

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 121: You Are It

[1,565 words]

The MARTA train rumbled beneath their feet, the car swaying gently as it sped through tunnels etched in steel and shadow. The world outside was a blur of graffiti-tagged concrete, patches of Atlanta skyline, and flashes of late-autumn trees shedding color like a sigh.

Bharath sat near the window, his arm draped over Marisol's shoulder, fingers tracing lazy circles into her upper arm. Marisol leaned into him, her cheek resting against his shoulder, her silky hair tickling his chin.

Neither spoke for the first few minutes. The silence between them wasn't awkward. It was full-rich with all they'd left behind and all they still didn't know how to name.

"I keep thinking about her," Marisol said finally, not lifting her head.

Bharath didn't need to ask who. "Yeah."

"She was so close to breaking."

He nodded slowly. "I felt it too. That edge. The kind of edge that doesn't show itself until you're already halfway over it."

Marisol shifted slightly, lifting her face to look at him. "We can't let her go back there, Bharath."

"We won't," he said without hesitation. "She's with the gang tonight. That's a start."

"She should be laughing now. Dancing. Being goofy with Camila and Tyrel and Jorge. That's good. She needs that energy."

He smiled faintly. "And she needs us."

"We're her roots now," Marisol murmured. "And we can't let her feel like she has to beg for that love."

He tightened his hold on her. "I don't think she will again. Not after today."

Marisol was quiet for a long moment, then added, "We'll keep reminding her. Every day. Until she doesn't just believe it-she knows it."

They reached their bus connection and slipped into two empty seats near the back. The hum of tires on asphalt joined the soft drone of quiet conversation from the front rows.

As the bus pulled away from the station, Bharath turned to her.

"Can I be honest with you?"

Marisol raised an eyebrow, amused. "You're naked around me most of the time. You better be."

He grinned, but it faded quickly.

"I've been thinking about what your mom said last time."

Marisol's body stilled, her posture shifting upright. "What part?"

"About... reality. About what it means to love someone outside your world."

Marisol turned toward him fully now, her eyes steady. "You mean how none of your friends or family know about me. Or Sarah."

Bharath winced. "Yeah."

She didn't flinch. "It's okay, Bharath. I get it."

"I want to change that," he said. "Eventually. But it's going to take time."

"You're scared," she said softly.

He hesitated. "I'm scared of them not seeing you both the way I do. Of them seeing you as-"

"Foreign," she finished for him. "American. Christian. Brown, but not the right kind of brown."

He swallowed. "It's not fair."

"No. But it's true."

They sat with that for a while. The bus passed a playground, empty and shadowed in the afternoon light.

"I haven't told them anything," Bharath said. "Not even about you. Not because I'm ashamed-but because I don't know how."

Marisol nodded. "And if they don't accept us?"

He reached for her hand. "I'm not going back home for a long time. We have time to figure it out. But I know this much already-"

He leaned closer, forehead to hers.

"I can't live without you. Either of you."

Her breath hitched. "You really mean that."

"I do."

She drew in a breath, her voice quieter now. "Tell me about them. Your family. The real story."

Bharath was silent for a beat. Then he said, "I'm an only child. My dad runs an IT company. My amma's a homemaker. They're old-school. Educated, loving, generous... but they live in a world with expectations."

"Which you're already defying by just being here," Marisol said gently.

"Exactly. And if I tell them I'm in love with not one but *two* American girls? One of whom is Catholic and the other Jewish by ancestry, both outspoken, beautiful, proud, *and* not Tamil?"

Marisol gave a soft laugh. "Their heads would explode."

"I don't want to spring this on them," Bharath said. "Not without a plan. Right now, they're just happy I'm doing well. Making friends. Top of my class. Settling into Atlanta. I want them to be able to see us and the love we have first - not just make judgements hearing about you."

"You're not hiding us," Marisol said. "You're protecting everyone from emotional combustion."

He nodded slowly. "But I never want you-either of you-to think I'm not proud of you. That I'm ashamed. You're my whole world now."

Her eyes softened. "We know. But let's come up with a strategy. We have time."

Marisol tilted her head toward him, her thumb brushing over the back of his hand as the bus rattled forward. Her lips pursed slightly, thoughtful, like she was already assembling a plan in her head - something tender, stubborn, and fiercely her.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “Here’s what’s going to happen.”

Bharath raised an eyebrow, wary and charmed. “Do I get a vote?”

She ignored him. “Sarah and I are going to start learning. Not performative, not surface-level. I mean *real* learning. About your life. Your culture. The language, the food, the stuff you miss but never talk about. We’ll figure out what your parents value, and we’ll meet them there.”

“Marisol-”

“I’m serious,” she interrupted gently, squeezing his hand. “We don’t need to become someone we’re not. But we *can* understand where you came from. Because if we’re going to be with you-*really* be with you-then that means loving your world too.”

He blinked at her. “You’d really do that?”

She smiled. “Of course. And not just for your parents. For *you*. We’re already building a life together - but I want to build it on solid ground. Sarah and I were talking about it the other day, actually. Joking, mostly, but... the truth was there.”

He tilted his head. “What truth?”

“That if this keeps going the way it’s going,” she said, softer now, “someday we might follow you. Even back to India. If you don’t stay here after school.”

He was stunned silent.

“I mean, obviously not tomorrow,” she added, laughing at his expression. “But you said you weren’t sure where you’ll end up long term. And Sarah and I already agreed - we’re not letting you go wherever that is, we’re going with you.”

Bharath’s throat went tight.

“So,” Marisol continued, “we figured we better start preparing. If you ever go back, your world won’t bend for us. We’ll have to meet it halfway.”

He stared at her, his heart thudding.

“We’ll start small,” she went on, more practically now. “You teach us the basics of Tamil. Just enough to make your amma smile if she ever hears us try. You tell us what comfort

food tastes like for you - and we'll cook it together. You show us what rituals mattered growing up..”

Bharath swallowed hard. “You’d do all that?”

Marisol looked him straight in the eye. “Of course. Because loving you doesn’t stop at you. It’s the you that was shaped by Chennai, and ritual, and tradition.”

Bharath smiled, but there was a wetness in his eyes.

“I haven’t had my amma’s rasam since I left. She used to make it whenever I got sick. She’d sit by my bed, rubbing my head with oil and humming this old P Susheela song.”

Marisol’s fingers laced through his. “Then teach us how to make it. We’ll mess it up the first time. But I want to know what comfort tasted like for you.”

His breath shuddered out.

“But,” she added with a little grin, “we’ll need your help. You have to be patient with us. I can’t pronounce half the stuff you say when you’re flustered. And I don’t even know where to begin with your food. I once thought paneer was a type of bread.”

He laughed. Loud and warm, his forehead falling to hers.

“You don’t have to do any of that just to prove something to my parents.”

“We’re not doing it for *them*,” she corrected gently. “We’re doing it because we love *you*. But if they see how much we’re willing to learn, to try - maybe that’s what opens the door.”

“I don’t deserve you,” he said quietly.

“Sometimes I worry,” Bharath said softly, “that if this ever gets too hard - too Indian, too complicated - you both will decide it’s not worth it.”

She kissed his chest. “That’s not even on the table.”

Marisol looked up, voice fierce but calm. “We didn’t fall in love with ease. We fell in love with you. That means we stay-even in the storm.”

“You deserve every ounce of love we give you. And more.”

He reached for her, pulling her close. The leather seat creaked as she slid into his lap sideways, arms around his neck. He kissed her hair, her cheek, the edge of her jaw.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Marisol kissed him back, slowly, deeply. "I know."

When they pulled apart, she added, "And for the record, Sarah's already making flashcards."

He blinked. "What?"

"She made me guess five Tamil words yesterday. I got *one* right."

He chuckled again, stunned and moved. "You two are unbelievable."

"No," Marisol murmured. "We're *yours*. That's the difference. If we're not careful, we'll end up like your backup dancers-slash-devotional wives. Sarah's already making plans."

Bharath choked. "What? That's a weird thing to joke about."

Marisol shrugged, smirking. "I mean, you do have a certain cult-leader charisma. We're just saying... hypothetically, if Mia ends up at Tech too--"

"Absolutely not," Bharath said quickly, hands up. "That's wrong. That's... she's your sister!"

"Relax," Marisol teased. "We're kidding. Mostly."

Sarah's voice, faint in his memory, echoed: *But it wouldn't be the worst thing to watch.*

He shifted in his seat. Bad idea to remember that while sitting on vinyl.

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Chapter 122: I'm Falling For Him Too!

[1,807 words]

The late-afternoon sun slanted across the sidewalk as Marisol and Bharath walked up the quiet, familiar street toward the modest Rivera house. It was strange how quickly it had come to feel familiar - the lemon tree out front, the sagging wooden gate, the slightly crooked wind chime that always seemed to rattle half a second too late.

Marisol exhaled slowly. "Okay. You ready for my mom?"

"No," Bharath said immediately. "But I'm good at improvising now."

Marisol smirked and squeezed his hand as they stepped up to the porch.

Before they could knock, the door flew open.

"Mia-?" Marisol began, but stopped short.

It was Mia.

But... not the version she was expecting.

No smoky eyeliner. No crop tops. No strategically ripped jeans or glittery accessories. Instead, Mia wore loose pajamas stretched across the front, a pair of soft leggings, and her hair pulled up in a no-nonsense bun. A pencil was stuck behind one ear, and she had what looked suspiciously like a textbook tucked under one arm.

"*What* in the Fresh Prince is going on here?" Marisol blurted.

Mia ignored her. Her eyes had locked onto Bharath the moment the door opened - and they lit up like someone had switched on a thousand-watt bulb inside her.

"Bharath!" she squealed, beaming as she reached for his hand. "You *finally* came back!"

Before he could say a word, she grabbed his wrist and tugged him into the house like a prize she didn't want to share, practically dragging him past a baffled Marisol.

"Wait-Mia-*hello?*" Marisol called out, shutting the door behind them.

"Later!" Mia shouted from down the hall.

By the time Bharath realized what was happening, he was in Mia's room, standing in front of a desk covered with neatly arranged flashcards, printouts, a calculator, and a small dry-erase board on a stand. Her bookshelf, once more decorative than functional, was now crammed with SAT prep books and chemistry manuals.

She spun around, eyes sparkling. "Okay, so first - look! I've been practicing vector problems. Mr. Alvarez said we're covering this next week, but I wanted a head start. And I've been doing mock SATs every other weekend - don't tell Marisol, she says I'm crazy."

Bharath stared, genuinely impressed. "This is... wow. This is incredible, Mia."

"I mean, I'm still struggling with some calculus topics," she said quickly, biting her lip, "but I hope I will get through it."

He smiled, touched by her earnestness. "You're doing all this by yourself?"

She nodded. "Well, mostly. Sometimes I rope in friends. But no one takes it seriously."

She paused, then added - just a bit too casually, "I've decided I'm only applying to Georgia Tech. Or maybe Georgia State, if I *really* don't get in. But Tech is the dream."

Bharath blinked. "You're aiming for Tech?"

Mia tilted her head, watching him carefully. "Would that be... weird? If I ended up there?"

"Are you kidding?" Bharath said, grinning. "That would be amazing."

Mia's eyes widened slightly. "Really?"

He nodded, stepping forward to look over her notes. "You'd crush it. Honestly, I wish I had been this organized at your age. You're focused. Motivated. You've got the drive. If you keep this up, you'll get in easy next fall."

Mia looked away quickly, a faint blush rising in her cheeks.

Bharath glanced at a sticky note by her desk that read "GT 1999. Get in. No excuses."

He turned back to her with a soft smile. "You remind me of your sister, you know."

That made Mia look up, a little caught off guard.

"She's one of the smartest people I know," Bharath continued, his voice gentler now. "Not just in books - though yeah, she's brilliant. But in the way she sees people. The way she fights for the people she loves. The way she never gives up."

Mia's face softened as she watched him.

"I'm so proud of her," Bharath said. "And proud to be with her. She's... one of a kind."

The silence that followed was warm. Charged. Mia glanced down, pretending to fix her pencil case.

"I think she's proud of you too," she said quietly. "She talks about you like... you're everything."

Bharath's voice dropped. "She's everything to me."

Mia swallowed hard, then smiled again. "Well. You better stick around, Bharath."

He tilted his head. "Why's that?"

"Because if I make it to Tech," she said, giving him a mock stern look, "I'll need a study buddy."

Bharath laughed, bowing slightly. "It would be an honor."

Mia smiled - but this time it lingered. Deeper. Softer. She didn't look away quite as fast as she normally would. Her eyes studied Bharath's face just a little too long. The sharp line of his jaw, the careful warmth in his gaze, the way he made her feel like she mattered not because she was pretty or clever, but because she was *trying*. Because she was *becoming*.

And in that quiet, unspoken space between them, something shifted.

Mia Rivera, for all her teasing and sass, had never once been seriously impressed by a boy before. Not like this.

She'd flirted. Toyed. Flashed a smile or a glance, always in control, always keeping boys at arm's length like pieces on a game board. But Bharath didn't fit any of the rules. He wasn't smooth. He wasn't loud. He wasn't trying to impress her.

He was just... *there*. Steady. Encouraging. Kind in a way that felt rare. Safe in a way that made her question every defense she'd built.

As he bent over her notes again, pointing out a correction with his index finger, she found herself watching the way his lips moved when he spoke. The way his brow furrowed when he explained a formula. She wasn't hearing the math anymore.

She was thinking about how he spoke of Marisol - with awe and respect, not just love. Like her sister was made of galaxies.

And Mia - for all her pride and bravado - had never seen a man look at a woman like that before.

No wonder Marisol is so protective of him, Mia thought, heart thudding softly. *He's rare.*

She felt something flutter inside her chest, uneasy and foreign. Admiration, yes - but something sweeter too. A longing she hadn't known how to name until this very moment - to be seen not just as clever or pretty, but *worth the effort*. To have someone look at her the way he looked at her sister: like she was *already enough*.

And God, how rare that felt. Something that twisted with guilt even as it bloomed.

Because how could she feel this way about the man her sister loved?

And yet... there it was. A warmth that crept in under the ribs. A longing not for attention, but for inclusion. To be *seen* like that. To be spoken of with that same reverence someday. To be *worthy* of that kind of love.

She tried to shake it. "You know, you're making it really hard to stay focused on academics," she said lightly, hoping her voice still worked.

Bharath looked up with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, I tend to derail focus with my overwhelming charisma."

Mia laughed, maybe too loudly. "Right. That's what it is. Your *dad joke energy*."

"Hey," he said, mock offended, "I've been working hard on that persona."

"And succeeding wildly," she quipped, but her tone had softened again.

He leaned against the edge of her desk, arms crossed casually, not pressing in but not retreating either. "You're really serious about Tech."

Mia nodded. "More than anything. It's all I think about lately. I mean, yeah, Georgia State's a good backup, but I want to be *there*. I want to walk the same halls you and Marisol walk. I want to be where the best people go."

Bharath tilted his head. "You are one of the best people, Mia. Don't doubt that."

Her throat tightened. "I'm not. Not exactly. But I'm trying."

He watched her a moment, something unreadable in his eyes. Then he said, more gently, "Trying counts for everything."

She looked down, her voice almost a whisper. "I guess I want to matter. Not just be the pretty girl or the wild one or the kid sister everyone underestimates."

"You *do* matter," Bharath said quietly. "You don't have to prove anything to matter, Mia. Not to me. Not to anyone. And you've got more grit than most people I've met at Tech already. That has nothing to do with who your sister is."

Mia swallowed. "But I want you to be proud of me too."

That came out before she could catch it.

And the second she said it, she wanted to rewind time.

Bharath blinked, then smiled. "I am proud of you. Seriously. You're killing it."

She forced a laugh, covering her embarrassment. "You sound like an overinvested soccer dad."

He smirked. "Better than being the weird tutor who vanishes after midterms."

"Don't," she said, pointing at him. "No vanishing. I need you around when I get my acceptance letter. I need someone to gloat to."

"Promise," he said, crossing his heart. "You'll be at Tech. And I'll be there to take you out for pizza to celebrate."

Her heart flipped at the way he said it - like it was already written. Like he'd just given her future a heartbeat.

Stop it, she told herself. You're getting carried away.

She sat down on the edge of her bed, trying to collect herself. "So... you and Marisol. It's real, huh?"

Bharath nodded immediately. "She's everything."

Mia nodded slowly, heart clenching and softening at once. "Yeah. I see that."

He gave her a warm, genuine smile. "But you're something else too, Mia. I hope you know that."

Her chest swelled. The words sat in her like light.

Before she could respond, there was a soft knock at the door.

Marisol peeked in, eyebrows raised, but her voice was casual. "Everything okay in here?"

Mia stood up quickly, clearing her throat. "Yeah. Just showing off my empire."

Marisol glanced around the room, eyes skimming over the notes and textbooks. "Damn. You weren't kidding. This is impressive."

Bharath nodded with pride. "She's locked in. GT 1999 - calling it now."

Mia tried to keep her smile measured. "Well, I have the best consultants."

Marisol stepped in and wrapped an arm around her sister, pulling her close for a quick squeeze. "I'm proud of you, chiquita. Even if you're trying to dethrone me."

Mia grinned. "Just keeping the Rivera legacy strong."

The three of them stood there for a beat - something fragile and warm hanging between them.

Then Mia gently pulled away, brushing imaginary dust from her pajamas. "I should probably get back to my reading."

Bharath looked like he might say something else, but Mia was already slipping toward her desk.

Marisol caught his hand and tugged him out, glancing over her shoulder. "Don't let the calculator bite."

Once the door shut behind them, Mia let out a slow, steady breath.

She leaned back in her chair, staring down at her SAT notes, though her eyes weren't focusing on the equations anymore.

This is going to be a problem, she thought, heart thudding against her ribs.

Because somewhere between the laughter, the compliments, and the soft way he said her name...

She'd started falling for Bharath.

And she had no idea what to do about it.

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Chapter 123: Enchiladas and Careful Hearts

[1,171 words]

Dinner was spread across the small, checkered tablecloth in the Rivera kitchen like a silent poem: warm colors, fragrant steam, and more dishes than Bharath could name. The smells-cumin, tomato, roasted peppers, lime-wrapped around him like a hug. A bowl of seasoned black beans simmered gently beside a golden platter of arroz amarillo, fried plantains gleaming in a ceramic dish, sautéed bell peppers and onions stacked neatly in a cast-iron pan. And at the center of it all was something Bharath hadn't expected: two whole trays of vegetarian enchiladas, their tops bubbling with cheese, stuffed with roasted squash, mushrooms, and black lentils.

He blinked at the spread.

“Ma’am,” he said, quietly stunned, “did you make all this... for me?”

Maria, who was bustling by the stove with a wooden spoon in hand, turned and gave him a modest shrug. “You don’t eat meat, right?”

He nodded slowly.

“Then of course,” she said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re in my home, mijo. You get fed.”

Bharath smiled so widely it almost hurt. His chest tightened in the best way. He looked at Marisol, who was already smiling at him from across the table like *she knew*. Because she did.

They sat. The meal began in soft clinks and satisfied hums. Maria made sure his plate was never empty, and Bharath made sure to thank her every time she passed something his way.

Conversation flowed easily, if carefully.

They told stories-censored, of course-about the “chaotic energy” of their friend group. About Ravi’s insistence that his mixtape could outshine any DJ, about Tyrel trying to teach Camila how to “grind like it’s 1998,” about Jorge and his tragic attempts at salsa. They shared anecdotes from class, laughter from late nights watching movies in their tiny dorm room, and memories of studying at Sarah’s off-campus house.

When Sarah’s name came up, Bharath felt a flicker of tension across the table. Maria’s eyebrows rose ever so slightly.

“She’s... the girl Bharath helped,” Marisol offered smoothly. “After the attack.”

“She’s a junior,” Bharath added. “Really kind. Brilliant. I think we’ve all sort of adopted each other.”

Maria nodded slowly, still skeptical, but not hostile. “And that’s whose place you’ve been staying most nights?”

“Yes,” Marisol said truthfully, brushing her thumb across Bharath’s knuckles under the table. “It’s just quieter there. Off-campus.”

“She has a very calm house,” Bharath said. “We all hang out there a lot.”

Maria nodded, then sipped her hibiscus tea and gave them a measured glance. “You should all come here for Thanksgiving.”

Marisol blinked. "Wait-what?"

"Your friends. You talk about them so much. Bring them. Your grandfather would have said the more the merrier."

Marisol's expression softened. "Are you sure, Mami?"

Maria looked between the two of them. "I'm sure. That way I can see if they're feeding you enough."

Everyone laughed, including Bharath-though his heart melted quietly under the table.

But not everyone was laughing.

Mia had been mostly quiet during dinner. Not sullen or withdrawn, just... observant. Her eyes kept drifting to Bharath whenever he wasn't looking. And when he did look her way, she'd shift her gaze back to her plate with a small smile or a pretend cough.

She was studying him. Trying to figure him out. Trying to *understand* the strange pull she couldn't explain.

Her fork clinked against her plate. "I'm still sucking at Calculus."

All heads turned toward her. Marisol raised an eyebrow. "Since when?"

"Since Mr. Alvarez decided we should all be baby Einsteins and solve multivariable integrals with broken calculators," Mia said flatly.

Bharath chuckled. "It's not that bad."

"Easy for you to say," she said, stabbing her rice. "You probably dream in integrals."

Marisol grinned. "He kind of does, actually. He's like a calculus god. He helped me visualize slope the other day and it was like someone had removed a mental blindfold."

Bharath laughed modestly. "It was a good analogy."

"Well, I need more of those," Mia said. "Consistently."

"I can help again," Bharath said, brushing his hair back. "But I can't really keep coming here often. It's a bit difficult with classes and no car."

Mia's eyes didn't leave his. "Then I'll come to you. I mean, it's not that far. I can take the MARTA after school. I've got my license now too."

Marisol tilted her head. "You want to come to campus for tutoring?"

Mia shrugged like it was no big deal. "Why not? You're always there anyway. And he's- well, he's better than Mr. Alvarez."

Bharath smiled. "We'll make a schedule. As long as you bring the effort, I'll bring the analogies."

"Deal," she said, almost too quickly.

Maria looked vaguely amused. "You're really serious about this Georgia Tech dream, huh?"

"I am," Mia said. But her eyes were still on Bharath. "And I have the best person helping me now."

Bharath didn't notice the way she looked at him then-not fully. But Marisol did.

She watched her little sister closely, a quiet flicker of something passing through her.

Later, as they helped Maria clear the table, Marisol nudged Bharath with her elbow. "I think you've got a fan."

He blinked. "Mia?"

"She's glowing like a firefly every time you speak."

Bharath frowned slightly. "I was just being supportive."

"I know," Marisol said gently. "That's why she's starting to look at you differently."

He went still for a moment, plate in hand. "You think...?"

"She's seventeen. You actually listen to her. That's like... mythical creature levels of rarity."

Bharath lowered the plate slowly. "I didn't mean to-"

"I know you didn't," Marisol said, touching his arm. "And she doesn't know what she's feeling yet. But maybe just... be mindful, okay?"

Bharath nodded, though his ears were burning. "I mean, yeah, she's cute. But she's also seventeen. And your sister. I'm not a monster."

"No one's saying you are," Marisol said lightly. "I'm just... observing. Besides, Sarah and I wouldn't let you seduce anyone else without our strict supervision."

"Wait, what?"

“Think of us as your erotic HR department,” she deadpanned. “All applicants must be emotionally stable, team-oriented, and okay with shared benefits.”

“You two are deranged,” Bharath muttered, but he was laughing despite himself. “This isn’t funny.”

“It is a little,” Marisol said, winking. “You should’ve seen your face.”

But even as he laughed, something tightened in his chest.

She’s seventeen, he reminded himself. She’s Marisol’s sister.

He didn’t want to imagine Mia like that-not seriously. Not ever. It felt wrong. It *was* wrong.

And yet, his body betrayed him with every teasing nudge, every sly comment from the girls, every time Mia looked at him like he was already part of her future.

He exhaled slowly.

This is dangerous, he thought. Not because of temptation-but because she matters. And I can’t afford to mess that up.

He glanced toward the hallway, where she’d disappeared minutes ago.

I need to be careful. For her. For us.

Mia appeared in the doorway then, drying her hands on a towel.

“Don’t forget,” she said, flashing Bharath a grin. “Tuesday after school. You’re mine for an hour.”

And with that, she disappeared down the hall.

Marisol exhaled. “Ay, Dios mío.”

Bharath just looked dazed.

And far down the hallway, in the quiet of her room, Mia sat down at her desk and stared at her planner.

She flipped to the coming Tuesday and wrote in block letters:

CALCULUS WITH B.

Then, after a long pause, she added a heart.

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Chapter 124: Mia and Marisol [Image]

[12 words]

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Chapter 125: Forbidden Fantasies

[1,284 words]

The house was quiet again, the faint hum of Bharath tidying up downstairs filtering softly through the floorboards. Upstairs, in the warm intimacy of Sarah's bedroom, the two women waited for him eagerly, their naked bodies draped casually across the bed. Despite their physical closeness, an uneasy silence lingered between them, as if some invisible barrier had risen unnoticed, thickening the air.

Sarah glanced repeatedly at Marisol, concern deepening each time she saw her partner's faraway expression. Marisol had been unusually quiet all day, her eyes frequently distant, her usually vibrant laughter and teasing banter markedly absent. Sarah's heart twisted with worry, unable to shake the thought that her earlier meltdown was the cause of Marisol's withdrawn mood.

This morning, in an unexpected burst of vulnerability, Sarah had reacted sharply when Marisol mentioned casually taking only Bharath home to her mother's house. The thought had instantly pierced Sarah, reopening old wounds, filling her with dread and insecurity. She'd felt suddenly and irrationally excluded, terrified she was still somehow secondary, even after all they'd shared. Sarah had broken down in tears, unable to articulate clearly how afraid she'd become in that moment. Marisol had quickly apologized and soothed her, insisting it wasn't what Sarah thought, but the tension had lingered nonetheless, a shadow across their day.

Now, watching Marisol stare blankly out the window into the dimly lit Atlanta street, Sarah felt the ache again. She set down the Tamil flashcards she'd been idly flipping through, deciding it was time to confront the silence directly.

"Hey," Sarah began softly, shifting to sit closer to Marisol. She reached out, fingertips lightly brushing Marisol's shoulder. "You've barely said a word since we got home. Are we okay?"

The house was quiet again, the soft, distant sounds of Bharath tidying downstairs barely registering upstairs in Sarah's bedroom. Sarah sat cross-legged on the bed, her bare skin glowing softly in the warm lamplight, the towel around her damp hair forgotten beside her. Across the room, Marisol stood quietly by the window, her equally bare form outlined delicately by the streetlights filtering through the curtains. She hadn't spoken much since they'd returned home, her quiet introspection weighing heavily in the air.

Sarah studied Marisol carefully, concern tugging at her heart. It wasn't like Marisol to retreat into silence, especially not after the charged emotional exchange they'd shared earlier that day. Sarah's mind spun anxiously, worried that the lingering tension might be because of her morning breakdown when Marisol mentioned taking only Bharath to her mother's house. Guilt twisted Sarah's stomach into knots.

"Mari?" Sarah asked softly, her voice hesitant but caring. "Are you upset with me? About this morning? I know I overreacted, and I just...I'm sorry if I made you feel like you can't share things with me."

Marisol turned, blinking as if emerging from a deep trance. Her eyes immediately softened, guilt mingling with tenderness as she hurried across the room, sinking onto the mattress and drawing Sarah into a comforting embrace. Their naked bodies pressed gently together, warmth spreading through Sarah's chest as Marisol hugged her tightly.

"Oh god, Sarah, no," Marisol murmured earnestly, pressing a soothing kiss to Sarah's temple. "I'm not upset about this morning at all. I promise. Please don't think that. It breaks my heart to see you hurting."

Sarah sighed deeply, relief and lingering insecurity warring inside her as she nestled into Marisol's comforting arms. "Then what is it, Mari? You've been so quiet, so distant. Something is definitely bothering you."

Marisol hesitated, pulling back slightly to meet Sarah's concerned eyes. Her voice came soft, almost ashamed. "It's Mia."

Sarah tilted her head, confusion and worry flashing across her face. "Mia? Your sister? Did something happen with her?"

"Not exactly," Marisol began slowly, visibly struggling with her words. She took a deep, steadying breath. "Tonight, I noticed how Mia was looking at Bharath. It wasn't casual or innocent, Sarah. It was... intense. Exactly how we both look at him."

Sarah's heart skipped a beat, a confusing mix of intrigue and apprehension swirling inside her. "You mean...like she's attracted to him?"

Marisol's cheeks flushed a deeper shade, her embarrassment battling with obvious arousal. "Yes. It's more than that. For a moment—just a moment—I imagined her with us. With Bharath. I saw it so clearly, Sarah."

Sarah felt heat ignite low in her belly, her breathing quickening instinctively. "Mari, you mean like... intimately?"

"Yeah," Marisol admitted softly, biting her lower lip, eyes clouded with conflicted desire. "I saw her beneath him, Sarah. I saw her giving herself to him, her face filled with awe and need, exactly how we must look when he takes us. I imagined him claiming her, making her cry out, her body arching up towards him, those gorgeous tits bouncing with every powerful thrust."

Sarah swallowed hard, images vivid and intoxicating flooding her mind. Her pulse quickened as she felt herself growing wet, the idea taboo but undeniably thrilling. "Mari, I... God, that's intense."

"I know," Marisol groaned softly, pressing her forehead against Sarah's shoulder. "It's wrong, isn't it? She's my sister. But I keep picturing Bharath bending her over, spanking her ass like he does mine, watching her moan and shiver beneath his hands. I can't stop imagining him teaching her to submit, making her beg and plead exactly how I did the first time."

Sarah's breath hitched sharply, her hands tightening around Marisol as arousal surged powerfully through her veins. Her voice trembled with equal parts hesitation and longing. "I can't stop seeing it now either. Imagining her choking on his cock, her lips stretched around him, tears streaming down her cheeks just like mine did. He'd be gentle at first, patient with her like he always is with us, teaching her to take him deeper and deeper until she completely gives herself over to him."

Marisol shivered visibly, her own breathing growing ragged. "Yes. Exactly that. God, Sarah, I can see her eyes widening, her innocence slipping away with every thrust. I see him grabbing her hips, driving into her, whispering filthy things in her ear that make her blush and gasp."

Sarah whimpered softly, heat blooming uncontrollably between her thighs, her imagination spiraling wildly. "Or slow and tender," Sarah whispered breathlessly, "the way he makes love to us when he wants us to feel worshipped. Imagine her trembling

beneath him, Mari, feeling completely adored, completely seen. Imagine her gasping his name, begging him to let her cum, learning how good it feels to surrender."

Marisol moaned softly against Sarah's neck, the sound rich with longing and frustration. "God, Sarah. How can something so wrong feel so right? She's my little sister, but picturing her like that—sharing in what we have, experiencing everything we adore about Bharath—it's driving me insane."

Sarah pulled back slightly, cupping Marisol's flushed face, her eyes filled with understanding and lust. "You're not insane, Mari. You're human. We both are. And the thought of seeing Bharath love someone we both care about, showing her the ecstasy we've found with him—how could it not excite us?"

Marisol sighed shakily, relief washing over her as she leaned into Sarah's comforting touch. "Thank you, Sarah. For understanding. For not thinking I'm terrible."

Sarah smiled warmly, her eyes sparkling mischievously as footsteps sounded softly on the stairs below. "Never terrible. Just honest and beautifully real."

Both women turned towards the door, hearts racing faster as they heard Bharath approach. Marisol's lips curled wickedly, anticipation brightening her eyes. "We should probably distract ourselves, burn off this crazy energy before it completely consumes us."

Sarah's smile widened playfully. "Mari, I love the way you think."

When Bharath stepped into the bedroom moments later, the two women immediately pounced, laughter and eager cries mingling as they pulled him down onto the bed, their urgent desire swiftly overtaking any lingering thoughts, replaced only by their immediate hunger for each other.

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

Chapter 126: Plotting Our Forever

[2,299 words]

The sheets had long since slipped to the floor, replaced by the heat of skin and the slow, pulsing rhythm of bodies that had forgotten the clock. Their breaths mingled with the faint rustle of leaves outside Sarah's window, the world dim and golden in the

moonlight. Every movement was slow, unhurried, full of intimacy. Love, not just sex. A triangle drawn in sweat and kisses and murmurs.

Bharath lay on his back, head turned slightly to the left where Marisol curled against him, lips brushing along the slope of his neck. On top of him, Sarah rode him slowly, her hips moving in gentle, reverent circles, her breath catching in soft, unfiltered moans as she leaned forward, her breasts brushing against his chest.

"I can't believe..." she gasped between movements, "...I'm saying this mid-thrust..."

Marisol chuckled against Bharath's shoulder. "Oh, this is going to be good."

Sarah giggled, rolling her hips just enough to make Bharath groan. "The movie," she whispered, pressing a kiss to his jaw. "I loved it. It was loud and chaotic and so... full of life."

Bharath managed a breathless smile. "You danced in the aisle, didn't you?"

Sarah nodded, cheeks flushed. "Twice. Nandita made us. There was this auntie who grabbed my hands and twirled me like we were in a Bollywood finale. Tyrel nearly died of confusion. It was glorious."

Marisol laughed again, threading her fingers through Bharath's hair as she pressed her lips to Sarah's shoulder. "I would pay money to see Jorge try to keep up with Camila in a dance number."

"You missed it," Sarah said, eyes twinkling. "You two were at the parental love-in, but I was living my best filmy fantasy. Three hours, five songs, endless drama. And whistles! People whistled in a *theatre*. Who does that?"

"Indians," Bharath murmured, a hand gripping Sarah's hip as she sank down onto him again. "We whistle for everything. Actually people who watch Hindi movies are more civilized. In the south where I am from people are insane. I hope you'll be able to see it someday."

Sarah moaned, trembled, and leaned into Marisol's kiss. "I want to learn all of it," she whispered. "The dances, the rituals, the festivals, the... gods, the language. All of it. I want to be part of your world, Bharath."

That stilled him.

He looked up at her, wide-eyed. Sarah slowed, still moving, still riding him, but her eyes locked on his, serious now.

Marisol stroked her back. "That's what I told him today. That you and I will learn. Not because we have to, but because we *want* to. If this is forever... we want to *belong*."

Sarah nodded. "Teach us Tamil. Tell us what your mom used to make when you were sick. Explain the story behind your favorite god. We'll get it wrong sometimes, but we'll try."

Bharath felt his heart expand. His eyes stung. "You really mean that."

Sarah smiled and kissed him, slow and deep. "We do."

She picked up her pace then, still gentle, still rolling, but with more heat in her core. Bharath's fingers tightened. His jaw clenched. Marisol kissed them both in turn, murmuring soft encouragement until Sarah cried out softly, her climax rippling through her like music.

She collapsed forward onto Bharath's chest, breathless and giggling, even as he was still inside her.

"You're magic," she whispered. "How is this as good as the first time with you every time? Even kissing you just makes me more aroused than I've ever felt before!"

"And I haven't even started chanting mantras yet," he teased.

Sarah laughed as she rolled off of him, curling into his side. "Give me ten minutes. I might convert."

Marisol was already moving.

She straddled him with slow, sensual purpose, sinking onto him with a long moan that turned Bharath's mind to static.

Sarah pressed kisses to his neck. "Don't die yet. She's just getting started."

Bharath groaned. "If I die now, bury me here."

Marisol began to ride him with a slow, controlled rhythm, her hands on his chest, her eyes never leaving his.

"You looked so proud today," she whispered. "At dinner. You were glowing when you praised the food my mom made for you."

"She made all that... just for me," Bharath said, breath hitching. "It meant everything."

"You broke through," Sarah said from his side. "Marisol told me that Maria was watching you the whole time. And not with suspicion. With curiosity. Respect."

Marisol leaned down, her movements not faltering, and kissed him hard. "She's proud of you, you know. She won't say it yet, but she is. You earned that."

Bharath felt the wave rising - not just pleasure, but something deeper, something fuller. Gratitude, love, awe.

"I never thought I'd be here," he said hoarsely. "Not just... in this room. But *seen*. Chosen. *Wanted*."

"You're ours," Marisol said, riding him slower now, gentler, like worship. "You'll never be alone again."

Sarah reached up and stroked his cheek. "You love so quietly, Bharath. But it's fierce. You changed us. We're better now."

"Also," Marisol added slyly, still moving on top of him, "Mia was watching you like a telenovela protagonist. I'm pretty sure she forgot what beans were called at one point."

Bharath groaned. "No. I refuse. This is a line I will not cross."

Sarah slid her hand up his thigh. "Relax. We're not suggesting anything. Yet."

"Oh my god."

"Kidding," Marisol whispered-but her smile held a note of mischief. "Mostly."

"She's just in high school and Mari's sister!"

"So were we... a year ago," Sarah said sweetly. "Besides, you wouldn't even need to touch her. Just tutor her. Help her solve for X."

"I hate you both."

His body tensed. He gripped Marisol's hips. His voice broke. "I'm coming-"

Marisol moaned, riding him through it as he spilled inside her, her own climax catching fire moments later. She collapsed onto his chest, both girls now tangled around him like silk ribbons.

For several minutes, they said nothing. Just breathing. Just touching. Just being.

The silence after their second climax lingered like mist. Sweat cooled slowly against the skin. Bharath lay motionless, arms wrapped around both women, his breath still uneven, heart pounding with the kind of fullness that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with love.

Marisol was the first to stir. She propped herself on one elbow, her fingers trailing absent circles on his chest.

“I should probably tell you something,” she murmured, her voice a low hum.

Sarah turned toward her, eyes half-lidded in pleasure. “Is this about how we just made a man transcend time?”

Marisol smirked. “That too. But no, this is... about Mia.”

Bharath blinked, still dazed. “Your sister?”

“She’s into you,” Marisol said simply.

Sarah lifted her head, now fully alert. “Wait. *What?*”

Marisol gave a slow nod, lips pursed in amusement. “I saw it in her eyes tonight. And not just curiosity. I mean *into* you.”

Bharath’s eyebrows drew together in disbelief. “That doesn’t make any sense. We’ve only talked to each other properly two times. How can you say that?”

“Because of the way she looks at you,” Marisol said, glancing between them. “I’ve seen that look before. Hell, *I* had that look. So did you, Sarah.”

Sarah paused, then giggled. “Touché.”

Bharath groaned softly, covering his face with one hand. “I don’t even know what I’m doing half the time. I was just... nice to her.”

“Exactly,” Marisol said. “You listened to her. You encouraged her. You respected her. You made her feel that she is more than just a pretty doll. You gave her the confidence to connect to her intellectual side and in just conversations built her self-esteem that was not built on looks alone. That alone makes you stand out from 99% of guys she’s met.”

Sarah tilted her head and traced a lazy finger down Bharath’s torso. “So now you’re the crush of an entire household. Tell me, how does it feel to be that irresistible?”

He tried to speak, but his throat caught on laughter. “You’re exaggerating.”

“We’re not,” Marisol said, her voice softening. “She’s just become an adult. It’s a confusing time. You represent something good to her. Safe. Inspiring.”

“She’s trying to get into Tech,” Sarah said, sliding closer. “And now she has *you* as her calculus coach. Do you have any idea what kind of fantasy that becomes for a girl her age?”

Bharath flushed. “I swear I didn’t mean to encourage anything.”

“We know,” Marisol said, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “That’s why it’s happening.”

Sarah leaned over and kissed the other side of his face. “And now you’re in real trouble.”

“How so?” he asked warily.

Sarah gave him a wicked smile, her lips brushing his ear. “Because now you have to handle *two* Rivera women.”

The effect was instant.

He groaned, and the telltale hardness returned between his legs-impossibly fast, yet undeniably present.

Marisol glanced down, then up with an arched brow. “Seriously?”

“I think we broke him,” Sarah whispered with delight.

“Or awakened something,” Marisol murmured, her fingers already sliding down his abdomen.

Bharath threw an arm over his face. “This is a trap.”

Sarah giggled as she reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his length and stroking him gently. “No, baby. This is your *destiny*.”

Bharath groaned again, his body already tense as Sarah’s hand slid slowly over him, warm and teasing. Marisol leaned in, her lips brushing his jaw, her breath feathering over his skin.

“You poor thing,” she whispered. “So loved. So wrecked. And still so ready.”

“I don’t even know how,” he murmured, eyes fluttering shut. “You’ve ruined me.”

Sarah laughed softly, settling between his legs. “Then let us ruin you a little more.”

Marisol leaned down to kiss him again, lips lingering. “But you should know something.”

“What now?”

“Watching you... with Sarah,” she whispered, her voice low and reverent, “was one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Same,” Sarah murmured. “Watching you love someone else-when that someone is someone we love too-it didn’t feel threatening. It felt... right. Like we were worshipping together.”

Bharath froze. “You two are serious?”

“Not about Mia,” Marisol said, cupping his cheek. “But about the idea. The feeling. That we’re strong enough to share you. When the love is right. When it’s real.”

Sarah nodded, curling into his side. “We don’t want more. But if more happens, if love expands-we’d rather witness it than fight it.”

Marisol kissed him once, deeply, before slipping down beside Sarah, the two girls exchanging a glance full of wicked tenderness. Their hands moved in tandem, their mouths following suit-soft, reverent, patient. They weren’t in a rush. They were savoring him. Claiming him.

Bharath’s hands clenched the sheets. His breath came in short, ragged gasps, pleasure overwhelming and spiraling with something far more profound. Every lick, every kiss was laced with affection. Every moan from the girls was more like a hum of worship than seduction.

He looked down only once-just long enough to see both of them looking back at him, eyes full of heat and something close to wonder. That did it.

His release came in a slow, shuddering wave, his voice catching on their names, his hands reaching for them both, as if he could hold the moment still. The girls stayed close, kissing his hips, his thighs, his belly, cleaning him up with their tongues, until the tremors passed and he was left breathless, undone, completely theirs.

They rose together, climbing up the bed, curling around him from either side.

“Easy now,” Sarah whispered, her voice like the end of a lullaby.

“You did good,” Marisol murmured against his chest, nuzzling in as her hand found Sarah’s under the blanket.

Bharath laughed weakly. “I think I left my soul somewhere halfway through that.”

The three of them nestled close, skin cooling but hearts still pulsing in sync. Sarah’s hand lay over Bharath’s chest, fingers curled loosely into the curve of his shoulder. Marisol kissed the spot just beneath his jaw before tucking her head into the crook of his neck.

“Promise me something,” he murmured.

“Anything,” they both said at once.

“Don’t ever stop loving me like this.”

Marisol tightened her hold. “We couldn’t, even if we tried.”

Sarah kissed his cheek, her voice already soft with the haze of sleep. “You’re ours, Bharath. We’re not going anywhere.”

Their breathing slowed together, heartbeats falling into rhythm. The night deepened, and the city outside slipped into silence. Inside that quiet little room, three souls wrapped around one another in the kind of love that needed no words.

Tomorrow would bring new stories, new questions, maybe even new complications. But tonight, they had this.

Later that night, long after the city had quieted and the heat of their bodies had faded into the softness of sleep, Bharath stirred.

Not from discomfort, but from clarity.

The girls breathed gently beside him - one tucked beneath his arm, the other wrapped around his chest - and he realized something: he didn’t feel like a boy anymore. Not in this bed. Not with this love.

He felt like a man carving a future. One defined not by tradition or rebellion, but by intention.

Carefully, he slipped an arm out and reached for the notebook on Sarah’s nightstand. The page was already half-filled with her Tamil practice - clumsy characters, tiny phonetic notes. He smiled

Below it, he added his own:

Plan for Amma & Appa - Phase One:

- Teach Marisol and Sarah Tamil (no judgment allowed)
- Make them food- spicy enough to hurt, but not enough to cry
- Tell Appa about school success again (soften the ground)
- Make a timeline for introducing them. For real.
- *IMPORTANT: Absolutely do not let them meet Marisol and Sarah at the same time on day one. They might explode.*

He stared at the list.

A beginning.

Behind him, Marisol stirred and wrapped her arm around his waist again.

“What are you doing?” she murmured sleepily.

“Plotting our future,” he whispered.

Sarah’s voice, barely audible from his other side: “We in it?”

He smiled, folded the notebook closed, and slid it back.

“You *are* it.”

And with that - a breath, a kiss to each forehead, and a quiet vow buried in the hush between heartbeats - Bharath let himself sleep and hugged his apsaras close to him, finally unafraid of what tomorrow might bring.

Because for the first time in his life, he wasn't walking into the unknown alone.

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

Chapter 127: Tyrel & Ravi Become Gym Bros

[1,401 words]

The gym smelled like iron, rubber, and testosterone.

Bharath inhaled it like incense. After weeks of early mornings and sore limbs, it had become oddly comforting - the scent of effort, of progress. And pain, sure. But the kind that meant something.

He pushed through the heavy glass doors of the Georgia Tech Student Athletic Center, squinting slightly at the brightness. It was early, just past 7 AM, and the gym was in that perfect state: half-awake, mostly quiet, filled with the low groans of effort and the occasional clank of plates. The cardio bunnies were wrapping up, and a few meatheads were already mid-scream over deadlifts that belonged in a Highland Games reel.

In the corner near the benches, Jorge was doing arm circles, his hair tied back in a tiny puffball, his walkman earbuds dangling from a belt loop as he softly hummed the chorus of a Shakira song.

“Buenos días, amante musculoso!” he grinned when he spotted Bharath. “Did your girlfriends finally let you leave the love nest?”

Bharath laughed, tossing his towel over the bench rail. “Barely. I left them wrapped up like human burritos.”

Jorge wiggled his eyebrows. “Dios mío! This guy lives in an X-rated fairytale.”

“They’re going to kill me one morning. That’s how this ends.”

“Death by affection. You could do worse.”

They fist-bumped and began their routine - bench presses, light to warm up. The rhythm was automatic now. Load. Spot. Lift. Rack. Repeat.

Then the doors burst open.

Not casually. Not politely.

Like a dramatic movie entrance.

Tyrel strode in with a swagger that screamed “I peaked in high school” - gym bag slung over one shoulder, protein shaker in the other, wearing a vintage Georgia Tech tank top that had clearly not been tested against his current body mass.

“Gentlemen!” he declared. “It is I. Your local Adonis. Your suburban Thor. Your Your Costco Arnold. Your Home Depot Hercules.... I ran out of metaphors but y’all get the point.”

Bharath blinked. “You’re awake?”

Jorge stared. “More importantly... you’re *here*?”

Tyrel nodded gravely. “Don’t act shocked. This body isn’t gonna resurrect itself.”

“Buddy, that body needs a seance and an exorcism,” Jorge said, trying not to laugh.

Tyrel flipped them both off cheerfully. “I used to have a six-pack. Now it’s more of a party platter. But I’m here. That counts.”

And then, as if summoned by the ghost of irony itself, Ravi walked in.

He looked lost.

Comically lost.

Like a high schooler who accidentally wandered into a Navy SEAL training camp.

He clutched a water bottle in both hands like it was the Philosopher's Stone.

"I... this is more metallic than I expected," he said cautiously. "It smells like electrolytes and heartbreak."

Bharath tried not to laugh. Jorge didn't bother.

"Ravi," Jorge said, shaking his head, "why are you here?"

"I've decided to pursue physical excellence."

"Since when?" Bharath asked.

Ravi cleared his throat. "Since Nandita said my arms were... 'cute.'"

"Ah," Bharath said knowingly. "The truth emerges."

Jorge turned to Tyrel. "And you?"

Tyrel didn't hesitate. "LaTasha said she likes guys who can lift her."

"She's like 5'2"," Bharath pointed out.

"And stacked like a tank," Tyrel added reverently. "I tried lifting her last weekend and pulled something. It was not romantic."

Jorge turned to Bharath. "We should make a rule. No love-induced gym memberships."

"Too late," Bharath said. "We're babysitting."

"Correction," Tyrel said, stretching his arms. "You're witnessing the glorious return of peak Tyrel. I used to bench 225, easy."

"When? High school?" Jorge asked.

Tyrel nodded. "Senior year. Prom season. I was jacked."

"Prom was many months ago."

"Muscle memory, brah."

"Memory, sure. Muscle, debatable."

Ravi, meanwhile, had wandered over to the dumbbell rack. He picked up a 10-pound weight, examining it as if it were a suspicious artifact.

“Is there... a manual for this?”

“It’s called your *biceps*,” Jorge said.

“Physics should not feel this heavy,” Ravi muttered.

Tyrel marched to the squat rack with confidence and promptly tried to load the bar.

“Let’s start light,” he said, placing the empty bar across his shoulders.

He dipped into a squat. One rep. Two.

On the third, he made a sound that could only be described as “middle-aged plumbing disaster.”

“...Why’s it so heavy?”

“It’s literally just the bar,” Bharath said.

“I think the Earth is pulling harder on me than usual.”

“You gained the freshman fifteen,” Jorge said.

“Don’t shame me!” Tyrel barked. “It’s *bulking*.”

“You skipped the ‘lifting’ part of that bulk.”

Tyrel tried a fourth squat and stood up groaning. It sounded like a haunted radiator in a haunted YMCA.

“You got ibuprofen? A therapist?”

Meanwhile, Ravi was trying to replicate what looked like a bicep curl, but with the posture of a question mark.

“I believe I’ve identified a flaw in gym design,” he said, straining. “Everything is heavy.”

“That’s literally the point,” Bharath said.

“I reject your premise.”

“Just curl it, Ravi,” Jorge said, laughing.

Ravi did.

Then immediately dropped it.

“I have dislocated my optimism.”

They were all laughing now.

Ravi, winded from the 10-pound attempt, slumped onto the bench like he'd just finished a marathon. Tyrel lay spread-eagled on the mat, mumbling about how his ancestors didn't die in wars so he could be mocked for sweating on a Monday morning.

Jorge leaned over to Bharath. “You remember our first day?”

Bharath nodded. “I couldn't finish a single set of pull-ups. And you almost passed out.”

“I *did* pass out. Nurse brought me juice. It was grape.”

“You threw up the grape juice.”

“Don't remind me. Still can't smell it without gagging.”

They looked back at Ravi and Tyrel, who were currently arguing about the optimal angle for incline bench press - neither of whom had any clue what they were doing.

“They'll get there,” Bharath said.

“Eventually,” Jorge agreed.

“After they survive this week.”

“Let's make 'em earn it.”

They clapped together and turned like twin devils.

“Alright rookies!” Jorge barked. “Ten push-ups. Now!”

Tyrel looked betrayed. “Push-ups? That's cardio!”

“You said you could lift LaTasha,” Bharath said. “Start with your own body.”

Ravi lowered himself cautiously onto the mat, palms flat.

“Do we inhale on the push or the up?”

“Don't think. Just push.”

Ravi did.

Then crumpled like a dying spider.

“I have lost control of my core,” he whispered.

Tyrel managed five push-ups, grunting like a constipated bear. “My arms are filing a restraining order.”

Jorge hovered nearby. “C’mon, boys. You wanted muscles? This is where they’re born - in the pain pit.”

“More like pain puddle,” Ravi wheezed.

But they didn’t quit.

Not even when Tyrel accidentally let out a tragic workout fart on rep seven.

Jorge needed a minute to recover from laughing. Bharath leaned against the bench, red in the face.

“You okay, man?” Tyrel asked, chest heaving.

“Just... remembering why we don’t bring new people here.”

They moved on.

Lat pulldowns, assisted dips, incline benches. The routine grew messier with each new station, but there was something beautiful in the chaos. Jorge helped Ravi fix his wrist angle. Bharath adjusted Tyrel’s stance. There were jokes, yes. But there was also spotting, encouragement, small victories.

Ravi managed his first proper curl by the end of the hour and looked at his bicep with visible shock.

“Did it... move?”

“It twitched,” Jorge said. “That’s the first sign of life.”

“I have awakened something ancient.”

Tyrel did five sit-ups and then dramatically rolled off the mat like a corpse sliding into a morgue drawer.

“I’m dying,” he groaned. “Tell LaTasha I died for her thighs.”

Jorge tossed him a towel. "They're worth it."

By the time 9 AM rolled around, the four of them sat collapsed on yoga mats like survivors of a small war.

"I can't feel my shoulders," Tyrel mumbled.

"My lungs are doing Morse code," Ravi added.

Bharath tossed them water bottles. "Proud of you both. You survived."

Ravi took a sip. "My body is a temple. Unfortunately, it's being fumigated."

Tyrel grinned. "This hurts. But I ain't gonna lie... hurting with you guys? It hits different."

Jorge nodded, stretching. "That's the secret. Brotherhood is built one bad rep at a time."

They lay there in the silence that only shared exertion could bring. The kind of silence that didn't need filling.

Then Ravi opened one eye. "So... if I do this three times a week... will I get abs by Christmas?"

"You might get *an* ab," Jorge said. "One lonely, shy little ab."

"If you stop eating wings at 2 AM," Bharath added.

"Blasphemy."

Jorge clapped him on the shoulder. "Hey. This was solid. You two didn't quit."

"Only because we were shamed into it," Ravi said.

"And that's the most effective motivator known to man."

They gathered their things slowly, groaning with every movement. Ravi walked like he'd just completed a pilgrimage. Tyrel kept muttering about needing an IV of Gatorade and a chiropractor named Destiny.

Bharath glanced at them - Jorge grinning like a devil, Ravi holding his back like he was 60, Tyrel twirling his towel like a champion even while limping slightly.

They had earned their carbs for the morning.

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

Chapter 128: Campus Royalty, But Just People

[1,252 words]

It was barely noon, but the dining hall was packed - a rolling tide of trays, metal cutlery clinks, and the low hum of gossip bouncing off every wall. A special kind of energy thrummed through the air, chaotic and electric.

Everyone could feel it.

And at Table 7 - near the corner window, half tucked away but impossible to ignore - sat the epicenter of the storm.

Bharath. Marisol. Sarah.

Flanked by Jorge, Ravi, Camila, Tyrel, LaTasha, and Nandita, they claimed the entire ten-seat table. One chair had been dragged in from another spot. Ravi was double-stacking trays. LaTasha was sipping soda straight from the 32oz cup like it was a sacrament.

They weren't just *eating lunch*.

They were shielding the holy ones again as they had been doing so for the past couple of weeks.

Sarah was sitting on Bharath's left, still glowing faintly in jeans and a Georgia Tech jacket, but the aura of "I made out with two people and broke the campus" hadn't dimmed. She was picking at her salad, smiling quietly as she listened.

Marisol was on his right, holding his hand like it was a matter of national security. She'd only just stopped glaring at the people who kept walking past their table twice - or thrice - just to get another look.

Bharath?

He looked like a deer caught in an emotional paintball fight - bruised, colorful, and vaguely thrilled to be alive.

Camila arrived last, sliding into the seat next to Jorge with a tray of French fries and a look of wide-eyed amusement.

“So,” she said, drawing the word out with a grin, “I heard a freshman peed himself during your hallway make-out session this morning.”

“Yeah, he’s on bedrest,” Tyrel said, nodding solemnly. “Campus health center’s calling it ‘emotional hydration loss’”.

“One girl said she blacked out for twelve seconds,” Camila added. “She thought she’d seen Jesus. Turns out it was just Marisol’s hair catching the sunlight.”

Sarah didn’t even blink. “Which one?”

That set the table off.

Ravi choked on his Sprite. Tyrel cackled loud enough to make two people at the adjacent table jump. LaTasha threw her napkin in the air like it was a confetti cannon. Jorge leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, like a proud producer watching the show unfold.

“Okay, okay,” Nandita said, raising her hand like they were in court. “Let’s get this straight. Are we confirming that today’s events are the most chaotic Georgia Tech has seen since the Great Parking Lot Flood of ’95?”

“Yes,” said Jorge solemnly. “But with more hormones.”

“And less structural damage,” Ravi added. “Well, physical structural damage.”

“My roommate said you guys caused a spiritual panic,” Camila said, pointing her fork. “She said her boyfriend just stared at the floor for fifteen minutes whispering, ‘How?’”

Bharath groaned. “Can we not-?”

“No,” Marisol said, smirking. “You broke the world, baby. Own it.”

Sarah grinned and leaned her head on his shoulder. “We’ve already achieved myth status. Now we’re just feeding the legend”

Tyrel set his soda down with a dramatic thud. “You wanna hear what I heard in the mechanical engineering building?”

“Absolutely,” Marisol said.

“So apparently, this senior - Charles something - was in the hallway when Sarah kissed Bharath, saw the crowd, and *fainted*. Legit dropped like a sack of logic boards.”

“Oh my god,” Camila whispered.

"I'm not done. When he woke up, he allegedly said, 'I've wasted three years here. I've seen *everything*, and still... I wasn't ready.'"

Sarah looked stunned. "He *fainted*?"

"Witness accounts," Tyrel said. "Very credible. One girl said he looked like a Sim being deleted."

Bharath rubbed his forehead.

"I need to transfer," he muttered. "To, like... Denmark."

"You'd break Denmark," Jorge said. "Too pure."

LaTasha leaned in. "Y'all don't get it. I saw a flyer. Someone's organizing a campus *walkthrough tour* called 'Path of the King.' It starts at the CoC building and ends outside the Calculus hall."

LaTasha showed them a copy of the flyer: "*Come walk the Path of the King™ — free t-shirt if you cry on the steps.*"

Nandita gasped. "*Stop.*"

"I'm serious. I think they're charging."

"I need a cut," Sarah said. "We're the attractions."

Marisol smirked. "We should offer autographs."

Jorge shrugged. "You are gonna be an urban legend by Friday."

"You already are," Camila added. "Someone drew fan art and stuck it on the bulletin board in Glenn Hall."

"Fan *art*?" Bharath croaked.

"Yeah. Like a medieval tapestry. You were on a throne. Marisol had a flaming sword. Sarah was levitating."

Marisol blinked. "Where was this?"

"Next to the vending machine," Camila replied, deadpan. "Right above the missing cat poster."

"Unbelievable," Bharath muttered.

It was surreal.

People were still circling the table. Some tried to pretend they weren't looking. Others didn't even *try*. One guy blatantly held up a disposable camera and snapped a photo. Another whispered something to his friend and pointed, as if confirming a sighting of Bigfoot.

"I think that one's a sociology major," Sarah whispered.

"Analyzing us like a mating ritual," Marisol whispered back.

"I feel like a museum exhibit," Bharath said.

"Correction," Ravi added. "You are a *miracle*."

"Can't lie," Jorge added. "Watching Ayesha blow her fuse and get annihilated? Easily the best ten minutes of my semester."

"Really?" asked Camila smirking.

"You know what I mean..." mumbled Jorge as everyone laughed.

"Oh my god," Nandita said, laughing. "What *happened* there?"

Everyone turned to Marisol.

She sat back, picked up a french fry, and chewed slowly like a seasoned war general.

"She insulted him. Called him a FOB, told him to go back to India, said we were using him."

LaTasha winced. "Ohhh no."

"I went off."

"She really did," Sarah added proudly.

"I gave her a warning," Marisol said, licking salt from her finger. "She didn't take it."

"What'd you say?" Nandita asked.

Marisol shrugged. "That if anyone's got a problem with him, they come through me. Or Sarah."

"Queen behavior," Camila whispered.

"I kissed him in front of everyone," Marisol added. "And told the crowd to deal with it."

"And then they *clapped*," Jorge said, grinning.

Sarah added, "Like literally. It started with one guy. Then everyone joined in. It was a round of applause."

"It was like the end of a Disney movie," Ravi said. "But with more tongue."

Bharath dropped his head into his hands. "I hate all of you."

"No you don't," Marisol said, kissing his temple.

Sarah patted his knee. "You love us."

"Unfortunately," he muttered, cheeks pink.

They all paused for a moment, the table surrounded by the buzzing cafeteria, the constant orbit of eyes and speculation.

Despite the noise, the chatter, the whispered myths building around them like storm clouds - at this table, there was peace.

Camila tapped her nails against her cup. "You know what's weird?"

"What?" asked Tyrel.

"They're *our* friends. Like, yeah, the rest of campus thinks they're living out some erotic Cinemax fantasy - but to us?" She shrugged. "They're just... them."

"Bharath's still the dude who eats toast with plain yogurt," Jorge offered.

"And drops dumb lines like, 'Do you want to review recursive algorithms?' like that's foreplay," Ravi added.

"We're not legends," Marisol said. "We're hungry. We're tired. We're a little horny and a lot confused most of the time."

"Speak for yourself," Sarah said, sipping her Coke. "I'm always hungry and very horny."

Marisol cackled.

Jorge nodded. "But that's the point. They're just them. That's why it works."

LaTasha smiled. "I don't care what anyone else says. To me, y'all are just our weird, wonderful friends."

At the edge of the cafeteria, someone snapped a photo.

This one wasn't sneaky. It was from across the room - a clear shot of the full table: laughter, hands touching, heads thrown back, plates scattered, a moment of pure *realness* in the middle of the myth.

Someone would post it on the dorm wall later with a marker:

"Campus Royalty. But Just People."

And under it, someone else would scrawl:

"And that's why it matters."

Share to your friends

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

- Chapter 129: Copium

[891 words]

Ayesha stabbed her fork into her Caesar salad like it had personally offended her.

She wasn't hungry, but she needed to do something with her hands. Her legs were crossed, posture perfect, chin lifted just slightly - the mask of control. She knew how to wear it. She'd built her whole freshman persona around it.

But her hands trembled every time she touched the metal.

Across from her, Zara chattered with Candace and Lila, who were applying lip gloss between bites of grilled chicken wraps. Two guys from the lacrosse team had joined them uninvited, both smug and slouched, talking about an off-campus party like they'd invented alcohol.

No one at the table mentioned that morning after Calculus class last week.

But everyone *knew*.

They were *tiptoeing* around it. The silence wasn't out of respect - it was theater. And the sympathy that finally did arrive?

Fake. Flimsy. Flavored with something rotten.

Candace leaned in just a little and offered a sugary smile. "Are you okay, babe? I *heard* what happened."

Lila chimed in. "That was so out of pocket of her. I mean, who yells in a hallway like that? So classless."

"She's clearly insecure," Candace added. "She was just projecting."

Ayesha managed a tight smile. "It's fine."

"No, like, *really*," Candace said, tapping her tray with a manicured finger. "You handled it like a *queen*. You walked away, and that's what people remember."

Lila nodded enthusiastically. "Totally. You're still you."

And there it was.

Still you.

Pretty. Popular. Present.

But underneath it?

You lost.

Ayesha's teeth clenched.

She could feel eyes drifting over to their table and then sliding past - to the one on the far side of the room.

Where the *real* show was happening.

She didn't need to look. She could *feel* it. Like a light on her skin.

Laughter. Shouted jokes. LaTasha howling. Tyrel slapping the table. Camila smirking like she was in on a private joke with the universe. Jorge tossing fries across the tray like confetti. Ravi nearly spat out his drink.

And in the center?

Bharath.

Marisol was practically in his lap.

Sarah had her hand on his thigh.

Ayesha finally looked.

He was glowing.

Not metaphorically. Not in some exaggeration.

He *glowed*.

The way people do when they've been chosen. Wanted. Anchored.

A crowd buzzed around their table like moths to heat.

Some students circled. Others sat nearby and leaned subtly closer. A few tried - pathetically - to look casual while stealing glances.

They're orbiting him like he's the sun.

Ayesha's salad suddenly felt dry in her mouth.

"I don't know how she does it," Candace was saying, eyes darting toward Marisol. "I mean, she's not even that pretty. Not in a 'put-together' way."

Zara shrugged. "You don't have to be put-together when you've got *him* holding your waist like that."

Ayesha stiffened.

Zara turned to her, voice light. "He really did level up, huh?"

"He's the same guy," Ayesha snapped, sharper than intended. "He didn't change."

Zara blinked. "No, *you're* right. He didn't. But maybe that's what's making it worse."

Ayesha's jaw clenched.

Zara leaned in, voice quieter now, more thoughtful. "It's just wild. The whole thing. I mean, Sarah and Marisol? Together? And him? In the middle?"

Candace whispered, "Do you think they... like... all three of them?"

"Obviously," Lila said, scandalized and intrigued.

Zara tilted her head. "I mean, have you *seen* how they look at him? They're not pretending. That's not an act."

There was a pause.

And then Zara added something that almost made Ayesha drop her fork.

“I wonder what it’s like... sharing a man.”

Ayesha turned sharply. “What?”

Zara met her gaze with a shrug. “I’m just saying. I never thought about it before. But the way *they* do it... it doesn’t look pathetic. It looks kind of... intense. Equal. Like a team.”

Candace looked baffled. “You’d *share* your boyfriend?”

“Depends on the guy,” Zara said, gaze drifting back to Bharath’s table. “And the girls.”

The conversation moved on, meandering into shallow territory about sorority mixers and new nail salons, but Ayesha was no longer listening.

Her ears were ringing.

Her stomach twisted.

Zara - the girl who had once scoffed at Bharath for being “too Indian, too awkward, too *uncool*” - was now watching him like he was a possibility.

A desirable one.

And Ayesha?

Ayesha was sitting with people who didn’t really care about her. Who saw her pain as an interesting twist to gossip over after dinner. Who only stayed close because she was still beautiful and could be leveraged socially.

They weren’t friends.

Not the way Marisol and Sarah were with each other.

Not the way Jorge and Ravi laughed like brothers.

Not the way Sarah kissed Marisol’s shoulder as she leaned across to grab a cookie from Bharath’s tray.

Ayesha stared down at her half-finished lunch.

When was the last time I laughed without calculating it?

When was the last time I told someone the truth and wasn’t scared they’d use it against me?

When was the last time I felt... seen?

The answer flickered in her memory like a dying light.

August. A cab ride. Him.

She remembered Bharath's warm voice telling her she was brave for coming here. That she had a spark about her. That she could light up any room.

And she'd laughed. And then thrown it away for a few plastic chairs at a prettier table.

Now she was sitting with girls who didn't really know her - and across the hall was the guy she'd written off, being held by two women who *worshipped* him.

She swallowed hard.

"Bathroom," she muttered, grabbing her tray and walking away before anyone could stop her.

Behind her, Zara's voice trailed after, amused and still far too curious.

"Honestly... he's kind of magnetic, right?"

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

Chapter 130: An Invitation to Diwali

[969 words]

The first floor of the library was unusually alive for a Monday evening - the kind of quiet buzz that came not from whispers but from pens scribbling, pages turning, and the occasional hiss of "Wait, how did you get that?"

Two study groups had camped at opposite ends of the open floor.

Sarah's corner, by the window, was covered in engineering textbooks, diagrams, and a growing mountain of mechanical pencils. She sat like a queen, flanked by Camila, Nandita, LaTasha, and Tyrel, all huddled around worksheets on stats and basic circuits.

"You calculated torque like it's your rent," Sarah said, peering at Tyrel's notebook.

“Look, the beam was heavy, okay?”

“You made it heavier by being on it,” Camila teased.

LaTasha was explaining resistor logic to Nandita with the patience of a saint. “So if this is parallel, the voltage stays the same across both, right?”

Sarah nodded. “Exactly. That’s why we use it in household wiring.”

Tyrel rubbed his forehead. “I don’t even trust my house anymore.”

Across the floor, Bharath’s group huddled around a whiteboard and several laptops - the Discrete Math brigade.

Jorge was buried under a blanket of truth tables. Ravi had three open notebooks and still couldn’t find the will to solve a single question. Bharath stood calmly at the board, walking them through a proof involving logical implications.

“If not Q is true, and P implies Q, then what must P be?”

“False,” said Jorge without looking up.

Ravi blinked. “Wait. How are you so sure?”

“Because I’ve failed at love and math,” Jorge muttered. “Both require logic. I have neither.”

Bharath chuckled but didn’t slow. “Focus. One more problem and we can take a break.”

Behind them, the printers hummed. Other students passed by but lingered subtly - stealing glances at Bharath, who had now somehow developed the reputation of being the best-looking Discrete Math tutor *and* the center of Georgia Tech’s latest romantic legend.

It was like a mothman sighting in reverse.

Bharath was refilling his water bottle when a tall figure approached from the left - pressed khakis, wire-frame glasses, and the unmistakable confidence of a campus organizer.

“Bharath, right?”

He turned, wary. “Yeah?”

“Arvind,” the man said, offering his hand. “President of the Indian Student Association.”

Bharath shook it politely.

"We've been meaning to talk to you," Arvind said. "A lot of our folks are talking about you lately."

"I've noticed," Bharath muttered.

Arvind grinned. "Well, Diwali's coming up - in a couple of weeks. It's our biggest event of the semester. We'd love to have you perform."

Bharath blinked. "Perform?"

"Yeah. Dance, sing, play something. You'd be a huge draw. People *know* you now. You're like our own campus Shah Rukh Khan."

Bharath stepped back, suddenly defensive. "I'm not a show pony. And neither are my girlfriends."

"Of course not! No offense meant," Arvind said quickly. "But this is cultural. Fun. The ISA event is mostly about community. Representation. We want to make it big this year. You could *lead* it."

"I'm really not-"

And that's when it happened.

Three shadows appeared behind him.

"Lead what?" Marisol asked, sipping from a Sprite can.

"Babe, why are you blushing?" Sarah followed, eyes narrowing in interest.

Camila appeared next to them, grinning. "Are we talking about a groupie situation or...?"

Arvind suddenly looked very outnumbered.

Bharath tried to wave them off. "It's nothing. Just the ISA thing. Diwali celebration. They want me to dance or something."

"*Dance?*" Nandita said, appearing like a ninja from the Sarah side of the room.

LaTasha and Tyrel peeked around a bookshelf like prairie dogs.

Sarah's eyes lit up. "Oh my god."

"No," Bharath said.

“Yes,” Marisol said.

“Absolutely yes,” Nandita chimed.

Camila clapped. “I’ve *always* wanted to be in a group dance.”

“No. Absolutely not,” Jorge said from across the room. “I’m Latino, I have rhythm, and I still say no.”

“You don’t get a vote,” Marisol called back.

“I *wasn’t voting!*” Jorge replied. “I was issuing a cry for help!”

Tyrel leaned into LaTasha. “What’s Diwali again?”

“Festival of lights. Big. Loud. Colors. Dancing.”

“Cool. Will there be drums?”

LaTasha grinned. “There *better* be.”

Sarah turned to Arvind. “We’ll do it. Group number. Minimum of eight people.”

“Nine,” Camila said. “We’re dragging Ravi in.”

Ravi lifted his head from his textbook. “What.”

“Nine is a nice square number,” Sarah said. “We’ll use both symmetry and chaos.”

Bharath tried one more time. “Girls, I’m not performing in front of an auditorium. I’m barely used to being stared at during lunch.”

Marisol patted his chest. “Which is why this is the *perfect* follow-up. You’re already a legend. Might as well bring the moves.”

“Besides,” Sarah said, linking arms with Marisol. “You’ve got two girlfriends. The least you can do is keep up with our choreography.”

Tyrel shrugged. “I’m in. I’ve always wanted to wear those floaty pants.”

“They’re called *dhotis*,” Nandita said with a grin. “And we’re doing fusion. Bollywood and hip hop.”

“Oh, you’re *choreographing* this?” Camila asked.

Nandita tilted her head like it was obvious. “Yes. And we start tomorrow.”

Arvind was still standing awkwardly in the middle, holding his clipboard like a shield.

Sarah smiled. "Send us the registration form. We'll finalize names."

Arvind nodded, blinking. "Right. Yes. Thank you."

He backed away slowly like he'd just negotiated a peace treaty with a gang of joyful zealots.

After Arvind left Bharath stared at the girls. "You just volunteered me for public humiliation."

Marisol shrugged. "Welcome to dating feminists with great balance."

Sarah smiled sweetly. "And hips."

Camila winked. "And flair."

LaTasha added, "And excellent taste in men."

"Don't worry," Nandita said, pulling out her planner. "We have two weeks. I'll break it down into daily practices. Outfits. Beats. Fusion setlist. We're doing this right."

Tyrel raised a hand. "Can I suggest one Bollywood song where the guy spins and doesn't sweat?"

"No," came three voices in unison.

By the end of the night, the study sessions were forgotten.

New schedules were made.

Playlists were drafted.

The library lights flickered as they were kicked out at closing - a laughing group with open notebooks, smudged whiteboard notes, and now... the beginnings of a full-fledged *Diwali dance squad*.

Legends or not, the gang had officially signed on for their biggest performance yet.

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

