BROWN EYES

Part One

“Tuesday Run”

The basketball floated against the fading California sky before catching the front rim and bouncing hard into the air.

“Rebound!”

Marcel Vincent moved before anyone else reacted.

Sneakers scraped across cracked concrete as he exploded upward, pulling the ball down firmly against his chest. Sweat rolled from his temples while bodies collided around him under the court lights beginning to hum awake overhead.

“Push it, Marcel!”

He turned quickly, scanning the floor with the calm precision he brought to everything in life. One sharp bounce pass split two defenders perfectly.

Derrick caught it in stride and laid it in clean off the glass.

“Game!”

The park erupted with noise.

A few men cursed. Others laughed. Someone tossed a shirt over his shoulder while another player bent over with hands on his knees trying to catch his breath.

Marcel simply nodded once and walked toward the sideline.

Tuesday nights had become sacred.

For two hours every Tuesday and Thursday evening, the noise in his head quieted. No court paperwork. No arguments. No ignored text messages asking to see his son. No calculations about overtime shifts and attorney fees. Just movement. Sweat. Brotherhood. Structure.

Out there, life made sense again.

The men gathered around a pair of coolers near the benches while music played softly from a nearby speaker. The scent of cut grass and asphalt lingered in the cooling evening air.

Derrick twisted open a sports drink and pointed toward Marcel.

“You finally decided to show up tonight.”

Marcel smirked faintly. “I been here.”

“Nah,” Luis laughed. “Your body been here. Your mind still somewhere arguing through text messages.”

A few of the guys laughed knowingly.

Marcel shook his head and took a long drink of water.

“Man works all them shutdown hours at the plant just to hand the money to attorneys,” Luis continued.

“Cheaper than marriage counseling,” Derrick replied.

More laughter.

Marcel leaned back against the fence quietly, letting their voices drift around him. These men understood enough not to push too hard. Most of them carried something heavy themselves. Divorces. Child support. Layoffs. Aging parents. Life had a way of humbling everybody eventually.

Terrence sat beside Marcel and tossed him a towel.

“You see Andrew this weekend?”

The question settled heavier than the others.

Marcel wiped his face slowly before answering.

“Supposed to.”

Terrence nodded once. No follow-up questions.

That was respect.

Across the court, teenagers had already started another game under the lights. The rhythm of bouncing basketballs echoed through the park while people walked laps around the trail nearby.

For a moment, Marcel simply sat there listening to life continue around him.

And for the first time all day, his chest didn’t feel tight.

Saturday morning arrived quietly.

Marcel stood in his kitchen making chocolate chip pancakes while his three-year-old son sat cross-legged on the counter wearing oversized superhero pajamas.

Andrew smiled with his entire face when he laughed. Marcel noticed that every time.

“Daddy, make Mickey Mouse one!”

“That looked like a turtle last time.”

Andrew burst into laughter.

Marcel smiled despite himself.

Moments like these repaired parts of him no one else could reach.

He carried Andrew into the living room later that morning after an exaggerated wrestling match neither of them intended to end. The little boy wrapped both arms around his father’s neck while cartoons played softly in the background.

“You strong, Daddy.”

Marcel kissed the side of his son’s head.

“I gotta be.”

The words slipped out before he thought about them.

Andrew eventually fell asleep against his chest sometime after noon, tiny fingers curled against Marcel’s shirt.

Marcel stared ahead quietly.

He had once imagined a different life by now.

A home filled with peace.
Weekend family trips.
Marriage.
Stability.

Instead, life had become schedules, tension, negotiations, and emotional exhaustion. He spent so much energy protecting his peace now that he barely remembered what it felt like to simply live freely.

But Andrew was worth every fight.

Every single one.

Tuesday evening returned.

The court lights buzzed overhead while another close game unfolded.

Marcel felt lighter this time. Not happy exactly. But steadier.

The ball was tipped loose near half court suddenly.

“Save it!”

Marcel sprinted instinctively.

The basketball bounced hard toward the sideline near the walking path. He lunged after it, catching it just before it rolled out of bounds.

But his momentum kept carrying him forward.

A woman walking near the court looked up suddenly.

Marcel planted hard, shoes skidding loudly against concrete as he reached out instinctively to stop himself from crashing into her.

His hand caught her waist gently while the other steadied her arm.

For a brief second, everything paused.

Her eyes met his immediately.

Brown. Deep brown. Warm enough to stop thought completely.

“You alright, Brown Eyes?” Marcel asked softly, still catching his breath.

The woman blinked once in surprise.

Then laughed.

Not irritated.
Not uncomfortable.
Just genuinely amused.

And something about that laugh reached him before logic could.

“I think so,” she said.

Marcel stepped back carefully, suddenly aware of how close they were standing.

“My bad. Ball got away from me.”

She glanced toward the court where the other men were already yelling jokes in his direction.

“I figured that part out.”

Marcel laughed quietly under his breath.

Up close, she carried herself with a kind of calm confidence he hadn’t encountered in a long time. No performance. No attitude. Just presence.

“I’m Marcel.”

“Naomi.”

Their hands met briefly.

Simple.
Normal.

Yet neither moved immediately afterward.

“Well,” she smiled slightly, “try not to tackle any more strangers tonight.”

“No promises.”

She laughed again before continuing down the walking path.

Marcel watched her go for half a second too long.

Behind him, Luis yelled loudly from the court.

“Ohhhhhh, there he is!”

The men burst into laughter.

Marcel shook his head, embarrassed despite himself, but when he turned back toward the game—

he was smiling.

And for the first time in a very long time...

it came naturally.