**Runaway Date, Billionaire Fate**

Chapter 1 Forced Marriage Blues

Ivy Gonzalez just graduated from college, and it feels like her mother, Grace Peterson, is on a personal mission to get her married. "Ivy, you're at that age where people start to talk if you aren't married!" Grace loves to remind her. And while Ivy’s never really cared about gossip, she can’t escape her mom’s relentless nagging that seems to intensify every couple of days.

Ivy barely sits down to eat after a long day of work when Grace sighs dramatically, “You know, Mrs. Wang next door has a three-year-old grandson! I saw her taking him for a walk today and I just couldn’t help but feel envious. Look at you!”

By now, Ivy has heard this speech at least a hundred times. She knows her mom’s worries—she's scared that Ivy will get older and find it harder to snag a good partner. Ivy usually just shrugs it off with a “Yeah, I know” or “I get it, Mom.”

Finally, after a long day, she’s ready to dig into her dinner, but Grace seems determined to ruin that moment. “You need to go on a date this holiday!” she says, her tone brooking no argument.

The mere thought of a blind date makes Ivy’s head hurt. She tightens her lips and finally manages to say, “Can we just eat first? I’m starving and really tired.” She picks up some meat and chews slowly, adding, “Besides, I’m not against marriage, but come on, it’s all about fate!”

Grace’s face morphs into a wounded puppy look, “I can’t even show my face outside thinking about how you’re not married. I can’t sleep at night! I’m restless until you find someone!”

Here we go again! Ivy rolls her eyes internally, feeling the familiar frustration wash over her.

Ivy’s father passed away when she was little, and while her parents had made some decent money running a small business, her mom’s gambling habit drained most of it. Now, they were barely scraping by.

With a smirk, Ivy quips, “What unlucky guy did you set your sights on this time?”

Grace stands to serve Ivy some soup, and suddenly, her expression brightens. “I posted your photos online for matchmaking, and believe it or not, it actually worked!”

Ivy feels a wave of dread crash over her. “Seriously? You posted my photos online? You think that’s a good idea?”

But under her mom’s relentless insistence, Ivy begrudgingly agrees to go on the date.

The next day, Ivy heads out at the agreed time, but she ends up waiting forever for her ride. Traffic is a nightmare, and the streets are packed with holiday-goers. But Ivy is surprisingly calm, just lounging on a bench, sipping her iced coffee while everyone else frets.

After what feels like an eternity, she finally hops into a car. She arrives at the restaurant half an hour late, and honestly, she hopes her date has lost patience and left.

Upon entering, Ivy’s heart sinks. This place is way out of her budget—she usually wouldn’t even dream of eating here. The waiter leads her to a reserved table where a guy is already sitting. He’s got a sharp haircut, a well-fitted suit, and a posture that screams confidence.

Ivy sizes him up as she approaches, and with a bright smile, she says, “Sorry I’m late! Traffic is terrible this time of year!”

Ethan Clark is busy scrolling through his phone, checking out Ivy’s profile and picture. When he looks up and sees her smiling face, he’s momentarily stunned. She looks even better in person than in her photo.

After a moment, he stands up and introduces himself, “Hi, I’m Ethan Clark.”

Ivy settles into her seat, trying not to feel underdressed in her casual outfit of a t-shirt and sweatpants, while Ethan looks like he stepped out of a GQ magazine.

As they chat, Ivy notices Ethan has a dish of appetizers in front of her. “This is our starter. You should try some,” he encourages.

Ivy takes a couple of bites, but then sets her chopsticks down. “The food looks great, but I’m allergic to seafood.” She glances at the table filled with shrimp and fish.

Ethan looks a bit embarrassed. “I’m so sorry! I didn’t think about that.”

“No big deal,” Ivy smiles, trying to keep the atmosphere light. She’s determined to get through this awkward date without too much discomfort.

As they talk, Ivy can’t shake the feeling that Ethan’s name sounds familiar. A quick Google search in her head confirms it—Ethan Clark is the heir to a massive fortune, the face of the affluent Clark family known for their conglomerate, the Clark Group!

She can’t help but feel out of her league. “Why would someone like you even need to go on a blind date?” she asks, half-joking.

Ethan chuckles, “Because dating takes time, and time is very precious for us.”

Ivy rolls her eyes internally—who isn’t busy? She had to ditch her binge-watching to be here!

As the meal winds down, Ivy is already plotting her escape strategy, ready to politely decline any further connection. But Ethan surprises her by asking, “Is the food not to your taste? You barely touched it.”

Ivy shrugs. “I’m really not hungry. I’m more of a burger-and-fries kind of girl.”

Ethan stands up suddenly, blocking the light. “Let’s go grab a burger instead!”

Ivy stares at him in disbelief. “Wait, what? We’re leaving?”

But Ethan is already striding out the door, turning back to wait for her. With a defeated sigh, Ivy follows him. What’s next? A spontaneous burger date with a millionaire? She can’t help but wonder how this will turn out...

Chapter 2 Blind Date

The car drove away from the bustling downtown area and onto a quiet little road lined with towering evergreen trees. Ivy Gonzalez sat in the passenger seat, feeling a sense of déjà vu as they pulled up to a charming, old-fashioned restaurant. The intricate, carved windows of the building reminded her of a place she had stumbled upon before.

Last time, the door had been firmly shut, and when she had knocked, a rather frosty individual had opened it just long enough to inform her, "We’re a private dining establishment, not open to the public," before slamming the door shut. Seeing Ethan Clark’s casual familiarity with the staff made it clear that he must be a regular here.

Ethan walked up to the host and exchanged a few words. Turning to Ivy, he asked, "Aside from your seafood allergy, is there anything else you can’t eat?"

Ivy shook her head.

As the dishes began to arrive, Ethan introduced them one by one, as if presenting his prized collectibles. To Ivy, they were just meals—she wasn’t particularly picky about food. But the earnestness on Ethan’s face was hard to resist, and she couldn’t help but let out a small laugh.

Ethan raised an eyebrow, puzzled by her lack of enthusiastic compliments. He was used to having people shower him with praise for his impeccable taste. But Ivy, ever the straightforward type, simply replied with a casual "Oh~."

He sighed, stifling his disappointment. "Alright, let’s dig in!" he said, clearly eager to see her reaction.

Every time Ivy took a bite, Ethan scrutinized her expression, searching for signs of approval. Unfortunately for him, Ivy was simply enjoying her meal without the theatrics he was hoping for. She had to admit, though, it was way better than what she normally ate—she just wasn’t going to make a big deal out of it.

"Delicious!" Ivy finally said to appease him, and his face lit up like a kid on Christmas morning.

But just as Ivy started to really enjoy her meal, her phone rang with an unfamiliar number. A sense of dread washed over her as she picked it up.

"Ivy, it’s about your mother, Grace Peterson... she’s been in an accident and is being rushed to the hospital..."

Panic surged through Ivy. She dropped her bag and bolted out of the restaurant, Ethan right on her heels, sensing that something serious had happened.

Standing at the entrance, Ivy realized in horror that she hadn’t driven herself there. The restaurant was in a secluded area, and there were hardly any taxis around.

Tears streamed down her face as she frantically looked around. Just then, Ethan pulled up in front of her, rolling down the window, urging her to get in.

Ivy felt like she was on a rollercoaster, her heart racing. She clutched her seatbelt as she remembered her mother’s smile—she couldn’t lose Grace. She had told her mom earlier not to drive today, but her mother loved to go out during holidays, and now this...

The traffic was a nightmare. Cars were barely moving, and Ivy’s anxiety skyrocketed. She glanced at Ethan, who was gripping the steering wheel tightly, but his eyes kept darting to her, worry etched on his face.

"I need to get out! Let me out!" Ivy shouted, her voice breaking.

"Ivy, just hold on. We’ll be there soon!" Ethan tried to reassure her, but she was beyond listening.

Finally, he relented and pulled over to the side of the road. Ivy flung the door open and sprinted toward the hospital, her heart pounding with every step. Thankfully, she had worn comfortable sneakers instead of those impractical heels.

As she rushed through the hospital doors, Ivy’s breath came in ragged gasps. She stumbled to the reception desk, her voice trembling as she asked for her mother. The nurse, seeing her distress, quickly took charge and led Ivy down the sterile corridors, the sounds of hurried footsteps and cries echoing around her.

When they approached the emergency room, Ivy froze. As she took deep breaths, bracing herself, memories of her father flooded her mind. He had passed away when she was just ten years old. The thought of losing her mother too felt unbearable.

Tears spilled from her eyes again, and she barely noticed Ethan had followed her inside, standing a few feet away, his expression a mix of concern and helplessness.

He set down a few water bottles next to her, maintaining a respectful distance as he sat quietly, offering his presence as comfort.

After what felt like an eternity, Ethan finally broke the silence. "If you keep crying like this, you’re going to wear yourself out. Who will take care of your mom then?"

His calm voice cut through the haze of anxiety, and Ivy stopped crying, though her heart was still racing.

She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from her bag, fumbling with them in a daze. Lighting one, she took a long drag, the smoke curling up into the air before dissipating. For a moment, it felt like a small release.

Ethan watched her, a frown creasing his forehead. He reached for one of the water bottles, holding it beneath her cigarette to catch the ash falling from it.

Finally, Ivy murmured, "You should go home, Mr. Clark. I’ll be fine on my own."

As she snuffed out the cigarette in the water, she met his gaze, her eyes filled with defiance. “We just met today. You don’t have to do this.”

Ethan tilted his head slightly, his voice steady, "I believe we're going to get married someday."

Ivy blinked, the absurdity of the statement cutting through her distress. "What?!" she exclaimed, half-laughing, half-crying.

But in that moment of chaos, she realized something. Maybe, just maybe, having someone like Ethan around wouldn’t be so terrible after all. Even if their first date had been interrupted in the worst way possible.

Chapter 3 The Marriage Certificate

A loud clap of thunder shattered the silence of the hospital night, and the rain began to patter softly against the windows.

Ivy Gonzalez stood frozen, unsure of how to respond to Ethan Clark. But when she saw the seriousness painted across his face, she knew he wasn’t kidding.

Just then, a doctor emerged, calling out for Grace Peterson's family. Ivy snapped back to reality and hurried over.

“The patient is in critical condition and needs heart surgery,” the doctor said.

Ivy’s mind went blank as she nodded mechanically.

"The cost for the surgery will be around $30,000; be prepared," he continued.

The moment those numbers hit her, Ivy’s heart dropped. Where on earth was she going to get that kind of money?

Standing against the wall, she frantically scoured her contacts, hoping to find someone who could lend her some cash. She went through her list, reaching out to anyone who might help, but to no avail.

Her mother’s gambling problems were well-known, and those who once might have lent a hand now seemed to want to run the other way.

Despair washed over her as she leaned against the wall, her eyes darting around the room until they landed on Ethan again. Suddenly, a thought struck her like a lifebuoy thrown into turbulent waters. She rushed over to him.

"Miss Lin, I know what you’re about to say, but—" Ethan started, cutting her off.

Ivy nodded, brimming with hope for what he would say next.

“You need to marry me,” he finished.

The words hit her like a bucket of cold water, chilling her heart. But at this point, who else could she turn to for immediate cash?

Ivy stood just a foot away from him, staring silently, her gaze sharp and scrutinizing.

After a moment, Ethan clearly heard her say, “Okay.”

He wanted to say more, but she turned and plopped down in the chair across from him, arms hanging limply at her sides, eyes shut tight, as if she was trying to shut the world out.

Ethan leaned back, propping his chin on his hand, watching her with a subtle smile creeping onto his lips.

As dawn broke, Ivy looked out the window, squinting against the soft sunlight.

The surgery room door swung open, and Grace was wheeled out. Hearing the doctor say the surgery was successful finally eased the weight on Ivy’s heart.

Seeing her mother lying in the hospital bed, Ivy grasped her hand tightly, unwilling to let go.

Ethan stayed by her side all night, and now he had gone out to grab breakfast.

He opened the food containers and turned to Ivy, saying, “Eat something before it gets cold.”

Ivy gently tucked her mother’s hand under the blanket and turned to Ethan.

“We’re going to get our marriage certificate soon,” she declared.

Ethan didn’t look at her, just nodded in acknowledgment.

At the civil registry office, it was eerily quiet, with no other couples in sight.

The staff looked at them curiously, unable to help but ask, “It’s unusual for couples to choose this day for marriage. Are you sure you want to get married today?”

Ivy and Ethan exchanged bewildered glances. “What day is it?” Ivy asked, perplexed.

“It’s Ghost Festival!” the staff replied.

“Oh,” Ivy said, realizing.

Ethan tilted his head and asked, “Should we come back on a different day?”

Ivy didn’t respond to him. Instead, she smiled brightly at the staff, “We don’t mind; it’s just a formality, thank you!”

Seeing their determination, the staff quickly stamped their paperwork.

As they stepped out of the building, both were lost in their thoughts.

Ethan weighed the marriage certificate in his hand, a grin on his face, though his eyes were devoid of joy.

The thought of marrying someone who looked so much like his late girlfriend, Noah Scott, excited him. Three months ago, she had died in a car accident, and they had been ready to tie the knot.

But life had other plans, and since then, sleepless nights had become his routine. Work became his refuge, and he avoided seeing anyone until he stumbled upon Ivy’s photo—she looked just like Noah, and he couldn't let that opportunity slip away.

Ivy shoved the certificate into her bag, still grappling with her new reality.

She adjusted the hem of her shirt; she had worn this outfit for over a day now.

With a shrug, she awkwardly glanced at Ethan, who was practically glowing with triumph.

When she caught his gaze, he quickly wiped the smile off his face, adopting a more serious demeanor. “I’ll take you back to the hospital.”

During Grace's hospital stay, Ivy had been running around like a headless chicken.

Thankfully, her mother was more alert and could speak a bit, though her voice was still faint.

Ivy sat by the bedside, peeling an apple, a gift Ethan had brought on his last visit.

“Why do you like apples so much? They’re such a hassle to eat,” Ivy grumbled as she sliced.

Grace chuckled softly, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

A nurse wheeled in a cart filled with medicine, glancing around the room until she asked, “Is that handsome guy not here today?”

Ivy looked confused, thinking the nurse must be in the wrong room.

Just then, Ethan walked in, and the nurse’s eyes lit up at the sight of him.

He came in with more gifts and apples, placing them on the table.

Ivy watched him intently, biting into her apple with frustration. She still resented Ethan for forcing her into this marriage for money.

Grace, lacking the energy to speak much, waved him over with a smile.

Ethan asked Grace how she was feeling, “Are you feeling any better today?”

Grace nodded with a smile, and upon learning that Ethan hadn’t eaten yet, she urged Ivy to take him out for food.

Now, Ivy couldn’t dare defy her mother, fearing another health scare.

She brushed past Ethan, filling a glass with warm water and setting it within Grace’s reach, then handing her the peeled apple before finally heading downstairs with Ethan.

Grace’s room was on the seventh floor, and the elevator was packed. They stood closely together, the cramped space forcing them into each other.

Ethan’s tall frame made him stand out in the crowded elevator.

He caught a glimpse of Ivy in the mirrored doors, her hair messy, dark circles under her eyes, and fatigue etched all over her face.

“What do you want to eat?” Ivy asked in a hushed tone, trying not to disturb the others.

But her voice was too soft, and Ethan leaned closer, determined to hear her.

The sudden nearness made Ivy’s heart race, and she instinctively tried to create space but found no escape, the scent of his fresh cologne engulfing her senses.

Ivy blinked at him, her neck flushing with warmth. Embarrassed, she stuttered, “Let’s talk about it outside.”

Inside, she screamed at herself, Stay calm!

Chapter 4 Wedding Day Shenanigans

Ethan Clark had Ivy Gonzalez on his arm as they meandered through a narrow alley, finally arriving at a tiny little noodle shop that specialized in beef noodles. It was the kind of place that felt like a hidden gem, if you could ignore the slightly questionable hygiene. The owner greeted them with the enthusiasm of someone who had just won the lottery, gesturing for them to sit down.

The decor screamed vintage—worn tables that glistened from all the elbow grease, and walls covered with faded posters. One particularly eye-catching poster showed a young Ethan standing next to the shop owner, both of them beaming like they were on the cover of a magazine.

Ivy raised an eyebrow, surprised to find this place so close to the hospital. It was small, but a steady stream of customers kept filtering in, forcing Ivy to shift her chair every time someone passed by.

Just then, a mom and her rambunctious five-year-old burst through the door, causing a ruckus. The little boy was a bundle of energy, bouncing on the chairs and zooming down the narrow aisles. His mother, glued to her phone, seemed blissfully unaware of the chaos her son was causing.

Ivy, not particularly fond of kids, rolled her eyes. If the kid were a little more well-behaved, she might’ve found him charming, but this one was a little monster!

Noticing Ivy’s growing impatience, Ethan suggested, “Hey, why don’t you come sit over here? I’ll swap with you.”

Grateful, Ivy jumped at the chance to escape. Just as she settled into her new seat, the owner came out with two steaming bowls of noodles, calling out, “Watch out! Noodles coming through!”

But in the madness of shifting seats, no one noticed the little boy squatting right in the path. The owner tripped, and before anyone could react, the hot noodles went flying everywhere, splattering Ethan’s arm in the process.

“Ah!” Ethan yelped as the scalding broth turned his pale skin a bright red. Ivy glanced over just in time to see his face contort in pain.

With quick reflexes, she grabbed his unscathed hand and yelled, “Let’s get you to the hospital!”

Before Ethan could even process what was happening, Ivy was dragging him out of the shop and toward the emergency room.

Once there, the doctor took one look at Ethan’s arm and said, “Oh boy, this is going to blister up. We need to take care of this right away.”

Ivy winced at the sight of the blisters forming. “If it hurts, just scream. Don’t hold back,” she advised.

Ethan, trying to maintain his dignity, forced a grin. “It’s not that bad,” he lied, even though he felt like his arm was on fire.

The doctor raised an eyebrow, clearly not buying it, before he proceeded to poke at the blisters. Ethan’s scream echoed through the bustling hospital, making Ivy jump before she couldn’t help but laugh.

Once the doctor finished bandaging him up, he turned to Ivy. “Okay, someone needs to pick up the prescription in three days.”

Ivy blinked, confused. “Wait, who’s the family member here?”

The doctor looked at her impatiently. “Aren’t you the family member?”

“Uh, she’s not,” Ethan chimed in, his tone deadpan.

“I’m not either!” Ivy shot back at the same time, both of them sounding like they were in a sitcom.

Ethan’s serious expression softened as he glanced at Ivy. “We are technically married, you know.”

Ivy felt a weird mix of acceptance and annoyance. Sure, they’d signed the papers, but that didn’t mean she was ready to be anyone’s family member just yet. She felt a twinge of guilt seeing his injured arm—after all, it was her idea to switch seats.

Sighing, she accepted the “family member” role, took the prescription slip, and hustled out to pay.

As Ethan watched her go, the doctor, sensing the tension, said, “Having a bit of a spat, huh? No need to hurt yourself over it!”

Ethan chuckled softly, rubbing his arm. “You have no idea.”

Meanwhile, Ivy stood at the back of a long line at the pharmacy, rolling her eyes at the wait. It felt like an eternity, and soon a crowd formed behind her. As she eavesdropped on gossip from the people in front, she couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was staring at her.

Turning her head, she caught Ethan’s gaze from across the room. He was scanning the chaos, a look of amusement on his face.

She felt a rush of emotions—familiar yet confounding. Just a few days ago, she’d asked her friends, including Sarah, why Ethan had chosen to marry her. The answer? “Sometimes, there’s no reason.”

But Ivy refused to believe that. People liked things for reasons! Just like she liked her cat because it was fluffy and her dog because it wagged its tail. How could there be no reason for liking a person?

As Ethan made his way through the bustling crowd toward her, Ivy instinctively tightened her lips.

He arrived, pulling her aside into a quieter corner. Then, without any warning, he revealed a silver ring from his pocket and slipped it onto her left hand.

Ivy’s eyes widened, her mouth half-open in shock. “What are you doing?!” she stammered, trying to pull her hand back, but he held it firmly.

Deep down, she didn’t want to embarrass herself in public, but the situation felt absurd. “Seriously, Ethan?” she thought, exasperated.

Yet, deep inside, she couldn’t help but feel a flutter of something as she stared at the ring, realizing that this day was turning out to be anything but ordinary.

Chapter 5 The Ring

Ivy Gonzalez stood there, patiently waiting for Ethan Clark to finish admiring the ring. It was a little too snug for her taste, but Ethan was insistent that she wear it.

Ivy felt a mix of confusion and warmth as she tightened her grip on her right hand. This ring was a surprise Ethan bought while on a trip with his buddy Noah Scott, originally intended to be a proposal token. But, well, life had other plans, and he didn’t quite get the chance to pop the question.

The ring was adorned with a dazzling sapphire, catching the sunlight and sparkling like it was auditioning for a role in a jewelry commercial. Ivy could feel her heart flutter a bit as she watched Ethan's tousled hair fall into his brows, looking all kinds of charming.

When he suddenly glanced up and their eyes met, Ivy’s heart skipped a beat, and she quickly looked away, feeling flustered. Ethan, completely oblivious to her reaction, mused, “You can’t get married without a ring.”

It felt like ages before he finally let go of her hand. Ivy was in a mild panic; now she had an unexpected ring on her finger, and it felt awkward. She shoved her hand into her pocket, absentmindedly rubbing the ring, trying to get used to its presence.

“What’s up with you? You look all flustered!” Ivy’s friend Sophia chimed in, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

Ivy had always been a bit blunt, quick to shoot off a comment, but inside, she was like a flower blooming, excited and giddy.

As they headed back to Grace Peterson’s hospital room, Ivy suddenly stopped at the door, scrutinizing the ring again, contemplating whether to take it off. But it was stuck. She pulled and twisted, but it wouldn’t budge, and her fingers were starting to turn red. Defeated, she sighed and thought, “Guess it’s here to stay for now.”

When Grace saw Ivy return alone, she frowned. “Where’s Ethan?”

Lately, Grace had been warming up to Ethan—he was charming, polite, and had a way with words. She hoped Ivy would hit it off with him. But seeing Ivy’s cool demeanor only worried her more.

“Just saving my breath!” Ivy teased, feeling drained after a long day and a quick dash to check on Ethan.

Grace’s eyes narrowed, noticing that Ivy’s slender fingers now sported a ring that looked pretty pricey. “What’s with the ring?”

Ivy figured she might as well spill the beans. She held her hand up for her mom to see and said, “Ethan and I got married. This is the ring.”

Grace’s calm demeanor vanished in an instant. Sure, she wanted Ivy to find a good guy, but this felt rushed. She hadn’t even met Ethan’s family! “Are you serious?”

Ivy couldn’t help but smile at her mom’s shocked expression. “Yep! I’m married now, so you can stop worrying about me.”

Just then, her phone buzzed with a message. She stepped outside, glancing at the screen. It was Ethan.

“There’s a nurse coming tomorrow,” his deep voice came through the line.

“Wait, what?” Ivy replied, caught off guard.

“I have to do something. After all, she’s my mother-in-law now,” he chuckled.

That reasoning was a bit shaky yet oddly sweet. Ivy had looked into hiring a nurse before, but it was pricey, and her mom was going to be in the hospital for a while, which meant a hefty bill.

After some back-and-forth, she accepted his offer. “Thanks for everything. I really appreciate it.”

Ethan stared at his phone after she hung up, a storm of thoughts swirling in his mind. He tossed the phone on the couch and reached for a pack of cigarettes he had bought earlier.

He had noticed Ivy smoked that brand, so he figured he’d give it a try. He lit one, took a puff, and immediately started coughing, tears streaming down his face. “How does she do this?” he thought, disgusted, before tossing the cigarette down the toilet. He was determined to get Ivy to quit; that wasn’t the image he had of her.

Ivy returned to the room and pulled out a small notebook from her bag, where she kept track of everything she owed Ethan. Now, she had to add the cost of the nurse to the list.

“Just so you know, there’s a nurse coming tomorrow to help you. I’ve got to get back to work,” Ivy told Grace, who was resting with her eyes closed.

Grace nodded, and Ivy turned off the lights, slipping into the hospital garden. The night air was cooler, with the earthy scent of grass and soil filling her lungs.

She settled on a bench, taking a moment to enjoy a cigarette, the ember glowing like a firefly in the dark. Feeling a bit more relaxed, she stretched her legs out and leaned back, taking in the night sky.

“Mind if I borrow a light?” a voice floated down from above her.

Ivy looked up to see a guy with gold-rimmed glasses. She fished out her lighter and handed it to him. He flicked it on, and the flame danced in the reflection of his glasses, creating a whimsical glow.

After lighting his smoke, the guy, Sophia Bennett, didn’t leave; instead, he plopped down beside her. Ivy noticed he was still in his hospital gown and had an IV drip in his arm.

“Hey, you shouldn’t be smoking if you’re sick,” she warned.

Sophia chuckled, revealing a charming dimple. “You’re the first person to care about me after my surgery.”

Ivy rolled her eyes, flicking the ash from her cigarette. “Nurses and doctors are people too, you know. They care more than I do.”

Sophia laughed again, a genuine sound that warmed the air between them. “Touché.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, gazing at the inky sky, sharing a moment as they let their cigarettes burn down to the very end.

Chapter 6 The Job's Gone, and So Are My Plans

\*Ding—\*

After what felt like the fifth snooze, Ivy Gonzalez finally pried her eyes open. She blinked at the clock, scrambled out of bed, and landed with a thud on the floor. Last night’s sleep had been deep—too deep.

In a frenzy, she ran her fingers through her messy hair, threw on whatever clothes she could find, and bolted out the door without breakfast.

As soon as she stepped into the office, something felt off. The atmosphere was thick with whispered conversations and the sound of frantic typing. Ivy’s heart raced—had word gotten out about her impulsive marriage? She could just imagine the gossip.

She gulped and shuffled to her desk, but before she could settle in, her colleague Lily popped her head over the cubicle.

“Did you hear the company’s shutting down?”

Ivy’s jaw dropped. “What? No way!”

Turns out, Lily had already known. “You didn’t see my message, did you?”

Ivy sheepishly admitted that her phone had been gathering dust lately, and she hadn’t seen anything. The news hit her like a brick. The company had been struggling for a while, but she didn’t think it would come to this.

Ivy had been planning to work hard and save up to pay off her debts to Ethan Clark—now that was all up in smoke. Her mood plummeted.

“What are you going to do?” Ivy asked, trying to mask her own anxiety as she leaned closer to Lily.

Lily shrugged, looking defeated. “My husband wants me to stay home and take care of the kids.”

Lily was only three years older than Ivy, and the thought of her settling into a life of diaper duty was just… disheartening.

“Is that what you want?” Ivy asked cautiously.

“Nope! But what can I do? Someone has to watch the kids, and my parents are sick.”

Ivy felt a pang of sympathy. “Hey, there will be other opportunities. You’ll figure it out.”

But Ivy couldn’t even be a good friend right now; she needed to focus on her own next steps. She started packing her things, tossing them into a bag as she made her way to the lobby.

A group of colleagues invited her to lunch, but she politely declined. She had no time to waste; her mother was waiting for her at home.

As she stepped into the elevator, Ivy noticed a crowd forming at the entrance. It was a typical office building, filled with various companies, and it was rush hour. Outside, the rain was pouring like someone had turned on a giant faucet, forcing everyone to huddle in the lobby.

Stuck with all her stuff and nowhere to go, Ivy stepped back to find a corner to drop her bags. Just then, she bumped into someone, her heel landing right on a polished leather shoe.

“Whoa!”

Before she could even think, the stranger caught her shoulder, steadying her. Ivy felt a sharp sting on her arm where the bag had pressed against her.

Feeling flustered, she turned to apologize, but as she did, the weight of her bag was too much, and it broke open, spilling everything across the floor.

“Oh man, sorry!” she exclaimed, crouching down to gather her things.

The stranger joined her, picking up pens and notebooks with surprising grace.

“Are you moving or just working?” he quipped, his voice oddly familiar.

Ivy looked up and met the gaze of Ethan Clark—those captivating hazel eyes were staring right back at her. He had come here for a meeting, but now here they were, staring at each other on the floor.

He handed her the last pen and noticed the ring on her finger. Ivy felt a mixture of pride and guilt wash over her.

“Thanks!” she said, slipping it into her bag.

They stood awkwardly near the entrance, both waiting for the rain to let up. The wind whipped droplets into their faces, and Ivy instinctively stepped back, but the crowd pressed closer.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Ethan’s arm wrapped in a bandage. “Your hand—how’s it healing?”

He glanced at her, then down at his injury. “It’s... okay, I guess.”

She felt a strange pang of empathy, watching his expression soften for a moment. “You should definitely go back for a check-up.”

He smirked at her concern. “Yeah, yeah, I will.”

Just then, a sleek black car pulled up, and the driver rushed out, holding an umbrella to shield them from the rain.

“Let’s go home,” Ethan said casually.

Ivy blinked, confused. “What? Home? What do you mean?”

Ethan chuckled, taking her hand and guiding her to the car. “We’re married, remember? Where else would we go?”

“Married? Pfft, it was just a deal!” she shot back, her mind racing.

Ethan’s expression darkened at the word “deal.” The driver, Jason, shot her a stunned look through the rearview mirror.

Ivy didn’t have time to play along with Ethan’s little marriage game right now; she was far too busy stressing about her job situation.

As they settled into the car, Ivy couldn’t help but feel a sense of uncertainty creeping in. What was she going to do next?

Chapter 7 A Trip to Ethan’s Place

Ivy Gonzalez stared out the window, feeling worse than the dreary weather outside. The orange streetlights flickered past her face like a strobe light, and she absentmindedly brushed her fingers over her cheek. Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in her head. Why not take advantage of the situation?

A mischievous grin spread across her face, revealing a dazzling smile that could light up a room. Her eyes sparkled as she turned to Ethan Clark, who was driving.

“What’s with that look? It’s kinda creepy,” Ethan said, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, trying to create some space between him and the intense gaze of Ivy.

Ivy’s smile faltered for just a moment, and she chuckled awkwardly, “Can I ask you a favor?” Her voice was soft and sweet, and her long lashes fluttered like butterfly wings.

Ethan found himself captivated; she looked like a little fairy. He gulped, his eyes darting left and right, before nodding mechanically.

With a swift motion, Ivy pulled out a freshly printed resume from her bag—it was still warm! Beaming, she handed it to him.

“Mr. Xu, this is my resume. Is there any chance I could get an interview? I’ve been a huge fan of your company for ages and would really love to be part of it…”

Ethan was momentarily speechless, his mind racing. He couldn’t help but chuckle quietly as he flipped through her resume. The first page had a photo of her looking fresh-faced and just out of college.

Ivy watched him carefully, her excitement wavering as she noticed his serious expression. “I’m not trying to pull strings here,” she hurried to explain, “It’s just that our… relationship might make things complicated. But if you’re okay with it, I’d really love a shot at an interview…”

Her confidence was slipping, and she couldn’t help but feel nervous about whether she’d even get the chance.

Ethan was well aware of her qualifications; he had been keeping tabs on her since he first saw her. He was surprised she would approach him about working at his company, considering she usually avoided getting too close.

Their driver, Jason Brooks, was utterly bewildered. Were they really married? Was this how couples acted? It was all very bizarre!

Ethan chuckled, crumpling her resume slightly in his hands. “Well, I guess it all comes down to your skills.”

As they were talking, their car pulled up to Ethan’s house. Ivy peered out the window, taking in the surroundings. The house was isolated, with no other buildings in sight, which felt eerie to her. The bushes were trimmed neatly, looking like they were straight out of a gardening magazine. She hesitated to step outside.

To be honest, Ethan was just a familiar face to her—definitely more than a stranger, but still potentially her boss.

Ethan swung his long legs out of the car and strolled over to Ivy’s window, where she was still peering out, her lashes fluttering like she was caught in some fairy tale.

Then, without warning, he leaned in closer, their faces so close she could feel the warmth of his breath. Ivy jumped back in shock, accidentally banging her chin against the window. “Ouch! You scared me!” she exclaimed, massaging her chin.

Ethan laughed, teasing her about her jumpiness.

Ivy followed him out, still on high alert. “Why do rich people always live in such empty places?” she muttered to herself, glancing around at the quiet surroundings. There wasn't even a hint of life around, just silence.

Then, out of nowhere, a cat leaped from the bushes with a startled “meow.” Ivy’s face went pale; she had a lifelong fear of cats and dogs.

“Can we maybe check out your place another time? I mean, we have plenty of time, right?” she suggested, trying to back out of the situation.

But Ethan wasn’t having any of that! He had plans, and he wasn’t about to let her escape.

With a swift motion, he grabbed her hand and led her to the entrance. She felt like she had no choice but to follow.

The grand door loomed ahead, closed tight, and Ivy couldn’t help but comment, “You’d think you’d at least leave the lights on, right?”

They reached the door, and Ethan paused, gesturing for Ivy to open it. She hesitated, her heart racing at the thought of what might be lurking inside. Taking a deep breath, she slowly pushed the door open.

Light flooded the room, and Ivy squinted against the brightness. It was like stepping into a magical fairy world, filled with flowers everywhere. The bright, shiny tiles looked like mirrors, and the spacious living room connected to an enchanting backyard. Ivy was awestruck; she’d never been treated so specially before.

Ethan took her hand gently and led her further inside. The floor was covered in petals, creating a beautiful path that danced beneath her feet with every step.

Out of nowhere, Ethan produced a flowing veil, waving it like it was a scene straight out of a movie. He placed it atop Ivy’s head, transforming her into a bride right before her eyes.

They locked gazes, and for a moment, the world around them faded away. Ethan’s fingers caressed her face, his eyes soft and full of unspoken affection.

Everything felt surreal, as if it were a dream he’d long imagined. Ivy, feeling a flutter in her heart, squeezed his hand back, a smile blooming on her lips.

Maybe, just maybe, she had stumbled upon love at first sight. Little did she know, this intimate moment was also Ethan’s way of healing old wounds. It was a bittersweet memory wrapped in joy, and in that moment, both of them felt the stirrings of something magical—like the calm before a storm, pulling them deeper into this unfolding tale.

Chapter 8 Getting Ready for the Interview

Ivy Gonzalez was lost in thought, mentally preparing for her big interview, when Ethan Clark suddenly called out to Jason Brooks, his tone as cold as a winter's day. “Take Miss Lin back to the hospital.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. What kind of mood swing is this? One minute Ethan is warm and friendly, and the next, he’s a total ice cube! Wasn’t he supposed to take her home?

Jason, ever the polite assistant, gestured for her to follow him. “Miss Lin, this way, please.”

Ivy was utterly baffled. She didn’t want to stick around and find out what Ethan's deal was, so she strode out with purpose. “Is your boss always like this?” she asked, trying to make conversation.

Jason’s focus remained glued to the road as he replied, “We never pry into the boss’s personal affairs.”

Ugh, Ivy thought. He's definitely been sneaking glances at me, but now he’s playing the mysterious stranger card. Whatever!

After they arrived, Ivy realized she was still wearing her veil from the previous event. She yanked it off and stuffed it into her bag before heading to Grace Peterson's hospital room. Seeing her sleeping mother eased Ivy’s worries. Grace had lost so much weight during her illness, and as Ivy tucked her mother’s blanket in, she felt a pang of concern.

With a laptop in hand, Ivy made her way to the garden downstairs. Setting it on a bench, she squatted on the grass, ready to submit her application to Ethan’s company. But the job requirements were intense—this gaming company was booming, and Ethan was touted as the industry's youngest elite entrepreneur.

Ivy was just a game artist right now, mostly handling the indoor scene details. She sighed, realizing there was still a mountain of skills to learn.

Suddenly, a tall figure blocked her view. Ivy looked up to see Sophia Bennett peering at her screen. “You could make some noise; you’re creeping me out over here,” she teased.

Sophia glanced down at her, his brows furrowing in concern. “It’s pretty dark; that’s not good for your eyes.”

Ivy shoved him playfully. “If you didn’t lurk around like a shadow, I wouldn’t be bothered.”

He obediently sat on a nearby bench, secretly thrilled to have spotted Ivy. He had been pacing the garden all day, afraid he might miss her, and now that she was here, he couldn’t help but feel giddy.

As Ivy focused on her laptop, Sophia couldn’t help but admire her concentration. “Didn’t you smoke today?” Ivy asked casually.

“Being sick means no smoking,” Sophia replied with a hint of a smile.

Ivy didn’t really care about his smoking habits; she just wanted to fill the silence. She stood up, looking somewhat weighed down with thoughts. “I’m heading out. You should get some rest too!”

Sophia stood up as well, towering over her. “Good luck with your interview.”

“Thanks!” Ivy said, stepping past him quickly.

Once she was gone, Sophia fished out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, chuckling to himself in the quiet night. “What a confusing girl,” he mused.

The next day, Ivy woke up early, putting on just enough makeup to look presentable. The dark circles under her eyes were worse than ever, so she added some concealer, hoping no one would notice. She picked a sharp-looking blazer and swapped her usual shoes for some snazzy heels. After a quick mirror check, she felt ready to conquer the world.

But as soon as she stepped outside, the sky opened up, and a light drizzle turned into a downpour. Determined not to let it ruin her mood, Ivy hopped into her car, relieved she had left early.

Traffic was a nightmare, and she silently thanked her lucky stars for her early start. But soon, the rain intensified, turning the roads into rivers.

Once she hit the overpass, a fellow driver shouted, “Don’t go forward! There’s flooding up ahead!”

Doubtful, Ivy rolled down her window and looked outside, only to see cars submerged, with just their roofs peeking out above the rising water level. Panic set in—she couldn’t just sit there, but if she detoured now, she’d definitely miss her interview.

After a moment of hesitation, she decided to take a longer route. Her heart raced as she sped through the rain-soaked streets. But when she finally reached Ethan’s office, her heart sank—she was late.

Ivy took a breath, fixed her frizzy hair, and approached the front desk. “Hi, I’m Ivy Gonzalez. I have an interview scheduled.”

The receptionist looked her over, noting her disheveled appearance. “Just a moment,” she said, her tone icy.

After a few moments, she added, “You’ve missed your interview time.”

Ivy’s stomach twisted. “Could you please let the interviewer know? It’s pouring out there, and I’m really sorry about the delay.”

With a reluctant nod, the receptionist agreed. Ivy sank into a chair in the waiting area, her nerves spiking. Around her, other candidates looked equally tense, and she couldn’t help but feel the pressure building.

“Ivy Gonzalez?” a voice called out.

“That’s me!” she replied, forcing a smile.

The interviewer glanced over her resume, pausing at the marital status section. “You’re married? At such a young age?”

Caught off guard, Ivy remembered she had just gotten her marriage certificate. “Uh, yeah, I just got married!”

The interviewer raised an eyebrow, clearly surprised. “Okay, we’ll be in touch,” he said, dismissing her.

As Ivy exited, her heart sank. The chances didn’t look good. She leaned against the wall, waiting for the elevator, her spirits low.

When the doors opened, she stepped inside without looking up, only to be startled by Ethan, who had been watching her with amusement.

He stood there, smirking, clearly enjoying her downcast expression.

Ivy shot him a glare, still annoyed from the previous night. Meanwhile, his secretary, James, looked puzzled, thinking he had offended Ivy somehow.

Crossing her arms, Ivy shot daggers at Ethan, who was enjoying the moment far too much.

When the elevator reached the ground floor, Ivy turned on her heel and headed for the exit, Ethan watching her until she disappeared around a corner.

Chapter 9 The Deal

The rain had stopped, and the sun was shining brightly.

Ivy Gonzalez was driving her little car, a gift from her dad, toward the hospital. After parking on the side of the road, she remembered that her mom loved the pastries from the bakery on the next street, so she decided to stroll over and pick some up.

As she passed by a shop, she noticed the door was shut tight. It was a glass door, but she couldn’t see anything inside. Curious, she peered in and glanced down at a job listing posted by the entrance that mentioned they were hiring part-time help.

Just as she was about to leave, the door swung open. A stunning woman with a sharp jawline and dark red hair stepped out quickly, blocking Ivy's path.

"Are you looking for a job?" the woman asked.

Ivy raised an eyebrow, feeling a bit wary of this stranger. The woman was definitely a looker.

"No, just bored and checking things out," Ivy replied, trying to sidestep her.

The woman flashed a sweet smile. "Come in! We have a great atmosphere here, and our clientele is made up of high-income folks."

Ivy started to realize this was not just any ordinary job offer. "I don’t have money to spend; I’m not your target customer."

The woman waved off her concerns and half-pulled Ivy inside.

Once inside, Ivy was struck by the luxurious decor. The plush sofas looked like they would be incredibly comfortable to sink into. It was still early in the day, and only a few staff members were setting things up at the counter. They glanced at Ivy as she walked in but quickly returned to their work.

The woman led her on a brief tour, explaining, “This is an upscale lounge. Our boss loves to collect interesting drinks.” She turned to Ivy with a glint in her eye. “Working here, you could earn about $1,000 a month.”

Ivy's ears perked up at the mention of money, especially since she was in dire need of cash. However, her thoughts were racing with worries about whether she could handle this kind of job.

Noticing Ivy’s hesitation, the woman casually handed her a business card. “If you decide to give it a shot, just give me a call.”

On her way home, Ivy mulled over the conversation. Deep down, she didn’t want to take a job like that; it wouldn't help her career in the long run. But with her mom’s medical bills piling up, she felt the pressure. Every day in the hospital brought a new stack of bills that made her head spin.

When Ivy finally arrived at the hospital, her mom, Grace Peterson, greeted her cheerfully. “Evan Garcia just stopped by!”

Ivy couldn’t help but feel a bit annoyed. Evan was her new husband, and while he had been helping out, she didn’t want to owe him anything more. “Oh, did he leave already?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

Grace chuckled, “Nope, he went to pay the bills.”

Ivy sighed. “Mom, please don’t let him cover any more of the costs! It makes it awkward between us. We’re not equals in this relationship!”

Grace blinked in surprise. “Is it really that serious? You just got married! Why draw a line?”

Ivy’s frustration bubbled up, and she smiled tightly. “Do you think this is a normal marriage? If it were...”

She trailed off, not wanting to say too much and upset her mom. Just then, she heard footsteps approaching and turned to find Evan walking in. The mood in the room shifted instantly, and Ivy felt a wave of awkwardness wash over her.

Evan glanced between the two of them, sensing the tension. He awkwardly placed the receipt on the table and stood by, unsure of what to do next.

Ivy took that moment to stand up and said, “We need to talk.”

The two of them moved to a stairwell, where Ivy opened a window and fished out a cigarette from her pocket. She took a light puff, feeling the weight of her thoughts pressing down on her. Turning to Evan, she said, “Don’t go paying for my mom’s treatment anymore. This marriage might be something you’re doing on a whim, but I’m getting money out of it too. You don’t owe me anything.”

Evan’s expression shifted from confusion to surprise as he looked at her. He stepped closer, took the cigarette from her fingers, and raised an eyebrow. “Is this really that appealing to you?”

Ivy lunged to snatch it back, but he held it just out of her reach. “Come on, give it back!” she huffed.

With a smirk, Evan tossed the cigarette straight into the trash can, leaving Ivy fuming.

“Quit smoking,” he said, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Ivy couldn’t help but crack a smile. “And who made you the boss of me?”

Evan’s gaze softened for a moment, and Ivy felt a chill run down her spine. “Quit smoking, and I’ll get you a job in my company.”

Ivy’s eyes widened in shock. That wasn’t the offer she expected. She stared at him, and he held her gaze steadily, stepping even closer.

After a moment, Ivy broke eye contact and looked down at her shoes, her heart racing. Why was he so intimidating?

Finally, she murmured, “You must feel pretty proud of yourself, controlling everyone’s lives like this.”

Chapter 10 New Job

Ivy Gonzalez was totally baffled by Ethan Clark's sudden demand for her to quit smoking. Seriously, who does that? It was almost as if he thought he could wave a magic wand and change her life overnight. Sure, she’d heard the rumors about how intense he was at work—like, the dude was practically a workaholic. He had this reputation for being super strict with his employees, and the thought of leveraging his connections to snag a job seemed utterly impossible.

Tossing and turning in bed, Ivy couldn't shake off the nagging thought about his ridiculous request. Was this some twisted crush of his, or just a power trip? Who knew. When morning rolled around, her brain was still in a fog. She wrestled with the idea of playing nice and just accepting his so-called "advice" as a way to keep her job. But come on, how lame would that be?

After a good think, Ivy finally slammed her fingers down on her phone, typing out a bold response: "I don’t accept."

Meanwhile, Ethan Clark was chillin’ in his office, waiting for HR to show up when his phone buzzed. Glancing at the screen, he saw Ivy's message and couldn’t help but smirk. Well, look at her being all feisty.

On the other hand, Ivy tossed her phone aside, not daring to look at it again. She peered out the window at the towering evergreens swaying in the breeze and let out a sigh. Was it really worth it to cling to her pride? Did she really want to keep her life so complicated when Ethan was clearly willing to help her out? But no, she couldn’t just roll over and let him dictate her lifestyle.

As she searched her pockets, hoping to find a cigarette to calm her nerves, she instead stumbled upon a business card. The memory of that gorgeous girl from the bar popped into her mind. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to reach out. After all, what was worse than living paycheck to paycheck?

When Ivy arrived at the bar, the place was buzzing with activity. The roar of luxury cars outside reminded her of her beat-up old clunker. She couldn’t help but chuckle, thinking she’d probably only get enough money from selling it to buy a tire for those fancy wheels.

Emma Ward, the dazzling bartender from that night, welcomed her with open arms, throwing an arm around her shoulder. Ivy felt a little overwhelmed by her enthusiasm but went with it, trying to keep her awkward smile in check as they headed inside.

They walked into a dimly lit room furnished with a cozy sofa and a desk. On the sofa, a guy with shaggy hair was strumming a guitar. Emma knocked on the door a few times, and the guy looked up.

“Michael Wood, this is our new singer—Ivy Gonzalez,” Emma introduced, and Ivy nodded, feeling her nerves flare as Michael simply gave a curt nod before diving back into his guitar.

They both settled into opposite corners of the sofa in a silence that felt thicker than the air. Ivy’s heart raced with anxiety. She’d only ever sung karaoke for fun; the thought of performing in front of a crowd felt like jumping off a cliff.

“First time on stage?” Michael asked, catching her off guard.

Is it that obvious? Ivy blinked, caught off guard. She managed a sheepish laugh. “Nah, I've sung before… just not in this kind of setting. It’s my first day, you know?”

Michael took a sip of his drink and offered some words of encouragement, “No pressure; no one’s here to actually listen anyway.”

Just as Ivy was about to respond, Emma stood up, guitar in hand. “Alright, let’s hit the stage!”

Ivy followed behind Michael, each step feeling heavier than the last. She kept muttering to herself, "Don’t chicken out!"

When they stepped onto the stage, she was met with a sea of faces. Her heart dropped as she realized how many people were there—all dressed to the nines. It was like stepping into a fashion magazine.

But just as Michael said, most people were too busy socializing, sipping their drinks, and scrolling through their phones to pay her much attention. A few even lifted their phones up to snap a pic, and Ivy couldn’t help but feel like a deer caught in headlights.

As the ethereal sound of the guitar filled the air, Ivy took a deep breath and began to sing. Her voice trembled a bit, but she tried to ride the rhythm of the music.

People gradually turned their heads toward her, noticing the girl with the sleeveless dress and porcelain skin under the spotlight. There were definitely some snaps being taken, and she felt a mix of embarrassment and thrill.

From the bar, a girl named Lila crossed her arms and watched Ivy with keen interest, noting her shaky performance.

“Did she just go off-key?” a waitress whispered to Emma.

Emma, however, only chuckled, “Who cares? She’s got the looks!”

Once Ivy stepped off stage, her face was flushed with embarrassment, knowing she hadn’t nailed it. She approached Emma, ready to apologize, but Emma beat her to it, showering her with compliments about her performance.

“You were great! Solid stage presence, too!”

Ivy felt a pang of guilt accepting the praise, but hey, it was a start, right?

Michael, who had been eavesdropping, couldn’t believe Emma’s words. This was not the Emma he knew! After Ivy left the room, he waltzed over to Emma, drink in hand, and sat down.

“Seriously? Partnering with her feels like a waste of my talent,” he said, shaking his head.

Michael was a perfectionist when it came to music. He played multiple instruments and practiced tirelessly. He didn’t expect Ivy to be a superstar, but he at least hoped she could stay on pitch!

Emma smirked at him, “Oh, come on! If she’s not great, she’ll just learn. Give her a chance!”

Michael sighed, knowing he was in for a lot of work with Ivy around.

By the time Ivy got home, it was way past midnight. Exhausted from the night, she dropped onto her couch, ready to crash.

Suddenly, a loud banging at the door jolted her awake.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Ivy’s heart raced. Who could that be?

Peeking through the peephole, she saw a shadow standing outside, and to her horror, the figure was looking back at her!

Panic set in, and she stumbled back. Who were they? What did they want?