt like to be seen and chosen by someone who actually listened.

She exhaled.

"Finish your dinner," she said, her voice rougher than before. "I'm going to make you a proper plate. No chicken."

Bharath stood too. "You don't have to - "

"I said *sit*," Maria snapped, but there was no venom in it.

Bharath sat. Marisol exhaled, half-laughing, half-relieved.

Maria disappeared into the kitchen, muttering under her breath in Spanish.

But as she opened the cabinet for the pot of beans, she paused - just for a second - and smiled.

Maybe. Just maybe. This boy was the real thing. Even if he didn't eat meat.

Maria returned with a fresh plate of rice, black beans, and sautéed plantains. She placed it in front of Bharath with a quiet nod, and he gave her the kind of grateful smile that looked like it had never been faked in his life.

She sat back down slowly, hands folded on the table now, not eating.

Marisol noticed.

"Mamá?"

Maria didn't look at her daughter. She kept her gaze on Bharath.

"You two think you're in love."

Marisol tensed beside him. "We are."

"I'm not arguing that," Maria said. "You feel it now. I see it. But feelings don't pay rent. And I'm not saying that to be cruel. I'm saying it because love at eighteen... it's a pretty thing. Soft. Wild. But it's not always strong enough to survive what comes next."

Bharath set his fork down slowly.

"We know it won't be easy," he said.

Maria nodded. "So then tell me. What happens after school? What happens when you graduate?"

There was a silence at the table now.

Marisol looked at Bharath. Bharath looked back at her. For once, neither had a ready answer.

Maria pressed. "You go back to India after four years? You stay? You move? What happens to my daughter's dreams? What happens when one of you gets a job offer somewhere else? What happens if one of your families says no? If her Catholic abuela wants a priest and your people want temple bells and jasmine strings?"

"I don't know," Bharath said softly.

Maria raised an eyebrow. "At least you're honest."

"But I do know this," he added. "I'm not going to lie to her. Or to you. I didn't come into this thinking I had all the answers. But I want to find them with her. Step by step. Not on a whim. Not just for college. But for forever if she chooses to be with me. I want to be with her forever."

Maria turned to her daughter. "And you?"

Marisol's voice was clear. "Same. I don't know what happens after. But I know I want it to be with him."

Maria didn't reply for a long time. She watched the two of them - the clasped hands, the way their eyes spoke without moving, the way her daughter sat a little taller beside this strange boy from across the world.

They were just eighteen. Too young, probably. Too reckless, definitely. But also - just maybe - exactly what each other needed.

She sighed.

"Well," she said finally, "that's more honesty than most grown men ever give me."

Bharath blinked, then nodded.

“I’m not a grown man yet,” he said. “But I’m trying to become one. For her.”

And for the first time that evening, Maria looked at him not like an invader or a threat - but something softer. Something dangerously close to approval.

“I can respect that,” she said.

She pushed her chair back and stood again.

“Dessert?” she asked, as if it were the most natural question in the world.

Marisol’s mouth dropped open.

“You’re not kicking him out?”

Maria glanced back. “I said dessert. Don’t make me change my mind.”

Bharath exhaled, half in shock, half in gratitude.

Marisol grinned and reached for his hand under the table.

And Maria, turning toward the kitchen, allowed herself the smallest smile.

She’d asked the questions she needed to ask.

She hadn’t gotten the answers she wanted.

But she had gotten the truth - or at least what they thought was the truth at this age.

The dishes were done. The food packed away. The air in the house felt different now - lighter, somehow. As if the laughter had settled into the walls, softening the old corners worn by years of worry.

Maria stood in the doorway, a cup of chamomile cooling in her hands. She watched them from across the living room - Marisol curled on the couch, bare feet tucked beneath her, Bharath sitting beside her, polite as always, but relaxed now. Her daughter’s hand rested on his thigh like it belonged there.

They weren’t doing anything scandalous. Just talking. Sharing quiet smiles. Leaning into each other in that gentle, unconscious way that spoke louder than any kiss.

It scared Maria.

Not because he was a bad boy. No - he seemed like a good one. Better than she'd dared hope for, honestly. Smart, respectful, kind. Nervous, even, which she found oddly endearing.

She only wished - privately, selfishly - that he were Latino. That he came with fewer question marks. That his family spoke the same language, went to the same church, ate the same food, knew what it meant to dance in the kitchen after payday.

But love didn't follow checkboxes.

And watching the way her daughter's eyes shone - how Marisol softened in ways Maria hadn't seen in years - made her ache with a different kind of fear.

What if this was real? What if this was the one? Because if it was... then there was so much to lose.

Maria exhaled slowly, setting her tea down on the table. Her knees creaked as she sat.

Across the room, Marisol glanced up, radiant and at peace. Bharath noticed too. He gave Maria a small, respectful nod. Not flashy. Not charming. Just honest.

And Maria, against her instincts, found herself nodding back.

Just once.

That was all she could give right now.

Hope. With trepidation, to this Indian boy who was not Catholic. Not Latino

She didn't know what the future held. Didn't know if young love could survive long-distance, culture clashes, growing pains. But she knew what she saw tonight.

For now, it was enough.

Share to your friends

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

