.23

"Has anyone arrived yet?"

He shook his head.

And she sighed in relief.

Yes! She was on time!

"I want this to get over with. I gotta get my girlfriend out for a date." Miles muttered darkly, his eyes skimming over the newspaper spread on the table.

Emma took off her sling bag and occupied the space beside him.

She had to arrive early because well, she didn't want to get surprised by seeing strangers floating around. She had to be the first one to greet them. Not the other way around.

Shutting her eyes, she relaxed but alas! The second she shut her eyes up, his smouldering eyes would take up her vision. . burning. . melting. .for her-

Hastily, she snapped her eyes open feeling the thud thud of her treacherous heart. God! If only she could clutch her heart . Calm it down somewhat. .

His name was enough to make her forget everything like Miles examining her harassed face.

"You okay?" He asked.

"Yeah. I'm-im fine. What are you doing so early?" She asked trying to change the topic.

And he fell for it.

"I suffer from insomnia and nope, don't you give me that I'm so sorry look. I'm fine by it." He shrugged carelessly, his eyes going back to the paper.

"Whatever floats your boat." She smiled.

"Yeah yeah. ." He trailed off.

"Do you want coffee?" She asked eagerly because she herself needed a caffeine fix early in the morning.

"Who doesn't want one?" His dry voice made her stand up. Oh she knew her way around the house like the back of her hand. The maids didn't arrive until **10.**

And the beast didn't wake up till **9**

Her heart perked up at his mention. It was so weird and beautiful at the same time. .how the tiny muscle would send sparks of joy all over her body and-

"Concentrate." She muttered. Now going towards the sleek kitchen.

As she entered , Emma switched on all the lights and walked towards the stove.

After five minutes , she was leaning against the shelf, while the coffee brewed.

Lost in her thoughts, she did hear the heavy footsteps coming towards the kitchen but she didn't take much notice.

Must be miles.

A tall shadow appeared on the threshold.

Emma rolled her eyes.

"I know you couldn't wait much. What'll become of . . ," She trailed off seeing himstaring back at her. Dressed casually in a t shirt and pants, the shirt seemed to be emphasising his broad shoulders. .he seemed to shock her every single time.

Green eyes fell on her and didn't move.

"Seems like destiny has it in for us." He stated in a cool voice.

Emma felt like if she didn't get out right now, she would burst into flames! The fire on the stove was getting to her! It was getting under her skin. Or was it him doing all that? She could feel the beads of sweat on her back. . slipping down.

"I don't think so. " She whispered softly.

"Then what is it you think of?" He asked taking her aback.

Why was he so interested in knowing what was going on in her head?!

She looked up , right in his eyes.

"I certainly don't think of you."

Nothing happened to his impassive face. .

"I never implied that."

His smooth and clean tone was bothering her. Once again she felt like she had dreamed about what happened between them the last time! Once again he shrugged it under the carpet.

"You know what? I don't want to cross paths with you ever again. In fact, I don't want to see your face today."

The kettle whistled and Emma couldn't be more thankful for that. His eyes moved wherever she did. .

Opening up the top cabinet, she took a cup out and then proceeded to fill it up with the steaming coffee while feeling his gaze burning her back.

So eager to leave the vicinity, the hasty action spilled some steaming coffee right on the shelf-Emma leaped back.

"Watch it!"

The commanding voice grated on her nerves. She didn't respond, instead she took the cup carefully and turned around . .at him.

The slight humor on his face gone.

Seemed like he was gritting his teeth as his gaze went from the spilled coffee on the shelf to her hand.

Not wanting to escalate the tension further, she moved towards him . . careful not to look at him. .her heart
thudded viciously as she passed by him on the threshold. .her shoulder barely brushing his. .time seemed to have stopped but she made it out. .

She made it!

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Before she could so much as protest, Diana had her in a flowy summer dress. The thin straps over her shoulder putting her decolletage on display. Diana had her brown hair curled up in soft waves. She went as far as to adorn her ears with diamond studs.

Emma wished the floor would open and swallow her up. Diana was piling good deed after good deed on her and she had no clue about how to pay her back.

She herself was dressed up in a casual summer dress. According to her it wasn't a glitz n glam party. .there would be another day for it.

Now she just wanted to unwind. Relax. Enjoy.

Emma had anticipated 100 of guests but really her family seemed quite tiny with only ten people arriving. Diana hugged everyone and ushered the women to the table adorned with delicious food and men straight to the bar.

While all of this was happening, Emma couldn't help but . .miss a certain face. She sneaked a glance at the wall clock. .

10:30 PM

She could feel the pit of her heart sinking slightly. .but she tried to keep herself busy with food or chit chatting away with the giggling women.

11:30 PM

Now, Emma couldn't help but feel the growing worry in her and the worst thing about it had to be not being able to share it with anyone. .she could see the smile wavering off Diana's face as she too kept glancing at the clock while attending the guests.

12:00 PM

Diana had her phone stuck to her ear and Emma knew she was trying to call her brother.

I don't want to see your face today.

Emma bit her bottom lip , tasting the lip gloss.

Did he take her words seriously? Did he disappear because she asked him to?

Why would he do that? It's not like she mattered to him. .

"Have you seen Max?"

A worried voice broke her chain of thoughts.

Diana was looking at her with palpable worry she was trying to hide.

Emma opened her mouth ready to spill about her last encounter with him and then she shut it down.

"No, I haven't ."

Diana nodded absently and then she slipped her phone in Emma's hand and asked her to keep dialing while she talk to Miles.

Watching her walk away, Emma swallowed hard. Staring at the phone as if it was a bomb.

Slowly, she lifted the phone and saw the contents on the bright screen.

Calling him feels so intimate**.** She thought.

I hope he's okayshe sent a prayer to the heavens and dialed his number.

The number you're calling is unavailable . Leave your message in the voice box

And what is she supposed to do if he did pick up? What was she going to say?!!

Please come back?

I miss you?

You're growing on me?

She had all the wrong answers!

But then. .she did feel guilty for Diana's sake.

At least that's what she told herself.

Summoning all her courage, she pressed the caller ID and held it up to her ear.

The same mechanical voice repeated the message.

"Hey. . umm it's me .Emma. I-i'm sorry for what I said in the morning and I'm- Diana's worried. I'm really sorry. . please come back."

With a breathless voice, she cut the call.

Not at all believing herself.

What the hell did she just do?!

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Not being able to hold herself anymore, she marched towards his room in order to find a clue about his whereabouts. .

Quietly, she slipped off from the gathering , taking the hem of her long dress in her hand, she trudged upwards.

Something was missing. .

The food wasn't delicious enough...

Her dress wasn't pretty enough...

Her heart wasn't happy enough. .

She had no idea why but she felt like crying. Emma didn't know the reason of such longing and sadness and-

Maybe she did know. .

Maybe she wasn't brave enough to acknowledge it.

Walking by the doors, she had reached his.

Would she never seen him again? Would she never see him being pompous?

Angry at her thoughts for being so rogue, her hand covered the bolt of the door but. . she stopped altogether.

There was just something in the air, a carnation. .a scent. . life

Slowly, she turned around and yes! It was life.He was standing three feet away from her. Now dressed up in a white dress shirt and blank pants, his dark eyes devoured her existence. Seeing the soft curls cupping her face had him slip his hands in the pockets of his pants.

Lest he did something he would regret.

Seeing him safe, in one piece had her breath a sigh of relief. Not at all knowing the affect she had on him.

Her worry and relief made her bold enough to diminish the distance between them in two steps.

"What's wrong with you?! Why can't you pick your phone-"

"Seems like you were worried." He cut her in.

Being caught wasn't on her plan.

"No-yes. . no!. Why the hell would I be worried? It's just that I have never seen Diana this worried and-"

He had her shut up by taking the last step towards her .

So close he seemed to be the only one dominating her line of vision.

"Careful, Emma or I might think you were worried for me. Also I liked your . .apology. You seemed to be doing that a lot lately."

The arrogance in his voice had her knot eyebrows.

"I didn't apologise. For anything!"

His eyes flared with a challenge and then Emma watched in horror as he slipped his phone out from his pocket and replayed her voice message.

"Hey. .it me .Emma. I-i'm sorry for what I said in the morning and I'm- Diana is worried. I'm really sorry. . please come back."

"This-this isn't my voice!"Red in the face , she blurted out. Lying at point blank.

"You seemed so worried you were ready to beg Emma." He taunted her with a condescending smile.

That fired her up.

"I don't care where you're at! Why would I care about you? There's nothing to care for!" She muttered darkly , failing at wiping the smile off his face.

"You sure?" He mocked.

She nodded, looking away from his face.

And she definitely wasn't ready when he suddenly caught her wrist in his hold-lifting it up while her eyes widened.

He leaned in . .

Until all she could see was him.

"If everything I do doesn't matter to you. .why do your eyes come alive when I touch you. .your face colors when you see me. .I can feel your skin going hot in my hold , Emma. You look at me like I'm too good to be true. You know what that makes you?" He asked watching the delicate tendons in her neck popping out and his mouth went close to her ear.

"A big fat liar."

"Max!"

Diana's shrill voice had him back up from her but his hot eyes didn't leave her.

"God! Where have you been!" She hurried towards her brother and mutely he let her hug him.

"I had a call from office. " His arms wrapped around his sister , his stubborn gaze not wavering from Emma.

"The least you can do is inform!" Diana grounded in his shirt.

"Well, at least I got to know I was missed by. .," Emma glanced at him in horror ," people" He finished, his eyes liking the color on her face.

"Oh shush!" Diana backed off . "Come on , we got a lunch to attend."

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The second they landed down, seats were being filled in by the family and Emma had eyed her seat from faraway.

He was talking with his sister and subtly, Emma moved towards the chair right by Miles.

Just as she occupied the chair, his eyes snapped at her direction which she ignored.

She couldn't survive the heat in them.

Maximus got seated at the head of the table as chatter broke out. Food was passed around , glass's were chinked together. It was one boisterous lunch.

Maximus couldn't hear anything but the sound of her breath.

He couldn't see anything but the curve of her smile.

Diana had poured his favorite coffee in the china cup and had his plate loaded with chocolate puff pastries and sandwiches.

He took the cup , waiting for the steam to cool down-his eyes finding her again as Miles whispered softly in her ear and she laughed in response-Miles's shoulder grazing by hers slightly-

Maximus didn't blink.

As he took a sip of the scalding hot coffee.

Burning the tip of his tongue.

Watching them, be downed the whole cup in one go, feeling the burn of the coffee , feeling his eyes water up in response-and he stood up.

Getting everyone's attention but hers.

That somehow burned him more than the coffee.

"I have to attend a call. Enjoy." He said coolly.

Casting one last withering glance at the oblivious couple.

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Emma nearly toppled over with relief.

As he vanished, the pressure on her lungs seemed to be be lifted off . She could feel his gaze burning at her skin. . trying to get under it. Trying to burn her.

"I have to show you this necklace Max got for me, Mrs Meyers."

She heard Diana's voice.

"Well then hurry up, dear."

"It'll take a minute-"

"No!" Mrs Meyers sharp voice forced Diana back on her seat. "You shan't. You're going to be a bride, for heaven's sake! In my time , we wouldn't let the bride set a foot down from the bed. That's a bad omen. Ask someone else to fetch it." She ordered.

Diana seemed helpless and then Emma felt her eyes on her.

"Emma? Can you please be a darling and get my necklace?" She pleaded.

"Of course!" Emma replied immediately.

"It's in Max's room."

Her answer sent shock waves across her body. The sudden anticipation of seeing him again had her lean against the chair.

Her intestines twisted around.

"O-okay." Her lips went dry as she stood up on woolly legs.

Just when she thinks she's out of his reach. . . .

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Breathing in and out, letting all the anxiety and nervousness washing away , she knocked on the door.

Twice.

She didn't get any answer.

Slowly, she plastered her ear against the door trying to listen for any sign of movement.

Nope. Nothing.

Maybe he isn't inside!

The encouraging thought made her turn the bolt and open the door wide enough to slip in.

The door shutting behind her with a click.

She wished she hadn't come in.

Her heart drowned at the sight of complete darkness. She couldn't separate two form two. Not letting the panic get to her, her hand searched the wall beside the door wildly to find a switch and-

"Don't."

The voice was so close , she gasped in surprise. .her skin heating up in response to his voice.

She definitely could feel his body . .his presence right in front of her . .the air was blocked away. .Emma stepped back against the door. .

"You can't find everything on your own." His breath fanned across her face.

Her reply was instant.

"I can."

"Prove it."

" What?"

"Find the light. Flip it on." His casual voice had her accepting his challenge in the blink of an eye.

"Watch me." She tried to sound brave.

"Believe me. I'm."

Blindly, she turned around. .her hand finding support on the wall as she felt around for a switchboard. .but her mind was fixed on him-hearing his breath-hearing his slight movement-the swish of his fabric-

She squeezed her eyes shut as the sudden bright lights blinded her eyesight.

Slowly, she opened them back up. . seeing the tiny dots all over . .

"You alright?"

His deep voice had her whirl around.

There he was ! Sleeves flooded up to his elbows, arms crossed over his chest and eyes rimmed red over the edges .

"You can't do everything on your own , Emma." He repeated . "You couldn't even find the switchboard. I had to intervene." He mocked. "You should have asked Miles for help."

The bite in his tone didn't go unnoticed.

"What has Miles got to do with it?" She remarked , feeling a burn at her heart.

Maximus unfolded his arms and again Emma's back went against the door as he placed one hand beside her head. His eyes flaring up.

"Can you handle the truth?"

She didn't know what to say.

"Seeing you laughing with him. Seeing your bare skin grazed by him. It burns me. I'm still burning. Want to feel?" He asked and without waiting for her reply, he took her wrist and placed it against his beating heart.

"It burns right here."

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