

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 11: Football 101

[1,255 words]

Later that morning, back in the common room of Smith Hall, the boys had gathered around the ancient tube television that buzzed faintly in the corner. Tyrel stood proudly with the remote like it was a sword of destiny and flipped through channels until he landed on a sports highlight reel.

The screen exploded into action - hulking men in tight uniforms crashing into each other like angry rhinos, a marching band blaring in the background, and slow-mo replays of a helmeted player diving dramatically into the end zone.

“Yo,” Tyrel said, pointing at the screen like Moses revealing the Ten Commandments. “Y’all know football?”

“You mean... *this* football?” Bharath asked, gesturing vaguely toward Bobby Dodd Stadium, which loomed across the street like a Roman colosseum made of concrete and bad acoustics.

“Yeah,” Tyrel said, grinning. “Not that soccer ballet y’all play back home. This is real football.”

Ravi squinted at the screen, confused. “Wait... I thought this *was* rugby.”

“This is football,” Tyrel declared, spreading his arms like a preacher. “The *real* kind. Pads. Helmets. Passion. Pain.”

“What’s with the gear?” Jorge asked, watching a slow-motion replay of a guy getting flattened like a piñata. “They look like crash test dummies.”

Tyrel chuckled. “That’s the point, man. This is strategy and violence with cheerleaders and marching bands. It’s war with school colors.”

“Is it... popular?” Bharath asked, genuinely confused.

Tyrel blinked. “Is it *popular*?”

The room went silent for a beat. Tyrel looked at Bharath like he’d just asked if water was optional.

"This is *America*, dawg," Tyrel said solemnly. "On Saturdays? Football is *religion*. Down here in the South? It's the gospel, communion, and rapture all rolled into one."

"Georgia Tech has a team?" Ravi asked.

"Hell yeah we do," Tyrel said proudly, puffing up. "We ain't Alabama or Florida State, but we hold our own. This year's gonna be fire. Joe Hamilton is our quarterback. That man's fast, smart, throws like a damn rocket. If anyone can take us back to glory, it's him."

"Glory?" Jorge said skeptically. "You mean winning?"

"*Beating UGA*," Tyrel said, with the weight of centuries in his voice.

"UGA?" Bharath asked.

"University of Georgia," Tyrel said with a sneer. "Athens. Our mortal enemies. The Bulldogs. We hate them. They hate us. If you don't feel deep irrational hatred toward anything red and slobbery by the end of the semester, you're doing it wrong."

Ravi leaned over to Bharath and whispered, "I thought this school was all algorithms and robot competitions."

Tyrel heard him. "It *is*. Monday to Friday, it's all labs and lectures and nerddom. But come Saturday? We're warriors in gold and white."

"Do students actually *go* to the games?" Jorge asked.

Tyrel laughed. "Are you kidding? Everyone's there. Frats, nerds, alumni, babies in bee costumes - hell, even the band kids walk around like they own the place."

Bharath tilted his head. "And what exactly do we do?"

"Yell," Tyrel said immediately.

"That's it?"

"Oh no, my sweet FOB prince," Tyrel said, clapping a hand on Bharath's shoulder. "You *scream*. You chant. You wave terrible towels. You learn songs you never knew existed. You lose your voice, your dignity, and possibly your shoes by halftime."

"And this is fun?" Ravi asked, raising an eyebrow.

"This is *college*," Tyrel said, like it explained everything.

Ravi folded his arms. "Still looks like armored rugby to me."

“You’ll learn,” Tyrel promised. “Come game day, I’ll take y’all. We’ll tailgate. I’ll get you barbecue. Teach you how to boo properly.”

“You’re going to teach us... how to scream and eat?” Bharath asked.

“Exactly. It’s an art form.”

“Are there rules?” Jorge asked.

“Yes,” Tyrel said seriously. “Rule one: always boo the refs. Rule two: if the other team fumbles, you scream ‘FUMBLEEEEE!’ as if your life depends on it. Rule three: you’re not allowed to say ‘football is confusing’ out loud once you’re inside the stadium. They’ll hear you. They’ll sense it.”

“Who will?” Bharath asked.

“The alumni. They’re everywhere.”

There was a beat of silence as another player on-screen got launched into the turf.

“Is that guy okay?” Jorge asked.

“No,” Tyrel said proudly. “But he got the first down.”

Ravi sighed. “This is insane.”

Tyrel grinned. “This is the USA. USA. USA. USA”

Then louder, “Shout it with me boys! USA! USA! USA!”

Suddenly as though there were some magical harmony in the dorm, shouts of “USA” heralded from every corner of the building. It appeared as if some mystical voice that existed in the very walls of Smith came to life with that war cry.

“Patriotic, aren’t they”, whispered Ravi to a confused Jorge and Bharath.

Later as the morning sunlight filled the Smith Hall common room, and the screen blared with crowd noise and helmets crashing, the three international students stared at the screen - part horrified, part fascinated.

They didn’t understand it yet. But somehow, Tyrel knew they’d be screaming by midseason. He would make it his mission to convert these football ignoramus into raging Ramblin Reck fans.

The rest of the day unfolded like a fast-forward button pressed on a brand-new life.

After their first meal of protein-and-Tabasco salvation, the boys gathered in the Smith Hall lounge with a flurry of printouts, course guides, and fluorescent highlighters.

Ravi spread his schedule out like a map of the known universe. "Okay, so CS 1331 is MWF at 10 a.m. Recitation on Thursdays. That one's locked in."

Jorge highlighted his econ elective. "I somehow landed in Microeconomics at 8 a.m. on Mondays. Pray for me."

Bharath circled Discrete Math with a thick red line. "This one has a waitlist. Should I panic?"

Tyrel walked in wearing sunglasses and a grin. "If you ain't got your books yet, *that's* what you should be panicking about."

The Georgia Tech bookstore was a zoo.

Students crammed into every aisle, balancing piles of textbooks with names like *Data Structures in Java*, *Discrete Math with Applications*, and *Modern Physics: Concepts and Connections*. The air smelled of new paper, coffee breath, and panic.

Tyrel led the charge. "Listen. Rule one of college economics - *don't* buy new books."

"But they look so - " Bharath started, reaching for a shiny hardback.

"Put that down unless you want to spend your tuition on page gloss," Tyrel snapped, batting his hand away.

"Used books are in the back," Jorge translated.

They maneuvered through the labyrinth of shelves and finally found the smaller, less glamorous section: bent covers, scribbled margins, the occasional highlighted mess.

Perfect.

Jorge grabbed a Java textbook with only mild water damage.

Ravi found one with a doodle of Batman swinging across the recursion tree diagram.

Bharath unearthed *Discrete Math* with all the answers faintly penciled in. He hesitated - then hugged it like treasure.

Tyrel gave him a thumbs up. "Now *that's* a win."

But first they needed money - they were yet to open a bank account. Hiding their treasures in a corner where they wouldn't be discovered, the four of them entered the

SunTrust Bank branch at the Student Center like explorers entering a temple of adulthood. The office smelled of leather, paperwork, and air conditioning. The carpets were too clean. The pens were on chains. The counters were too high.

Bharath had never opened a bank account on his own before.

Back home, everything was joint, ritualized, overseen by a parent or uncle with godlike authority. Here, it was just him, a passport, an I-20, and a hesitant signature.

The teller, a kind woman named Susan, guided him gently through the process.

“You’re international?” she asked.

“Yes,” Bharath said proudly. “India.”

“Well, welcome to Georgia, sugar.”

She smiled and handed him a small envelope.

Inside: a temporary debit card, his first bank statement, and a blue-checkbook with his name printed at the top.

He stared at it like it was an award. It looked so official. So permanent.

He didn’t even care that he didn’t know how to write a check yet.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 12: Coffee Confusion & A Moment with Marisol

[1,082 words]

To celebrate opening his first bank account by himself, Bharath insisted on treating everyone to coffee.

“Your first bank account and you’re already wasting money on us?” Ravi teased.

“It’s not wasting,” Bharath said. “Just a treat.”

“Your funeral,” Jorge said.

They went to the on-campus coffee shop, which was full of over-caffeinated graduate students typing on ThinkPads.

Bharath stepped up to the counter first.

The girl behind the register looked at him, eyebrow arched. "What can I get you?"

Bharath looked up at the menu.

And immediately regretted everything.

There were *too many options*.

Espresso. Americano. Cappuccino. Cold brew. Nitro cold brew. Latté. Mocha. Macchiato. Pumpkin spice something. Oat milk. Soy milk. Whole milk. Almond milk. Skim. No whip. Extra shot. Venti. Tall. Grande.

"Where's your... filter coffee?" Bharath asked helplessly.

"What's that?"

"You know where they put the hot coffee with powder into something with a filter and you collect it in another bowl?"

"Drip?" she said.

"Drip?"

"Drip," she stated with certainty.

That settled it. She seemed to know what she was talking about until her next question.

"Hot? Black?"

Why were there so many questions to answer just to get a cup of coffee? "I guess"

"Size?"

He paused. "Uhh... medium?"

"You mean grande?"

"Sure"

She nodded. "Room for cream?"

Bharath blinked. "I don't know. Maybe? Is the cup not big enough? How do you like it?"

She gave him a strange look as she scribbled something. "I have a boyfriend, you know. I'm not interested. Anything else?"

"I think that's enough confusion for today."

Jorge ordered an iced vanilla latté. Ravi got a mocha. Tyrel got a triple-shot espresso "with menace."

They sat by the window, sipping slowly.

Bharath took a cautious sip of his drink.

It was hot. Bitter. A little sour. But oddly comforting.

"Not bad," he admitted.

"Freedom in a cup," Tyrel said.

"You can't even spell freedom hermano," Jorge muttered.

Tyrel flipped him off.

Bharath hadn't expected to feel this exhausted from something as simple as managing paperwork and buying books. His shoulders were sore from his first real morning at the gym, his head still spinning from the banking jargon, and his tongue felt slightly burned from the harsh black coffee that now sloshed around in his stomach like sour motor oil.

He was walking back from the restroom in the bookstore, still tucking the printout of his schedule into his hoodie pocket, when he saw her again.

Marisol.

Standing under the harsh fluorescent lighting of the textbook aisle looking like an angel without her wings.

She had one hand on her hip, the other leafing through a used *Discrete Math* textbook with the air of someone trying to divine the future through its margins. She wore tight, dark jeans and a burnt orange crop hoodie with a Georgia Tech logo that had been stylishly cut to hang loose at the collar. Her wavy hair was half-tied - somehow only enhancing her magnetism rather than softening it.

Bharath stopped dead.

She looked up. Saw him.

Her lips curved.

“Lost in the math section, huh?” she called out.

He smiled, awkward. “Always.”

Marisol slid the book back into the shelf and walked over, her black boots making confident, measured clicks on the linoleum.

“Are you following me?” she said, arms crossing in front of her. “Should I be worried?”

“No,” Bharath said quickly. “I swear I’m not stalking anyone. Just... absorbing America. Slowly.”

She laughed. “You still look like you’re about to ask someone if this entire week is a prank show.”

“Is it?”

“Only emotionally.”

He smiled, but was still too stunned to find a real comeback. She was standing close now - not too close, but enough that he could smell the faint scent of citrus shampoo, maybe some coconut lotion, and whatever confidence smelled like when it came wrapped in curves and sarcasm.

“I was picking up the books for CS,” she said. “Do you already have all of them?”

“Almost. Got lucky. Used ones. Pages intact. Some answers scribbled in. Best kind of theft.”

“Smart man,” she said, tilting her head. “We really are in all the same classes?”

He nodded. “Looks like it.”

“Guess you’re stuck with me.”

Stuck was the last word he would’ve chosen.

She stared at him for a moment, eyebrows raised. “You gonna say something, or just keep looking at me like I walked out of a music video?”

Bharath blinked. “Sorry. You’re just... always dressed like you’re about to star in a music video. Like Shakira. Only prettier.”

She laughed - warm, genuine.

“That’s... not a bad line, actually,” she said.

He scratched his chin, flustered. “It wasn’t a line. I meant it.”

Even better.

Something about his honesty disarmed her. She was used to smooth talk from men. Slick. Guys who looked at her like a trophy. Bharath looked at her like a phenomenon he hadn’t prepared for. A pleasant disruption to his operating system.

“I’ll take it,” she said. “You’re charming. Accidentally. It’s cute.”

Just then, a voice echoed from the next aisle.

“Yo, B! We done here or what?”

It was Tyrel, followed by Ravi and Jorge, each carrying a few books and looking mildly lost.

They rounded the corner, saw Marisol - and stopped.

Ravi blinked. Jorge smirked.

Tyrel grinned like he’d found gold.

“Well damn,” Tyrel said, stepping forward. “Who dis fine thang talkin’ to our boy like he the prince of Tech?”

Marisol turned slowly.

Her eyebrow arched.

Tyrel leaned in slightly, the swagger oozing from every inch. “I’m Tyrel. ATL native. Triple espresso connoisseur. Sometimes I DJ. You need someone to show you where the real party’s at?”

Bharath visibly winced.

Marisol stared at Tyrel like she was measuring him for burial.

“That’s your opener?” she asked.

Tyrel’s smile widened. “Straight to the point.”

She crossed her arms. “Here’s a point: if I wanted to hear someone butcher hip hop slang while imagining they’re God’s gift to women, I’d rewatch a Milli Vanilli interview.”

Jorge and Tyrel gasped.

Ravi and Bharath were confused. Bharath blinked and asked, "What the hell is a Milli Vanilli?"

"Exactly," Marisol said.

Jorge whispered to Bharath and Ravi, "She just dropped a nuke."

They just tried not to laugh too loudly, still a little unsure about how much of an insult it really was.

Marisol turned back to him, now smiling as though the moment had never happened.

"Catch you in CS tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," Bharath said, still stunned.

She looked at the others. "See you around, boys."

And with that, she walked away, hips swaying, hair bouncing, a stack of books balanced on her hip like she owned the entire campus.

The silence she left in her wake was thunderous.

Ravi exhaled. "I think I just fell in love."

Jorge clapped Bharath on the back. "You lucky bastard."

Tyrel muttered, "She disrespected me like I was a parking ticket."

"Yeah," Jorge said, "but you kinda earned it."

Bharath was still smiling, eyes on the last place she'd stood.

He didn't know what this was.

But he liked it. A lot.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 13: Marisol's Reflections

[1,050 words]

Marisol walked out of the bookstore and into the thick Georgia heat, her arms aching from the weight of overpriced textbooks and her chest buzzing with something she refused to call nerves.

That boy - Bharath - he'd been sweet. In a way she hadn't seen in a long time. Not polished. Not trying to be cool. Just... awkward and oddly sincere. He didn't know how to flirt. Which was the only reason she hadn't immediately dismissed him like the rest.

She glanced over her shoulder. The boys were still back there, laughing about something. Probably Tyrel trying too hard again. She smirked.

Bharath was different.

But so was her father. Once.

She didn't talk about him - not to anyone at Tech, and barely even to Mia.

Her dad had left when she was just a baby. Packed up and gone before her sister had even turned six months old. According to her mother, he said something ridiculous like, *"This isn't the life I imagined."* He was apparently working at a car dealership at the time. One day, he stopped showing up to work and to home.

The last thing they heard was that he'd moved to Tampa with some girl ten years younger - a waitress who used to flirt with him at the diner.

That was it. That was the end of their family.

Marisol's mom never begged him to come back. Never cried in front of them even though she had barely been older than Marisol was right now. She just went to work. Took evening shifts at the grocery store. Cleaned houses on the weekends. Paid the bills. Kept her hair tied back in a bun and never brought another man home again.

Watching her mom hold it together like that? It taught Marisol two things early: Men can leave; You don't fall apart when they do. Still, that hadn't stopped her from getting curious.

Her first kiss had been in middle school - behind the gym after a school dance. She couldn't even remember the boy's name anymore. Just the scratchy polyester of his dress shirt and the way he smelled like Axe body spray and Juicy Fruit.

Then in high school, it was Jeremy. Tall, part of the yearbook club, always borrowing her notes. He'd called her "beautiful" once and it had made her chest tighten in all the wrong ways. They'd dated two months - if you could call sharing fries at the mall food court dating.

Then came Carlos.

The one she really thought might be different.

He made her a mix CD. Said he'd drive her to prom. Prom never happened. Because three weeks before, she caught him making out with a junior near the parking lot, their hands on each other like they were in a telenovela.

Now?

Now she didn't fall for anything.

She liked her boundaries. Her headphones. Her schedule.

And yet here she was - thinking about a boy who barely said ten words in a row without stumbling over one. Who looked at her like she was a page in a textbook he couldn't believe he got to read.

And maybe that's what scared her most.

He wasn't trying. He was just being... him.

She crossed the quad slowly, letting the crowd thin around her. The sun was lower now, staining the sky with that soft orange haze that always made Atlanta look prettier than it had any right to.

Her fingers adjusted the strap of her backpack, her mind replaying the way Bharath had looked at her when she teased him.

Not flustered in the gross, twitchy way guys did when they were thinking about what you looked like naked. Flustered like... he didn't know where to look because he was too busy trying to not mess up the moment.

That was rare. Especially here. Especially now.

She'd already had two guys ask her what club she was joining "because a girl like you can't go unnoticed," and one of them had winked - winked - while glancing at her chest. Like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Gross.

Marisol hadn't wanted to go to Tech at first.

She'd gotten into other schools - smaller, private ones that were more artsy. But Tech had the better program. Better scholarships. Closer to home, too, even if she told everyone that didn't matter.

Her mom cried when the acceptance letter came. Said her daughter was going to be an *ingeniera* - even if it was *Computer Science* and not civil like her uncle in Havana.

She wasn't doing this for her mom, not entirely. But it helped, knowing she could look back one day and say, "*We made it.*"

She stepped onto the path near the fountains, the sound of water bubbling under the hum of cicadas.

She thought again of Bharath's face - stunned, a little sweaty, almost boyish in its lack of guile.

He wasn't hot in the obvious way. He didn't walk like he owned the place. He didn't look like he had a list of ex-girlfriends back home. His T-shirt wasn't even ironed properly.

But something about him - the quiet eyes, the unassuming posture - it made her pause.

Was he real?

Was this just a phase for him - a wide-eyed international student trying to find his way, saying nice things because he didn't know the rules of the game yet?

Or had he really meant it when he said she looked like she belonged in a music video?

Stupid line.

Stupidly effective.

But Bharath... didn't seem like he was waiting for anything. Not approval. Not leverage. Not an opening to sneak a hand somewhere it didn't belong.

He just looked glad to be speaking with her. Like someone had granted him permission to walk in a dream for five minutes.

It made her chest ache, just a little. Maybe she'd keep an eye on him.

Not too close. Not too soon.

But if he showed up to class tomorrow, sat near her, maybe she'd... leave space in her notebook margin. A gesture. A start. She wasn't stupid. She knew people could pretend.

She knew how boys could look at you like you were special - right up until they found someone easier, quieter, shinier. She wasn't going to be fooled again.

But if Bharath was really that rare kind of boy? The kind who didn't just see your face but also your effort - the weight of your days, the pressure in your smile - then maybe...

Maybe he was worth watching.

For now.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 14: Cricket Showdown

[2,019 words]

"Come on, it'll be fun," Ravi said, grabbing Jorge by the elbow and dragging him across the campus green.

Bharath, dressed in sneakers and a white cricket tee with a small Indian flag stitched at the chest, jogged ahead, bat tucked under his arm like a sacred relic.

"What is this again?" Jorge asked, squinting into the late sun. "Like baseball but... not?"

"Cricket," Ravi said. "Our version of religion. Specifically, India versus Pakistan. Think Yankees vs. Red Sox if the countries also had a few wars in the background."

"I'm not sure that clarifies anything," Jorge muttered.

Tyrel brought up the rear, chewing gum and adjusting his cap sideways. "As long as there's food and girls, I'm good."

"Focus, gentlemen," Ravi said with a grin. "Today, Bharath is representing national pride."

The astroturf practice field next to the Student Athletic Complex had been taken over.

A rectangular strip had been laid with chalk dust to mark the wicket. Bright orange cones served as boundaries. A collapsible table stood to the side with water bottles, chai in thermoses, and steel tiffin carriers smelling faintly of masala and ambition. There

were even plastic chairs - scavenged from the international lounge - lined up like a cricket stadium's VIP box.

And, remarkably, someone had figured out how to turn on the floodlights. As the sun dipped lower, the field lit up under artificial glow, throwing long shadows across the turf and adding an almost cinematic intensity.

On the "Indian" side were a dozen students - some in whites, others in jeans and college tees. They hailed from Bangalore, Chennai, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, and one very loud guy from Patiala. They tossed the ball back and forth, practiced cover drives, and discussed bowling rotations like they were preparing for an actual tour.

"Bharath! You open, okay? You played in the State championships back home right?" the makeshift captain called out. "Just anchor the innings."

"Got it," Bharath said, nerves fluttering. "Haven't played proper cricket in a couple of years, but let's go."

"You'll be fine," Ravi said from the sidelines. "You're Indian. It's in your DNA."

The Pakistani Students Association was just as energetic. Their captain was a tall guy named Saad from Lahore, who wore aviators even as dusk fell. They brought their own bats, extra grips, a duffel full of balls, and even an old scoreboard they had re-painted with PAK in large green letters.

"You ready, Chennai boy?" Saad called across the pitch.

Bharath grinned. "Always."

The game was on.

Tyrel and Jorge took their seats near the boundary, legs stretched out, watching the chaos with mild confusion and deep fascination.

"Why are they throwing the ball that way?" Tyrel asked.

"That's bowling. You can't bend your elbows like you do when you throw in baseball," Ravi corrected. "They can bowl it fast or spin it."

"Spin it? Like with magic?"

"Kind of," Ravi said, "It's all wrist and timing. Think curveball meets chess."

Bharath was on strike. The ball - a bright tennis ball wrapped in black electrical tape - fizzed past his legs first ball. He didn't flinch. Just adjusted his grip.

The second ball, he flicked off his pads - elegant, clean - and it zipped past square leg. The crowd clapped. A few guys whistled.

"That's our man," Ravi grinned.

Tyrel tilted his head. "Yo, I don't know what he did but he's got style."

"Of course," Jorge said. "He's Indian *and* dramatic. It's built-in."

By now, the game had picked up pace. Bharath had hit a few fours - graceful drives and one risky pull over midwicket that got him applause and a cheer from the sidelines.

The floodlights made every catch look cinematic. Every throw glinted off the turf like sparks.

The Pakistani bowlers started sledging.

"Come on, Bollywood boy," one shouted. "Show us a dance move with your bat!"

Bharath grinned, unshaken. He wasn't the most aggressive player - but he was clean, precise, frustratingly consistent.

When he finally fell for 58 - almost 80% of the team's score - bowled by a flipper that skidded off the turf - he got a standing ovation from the Indian side and a few appreciative nods from the Pakistani bowlers.

Ravi fist-bumped him as he walked off. "That was class, bhai."

"Okay," Jorge said, scanning the small crowd. "There are definitely women here."

"Half of them look twelve," Tyrel muttered.

"College freshmen," Jorge corrected. "They *are* twelve, mentally."

They found two girls near the drinks table - one in a salwar kameez with Doc Martens, the other in cargo shorts and a ponytail.

Tyrel tried to turn on the charm. "So uh... which team y'all supporting?"

The girls exchanged glances.

"We're from Nepal," the girl in shorts said. "We're just here for the snacks and chai."

"Respect," Jorge nodded.

"And the cute wicketkeeper," she added with a grin.

Tyrel glanced at the field. "Wait. Who's the wicket guy?"

"Indian side," the girl said. "Short. Loud. Talks a lot."

"Damn," Tyrel muttered. "Even the short kings are pulling here."

Jorge and Tyrel were still chuckling over the Nepalese girls' wicketkeeper crush when a fresh group arrived near the field's edge - five girls in coordinated pastel tops and low-rise jeans, arm-linked and radiant like they were headed to a photoshoot instead of a cricket match.

They stood out immediately.

Not just because they were dressed like they didn't care about the game - but because the entire vibe around them shifted. Boys started glancing over, some trying to discreetly fix their hair.

At the center of the group were Ayesha and Zara.

Ayesha wore a cropped Georgia Tech hoodie knotted at the waist, a black pleated skirt, and oversized sunglasses she didn't need. Her hair was done up in a high ponytail that moved like it had its own gravity. Around her wrist was a stack of silver bangles that clinked with every turn of her hand.

They looked like they had come to a party.

The other hot girl, Zara, the queen of giggles - leaned over. "Oh my god, isn't that Danish playing for the Pakistani team?"

"Yeah," said another. "His older brother is at Emory. Total smoke show."

Ayesha gave a polite nod, her eyes drifting to the pitch. She hadn't planned on coming. But Zara had dragged her out, saying something about representation and "cute accents."

She didn't expect to see him again.

Bharath.

The same boy who'd fumbled with his passport at the airport. Who had insisted on splitting a cab. Who'd blushed when she leaned too close. And who she had laughed about, mocked even, in the cafeteria just yesterday. Now he was at the crease, in a slightly too-loose cricket tee, bat in hand, forehead gleaming with sweat.

He looked... good.

Not conventionally. Not in the overconfident, polished way her usual types did. But focused. Centered. Calm in a way that made him *stand out* from the sea of noisy chest-beaters around him.

He waited for the bowler's run-up.

Ball released. He shifted his weight - and met it with a smooth, grounded drive that whistled past cover point and rolled cleanly to the boundary.

The Indian crowd erupted.

Zara made a sound that was half-clap, half-snort. "Wow. Mr. Quiet Guy's got skills."

"Who?" Ayesha asked, pretending not to know.

"That guy - Bharath or something? That Indian FOB kid in our dorm group. The one who looks like he borrowed all his clothes from 1996."

Ayesha smiled thinly.

Yeah. That guy.

India posted a respectable 108 in 20 overs.

The Pakistani side came in strong - two sixes in the first three overs - but Ravi noticed their middle order was shaky.

"Watch. Collapse incoming," he said.

By over 14, they were 78 for 6.

Bharath came in to bowl - off-spin, loopy and deceptive. He wasn't fast, but he had rhythm.

His second ball took a top edge.

Caught at short midwicket.

Ravi lost his mind.

"YESSS! Let's go, yaar!"

Jorge turned to Tyrel. "I don't know what's happening, but this is intense."

Tyrel shrugged. "Still looks like baseball in a fever dream."

Pakistan needed 7 runs from 6 balls.

Bharath had bowled out.

Saad, the Pakistani captain, was on strike.

A hush fell.

Ravi was chewing on his knuckles.

Jorge and Tyrel had actually stood up shouting and cheering just because everyone around them were.

First ball - no run.

Second ball - 2 runs.

Third - edge for 1.

Fourth - no run.

Fifth - full toss. Swung to deep midwicket - one run.

Fielded. 1 run.

Last ball. 3 needed.

Bharath turned to Ravi. "If this goes for a four, I'm blaming your bad luck."

Ravi shut his eyes.

The bowler ran in.

The ball landed - low, skidding.

Saad swung hard - too hard.

The ball spooned up, straight to Bharath. The ball swung prodigiously in the night sky. It would have been a miracle to catch that. But steady, dependable Bharath aligned himself on the field under the ball despite it swinging unpredictably and pounced on it.

India won.

The field erupted in cheers, laughter, war-cries that sounded vaguely blasphemous, and a chorus of high-fives.

Bharath was hoisted by two guys.

Tyrel and Jorge ran onto the field, arms in the air like they'd won the World Cup.

“Okay,” Jorge said, panting as he reached Bharath. “That was actually... kind of awesome.”

Tyrel gave him a slap on the back. “Y’all were possessed out there. I can’t believe you catch the ball barehanded”

Bharath smiled, out of breath. “It’s more than a game, man.”

Ravi grinned. “It’s our substitute for warfare.”

Jorge nodded. “Explains the yelling.”

Tyrel chuckled. “Still don’t understand the rules. But I know who I’m betting on next time.”

Bharath looked up at the floodlights above the turf, now buzzing faintly as the crowd slowly dispersed.

His hands stung. His shirt clung to him. His body ached.

But inside?

He felt electric.

For the entirety of the match, Ayesha couldn’t stop watching Bharath.

The way he moved between the wickets - cautious, but precise. The way he didn’t showboat when he hit a four. The way he acknowledged teammates with quiet nods instead of chest bumps.

He didn’t look like the kind of guy who would charm a room.

But here, in motion - he had gravity. And worst of all? He looked like he didn’t even know it.

Someone behind her shouted, “That’s a proper shot, man!”

“Straight from Chennai to Atlanta!” another called.

Ayesha winced. It wasn’t even the shouting - it was the pride in their voices. She had laughed at this boy in public. And he’d done nothing but be... kind.

She glanced at her friends, who were now trying to guess which team had the hotter boys. None of them were really watching. Not like she was.

Her chest prickled with something sharp.

A few overs later, Bharath got out - bowled on a flipper he didn't quite read.

Even as he walked back, he wasn't angry. Just thoughtful. Maybe a little disappointed. He looked toward the sidelines and caught sight of her group - and his eyes passed right over her.

No recognition. No lingering pause. It shouldn't have stung. But it did.

Zara nudged her. "You okay?"

Ayesha nodded quickly. "Just... hot in these floodlights."

A little later, the match ended with Bharath making a very difficult catch look easy and the boys rushed the field. The crowd thinned. Her friends had already started talking about heading to Cold Stone.

But Ayesha lingered.

Bharath was standing near the players' water table, head tilted back, chugging water. His shirt stuck to his chest, damp and clinging.

One of the Indian team guys clapped him on the back. They lifted him and danced around.

She thought about walking over. Just to say hey. Maybe tease him about being Tech's surprise cricket star. But then she imagined how Zara would react. How her other friends would look at her.

There were rules. Rules about who they talked to. Who they were seen with. Who they let past the walls.

Bharath wasn't cool.

He didn't look dashing. Didn't try to sit near them in the dining hall and grovel for their attention. He'd looked at her like she was a marvel once - and she'd mocked him to his face the next day.

She felt... ashamed. But shame wasn't useful. Popularity was currency, and hers was freshly minted. Freshman year was too delicate to risk on kindness.

So she turned away. Didn't say hi. Didn't wave. Didn't even let herself look back.

But as they walked toward the parking lot, she heard Zara say, “Honestly, Bharath’s got a nice build. Like lowkey shredded. I didn’t expect that.” Ayesha said nothing. Just kept walking, her hands clenched in her pockets, the sound of the crowd behind her ringing louder than the silence in her chest.

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 15: Waffle House Confessions

[1,646 words]

The cricket match had ended hours ago, but the adrenaline still pulsed in their veins.

Bharath lay on the grass outside Smith Hall, arms splayed, shirt stained with dust and triumph. Jorge sat next to him, sipping from a warm water bottle, still talking about that last catch. Ravi was checking the grainy photos he’d taken on his clunky digital camera.

Tyrel swaggered up, twirling his keys. “Alright, y’all earned it.”

“Earned what?” Jorge asked, raising an eyebrow.

Tyrel grinned. “Late night Waffle House. Hop in. It’s tradition.”

Bharath blinked. “Is that like... an actual house?”

“No,” Ravi muttered. “It’s a chain. Open 24/7. It’s like if grease and comfort food had a baby and forgot to clean it.”

“Beautiful description,” Tyrel said. “And accurate.”

Tyrel’s pickup truck sat near the curb like a loyal old dog - a battered red Ford with peeling paint, a Georgia Tech bumper sticker half curling at the corners, and an air freshener shaped like a peach swinging from the rearview mirror. The passenger-side door had a dent that looked suspiciously fist-shaped. The speakers, Tyrel had warned them, were “tempered by life experience,” which meant they buzzed faintly when playing anything louder than a whisper.

The four of them piled in.

Ravi climbed into the backseat without hesitation, taking the middle spot like it was second nature. Bharath slid in behind the passenger seat, knees already brushing the fabric. Jorge, the only one who moved fast enough, claimed the passenger seat next to Tyrel.

Tyrel stared at them all in disbelief as he adjusted his cap.

“Why didn’t anyone call *shotgun*?” he asked, scandalized.

Bharath blinked. “Call... what?”

“*Shotgun!*” Tyrel repeated. “Front seat! Passenger side! It’s tradition. You yell ‘shotgun,’ you ride up front.”

Ravi tilted his head. “You mean people *fight* to sit up front?”

“Not fight,” Tyrel said, offended. “It’s a sacred code. It’s how you assert dominance. How you earn respect.”

“I like the back,” Bharath offered. “It’s peaceful. Less responsibility.”

“Same,” Ravi said, shrugging. “Feels weird being up front. Like I owe someone gas money.”

Tyrel stared at them both as if they’d just told him they didn’t believe in gravity. “Y’all... *enjoy* the back seat?”

“Sure, man,” Ravi added. “When our driver drives us back home we always sit in the back seat.”

Bharath nodded in assent.

Tyrel groaned, slumping over the steering wheel. “I have *failed* as your American cultural guide.”

Jorge laughed and patted his shoulder. “They’re international, hermano. You gotta give them time.”

“You’re international dude!” said Bharath. “We didn’t hear you calling shotgun or whatever either”

“No, no,” Tyrel muttered, half to himself. “This was supposed to be my moment. Teach them the rules. Initiate them into the brotherhood of the road. And instead - ”

He shot them a withering look, then turned the key. The truck coughed like it was waking from a nap, then rumbled to life. The speakers immediately blasted what sounded like a country-rap fusion track. Half static, half banjo.

Bharath leaned forward. "Is there a quiz?"

"There's a *lifestyle*," Tyrel said.

"Y'all gonna sit in the back, fine," he said, cranking the volume. "But you're learning American music *and* shotgun rules before the semester ends. I swear it."

"Now THIS is music," Tyrel declared, cranking up the volume.

The beat dropped - heavy, fast, and filled with swagger.

DMX - Ruff Ryder's Anthem.

Tyrel slapped the steering wheel and shouted along:

/Stop, drop, shut 'em down, open up shop/

/Oh, no, that's how Ruff Ryders roll/

/Niggas wanna try, niggas wanna lie/

/Then niggas wonder why niggas wanna die/

Jorge was bopping his head. Ravi looked mildly alarmed. Bharath... tried not to laugh.

Tyrel rapped along like a man possessed, swerving into every verse like he'd lived the lyrics. At every red light, he turned up the volume and made finger-gun gestures at the passing night.

"My niggas is with it, you want it? Come and get it. Took it then we split it, you fuckin' right we did it!" he shouted as they pulled off North Avenue.

Bharath leaned over to Jorge. "Is this... normal?"

"This is art hermano," Jorge whispered solemnly.

The Waffle House stood bathed in amber neon at the corner of a quiet intersection - bright, open, and buzzing with 12 a.m. life.

Inside, a few scattered students, a couple of overnight workers in scrubs, and a trucker reading a newspaper populated the booths.

They slid into a table near the window, their skin still glowing faintly from sweat and turf dust. The waitress - a middle-aged woman with hoop earrings and chipped nails - handed them laminated menus with a half-smile.

“Y’all look like you’ve been through it,” she said.

“We won,” Bharath said proudly.

“Whatever it was, congrats sugar,” she said, chewing gum. “What’ll it be?”

Jorge ordered a bit of everything: scattered hash browns, bacon, grits, and two waffles drowning in syrup. “To make up for all the sadness I’ve tasted at our campus cafeteria.”

Tyrel leaned back and grinned. “Give me the All-Star Special. Add cheese. Add sausage. Add pancakes. Add flirtation.”

The waitress blinked. “You want extra bacon or extra disappointment?”

“I want your number,” he said with a wink.

She rolled her eyes. “You want food or detention?”

“Both,” Tyrel said, undeterred.

Bharath scanned the menu. Everything had meat. Pork, sausage, beef. He hesitated - then spotted it.

“Three-egg omelet,” he said. “No meat. Extra onions, tomatoes, and cheese.”

“Toast?”

“Yes please. Wheat?”

“Good choice, baby,” she said, scribbling.

Ravi grinned. “Pancakes. Butter. Syrup. No shame.”

The waitress walked off with a final eye-roll at Tyrel, leaving the four of them basking in the warmth of Formica, flickering overhead lights, and anticipation for food that would probably shorten their lifespans - but beautifully.

Ravi leaned back against the booth, arms crossed.

“So,” he said casually, “We’ve been wondering about something.”

“Here it comes,” Tyrel muttered, grinning.

“Why are you like... this?” Jorge asked, gesturing vaguely.

“Like what?”

“You know,” Bharath said, finally chiming in, “you’re white - but you dress like those guys from the hood. You rap every song. You sound more black than the actual black folks.”

Tyrel leaned back, nonchalant. “Y’all saying I’m not allowed to vibe?”

“No, no,” Ravi said quickly. “Not judging. Genuinely curious. Back home, most white Americans we imagined were... I don’t know... like the ones in the brochures. Polo shirts. Country clubs. Hiking. Soft rock.”

“Mayonnaise,” Jorge added helpfully.

Tyrel let out a deep chuckle. “You mean Suburb Caucasian Default Mode?”

The table burst out laughing.

“Alright,” Tyrel said, leaning forward. “Here’s the story.”

“I grew up in south Atlanta. Not Buckhead. Not Decatur. *East Point*. That’s mostly Black neighborhoods, right? My street was straight-up hood. My neighbors were Black. My best friend growing up? Malcolm - taught me how to ride a bike and throw a punch. His mom made better fried chicken than any church basement in Georgia.”

Bharath, Ravi and Jorge listened, rapt.

Tyrel continued, more serious now. “So yeah, I’m white. But I never *fit* with the prep school crowd. My mom worked nights. My dad was... let’s just say *not in the picture*. I wore hand-me-downs. Malcolm’s cousins taught me how to dress - you know, sag the jeans, tilt the cap, wear chains.”

Jorge nodded slowly. “So it’s not imitation. It’s upbringing.”

“Exactly. Some people wear it like a costume. For me? This is just... me. Always has been. It ain’t performative. I grew up in it. The music, the slang, the struggle. I’m not pretending. I’m participating.”

Ravi stirred his coffee thoughtfully. “Didn’t people give you a hard time for that?”

Tyrel rolled his eyes. “All the time. Black kids said I was trying too hard. White kids said I was embarrassing. Teachers tried to ‘correct’ me. But you know what? I wasn’t trying to *be* Black. I was just being *me*. This was the culture that shaped me.”

“And now you’re at Georgia Tech,” Bharath said, almost to himself.

Tyrel nodded. “Yeah. Lot of kids like me don’t make it here. I had a guidance counselor who said, ‘Tech might be a stretch, Tyrel. Try plumbing school.’ I didn’t even tell her when I got in.”

There was a quiet pause.

Then Jorge raised his soda. “To breaking molds.”

Tyrel clinked his cup with Jorge’s. “To be honest to who you are, even if nobody else gets the memo.”

The food arrived, saving them from drifting into anything too sentimental.

Plates clattered down. Steam rose. Cheese melted. Syrup flowed. Tyrel winked at the waitress again as she dropped off the plates. She just gave him a tired eye roll.

Bharath dug into his omelet, savoring the burst of flavor. It had the right amount of bite, the eggs fluffy but not watery. It reminded him of the tomato-onion bhurji his mother used to make - except this came with cheese and the smell of coffee and old vinyl booths.

“You guys ever get mistaken for something you’re not?” Tyrel asked, mouth full.

“All the time,” Jorge said. “People think I’m Korean-American. I don’t speak a word of Korean.”

Ravi nodded. “Most folks back home think I’m Muslim because my name is Ravi Khan.”

Bharath added, “At the ISA event, I got called a FOB like it was an insult.”

Ravi snorted. “That’s because half those born-here desis forgot who made their biryani. They’re all trying to prove they’re more ‘American’ than the American kids.”

“Truth,” Tyrel said, raising his fork.

“So what do you do?” Bharath asked.

Tyrel smiled. “You show up. You don’t fake it. And if people don’t like your flavor, you give them the full bottle.”

They finished their meal in companionable silence, save for the occasional moan of satisfaction or “holy hell this is good” from Jorge, who by now had syrup on his wrist and a smear of grits on his hoodie.

Not after what they'd seen.

Not after walking past men in the gym who looked like they'd been handcrafted by Renaissance sculptors on pre-workout supplements, or watching women on the track who ran sprints with the intensity of someone trying to outrun generational trauma.

"We're gonna look like that someday hermano," Jorge mumbled, eyes bloodshot.

Bharath nodded, then tripped over a sprinkler head.

The gym loomed ahead of them like a temple built for pain.

Inside, they stretched, lifted, grimaced, and audibly regretted their life choices. Jorge's attempt at squats ended with him whispering, "I think my soul left my body," while Bharath got stuck mid-deadlift and had to be rescued by someone with traps the size of dinner plates.

They both still relied heavily on the *assisted* pull-up machine - the one that practically did the exercise for you while quietly judging your choices.

But this time?

It only took two fewer assist plates.

Progress.

"I think I saw my muscle twitch today," Bharath whispered during a water break. "It might have been a shadow, but it felt personal."

They powered through rows, presses, a cable machine that Jorge swore was designed by a sadist, and a "core finisher" that left them lying on their backs like roadkill.

The real boss fight, though?

The shower.

It was still a gauntlet.

They walked in with towels clutched like armor, eyes locked firmly forward, pretending they were in a steam-filled monastery of platonic brotherhood and *not* a communal chamber of horrifying angles and slippery tiles.

Jorge tried to whistle casually and ended up choking on steam. Bharath nearly slipped on someone's dropped loofah and had to catch himself on a wall with arms that no longer worked.

“Why is it so open?” Bharath whispered through gritted teeth. “No curtains. Just horror movie vibes and trauma.”

“Don’t make eye contact,” Jorge muttered. “You make eye contact, you owe that person a coffee. Maybe more. Also, I’ve been told you do not drop the soap.”

They showered like fugitives - quick, silent, using exactly one bar of soap between them like it was a sacred artifact. After Jorge’s dire warning they were very careful that it didn’t drop down to the floor. Unfortunately, it ended up with their hands grasping each other reaching for the bar at the same time. That brought a quick end to the shower as they both denied anything ever happened. The lonely soap bar remained forgotten in the shower forever.

And yet, despite everything - the soreness, the social nudity, the protein-bar-induced regret - they felt it: A rhythm. A routine. A weird, sweaty sort of brotherhood forged in whey powder and communal suffering.

They emerged ten minutes later, hair damp, eyes red, bodies sore - and somehow... a little stronger. The light was visible at the end of the tunnel.

“We lived,” Bharath said, patting his own chest weakly.

Jorge nodded solemnly. “Barely. But yeah. We’re basically Spartans now.”

They tried to high-five each other. They couldn’t lift their hands. Gritting their teeth they tried again.

It was a slow, floppy high-five.

But it counted.

Breakfast was a blur. Boiled eggs. Toast. Tabasco. Milk. The boys inhaled their food like they were late for a flight rather than a 10 a.m. lecture.

“You know we have our first real class in twenty minutes, right?” Ravi said, licking Tabasco off his thumb with zero shame.

“Right,” Bharath nodded, checking his schedule. “CS 1331. Boggs Hall.”

“Ten AM.,” Jorge added, groaning. “I hope the chairs are soft. My glutes are toast.”

Just then, Tyrel strolled past with all the swagger of someone who had already conquered the day. He wore sunglasses indoors, a biscuit sandwich in one hand and his Walkman clipped to his belt, headphones slung around his neck blasting *Hypnotize* by *B.I.G.*

“Good luck in geek camp, nerdlings,” he said with a shit-eating grin.

“You’re not coming?” Ravi asked, chewing.

Tyrel stopped, dramatically turned around, and took a slow, exaggerated bite of his biscuit. “Mechanical Engineering, baby,” he said, thumping his chest. “Thermodynamics. In a windowless basement. With real men.”

Jorge raised an eyebrow. “Que mierda! Are you calling us fake?”

“I’m calling y’all keyboard gardeners,” Tyrel said, gesturing vaguely with his sandwich. “While you’re learning to tickle semicolons and debug feelings, I’m out here solving the energy crisis one torque diagram at a time.”

Bharath laughed. “We build the future.”

Tyrel leaned in conspiratorially. “You *type* the future. We *weld* it.”

“Oh god,” Ravi muttered, sipping his milk. “Here it comes.”

Tyrel pointed at each of them like he was hosting a talk show. “CS majors out here writing ‘Hello World’ while the real dawgs are calculating heat dissipation in turbine engines. Y’all choose majors where your only enemy is a syntax error. My enemy? Is entropy. And gravity. And reality.”

Bharath grinned. “Jealous because our labs have AC?”

“I don’t need AC. I sweat excellence.”

Ravi deadpanned, “You also sweat through your shirt every day.”

Tyrel ignored him. “Y’all get homework that starts with ‘Write a function.’ Mine starts with ‘Assume Mars has air.’”

“Didn’t you say you blew up a microwave last week?” Jorge asked.

“That,” Tyrel said, holding up a finger, “was *experimental research*. Uncontrolled combustion is just enthusiasm without supervision.”

“Did you fix it?” Ravi asked.

“I wrote a strongly-worded poem about it in my lab notebook. That’s what we real engineers do. Expressive thermodynamics.”

Bharath chuckled, tossing his milk carton into the trash. “Enjoy your dungeon.”

Tyrel walked backward toward the exit, raising his sandwich like a trophy. “Enjoy programming your loneliness! I’ll be out here learning how to launch rockets and fix motorcycles with duct tape!”

He slapped Jorge on the back, fist-bumped Ravi, and gave Bharath a mock salute.

“Remember, boys,” he called over his shoulder, “code fades, but torque is forever.”

Then he disappeared out the cafeteria doors, his Walkman kicking into another B.I.G track, leaving behind a table full of amused, mildly insulted CS nerds and the lingering scent of biscuit and bravado.

Jorge shook his head. “He’s gonna die in a boiler room, isn’t he?”

“Wearing sunglasses,” Ravi added.

“Looking smug,” Bharath finished.

They grabbed their backpacks and headed out. Geek camp or not, class was calling. And apparently, so was thermodynamics.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 17: The Hot Girl Who Sat Next to Him

[1,582 words]

They arrived outside Boggs Hall just before ten, joining the trickle of freshmen gathering for CS 1331: Intro to Object-Oriented Programming.

Ravi checked his printout again. “Room 104. Let’s get good seats.”

They filed in and found the lecture hall mostly empty - a wide, tiered room with soft blue seats and long desks, perfect for spreading out.

Bharath sat in the middle row, three seats from the center. Jorge plopped beside him. Ravi sat behind them.

The room buzzed with quiet anticipation.

Students flipped open notebooks with trembling hands, propped up bulky Dell laptops like they were defusing bombs, and checked their folders for the syllabus again and again - just in case it had magically changed in the last two minutes.

The room buzzed with low-level panic, caffeine, and the unmistakable smell of someone's forgotten egg sandwich.

And then - She walked in.

Like a glitch in the simulation.

Marisol.

Wearing a navy Georgia Tech hoodie that somehow managed to be both casual and runway-ready, tucked just right into a pair of fitted black jeans that made time itself pause. Her hair was tied back in a sleek ponytail, gold hoop earrings catching the light with every step. She scanned the room like she was looking for someone - or just deciding who deserved to live.

Half the class stopped breathing.

A pencil dropped. A laptop fan kicked into high gear in what sounded suspiciously like panic.

One guy in the front row actually *adjusted his posture* and tucked his shirt in without moving from his chair.

Someone behind Bharath whispered, "Is she lost?"

"No way she's in CS," another muttered. "That's a finance major. Or aerospace. Or dreams."

Bharath, for his part, forgot how chairs worked.

He was sitting normally one second, then suddenly ramrod straight like someone had installed new spine firmware. His hand froze on his pen mid-word. He didn't even know what he had been writing - possibly his name over and over.

He had drawn a heart around the word *algorithms*.

Kill me now, Bharath thought.

And then - to his complete surprise, as if summoned by the sheer force of his hormonal panic - she smiled.

And started walking toward him.

Not in his general direction. Not toward someone behind him. Not to the door. To. Him.

Jorge, sitting to his right, elbowed him so hard he nearly dislocated a rib.

“What the hell is happening?” someone whispered like they were witnessing a miracle or the birth of a new religion.

Bharath couldn't answer. His brain had put up a 'We're Closed' sign.

Marisol reached their row, scanned the empty seats, and - with the ease of someone who had clearly never known social anxiety - slid into the one right next to Bharath. She dropped her bag with a soft thump and turned to him.

“Morning,” she said, casual as a breeze.

“Morning,” Bharath replied, somehow managing not to squeak. His voice cracked internally, but externally? Smooth as silk.

“You're in this class *too*?” she asked, already unzipping her bag.

“Yeah. You too? Fancy seeing you here? What are you doing here?” he replied, immediately hating himself for saying something that stupid.

“*Smooth!*”, gasped a guy behind him.

She chuckled. “We literally talked about it at the bookstore yesterday.”

“Right. I remember now.”

He absolutely didn't. Her sitting next to him was blowing his mind. He hoped that the extra spritz of Wild Stone he had on would help with his confidence.

Jorge, meanwhile, was now vibrating like a suppressed earthquake. His face was locked in an expression that read *I will mock you for this later but right now I am too impressed*.

But Bharath didn't notice.

Because what he did notice - what he *couldn't* not notice - was that the entire row of guys behind them had gone eerily silent.

Like birds before a thunderstorm.

They weren't even pretending not to stare anymore.

Not at Marisol.

At him.

One guy in a faded North Face hoodie mouthed “*Damn.*” Another nudged his friend and whispered something that made them both burst into grinning disbelief.

There was reverence in their gaze. Confusion. Maybe even awe.

Bharath had gone from “Indian guy with average notebook” to “mysterious alpha who pulls goddesses in CS lectures” in about six seconds.

He didn’t know what he had done. But he was *never* changing seats again.

Marisol leaned in slightly, her voice low. “You think she’s gonna go hard on us on the first day?”

“Hope not,” Bharath replied, a little too fast, a little too earnestly, like a man who had just remembered what words were.

She gave him a sideways glance and a small, approving smile - the kind that short-circuits nervous systems.

The air around them shifted. Not heavy. Not awkward.

Just... charged.

Behind them, someone whispered, “Bro. Did he save her cat or something?”

Someone else muttered, “He must be Bill Gates’ illegitimate son.”

Meanwhile, Jorge pulled out his notebook and, without looking up, scribbled one word across the top of the page: *Legend.*

And Bharath - barely breathing, pretending everything was normal - smiled faintly and opened his own notebook.

He had no idea what the class was about anymore.

But whatever this was? He was in.

At exactly ten, the door closed with a soft click.

A woman in her mid-fifties walked to the front - short grey hair, sharp glasses, and the kind of posture that suggested she tolerated no nonsense.

She picked up a stick of chalk and wrote in neat block letters:

PROF. HELENA STONE

CS 1331 – OBJECT-ORIENTED PROGRAMMING IN JAVA

She turned to the class, adjusted her glasses, and spoke in a clear, clipped voice.

“If you are here by mistake, this is your last chance to escape.”

A few chuckles.

“If you are here on purpose - congratulations. You’ve chosen the career path that combines math, logic, caffeine addiction, and existential dread.”

More laughter.

Bharath smiled, finally relaxing into his seat.

Marisol leaned over and whispered, “I like her already.”

He nodded.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

Professor Stone wasted no time.

By ten minutes into the lecture, the word “Object” had already been written on the board in multiple places, along with its mysterious cousins: Class, instance, and encapsulation.

“An Object,” she said, pacing across the front of the room like a general before battle, “is a package. It holds both data and behavior. Like a student. Name, major, GPA - those are properties. But that same student can register for classes, drop out, change majors. Those are actions - methods.”

She paused and scanned the room. “If that went over your head, don’t panic. This class exists to unpack that mystery. Slowly. Painfully.”

More nervous chuckles.

Bharath didn’t laugh.

Because he was... getting it.

Somehow, it all just made sense. The way she diagrammed things - a stick figure labeled “Student” with arrows pointing to boxes that said `.register()` and `.getGPA()` - reminded him of flowcharts from the coding competitions back home.

Maybe it was because he'd spent that summer reading Ritchie Kernighan's books like his favorite novel. Or maybe he was just wired for this.

Either way, he found himself nodding while the girl to his left - Marisol - was scribbling furiously and whispering, "What the hell is encapsulation again?"

By the end of the hour, Professor Stone had walked them through the syllabus, the grading scheme, and a dire warning about plagiarism that somehow involved a gif of a cat crying behind bars.

The bell rang.

Students began gathering their things.

Marisol groaned. "That was a lot."

Jorge leaned over. "You say that like it's over. I blacked out during the middle twenty minutes."

Ravi popped his head between them. "I understood three words: 'Java' and 'Attendance mandatory.'"

Marisol turned to Bharath. "Please tell me you were lost too."

Bharath hesitated. "I mean... not really?"

They all turned to look at him.

Even Jorge - mid-shoulder stretch - stopped and narrowed his eyes.

"You understood that class?" Ravi asked.

"Yeah, kind of?" Bharath said. "I mean, the way she broke it down - it just clicked. I've read a bit of this before."

Marisol squinted. "Wait. Are you one of *those* kids?"

"What kids?"

"The ones who finish assignments before class. The ones who *prepare*."

Bharath looked guilty.

"Dios!," Jorge said. "We've brought a teacher's pet into our group."

"I'm not - !"

"It's too late," Ravi said. "We've seen your true form."

Marisol crossed her arms, grinning. "Well then. I guess we're going to have to steal your notes."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," she said. "We are forming a study group, and you are the central asset."

"That sounds... like a threat."

"It is," Jorge confirmed.

"Absolutely," Ravi added.

Bharath held up his hands in mock surrender. "Fine. You may borrow my notes."

"*Borrow?*" Marisol echoed. "You're cute."

Jorge threw an arm around Bharath's shoulder as they walked out of the lecture hall. "Welcome to the most academically desperate band of idiots on campus. Our motto: If you succeed, we all get an A."

Outside, the sun was higher now, baking the pavement with Georgia heat. Students swarmed across the quad in crisscrossing lines, everyone with somewhere to be, caffeine in tow.

They lingered just outside the steps of Boggs Hall, surrounded by the smell of cut grass, fresh concrete, and whatever strange perfume the vending machines emitted.

"So, when's this study group thing happening?" Bharath asked.

"Tonight?" Ravi offered.

"Too early," Jorge said. "Let's give the illusion of independence for at least two days."

Marisol pulled out her almanac. "Tonight. Don't put off what you can do today to tomorrow. Student center. We'll pretend it's casual. You show up with your notes. We ask you things. You explain everything. I glare at you. Jorge eats chips."

"Why do I have chips?" Jorge asked.

"You just *seem* like you'd bring chips."

He thought about it. "That's fair."

Ravi nodded. "It's settled then. Bharath, our nerd guru, will guide us through the jungle of objects and classes."

"I don't know if I'm qualified - "

"You're the chosen one," Marisol said, patting his shoulder. "Don't fight destiny."

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 18: Mean Girls in Calc & An Unexpected Wingwoman

[1,534 words]

The Howey lecture hall was a fridge, or maybe it just felt that way after the late morning sun had roasted them through their walk across campus.

Bharath and Marisol entered side-by-side, their conversation still bouncing lightly from the CS lecture they'd just survived.

"I still don't get how you understood all that object nonsense," Marisol said as she chose a seat in the middle row. "It was like English until she said 'instantiate' and then it became Egyptian."

Bharath gave a small, embarrassed laugh. "I've just... read, that's all."

She sat and slung her bag under her chair, raising an eyebrow at him.

"You read ahead?"

"Well, yeah. I got a Java book back home. I didn't think I'd get into Tech, so I started early."

"Wow," she muttered, opening her notebook. "You're like if a cinnamon roll came to life and coded."

Bharath blinked. "Is that a compliment?"

"It means you're nice and secretly badass. Take it."

He smiled sheepishly and opened his own notebook.

The lecture hall was filling up fast now, at least eighty students, mostly undergrads, all filtering in with the usual mix of caffeine, earbuds, and calculated indifference.

Then, just as he was uncapping his pen, he caught the faint whiff of something familiar - a citrus-floral perfume with a sharp, expensive edge.

He didn't need to turn.

Ayesha.

Her voice reached him first, low and amused as she was with her companion Zara.

Zara said, "So, where are we sitting?"

"Anywhere away from people who think GPA stands for 'Good Personal Aroma.'"

Zara giggled. "Is that a cab guy sighting? Hey FOB... We're talking about you mister"

Ayesha chuckled, "Apparently he's decided pretending to be the strong and silent type is attractive now."

Bharath froze for just a breath. He didn't look up. Didn't flinch. But the edge of his page crumpled under his grip.

Marisol caught it.

Her eyes narrowed. She followed the sound, the tone, the deliberate flick of syllables meant to wound without taking credit.

Zara and Ayesha settled a few rows behind them, talking loud enough to be overheard - but just soft enough to maintain plausible deniability.

It wasn't the first time Bharath had heard that tone since landing in Atlanta.

But it still stung.

"Ignore them," Marisol said, voice low and even. "Some people peak in high school. They're just mad they have to climb again."

He didn't answer.

So she added, "And for the record, cinnamon roll or not, you could run circles around most of the guys in this room."

That earned a small twitch of his lips. Close to a smile.

Professor Rhodes arrived shortly after - a gangly, absentminded man in his early sixties who looked like he'd been asked to teach math on his way to a jazz concert. He wore a wrinkled grey blazer over a yellow T-shirt that said, "Limits do not exist."

"Alright," he said, adjusting his glasses. "Who here actually remembers limits from Calc I? Be honest."

Only a few hands went up. Bharath was one of them.

Marisol, meanwhile, was busy drawing a doodle of a drowning man labeled "Me."

The professor launched into the review with a dry humor that made the math almost tolerable. He scribbled equations with practiced ease: derivatives, Taylor series, integrals like waterfalls.

Then came the class exercise.

"You'll find problem sheets taped to the back wall," he said. "Grab one. Pick a partner. Let's see how rusty we are."

Marisol groaned. "Math trauma time."

They both got up, fetched a sheet, and returned to their seats.

Bharath read the first question and started sketching a graph.

Marisol blinked. "Wait - you already - ?"

"Do you want to try first?" he offered.

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "You're just going to be polite and secretly do it in your head anyway."

He looked guilty.

"You're hopeless," she said, but smiled as she slid her notebook toward him. "Alright, sensei. Walk me through it."

He did - gently. Not as someone showing off, but like someone sharing something that made sense to him, hoping it would make sense to her too.

Marisol found herself unexpectedly... absorbed.

He didn't lecture. Didn't condescend.

He just *showed*.

And when she got something right, he lit up - like he was genuinely proud of her for figuring it out.

Zara, watching from behind, leaned in toward Ayesha.

“Okay. That’s weird. Are they like... friends? Isn’t she way too attractive for him?”

Ayesha stared at Bharath’s side profile. His steady hand. The quiet focus. Marisol’s easy laughter.

Something about the whole thing rubbed her raw.

“I give it a week,” Ayesha muttered. “He’ll overstep. Guys like him always do.”

Back at the desk, Marisol tilted her head and tapped her pencil against her notebook.

“Okay. That one made sense. Wait... that *actually* made sense.”

Bharath smiled. “It’s just visualizing it like motion. You’re good at connecting patterns.”

“Flattery will get you slightly fewer sarcastic comments from me,” she said, smirking.

Then, softer: “Thanks.”

He looked up. “For what?”

“For being... not like the others.”

He didn’t know what to say to that.

So he just smiled again and got back to the problem set.

By the time class ended, Marisol had filled almost two full pages. Her notes weren’t perfect, but she *understood* what she’d written. More than she’d expected.

As they packed up, she nudged him.

“Study group is officially doubling as Calc support group. Congratulations, you’re our TA now for that as well.”

Bharath looked mildly alarmed. “Do I get paid?”

“You get chips.”

“Jorge’s chips?”

“Possibly.”

She slung her bag over one shoulder. “Come on. Let’s grab something cold before I spontaneously combust from both math and drama.”

He glanced back once as they walked out.

Ayesha was still seated.

Her eyes locked onto him for a split second - something unreadable flickering behind them - before she looked away.

He turned back and followed Marisol out the door.

Whatever it was? It could stay behind.

The lecture hall had mostly emptied, the scrape of chairs fading into hallway murmur and fluorescent hum.

But Ayesha remained seated.

Her notebook sat unopened on the desk. The page still blank. The cap of her pen, slightly chewed.

Across the aisle, Zara was fixing her lip gloss in the reflection of her compact. Her voice was a faint buzz.

“You good?” she asked, not looking up.

Ayesha nodded. “Yeah. Just tired.”

Zara snapped the compact shut with a click. “God, this class is going to kill me. I need espresso and zero math for the rest of my life.”

Ayesha smiled faintly - the kind that didn’t reach her eyes. She watched Zara gather her bag and sway down the aisle in confident strides. Already moved on.

But Ayesha didn’t move.

Her gaze had drifted - not to the board, not to her notes - but to the now-empty seats across the room.

Bharath had been sitting there.

Beside him. That girl.

The beautiful Latina with the sharp eyes and don't-touch-me confidence and goddess level boobs. The one who walked like she owned the floor and didn't need anyone to tell her so.

Marisol.

Ayesha had seen them together the whole class - laughing softly, heads bent close. Not flirting, exactly. But *familiar*. Like they had a language no one else was privy to. She had watched Marisol slide into the seat next to him like it was hers by right.

And the worst part?

He hadn't even looked up when Ayesha entered the room.

Not once.

Two days ago, she'd waved at him in the dining hall and he'd practically lit up. Now he was smiling at *her* like it meant something.

Ayesha folded her arms tightly, pressing her notebook to her chest.

Why did she care?

She didn't like Bharath. Not like *that*. He was sweet, sure. A little awkward. Polite in a way most guys here weren't. She'd actually liked that about him - the quiet way he held himself. The nervous charm. The way he'd looked at her like she wasn't just another girl in a hoodie.

And now... he wasn't even looking at her at all.

Why did I say those things? she asked herself, wincing internally.

The GPA joke. The FOB comment. The smirk she wore like a mask.

She hadn't been like this in high school.

She'd always thought she was better than that kind of girl - the ones who needed to hurt someone to feel powerful. But lately... she didn't know.

Was it really about *him*?

Or about how *she* felt invisible when he wasn't watching her?

Why wasn't he watching her?

Why wasn't he orbiting her like the others always had?

And why... *why*... was that Marisol girl smiling like she actually *liked* him?

She had to be using him. That had to be it. Maybe it was some weird freshman strategy. Befriend the nerd. Milk his GPA. Laugh at his jokes. Graduate with honors.

Except... except he had looked so *genuinely happy*.

So comfortable in his skin in a way she'd never seen before. Not around her.

And that smile Marisol gave him?

It hadn't looked fake.

Not like hers did.

Ayesha stared down at her hands, fingers still curled tight around the edge of her notebook. Her knuckles were pale.

What the hell is wrong with me?

She didn't know.

But something about the way Marisol had looked at Bharath - like he was worthy - had shaken something loose in her. Something small and ugly. Something she hadn't wanted to admit lived in her.

And now... she wasn't sure what to do with it.

She stood slowly, adjusting the strap of her bag on her shoulder. Her face was back to neutral, perfect, unreadable.

But her heart?

A little cracked.

And behind the practiced smirk and sharp one-liners, something very real was beginning to flicker:

Doubt. Jealousy. And maybe, just maybe... regret.

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Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 19: Wizard in the Wild: Lunch Confessions & Quiet Shifts

[1,234 words]

After the Calculus lecture, Bharath and Marisol lingered on the brick steps outside Howey Hall, schedules in hand.

Marisol squinted at hers. "Next up... Industrial Engineering 1101. The intro elective."

Bharath blinked. "You're in that too?"

"Yeah," she said, grinning. "Don't tell me... "

"I've got it too. Same room?"

She nodded, checking her sheet. "Room 228, Van Leer Building."

"Looks like I'm following you all day."

She laughed. "More like I'm being guided through the academic wilderness by the campus Yoda."

Bharath snorted. "You're going to keep saying things like that, huh?"

"As long as you keep understanding everything and making me feel dumb in comparison, absolutely."

The Industrial Engineering class was smaller, held in a less intimidating space - whiteboards instead of projectors, a round, chalk-dusted table in front instead of a lectern.

The professor was a young, balding guy with fast hands and faster speech. He launched into an intro of systems design, human factors, and logistics in everyday life.

As usual, Bharath sat still, silent, and absorbing everything like a sponge. His notes were precise, but he never looked down for long. He seemed to grasp the concepts intuitively, seeing the logic of process flows and constraints before the diagrams were even fully drawn.

Marisol watched him from the corner of her eye.

He didn't raise his hand. Didn't interrupt. Just... got it.

And she liked that.

It wasn't showy. It wasn't loud. It wasn't the desperate look-at-me hunger that came with guys trying too hard to prove they were smart.

It was quiet brilliance.

Effortless.

And suddenly she realized something: *She liked being around it.*

After the class, as they made their way to their next one, Discrete Math in the Klaus Computing building, Marisol said, "Okay. I'm calling it. You're a wizard."

Bharath laughed. "It's just logic. This stuff's... fun."

"Fun?" she repeated, mock-horrified. "You think this matrix-binary-graph-mumbo-jumbo is *fun*?"

He shrugged. "It's like solving puzzles. I've always liked puzzles."

"Do your puzzle-solving talents extend to lunch decisions?" she asked.

"Only if it involves choosing the least inedible thing on campus."

"Perfect. That's where I need a leader."

They grabbed lunch at the Student Center café, settling at a sunlit corner table near the windows. Marisol had grilled cheese and a berry smoothie. Bharath stuck to a spinach wrap and an unsweetened iced tea. He was already trying to eat "healthy" because Jorge had declared war on carbs.

As they unwrapped their food, Bharath said, "Hey. Thanks for hanging out."

Marisol gave him a look. "Why are you thanking me?"

"You know," he said, shrugging. "Most people would've just peeled off after class. You stuck around. That too with someone who's not exactly... the poster boy of cool."

She tilted her head. "You think that's why I'm here?"

He smiled sheepishly. "Let's just say, I've noticed the looks I get when people see me walking with you. I think my social stock has tripled."

That made her laugh — loud and unexpected. "You're so honest. It's ridiculous."

“But seriously,” he said, voice a little softer. “Thanks.”

She stirred her smoothie. “You’re easy to be around. I don’t have to perform.”

Bharath blinked. “Perform?”

“You’d be surprised how much of my day goes into managing perception,” she said. “Especially from guys. Either they flirt too hard, or they assume I’m dumb because I’m ‘hot,’ or they act like talking to me earns them some prize.”

Bharath nodded slowly. “Yeah. That sucks.”

“But you? You look at me like I’m just... a person.”

He smiled. “You are. A very pretty person. But still.”

She blushed faintly and shook her head. “See? That. You get it.”

He took a sip of tea. “I mean, it helps that I keep forgetting I’m allowed to talk to girls like you.”

She laughed again, not out of politeness. Because she liked how *unfiltered* he was.

There was a pause.

And then she said, more thoughtfully, “My mom would like you.”

Bharath looked up. “Yeah?”

“She doesn’t like many people. But you... you’re good.”

He tilted his head. “Tell me about her?”

Marisol leaned back in her seat, eyes drifting out the window.

“My mom’s a powerhouse. Single mother. Two daughters. She worked three jobs at one point. Grocery store in the mornings, cleaning houses on the weekends, late night shift at a supply warehouse.”

Bharath sat still, listening intently.

“She never complained,” Marisol continued. “Not once. She kept our hair neat, made sure we were fed, helped with homework, and showed up for every PTA meeting. No matter how tired she was.”

“She sounds incredible.”

“She is. She didn’t go to college. Barely finished high school. But she always told me: ‘Your future isn’t something you’re handed. It’s something you earn.’”

Bharath was quiet for a moment. “And you did.”

Marisol glanced at him. “Still earning.”

He smiled gently. “But you got here.”

“Yeah.” She smiled. “Georgia Tech, baby. The big leagues.”

There was a pause.

Then she said, “What about you? What’s your story?”

Bharath scratched the back of his neck. “My story’s a lot... softer.”

“Soft can be good.”

“I’m an only child. My mom is like this hyper-competent, temple-going, masala-mixing goddess who thinks I’m still ten. My dad’s just a businessman who plays chess and reads newspapers out loud like he’s broadcasting to the neighborhood.”

She smiled. “That’s cute.”

“I had cousins around. A lot of family. I was... spoiled. I didn’t even know how spoiled until I heard stories like yours.”

Marisol frowned. “Don’t say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“I just mean,” he said, choosing his words, “I didn’t have to fight for anything the way you did. Sometimes I wonder if that made me soft.”

She leaned forward. “No. It made you kind.”

He looked surprised.

“Don’t confuse softness with weakness,” she said. “Kindness is rare. Especially for men.”

Bharath flushed slightly and looked down at his plate.

“Feminist!”, he declared as she punched him playfully.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes.

Then she asked, "What about your mom? Would she like me?"

He looked up. "She'd love you. Aiyo Kanna! She is so beautiful. Like Saraswati herself! And then she would immediately say, get married. Have three kids. Quit school. Come back home live with us and start giving me grandchildren!"

Marisol laughed so hard she almost snorted.

"Noted," she said. "Avoid mother-in-law until finals."

Bharath couldn't stop smiling. "Done."

They finished their lunch, neither in a rush to move. The sun filtered through the glass in golden sheets, casting soft shadows on their trays.

Outside, the day buzzed on - freshmen scurrying between classes, birds chirping from lampposts, and the occasional squirrel darting across the path like a caffeine-addled courier.

Inside, at that corner table, something was shifting.

Not fast.

Not dramatic.

But quietly.

Marisol felt it in the way she leaned slightly toward him without meaning to, in the way she kept smiling after every sentence. In the way she felt less... tired, just being around him.

They lingered a moment longer than necessary, trays pushed aside, the cafe noise fading into background static. Marisol glanced at Bharath across the table: his quiet smile, the way his fingers traced absent patterns on his cup, and felt something settle deeper in her chest. Not fireworks. Not drama. Just... a steady warmth, like sunlight after too long in the shade.

She stood first, slinging her bag. "Come on, Yoda. We've got a study group to crash later. Don't want to leave the squad hanging."

Bharath rose too, matching her easy stride. "Lead the way."

As they stepped back into the buzzing campus afternoon, Marisol stole one last look at him. He didn't notice. He was too busy dodging a rogue squirrel... but she did. And for the first time that day, she let herself wonder:

What if this quiet thing between them wasn't just convenience?

What if it was the start of something real?

Share to your friends

Tip: You can use left, right keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

Chapter 20: Overheard & Undeniable: Girls Like Her, Guys Like Me?

[2,901 words]

The Student Center was a gentle hum of post-dinner chaos: vending machines humming, coffee brewing, tables crowded with laptops and textbooks, and the occasional sound of someone losing it over a group project.

Bharath and Marisol found a quiet table near the corner, far from the microwave smells and the ambient drama of Greek life.

"Should we... order snacks?" Marisol asked, eyeing the overpriced mini café.

"I have protein bars in my bag," Bharath offered.

Marisol gave him a look.

He shrugged. "Gym life."

She rolled her eyes but smiled. "You're lucky you're charming."

Just then, the glass doors swung open, and in stumbled Jorge and Ravi, looking like survivors of a midterm apocalypse.

"Madre de Dios!" Jorge groaned, dropping into the chair across from Bharath. "If I have to look at one more derivative, I will start a cult that worships *failure*."

Ravi collapsed next to him. "Linear Algebra is a hate crime. No one warned me college math had actual math in it."

"You guys look like you got steamrolled," Marisol said, amused.

"We did," Jorge said. "By matrices. And the concept of time. I didn't even eat lunch."

“I had a Pop-Tart and a breakdown,” Ravi added.

Bharath opened his notebook and slid it toward them.

“Want to go over today’s stuff?” he asked.

Both of them blinked.

“You already... did it?” Jorge asked.

“Most of it. In class.”

Ravi blinked harder. “Wait. You *understood* today’s class?”

“Yeah,” Bharath said. “I mean, it wasn’t easy, but it made sense after the first few examples.”

The table went silent for a beat.

Then Jorge slowly turned to Ravi. “We’ve found our jefe.”

Ravi placed a reverent hand on Bharath’s forearm. “Teach us, O wise one.”

Bharath laughed. “It’s really not that complicated...”

“We don’t want to *know* how it works,” Jorge interrupted. “We want to copy your notes, memorize your brain, and coast through life on your coattails.”

Marisol snorted. “You guys are unbelievable.”

Jorge grinned. “You say that, but you’re already in the front row of the temple.”

“Damn right,” she said, leaning back. “And I got here first.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Ravi said, pulling out a notebook and a half-functioning gel pen. “So what you’re saying is... if we hang out with you, we don’t have to study?”

“I didn’t say...”

“Say no more,” Jorge cut in. “We’re forming the Brotherhood of Bharath.”

“The Cult of Calculus,” Ravi added.

“The Jivasutra,” Marisol said, barely keeping a straight face.

Bharath sighed but couldn’t stop smiling. “You guys are ridiculous.”

“You love us,” Jorge said.

Bharath nodded. “A little.”

They spent the next hour going over CS concepts, basic discrete math logic, and the syllabus overview. Bharath explained in a way that was easy to follow - drawing comparisons to movies, food, even Jorge’s terrible attempts at Spanish rap.

“So a class is like a taco shell,” Bharath said at one point, drawing on a napkin. “The object is the concept of a taco. The class makes it real. Each taco has ingredients. Those are your properties. The functions are what you can do to the taco.”

“Like eat it?” Jorge asked.

“Exactly. `.eat()`, `.heat()`, `.share()`. Those are methods.”

Marisol leaned over. “Okay, I know it’s ridiculous, but that actually helped.”

“I’m never looking at tacos the same again,” Ravi muttered, scribbling furiously.

They laughed until their stomachs hurt.

And then kept laughing.

The night air had finally cooled. The sky above Georgia Tech shimmered with a few brave stars, barely visible through the orange streetlights and soft smog. Crickets hummed like an ambient soundtrack, and the occasional laughter from a distant dorm echoed across campus.

Marisol zipped up her hoodie and stretched.

“Alright,” she said, hoisting her bag over one shoulder. “If I don’t catch the MARTA now, I’ll have to wait an hour. Or worse, share a ride with someone who still listens to Limp Bizkit on purpose.”

Jorge let out a wheezy laugh. “Are you heading to North Avenue Station?”

She nodded. “Yeah. My mom’s picking me up from the Doraville stop.”

“Tell her gracias from us,” Jorge said. “For making a daughter cool enough to carry this whole squad.”

Marisol smirked. “I’ll pass that along.”

Ravi added, “And thank her for not raising another annoying group project overachiever. You’re one of the good ones.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled warmly. "You guys are idiotas."

Then she turned to Bharath.

"Don't forget to skim the problem set. And don't solve *all* the problems before the rest of us even figure out what a loop is."

He grinned. "No promises."

She gave him a playful salute and started walking off toward the Student Center's front doors, her boots clicking softly against the tile.

Marisol had only made it halfway down the hallway when she realized her campus map - the one she'd doodled all over during lecture and folded meticulously - was still in her bag... inside the lecture room.

She sighed, pivoted on her heel, and retraced her steps.

The building was mostly empty now, the halls echoing with the faint hum of vending machines and distant footfalls. She pushed open the side door quietly and stepped into the vestibule that led back to the classroom.

That's when she heard her name - or more specifically, her.

"...She could sit next to any guy in class," said Jorge's unmistakable voice. "But she keeps choosing you."

Marisol froze just inside the threshold, sneakers silent on the tile. Her fingers hovered over her bag's zipper as the words drifted toward her - unfiltered, unguarded, and not meant for her ears.

She hadn't meant to eavesdrop.

She really *hadn't*.

But something about the tone - soft, wondering - made her stay.

Bharath's voice came next, low and self-deprecating. "It's probably strategic. I'm the only one who understands the material."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't stop the smile tugging at her lips. *Strategic*, huh?

"She laughs at your jokes," Jorge said.

"I barely make jokes."

“Exactly. And still she laughs.”

Marisol’s smile deepened. *Damn right I laugh*, she thought. *You don’t know how funny you are just by being so... you.*

Then she heard it. The one that stopped her hand mid-zip, the one that made her breath catch ever so slightly in her chest.

“Girls like her don’t go for... guys like me.”

It wasn’t said with bitterness. There was no pity or resentment in his voice. Just... quiet certainty. Like he wasn’t trying to impress anyone with it. Like it was simply a law of nature he’d accepted long ago.

And for some reason, that hit her harder than anything else he could’ve said.

She stood there, half in shadow, heart thudding just a little too fast for comfort.

Because the thing was?

Bharath was wrong.

Dead wrong.

She *had* noticed. Everything.

How he never tried to prove he was smart - he just was. How he didn’t leer or show off or try to impress her with jargon. How he looked slightly confused by the chaos of American college life but never cynical about it. How he actually listened - with his whole attention, like her words mattered.

She had noticed the way he carried himself - a little awkward, yes, but solid. Quietly grounded. Present. Unfiltered. He was refreshing. He was *him*. And God - that was rare.

She thought back to the bookstore two days ago - how he’d helped her find the right edition of the CS textbook without making it weird, how he hadn’t stared at her tank top like the other guy in the aisle had, how he’d actually remembered what she said about missing home, even though she barely admitted it.

She hated that phrase. Like she was some untouchable category. Like just being attractive meant she existed in a separate class - one defined by makeup and mystery and being looked *at*, not *into*.

But Bharath didn’t treat her like that.

He looked at her like she was... a *person*. Not a prize. Not a potential notch.
Just *Marisol*.

And that made her feel something she didn't quite have a name for yet.

Not love. Not even a crush. But... hope. Maybe.

She inhaled deeply, smiled softly to herself, and finally reached for her map, still tucked into the side chair where she'd left it.

As she turned to leave, she caught a glimpse of them through the window: Jorge gesturing wildly, Ravi shaking his head, and Bharath with that quietly baffled look, as if he didn't know what to do with the possibility that someone might choose him.

She hesitated for a heartbeat - then let the door close gently behind her.

The Atlanta night air kissed her skin as she stepped out into it, stars barely visible above the faint orange haze of the city.

Her steps were lighter than before. Her heart? A little heavier.

But in the best way.

Back inside, Jorge yawned and stood.

"We're meeting tomorrow, right?"

"Same place," Bharath nodded. "Bring questions. I'll try not to solve everything in advance."

Ravi slung his backpack over one shoulder. "Bring Marisol too. Study sessions go down easier with good company."

Jorge added with a grin, "Especially company that makes the whole class look at you like you're secretly dating Miss Universe."

Bharath rolled his eyes and followed them out, but as the doors swung shut behind them, he couldn't help glancing over his shoulder - just once.

She was gone.

But her absence felt heavier than expected.

And in its wake, something strange and quietly sweet had begun to settle.

They got back to Smith Hall just after ten.

The hallway buzzed faintly with muffled laughter, TV static, and the squeaky wheels of a vacuum cleaner somewhere in the distance. Most students were winding down. But for Room 202, the night was just getting started.

Tyrel was already waiting, sprawled across the couch in basketball shorts and a white tank top, chewing sunflower seeds and watching *Fresh Prince* reruns with the sound barely audible.

He looked up as Bharath, Jorge, and Ravi entered.

“Ayyyy, the prodigal nerds return,” he drawled. “What y’all been doin’? Studying so hard your glasses got glasses?”

“Actually,” Jorge said, collapsing into his chair, “yeah. I think I used up the last functional cell in my brain.”

Ravi dropped his backpack with a thud. “I’m this close to declaring a major in sandwich-making.”

Tyrel laughed. “Well then, boys - you’ve come to the right chapel.”

He reached under the coffee table and yanked out a tangled bundle of blue Ethernet cables.

“I give you... LAN night.”

Bharath’s eyes widened. “Wait - you hooked us up?”

Tyrel puffed his chest. “Hell yeah I did. You’re lookin’ at the proud owner of a makeshift 4-port switch, wired straight into the dorm’s T1. It’s not broadband, it’s brain-band.”

Bharath grinned. “This is the fastest internet I’ve ever seen in my life.”

“It’s like teleportation,” Jorge muttered. “No dial-up tone. No waiting for my uncle to finish his call.”

Tyrel grabbed a pile of jewel cases and started spreading them across the table like sacred relics.

“Quake II. StarCraft. Need for Speed II SE. And the greatest of all... Age of Empires 2.”

Ravi raised a hand. “I vote for AoE 2. I already know how to click villagers.”

“Praise be to the click gods,” Tyrel said, tossing everyone a disc.

Half an hour later, the room was dark except for the glow of three monitors, blinking routers, and the occasional flicker from Tyrel's lava lamp in the corner.

They'd pushed the desks together, cables snaking around power strips. Tyrel's boombox played *DMX* in the background - just loud enough to vibe, not loud enough to invite the RA's wrath.

Age of Empires II loaded with a triumphant chime.

The LAN connected instantly.

It was like discovering magic.

"No lag," Bharath whispered, half in awe.

"None," Ravi confirmed. "Even when I zoom out and send thirty villagers to cut trees."

"Who needs America's dream," Jorge said, "when you've got LAN and grain silos?"

They picked teams. Set the map. Chose random civilizations. No cheats - *at least for now*.

The first few minutes were chaotic.

Jorge couldn't find his town center.

Ravi kept forgetting to build houses.

Tyrel accidentally killed all the deer with his soldiers instead of his villagers and killed his own soldiers with a Siege Onager.

Bharath?

He didn't say much.

But ten minutes in, he was already feudal.

"Yo, what the hell?" Tyrel leaned over. "Are you reading the game manual in your dreams?"

Bharath shrugged, eyes never leaving the screen. "Just... resource flow. Priorities."

"Man's already got archers," Ravi muttered.

"I'm still making farms," Jorge added. "Bad farms."

The next hour was full of laughter, trash talk, and betrayals.

Tyrel sneak-attacked Jorge with cavalry.

Ravi built a wonder just to flex.

Bharath sent a perfect pincer of spearmen and archers into Tyrel's base with surgical precision.

"Oh hell no," Tyrel shouted. "This is betrayal! I introduced you to LAN!"

"This is strategy," Bharath said with a grin.

Eventually, they were all wiped out except Bharath - whose empire stretched corner to corner, shining with towers and neatly arranged farms.

"You're not human," Jorge said, staring at the screen.

"He's Skynet," Ravi agreed. "Be polite for when they come for you."

Tyrel lay on the couch, arm across his forehead. "If I ever get rich, I'm hiring you to play my games for me."

They shut down around 12:45 a.m., bleary-eyed and euphoric. The smell of warm electronics and stale chips hung in the air.

The room felt small and full - not of clutter, but of something better.

Connection. Not just digital. Human.

Four boys from wildly different worlds - a Tamil computer science student, a Bolivian with a Korean grandmother, a sarcastic Punjabi with toast-based survival instincts, and a white boy raised on hip hop and hustle - all pulled together by Cat5 cables and pixels.

"This," Jorge said, as he flopped onto his mattress, "this is the dream."

"No," Ravi corrected, brushing crumbs off his pillow. "This is the *Desi* dream."

Tyrel yawned. "This is the *Tyrel* dream."

Bharath just smiled as he shut down his monitor.

The room was finally quiet.

Outside the windows, the lamplight from the quad cast long shadows on the walls. A faint breeze stirred the blinds. Somewhere, faintly, someone was playing a flute - badly. Probably on the freshman quad rooftop again.

Bharath lay on his narrow bunk, one arm tucked under his head, the other resting over his chest. The ceiling fan spun above him in lazy circles, wobbling slightly, as if uncertain it wanted to keep turning.

He should've been asleep by now.

But his mind was still full.

The entire day played back in flashes: waking up sore but motivated; breakfast with too much Tabasco; the thrill of acing class after class; sitting beside Marisol through the afternoon, laughing, explaining, watching her eyebrows furrow as she tried to make sense of partial derivatives and object methods.

And then dinner. The banter. The jokes. T1 ethernet. The games with no lag.

Bharath smiled in the dark. It had been a good day.

Better than he'd dared to expect when he'd boarded that flight from Chennai.

There was a rhythm now - a messy, awkward, American rhythm. But he was finding his beat.

Still... His thoughts drifted, as they often did, back to Ayesha.

The cab. That first shared ride. Her perfume. The flash of her smile when she said her name.

He remembered thinking: *This is it. My story starts now.*

Only, it hadn't.

She'd changed.

Or maybe she hadn't. Maybe he had just imagined someone else entirely. Someone kinder.

The comments she'd made that morning still stung. Not just because they were sharp - but because she'd said them in front of others. Laughed with them.

Like he didn't matter. Like he was still invisible - but now in a new country.

But not to everyone, a small voice in him said.

His mind turned, inevitably, quietly, to Marisol.

The way she sat next to him without hesitation. The way she teased him, challenged him. The way she had looked back at Ayesha and Zara and thrown words like tiny knives in his defense. Not sharp with malice, but clean with truth.

No one had ever stood up for him like that before. Especially not someone like her.

And that was the thing, wasn't it?

Someone like *her*.

Gorgeous. Confident. Stylish. Witty.

She turned heads in every hallway, and yet - she'd spent the entire day with *him*. Not out of politeness. Not out of pity.

Just because... she wanted to.

Jorge's teasing floated back to him. "You're aware she likes being around you, right?"

Bharath smiled faintly.

He'd dismissed it then. Still wanted to.

Girls like Marisol didn't go for guys like him. That's how the world worked. Right?

He wasn't smooth. He didn't speak Spanish. He didn't have that effortless swagger Latino guys always seemed to have in the movies. Or even in real life.

He wasn't charming like Jorge. Or buff like Tyrel.

And yet... she'd stayed.

She'd eaten lunch with him. Laughed with him. Watched him like he was something worth paying attention to.

Maybe that counts for something. Maybe it didn't.

But it felt... different.

And that difference - whatever it was - settled gently into his chest as his eyelids grew heavy.

He turned slightly on the mattress, hugging the pillow tighter, the soft hum of the dorm settling around him like a blanket.

Ayesha's absence still left a bruise.

But Marisol? Marisol was a surprise. One he hadn't expected.

And now, as the first real threads of sleep pulled at him, he let that surprise linger - soft, quiet, unfinished - and let it carry him into dreams.

In the dim glow of Tyrel's lava lamp, Bharath stared at the ceiling, the fan's wobble syncing with his slowing heartbeat. Ayesha's sting lingered like a distant bruise, but Marisol's presence today had been something else entirely.

He replayed her laugh from lunch, the way she'd leaned in during the study group, the effortless way she'd chosen his side of the table again and again.

Maybe girls like her did go for guys like him. Or maybe, just maybe, the lines between "like her" and "like him" weren't as fixed as he'd always believed.

Tomorrow would bring more classes, more notes, more of this strange new rhythm. And perhaps, hopefully, more of her.

Sleep finally claimed him, carrying whispers of possibility into the Atlanta dark.

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