

## Dialogue:

With a sigh, Amir plummeted into the threadbare armchair, thrust a doona over his neck and opened the book, coughing at the dust that glistened like cosmic freckles in the sun's crimson rays. His eyes are set on every phrase, every word, every syllable that bounds out of his mind as quickly as it came.

Emily nudged his book aside with deliberate care, her eyebrows arching expectantly. "Scared of a little reading marathon, are you? Twenty-four hours isn't that long when you're lost in another realm."

Amir's fingers drummed against the chair's dilapidated edge. "If protecting my sanity counts as fear, then yes."

He exhaled slowly, avoiding her gaze. "Not everyone finds escape in books."

"The fundraiser needs reliable people," she persisted, sliding the charity brochure closer. "Since when did you become the type to back away from helping others?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "That's unfair and you know it."

Emily's expression softened slightly. "What's really going on? This isn't like you."

"Last year's literature festival," he murmured, voice barely audible. "Twelve hours of reading, then Dad's call about Mum... and the crash."

Emily reached across, stilling his restless fingers. "I'm sorry," She stated quickly, feeling her eyes darting from left to right as if watching a tennis game. Sweat pearled on her forehead, rolling down and plonking in a syncopated rhythm onto the book's claret cover. "I just didn't realize \_"

"How could you?" Amir straightened his shoulders, pushing the memory aside with a sharp breath. "Some books leave marks that never quite fade."