

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 51: Built Different

[2,745 words]

The Rivera living room smelled of lemon oil, cumin, and the faintest trace of lavender perfume. The sofa cushions had that faint give of a home lived in, loved in. Along the wall, school certificates were framed with care - Marisol's math awards, her track ribbons, even a faded honor roll mention from middle school.

Marisol and Bharath sat side by side on the couch. Her hand rested lightly on his thigh. He was doing everything to pretend he wasn't still recovering from their *dinner* inquisition.

From the kitchen, Maria grumbled about cumin.

"I told her yesterday," Marisol whispered.

Bharath was about to rise and help when a voice slid like silk down the hallway.

"Que guapo! So *this* is the famous boy?"

Marisol flinched. "Shit. No."

The hallway parted like a curtain, and in strolled Mia Rivera - seventeen and unreal. Her tank top was snug, her jeans painted on, and her skin practically glowed. Her hair was perfect, her lips glossed, her lashes long enough to fan air.

Bharath blinked.

For a full second, he forgot how to breathe.

Because if Marisol was fire, Mia was the sun. Radiant. Dangerous. Impossible to ignore.

And she knew it.

Mia's eyes swept over him, hungry and amused. "Well, well. You weren't lying, Mari. He is cute."

Bharath stood awkwardly. "Hi. I'm Bharath."

Mia tilted her head, smiled sweetly - and didn't take the offered hand. "I'm Mia. M-I-A. Which also means 'mine' in Spanish. Just saying."

Marisol groaned, already burying her face in her hand. "Here we go."

Bharath's lips curved into a confused smile. "Oh. I didn't know that. That's clever wordplay."

He sat down again, visibly trying not to stare.

Mia, used to turning heads, noticed the flicker of admiration - and then the puzzling *nothing*. No follow-up flirtation. No stumble. No "*you're hot too*." Nothing.

She narrowed her eyes, perched on the armrest like a cat about to pounce.

"So," she purred, "Mari says you're smart."

"I try to be," Bharath said.

"And humble too." She leaned closer. "Do you work out?"

He blinked. "A bit. My friend Jorge and I go to the gym."

Mia raised her brows. "You don't look it."

Bharath nodded. "Yeah. I think I'm still not there yet. But I'm working on it."

There was no self-deprecation. No false modesty. Just... honesty.

Mia frowned slightly.

Weird.

"What music do you listen to?" she asked.

"Mostly A. R. Rahman. And Ilaiyaraaja. Indian composers."

Mia blinked. "I don't know who that is."

"I can share some cassettes," he said.

"You still use *cassettes*?"

Marisol muttered, "He's a dinosaur. He barely discovered Napster last week."

"I like things I can hold," Bharath said, smiling sheepishly.

Mia tilted her head again, studying him. No chains. No posturing. Not even a hint of effort to *be cool*.

And that... *confused her*.

She'd expected the kind of guy who could captivate a woman as hot as Marisol would puff his chest and start bragging. Or at least flirt back a little.

But this boy?

He just looked at her like she was a person. Not a prize. Not a threat. Just... someone else in the room.

"I have a boyfriend," she said suddenly.

Bharath nodded. "That's nice."

Mia blinked. "You didn't ask if I did."

"I figured it didn't matter. You're not interested in me."

Marisol laughed into her hand.

"Oh, *he's* good," Mia muttered. "You're good. You've trained him, Mari."

"Nope," Marisol grinned. "That's all factory setting."

Maria's voice called from the kitchen. "Mia, are you helping or just talking nonsense?"

"I'm interrogating!" she yelled back.

Maria entered with a dishrag slung over her shoulder. Her gaze flicked to Mia, to Bharath, to Marisol's hand on his leg.

"Mia," she said slowly. "You look like you're about to commit a sin."

"I was just *observing*," Mia said.

Bharath stood. "Do you need help with anything, ma'am?"

Maria blinked. "You cook?"

"I can boil things. Very carefully."

Marisol snorted. "He makes a mean cup of chai. And he says he knows how to cook. I plan to make him show me very soon."

“Sit,” Maria said. “You’re a guest.”

Mia flopped into a chair. “You know, for a guy who just survived a Riveran gauntlet, you’re still very boring.”

“I’m not boring,” Bharath said with a smile. “Just... consistent.”

“And you don’t blush.”

“I do,” he admitted. “Just not because someone’s pretty.”

Mia’s mouth opened. Then closed. Then opened again.

“What does make you blush?”

Bharath glanced at Marisol, smiled faintly and winked. “Private things.”

Marisol covered her face. “Oh my God.”

Maria crossed her arms. “At least he’s honest.”

“Too honest,” Mia muttered.

Bharath shrugged. “I get that a lot.”

“You’re still a little weird,” Mia said, staring at him. “But... not in a bad way.”

Maria narrowed her eyes at Mia, then looked at Bharath. “I’ll be honest. I thought you were going to be someone else entirely.”

“Sorry,” he said.

“No - I mean that in a good way.” Maria paused. “I expected... I don’t know. Some player. You’re not that.”

“No, ma’am.”

She looked at him long and hard. Then nodded, almost imperceptibly.

In the hallway, Mia leaned back, her gaze lingering on Bharath’s profile.

She didn’t get him.

At all.

But maybe... that was the most interesting thing of all.

The dessert was nothing fancy for Mia - just tres leches in chipped porcelain bowls - but in the Rivera home, food was still a kind of sacred activity. The clink of cutlery, the muted hum of the ceiling fan, and the faint scent of lavender from Maria's apron mingled with cinnamon and sweet milk.

Mia, however, had declared war.

She sat across from Bharath, elbows resting lightly on the table, the candlelight flickering against the delicate gold chain nestled just above her cleavage. Her tank top - innocent in theory - had clearly been chosen with intent. One strap had already slipped halfway down her shoulder, exposing a smooth expanse of skin and the faintest edge of a lacy bra cup.

She dragged her spoon through the soaked cake, slowly - torturously - then lifted it to her lips, letting the milk drip onto her tongue before sucking it clean with a soft, deliberate pop.

Bharath's hand paused mid-air. He blinked, and for the first time all night, his composure frayed - not broken, but teased apart like fine silk under tension.

Mia's smile was lazy, predatory.

Marisol didn't miss it. "Mia," she warned, voice dry as a Georgia summer. "It's dessert, not foreplay."

Mia didn't flinch. Her eyes never left Bharath. "Relax, hermana. Just tasting. I thought you said your man liked sweet things." Her voice curled around the words like a cat around a sunbeam.

Maria returned from the kitchen, oblivious to the silent standoff unfolding at her table, and sank into her chair with a sigh. "This boy eats like a bird," she muttered, reaching for her glass.

Mia realized that Bharath was looking at her but not in a lustful way as she was normally accustomed to but really seeing her. Not just her beauty, which was staggering in a way that demanded acknowledgment, but something else. Her pride. Her challenge. The way she kept leaning forward just enough to test him, but not enough to fall over the line.

And she could tell.

That was the most maddening part. He *noticed* - oh, he noticed everything. The cut of her top, the slight push of her breasts as she folded her arms under them. The way her long hair spilled over one shoulder. His eyes betrayed him in flashes - flickers of heat buried beneath layers of restraint.

He was a breast man, she'd bet money on it. Her body didn't lie. Boys fumbled when she walked past. Men forgot their wives. Even professors occasionally lost their train of thought when she leaned in to ask a question.

But this boy... this *shy little saint*... was built different.

She blinked. Her spoon scraped the edge of her bowl, the motion unsteady for the first time.

"You're weird, you know that?" Mia said suddenly, setting her spoon down. "Most guys by now are sweating. You're just... what? Meditating through it?"

Bharath smiled faintly, looking at his bowl. "Just trying to enjoy the cake."

His voice was low. Calm. Infuriating.

She leaned in again, breasts pressing just slightly against the edge of the table. Her voice dipped to a whisper. "So you're not even a *little* tempted?"

He finally met her gaze, steady now.

"I didn't say that."

There was a pause. A charge. Like lightning caught in a bottle.

Mia's breath caught - not that she let it show. But inside, something fizzed.

Marisol let out a dramatic sigh and stood to clear her bowl. "I swear, this house should've come with a spray bottle for her."

Maria, sipping her tea with one eyebrow raised, finally looked up. "Mia, cariño, let the boy finish his dessert before you eat him alive."

Mia threw her hands up in mock surrender. "I was just being friendly!"

But even as she stood, she threw one last look over her shoulder - slow, sultry, and deliberate.

And Bharath? He looked down again. But this time, he was smiling.

He glanced up, cheeks just a shade darker than before, and said quietly, "This is very good. Did you help make it?"

That wasn't the reaction she expected.

"Yes," she said, surprised by her own honesty. "I help with dessert on weekends."

He smiled at that. Not at her cleavage. Not at her pout. At that.

“You’ve got a real eye for balance,” he said. “The sweetness, the spice - it’s not overwhelming.”

“You like balance, huh?” she asked, playing with her spoon again.

“I think everyone needs it. Especially smart people. You strike me as someone who needs a lot of stimulus.”

Mia blinked. Her spoon paused mid-air.

Maria and Marisol were chatting about laundry or something equally forgettable, and suddenly Mia felt like they weren’t even in the room.

“What makes you think I’m smart?” she asked, genuinely puzzled.

He tilted his head slightly. “You’re testing me. That’s not the mark of someone who’s bored. That’s the mark of someone who’s used to disappointment and wants to know if there’s anything underneath.”

Mia stared at him. Her heartbeat stuttered.

“No one’s ever said that to me before,” she murmured.

Bharath gave a soft shrug. “Maybe they weren’t looking at the right things.”

She dropped her spoon into the bowl with a soft clink and leaned forward across the table.

“You are weird,” she whispered. “And dangerous.”

Marisol glanced up. “If you’re threatening him, I get to throw the first slap.”

“I’m not threatening him,” Mia said, her voice still low. “I’m just... confused.”

“You and me both,” Marisol muttered, but even she was watching them now.

Maria raised an eyebrow, her tone distracted. “What are we talking about?”

“Dessert,” Mia replied breezily - too breezily. Her eyes flicked to Marisol, daring her to contradict her.

But Bharath didn’t smile. He didn’t play along. Instead, he looked at her with something closer to curiosity - or was it *pity*?

“Mia,” he said, voice low and careful, like he’d just stepped onto thin ice, “what do you want people to see when they look at you?”

It hit her like a whisper through a crack in the armor.

Her spoon paused mid-air.

She hadn’t expected that. Not from him. Not here.

Her body went still, except for the small twitch of her jaw. “I don’t know,” she said before she could catch the words. The admission slipped out, raw and exposed, like a wire sparking in the dark.

A long breath dragged through her nose.

Fine.

Enough was enough.

He wanted real? She could be real - in her own way. In the way she *knew* worked. No man had ever lasted when she touched them - not the football captain, not the physics tutor, not the thirty-year-old barista who used to flirt with her during study breaks at the coffee house.

Time to see if this *monk* was made of flesh or marble.

Like a sleight of hand, she rose from her chair with the practiced grace of someone who *knew* how her body moved in space - every sway calibrated, every angle intentional. Maria was reaching for a napkin, fussing about the condensation ring under her glass. Marisol was frowning, suspicious.

But Mia’s target never moved.

She walked slowly, barefoot on the cool tile, around the table. And then - with the theatrical precision of someone born for the stage - she stopped behind Bharath’s chair.

He didn’t flinch.

She leaned in, letting her chest ghost just above his shoulder, close enough for him to *feel* her presence but not touch. Her breath skimmed his hairline. And then, she laid one perfectly manicured hand on his shoulder.

His skin was warm beneath his shirt, and she felt the faint rise and fall of his breath. A subtle shift. A flicker of tension under his muscles. Not retreat - but bracing.

Her fingers trailed lower. Slowly. Lower.

To the edge of the gauze just peeking out under the collar of his t-shirt.

Bharath flinched.

Not violently. But sharply. Like a live wire had been touched.

“What the hell - ” Marisol stood up.

Bharath’s face paled.

Mia stepped back instantly. “What... what is that?”

“Nothing,” Bharath said, too fast.

But Mia’s hand had felt the bandages. The heat of a healing wound.

Maria stood now too. “What are you hiding?”

Marisol stared at him, suddenly serious. “Bharath.”

He exhaled slowly, looking at all of them, then at Mia.

“You touched my stitches.”

The room fell into stillness.

Marisol’s breath hitched. “Your... what?”

Mia’s mouth was slightly open, her fingers curling slowly as if trying to take the touch back. “Wait. Are you serious?”

Maria’s hands went to her hips, eyes narrowing. “Stitches? What stitches?”

Bharath shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Oh, no,” Marisol snapped, standing now. “You don’t get to say that. You were supposed to be taking it easy.”

Mia looked between them, blinking fast. “You weren’t kidding. What happened?”

Bharath looked at Marisol. He didn’t want to make a scene. But the truth had found its way out - in the most unexpected way.

“Can I borrow yesterday’s AJC?” he asked softly.

Maria, still fuming, gestured to a stack of papers on the sideboard.

“Third page. Local section.”

He got up carefully and flipped through the newspaper. Then, without a word, he laid it flat on the table and pointed.

There were no names. Just a sketch of the MARTA station. A brief mention of a man in his late teens sustaining non-critical injuries after fending off two attackers. One of them had a knife.

Maria read the article slowly. Her fingers trembled as she folded the paper. Mia picked it up to read whatever had shaken her mother to her core.

“This is you?”

Bharath nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And Marisol?” she whispered.

“She was with me,” he said.

Marisol stepped closer, voice softer now. “We were walking to the MARTA station at night for Marisol to return home when Sarah - the girl who was attacked - was getting mugged. It all happened so fast.”

Maria’s face went pale. “And you didn’t come home because...”

“I stayed with him,” Marisol admitted. “At the hospital.”

There was a silence that felt like a weight pressing down on everyone in the room.

Maria sat heavily in her chair, staring at the story again.

“You... you could’ve died,” she murmured.

“I’m okay,” Bharath said gently. “It was just a shallow cut. Nothing major.”

Mia hadn’t moved. She just stood there, eyes locked on him.

The story in the paper was short. Sparse.

But the reality - the blood, the fear, the choice to step into danger for someone else - that hung in the air.

“You didn’t even know the girl,” Maria whispered.

Bharath nodded. “Didn’t matter.”

“Why?” Mia asked, her voice cracking slightly. “Why would you do that?”

He looked at her - at the way her teasing armor had cracked open - and said simply, “Because someone had to. Because she screamed.”

The silence deepened.

And then Maria exhaled shakily. “You’re not like Ricardo.”

Bharath blinked. “Ma’am?”

“My ex husband,” she said, her voice hollow. “He liked to pretend to be brave. But when things got hard, he ran.”

Bharath looked down. “I’m not brave either. I was scared.”

“But you didn’t run,” she said.

He didn’t answer.

Mia moved toward him again - not flirtatiously this time, but almost reverently. She sat beside him, not touching, just close enough to look into his face.

“You really got hurt for a stranger?” she asked quietly. “And you still came to dinner.”

He shrugged. “Marisol said your mom was scary. I couldn’t say no.”

Even Maria cracked a smile at that.

Mia was quiet for a long time. Then, in a voice so soft it could’ve been mistaken for awe, she said, “You’re kind of... magnificent.”

Bharath blinked. “I’m really not.”

“You are,” she said. “You just hide it with that dorky face.”

He laughed, a little awkwardly.

Maria stood, wiping her eyes with the edge of her towel. “I still don’t know about this... relationship. But I’ll say this - you’re not what I feared.”

Marisol moved behind Bharath and slipped her arms around his shoulders, her chin resting gently on his head.

“He’s the best,” she said simply.

Mia watched them. And for the first time in a long time, she felt jealous of her sister.

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

Chapter 52: Under the Porch Light

[986 words]

The porch light flickered softly overhead as Bharath stepped out onto the stoop, the humid Georgia night wrapping around him like a warm shawl. Crickets chirped in the bushes, and the air smelled faintly of lemon cleaner and garden soil. Maria followed just a step behind, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

“You’ll come again, Bharath?” she asked, not quite a question, not quite a command.

Bharath turned and nodded earnestly. “Yes, ma’am. Thank you for dinner. Everything was... perfect.”

Maria studied him for a long second. Then she reached up and patted his cheek lightly - almost maternally.

“Next time,” she said, “you’ll bring stories. Maybe teach us some words in your language, huh?”

He smiled. “I’d love to.”

She nodded, then tugged Marisol by the elbow as Bharath stepped down toward the curb where Tyrel’s pickup truck waited.

Once they were alone on the porch, Maria lowered her voice. “Mija, I meant what I said earlier. He seems like a good boy. Sweet, honest - and I like that he doesn’t try to charm me.”

Marisol grinned. “He doesn’t know how.”

Maria rolled her eyes, then sighed. “But you’re still young. Both of you. Love feels real when you’re in it, but life...” She looked off into the darkness. “Life can change everything.”

Marisol nodded solemnly. “I know, mamá. But I also know what this feels like.”

Maria looked at her daughter, at the fire in her eyes, the softness in her cheeks. "Then just don't let it blind you, mi corazón. That's all I ask."

The porch light above flickered once - not enough to go out, but just enough to shift the shadows across the yard. Bharath stepped toward the pickup truck, trying to look anywhere but at the way Mia stood at the top of the steps, framed by the door like a siren carved out of moonlight.

She was... devastating.

The shape of her was impossible to ignore - all curves and confidence, hips cocked slightly as she leaned against the doorway. The cotton of her tight tank top clung to her like a second skin, and her jean shorts did nothing to hide the lithe strength of her legs. The way the porch light haloed around her body made her look almost unreal - like a fever dream conjured by a lonely man.

She followed him down the steps and leaned casually against the passenger side door, right before he could open it. Bharath paused, not knowing if he should move her aside or wait her out.

"You really didn't have to come tonight," she said, twirling a loose strand of hair between her fingers.

"I wanted to," he replied honestly. "It was important to Marisol."

"It was important to mamá too," she added. "She just hides it under ten layers of suspicion and salt."

He chuckled softly, hand brushing the edge of the truck. "She was kind. Direct. I respect that."

Mia tilted her head, eyeing him in that way again - not the overtly seductive look from earlier, but something stranger. Studying. Prying.

"You're weird, you know," she said.

"You've made that clear a few times tonight."

"Not in a bad way," she added, biting her lip. "Just... different."

Then she leaned in a little.

And Bharath's breath almost hitched.

She wasn't trying to do anything, not exactly. But the neckline of her top was low, and the way she angled her body - one arm draped along the window - sent her chest

forward in a way that made it impossible not to notice. Her scent - something sweet and citrusy - mingled with the humid night air.

And her voice dropped, just a shade softer. "You're... brave. What you did for that girl. I don't think I've met anyone who'd do that."

He tried not to react. Really tried.

"Anyone would've stepped in," he said carefully.

"No, they wouldn't have," Mia whispered.

Her hand briefly brushed his forearm, and the warmth of her touch sent a jolt through him. He tried to think of anything - circuit diagrams, spicy food, the smell of diaper pails - anything to pull his mind out of the heat of the moment.

He cleared his throat. "You said you're into science, right? That's what you're focusing on?"

Mia blinked, slightly thrown by the pivot. "Uh... yeah. STEM magnet program. I want to go into computer science or biomedical engineering. Haven't decided."

"That's amazing," he said, genuinely impressed. "My cousin back home is studying biotech. She's brilliant."

Mia shifted again, crossing her arms - which only made her breasts rise. Bharath forced himself to look her in the eye.

"You really care about that?" she asked. "What I want to do?"

He nodded. "I care about what matters to people."

For a second - a real second - Mia's facade cracked. Just a hairline fracture. And underneath the teasing, flirtation, and glossy charm was a girl who was never asked that question by anyone who wasn't trying to get into her pants.

Bharath looked out across the yard, trying not to focus on how beautiful she looked, silhouetted like a goddess under the porch light.

"I don't think I could handle two Riveras being this intense," he said, half-joking.

Mia smiled, softer this time. "We're a lot. You sure you're built for it?"

He looked back at her. "You'd be surprised what I'm built for."

Her lips parted slightly. "Dios."

And then - mercifully - the front door creaked open, and Marisol stepped out with a bag slung over her shoulder.

“Did I miss something?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

Mia backed up from the truck with a sigh. “Just your boyfriend being a monk.”

Marisol slid into the driver’s seat, smirking. “Verdad? That’s not what he was earlier in the afternoon with me.”

Bharath groaned and dropped into the passenger side of the bench. “Please drive.”

As they pulled away, Mia stood on the porch, arms crossed over her chest, watching them disappear down the block.

And for the first time in a long time, she didn’t feel like the center of the universe. But Mia could now understand why her sister seemed to think he was hers.

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Chapter 53: American Extracurricular Experience [18+]

[1,384 words]

The truck rumbled to life with a low growl, headlights sweeping the quiet street. Marisol shifted into gear, her hands on the wheel.

Bharath sat beside her, spine rigid, trying very hard not to look out the passenger window - because Mia was still on the porch, leaning in with a wave, her silhouette backlit and borderline biblical.

He adjusted his seatbelt.

Marisol clocked the movement with a raised brow. “You okay over there, mi corazón?”

“I’m fine,” he said quickly. Too quickly.

“Oh yeah?” she said, voice teasing. “Then why is your pant tenting like that?”

He glanced down and groaned. “Kadavule...”

“Uh huh.” Marisol made a sharp turn off the main road and into a quiet tree-lined lane that smelled faintly of pine and honeysuckle. “Poor baby. That bad, huh?”

Bharath rubbed his forehead. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You didn’t have to.” Her voice dropped. “You sat there looking like a damn saint while Mia tried every trick in the book. That’s what did it for me.”

He turned to her, stunned. “You’re turned on?”

Marisol slammed the brake, pulled the gear into park, and leaned over, her lips suddenly inches from his.

“I’m fucking soaked, baby,” she whispered. “Watching you be the only man on earth immune to my sister’s nuclear-level tits? That did it for me.”

He was still panting when she climbed onto his lap.

“You sure about this?” he gasped. “In Tyrel’s truck?”

She grinned wickedly. “Tyrel will never know. Unless you fog up the windows like Titanic.”

“Then we’ll just have to try hard, won’t we?”

“Hold up,” Marisol whispered, breathless and glowing in the dim light. She had one hand pressed against Bharath’s bare chest, the other bracing herself on the dashboard as she caught her breath. “Your stitches. Shit.”

Bharath blinked, still dazed from the way she had just climbed over him, all hips and laughter and that maddeningly sinful tongue. “They’re fine,” he muttered, already leaning in for more.

“No, they’re not. You’re pulsing so hard I can feel it in your ribcage, and not in the fun way.”

He groaned, tossing his head back. “I’m fine.”

Marisol gave him that look - half amused, half exasperated - then gently cupped his cheek. “I’m not taking chances with my man. You got stabbed, remember?”

“Worth it,” he murmured, grinning.

She grinned back. “Good. Because now I’m going to take care of you. My way.”

Before he could ask what that meant, she slid down, her palms grazing his abdomen as she repositioned herself between his legs, careful not to jostle his side. The shift in temperature - from humid Georgia night to the heat of her breath on his skin - made his entire body tense.

“Marisol...” he whispered, half prayer, half warning.

“Hush, baby,” she whispered back. “You’re about to get an American education.”

Her fingers hooked into the waistband of his boxers, tugging them down just enough to free him. She paused, her eyes widening slightly - and then she bit her lip, smiling with a kind of reverence that made his blood roar in his ears.

“Dios mío,” she murmured. “She really did a job on you mi amor. I’ve not seen you this hard before without us doing anything.”

Bharath let out a strangled laugh - but it died the moment she leaned forward and licked a slow, teasing line up the underside of him.

His whole body jerked.

“What... what is this...” he gasped.

Marisol giggled softly, swirling her tongue around the tip. “This, papi? This is a big deal in America.”

He blinked down at her, wide-eyed.

“There are movies, jokes, music videos. Pop culture is obsessed with blowjobs in cars. It’s practically our second national anthem.”

“I - I didn’t think - ”

“You didn’t think your sweet Cuban-American girlfriend would be the one to teach you?” she said wickedly.

He whimpered as her lips closed around him.

“No... I just... aaaaah!”

She hummed, and the vibration made him curse again - in Tamil this time, untranslatable and raw. Her rhythm was slow, luxurious, teasing. She alternated between long, swirling sucks and soft kisses, her hands stroking what her mouth couldn’t reach.

Bharath was trying so hard to stay still - to keep his hips from bucking and his side from tearing - but she was making it impossible. Every flick of her tongue, every satisfied moan from her throat drove him closer to the edge.

Marisol looked up at him, her lips damp and eyes gleaming with a teasing glint, but also something more tender - something reverent. She wasn't just touching him to arouse him. She was memorizing him. Worshiping him in her own way.

Bharath's breath hitched as her fingers brushed his thighs, slow and purposeful, grounding him in the moment.

"Relax, baby," she whispered, her voice low and intimate, like a secret between lovers. "This is about you. Let me take care of you tonight."

He tried to speak - to say something witty or romantic or at least coherent - but the words caught in his throat. He just nodded, throat dry, heart thudding beneath the stitches he was supposed to be protecting.

Marisol was careful. Painstakingly so. Her lips kissed around the angry bruise near his side first, whispering apologies against his skin. "This still okay?" she murmured, her cheek resting briefly on his chest as she looked up.

"Only if you stop asking before I lose my mind," he rasped, brushing a strand of her hair from her face. "I trust you."

That made her smile - soft, almost shy. Then she shifted again, her hair falling like silk curtains around him as she worked her way lower.

Her kisses were slow, deliberate, tracing a line down his torso. Every breath she took sent a new jolt of sensation through him. Bharath wasn't sure what he expected - he'd never even imagined this far. But it wasn't this. Not the gentleness. Not the complete focus she gave him. It was like she'd tuned out the world, as if her entire universe had narrowed to just him.

His fingers tangled in her curls, not to guide or demand, but to hold on to something - anything - as she explored him with the kind of devotion that left him dizzy.

And yet, beneath the awe and the desire, there was laughter too.

At one point she pulled back, licking her lips with a mischievous smirk. "I swear, there's going to be a song about you in my playlist after this."

Bharath blinked at her, flushed and dazed. "What?"

She grinned. "Trust me, mi amor. I'm going to have a very specific smile whenever I hear *Santana* now."

He groaned, tossing his head back with a soft laugh, the tension easing just enough for him to feel the joy beneath the ache.

And when he finally surrendered to her - to the warmth of her mouth, the pressure of her hands, the impossible intimacy of it all - it wasn't explosive.

It was quiet. Shattering. A gentle unraveling of breath and heartbeat and whisper-soft exclamations in Tamil he didn't know he could say out loud. She held him through it, letting him ride the wave, never rushing. Never demanding.

When he finally opened his eyes, blinking through the fog of afterglow and disbelief, she was already curled up beside him again, wiping his brow with the sleeve of her hoodie and humming something low and wordless.

"That... was not in the syllabus," he mumbled.

Marisol laughed, breathless and pleased. "Welcome to the American extracurricular experience."

He turned to her, heart swelling with something beyond lust - something deeper, more sacred.

"You didn't have to..."

"I know," she said, eyes serious now. "But I wanted to. Because you make me feel seen. Safe. Desired in the ways that matter. And you deserve that too."

He reached for her hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

They sat like that in the truck for a while - the night humming softly outside, the windows cracked, the scent of jasmine and summer rain drifting in. She leaned her head on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her gently, careful not to tug too hard near the wound.

Eventually, she stirred and smirked. "Next time though? I'm climbing on top. Properly."

Bharath chuckled, tightening his grip just a little. "Only if we fog up the windows like in *Titanic*."

She grinned. "Challenge accepted."

They stayed there a little longer, tangled together in the cab of a borrowed truck, dreaming of Tuesdays and fogged-up glass, and the growing ritual of a love that was slowly becoming something unstoppable.

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

Chapter 54: Dangerous because He's Honest

[1,540 words]

Marisol climbed back over him with lazy grace, straddling his hips carefully so she didn't jostle his side. The overhead light of the pickup cast her in golden hues - her skin still flushed, lips still glistening, curls mussed in every direction. She looked like something out of a fever dream.

But her eyes were soft now, thoughtful, as she slowly lowered herself until her bare stomach met his chest. She let her weight settle against him, her cheek resting just above his heart.

Bharath sighed, his arms coming up instinctively to hold her close. His fingers traced idle lines across the curve of her back.

"I needed this," she whispered, her voice dreamy.

"I did too," he murmured, pressing a kiss into her hair.

They lay like that for a moment - skin to skin, hearts syncing, the night buzzing gently around them.

Then Marisol tilted her head just enough to look at him, her chin resting on her folded hands atop his chest.

"So... you survived Rivera interrogation night."

Bharath chuckled, the sound low and warm in his throat. "Barely. I think your mother is part CIA."

Marisol laughed, the motion making her breasts press softly into his chest. "She's not so bad. You actually impressed her."

"I did?" he said, eyes wide with mock surprise. "Even after I admitted I don't eat meat?"

Marisol smirked. "That was actually a point in your favor. She'll never admit it, but she respects a man with discipline."

Bharath raised an eyebrow. "She also called me 'not Latino' like it was a warning label."

“She’s just old-school,” Marisol said gently. “After Ricardo - my dad - she’s wary of anyone not from the neighborhood. Anyone who doesn’t speak Spanish, who wasn’t raised Catholic, who doesn’t know Celia Cruz from Celina the pop star.”

“I’ll study up,” he said, deadpan. “Flashcards and everything.”

Marisol grinned and kissed the underside of his jaw. “You’re already doing amazing.”

She paused, thoughtful again. “It meant a lot... how you handled her. Calm. Respectful. You didn’t try too hard - you were just *you*. That’s what got to her.”

Bharath’s eyes softened. “I didn’t know what else to be.”

She nuzzled into him again, smile fading into something more vulnerable. “You should’ve seen her face when you said our decisions are ours. That our parents get a say - but not the final one. That hit her hard. I think she finally saw us as real.”

He brushed a hand along her spine, grounding them both. “We *are* real.”

A silence settled again - not awkward, but full.

Then she sighed into his chest. “Mia’s going to be a problem.”

He laughed, covering his face briefly. “She’s... a force of nature.”

“Did you think she was hot?” Marisol asked, teasing - but something genuine in her tone.

Bharath didn’t flinch.

He could’ve lied. He could’ve brushed it off with a smirk or turned it into a joke. But he didn’t. His hands, warm against her back, stilled for a moment as he took a breath.

“She’s devastating,” he said softly.

Marisol lifted her head slightly, eyebrows raised - not angry, but curious.

“No straight man with a pulse could ignore her,” he added with a wry smile. “She walks into a room and everything tilts toward her. I mean, *you* saw how she looked in that light, Marisol. Those curves, that confidence - even the moths were confused.”

Marisol laughed, a low, surprised sound. “So, you did notice.”

“I’d be dead not to,” he said honestly, brushing a stray curl from her cheek. “But she doesn’t belong to me.”

Marisol tilted her head, lips parting. "And I do?"

He didn't hesitate. "Completely."

She let the silence hang for a moment, watching him closely. Her thumb brushed over his chest, just above the edge of the gauze where the bandage still clung to his healing skin.

"What if..." she said slowly, "what if she *wanted* to belong to you? Like Sarah does?"

That made him pause.

For once, Bharath had no immediate answer. His mind blanked - utterly betrayed by the sharp twitch of his body beneath her. He tried to speak. Failed.

"Ah-hah," Marisol grinned, triumphant. "That was not your brain answering."

Bharath groaned and covered his eyes with one arm. "My little head is a traitor."

"I saw that twitch, by the way," she teased, smacking his chest lightly.

"I can't help it! She leaned into the truck! The stitches were the only thing keeping me from embarrassment."

"You're lucky I didn't come out five seconds later," she said, laughing as she sprawled against him again. "I might've killed you *and* her."

"But I didn't do anything," he muttered.

Marisol looked down at him, eyes shining with affection. "You didn't. You've been nothing but honest. That's what makes you dangerous, you know."

"Dangerous?"

She nodded. "You don't hide anything. Not what you think, not what you want. You don't flirt with smooth lines or pretend to be cool. You just *are*. And women like Mia? We don't know what to do with that."

He reached up and cupped her cheek. "You figured it out."

She leaned into his touch. "Barely. And only because you made it easy."

They were quiet for a beat.

Then she added, more seriously, "I don't know what's going to happen with Mia. Or with Sarah. Or anyone else that might come into our orbit. But I do know one thing..."

She kissed him. Long and slow.

Then whispered against his lips, "You're mine."

He smiled into her mouth. "That part I know by heart."

She lay down again, their hearts aligned like twin engines.

"So," she murmured, yawning slightly, "how do we top tonight?"

He chuckled. "We don't. We just keep showing up."

"Every Tuesday?"

"Every damn day."

Mia stood at the bathroom mirror, wiping away the last of her lip gloss with a towel that smelled faintly of bleach and hibiscus. The porch light still glowed outside, casting a halo of gold through the slatted blinds in her room.

She stared at herself in the mirror.

Same flawless skin. Same killer curves. Same confident arch of the brow. And yet... something felt off.

Bharath hadn't looked at her like the others. Not like a trophy. Not even like temptation.

Not like anything she was used to.

"Qué carajo...?" she whispered, tossing the towel into the hamper.

She'd tried everything. The crop top, the lashes, the "mine" joke, the slow dessert bite with eye contact so deadly it had once made a gorgeous college senior trip over his own tongue. Nothing.

He hadn't blushed. He hadn't stammered. He'd just *seen* her.

Not her tits. Not her ass. Not her waist. *Her*.

What kind of guy does that?

She wandered out into the hallway barefoot, arms crossed, hips swaying by habit alone. She found Maria still in the kitchen, drying dishes with tired hands and a look on her face that Mia couldn't place - part worry, part memory.

Mia leaned against the doorway, watching her for a moment. "So?"

Maria looked up. "So what?"

"You like him, don't you?"

Maria raised a brow. "I like that he didn't turn into a tomato when you tried to seduce him in front of the tres leches."

Mia rolled her eyes. "I wasn't seducing. I was... stress testing."

Maria gave her that mother look. The one that said *mija, please*.

Mia walked in, hopped up onto the counter like she used to when she was ten, and pulled an apple from the fruit bowl. She didn't bite into it, just rolled it between her palms.

"I don't get him," she said finally. "He's... nice."

"That's rare these days," Maria replied.

Mia was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, "He doesn't act like someone who's trying to impress anyone. He doesn't act like someone who even knows he's attractive."

Maria sat across from her at the table. Her shoulders sagged with the weight of the day. "That's what makes him different. He's not *playing* at anything. He's just living."

"I made him flinch," Mia said quietly. "When I touched him. I thought it was a power move. But I touched the bandage."

Maria watched her daughter closely.

Mia met her mother's eyes. "I think I felt guilty for the first time in my life."

Maria's expression softened. "He's a good one, *mija*. But he's not a fantasy. And he's not for you."

Mia didn't answer right away.

"I know he's with Marisol," she said at last. "But that's not what this is about. It's not like I want to steal him or anything..."

Maria tilted her head. "But?"

"But I just - " Mia looked down at the apple again, voice low. "He saw me. *Me*. Not the way I move or dress. Not the makeup or hair. Like I was... a person."

"You are a person."

“I know, mamá. But it’s like... for the first time, someone acted like they knew that.”

Maria smiled - sad, knowing. “It’s a dangerous feeling. Being seen.”

Mia nodded. “And now I can’t stop thinking about him.”

Maria got up slowly, walked over, and brushed her daughter’s hair gently back from her face.

“He’s a sweet boy, mija. And you’re right - he *is* different. But maybe that’s not to chase. Maybe it’s to learn from.”

Mia looked up, eyes glassy. “Then what do I do?”

Maria kissed the top of her head. “You grow. You find someone who sees you like that. Who makes you feel like *you* - not a show. You don’t need to seduce everyone. Some hearts open better with truth.”

Mia nodded slowly.

And for the first time in a long time, she wasn’t trying to be *more*.

She just sat there - thoughtful, quiet, and seen.

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

Chapter 55:Pop Culture Orientation

[995 words]

By the time Marisol and Bharath returned to Smith Hall, the Georgia night had settled into a comfortable hush. The cicadas had quieted, and the air was thick with the scent of magnolia and impending rain. They parked Tyrel's pickup truck and made their way upstairs, their footsteps echoing softly in the stairwell.

Inside the dorm room, the atmosphere was anything but quiet. Jorge lounged on the futon, strumming a guitar aimlessly. Ravi was perched on his desk chair, engrossed in a comic book. Camila, visiting for the evening, sat cross-legged on the floor, painting her toenails a vibrant shade of red.

As Marisol and Bharath entered, all eyes turned to them.

"Well, well," Jorge drawled, setting the guitar aside. "Look who's back from the lion's den."

Marisol rolled her eyes, dropping her bag by the door. "It wasn't that dramatic."

Bharath chuckled, rubbing around his itching wound. "Speak for yourself."

Camila looked up, curiosity piqued. "So? How did it go?"

Marisol flopped onto her bed, stretching out. "Surprisingly well. Mamá was... intense, but she warmed up eventually."

Ravi raised an eyebrow. "Did she find out about the stabbing?"

Bharath nodded, settling into his desk chair. "Yeah. Mia accidentally touched my stitches, and it all came out."

Camila gasped, her eyes wide. "Stitches? What happened?"

Marisol sat up, her expression serious. "We were involved in an incident where a girl named Sarah was in danger. Bharath got hurt helping her."

Jorge leaned forward, intrigued. "And your mom's reaction?"

"She was shocked," Marisol admitted. "Worried, of course. But she saw that Bharath's intentions were good."

Jorge smirked. "So, she didn't chase him out with a chancla?"

Bharath laughed. "No, but I think she considered it."

Camila looked thoughtful. "It's impressive that you stood your ground, Bharath. Not everyone would."

He shrugged modestly. "I just did what felt right."

Jorge nudged Ravi. "Looks like our boy's a hero."

Ravi grinned. "Atlanta Batman strikes again. And a humble one at that."

Marisol smiled, reaching out to squeeze Bharath's hand. "He's more than that."

The room fell into a comfortable silence, the earlier tension dissipating. Outside, the first drops of rain began to patter against the windowpane, a soothing backdrop to the warmth and camaraderie inside.

Ravo leaned back on the futon, tossing a pillow at Bharath. "So bhai, did you recite the Bhagavad Gita or just smile your way through her interrogation?"

Marisol snorted. "Please. This man sat there like a monk. No sweet talk, no charm. Just brutally honest answers like a freaking spreadsheet with feelings."

Bharath raised a hand. "I prefer 'emotionally transparent and culturally grounded.'"

Tyrel plopped onto the floor next to Camila. "Wait, wait - tell it from the beginning. What did her mom ask you?"

Marisol stretched dramatically, grinning. "Everything. Why are you vegetarian? What do your parents believe? What happens when you get married? Do you expect her to cook vegetarian food forever? What about religion? Politics? Babies?!"

Jorge let out a low whistle. "Damn."

"She went full abuela mode," Marisol added. "And this guy?" - she jabbed her thumb at Bharath - "He just nodded like he was being quizzed in class and dropped answers like 'We'll work through it. It'll be our decision. Not just our parents'."

Tyrel sat up straighter. "That actually kinda rocks."

Marisol smiled. "He earned that tres leches."

Ravi turned toward Bharath. "And the sister. You never mentioned the sister. What's she like?"

Bharath opened his mouth to speak, but Marisol narrowed her eyes.

"Be very careful."

That only made the boys lean in more.

Bharath waved a hand at himself. "Imagine Marisol... but curvier."

Jorge and Tyrel let out a chorus of "*Daaaamn!*" as Ravi made a show of biting his knuckles.

"Is she single?" Tyrel asked immediately.

"I'm not answering that," Bharath said wisely.

“She’s still in high school,” Marisol deadpanned.

“...So in one year?” Ravi asked hopefully, ducking the sock she threw at him.

“Down, boys,” Jorge said, laughing. “Let the man survive tonight before you throw him into round two.”

Camila was watching this exchange with quiet fascination. Her brow furrowed slightly. “So... you’re just okay with him talking about your sister like that?”

Marisol shrugged, tossing her legs over Bharath’s lap and leaning back onto his shoulder. “It’s not like he lied. Mia’s stunning. Always has been. But he’s not hers. He’s mine.”

Bharath placed a kiss on her hair. “Completely.”

Camila blinked. “Damn.”

“Yeah,” Ravi said, gesturing broadly. “That’s what we keep saying.”

Tyrel grinned. “Okay okay. Enough with the romance hour. Time to educate the foreigners. Camila and Marisol, you’re American right, but these three?” - he gestured at Bharath, Jorge and Ravi - “Need help. Pop culture class is in session.”

“Hit me,” Ravi said, stretching his arms behind his head. “Give me your finest Americana.”

Marisol rubbed her hands together. “Alright. Quickfire round. What’s *FRIENDS*?”

Ravi blinked. “It’s that show with the fountain and white people yelling?”

“Correct,” Camila said with a laugh.

“Who is Britney Spears?” Camila challenged.

“She’s that singer who made schoolgirl outfits illegal,” Bharath replied innocently.

Camila snorted.

“Favorite fast food chain?” Marisol asked next.

“In India?” Bharath frowned. “Does the dosa cart outside my campus count?”

Marisol poked him. “Try again.”

“Waffle House,” Bharath said without hesitation. “Tyrel introduced us. I love their omelets.”

Tyrel pumped a fist. “Hallelujah! Black Jesus has saved you! You *are* one of us.”

“What about American icons?” Camila asked, twirling her hair. “Say, *Titanic*?”

“Oh!” Bharath lit up. “That’s why I wanted to have car sex. The windows didn’t fog up though. Very disappointing.”

Everyone *howled*.

Marisol clapped a hand over her face. “Bharath!”

“What?” he said innocently. “It’s cultural immersion.”

Jorge wheezed. “Cultural immersion? You make it sound like she gave you a guided museum tour!”

“She kinda did,” Bharath said with a fond grin. “Very hands-on.”

Marisol turned red. “I’m going to die. Right here.”

“You’re just mad because it’s true,” Ravi teased. “You did him like a field trip.”

“Pop quiz at the end,” Tyrel added.

“Multiple choice,” Jorge said.

“Shut up!” Marisol tossed another pillow, but even she was laughing now.

Camila watched it all unfold - the laughter, the inside jokes, the teasing - and her expression grew contemplative. There was something different about this group. Something grounded and honest and weirdly beautiful.

She looked at Bharath again. Then at Marisol. And then smiled.

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

Chapter 56: She Didn't Need to Be Brave Anymore

[985 words]

The night was warm, heavy with summer's leftover humidity. A lone cicada buzzed somewhere outside her bedroom window. Sarah lay curled on the mattress, one leg kicked free of the sheets, staring up at the faint shadows on the ceiling.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

The kind of quiet that made you think about the worst moments on loop - the ones you didn't talk about. The alley. The screams. The fear. The hands that had grabbed her. The knife that could have ended everything.

And then... the boy who stepped in.

Bharath.

And the girl who held her after - arms around her like they'd known each other forever.

Marisol.

Sarah turned onto her side, staring at the envelope she'd written earlier and set on the nightstand. She'd started to write them a note - not even sure what she wanted to say. Apologies. Thanks. Something desperate in between. She hadn't finished it.

Not because she couldn't find the words.

But because she knew now - words weren't enough.

She sat up slowly, legs swinging over the edge of the bed. Her room was modest - mismatched sheets, a little desk tucked under a poster of *The Smashing Pumpkins*, and a battered dresser with a cracked mirror. But it was hers. She paid for it. She lived here.

Alone.

And she was tired of being alone.

Sarah picked up the envelope, stared at the half-scribbled note inside, and then crumpled it gently in her hands.

No more writing.

Tomorrow, she would find them.

She would look Marisol in the eye and tell her the truth - that she couldn't walk away. That even if nothing ever happened between the three of them again... even if Bharath's heart was already taken, even if the heat that had flared between them was never touched again - she *still* needed them.

Because for the first time in her life, she felt something close to safe when she was with them.

Not "whole." Not "healed." But... *held*.

And that mattered more than any fantasy.

Sarah stood and walked to the window. The night was thick with the scent of magnolia and car exhaust. Somewhere down the street, a dog barked once and went silent. A train groaned in the far distance.

She didn't need to make a grand gesture.

She didn't need to make a move.

She just needed to show up.

To sit beside them and say, *I'm still here. Don't let me go.*

She reached over and turned off the lamp, the room sinking into velvety black.

"Tomorrow," she whispered to no one.

And for the first time in a long while... she slept.

The laughter faded slowly into the walls of Smith 202, leaving behind the warm afterglow of an evening well-spent. Dishes were stacked, pillows fluffed, and the faint sound of a late-night rerun on mute buzzed in the background.

Ravi yawned and stretched, slinging his backpack over one shoulder. "I'm off. Unlike some of you, I actually *like* sleeping in my own bed alone."

"Liar," Marisol teased.

"Yeah, but it sounded noble," Ravi said, flashing a grin before heading out the door.

Jorge checked his watch, then glanced at Camila, who was already collecting her jacket and purse.

"I'll walk you back," he offered.

Camila raised an eyebrow. "Afraid I'll get lost?"

"No," Jorge said, lips twitching. "Afraid you'll talk to someone else and forget I exist."

Camila laughed, slinging her bag over her shoulder. "Fair."

They left with a chorus of goodnights leaving the dorm suddenly still, soft, and quiet.

Bharath and Marisol moved instinctively toward the bed like magnets, limbs tangled together after they finished brushing their teeth. The window was cracked open just enough to let in the nighttime chirp of crickets and the faint buzz of a streetlamp.

Marisol lay on her back, her silky black hair splayed like a halo against the pillow, eyes half-lidded and dreamy. Bharath curled up beside her, one leg thrown over hers, his hand slipping under her tank top with the kind of casual confidence that came from knowing he was exactly where he belonged.

"Again?" she asked, feigning exasperation.

"Just making sure my property is well," Bharath said, lips brushing her cheek. "Ownership responsibilities, you know."

She snorted, sleep-tinged and soft. "You and these boobs. You need a membership card."

"I'm the president of the fan club," he whispered reverently, gently cupping one large delectable breast in his hand. "I take my job seriously."

She snorted. "You're lucky I love you."

"I really am," he murmured, thumbing her nipple lightly. "And these. These are like... divine engineering."

She rolled her eyes but arched into his touch. "You're such a nerd."

"You're the one who moaned like a soprano when I touched them the first time."

Marisol slapped his chest playfully. "You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Never," he said proudly, still gently kneading, watching her with open adoration. "Also, you're warm. And soft. And mine."

"Yours," she echoed, threading her fingers through his hair.

They lay like that for a while - no urgency, no teasing. Just skin and sighs and slow, sleepy affection. His hand never left her chest, even as their conversation drifted to lazy whispers.

"I still can't believe all that happened today," Marisol mumbled.

"We had nooner sex. I spanked you and made you climax multiple times. I met your family. Almost had a heart attack thanks to Mia. Survived your mom. Got car head. And came back to a room full of pop culture quizzes."

Marisol giggled, burying her face in his neck. "It was a lot."

"And somehow," he said, kissing the top of her head, "it was perfect."

She nestled closer, draping a leg over his. "Best Tuesday ever?"

"The best," he said without hesitation.

A pause.

"Tomorrow won't top this," she murmured.

"Doesn't have to," Bharath whispered, finally letting his hand gently squeezing her breast, fingers splayed like he was holding something sacred. "As long as you're here."

She smiled, her lashes brushing his collarbone as she closed her eyes.

Minutes later, both were asleep - tangled up in each other, still smiling, still lost in the magic of a day they knew they'd never forget.

The best Tuesday ever.

And the first of many.

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

Chapter 57: Waking up to Hunger – From Sleep's Embrace to Steaming Surrender [18+]

[1,267 words]

The first thing Marisol felt was heat.

Not gentle warmth, but thick, heavy, unmistakably male heat that pressed into her from every direction. Bharath's arm lay heavy across her chest, his forearm wedged firmly beneath the soft undersides of her breasts, lifting them slightly. His palm had settled over one breast in sleep, fingers splayed and possessive, the natural weight of his hand making her nipple harden against his skin even through the thin cotton of her tank top.

The rest of him surrounded her completely. His chest molded to her back, one powerful thigh slung over both of hers, pinning her in place. His cock, already fully erect, nestled hot and insistent against the cleft of her ass, the blunt head nudging the thin fabric of her sleep shorts with every slow, unconscious roll of his hips. She could feel the thick ridge of him throbbing in time with his pulse, the heat of it seeping through the layers between them, demanding attention.

Marisol's breath caught. Her lips parted on a silent exhale as fresh wetness bloomed between her thighs. She stayed perfectly still, not because she wanted to avoid waking him, but because she wanted to savor every filthy second of feeling him like this.

She could smell him: warm skin, faint traces of last night's soap, the musky undertone of arousal that had gathered in the crease of his groin overnight. That scent alone made her clit pulse.

When had this sweet, awkward, glasses-wearing boy turned into the gravitational center of her entire body? A few weeks ago she had snapped at him for staring too long at her orientation party. Now his sleeping erection was tucked against her ass like it belonged there, and she was clenching around nothing, aching to be filled.

His fingers flexed in his sleep. A lazy, reflexive squeeze of her breast. The sudden pressure sent a sharp spike of pleasure straight to her core. Her inner walls fluttered, slickness coating her folds and beginning to dampen the crotch of her shorts.

She bit her lip hard enough to taste copper.

Her mother's warning still lingered somewhere in the back of her mind "*Be careful, he seems like a good boy, love can turn ugly fast,*" but the warning felt laughably distant now. Bharath's body remembered exactly what it wanted even if his conscious mind was still dreaming. And her own body was answering with a slow, greedy throb that demanded release.

She shifted her hips, just a fraction, and dragged the length of him along the seam of her ass. The friction made him groan low in his throat, the sound vibrating against her neck. His cock jerked, smearing more pre-cum against the fabric that separated them.

Marisol smiled into the pillow, dark and hungry. She rolled her hips again, deliberate this time, grinding back until the head of him nudged right against her entrance through their clothes.

Another rough groan. His arm tightened around her ribs.

“Bharath,” she whispered, sliding her fingers along the forearm that caged her. His skin was hot, dusted with fine hair, the muscle beneath rigid with unconscious need.

He nuzzled deeper into her curls, lips brushing the sensitive skin behind her ear.
“Mmm... so soft...”

“You’re not dreaming about clouds,” she murmured, voice thick. “You’re grinding your cock against my ass like you want to fuck me awake.”

His breath hitched. Fingers dug into her breast harder. “Safety... protocol... important...”

She laughed softly, twisted just enough to kiss the stubbled line of his jaw. “You’re my filthy little spoon.”

“Only yours,” he mumbled, still half-asleep, but the words landed like a brand.

She turned fully in his arms. His eyes cracked open. They were dark and glassy with lust and sleep. His erection strained obscenely against the front of his boxers, the wet spot at the tip clearly visible now. When she slid her bare thigh between his legs and pressed it firmly against that thick length, his pupils blew wide.

“Hi,” he rasped, voice wrecked.

“Hi.” She brushed her lips over the corner of his mouth. “We should get up.”

“Why?” His hips rocked forward instinctively, dragging his cock along her thigh.

“Because if we stay here I’m going to ride you until the bed breaks, and then the entire floor will hear us.” She nipped his lower lip. “But the showers are empty at 4:25.”

His eyes flared. “Shower. With you.”

She smirked. “Naked. Wet. Now.”

He scrambled out of bed so fast he nearly tripped. Towel around his waist, no shirt, cock still tenting the fabric outrageously. She threw on his oversized T-shirt - no bra, no panties - and followed him into the dim hallway.

They barely made it to the communal bathroom before he had her pressed against the tiled wall inside the stall. Hot water cascaded over them. She peeled the soaked shirt

over her head; her breasts bounced free, nipples already painfully tight. Bharath stared like a man starved, pupils swallowing the iris.

“Marisol...” His voice cracked.

She hooked her fingers in his waistband and shoved the boxers down. His cock sprang free - thick, flushed dark, the head glossy with pre-cum, veins standing out along the shaft. She wrapped her hand around him, stroking once, slowly, feeling him throb and leak against her palm.

“You want to fuck me?” she asked, voice low.

“God yes.” His hands were already on her gripping her ass, spreading her, fingertips brushing the slick lips of her cunt.

She turned, braced her palms on the wall, arched her back. Water streamed down her spine, between her cheeks. She reached back, guided the blunt head of him to her entrance, rubbed it through her folds until he was coated in her arousal.

“Fuck me hard, mi amor,” she ordered.

He thrust in one long, relentless stroke.

The stretch burned deliciously. Her walls clamped down around him, fluttering, greedy. He bottomed out with a choked groan, hips flush to her ass, balls pressed tight against her.

“Fuck... Mari... you’re so tight...”

She pushed back, taking him deeper, grinding until the head kissed her cervix. Pleasure-pain sparked behind her eyes.

He started moving in short, brutal thrusts that slapped wetly against her skin, water muffling the sound but not the filthy rhythm. One hand slid up to palm her breast, pinching and rolling her nipple. The other found her clit, rubbing tight, fast circles.

She bit her forearm to stifle the moan that wanted to tear out of her throat.

He fucked her like he was trying to imprint himself inside her with deep, possessive strokes that dragged along every sensitive ridge inside her. Her thighs trembled. Her cunt clenched harder with every pass over that swollen spot that made stars burst behind her eyelids.

When she came it was sudden and violent. Her inner walls spasmed, and gushed slick down his shaft and thighs, a low, broken whimper escaping despite her best efforts. He followed two thrusts later, burying himself to the hilt, cock pulsing as he emptied inside

her in hot, thick spurts. His teeth grazed her shoulder. His fingers dug into her hip hard enough to bruise.

They stayed locked together, panting, water pounding against their skin until it began to run cold.

She turned slowly. Kissed him deep and lazy, tasting salt and sex and morning.

“Good morning,” she whispered against his swollen mouth.

He laughed, wrecked and blissful. “I’m never waking up any other way.”

They slipped back to the room still damp, still flushed, his hand possessive on the small of her back.

“Best Wednesday ever?” he murmured.

She glanced at the clock - 4:58 AM - then at the faint purple marks already blooming on his throat and arms where she’d gripped him.

“It’s not even five yet,” she said, voice dark with promise. “You better hope tomorrow morning is even filthier.”

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Chapter 58: Rate of Change

[1,090 words]

The air inside the lecture hall buzzed with subdued chatter as students filtered in for their Wednesday morning CS class. Jorge flopped into the seat next to Bharath, still yawning, while Ravi tossed his bag down with a sigh like it had disappointed him in some way.

“Midterms, man,” Ravi muttered, rubbing his eyes. “Why’d they hit us with that this early?”

“Welcome to Georgia Tech,” Marisol said sweetly, sliding into the seat next to Bharath with a fresh spiral notebook in hand. “Where hope goes to die by October.”

Bharath chuckled but was already scanning the syllabus. "It's still three weeks away. We've covered most of the fundamentals already."

"Oh thank God," Jorge said, turning to him. "Because I was definitely counting on you to explain polymorphism in English later."

Ravi smirked. "Our boy's the Indian Yoda. *Calm he is. Smart he be.*"

"*Focus you should,*" Bharath replied in a perfect impression, which earned a groan and a high-five.

The banter helped settle some of the nerves. The Professor's voice was its usual dry monotone, but Bharath tuned in quickly, already mapping out which topics to review and which ones to help Jorge, Marisol and Ravi with.

But when class ended and the others filtered out, Marisol nudged him gently. "Ready for part two?"

He nodded, and together they walked the short distance to their calculus class. The mood shifted as soon as they stepped into the room.

There she was.

Ayesha.

She was seated near the front - long legs crossed, flawless hair cascading over one shoulder, pager in hand, gum snapping softly between her teeth.

She looked... unreal. Designer jeans, subtle smoky eyeliner, a crop top that skirted the edge of the dress code, and a practiced scowl that dared anyone to talk to her first. The people around her laughed too quickly at her jokes, hung on her words like acolytes.

And she didn't even glance at Bharath.

But the silence she left in her wake was louder than any greeting.

Marisol felt Bharath stiffen beside her. She looked up, catching the faint flicker in his eyes - not longing, not regret. Just... a soft ache. A memory.

She knew that look. She'd worn it herself before.

He didn't say anything. Just kept walking with her to their usual spot in the second row.

Ayesha didn't even blink.

It was like they were ghosts now.

Marisol settled beside him and leaned in slightly, her hand brushing his.

“You okay?” she asked quietly.

Bharath gave a tiny smile. “Yeah.”

He didn’t elaborate. He didn’t need to.

She understood.

He remembered the girl who had once laughed with him in a taxi, kind and full warmth that only came with new beginnings. She wasn’t there anymore. This was someone else. Someone sculpted and sharp. Someone who had traded depth for shine.

And for the first time, he didn’t want her back.

The class began. Limits. Derivatives. Rate of change.

Bharath locked in.

Marisol stole glances at him as he scribbled through the professor’s questions with fluid grace, head tilted in concentration, fingers tapping lightly as he solved each problem before it was fully asked.

God, he was beautiful when he was in his element.

When class ended, Marisol didn’t wait.

She leaned over and kissed his cheek, right there in the aisle as students shuffled past them. A few heads turned. A few eyebrows rose.

She didn’t care.

Neither did Bharath. He turned to her and smiled like the sun had just walked into the room.

Ayesha glanced up at that moment, eyes flicking over them.

But her expression didn’t change.

Or maybe... she didn’t let it.

Ayesha crossed one long leg over the other, her boot tapping a slow, idle rhythm as the last few stragglers filed out of the lecture hall. Her bubblegum snapped - sharp, deliberate.

Marisol was leaning over Bharath's desk again. All soft eyes and 'accidental' skin. Elbow grazing his. Smile that said *I'm effortless*.

Please.

Ayesha tugged off her sunglasses with a flourish and turned to the girl beside her. "So we're just... doing this now?" she muttered.

Zara didn't look up from her compact mirror. "Apparently. He's gone full labrador."

Ayesha snorted. "She even kissed him in public. You'd think he cured cancer."

Zara smirked, reapplying lip gloss. "More like caught a squirrel and decided to marry it."

They both laughed - quiet, catty - the practiced sound of girls who ruled high school and never unlearned it.

Bharath. God, of all people. Still slouchy, still earnest, still walking around like life owed him honesty. Back when he'd stammered through a "hi" on the quad that first week, Ayesha had pegged him in five seconds: Smart. Soft. Aching for someone to see him.

She didn't.

She made sure of it.

Boys like Bharath were dangerous - not because they hurt you, but because they *meant it*. The poetry. The loyalty. The wide-eyed belief that love fixed things.

They'd crawl into your soul, and when you crushed them - and you *had* to, for your own survival - they'd haunt you. Make you feel like the villain in a rom-com you never agreed to star in.

So she'd iced him out. Gently. Cleanly. Like pulling duct tape off skin - one quick rip and no eye contact.

Now he was here. With *her*. With "sunshine and softness" Marisol, all curls and curves and actual laughter. Looking at him like he was *safe*.

"Do you think she's serious?" Zara asked.

Ayesha shrugged. "I think she's bored. Girls like her always want a story."

Zara raised a brow. "And you don't?"

"No," Ayesha said, gum snapping. "I want receipts."

Still, her eyes wandered back.

He looked good. Still awkward, still wildly unpolished. But there was something new in the way he held himself - like he'd stopped trying to be invisible. Like someone had finally handed him permission to exist without apology.

It wasn't jealousy. Not really.

It was just... unnerving. The way he looked at Marisol like she *mattered*. Like he *mattered*. As if the whole damn world hadn't spent years proving otherwise.

She couldn't remember the last time someone looked at *her* like that. Not without angle. Not without a mirror in it.

Zara followed her gaze and grimaced. "Ugh. They're disgustingly cute. She's gonna ruin him."

"No," Ayesha murmured, voice softer than she meant. "She's gonna make him impossible."

Zara blinked. "What?"

"Never mind," Ayesha said quickly, rising from her seat and slinging her bag over her shoulder. "Let's go. Before this turns into a musical."

They walked out without looking back. But as Ayesha stepped into the corridor, she stole one last glance - just a flicker - at Bharath laughing, forehead pressed to Marisol's like they were the only two people in the room.

The ache in her chest surprised her.

She chewed her gum slower.

Because the truth?

She didn't want *him*.

She wanted what he believed was still possible.

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Chapter 59: Held Without Conditions

[1,208 words]

The Student Center lawn was painted in soft gold and green, the kind of afternoon that made people linger. Autumn hadn't yet taken hold, but it flirted with the breeze - rustling the trees, nudging the warmth aside just enough to make one grateful for the sun.

Bharath and Marisol sat beneath a red maple tree on a weathered but clean fleece blanket, the kind with frayed edges that had clearly survived a few bonfires and impulsive picnics. An open lunchbox lay between them, a half-eaten wrap in one corner, a small pile of orange segments in the other.

They were folded into one another without thinking - Bharath's knee pressed against hers, Marisol's hand lazily resting on his thigh. The conversation had meandered from lunch plans to homework gripes, then into that soft, quiet rhythm that couples share when no one else is watching.

"Say 'ah'," Bharath murmured, holding up a forkful of fruit salad.

Marisol grinned and leaned forward, catching the pineapple between her teeth with a dramatic hum. "Mmm," she exaggerated, chewing slowly. "Sweet, but not as sweet as you."

"That's the cheesiest line I've heard today," Bharath muttered, his ears already turning pink.

"Yet here you are - still feeding me fruit like a love-struck squirrel," she teased, nudging his shoulder with hers.

They both chuckled - low, warm, and private - the kind of laugh that didn't need to be loud to carry weight.

Neither noticed the figure approaching until a soft voice interrupted the moment.

"Hey..."

Bharath turned first, brows lifting in mild surprise. Marisol's posture straightened a breath later.

Sarah.

She stood a few feet away, framed by the dappled sunlight through the trees. Her outfit was simple - a faded gray tee tucked into worn jeans, sneakers dangling from one hand,

denim jacket folded over the other arm. Her hair was pulled back in a loose, unbothered ponytail, with a few strands clinging stubbornly to her cheeks.

She looked natural. Effortless. Beautiful, even in stillness.

But her eyes told a different story.

There was a tremble in them. Not fear - not exactly - but something older. Something unspoken and fragile, like the first note of a song after a long silence.

Marisol blinked. "Sarah?"

"I... didn't mean to interrupt," Sarah said, shifting her weight awkwardly. Her smile was faint - the kind that didn't quite reach the eyes.

"You're not interrupting," Bharath said instantly, already scooting aside and patting the blanket. "Come sit."

Marisol echoed him with a warm nod. "Seriously. We were just talking about how CS lectures could be classified as a sleep aid."

Sarah hesitated. Her eyes flicked from one to the other. And then, after a moment's pause, she stepped forward and folded herself carefully onto the space between them. She sat cross-legged, shoes forgotten, fingers nervously picking at the frayed edge of the blanket.

Silence stretched for a few seconds.

Marisol reached out and lightly brushed Sarah's arm. "You okay?"

Sarah's breath shook. She nodded. Then shook her head.

"I'm... figuring that out."

Bharath didn't press. He leaned forward, propped his elbows on his knees, and just *listened* - something Sarah hadn't realized she needed until she saw it in his eyes.

"I thought about the other night," she said softly. "The three of us. That whole night. The laughter. The warmth. The way you two held space for me like it wasn't a favor. Like I belonged there. And after everything that's happened, I - " she paused, swallowing hard. "I don't feel that often. The sense of... belonging."

Neither Bharath nor Marisol spoke.

Sarah went on, voice growing steadier. "I realized something after last night. I realized that healing isn't a solo act. That sometimes, you can't put yourself back together with only your own hands."

Marisol reached for her hand. Sarah didn't flinch this time. Their fingers laced together with quiet strength.

"I don't know if I'm ready for... whatever this thing is," Sarah continued. "A relationship. A triangle. Even something casual. I'm not wired for that right now. I'm still scared of my own body, some days. Still waiting to wake up from panic dreams. Still... trying to remember what it feels like to trust someone without a knot in my stomach."

Bharath's gaze didn't waver. His voice was soft but firm when he finally spoke. "You don't owe us anything, Sarah. Not romance. Not answers. Just your truth."

She looked at him, eyes brimming.

"And my truth is... I *need* you both," she said. "I need to feel held. Safe. Wanted, but not in a way that expects anything from me. I need your friendship. Your arms. Your patience."

Her voice cracked slightly.

"I don't know where this leads. I don't even know who I am when I'm not protecting myself. But I know that being with you - both of you - feels like the first time in months that I'm not surviving. I'm *living*."

A silence followed. Not empty - *full*. Thick with emotion.

Marisol moved first. She let go of Sarah's hand, only to wrap her arms around her shoulders instead. She pulled her in close, burying her face into Sarah's hair, holding her like she was something delicate but not broken.

Bharath leaned in too, resting a hand gently between Sarah's shoulder blades, grounding her.

"You don't have to be ready," Marisol murmured into her ear. "You just have to be *here*. We've got the rest."

Sarah clung to her. Her shoulders trembled - not in fear, but in release. In surrender. Her breath hitched once. Twice.

And then she melted.

Into them.

Into the warmth.

Into the space they offered without conditions.

When they pulled apart, her eyes were glassy, but there was color in her cheeks again.

Bharath smiled gently. "You don't have to earn your place with us, Sarah. You're already part of our lives."

Sarah looked between them. "Are you sure?"

Marisol chuckled. "Girl, we've already argued over who gets to cuddle you more. You're stuck with us."

That earned a laugh. A real one. Unsteady, but unguarded.

"I'm not going to be perfect," she said, wiping at her cheek. "There are days I'll need to disappear. Days when I need space. Days when I wake up scared for no reason."

"Then we'll be there," Bharath said simply. "Even if that means waiting outside your door with tea and a bad joke."

Sarah's smile softened. "Especially the bad jokes."

Marisol bumped her shoulder. "And for the record, if things *ever* do get romantic, I still call dibs on teasing rights."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "Dibs? That's bold."

Bharath blushed. "I'd just like to formally state that I have no say in this matter."

They all burst into laughter - messy, joyful, healing laughter that made people on nearby blankets glance over with small smiles of their own.

The tension in Sarah's shoulders had melted. She leaned back onto the blanket, staring up at the leaves overhead. The sunlight danced between the branches, speckling her skin with gold.

For a long while, none of them spoke. They simply lay there - three bodies, one heart - breathing in the moment.

Finally, Sarah sat up and reached for a slice of orange from the lunchbox.

"You sure there's room in this weird little world of yours?" she asked, peeling it.

Marisol leaned back, arms behind her head. "Honey, we're making room."

Bharath smiled and offered her a second fork. "You've already got a plate."

Sarah took the orange slice. And then the fork.

And for the first time in a long while... she allowed herself to believe.

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

Chapter 60: The Ravi Experience™

[1,433 words]

The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the quad, painting the grassy expanse in golden slants as Bharath, Marisol, and Sarah sat on their fleece blanket, their paper containers of noodles steaming in front of them. Marisol leaned into Bharath's side, her hand lazily tracing circles on his thigh, while Sarah sat cross-legged across from them, her laughter soft and warm as she recounted something from her polymers lab.

"So the TA says, 'this isn't a cooking class,' and literally five people look offended," she said, shaking her head. "Like, sorry for trying to not die from chemical exposure, Ben."

Bharath chuckled. "I'd definitely prefer a little culinary caution when handling sulfuric acid."

Marisol giggled, tucking a loose curl behind her ear. "And you called us nerds."

Sarah winked. "Only in a flattering way."

They were so engrossed in their quiet moment of joy - laughter easy, smiles unguarded - that they didn't see the rest of the crew until Jorge let out a loud, theatrical gasp.

"Holy shit. They multiply!"

Ravi practically slid into the scene like he was in a music video. "No, no, no. Wait. Who is this? And why have we not met her before?"

Tyrel chimed, "Yeah dawg, who dis fine shawty?"

Marisol rolled her eyes as she turned around. "Boys, behave. This is Sarah. You've *heard* about her."

“You mean the girl?” Ravi’s jaw dropped. “*The* girl?”

“The one from the MARTA station?” Tyrel added, his grin spreading. “The one Bharath pulled a whole ‘Die Hard’ moment for?”

Sarah gave a modest wave, lips twitching. “Hi. That would be me.”

Tyrel crossed his arms, nodding like he’d just met a legend. “Damn girl, you even prettier than the version in my head. And that version was already a dime.”

Marisol raised a brow. “You imagined her?”

“I’m visual,” Tyrel said without shame. “Don’t judge my creative process.”

Ravi clapped his hands together dramatically. “Okay, hold up. I feel like I’ve been preparing for this moment my whole life.” He stepped forward and struck what he clearly thought was a suave pose. “Sarah, you are cordially invited to the Ravi Experience™. Includes charming conversation, mid-level dance skills, and subpar microwave cooking.”

Sarah laughed - warm and unforced - eyes sparkling with amusement. “Is that a limited-time offer?”

Tyrel scoffed. “Girl, please. Ravi’s idea of charm is quoting Sci-fi movies and burning instant ramen. *I*, on the other hand, can change your oil, fix your A/C, and build you a bookshelf with my eyes closed.”

“You’ve never even *finished* a bookshelf,” Jorge chimed in from the back, deadpan.

“I start strong,” Tyrel muttered.

“I’m sure you do,” Sarah said with a teasing smirk, eyes darting between the two of them.

Marisol leaned closer to Bharath and whispered, “Is this what you felt like watching Mia and me go at it?”

Bharath chuckled, eyes still on the circus in front of him. “I think this is worse. At least you weren’t trying to assemble IKEA furniture as a mating dance.”

Sarah, now clearly enjoying the spotlight, rested her chin on her hand. “So let me get this straight. One of you can cook badly but dance okay, and the other one owns a power drill?”

“Multiple drills,” Tyrel said, puffing up his chest. “And a socket wrench set.”

"I also know all the words to 'Hero' by Enrique Iglesias," Ravi added, striking a tragic expression and clutching his chest.

"Oh wow," Sarah muttered through a laugh. "That's dangerously close to bribery."

"I'll take dangerously close," Ravi winked.

Jorge leaned toward Camila, stage-whispering, "We're witnessing the birth of a new triangle. Lord help us."

Camila, who had been quiet until now, tilted her head curiously at Sarah. "She's got the whole Playboy playmate meets grad student vibe. I get it."

Sarah raised a brow. "Should I be flattered or concerned?"

"Flattered," Camila replied with a half-smile. "You've clearly passed the vibe check."

"I haven't even taken the quiz," Sarah said, mock-panicked.

"Don't worry," Ravi said. "It's an open book and I'll help you all the way. And you get extra credit for laughing at Tyrel's jokes."

"I'm the only reason these jokes are funny," Tyrel shot back.

"Because you're the punchline," Jorge quipped.

Marisol finally held up a hand. "Alright, alright. If we let this go on any longer, they'll start trying to arm wrestle for her."

"I was just about to suggest that!" Tyrel said, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Of course you were," Bharath said dryly. "You can barely contain yourself around power tools *and* pretty girls."

"Facts," Tyrel said without shame.

Sarah, still giggling, put her hands up. "Okay, okay. You're all insane - but in the good way."

Bharath smiled. "You'll get used to it."

"I think I already am," she said, giving Marisol a quiet, grateful glance.

Marisol winked. "Welcome to the madness."

The light was slanting through the leaves above, turning the grass golden and dappled as Sarah sat cross-legged on the edge of the bench, her empty noodle container crumpled beside her. Her laugh still lingered in her chest - the echo of Tyrel and Ravi's antics bouncing around her heart like warmth she hadn't known she was missing.

She glanced at Ravi, now halfway through what had to be the third retelling of his high school "date disaster" - complete with grand gestures and pitiful results. Tyrel kept interrupting, trying to top him with a tale involving a mechanical bull, a cowboy hat, and a sprained ankle. It was like watching two puppies vying for attention, and she had to admit...

It was adorable.

They were adorable.

The way they competed was so open, so earnest - no malice, no toxicity. Just goofy, playful bravado. She couldn't remember the last time someone flirted with her without trying to *own* her. Without expecting something immediately in return.

And God - it felt good to laugh.

She smiled, tucking her knees up and wrapping her arms around them. Jorge had slid into the circle quietly, offering dry commentary that Camila - cool, beautiful Camila - punctuated with sharp glances and unexpected wit. They were interesting. Balanced in a way she didn't expect. Like a quiet current beneath the louder waves of the others.

They have something, she thought, watching them.

They all did.

This group - this strange, beautiful, chaotic mix - was alive. Connected. Built on little in-jokes and unspoken trust. Even the teasing had edges softened by care. Nobody cut too deep. Nobody seemed to need to be the center.

She missed this.

No - if she was being honest - she'd *never* had this.

Her old life was about performance. Appearing happy. Appearing successful despite living through hell with Derek. She never had a real friend. She had become an expert at faking laughter, at dressing up loneliness in lip gloss and confidence.

But this?

This was something else.

She looked to the side - and her breath caught.

Marisol was curled against Bharath's side, her head resting on his shoulder. Bharath's arm was slung around her waist in a loose, absentminded gesture - the kind that said *mine* without a word. His fingers were idly tracing circles over the hem of her top, like her skin was the gravity that kept him anchored to Earth.

They weren't even kissing.

They didn't *have* to.

Everything about them radiated intimacy. The kind you couldn't fake. That warm, quiet magnetism that came when people truly saw each other. Loved each other. Trusted each other.

Sarah's heart clenched - not with jealousy, but yearning.

I want that.

Not just the touch. Not just the attention. But the *belonging*.

The safety.

She looked away before she could spiral. Before that ache - so old, so familiar - could take over. She took a breath and reminded herself that she was here now. That they had welcomed her. That Marisol had hugged her kissed her temple like a sister, and Bharath had held her close whispering that everything would be ok when she was shaking, and both of them had made her feel like she *mattered*.

Even if it wasn't romantic. Even if it never was.

But what if it could be?

The thought drifted in uninvited.

She shook it off. It was too soon. Too raw. Her heart hadn't fully mended yet - and theirs was still too sacred to trespass on.

Heal first, she told herself. *Become someone worthy of the kind of love they offer.*

She let herself watch them again - this time with softer eyes.

If she could just stay close, just be a part of their world, that would be enough.

For now.

Maybe one day...

She let the thought trail off as Ravi dramatically collapsed into the grass beside her, moaning about Tyrel's "unfair advantage" of "having actual biceps."

Sarah laughed again - open, full - and leaned back on her hands, the sun catching in her hair. She tilted her face toward the sun, smiling gently, and wondered - for the first time - what tomorrow might bring.

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