

BODYGUARD ON DUTY

A tale of Wealth, Love and a Kiss to the Enemy

Vexed. Enraged. Bleary-eyed. Marion hit the Police station. She pulled a straight face as a heavy lump of anger creased through her flaming mind on every step she took. The hurrying tired-looking cops with pistols and batons. The cursing civilians on cuffs. The babbling terrified teens in a corner. The pot-bellied brunnetes murmuring over cups of steaming coffee. All of these she grew utterly oblivious of. They could only spur up the rage boiling within her and nothing else. Her flickering blue eyeballs perched on the wooden counter ahead and that was exactly where she was headed.

Marion Hart hates a handful of things but she hated cops the most—nothing else came close. After a few encounters with a couple of them while stuck in traffic or overspeeding, her despise for them hit the roof. The uniformed law enforcement officers, regardless of the city they operate, are just so inconsiderate for her liking. To her, policing was a terrible job meant for only slightly responsible people. She had on several occasions, fantasized a Boston without dirty annoying cops who won't frustrate the hell out of innocent civilians.

For the first time in many months, the need for the services of a cop hit Marion hard like a hurricane. She never saw it coming. Not any soon. *Maybe, they aren't completely needless*, she reconsidered. On stepping into the crowded hallway at the hospital, a barrel-chested dark dude on a blue basketball vest and black hoodie bumped into her. She immediately wrote it off as an accident but before she could regain balance, her purse went missing.

Incredible.

It all happened in a flash. At the drop a hat, her eyes didn't get even a shadow of him anymore. He had long snaked into the nearest hallway and zoomed off. Pinned to a spot, she veered her gaze across the hallway, feeling the fressing eyes of passersby. She was too startled to scream. *Is it necessary?* Passing women pelted her with insincere *sorrys* while she stood there numb and mum. She hated being pitied and after thinking for a while, hitting the nearest Police station came off as the best thing to do. The belongings in the purse were quite too essential to be left in the custody of some godforsaken street robber. She hated the option but it was her only elixir. The only way out.

“How may I help you, ma'am?” the platinum-blonde female cop inside the counter asked, pulling a gap-toothed grin that Marion found impolite. Her name tag read, *Susanne H. Cyr*.

“I'm Marion Hart. Here to file a robbery report,” she responded under her breath.

“Alright,” Susanne replied, her hands rifling for something beneath the counter. Perhaps a notepad. She already had a pen clenched to her feeble fist.

Marion still grew oblivious of the rustling and bubbling behind her. All she wanted was to get the report done with so she could jet out of the place and await the return of her purse and every belonging therein. While Susanne hesitated, Marion's piercing eyes went over her frame in a fine-toothed comb. Her tender pitch. Her burgundy-brown eyes. Her pink oxbow lips. Her butterfly cut that was bundled into a tiny bun. She was grippingly resplendent. Stunning. Too pretty to be a cop. *What was she thinking?*

“Can I have your ID, please?” Susanne asked.

“He's got it!”

Giving her a quizzical stare. "You mean?" Susanne asked.

"The black dude. The thief who stole my purse. The purse he stole had my ID."

"Oh. Your purse. Stolen? "

Getting pissed off already. Her eyes glistened as she spoke. "Yes. That's why I'm here. To file a report about my stolen purse."

Woke. "Oh. Sorry about that Ms. Marion," she apologized, flipping through the pages of her notepad. "Can you describe your purse, please."

"It equally qualifies to be called a wristlet. Black. Rectangular. Chain-handled. The brand? Louis Vuitton."

"Okay. When and where exactly were you robbed, please?"

Marion rolled her eyes and glanced at her glistening wristwatch. "About an hour ago. Fulton Medical Center."

"Did you misplace the purse or was it snatched, or you handed it over at gun point or something? How exactly did you lose it?"

"Stolen. Snatched. I have no idea how you cops call it down here but some big dude bashed into me and then ran off with it?"

"Did he have a weapon? A gun? Baseball bat? Just anything?"

She shook her head. “Nothing. Just some sneaky move I couldn’t detect. The asshole must be some professional in that shit.”

“Can you recognise him?”

She pulled a smirk. “Not really?”

“Not even what he wore?”

She thought for a moment . “Dark. Huge. Bald. Beardless. I think he wore a blue basketball vest and a black hoodie. I can’t say much about him. It all happened so fast.”

Susanne scribbled Marion’s responses. Every single line of word she spat was jotted down. The beautiful cop was about striking another question when the tick-tocking of incoming footsteps distracted her—hijacked their attention. She pulled a smile and assumed an erect posture when her eyes met the owner of the footsteps.

“I’ll take over from her, Officer Sussane,” a coarse and husky baritone announced upon screeching to a halt right beside the counter.

Marion was taken aback. She stepped a few inches backward and ditched her rimless sunshades to have a perfect glimpse of the uniformed male figure silhouetted before her. Her pulse jerked and the corners of her eyes crinkled. It wasn’t a resemblance. It wasn’t a mistake either. It was him. The same guy. The same face. The same voice. The same smile. The same walking posture. He even reeked of that familiar delft-blue-Hyacinth-scented cologne.

“Y-y-o-u,” Marion stammered.

“Ms Marion, meet my boss. Deputy Chief Keith Moses. He'd be handling your case, excuse me please,” Susanne announced, egressing the counter unhurriedly, a sly smile cracking out of her tender lips.

As silence breathed within the minuscule space between them. Marion's already diminishing rage shot up and she bit her tender pinkish lips in raw fury. She got nudged by a strong itch to ditch him away in an uprooting push, but she flagged it down. He was a cop. She was at the Police station. It wasn't a saucy path to trail. Not inside that annoying structure. What *the fuck is happening here?*

“Welcome to Oswego County Police station, Ms Marion Hart. Shall we?” the officer said, nodding to the office by their left in a cheerful grin.

“You stinging motherfucken son of a bitch. I'm out of here you asshole,” she bloated and bolted towards the double-swing exit door as fast as her sleek legs could travel.

“I've got your purse, Ms. Marion,” he hollered as-a-matter-of-factly.

Well played.

She froze and dropped dead on her track more like she just stepped on molten magma. Shut her eyelids and pulled a lenthly deep breath.

He's truly a bloody son of a bitch.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SUN WAS AWAKE. It stood right there at the skyline, volleying its gold-yellow beam on the glinting floor of the luxurious terrace and on the giant windows of Marion Hart's penthouse. It was her day. Her birthday. A day that'd get her heart suffused with memories—good and bad, bitter and sweet, painful and joyous.

The sun was her favourite stellar object—and she saw it beyond a mere non-luminous mass of matter reflecting light rays from the sun but as a source of light that had shooed crumbs of darkness off her path for as long as she lived. As a Russian by root, it was one of the many Russian nighttime folktales her grandmother never stopped sharing every night after dinner. She said the sun was a protective being—one to hold dear to the heart. It wasn't just the perfect lullaby for her kid self but the best moments for her as a dreamful kid. Her grandmother gave up to stroke when she was eleven. But, the Sun stories never died out. They never faded, they'd creep through her mind like she just heard them. She liked every bit of that feeling. It was a jewelry she treasured.

Over the years, she had learned to dwell on the good sides of her grotesque past. To wallow less in her dark and skid into the bright future ahead.

Why swim in the regrets of the past that can't be changed?

With the level of affluence she's amassed since her feet first dock America at age eighteen, she was certain of a blinding future. She saw shards of hope that it'd be saucy at the other end of the tunnel. She saw a future that'd make her proud of her conquest for survival in a world of pain and struggle.

The private elevator kept beeping in quick succession as more guests trudged into the apartment, ready to wine and dine Marion on her special day. Slowly, they drove their uncladding gazes across the massive sitting room in a fine-toothed comb, with their lips parted. The sight of the interior was thrilling and eye-catching; it reeked of splendour and grandiloquence. The sight painted a visible picture of luxury and beaut.

The penthouse was a double-duplex apartment right at the peak of Freedom Tower—one of the tallest and most expensive skyrisers in Boston. Marion's apartment was one of the two sought-after penthouses in the building. It was an out-of-the-box architectural edifice with a perfect blend of opulence and class. One didn't have to think twice to admit that grabbing the apartment must have left a dent in the young realtor's pocket—for some, it might have cost a fortune!

The whiteness of the high-end finish walls, vaulted ceiling, oversized windows and leather-quilted furniture pieces gave the overly spacious sitting room a beautiful ambience and cozy atmosphere—perfect for the hungry eyes of the guests to feed on. The finishing of the vandyke brown floor matched with the burgundy-brown texture of the enclosure around the fireplace. The fireplace was lovely, ghosts of the heat it emitted droned the room as the burning coal kept crackling and breaking apart.

At the immaculately arranged dinning about a few meters away from the statuesque tapers were elegant candelabra whose dim lighting crosshatched with the golden glow of the grandeur chandelier dangling above the glass-topped table at the centre of the room, giving the room a radiant blue hue, perfect for the birthday party. It was the perfect lighting for the mood.

With a whiskey-filled margarita glass clenched to his fist, one of the guests scrambled towards Marion who was perched at the rail of the colourful terrace, staring at the

beautiful skyline of the city, with a lump of excitement stuck within her. She felt it creeping right through her mind...slowly but steadily.

“Catching some fresh air, huh?” a male voice teased, the tick tocking of his footsteps came audible as he dogtrotted closer to Marion.

She didn't turn in his direction. “And admiring the unblemished beauty of Boston,” she said and turned towards him. “Mr. Stockton, you never can tell how beautiful this commercial city is until you view it from some place like this.”

He caught up with her. Beamed a sly smile. Leaned on the rail. And, beheld the endless expanse of Boston with his eyeballs bulched out. “Quite beautiful than what the tourism guides on TV claim. I can't deny it, Ms Marion,” he finally admitted.

Silence lingered as they both kept staring. Snaking out from the part of the building behind the terrace came a flock of seagulls. With their wide snow-white wings fully spread out, they flew northwest, making squawking sounds as they went farther. A smile cracked out of Marion's lips and extended to her dazzling eyeballs as she kept her eyes glued on the flying creatures.

“What a lovely sight of nature to behold,” she said taking a sip off her tumbler.

“Incredible,” Mr. Stockton concurred and turned towards the entrance door middled by a streak of oversized windows. “Just like the magnificent structure you've got here, Ms Marion,” he bellowed behind, this time, not hiding his German-accented English.

Marion feigned a smirk and then smiled broadly, stealing a gaze at Stockton's lit-up face. It was the only time she actually confirmed his identity beyond his familiar voice. He was truly Mr. Stockton. He wore a black suit underneath a sparkling white button-up Turkish shirt and had a burnt-umber-coloured tie that matched with his sparkling

brown shoes. He held that simple-looking but tough visage of his and reminded Marion so much of his profession; chartered accounting. She wondered why this set of people loath smile.

Marion turned towards the sitting room, beaming a warm smile that sped through her alluring blue eyeballs. “Yeah. I know that. Uhm! You know, sometimes, we just have this fantasized life we've all figured out on her heads but do seem to doubt if they'd ever come true.”

“My seven-year-old daughter calls it castles in the air!” Stockton chimed in sharply and they both laughed hard.

“Yeah. That's right. She's a smart kid and uhm I ain't surprised she knows that. But,” she turned towards Stockton again with a worrisome look. “Does she have these cattles too?”

“Uhm. None that I have noticed so far nor any she had wanted us to talk about. But what I do know is that the whole castle-in-the-air talk is about her little brother who dreams of saving Boston from the bad guys by becoming a superhero some day!”

Holy Christ!

She returned to their conversation after they laughed hard at the kids' jokes. “So, like everybody else, I had tons of fantasies, I mean crazy ones while growing up. But, this,” she turned around, waving inside the apartment “was one of my dream houses! I'm sure you like it!” she responded, rifling her receding hairline to the back.

He rolled his eyes and lurched further dramatically. “I do not like your dream house, Ms Marion,” he bloated and then turned away from Marion who's face had swiftly contorted into a weak frown. He left an aura of suspense in the air. Marion, perhaps,

instantly craved to know why he doesn't like it. "I love it," he finally admitted amid chuckles.

"Come on, you got me on that one! I only intended to sound a bit moderate in my attempt to portray your perception about the house," she brushed it off. She waltzed backward and slumped into one of the sophisticated wrought iron recliners, surrendering her cocktail tumbler to the glass table. "Wasn't that good to go? I mean the use of "like"?"

He didn't respond. His eyes were on the glowing surface of the ocean-blue swimming pool not more than ten meters away from where they sat. Turning to Marion who patiently waited for him to finish admiring the pool, he nodded to the pool, "'like' is quite too immature to picture what I think of this bagnio!"

"So you think "love" isn't too strong a word?"

He took a long sip. "Not particularly, but if it does better justice in a bid to portray how I feel about this structure, then I'll always go for it Everytime!"

She emptied her tumbler and slumped it back to the table in an audible clang. A smile cracked through her lips as she pondered upon his words. He's a promising chartered accountant uptown Boston. Apart from having his way with words, he had been in the financial system for decades and seemed like a potential business connection to Marion upon their first meeting at a bank in the heart of New York City. Overtime, he became a longstanding business partner after Marion showed him around places and shoved him on the faces of the big wigs in the American real estate industry—precisely those in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. After he got redeployed to a branch of the bank in Texas, he grew to become one of the pivots of Marion's real estate investments over there.

“You see, Ms Marion, I used to think that you realtors do not have personal interest in luxurious houses like this—you know, I thought it was all business and nothing less. I felt it was more about profiteering and nothing else. You guys just get right into buying, developing, building or renovating, then selling them off and the cycle goes on and on, fetching you more and more money.”

She chuckled. “We do. I mean, I personally do have interest in luxuries. I love luxuries,” she turned again to the direction of the sky. “I love beautiful houses, you know. I think everybody does. But I have always had this sober dream of living in a house different from what everybody lives in. I mean a house with high-end luxury and that can let me have a perfect view of the beautiful expanse of Boston before sunrise, after sunset and in the shadow of the night like I just did a few minutes back! A perfect penthouse right in the heart of Boston—distinct in beauty and class and feel.”

“Now, that sounds lavishing, I must confess. It is just the perfect way to mark the most important day in your life. I mean in grandeur and style!”

She smiled and leaned backward, resting her head on the backrest of the recliner. “It is obviously the best treat I could give myself. A dream come true!”

A dream come true!

Marion couldn't help but be grateful. For as long as she had lived in Boston, she loved keeping a low-key lifestyle, but with the freedom to get herself whatever she wants at wherever she wants it. Although her financial status quo made it difficult for her to hide but she rarely fancied fame and the exaggerating men of the press—she hated being on frontpages of several papers. To her, the little circle of friends and investors she had was enough to mark her birthday and keep around whenever she needed a family-like gathering. The turnout of guests was quite impressive. She couldn't get her head round it.

The ambient lighting had long replaced the general lighting from the pendants and chandeliers, giving the room a perfect hue and setting the mood for the party to begin. As a Russian immigrant, she had no family in America to join the merrymaking. It was a pain triggering reality but that evening, she relegated the feeling to the foreground—it wasn't worth dying over. Not that night. Hopefully, her business partners and friends who crammed the house to celebrate her were enough to be called a family. A big one—where love exist and happiness abound.

As the soothing baseline of the background music droned the apartment, one of the guests motioned to speak. She's a top-hourglass-shaped brunette with a jet-black shoulder length hair made into a perfect blunt bob. She wore a minted-green figure-hugging flowy off-the-shoulder dress that merely ran to her knees and perfectly revealed her contours and bends as she sashayed forward, right into the middle of the sitting room, her glowing face fledged with sparkles of smiles. She's Dorothy Floyd, Marion's friend and attorney—a well-connected Harvard law school graduate who kept Marion on the light of the law all round the clock.

The music had dwindled into a faint blend of instrumentals before Dorothy made it to the cake towered atop the glass table at the centre of the sitting room. It was small but lovely. It was a circular cream-coloured cake with three couches; the second and third couches were smaller in size than the base couch, and had five lighted multicolored candles at its peak. At the base of the cake was an expression written in deep gold “Happy Birthday To An Icon”.

An icon she was. Indeed.

“Today we the friends of Marion Hart aren't only witnessing the official opening of this magnificent edifice, her Freedom Tower penthouse,” Dorothy opened the floor with a remark. She paused and shot speeded-up glances across the apartment, her eyes

screeching to a halt right in the direction of the fish-filled red water aquarium. “We are equally witnessing the celebration of life, of friendship and of progress. Six years ago at a train substation, I bumped into a stunningly beautiful Russian immigrant and we both built a friendship that stood through the thicks and thins of life. We’ve closed quite a number of deals together as business partners over the years and our friendship have waxed even stronger.”

Staring at the many faces but at no one in particular, she continued. “I might not know how exactly she had splayed her uniqueness before you but I do know for sure that she’s an amazing personality and I know that none of us here can dispute that. So, tonight in the spirit of celebration, I celebrate with her and wish her a happy birthday.”

Investors, friends, business associates—all took turns to say Marion a birthday wish. She was so overwhelmed and swept off her feet by the display of affection that she only stared in awe—completely short of words. It was the last call from the person who spoke that jolted her from her reverie. The feminine voice belonged to Kate Patterson; a friend who was like another of her thick skin. Kate was her best friend.

“Put out the candles and make a wish, Marion,” Dorothy instructed, gawking Marion’s frame as she took mouth agapped. Marion blew out the candles and made a wish amid tears, taking turns to give her guests warm hugs for holding her so dear to their hearts and shwoing how what it exactly it means to be loved.

Mr. Stockton led the cheers. Like everybody else in the large room, he held his wine-filled glass up and pulled a smile. “Cheers to friendship, business and to Marion Hart!”

“To Marion Hart,” they all chorused.

While the rest were dancing, Marion was engrossed in a conversation with Dorothy Floyd. At some point, she felt a buzzing vibration. It was from her white leather-quilted

gemstone-coated wristlet. Her phone. She murmured an *excuse me*, grabbed the phone and headed for the rail. She recognized the voice on first hearing. It was Whitney Cook; her secretary.

“Is everything okay?” Marion asked, her voice coated with curiosity and fear. Whitney kept mute. “Come on, what’s the problem, Whit?” Marion asked again, this time, her tone a bit higher than it is usually is.

“I’m afraid we’ve got a serious problem!”

CHAPTER TWO

NOT TODAY. That was the line of words that flushed through Marion's apprehensive mind as she tightened her grip on the leather-quilted steers and fought to keep her eyes on the road. Whitney Cook has been her secretary for three years and had never sounded that nervous on the phone. Never. She couldn't get her to disclose what the problem was before their phone lines snapped, leaving her hanging with a thick lump of fear creasing through her veins. Further attempts to reach her never pulled through.

It all seemed to Marion like a bad sign—one that something had to be done about or else it gets uncontrollable. And, despite craving to have a good time with her friends and investors on her birthday, she couldn't help but dust off every activity and jet out of Freedom Tower as fast as she could. She confided in Dorothy Floyd and Kate Patterson, hoping to have them keep things in order while she hurries to the office.

"I'll come with you, Marion," Kate had insisted before she hopped into the elevator but Marion flagged down her request. Following her to the office was quite a lovable thing to do, but Marion didn't see perfection in the timing. She didn't want her guests to man a sense of neglect upon noticing her absence and she was sure that if they ever get to feel that way, Kate's presence would pull a sweeping stunt in easing the tension. They all knew what they both shared. They knew them as best of friends.

"Come on, you've got to give Dorothy a hand. I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise," she tried to talk her out. She just had to give it a shot even if she could stake her entire net worth that Kate won't back out easily—when it comes to Marion, she never backs out easily. She never does.

"But you look so tired to even drive! You've had a really long day, Marion. It might not be safe alone for you out there," she insisted.

Kate Patterson is a dark-skinned amazon with a touch of elegance. She's a model, choreographer and business consultant with a fast growing influence in the Boston entertainment industry but unlike Marion Hart, she was a social type with lots of crazy dreams stuffed in her head. After she met Marion at a real estate site while consulting for a choreography startup, she liked her instantly and then, true friendship happened to them. They grew to become best of friends. Although she met Dorothy Floyd before her, their bond grew stronger than every other one Marion shared.

Marion tripped for the fact that Kate was all out to keep their relationship standing, beating all odds. She was always available to give a hand, completely oblivious of the risks involved. Like every other day, Marion knew it'd take some balls to talk Kate out. She knew it'd be hard on her to let her just walk out of her birthday party and then zoom off alone to some emergency she had no idea what it was about. She knew Kate would only want nothing but smiles on her beautiful face that day and not worry nor tears.

Away from the elevator, Marion inched closer to the worried-looking Kate and tugged her into herself in a warm and tight embrace. Her throbbing heart felt the warmth as her frame collided with Kate's. She stroke Kate's sweet-scented brown hair and planted a warm kiss on her left cheek.

"Spending more time here might worsen whatsoever is happening to Whitney or any of my employees out there," Marion said slowly, laying emphasis on every word as they egressed her pink oxbow lips. She dugged her eyes into Kate's and maintained the contact. "I know you love me, Kate. I know you care so much about me and won't stop watching my back. But, come on, I promise. I'll be fine. Just keep an eye on the guests while I'm away."

With a silent smirk, Kate curved her glossed lips in a feigned smile. “Are you sure about that?”

Marion smiled broadly. “Yes I am. I’ll be back, trust me. Don’t forget. No one knows about the emergency! Okay?”

With a glassy eyeballs, Kate nodded like a three-year-old. They hugged again before Marion started towards the elevator. She didn’t step in when she felt a warmth behind her. Again, Kate was behind her, her eyes logged with tears.

“Marion. Today’s your birthday. You were supposed to be having fun with us, your friends,” she said amid a silent sob and then wiped off the line of tear that just evaded her eyes. “I know this isn’t your doing but make sure you’re fine. I have no idea why I’m feeling this way but one thing is sure, I want to be sure you’d be safe driving to that place alone.” Marion gave her her hands and she grabbed it gently. “I love you so much Marion and don’t ever make me think of losing you. I can’t stand it!”

Tears dripped down Marion’s eyes as she watched Kate acting like the sister she never had. Her heart felt the compassion and the love—stronger than anything she had ever felt. They hugged again, this time, so hard that their girls pressed against each other fiercely.

“I’ll be fine. You’re an angel, Kate,” she mumbled before being swallowed by the elevator. Kate stood glued to her spot till she got out of sight.

What a bond!

Marion’s office was just two miles away from Freedom Tower. Luckily for her, traffic didn’t pull a stunt. The road seemed unbelievably scanty. Hoaxed by the car-less lane, Marion grew so concerned about hitting the office as fast as possible that she had no

idea when she began overspeeding. It was after she spotted a police car trailing behind her with blaring sirens that she stole a glance at the screen of her speedometer. She was overspeeding!

Shit!

The police car barricaded her and she pulled over, enraged. She cursed as she banged the soft padded steers, finally surrendering her throbbing head on it gently. Hatred! That was the greatest thing she felt for American cops. Her despise for the uniformed fellows knew no boundaries. She couldn't and had never been cool with their operational approach and sometimes, she disliked them just for the fact that they are cops and not because they have done her any wrong.

Aren't all cops just the same?

The approaching cop was a potbellied blonde man. He was stout and chubby. He looked to Marion like one who had spent more time at the pub drinking beer than he spent in Police training. He wambled further, a radio clutched to his right hand and a black baton to his left. She could see him from the side mirror. Her feeling of intense uneasiness began just when the cop slightly knocked the windowglass. She saw his mouth moving in an up-down motion. He was talking.

He pored over her face for a few seconds after the windowglass was down. "Are you okay, Ma'am?" he asked, studying her oblivious face.

She ditched her rimless sunshades when he asked the question for the second time. To the angered Marion, he was skidding beyond the limit she could handle, beyond the point where she could respond sanely.

“Is that why you almost ran me over, Mr. Cop?” she grumbled, flickering her eye lashes rapidly.

The cop stole a weak glance at the Police car just a few yards away from hers. “I wasn't trying to run you over, Ma'am. I only needed you to pull over,” he responded.

“Then what was it then? You swerved to a halt right in front of my car like we both were in some street race. Do you think I was running away or something?”

The cop heaved a sigh of disbelief. “It was the only way to have you stop. You saw the Police car, you heard the siren. You knew that you had done something wrong and needs to be questioned but you kept ahead.”

Marion ran her finger through her hair and bit her lips, feeling a ball of fury glazing deep within her tracts. “You've caught up with me and now what? What do you want? To ask if I'm fine? Come on, you can go ahead and tell me if I'm crying or look like someone who's got the whole planet on her head. Is that it?”

He looked away and turned back to her. He gave her that I'm-not-ready-for-this kind of look that seemed to irritate her the more and then got right into business. “Can I have your papers, please?”

She knew she had no time. No time for the Police drama. No time to squander her energy on the cop. She rifled the papers out of the compartment and handed them over. Carefully, he flipped over the pages and skimmed through them, occasionally looking at Marion's furious face.

“Cleared,” he belched, returned the papers and then stepped a bit closer to the car. He bent outward and put his head through the opened window. “You seem to have been in a hurry. Where are you headed Ms. Marion Hart?”

“To my office! Is there a problem with that?”

He shook his head. “Where exactly is your office, Miss?”

“And how's that supposed to matter? I've got an emergency and you've got to let me out of here before things get out of hand. Can you please do me that favour?”

He stared right into her eyes for a few seconds and pulled a smirk. “I have no idea what scores you've got with or against some cop or cops that you tend to sound offended by even the slightest thing I do—even though these are nothing strange but the common routine check.”

“Did you say common? Did you say what you did wasn't strange? You swerved right ahead of my moving car. You almost ran me over, hit me right into the pedestrian walkway. Tell me how that isn't strange?”

“Ma'am, can you calm down while I get this done with?”

“You better do 'cause I've got no time for this everyday bullshit. You're delaying me”

“No,” he shook his head in utter disagreement. “You're simply the one putting yourself in whatever delay you're having right now,” he gruffed.

“And how's that supposed to be true?”

“Because you're being rude, making false allegations and have avoided giving direct answers to my questions.”

Furious. “And what makes you think that you cops deserve to be treated with respect?” she bloated, the tone of her voice rising beyond the usual.

“Ma'am, you've got to keep your voice low and stop creating a scene!”

“And why the fuck will I give a damn about that? You cops are nothing but annoying assholes who's been nothing but a pain in the butts to responsible citizens like myself.”

“Responsible citizens do not break the law, Ms Marion.”

“Spare me that poorly planned emotional blackmail. I didn't break any law.”

“Really? You went beyond the speed limit, Ms Marion. You went against the law by overspeeding and then driving under the influence of alcohol and expect to be left unchecked...?”

“I haven't drank anything you asshole...,” she lied. “I am only under the influence of the fact that I have to attend to some emergency which you have long made impossible. And, I'll make sure to fix you where you belong if things get messier than they are right now,” she ended with a threat.

“And now you're giving me reasons to reconsider...”

“To hell with your reconsideration. I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Shut the fuck up and listen to me!”

“Then you've got to force me to do that.”

“Would you stay calm and let me do my job, Ms Marion? Stop pushing me.”

She banged the steers in fury and angst. “Come on, do your worse Mr Cop.”

The cop stepped back in annoyance. His face grew red as Marion’s rebuttals made him go nuts. Swiftly, he volleyed a stainless Glock out of his gun pouch and trained it at the untameable Marion.

“Get out of the fucken car now!” he barked.

CHAPTER THREE

EVIL DAYS ARE THE MOST COLOURFUL. They take up the silhouette of good days. They seem to smear more faces with smiles. And, they tend to drag happiness out of its burrow. But, as the looming evil ripens, all of these fall apart and these days become red-letter days on a sad and dehumanizing note.

To many people on the streets of Kazan, that beautiful Friday morning was quite indifferent from the rest of the mornings. Even if it were different, it'd have been because of the excitement of the weekend—where the break from work would accrue workers more hours for funtime with their families and loved ones. But to the young Marion, that Friday was a day that was impressed on her thirteen-year-old heart. A day she had long been fantasizing but still couldn't readily accept that it came alive.

She wasn't just graduating from highschool but was the valedictorian. A dream she had nurtured for years. She was tasked with presenting the Victory speech before the sea of glistening eyes in Yellowstone Memorial Hall of her school's campus. Although delivering a speech on that day was all she ever wanted, the reality of speaking before thousands squeezed fear into her excitement-torn heart—the cold feet that engulfed her was sweeping. The imagination of a sea of piercing eyes down the hall logged her head. She couldn't tell what it was, but something within kept whispering. *You can do this!* She believed it.

I can do this!

Young Marion found it soothing that her gladsome mother was not merely thrilled by the news but remained quite supportive of her. She had always given her all the emotional support she craved and duvetted her with that motherly warmth whenever

she needed it. But it hit differently for her authoritarian father. He outrightly flagged down the idea. “I can not have you speak on that podium!” he had made it clear. Marion knew he meant it. His conclusions were always irreversible.

Trouble. She saw it coming!

Hart Nabokov was his name. He was a tall heavily-built blonde man who didn't look quite his age. After resigning from the Ground Force of the Russian Armed Forces due to PTSD, Hart finally had the luxury to delve into the world of entrepreneurship—a path he had contemplated for decades. He ran a successful real estate agency with investments that spanned across Saint Petersburg, Novosibirsk, Moscow and Kazan—and further extended his investments to only a fragment of Europe, notably Ukraine and Slovakia.

Hart worked hard to keep his family off the eyes of danger. As an ex-soldier, he never stopped admitting how risky Russia could be for his family but he never thought of moving. It was against his agelong belief as a disciplined soldier. Marion was the only offspring off his marriage to his military school heartthrob and he couldn't help but enforce an authoritative parenting atmosphere for her. He felt terrible that he was hard on her but it was the best he could do to keep her off danger. The eyes she'd never notice.

That day, his eyes pinched inward and his face contorted into a tough grimace when the excited Marion announced the news. He looked away and furrowed his brows, heading to the bar cabinet to grab a glass of Vodka. Although Marion had for years, fought to have a good father-daughter relationship with her father, she couldn't get him to consider her feelings when making decisions about her life. She wanted that fatherly love every friend of hers experienced and in spite how rigid her father seemed, she wanted him to be a greater part of her life. But, that Wednesday night, she drew the conclusion that what he felt for her was nothing but shear hatred.

How can it be something else?

She found it quite disheartening that what mattered most to her meant nothing to her father. The same and one person who was supposed to safeguard her interest and stand by her through her lows.

She paced round the open terrace, not far from the pecan furniture her father sat—her right hand on her stumping head. She ran her fingers through her curly hair, unintentionally peeling the gelled edges. She had no idea what to feel, what to say and what to do.

“But father, all my life... this is what I have always wanted. To graduate with good grades and get a chance to deliver my set's Victory speech. Now I have this tiny dream of mine come alive but you want me to let it go? Why don't you care about my happiness? Why is it always about what you want without considering my feelings or that of mom?” she yelled amid tears.

He took a sip of Vodka and buried his face in his palms. He still wore a frowning face and rested his gaze on the glass of Vodka seated atop the glass-topped Ork furniture while Marion kept pacing, moving further away from him, her heart boiling with rage.

“I want the best for you, Marion. I always do. I want you to grow up as a happy child and...”

“But you've been acting otherwise for a very long time now. You've caused me nothing but unhappiness father,” she snapped, not looking in his direction.

He gritted his teeth and clenched his bare fist. “That's because I want you to stay safe. To stay sane,” he growled.

“To stay sane? How the hell will all of these keep me sane, father? You want me a complete loner. You hate to see me keep friends. After grandmother died, you don't want me getting to meet any of my relatives again. No aunt. No uncle. No cousins. And now, you do not want me to deliver the valedictory speech on my graduation? How exactly are all these attempts to keep me happy?”

“Marion. You're nothing but a kid who can't see nor read in between the lines. This is way beyond what you think you know. I mean, it's dangerous out there and I have to make sure that you're safe. At home, in school, anywhere...”

“But it is making me unhappy.”

“There's nothing I can do about these things, Marion. It's my safest way of keeping you under the radar. Protected.”

“What exactly are you protecting me from, father?”

Marion had no idea what ex-veterans share in common but she had groomed a beardown despal for them, judging from the authoritative displays of her father who seemed too overprotective of her. She yearned to know why he always felt that she was in danger and for the first time, she felt her mother was hiding something. Perhaps, she had a thing or two to say about what his fear was about but always held it back...Marion could tell that she never wanted to spill it.

“But father...”

He jerked to his feet and lifted a finger. Marion knew exactly what that means. He gulped his Vodka, draining his glass and then turned to walk away. “Do not push it, Marion. I can not have you speak on that podium on Friday,” he bellowed and

wambled inside the apartment, leaving Marion at the terrace to sob her eyes out. Those words were his final take, Marion knew that. Not even her mother could talk him out of it. She had never succeeded.

Marion's hope went crashing, completely that no even a shard of it was left. Her pained mind got logged with nastiness. She yearned to do it her way but couldn't figure out how. She feared getting into deeper trouble with her ex-soldier father but at the same time never saw herself missing to deliver the speech the coming Friday.

Miracles are real!

That was what Marion concluded it to be. On Thursday afternoon, Hart Nabokov sent for her. Her heart sank and her hands quivered. She had groomed outrageous means of delivering the speech without her father's consent and then wondered if he had figured out that she had ulterior motives. She had concluded to make the speech regardless of whose ox is gored. And, only one thing could stop her. If she's not allowed to go for the graduation at all. She thought that was why he called her—to finish what he started in grand style. *Isn't that what he knows how best to do?*

“Marion, I have no idea what father you take me for, but I'll reemphasize that whatever I do is for your good,” he announced subtly. It was one of the rare moments where Marion scented splashes of Russian intonation in his English. She had always liked him. She loved him. How he talked and his body movement when talking—she had no idea why she found those moves admirable but she had never for once liked what used to come out of that mouth when it had to do with making decisions that are related to her.

“Despite how restrictive I can be, I honestly do want you to be happy.” He paused and grabbed her hand, looked into her teary eyes, planted a warm kiss on her forehead and then pulled her close. She sniffed his sweet-scented cologne and felt that daughter-father

bond she hadn't felt for years. It was the first time they both had that lovey-dovey moment.

Snapping his grip, he wiped off a streak of tear off his eyes with a checked handkerchief from the pocket of his denim jean pants. "I want to make you happy your own way and not mine."

Marion's eyes flickered and she shot a glance right into his face. She couldn't spit the question but her eyes sent the message across. She was sure he had read the writings on her eyeballs. "You can go ahead with the valedictory speech. You have my permission."

That was it. That was the unexpected victory that gave her the leeway to deliver the Victory speech. But, it was short-lived. She defeated her fears and delivered a flawless and thought-provoking speech that left Yellowstone Memorial Hall spellbound. The soothing smile on her father's face was unusual. It was enough to tell that he was proud of her even if he never got to admit it. But something more unusual laid ahead. For the first time in years, Marion's parents headed home from her graduation in a different vehicle. He didn't force her into their car at the expense of a stern stare—he wanted her make the best out of the day; her own way.

Lost in the grey Mercedes Benz of her favourite female teacher; Ms Sarah Mikhail, Marion trailed right behind her parents car. She got engrossed in a conversation with two other students at the backseat and only turned around in shock after a scathing wail was heard right ahead of them. An autocrash.

A timber truck with a failed brake smeared a certain car ahead of them beyond recognition. Marion's eyes dilated in awe and her heart froze when she caught a better glimpse of the crushed car. She might have mistaken the colour and car brand but she recognised the license plate number—it was one she knew by heart. She couldn't scream

nor wail nor weep. Her terrified eyes grew blurry and she plonked to the floor in exhaustion, startling Ms Sarah Mikhail.

Death became her only wish.

They couldn't make it. Both of them. It sounded outrightly numbing that she lost her parents the same day she graduated out of Highschool. The same day they were supposed to celebrate with her like the parents of her friends did. The same day she was to thank her father for considering her happiness for the first time since she became of age. She was left with just her and the world—the same lonely world her father built for her. She watched her world crashed to the ground in a single day. She watched herself lose everything in one day. And, she wondered why death spared her by having her drive in a separate vehicle. She wished to have been crushed with them...perhaps, it'd have been honourable to die with them than watch them cease to breath.

She knew no one other than Saraphina Matviyenkoher, her family's lawyer. It took her weeks to fix the legal documents that made everything Hart Nabokov owned become Marion's. She said he had already willed more than ninety percent of his assets to her and that realization tugged a chain of questions into Marion's mind. *Did he know he was dying soon? Why did he let her drive in a separate car?*

She no longer had interest in Russia. A new life in a new place with new faces and new troubles was all she wanted. Moving out of where she was born and groomed seemed so hard a thing to do, but perhaps what was harder to ignore was the feeling that Russia wasn't safe for her anymore. A new life in America was all she wanted! No one could stop her. Not even Saraphina Matviyenko.

Marion was still seated at the old-looking wooden chair right beside the counter at the Police station. Having seated there for more than thirty minutes, she had done nothing but stare and stare. She dreaded the place with every bit of her being and couldn't wait to walk out through the door. The sight of weird looking cops, the nagging of angered arrestees, the yelling from the cell section—she loathed every one of them.

There was a lanky cop at the corner before the last bend to the cell section with a coffee mug clutched to his hand. He was lost in a conversation with a giant looking lady on mufti. She was more than seven inches taller than the man towered before her and looked quite masculine—her facial expressions, her standing posture, her mohawk haircut. The only proof that she was female was the pair of firm breasts that perched on her thoracic region. However, what pulled Marion more to their conversation was the language they used. They spoke Russian. Having abandoned the language for English for many years, she noted clear-cut signs from the conversation ahead, that she had slightly forgotten Russian.

Her eyes were still on the two cops when she heard her name from a distance. She swung around hurriedly and pulled a lengthy sigh of relief. Kate Patterson. They both didn't wrap up exchange of pleasantries when Dorothy Floyd shuffled out of the office adjacent to the counter. She first pulled a gripping frown but at the split of a second, it relaxed into a sly smile. She hugged Marion and whispered into her ears.

“Let's go home, Marion.”

CHAPTER FOUR

DOROTHY HASTENED THE BAIL! Marion had phoned her after the cop took her to the Police station. Although that was her first time of getting arrested by Boston Police for traffic violation, she knew she wouldn't be getting close to the cell neither would she spend more than an hour there. Dorothy never makes vain promises—she assured her of a bail.

More than half of the guests left the party before Dorothy left for the Police station. Of course, Kate Patterson couldn't stay back. While Dorothy unwaveringly gave Marion the assurance that she'd be getting her out of what she called a “shit-hole,” Kate Patterson sounded frightened when she was finally able to reach Marion. All she cared was her safety.

They met Marion sound and safe but a bit tired. Her eyes had grown weak and her face looked slightly crestfallen. She had been immersed in ceaseless thoughts. And, most importantly, Whitney was yet to take her calls. She couldn't stop wondering what exactly was going on back at the office. Dorothy arrived earlier and took care of the paperwork with the case officer inside his small office. Kate arrived later, after placating the remaining guests.

As an attorney, Dorothy found it disturbing that having being clearly guilty of overspeeding and drunk-driving, the case became all the case officer needed to open a new criminal record in Marion's name. It was just an infraction, but to a lawyer like her, a crime is a crime—it is nothing to be compared to zero criminal record and can leave a dent on one's reputation.

But, there was a bigger problem. She harrassed a cop. Another crime. Although it was clearly a misdemeanor, the case officer made it sound like a felony—like some crime

that'd guarantee Marion a jail term that'd run into years if found guilty. Dorothy was sure that he'd have had the case hit the court if he was the cop in question. *Isn't that why people are different?*

The Police officer waltzed into the office. His badge read *Collins. N.* He was the one who had the encounter with Marion and ended up arresting her to the station. With his mammoth potbelly and bulky stout frame, he pulled an intimidating atmosphere around him that Dorothy wondered how Marion looked him in the face and talked back at him. However, he was quite softhearted. His looks was a complete opposite of his personality.

“I do not want to press charges,” he announced, looking at Dorothy right in the face.

“Are you sure about that?” the case officer asked, turning aptly in Collins' direction with a ghost of shock and frustration ebbed all over his face. Dorothy felt that perhaps, what he intended saying was *how can you say such a thing?* He clearly disapproved the decision. His facial expression and his eyes gave so much clues. Collins must have noticed it, though not as better as Dorothy did.

He stroke his bald head and insisted. “I do not have reasons. I just want to let it go!”

The case officer stared at him for a few seconds and then shrugged, splaying his pale hands in a feigned acceptance. Certainly, if he had his way, Dorothy knew that he'd have lured Collins to dance to his tone; press charges and have Marion appear in court. The lawyer watched in disbelief, combing through her mind for reasons some people feel comfortable with inflicting pain on others.

Again, Dorothy's eyes went over his frame in a fine-toothed comb. He had a shape that looked like the exact opposite of Collins' physique, except that he was taller. He looked fifty. He was black, lanky and had a generic oblong face of typical Latinos, with a

minion grey-haired moustache squatting right above his upper lips. His grey-haired brows jerked occasionally whenever he spoke, brushing the edges of the rim of his oval spectacles. Just like Collins, his personality was the opposite of his simple looks.

“Alright, if you say so. You may leave now,” he nodded to the door.

Dorothy's eyes didn't evade his annoying face. She watched him with scorn but suppressed her countenance harder than she had ever suppress any feeling. Collins had already grabbed the doorknob when he called him back.

“Make sure you think about this Collins. Don't hesitate to give me a call if you wish to change your mind,” he encouraged. Collins faked a smile and nodded in the affirmative before slamming the door close.

What a dark-minded fellow!

Back to Dorothy who stared in awe, he shoved a document onto the table. “Sign here. Your client's a lucky one. The cop isn't pressing charges and that means....”

“I know what that means Officer! I am a lawyer,” Dorothy snapped, her annoyance slowly skidding out of its shell.

“Oh. I should have figured that out before explaining. So, in that case, that means everything is gonna be easy then,” he pointed to a certain part on the bottom of the A4 paper. “Sign here and progress to choosing the best punitive measure for your client. Be careful with it, there wouldn't be a new one if you get it ruined.”

Will you fucking shup up you old man! That was what brimmed Dorothy's mouth. It almost egress her lips but she tamed her temper. She feared replicating Marion's mistake even though some cops sucks. Like the one seated right in front of her.

Upon receiving the form after Dorothy assented it, the case officer skimmed through it and then smilingly turned to Dorothy. "So, you've evaded community service, huh?"

Angered. Dorothy leaned closer and rested both hands on the table. "Do you have a problem with that?"

He stuttered. "I-I-Uhm. Of course I don't. You know, I just need to be sure that you know what's right for her."

"You wanna teach me my job?"

Woke. "Come on woman, don't trivialize this. Okay?"

"No. Go on, just let me know if you do wanna teach me my job." She paused and hoped to have him say something but he kept mute. She continued. "What you've seen there is what I choose for my client because I am her lawyer and I know that that's what's best for her, you have no business questioning me about the punitive measure I choose for her."

He smiled. "Fine. But, you're sure she's gonna afford the fine?"

Money? Is this what all of these is about about?

Dorothy smiled back. Brushed the edges of her a-line lob to the bridge of her ears. And, leaned closer and whispered to the case officer.

"That little-looking beautiful lady out there is a moneybag that can afford this Police station alongside your job if you don't mind."

Mr Stockton was still in Mario's penthouse at Freedom Tower when she arrived. Kate Patterson was with her while Dorothy had left for her house. Her husband phoned even while there were still at the Police station. The accountant sat at the terrace, helping himself with a glass of spirit while staring at the star-spangled skyline. He seemed to be the only guest who knew about what happened to Marion and that was because he's Marion's accountant and was contacted by Dorothy about processing the payment of the fine.

He couldn't help but linger till she got back. He took to his feet when Marion finally came into sight, Kate trailing right behind her.

"Are you okay?" he asked the weary looking Marion, hobbling closer.

Marion nodded and slumped to the furniture. Fatigue had played her for a sucker.

"She's fine," Kate responded from the direction of the dining, a coffee-filled mug clenched to her fist. "She just needs some hot bath and a cup of steaming creamed coffee," she said carelessly, heading in their direction.

"Cleared with the Police?" Stockton asked.

"Yeah. The fine payment has been confirmed."

"No further charges? Dorothy said they might be another one?"

Kate chuckled. "Yeah. I thought as much. I mean, we all thought so. There was suppose to be something else other than overspeeding and drunk-driving.

"Drunk-driving?" Stockton asked, his brows arched. "She didn't leave here drunk. Would you have let her?"

"She doesn't have to be drunk to be charged with drunk-driving. The alcohol test came positive. That's all was needed. A confirmation that she had had alcohol before stepping into the car qualifies the crime as drunk-driving."

"Oh," Stockton rolled his eyes. "So what about the other charge?"

"Harrassment. I mean alleged harrassment."

"And that sounds like big trouble. Isn't it?"

Kate groaned, helping Marion keep her head up. "Uhm. Dorothy would respond to that better. But I think that too has been sorted," she paused and handed Marion the coffee mug. "Come on, have a sip," she whispered to the jetlagged Marion. Back to the staring Stockton. "The allegedly harrassed cop doesn't want to press charges."

Marion had taken the first sip of the coffee and had the cup only a few inches from her nearly shivering lips when the ring from her phone interrupted. Their eyes all went in the direction of the phone which rested on the furniture, right beside Marion's left foot.

"Who's it," Marion asked clumsily, gazing at Kate who had the phone in her hand.

She flickered her brows and handed the phone over. "Whitney!"

CHAPTER FIVE

NEW YORK IS THE MAINSTAY OF REAL ESTATE. It is the abode of realtors who crave to get their hands on high-end luxury properties that'd appreciate at the pace of a blooming delft blue hyacinth. It is the ideal city for realtors who's got a thing for class and would want to have a taste of it.

Marion wasn't left out of these classes of realtors. She was always out for the best—in quality and in profit, that became her rule of thumb. At the toddling stage of her real estate agency; Tristar Realty, she limited her real estate investments to Boston and its suburbs. But, five years down the line, she expanded her investment wings to as far as Texas and Philadelphia. Her next dream city was New York city. She couldn't help but crave to not just have landed assests in these cities, but to get to connect with the big names in the real estate industry.

Unlike when she first touch down Philadelphia and got greeted with a grotesque housing policy that endangered her first investment, her expansion to Texas was timely. She gave it a thought after she bumped into Mr Stockton in a banking hall at New York City. Days danced into weeks and weeks into months before they both went down into business proper—the terrain met and even exceeded her standards. Mr Stockton finally got redeployed to a mega branch of his bank in Texas and resting on his expertise in the finance sector, Marion made her first real estate investment in Texas, putting the project under his close supervision. He was such a daunting force to rely on.

Her first investment in New York City seemed promising but only garnered a profit that ran into a few thousands of dollars after closure. It was way below her expectations but not outrightly bad for a start in a city brimmed with crazy competitors. A week to her birthday, she bagged a deal that smeared her face with smiles. It was the most perfect

pre-birthday present she had ever received. It was a multimillion dollar project with a renowned film academy and that concussed her to channel every bit of her energy to New York City at the time. It was a project that never had to slip through her fingers and was obviously the same reason she fretted when Whitney called. Whitney was equally in Boston but kept more tabs with the team working on the New York City project than Marion did.

Whitney's call couldn't be ignored. Mr Stockton finally left the penthouse while Marion jetted out to the office. Of course, she couldn't talk Kate out this time. Kate didn't just join Marion to the office but was the one occupying the steers. Without doubts, Marion didn't make even a mental attempt to stop her this time. It'd be easy for a cow to pass through the eye of a needle than for her to convince Kate to stay back. She was certain that she wasn't strong enough to be left alone. As always, she needed Kate around.

"You work too hard, Marion. You've got to take it easy on yourself girl," Kate mumbled, her eyes still on the road.

Marion groaned. "I know. But, what else am I supposed to do? My investments have to be taken care of. They have to be watched closely."

"But you've got agents working round the clock to keep these assets in shape and then hunt for prospects. Isn't that enough for you to just rest and watch them do what you paid them to do..."

"No. That's not it. I mean, that's not enough. New York is a dynamic city and you have no idea how saturated the real estate market over there is, you've got to put in more work or drift towards running into multimillion loses."

“And that means you should get yourself all worked out every single time? Even on your birthday?”

Marion chuckled. “Come on girl, that’s not it. I work hard but I still have my mental and physical wellbeing at heart. I mean I still observe sessions with my psychiatrist. I still hit the gym. I keep fit and...”

“This isn’t about your outside, Marion. It’s not about keeping fit. It’s about staying sane. You got into trouble with the Police today because you abandoned your birthday party and hurried to some emergency at the office...”

“But there was nothing I could do than to drive down there. It was the only thing I could do to figure out what was wrong.”

Kate gave her a stern stare. “No, Marion. It was the worst thing you ever did. Abandoning your friends at your birthday party and hurrying to some business emergency that you’d have averted using other alternatives.”

Her eyes bulched out. “Really? Other alternatives, you say? My office is only two miles from Freedom Tower, how does me hurrying there a problem?”

“It was a problem, Marion. A big problem. Just like your business and every other thing you care very much about, your friends are important. Yes, they are. I don’t don’t know how you uhm. Listen, you do not always have to shot out your friends. These are people who keep standing by your side when you’re down and needs to be comforted. They always encourage you to pull yourself together when it seems like everything’s crumbling. They equally deserve to be showed some level of respect and regard just like your business is getting...”

“I respect my friends, Kate. I respect you, I respect Dorothy. I respect all of you. I do not and can not take you guys for granted. I have no idea what you think of me lately but I’m not a monster. Okay. I try my best...I just want to...I-I. Listen Kate, I just couldn’t help it.”

“You could have helped it if you wanted to. You could have called the cops to go check up on Whitney...”

“Cops?” she asked and spun sharply towards Kate. “You know I hate the cops, Kate.”

“But you do not hate your agents too? Do you? You could’ve easily phoned a number of them to go check up on Whitney.”

“At the party. Some of them were at the party. I mean, I didn’t even think of that. I-I was just...”

“Doing what you know how to do best,” Kate snapped.

Confused. “What are you talking about?”

“What I am talking about isn’t something new nor something I haven’t raised concern about before. It’s what you do almost all the time and I want you to change that. Prioritize your friends. Make them feel that they’ve got a space in your heart and not just saying it but acting otherwise!”

Guts!

They drove in silence and kept stealing glances at each other with the corners of their eyes. Marion’s eyes grew wet. Perhaps, ceaseless thoughts ran through her stumping head. She practically jarred her mind, giving every word Kate said the leeway to sink

deeper into her subconscious. She had known that she had been making silly moves that nullified her regards for her friends. She knew that what mattered most to her was her business and not her friends. The scenes of their first verbal fight creased through her head. She once chose a board meeting over visiting Kate who got a heart attack. She once forgot Dorothy's birthday because she needed to seal a deal. All these shortcomings and many more stabbed her heart like the piercing from a blunt piece of rusted metal. She tried her best and evidently, she needed to try harder.

She jerked a bit when Kate's hand grabbed hers that rested on the reservoir compartment that divided their seats. With her eyes still on the road and her left hand on the steers, Kate cuddled her cold feeble hand, saying nothing.

“K-K-Kate,” Marion stuttered. Kate spun around, gave her a quizzical stare and then looked back at the road. The frown that littered all over her face while they argued had long disappeared, not even a ghost of it left.

“Are you uhm. Are you mad at me?” Marion finally asked.

Kate smiled. It wasn't fake. It came from right within her. Marion knew her so well, enough to detect a feigned smile whenever it is found on her face. “Why should I?” she responded, throwing Marion into a deeper confusion.

Marion looked away, pausing to have a look at the car overhead. It was a black Mercedes Benz that struck a memory in her head. It just screeched to a halt by the roadside and her eyes couldn't stop feasting on it. At the drop a hat, her uncladding eyes rifled to the license plate number. She hissed a silent sigh of frustration. The numbers that rung on her head were not what was written on the license plate. The state and country code didn't even tally. She completely forgot that these numbers were continents apart. Memories. Ugly memories.

“We’re here!” Kate announced as soon as she swerved the tyres into the parking lot of the giant highrise that housed Tristar Realty’s office in Boston. She undid her seatbelt and had already dropped one foot to the floor as soon as the door went ajar but something warm grabbed her arm. Marion.

“Kate! I-I am so sorry if my actions hurt you. I-I uhm. I didn’t mean to…”

“Sssssssshhhhh,” Kate interrupted, pressing her long finger across her knitted lips. “Listen, Marion. This isn’t about me. It’s about us. It’s about everybody that qualifies as your friend. We shouldn’t begin an apology party now,” she said and nodded upward. “Whitney is waiting for you, upstairs.”

“But I…”

“Trust me, Marion. We can always do this some other time. Not now!”

They didn’t get to Whitney’s office. They bumped into her at the forty-seventh floor. Right before the elevator, about to egress the building. Their eyes splayed in awe as they stared at each other; starstruck.

Tall, chubby and blonde, Whitney Cook got glued to a spot. She fiddled her walnut wristlet that perfectly matched with her shoes and furrowed her brows, her thick eyelashes occasionally concealing her eyeballs.

“W-w-what is going on, Whitney?” Marion summed up courage to ask.

Whitney kept mute, brushing the edges of her wispy see-through air bangs to the side and pulling a worried look.

“Can you say something?” Kate took up the questioning.

“Is everything okay?” Marion asked again.

“No,” Whitney finally hushed. She was barely audible but the two curious ladies were so attentive that they heard what she said. Marion gave Kate a blank gaze and looked away, back into Whitney's direction.

“What is the problem, Whitney?”

“Accident” she bloated.

“What are you talking about?” Marion chimed in, getting more restless.

“Where? To who?” Kate quizzed.

Whitney hurried for her phone inside her wristlet. Pulled it out and after a few tabs, handed it over to Kate.

“Accident. At the project site in New York.”