

Their Wonder Years: Fall 98

Chapter 131: What Have They Signed Up For?

[1,432 words]

The streets were quiet as the group made their way down 10th Street, bundled in jackets and backpacks, the warm autumn night hugging them like a breath between storms.

Marisol had her arm looped through Bharath's.

Sarah was skipping ahead with Camila and LaTasha, singing bits of Bollywood songs none of them remembered the lyrics to.

Jorge, Ravi, and Tyrel lagged behind with faces that looked like they were heading to a pop quiz on interpretive dance theory.

Nandita marched confidently near the front, scribbling choreo ideas in a spiral notebook with the fervor of someone organizing a small but fabulous rebellion.

"Wait," Ravi said, breathless, "did Nandita just say how many people come to this thing?"

"Around a thousand," she replied without missing a beat. "Maybe more. Depends on the sponsors."

Jorge physically stumbled. "A *thousand*?"

"A thousand *people*," Ravi echoed. "Watching *us*."

"More importantly," Tyrel muttered, "watching *me*. In pants that are basically curtains."

"You said you wanted to wear them," LaTasha called over her shoulder.

"I *thought* I did!"

They turned the corner onto Sarah's street. Porch lights blinked on like blessings.

Sarah grinned and kicked open her gate. "Come on, you dramatic boys. Time for dinner and dance therapy."

Plates clinked, laughter bounced off the walls, and the smells of leftover enchiladas, reheated mac and cheese, and Nandita's emergency packet of lemon rasam mix filled the room with chaotic joy.

Everyone had spread out across the living room floor and couch. Jorge was two bites away from a food coma, Ravi was stirring rice and muttering about stage fright, and Camila had commandeered the stereo to play soft tabla beats she found on a CD from Sarah's shelf labeled "Fusion: Karan's Mix."

"I still can't believe we said yes to this," Bharath said, resting his head against the back of the couch as Sarah and Marisol curled on either side of him.

"Correction," Marisol said. "*You* didn't say yes. *We* did. You pouted."

"I didn't pout."

Sarah snorted. "You *absolutely* pouted. Like a Bollywood hero when he thinks the heroine's going to marry someone else."

LaTasha pointed her fork at him. "You'll be fine. I've seen you move. You've got rhythm. Jorge's the one we need to worry about."

"I heard that," Jorge said from the floor.

Sarah laughed. "This reminds me of that night at Peachtree Cinemas... Remember? Kuch Kuch Hota Hai?"

Camila clapped her hands. "Oh my *god*, yes! We were dancing in the aisles during *Ladki Badi Anjaani Hai*."

"I got kicked in the ankle by a six-year-old doing hand gestures," LaTasha added proudly.

"We were so loud," Camila said. "But the whole theater was into it."

Sarah turned to Bharath, her face softening. "That was the first time I really *felt* it. The color, the music, the way people cried like it was a religious experience."

Camila nodded. "It wasn't just watching a movie. It was *belonging* to a mood. A moment. Even if we didn't speak the language."

Bharath blinked, caught between affection and awe.

"You guys really liked it?"

Sarah took his hand. "Loved it."

Marisol leaned into his shoulder. “And now we get to *be* part of that. With you.”

He felt something tighten in his chest - in a good way. Something grounding. Humbling. A circle closing.

“I never thought I’d see the day,” Nandita said, balancing her plate on her knees. “A group Diwali fusion dance. Involving *Tyrel*.”

“Hey,” Tyrel said. “I bring the funk. I’m just... confused by the script.”

“There’s no script,” she replied. “Just energy, symmetry, and sass.”

Camila raised a hand. “Do we get costumes?”

“Of course,” Nandita said. “We’re going full Bollywood. Half the set in bright kurtas and lehengas, the other half in hip hop fusion gear.”

Sarah beamed. “We’re doing *both* sides of him. Bharath the Georgia Tech coding nerd... and Bharath the Tamil dancing god.”

Jorge groaned. “So I’m doing the footwork of Hrithik Roshan and the logic of Alan Turing.”

“Exactly,” Marisol said sweetly. “With eyeliner.”

Bharath opened his mouth to protest - and closed it.

Because even though he was exhausted, and overwhelmed, and terrified of slipping in front of a thousand people...

He also felt *seen*.

Bharath rinsed dishes at the sink, sleeves rolled up, fingers moving on autopilot as steam rose around his wrists. The clink of plates, the damp squish of sponge on ceramic - these little domestic sounds usually soothed him.

But tonight, his thoughts were too loud.

Across the kitchen, Sarah wiped down the counters in slow, lazy swipes, humming under her breath. Marisol stood by the fridge, meticulously stacking Tupperware like she was preparing for battle.

It should’ve felt mundane.

It didn’t.

It felt like a dream he hadn't dared imagine.

"I've never danced for a crowd," he said softly, breaking the quiet.

Sarah glanced up, eyes catching his reflection in the window above the sink. "Then it's about time."

He smiled faintly. "What if I mess it up?"

"You will," she said without missing a beat. "And it'll be perfect."

Before he could reply, Marisol moved behind him - arms sliding around his waist, her cheek pressing flat between his shoulder blades. Her hold was warm. Anchoring.

"Then you mess it up," she whispered. "And we laugh, and keep dancing. Because it's not about the crowd."

"It's about showing up," Sarah added, walking over to his other side and leaning in. "Together."

He turned toward them, eyes moving from one radiant face to the other.

Two women. One Cuban, the other Jewish-American. Neither of them were born into the world of sarees, Diwali lamps, or Bollywood musicals. Yet here they were - learning his rhythms, holding his culture with reverence, calling it *ours* like it had always been part of them.

He didn't deserve them.

And yet, they *chose* him - not just in bed, not just in public - but here, now, elbow-deep in dishwasher and dreams.

Emotion swelled in his chest, thick and sharp.

He kissed them both.

Not with heat this time - not yet - but with the kind of quiet gratitude that echoed deeper than desire. One kiss to Sarah's temple. One to Marisol's cheek.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Marisol tilted her head. "For what?"

"For this. For... wanting to be part of where I come from."

Sarah smiled. "It's easy. You make it feel beautiful."

He swallowed the lump in his throat.

"I don't know if I can ever make you understand what it means to me," he said, voice low. "How hard it is sometimes... to feel like you have to split yourself in two. Code-switch. Compromise."

Marisol's fingers curled into his shirt. "You never have to split with us."

"Yeah," Sarah said, stepping closer. "We're here to learn. Dance steps, food, phrases... history. All of it."

"But it's not just fun and pretty lights," he said. "It's also being the guy who gets asked where he's *really* from. The guy who hears slurs when people think he's not listening. The guy who's never quite American enough and too Indian for the Americans. Too American for the Indians."

Neither girl spoke right away.

Then Marisol leaned in and kissed his chest over his shirt.

"Then let them be confused," she murmured. "We're not."

Sarah touched his jaw. "And we'll never make you choose. Not ever."

He closed his eyes.

María.

The thought surfaced like a shadow.

He could still see her guarded eyes during dinner. The way she looked at him like she was waiting for him to fail her daughter. Not cruel - but skeptical. Wary. A woman who had been through too much to trust easily.

He would win her over. Somehow.

He would make María see him - not as the brown boy dating her daughter, but as the man who *loved* her.

And Sarah... God. Sarah had no parents left to disappoint. No protective mother to call. No one to cry with if this fell apart.

That meant her heart was entirely in his hands.

He wouldn't let her down. He would give her a life that was full of joy. Of belonging. Of *bliss*.

Starting with tonight.

A smile crept onto his face as the mood shifted.

“Speaking of dancing...” he murmured, stepping back from the sink and flicking water playfully toward Sarah.

She squealed. “Don’t you *start*.”

Marisol smirked. “He started. Now he has to finish.”

Bharath arched an eyebrow. “Finish what?”

The two women shared a look. Dangerous. Gleaming.

Sarah stepped in close and pressed her palm to his chest.

“You know the rule,” she said softly.

Marisol’s breath grazed his neck. “You pleasure us...”

Sarah’s lips brushed his ear. “Until we pass out.”

He inhaled sharply.

Sarah giggled. “Now wash your hands, dancer boy. You’re going to need them.”

Marisol took his arm and started leading him toward the hallway. “Shower first. You’ve been carrying the group all day.”

Sarah followed, already peeling her sweatshirt off. “Time to let us carry *you*.”

He didn’t resist.

Because he knew - the real performance was about to begin.

And tonight, he was going to make sure that both the women who had danced into his world would remember why he was *theirs*.

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

Chapter 132: Making it Work

[1,403 words]

The world was silent.

A different kind of quiet than the library or even the stillness of late-night campus. This was that deep, breathless silence that only came after something seismic - like the hush that follows a storm.

Bharath lay still, floating in the warm wreckage of pleasure.

One arm cradled Marisol's bare waist, his hand still gently curled between her thighs. Her leg draped across his like a vine, her breath soft against his shoulder. Her curls were damp, clinging to her cheek, her expression dazed and content.

On his other side, Sarah lay half across his chest - the rise and fall of her body perfectly synchronized with his. She had collapsed atop him in the final wave of their shared high, her inner walls still clutching him in sleep, her hand resting over his heart like a claim and a prayer.

He was *inside* her.

And still *inside* the dream.

His entire body was cocooned in heat, affection, and the slow thrum of satisfaction. The room smelled of shampoo, sweat, skin, and sex - a scent that didn't just linger but radiated like incense.

They had done it.

Again.

And again.

He'd lost count after the second shower.

Time had dissolved somewhere between Marisol riding him until she couldn't form sentences, and Sarah whispering instructions to him while they guided each other into every possible configuration of pleasure their bodies could manage.

He'd lived up to their challenge.

Even if it took hours.

Even if he could barely feel his legs now.

He would do it all over again just to see them look at him the way they had - wild, worshipful, hungry, and *his*.

And now?

Now they were sprawled across him like two divine creatures fallen from the heavens - apsaras, goddesses of love and delight, tangled with him like they belonged here.

Like *he* belonged to *them*.

Bharath exhaled slowly, careful not to wake either.

And as the haze of pleasure cleared, another feeling rose to the surface.

Responsibility. Because this? This wasn't just sex.

This was love.

This was a bond built not in secrecy or thrill, but in truth - and it would not survive if he let the world define it before they did.

He had made a promise to himself - that he would protect this.

And it started with Marisol.

Her mother, Maria, was no fool. Sharp, hardworking, cautious. She'd been surprisingly warm to him after that first dinner - even after the drama with Mia. But *this* would test everything. It was one thing for her daughter to fall in love with a respectful, foreign boy from Georgia Tech. It was another for that boy to also be *in a relationship with a second woman*.

A second woman who would not be leaving.

Could they hide it? Possibly. But not forever.

She may possibly even know already after their public display exploded on campus. Marisol had mentioned that her mother may soon hear about it through the gossip grapevine.

Bharath traced soft, absent circles on Marisol's hip with his thumb as he thought.

The night had been madness - carnal and chaotic, beautiful in a way words couldn't quite describe. His body was wrecked in the most blissful way, still buried inside Sarah, his hand still resting on Marisol, their warmth wrapped around him like skin.

And yet, in the tender silence that followed pleasure, his mind would not still.

Lying wasn't an option.

Not to Marisol. Not to Maria. Not to himself.

But how did one explain this kind of love to someone who had never seen it modeled?

A fierce, proud, religious mother who had worked herself raw to raise her daughters alone. Who clung to discipline and tradition like armor. Who had already looked at Bharath with doubt - tolerated him, maybe, but didn't trust him yet.

How did he explain that her daughter wasn't being led astray? That this wasn't indulgence, but *devotion*? That Sarah didn't replace Marisol, but expanded her joy? That *he* wasn't using them - but had been *chosen* by them, cared for, kept upright by their love?

He considered the obvious strategy.

Take Sarah with him.

Introduce them together. Let Maria see it - the tenderness, the intelligence, the mutual respect. Let her see Sarah not as a rival, but a partner. A quiet, nurturing force who wanted nothing but Marisol's happiness.

That made sense. But it could backfire.

Maria might see the two women and jump to assumptions. Might misread Sarah's elegance, her sensual presence, as a sign of seduction. Manipulation.

She might see two girls clinging to one man and assume it was filth.

He swallowed hard.

This wasn't filth.

This was sacred.

But sacred things weren't always seen as such - especially when they didn't fit the mold.

He shifted slightly, careful not to wake either of them. Sarah sighed and pressed her cheek deeper into his chest. Marisol murmured something in sleep and moved her leg further across his.

No. If it came down to it, he'd start with Marisol. She deserved that autonomy. Her story. Her voice. It was her mother. He'd follow her lead. Stand beside her. Then, when the time was right... bring Sarah in.

Still, the uncertainty lingered. How would Maria react? Would she try to pull Marisol away? Threaten her with home, with shame, with religion?

Would she blame Bharath? Tell him to leave?

Could they survive that? He didn't know.

Then another thought slipped into his mind.

Mia.

He hadn't considered her - not really - but now that the idea rooted itself, it refused to let go.

He had a tutoring session with her tomorrow. Calculus.

The idea of spending an hour with her now, after *this*, felt absurdly loaded.

Mia was sharp. Maybe too sharp. She already had a front-row seat to the emotional symphony playing out between her sister and Bharath. And she'd definitely heard about today.

Hell, the entire campus had.

The Calculus hallway scene was already morphing into folklore. The stories would grow taller by morning - three girls fainting, one professor crying, a hundred clapping students throwing roses as Sarah and Marisol kissed Bharath atop the CoC steps.

Mia would *know*.

She'd ask.

And the thing was?

Mia might be young, but she wasn't naive.

She'd always struck him as a fox - clever, too observant for her own good, with just enough sweetness to disarm people before saying something surgical.

Could she help?

Would she?

He wasn't sure.

Mia could be unpredictable.

But she also loved her sister. Fiercely. She watched Marisol like someone who still missed her when she left for college each week. Who didn't always know how to say "I love you" but said it anyway in the way she hovered, asked sly questions, teased.

And Mia admired him.

He had seen it in her eyes the night he first sat at Maria's table - the way she studied him like a puzzle. The way she flirted not out of malice, but curiosity. The way she slowly began to respect his restraint, his discipline, his weird, quiet strength.

Maybe Mia could be... a bridge?

Maybe not at first. But if she *understood*, she might defend them in the long run. To Maria. To others. To herself.

He imagined the tutoring session.

Mia would sit across from him, textbook open but attention entirely elsewhere. Her eyebrow raised, a smirk playing on her lips.

"So. Lover boy. You made the campus explode today."

"Did you plan the synchronized kiss sequence or was it improv?"

"My friends want to know if you're recruiting for a cult."

He chuckled softly to himself at the imagined dialogue.

But beneath that, he could already hear her quieter question.

"Do you love my sister?"

"Are you going to hurt her?"

"Does she know what she's getting into?"

Yes. Yes. Yes.

To all of it.

He would answer truthfully.

And if Mia still looked him in the eye and didn't flinch - if she *believed* in them - maybe she could help prepare Maria.

Lay the groundwork. Remind her mother that Marisol was strong. Happy. Safe.

That Bharath wasn't destroying their daughter.

That he might just be the one who was finally giving her peace.

He sighed.

So many steps.

So much risk.

But it was worth it.

He'd risk humiliation. Rejection. Even exile from Maria's dinner table.

If it meant Marisol never had to *hide* her love.

If Sarah never had to wonder whether she was the extra piece in someone else's story.

If *they* - these wild, breathtaking, impossible women - could walk through campus with their heads held high, and not flinch.

Bharath leaned down, kissed Sarah's forehead.

Then Marisol's.

Then whispered, softly, to the ceiling:

"I'll make it work. Somehow. I'll protect this."

And in the quiet that followed, as dawn crept closer and the weight of his body began to surrender to sleep, Bharath allowed himself one final, dangerous, hopeful thought:

Maybe... just maybe... Mia would be the key.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 133: Mia's Multiverses

[1,903 words]

The lights were off, but Mia wasn't even close to sleeping.

Her bedspread was tangled around her legs, the fan overhead hummed steadily, and a soft breeze carried in the sound of distant traffic from the highway. But her mind was far louder than the world outside.

She lay on her stomach, her chin buried in her pillow, bare feet twitching behind her, heart thudding like she'd just run a sprint.

Tomorrow. *She was going to see him tomorrow.*

Just the two of them. Alone.

Bharath.

It had only been two meetings. Two conversations. And yet he was more deeply embedded in her mind than any boy she'd ever met. Not just because of his looks - though, God, he was handsome in that calm, unbothered way - but because he was... different.

The first time had caught her off guard.

She'd gone full bombshell. Tight top, perfect eyeliner, the confident strut that always made boys forget their own names. She'd walked into the living room like she owned it. But Bharath didn't crumble. Didn't gawk. Didn't even flirt.

He *looked* at her - not like a guy undressing her with his eyes, but like someone trying to find out what else was underneath all that polish and perfection.

It had rattled her.

Most guys were easy to disarm. Bharath had disarmed *her*.

And then there was the second time - during his visit to the house for dinner.

She'd pounced.

The moment she saw him walk in again, she practically monopolized his time. Not out of competition, but out of need. She wanted his attention. Wanted him to see her the way he saw her sister. She told him about her dream of getting into Georgia Tech, about her

AP classes, her math scores, how hard she was studying. She had wanted him to be impressed - not with her body, but with her mind.

And he *was*.

He'd listened to every word. Asked thoughtful questions. Told her he believed in her. Even offered to tutor her - for free.

That moment hadn't left her since.

And now, tomorrow, she was getting her wish.

Mia rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

It had started as a harmless crush - the usual excitement that came with meeting someone older, someone grounded, someone *worth* looking up to. A role model, she told herself. Someone she could learn from.

But the longer she sat with that idea, the less convincing it felt.

Because role models didn't make your breath catch when they looked at you.

Role models didn't haunt your thoughts late at night.

Role models didn't make you dream about what it would feel like to be *wanted* by them - to be held, kissed, protected.

No.

This wasn't just admiration.

It was... something more. Something frightening in its depth. Something that had begun blooming in her chest and refused to stop.

And then there was the other thing.

The thing that made her heart flutter and her thighs clench with the same dizzy, dangerous heat.

The story. The *incident*.

Bharath had saved a woman - *fought off two attackers* with nothing but his bare hands.

He had been stabbed.

Stabbed.

She hadn't believed it at first, but then Marisol confirmed it, her tone tight and proud. He had even shown the newspaper article that night. He had intervened to stop a mugging outside the MARTA station and hadn't even hesitated.

He had gotten stitches.

Stitches.

Did he have a scar?

God. Probably. *That was hot!*

She found herself picturing it. A thin line over smooth, brown skin. The quiet, masculine evidence of bravery. Of violence. Of someone who would step between a woman and danger without thinking twice.

He'd done that for a stranger.

Imagine what he would do for someone he *loved*.

The thought made her breath catch.

Mia sat up in bed, crossed her legs, and reached for the sketchpad on her nightstand. She didn't really know why - she just needed to *do* something. The energy in her body wouldn't sit still. She ended up doodling spirals and hearts and random lines that all eventually turned into some version of *him*.

His eyes. His jawline.

The way his shirt clung to his chest when he leaned forward at the dinner table.

She bit her lip.

What would he wear tomorrow?

More importantly - what *should she* wear?

She padded barefoot to her closet, pulled the door open, and began scanning through the options. Nothing too obvious. She couldn't show up looking like she was dressed for a date. But also... she wasn't about to look like she rolled out of bed.

She wanted his attention - but not the kind that came from skin alone. He wasn't that type of guy.

She smiled to herself.

Still... a little cleavage couldn't hurt.

He was a breast guy. She could *feel* it in the way his eyes darted - quickly, always politely, but helplessly - during that first meeting. She had seen the flash of guilt in his eyes when he realized he was staring. That was when she *knew*.

But he didn't act on it. Because he was honorable.

She wanted to respect that. She also wanted to... test it. Just a little. See where his lines really were.

Would he be flustered again? Would he blush? Would he admit he noticed?

She didn't expect him to make a move. But God, she wanted to see if she could shake that monk-like calm of his.

And maybe - maybe - plant a seed.

Mia settled on a snug, ribbed long-sleeve top. Soft and modest, but it dipped just enough to offer a peek of what lay beneath. Her favorite jeans. Her good sneakers. Gloss, but not lipstick. Hair tied back, neat, studious, focused.

She'd be the perfect student.

Almost.

She glanced at herself in the mirror.

Did her sister suspect?

Probably not.

Marisol barely noticed anything that didn't yell. And Mia had kept this buried deep - partly out of fear, partly out of shame.

But lately, her feelings were too big to ignore.

And part of her - the part that remembered how Marisol had softened after dinner, how happy she was when Bharath smiled - wondered if this strange new version of her sister might be willing to *understand*.

Could she... *share* him?

Would she ever even *consider* it?

It sounded insane.

But then again... this whole thing was already insane.

He wasn't like other guys.

And their connection - hers and Bharath's - might be new, but it wasn't small. It was already deep. Already *dangerous*.

And she hadn't even touched him yet.

Mia lay back down, hand on her chest, heart pounding under her palm.

Tomorrow was the start of something.

She didn't know what yet.

But she *knew* this: if there was even the smallest crack in the wall between them, she was going to find it.

And when she did?

She'd show him that she wasn't just Marisol's kid sister.

She was *Mia*.

Smart. Gorgeous. Ambitious.

And maybe... just maybe... the next person to truly see him.

Mia lay sprawled across her bed again, staring at the ceiling fan as it spun lazily overhead.

Sleep was a fantasy. Her mind was far too alive.

She had already planned the outfit. The notes were ready. Her bag was packed. But her brain wouldn't let go. It kept replaying the same internal loop - *tomorrow*. The tutoring session. The possibilities.

The *what-ifs*.

And somewhere in the quiet hum of her room, imagination took over.

Version One: The Spark

She's seated at the kitchen table, the light catching the edge of her collarbone just right. Bharath sits across from her, shirt rolled at the sleeves, focused on a calculus equation.

He leans in.

“You’re really good at this,” he says, surprised.

Mia smiles, letting a little of the pride show. “Told you. I just needed the right teacher.”

Their hands brush as he reaches for the pencil.

He pauses. Looks up.

And something passes between them - not electric, not lustful - but *intimate*. Familiar. Like he suddenly sees the full version of her.

He swallows. Shifts in his chair.

Then he speaks, low.

“You’ve changed a lot.”

She lets the words hang before saying, “Maybe you’re just seeing me now.”

And that’s how it starts.

Not scandal. Not tension.

Just a look.

An opening.

Version Two: The Storm

Rain is pouring outside. Loud. Insistent.

The campus is soaked in rains. Mia’s ride bails. She’s stranded, just as the session ends.

Bharath offers to walk her home.

They share an umbrella. Her shoulder brushes his.

They reach her front door, soaked and laughing. She shivers.

He sees it.

“Come inside,” she says.

Inside, she wraps herself in a towel and changes clothes. Bharath looks away - a perfect gentleman - but when she re-enters the room in a tight t-shirt and shorts all soaked like Denise Richards in Wild Things, his breath hitches.

She thanks him. Sits beside him.

The mood shifts. Quiet. Heavy.

"I wish I'd met you first," she says softly.

He doesn't answer.

But he doesn't move away either.

Version Three: The Slip

They're working on derivatives.

Mia leans over the paper, fully engaged. Bharath is helping her trace the slope of a function.

She looks up. He's close.

So close.

She forgets the problem. Forgets everything.

"Can I ask you something?" she says.

He nods.

"If things were different... do you think we'd be something?"

He hesitates.

Then - heartbreakingly honest - he says, "I don't know. But I think about it."

She doesn't push.

She just smiles. "Me too."

Version Four: The Confession

This time, it's her who says it.

The session ends. She thanks him. He's proud of her progress.

And then - out of nowhere - she blurts it out.

"I like you. Not just for helping me. Not just because you're Marisol's boyfriend. I *like* you. And I don't want to pretend I don't."

Bharath freezes.

And slowly, carefully, says, "I've felt something too. But I've been scared to admit it."

They sit in silence.

But the world has already changed.

Version Five: The Impossible Dream

This one is softer. Gentler.

It's not about seduction or sparks. It's about *acceptance*.

She comes clean to Marisol.

They're alone. Maybe it's weeks from now. Maybe months.

"I have feelings for Bharath," she says. "I didn't mean to. But I do."

Marisol's eyes narrow. But she listens.

She doesn't scream. She doesn't throw a glass.

Instead, she sighs. Long. Tired.

"I kind of suspected."

"You're mad?"

"I'm *jealous*. And scared. But not mad."

Then - impossibly - Marisol asks, "Do you love him?"

Mia nods.

Marisol studies her. Really studies her.

Then says the words Mia never dared imagine:

"Then don't lie about it."

Version Six: The Wild Card

This one she barely lets herself believe.

She shows up to the tutoring session, nervous, skin buzzing.

But instead of jumping straight into calculus, Bharath closes the notebook.

"We'll study later," he says.

"Why?"

"I want to talk to you first."

About what?

About the way he's been thinking about her. About how much he respects her ambition. About how he hasn't been able to stop replaying their last conversation. How proud he is that she's chasing GT like a warrior.

And then - with the same honesty that floored her the first time - he says:

"Whatever this is between us... it's real. I don't know where it leads. But if you want to talk about it, I will."

And she says yes.

And it begins.

Mia turned over, the sheets tangling around her legs.

Her cheeks were flushed. Her heart thudded behind her ribs.

Each fantasy was more vivid than the last.

Not just sexual - though that was there, humming beneath everything - but *emotional*. Honest.

None of them involved betrayal.

None of them involved lies.

Only possibilities. Fractals of a future that might not exist - but might be *waiting*.

She looked at the clock. 1:42 AM.

Still no sleep.

She groaned into her pillow and curled tighter into herself.

Maybe tomorrow nothing will happen.

Maybe it will be just a normal study session.

Maybe Bharath will keep his walls up.

Maybe he won't see the way her heart races when he says her name. Maybe he won't notice the way her voice softens just for him.

Or maybe he *will*.

Maybe the first thread of something impossible will be spun.

And Mia?

Mia would be ready.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 134: Words of Wisdom

[1,465 words]

Bharath didn't know how he was standing.

His legs felt like linguine left too long in boiling water. His back ached, his abs stung from the repeated clenching, and his arms had the grip strength of a pool noodle. And yet-he felt... radiant. Used. Loved. Worshipped. *Empowered*.

Two hours of slow, sacred chaos in the bedroom that morning with Sarah and Marisol had left him physically enervated and emotionally supercharged.

And somehow, with divine willpower and an indecent amount of electrolytes, here he was: stumbling into the Georgia Tech Student Athletic Center, glowing faintly like a holy saint.

Jorge looked up from his warm-up stretches, one leg hooked on the bench like a flamingo doing ballet.

Tyrel was sprawled on a yoga mat in full faux-Nike gear, clutching a foam roller like it owed him child support.

Ravi sat slumped on the rowing machine with a Gatorade in hand and the dead eyes of a man still waiting for someone to laugh at his best jokes.

“You look like a man who got exorcised,” Jorge said, squinting like Bharath was vibrating.

“I feel like one,” Bharath muttered, rubbing his shoulder. “But like... in a good way.”

Tyrel raised an eyebrow. “Did the girls summon a demon and make you fight it shirtless?”

He paused.

“...Actually, don’t answer that. I don’t need the visual of you chanting in tongues while Marisol rides you like a Valkyrie.”

“TYREL,” Ravi snapped, holding up a hand. “I am a virgin in *three* time zones. Let me have *something*.”

Bharath chuckled and dropped his duffel bag. “I’m just here to sweat out the lavender oil and not die.”

“‘Not die,’ he says,” Jorge muttered. “Meanwhile, the hallway gossip makes it sound like you walk on water every day.”

Ravi perked up. “Didn’t Camila say the girls generally glow during their breakfast like *actual* saints?”

Tyrel nodded solemnly. “She said Marisol looked like she’d been on a pilgrimage to a tantric monastery. And Sarah generally speaks in... fragments after your morning sessions.”

“She said that?” Bharath blinked.

Jorge smirked. “Camila says a lot. Most of it while biting. But yeah. Apparently your ladies show up looking like they just got baptized in pheromones.”

Ravi sighed dramatically. “Meanwhile, I’m over here trying to build up the courage to put my arm around Nandita’s shoulders.”

Tyrel looked up from the mat. “Bro, I nearly fainted when LaTasha kissed me yesterday.”

Bharath took a seat on the bench. “You guys are exaggerating.”

“No we’re not,” Tyrel said, deadly serious. “There’s a whiteboard in the dorm with a running list of your rumored skills. Someone added ‘telepathy’ and ‘knows the secret G-spot code.’”

“There’s a *whiteboard*?” Bharath blinked.

Ravi leaned in, reverent. “They call you the ‘Indian Prince of Pleasure’ now.”

Tyrel added, “With *abs of devotion*.”

Jorge nodded. “And thighs like twin fax machines.”

“...Fax machines?” Bharath frowned.

“It’s 1998,” Jorge said with a shrug. “We work with what we know.”

They migrated toward the weights. Bharath picked up two 25s. His arms quivered like a bad lie. Ravi grabbed a 15 and almost tore a ligament trying to curl while watching a girl tie her ponytail.

“Okay,” Jorge said, adjusting his headband. “We need intel. How the hell are you alive? Shouldn’t you be, like, spiritually desiccated by now?”

“Yeah,” Ravi added. “What are they feeding you? Ambrosia? Tandoori-flavored moonlight?”

Before Bharath could answer, a freshman boy in a *Pokémon: The Movie* T-shirt popped out from behind a squat rack like a gremlin.

“Are you... the Prince of Pleasure... the King of the College of Computing?” he asked breathlessly.

“What?!” Bharath blinked.

“That’s what they call you on the dorm whiteboard,” the kid said reverently. “That you smell like Wild Stone and justice. My girlfriend had a dream where you were shampooing her cat and then it levitated.”

“...WHAT?!”

The kid bowed, and then vanished into the cardio section like a ninja.

“You need security,” Jorge muttered.

“I’m not magic,” Bharath sighed. “I just listen. And love. And use conditioner.”

Tyrel leaned in. “No. This is a public service. Tell us what they talk about when we’re not around. We need recon.”

Tyrel rolled over dramatically. “Okay, real talk. Are you on drugs? Supplements? Viagra? Vedic prayers? You looked *calm*. Like post-orgasmic Black Jesus.”

Another student wandered over, a girl in basketball shorts and a Georgia Tech hoodie. “Excuse me. Do you actually meditate between orgasms?”

Ravi shrieked.

Bharath blinked.

The girl nodded solemnly. “I just want you to know that that’s incredible. My roommate said she saw you hovering.”

Tyrel collapsed onto a yoga mat.

Jorge pulled out a resistance band like it was holy scripture. “Okay, I’m done pretending. Teach us, Master. Teach us the Way.”

“I’m just... loved,” Bharath offered.

“Oh my god,” Ravi muttered. “He’s going full monk again.”

“I *told* you,” Tyrel snapped. “He’s like if Gandhi and a Playgirl model had a baby and sent him to Georgia Tech.”

Bharath grinned, toweling his face. “Look, there’s no secret technique. No Kama Sutra flashcards. No tantric cheat codes.”

Jorge crossed his arms. “You expect us to believe you’re casually pleasing two beautiful women on the regular and not even breaking a sweat?”

“I *am* breaking a sweat!” Bharath protested. “Do you see this shirt? It smells like sweat and despair.”

Tyrel leaned in. “Okay, but how? Seriously. What do the girls *talk about* after all this?”

Ravi nodded eagerly. “Yeah! What do they say when you’re not around?”

Bharath blinked. "Honestly? Not what you think. They talk about lotion. And astrology. And... mortgages."

Jorge snorted. "Mortgages?"

"Yeah," Bharath nodded. "Sarah read one article about property taxes and now she's decided we need to own a duplex in five years."

Tyrel looked offended. "So while I'm over here trying to figure out how to ask LaTasha to make out without passing out, your girls are pillow-talking about *home equity loans*?"

Bharath shrugged. "Sometimes it's about what songs they'd strip to. Sometimes it's Marisol explaining recursion in Java while biting my shoulder. It's a range."

Ravi dropped his water bottle. "You mean they're smart *and* freaky?"

"They're apsaras," Bharath said, without irony.

There was a moment of stunned silence.

Then Jorge whispered, "You lucky son of a-"

Tyrel cut in, waving a hand like an NFL coach drawing up a play. "Okay. We need the actual strategy. Are we talking massage oil? Pre-wash rituals? Incense?"

Bharath leaned on a medicine ball. "Fine. Step one: Massage. Use your hands. Your fingers. Like they're extensions of your soul. You're not kneading dough-you're dissolving trauma."

"Not dough. Dissolve trauma," Ravi wrote.

"Step two: Shampoo. Take your time. Use your nails. Condition like it's foreplay."

"Do you hum while doing it?" Jorge asked.

"I sometimes chant the X-Files theme," Bharath said solemnly.

Tyrel whispered, "That explains the transcendence."

Bharath chuckled. "Honestly? Massages help. Learning to shampoo helps. Apparently scalp attention is underappreciated in the male population."

Ravi scribbled furiously in a notebook. "Scalp. Shampoo. Massage. Male population. Understood."

Tyrel pointed at him. "You're writing this down?"

“Bhai,” Ravi hissed, “Do you want to die alone?”

“Step three: Know their cravings. One time, Sarah needed peanut butter, Cool Ranch Doritos, and mango slices at 2:13 AM. I didn’t ask questions. I just got them.”

Jorge whistled. “And they say romance is dead.”

Ravi clutched his pen like it was a crucifix. “Cool Ranch Doritos. 24x7 service like a 7-11. Got it. My man’s living in the *legendary edition* of life.”

Tyrel sat up, eyes narrowed. “Okay. Last question. What’s the mindset? How do you keep them happy?”

Bharath paused, serious now. “It’s not about keeping them happy like they’re plants. It’s about seeing them. Listening. Touching with purpose. Worshipping like you’re grateful to be allowed near them.”

Ravi's jaw dropped. “That’s poetry.”

Tyrel grabbed the notebook from Ravi. “Repeat that. Slower. Like a monk.”

Jorge picked up a dumbbell and cradled it like it was holy. “I will never disrespect shampoo again.”

Bharath leaned back on the bench, muscles aching, heart full. “You want the real advice?”

They all leaned in.

He grinned. “Make them laugh. Touch her like you *remember her body*. And don’t fake listening-just actually care.”

Tyrel whispered like he was receiving prophecy. “*Actually care.*”

“Also,” Bharath added, “know when to shut up and let her put her cold feet on you and use plenty of Wild Stone.”

“Say less/. Listen like you care... write that down bhai,” Ravi said reverently. “I’m going to go volunteer as a human space heater.”

“I’m gonna buy a better conditioner,” Tyrel said, already standing.

“Do they make Kama Sutra audiobooks?” Jorge muttered, pulling the notepad towards him to add his notes.

They all huddled around the water fountain after that, debating whether sandalwood candles were too forward for a second date and if learning to braid hair was hot or creepy.

Meanwhile another kid appeared, hands trembling. “Will you sign my arm?”

Tyrel stared. “This is getting culty.”

Bharath just laughed, picked up a kettlebell, and began his set. Every rep hurt like divine penance. His shoulders burned. His thighs begged for mercy.

And he welcomed it.

Marisol’s lips on his temple. Sarah’s voice in his ear.

They gave him everything.

And all he could do now... was share what little wisdom he had with the boys too dumb to figure it out alone.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 135: Roping in Mia

[1,277 words]

The door barely clicked shut behind him when Marisol appeared in the hallway, hands on her hips, eyes gleaming with something between affection and conspiracy.

“Clothes,” she said simply.

Bharath blinked. “What?”

Sarah leaned over the arm of the couch, her voice playful but firm. “Strip. Bath time.”

He chuckled, tossing his gym bag near the door. “I literally just walked in.”

“And now you’re walking out of those,” Marisol said, already padding toward him. “You stink like sweat and virtue.”

He raised an eyebrow. "Virtue?"

Sarah smirked. "Only someone virtuous survives what we did to you this morning and *still* goes to the gym."

Before he could reply, Marisol was on him-lifting the hem of his sweat-soaked shirt and pulling it up over his head. Sarah was already by his side, undoing the waistband of his gym pants with a theatrical sigh.

"Honestly, this is for *our* sanity too," she said. "You in sweatpants after sex? Criminally hot."

Bharath opened his mouth to protest-only to find his pants yanked down and a pair of greedy hands cupping his ass.

"Hey-!"

"Shhh," Marisol whispered. "Just let us."

He laughed softly as they stripped him completely, pausing every so often to press kisses to his neck, his chest, his hips-nowhere overtly sexual, but everywhere meaningful.

Sarah brushed her lips across his collarbone. "You're not allowed to wash yourself anymore. It's our job."

"And our pleasure," Marisol added, sliding a hand down his back. "New rule. House policy. Non-negotiable."

He shook his head, still smiling. "You two are going to be the death of me."

"We plan on it," Sarah murmured, taking his hand. "Now into the bath, hero."

The shower was already filling with steam curling up from the warm water, the air rich with lavender oil and something citrusy. Candles flickered near the edge-Sarah's touch-and soft music played from a tiny tape deck tucked on the vanity.

Bharath stepped in first, easing into the heat with a groan.

But before he could settle, two pairs of hands were on him again.

He didn't resist.

Marisol stood behind him, guiding his back against her chest, her arms curling around his waist. Sarah stood next to him dipping her hands into the warm water and lathering a sweet-smelling shampoo between her fingers.

“We take care of our man,” Sarah whispered as she smoothed the foam into his hair, her nails massaging his scalp in slow, circular patterns.

Marisol’s hands slid down his arms, over his chest, her lips pressing kisses to his damp shoulder blades. “Every inch. Every day. You don’t lift a finger when it comes to this. Understood?”

Bharath groaned-not from exhaustion, but from how *amazing* he felt in that moment. Cared for. Claimed. Cherished.

“Yes,” he breathed.

The shampoo frothed as Sarah worked deeper, scratching gently behind his ears, dragging her fingers down to his neck.

“I love this hair,” she said softly. “It’s strong and soft. Like you.”

Marisol chuckled. “He *is* soft right now. Well... mostly.”

They giggled as his cheeks flushed, and Sarah leaned in to press a kiss to his wet temple. Her eyes were glassy with affection.

“You are *ours*,” she whispered. “And we don’t waste bathtime.”

Marisol nodded against his back. “And if you ever try to shower alone again, we’ll punish you.”

“Oh?” he rasped. “And how exactly?”

Sarah leaned down and nipped his ear. “We’ll *not* let you touch us for a whole day.”

Bharath’s breath caught. “Cruel.”

“Necessary,” Marisol said. “Now hush. We’re not done worshipping you.”

They rinsed his hair slowly, taking turns pouring water over his head from a ceramic jug, watching the suds trail down his body. Marisol’s hands began soaping his chest next-long, slow strokes down his sternum, her thumbs caressing his ribs as though learning him again.

Sarah lathered his arms, bringing his fingers to her mouth and kissing each one, reverent. Her lips lingered on his palm before she guided it to her cheek.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” she whispered.

He met her eyes-and saw nothing but truth there.

Marisol's hands moved to his thighs now, massaging deeply, kneading the muscle with slow intent.

"You give us *everything*," she said quietly. "And we see it. All of it."

Bharath's voice was hoarse. "You two... you make me feel like..."

"Say it," Sarah urged, crawling into the tub now so she could straddle his lap, careful not to take it further, just resting her forehead to his. "Say how we make you feel."

"Like I matter," he whispered.

Marisol tightened her arms around him from behind.

"You do," she said fiercely.

"To both of us," Sarah added, kissing his jaw, his brow, the tip of his nose.

They stayed like that for minutes, maybe hours. The water cooled around them, but none of them moved. Bharath's head rested between their breasts. Their hands drifted along his skin like the tide—never sexual, but deeply intimate.

They kissed him until he smiled again.

They bathed him like he was sacred.

The new rule was clear:

Bharath never bathed alone again.

The diner was nearly empty, save for a pair of retirees sipping coffee in the corner and a college couple sharing a newspaper and greasy fries. The neon sign buzzed faintly outside, casting flickers of pink and blue over the fogged windows. It was the kind of place that smelled like burnt toast, syrup, and butter—safe, unremarkable, and perfect for staying under the radar.

Bharath, Marisol, and Sarah slid into a booth near the back, the vinyl seat cold against their jeans. They kept their voices low, their touches subtle, but the warmth between them hummed beneath every glance, every brush of the hand on the table.

"Toast, hash browns, eggs—no meat?" the waitress asked, barely looking up from her notepad as she refilled their water glasses.

"No meat, please," Bharath replied, giving her a polite smile.

Marisol grinned across the table. "He's the only man I know who could worship two women and still be gentle to a cow."

"Discipline," Sarah said, smirking. "His superpower."

Bharath raised his coffee cup. "And yours is corruption."

They laughed softly, and for a moment, it was just the three of them in their bubble-steaming mugs, shared toast, glances that lingered.

"So," Sarah began, sobering slightly, "Mia's coming today?"

Bharath nodded. "After classes. I'll tutor her like we planned. But... I want to bring her home after. So she can meet you, Sarah. See this" - he gestured gently between the three of them - "with her own eyes."

Marisol arched an eyebrow. "Tonight?"

"If she wants to stay over, let her. No pressure. Just... let her feel the truth of it. Not gossip. Not whispers. Just us."

Sarah leaned back. "Let her ask questions. Let her watch. Let her... decide."

He nodded. "Exactly. She's smart. She will figure something is up between us when she meets us. If we don't bring her into the light, she'll be lost in the rumors."

Marisol stirred her coffee. "You think she'll be okay?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But I know she loves and respects you. And if she sees you loving this - us - I hope she'll believe it's real."

There was a pause.

Then Marisol smiled.

"I haven't spent proper time with her in weeks. Just quick check-ins. Maybe this is overdue."

Sarah reached for Bharath's hand beneath the table. "And if it overwhelms her?"

"Let's figure that out when we cross that bridge. I feel she will understand though."

Marisol looked between them, heart swelling with a strange mix of excitement and apprehension. "You two really are the most dangerous kind of people."

Bharath tilted his head. "How so?"

“Gentle,” she said. “But unstoppable.”

They finished breakfast in silence after that, save for a few soft chuckles, shared bites, and quiet sips. Outside, the first week of November painted the world in gold and rust. A chill wind waited to bite at their jackets, but here, in this booth, they were warm.

And somewhere later that day, Mia Rivera would step into the world they had built.

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

Chapter 136: I Hope He Is The Man You Think He Is

[1,077 words]

The Georgia autumn was showing off - crisp air, golden leaves swirling in lazy eddies, and a sky so clear it felt painted. Marisol tucked herself under Bharath’s right arm. Sarah claimed the left. Three sets of footsteps in sync. One unit.

A few passing students turned to look, some curious, others slack-jawed. A few whispers trailed behind them.

But none of them cared.

Marisol was humming softly, her hand trailing lazy circles against Bharath’s lower back. “So... I was thinking.”

“That’s always dangerous,” Sarah quipped.

“Quiet, slut. I was thinking it’s time you were properly inducted.”

Bharath glanced down, suspicious. “Inducted into what? She already knows about Sacred Tuesdays.”

“And lives for them,” Sarah added, smiling wickedly. “Nooners, cock worship, sacred choking. Best part of the week.”

Marisol grinned. “Exactly. But there’s one thing you haven’t done yet. One ritual.”

Sarah tilted her head. “There’s more?”

“Oh yeah,” Marisol said, voice low. “The claiming.”

Sarah slowed her step. “Claiming?”

Marisol stopped for dramatic effect, tugging Bharath and Sarah to a halt with her. “When we first got together, Bharath made me lie down on his bed... and he pointed to every single part of my body and declared it his.”

Sarah’s eyes widened slightly, lips parted.

“He’d say, ‘Mine,’” Marisol whispered, her voice like velvet. “Then he’d touch it. Sometimes kiss it. Sometimes spank it. Sometimes...” She gave Bharath a sly look.

“I get the picture,” Sarah said, her cheeks pinkening.

“I didn’t even know I craved that kind of ownership,” Marisol confessed. “But the way he did it? Reverent. Commanding. Like my body was a kingdom, and he was its rightful ruler. I melted.”

Sarah turned to Bharath, pupils dilated. “Why haven’t we done this?”

Bharath rubbed his temple. “Because every Tuesday you two wreck me for hours and I can barely walk by lunch let alone remember rituals.”

Marisol giggled. “He’s still recovering from last week. Remember how you choked yourself on him while I rode him and made him spank me until I sobbed?”

Sarah shivered. “I do. I still dream about it.”

“I *still* feel it,” Bharath muttered.

Sarah pressed herself closer to him. “Tonight. I want the whole thing. Claim me. Worship me. Own me.”

Marisol winked. “And then we can spank each other until someone begs.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “Someone?”

Marisol grinned. “Usually me.”

Bharath choked. “You two are plotting my physical demise.”

“Not demise,” Marisol said, her lips brushing his ear. “Devotion.”

Sarah smirked. “You spank her, right?”

Marisol nodded. "Sometimes soft. Sometimes hard. Depends on how much I beg for it. Or how much you egg him on."

Sarah's eyes gleamed. "I love watching that. The way she arches. The way you growl."

"I swear to god," Bharath muttered.

"Oh, and you love it," Sarah said sweetly. "Just like you love when I choke on you until you twitch."

Marisol mock-fanned herself. "I'm horny again."

Sarah mock-nodded. "Same. Can't believe it's not even noon."

Bharath sighed. "Can't believe I thought college would be about computers."

"Speaking of systems," Sarah said brightly, "I propose a new tradition."

"Of course you do," he groaned.

"Tandem blowjob and titjob alarm clock," she declared. "To wake you up right. Tuesdays and Fridays?"

Marisol looked thoughtful. "Hmm. Balance. Holistic. I approve."

Bharath stopped walking. "You two need help."

"You need protein," Marisol said, kissing his cheek. "And electrolytes."

Sarah looped her arm around his waist. "Man up, lover. You started this. Now keep up."

They continued toward campus with Bharath half-laughing, half-dreading, and completely smitten.

As they crossed the street, the breeze caught Sarah's curls and Marisol's voice as she whispered something else in his ear that made him stumble slightly.

Maria Rivera stirred the pot on the stove with a practiced hand, the scent of simmering tomatoes and garlic filling the kitchen. The clink of a spoon against ceramic echoed behind her-Mia, eating cereal at the counter, for once not glued to the phone or flipping through a magazine. Her leg bounced restlessly under the stool.

Maria didn't comment on it.

She didn't have to.

Mia was practically vibrating with energy.

“So,” Mia said, her tone suspiciously casual, “I might head to campus later. Marisol asked if I wanted to hang out.”

Maria arched an eyebrow. “Since when do you ‘hang out’ on a school night?”

“It’s not just for fun,” Mia said quickly. “Bharath’s helping me with calculus. He’s... really good at explaining stuff.”

“Mm-hmm.” Maria turned back to the stove, hiding the small smile tugging at her lips. “And you need help in the evening now?”

“Well, yeah. It’s quieter at night. And I might stay over, y’know... spend some time with Marisol. I haven’t seen her properly in weeks.”

Maria turned, ladle in hand, and gave her daughter a long, knowing look. “You used to roll your eyes when your sister talked about college boys. Now you’re volunteering for overnight study sessions?”

Mia flushed. “It’s not like that. I mean-he’s different.”

“Different how?”

Mia hesitated. “He... listens. And he believes in me. Like, really believes I can make it into Georgia Tech. He makes me want to prove him right.”

Maria watched her carefully, placing the ladle on a folded towel.

“You like him,” she said simply.

Mia opened her mouth. Closed it. Then looked away. “Maybe.”

There was a beat of silence. The kitchen clock ticked louder than it should have.

“I’m not saying I’ll do anything,” Mia added quickly. “I’m not trying to ruin anything between him and Marisol. I just... want to be near him. That’s all.”

Maria leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Her gaze softened, but it didn’t lose its sharpness.

“He’s a good man,” she said after a moment. “That night you met him, I saw it in how he carried himself. The way he looked at you-like you were someone worth taking seriously. Not just for how you look.”

Mia’s face warmed again, but this time with something deeper than embarrassment.

Maria continued. "But he's still a man. And you're... not exactly forgettable, mija."

Mia smirked. "You mean I'm hotter than Marisol?"

"I mean," Maria said with a raised brow, "you've always known how to turn heads. But your sister has her own fire. And she's in love. You are stepping too close to that... could burn you both."

"I know," Mia said quietly.

Maria stepped forward and gently tucked a strand of hair behind Mia's ear. "Just... be careful, chiquita. Don't mistake admiration for something deeper. And if it *does* become something more, make sure you're proud of how you got there."

Mia nodded, her throat tight.

"I just want to be someone he respects," she whispered. "Someone he could-maybe, someday-care about."

Maria didn't respond right away. She just pulled her daughter into a brief, warm hug.

"I hope he is the man you think he is," she said softly. "For both your sakes."

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

Chapter 137: The Legend of WildStone

[1,243 words]

The campus dining hall was, once again, humming.

Trays clattered, chairs scraped, and conversations swirled like wind through leaves-but Table 7, by the east-facing windows, had a gravity all its own.

At the center of it all sat Bharath, flanked by Marisol and Sarah like bookends of devotion. On his right, Marisol poked at her burrito bowl with studied calm, one hand always resting somewhere on Bharath-his forearm, his thigh, his knee under the table. On his left, Sarah nibbled carrot sticks with alarming grace, occasionally slipping him sips of her strawberry lemonade without being asked.

Across from them, Jorge, Ravi, Tyrel, Camila, LaTasha, and Nandita did their best to act casual. It didn't work.

There was a subtle but unmistakable energy around the table-part reverence, part chaos. A few heads from neighboring tables turned their way now and then, whispering, giggling, nudging elbows.

"Okay," Tyrel said, finally leaning forward, "you want to hear today's greatest hits?"

Bharath blinked. "Do I?"

"Oh, you *do*," Ravi said, eyes wide.

"I'm just brushing my teeth," Tyrel began, "minding my business. Then these two freshmen barge into the bathroom and ask me-*me!*-if I know where the Prince of Pleasure' lives."

"Another time I heard someone say you've got healing hands," Tyrel whispered. "Like, literally. There's a kid claiming his acne cleared up after you high-fived him yesterday."

Sarah choked on her lemonade.

LaTasha dropped her fork.

Marisol snorted into her napkin. "Prince of what now?"

Tyrel threw his hands up. "Don't ask me! I'm just quoting. Apparently, they've started a *whole discussion thread* about Bharath on the dorm whiteboard. He has other names too... like the King of the College of Computing"

Jorge chimed in. "Last night two guys knocked on my door just to see Bharath's *desk*. They wanted to know what cologne he uses. Said they were doing 'recon.'"

Ravi nodded solemnly. "One of them was taking notes."

Marisol tilted her head at Bharath. "What *do* you use?"

Bharath straightened like a soldier reporting to duty. "Wild Stone," he declared. "It's this musky-"

Both girls gasped.

"Oh my god," Sarah groaned.

“No,” Marisol said, pointing at him. “Absolutely not. We *binned* that weeks ago. You’re still using that?”

“But it’s got this... smoky charm,” Bharath defended weakly.

Sarah leaned in, dead serious. “It smells like bad decisions and airport bathrooms.”

“You said you liked it!” Bharath protested.

“We like *you*,” Marisol replied with a grin. “Not the chemical weapon you were wearing.”

“Blasphemy,” Jorge said, cracking up. “I *knew* that smell was working some kind of dark magic.”

Tyrel leaned back. “I’m just saying-if the campus has an underground ‘Bharath strategy council,’ I want *in*. I’ll sell tips.”

“I knew I had a fan club back home,” Bharath muttered dramatically. “Looks like they’ve gone international.”

Sarah and Marisol leaned into him from either side and kissed his cheeks in unison.

“You’re welcome,” Marisol whispered.

“We created a monster,” Sarah added.

Nandita, who had been flipping through a notebook with choreo sketches, finally looked up. “Okay, enough about perfume espionage and fan clubs-*we need to dance*.”

“Oh god,” Jorge groaned.

Camila raised an eyebrow. “Dance?”

“LaTasha, Sarah, and I are already onboard,” Nandita said. “Marisol, I assume you’re in?”

Marisol perked up immediately. “Diwali dance? Of course.”

Nandita smiled. “I’ve narrowed down the choreography and costume ideas. It’s fusion-modern Indian meets street performance. Think lehenga with sneakers.”

Sarah clapped her hands. “I love this.”

“The guys will need at least one rehearsal every day this week,” Nandita said, eyeing Bharath. Ravi, Jorge, and Tyrel meaningfully.

Tyrel groaned louder. "No offense, but I have the rhythm of a broken washing machine."

"You'll learn," LaTasha said sweetly.

"Or suffer," Nandita added, not missing a beat.

Jorge turned to Bharath. "Tell me you've at least danced before."

Bharath shrugged. "Mostly at weddings. Badly."

"Perfect," Nandita muttered. "We'll start from scratch."

Ravi, sipping his third iced tea, squinted at Bharath. "Speaking of tonight-are we meeting your little sister-in-law?"

Bharath hesitated.

"Tonight's just for family," he said. "I'm tutoring Mia, and then... she's coming over. To meet Sarah."

Camila raised an eyebrow. "Big move."

Marisol nodded. "She's curious. It's better she hears things from us than from the dorm gossip chain."

Sarah added, "She's smart. But we want to give her space to ask questions. Tomorrow, she can meet all of you."

Ravi raised his hands. "Fair. But I'm bringing popcorn to see how she reacts."

Tyrel nodded. "And a pen and notebook. In case she starts a competing fan club."

Bharath buried his face in his hands. "I hate all of you."

Marisol and Sarah just leaned in again, each pressing a kiss to his jaw.

"We *know*," they said together.

As Nandita rolled out her folded paper with sketches and notes, the energy at the table shifted again-from playful chaos to organized mischief.

"Alright," she said, flattening the sheet with both palms. "Here's the deal. We've got ten days till the Diwali showcase. That means daily practice."

"Daily? I thought you were joking before!" Ravi blinked.

“Every day?” Jorge’s voice cracked.

“Wait-there are *ten* days in a week now?” Tyrel asked, horrified.

Nandita raised an eyebrow. “I’m a girl. I can change my mind. Let’s make it two sessions on weekends. One hour after class on weekdays. Minimum.”

LaTasha nodded supportively. “It’s not that bad. We’ll rotate through segments and everyone gets breaks.”

Sarah leaned over to look. “Are we starting with the group number?”

“Yes,” Nandita confirmed. “Then a mid-tempo trio, and we finish with a high-energy fusion mashup.”

Marisol grinned. “Tell me there are dupattas I can twirl.”

“Flowy skirts, bangles, eyeliner, drama-the works,” Nandita replied. “We’re going big.”

Bharath winced. “We’re doomed.”

“No,” Sarah said, nudging him. “You’re going to be radiant.”

“I am going to be publicly humiliated.”

Marisol kissed his temple. “You’re going to be publicly *desired*.”

The girls high-fived.

Meanwhile, across the table, Ravi leaned toward Jorge. “Video games after this?”

“Immediately,” Jorge whispered. “I need to go beat something up very badly.”

Tyrel was already pushing back his chair. “Let’s go pretend we have agency.”

“You can’t run from culture,” Nandita called after them.

“Watch us!” Tyrel yelled back as they fled in a tight huddle of masculine dread.

Bharath made his way back to Smith Hall alone, still chuckling from the after-lunch chaos. The November breeze was cool against his cheeks, but his thoughts were a warm blur of Marisol’s fingers in his hair, Sarah’s laughter echoing in the dining hall, and the faint cinnamon-sandalwood scent still clinging to his collarbone from that morning’s bath.

The moment he stepped into the dorm lobby, it hit him.

“Yo-it’s *him!*”

A group of guys lounging on beanbags around the common TV turned as one. Two freshmen actually stood up. One of them-skinny, bespectacled, vibrating-practically ran up.

“Is it true?” he asked breathlessly. “You use Wild Stone?”

Bharath blinked. “I... yeah?”

The room *erupted*.

“I knew it!” someone yelled from the back.

“Dude, I just *ordered* a box!” another guy shouted.

“You’re like the Tom Cruise of romance,” a voice muttered reverently.

Bharath was ushered into the lounge like a cult leader returning from pilgrimage. Someone brought him a slice of cold pizza. Another offered the controller to the dorm’s PlayStation with both hands like it was sacred.

“Tell us,” a guy in an anime hoodie said seriously, “what’s the daily ritual?”

“I don’t know if I should-” Bharath started.

“Please,” someone else said. “My GPA depends on this.”

Bharath laughed and raised his hands. “Alright. Fine. Step one: shampoo. Step two: kindness. Step three: *Wild Stone*. That’s all I’ll say.”

“Legend,” someone whispered.

“I’m naming my goldfish after you,” another added solemnly.

As he settled onto the couch with a controller in hand and the scent of body spray lore trailing behind him, Bharath glanced out the window-toward the direction of the diner, of Marisol and Sarah and the girls talking dance-and smiled.

He had no idea how he got here.

But apparently, he smelled good doing it.

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

Chapter 138: Struggling

[1,598 words]

Mia adjusted the strap on her shoulder bag as she stepped out of the MARTA station, the chilly November breeze catching her hair and sending a shiver up her spine. She walked for a while following the signs to GT until she paused in front of Smith Hall and glanced around for a campus phone.

She spotted one in a half-open glass booth under the dorm's awning and slipped inside, immediately wrinkling her nose. The phone smelled like sweaty coins and questionable life choices. She punched in the number Marisol had scribbled down.

Four rings.

Then: "Hello?"

"It's Mia. I'm outside."

A pause. Then Bharath's warm voice: "Be right down."

She hung up and stepped back onto the sidewalk, exhaling steam in the crisp air.

And then... she noticed it.

Windows. Dozens of them.

All across Smith Hall, windows had heads peeking out like meerkats during a thunderstorm. Some had pressed their faces to the glass. Others were pulling friends to the window, pointing and whispering. One guy held up a small cardboard sign that said "WHO IS SHE???"

Mia blinked. "Okay... what the hell?"

The door swung open.

Bharath jogged out in a sweatshirt and jeans, hair slightly mussed, face glowing with that annoyingly kind expression he always wore like a second skin.

"Hey!" he called.

Mia couldn't help but smile. "Hey yourself."

As he reached her, the collective movement behind the glass intensified. Curtains twitched. Blinds shifted. At least three guys scrambled to get better angles.

“Are they always this... creepy?” she asked under her breath.

Bharath followed her gaze and sighed. “It’s... gotten worse.”

Mia crossed her arms. “Why? Is this about that girl you rescued at MARTA? Because I thought they gave you a thank-you card or something. This feels like you’re in a boy band.”

“No, it’s... not just that.”

Before she could press further, two guys burst out of the building and paused mid-run when they saw her.

“Is that her?” one whispered loudly.

“No way. She’s, like, *beyond* hot,” the other muttered. “That’s an 11. At least.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

They backed up immediately, mumbling apologies, then fled.

“Okay what *is* going on?” she asked, genuinely baffled.

A third guy leaned out the lobby door and yelled, “Hey Bharath, what’s your cologne again?!”

“Wild Stone!” Bharath called back automatically.

The door slammed shut.

Mia turned. “Wild Stone? Seriously? That stuff smells like high school locker rooms and budget hotel soap.”

Bharath looked genuinely offended. “Hey! It’s not that bad! My cousin gave it to me before I flew out.”

“Well, it’s clearly enchanted.” She squinted up at the dorm windows again. “They’re looking at you like you’re Brad Pitt dipped in gold.”

He winced. “Apparently Marisol already threw it out. Twice. Someone doesn’t understand the value of Wild Stone.”

Mia snorted. “Good. But someone needs to tell your fan club.”

As they began walking toward the library, Mia noticed more people giving them a once-over. A girl at the vending machine did a double take so aggressive she tripped on her own backpack. Two guys paused mid-conversation and followed them with their eyes like radar dishes.

Mia leaned in. "Are you secretly on the cover of TIME or something?"

Bharath chuckled, "Not unless they have a new 'Most Confused Engineering Student' list."

"Well," she muttered, "you're clearly hot campus property now."

As they rounded a corner toward the library, two freshmen ran past them—one held a tiny notepad, the other was muttering something about pheromones and 'ambient charisma levels.'

"Did they just take samples of your *aura*?" Mia whispered.

"Don't look at them," Bharath muttered, clearly mortified. "It only encourages them."

Mia walked a bit closer to him, amused and a little stunned. The attention wasn't just about him being hot—though, okay, he was definitely hot now. He had this lean, clean strength about him. That hoodie wasn't hiding much. His shoulders had filled out. His forearms looked like he could lift her with one arm and recite poetry with the other.

And he had a *butt*.

Mia had spent her entire academic life walking down hallways like she owned them. At her school, she was *that girl*. But this... this was a different level. The way people whispered his name. The way eyes followed them. She wasn't even sure they were looking at *her*. They were looking at *him*.

Which was... new.

Inside the library, things didn't calm down. If anything, the gawking intensified. A guy by the payphone hung up mid-call. A girl behind the check-out desk elbowed her coworker so hard he dropped a stack of index cards.

"Tell me something," Mia muttered as they passed a shelf of whispering juniors. "Do you, like, read poetry in the quad at midnight? Or have you cured cancer?"

Bharath kept walking like he hadn't heard.

"Don't ignore me. This is weird."

"I *know* it's weird," he said finally. "It just... started happening."

“After the mugging?”

“Yeah. Then it got... exponential.”

They reached a group study room and he opened the door for her. “Here. I booked this one earlier.”

Mia walked in, glancing back to find-yes. A guy had followed them. He didn’t even try to hide it. He was pretending to browse the encyclopedias while staring through the glass like it was SeaWorld and Bharath was the prized dolphin.

“What is this?” she muttered. “A zoo exhibit?”

“Ignore him,” Bharath said, pulling out a chair and grabbing his notebook. “They’ll leave once they realize I’m about to teach calculus.”

“Unless they think your math voice is sexy.”

He gave her a look.

She grinned. “Just saying. You’ve got ‘academic heartthrob’ energy.”

He took a deep breath and opened her textbook, flipping past dog-eared pages with a kind of calm precision that Mia found deeply unfair.

“Here,” he said. “You were stuck on some of the basics?”

“Yeah,” she said, trying to focus as a shadow flickered past the window.

She leaned closer. “But seriously-what is it? Did you write a viral chain email about being soulful and brooding and sensitive?”

He looked up. “You think I’m brooding?”

“No, but apparently someone does.”

He grinned. “Maybe it’s the Wild Stone.”

Mia laughed. “God, I hope not. That cologne smells like my cousin's gym bag.”

“Hey-my cousin *swore* it would make me irresistible. And it did!”

“To who? Mosquitoes?”

He paused, dramatically solemn. “It *did* get me tackled by two girls once.”

Mia blinked. "Wait-seriously?"

He froze.

She narrowed her eyes. "What kind of tackle are we talking about? Flag football or... Cosmo Magazine?"

"I meant metaphorically," he said too quickly.

She filed that reaction away for later.

They settled into the lesson, and for a while, the world beyond the study room faded. Bharath was focused, articulate, and-of course-patient to a fault. He didn't treat her like she was stupid. He never rushed her. He even made bad math jokes, which she secretly appreciated.

But every so often, Mia would glance up and see someone lingering by the door or pretending to fix the water fountain across the hall.

Fifteen minutes in, she dropped her pencil and whispered, "Are those two girls... passing notes about you?"

He looked.

They were.

Another ten minutes passed. The air cleared. The math clicked. Mia felt her brain untangle itself a little-and that warm, steady presence beside her felt weirdly... grounding. Like being near him made her sharper. Better.

At one point, he shifted to reach her notebook and his shoulder brushed hers.

She looked over.

He didn't flinch.

He just smiled.

And suddenly, the buzz outside didn't matter. The fan club. The whispering. The stupid cologne. None of it.

What mattered was that *he* was here. Patient. Funny. Kind.

The problem set was going well-too well.

Bharath sat beside her, posture calm, voice smooth, his focus entirely on the equations he was patiently explaining. She nodded along, asking the right questions, solving the next one before he could finish explaining it.

But underneath all of it, another question pulsed louder than any math problem:

Does he see me the way I see him?

She'd wondered since that second dinner. Since the tutoring offer. Since he'd looked her in the eyes and told her she was smart, capable, and worth the effort. No one said things like that unless they meant something. Or maybe he did. Because Bharath was frustratingly sincere.

Still, it gnawed at her.

She took off her hoodie and leaned forward slightly, letting her arm brush against his as she worked a step. When he shifted slightly to accommodate her, she took it a bit further-adjusting how she sat. Her blouse, carefully chosen that morning, slid just enough to show the curve of cleavage she knew was... well, impressive.

Bharath glanced-just a flick of his eyes, so fast it might have been imagination.

But it wasn't.

Mia bit back a smile.

"You're quiet," she said softly.

"I'm letting you think," he replied.

"I like it when you watch me think."

Bharath looked up, blinked once, and then flushed-not wildly, just a faint hue, but it was *there*.

Oh, he *noticed*.

Encouraged, Mia leaned her chin on her hand, elbow resting just enough to gently press her breasts together. She asked a question about parabolas that even she knew the answer to. As he leaned in to respond, she exhaled softly in his direction.

Outside the glass wall, a ripple of movement.

One of the note-passing girls gasped and ducked.

Another guy elbowed his friend hard and made some ridiculous gestures.

Mia fought back a smirk.

She turned slightly toward Bharath, knowing that he was getting an eyeful of her cleavage, watching him flounder for a beat before regaining control. His pencil paused mid-air. His throat bobbed with a swallow.

“You okay?” she asked, batting her lashes with just enough irony to let him *almost* catch her game.

“I’m-fine,” he said, carefully looking back at the math.

Victory.

Sort of.

Because even though it thrilled her to know he *did* see her-not just as a Rivera sibling, but as a woman-he still didn’t take the bait. He stayed gentlemanly, noble to the end. A little flustered, maybe. A little distracted.

But not disrespectful.

And somehow... that made her like him even more.

Share to your friends

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

Chapter 139: First Tutoring Session

[898 words]

Bharath was trying to explain limits.

Trying being the operative word.

“Okay,” he said, voice steady, “so think of a limit as what the function approaches-even if it never actually reaches that point...”

He trailed off.

Because Mia had leaned forward again. Just slightly. Just enough for her arm to brush his as she worked through the equation. The contact was feather-light, casual-except he was starting to recognize it for what it was.

A test.

She shifted in her seat. Slowly. Deliberately. Her blouse, already unbuttoned one-too-many for decency's comfort, dipped open just enough to reveal the full curve of cleavage that had no right to exist in a Calculus study session. Her bra peeked out-a lacy piece that made him lose track of his train of thought.

Mia kept her eyes on the notebook, pretending to focus as she wrote out a limit expression.

But she *knew* what she was doing.

She could feel his attention wavering. Not in a gross way-Bharath was far too respectful for that-but in the way his voice tightened. In how he shifted his weight. In the way he paused, mid-sentence, like the English language had briefly glitched.

Perfect.

She remembered when moves like that would derail an entire row of high school boys in AP Chem. She'd once made a TA drop a beaker. One time a substitute teacher forgot what class he was teaching. But this? This was different.

This wasn't about power.

This was about *recognition*.

She wanted to know-*really know*-that Bharath didn't just see her as Marisol's younger sister. Or some charity case he was mentoring. She wanted to know that he saw her as a woman. That her presence stirred something in him. Even if he'd never act on it.

So she kept going.

When he pointed to the next question, she tilted her head and gave him her "confused but adorable" look. It always worked. She'd mastered it in eighth grade and perfected it by junior year.

"Wait," she said, frowning slightly, "can you show me that epsilon-delta thing again? It's... just not sticking."

She leaned forward more this time-like she was trying to squint at the diagram-but it gave him a full, unobstructed view of her breasts pressed together, soft and generous

beneath the curve of her blouse. From this angle, they looked like they were plotting his spiritual downfall.

Bharath swallowed audibly.

"It's... um, about how close you can get to a value-without actually getting there," he said squeakily, blinking fast. "So, if you pick a distance epsilon from the limit, there's a distance delta on the x-axis that... um..."

He stared at her notebook like it had betrayed him.

"I-I should draw this."

"Yes," she said sweetly. "Draw it out. Slowly."

He grabbed the pencil like it was a weapon against temptation and started sketching a basic graph. But his hands-normally so steady-were a little jittery now.

And Mia was positively glowing.

She crossed her legs under the table, her knee brushing his. Another deliberate contact. Not lewd-just *enough*. She even let her sandal dangle a bit from her toes, her foot swaying in the corner of his vision like a pendulum of doom.

He exhaled slowly through his nose and kept sketching. "So... let's say the limit of $f(x)$ as x approaches 2 is 5..."

His eyes flicked upward for a second-just a second-and caught the curve of her chest again.

He looked away immediately, ears darkening.

Mia bit her lip.

He *was* noticing.

He *was* struggling.

Good.

But he wasn't being disrespectful. He wasn't leering or making a comment or turning into the kind of boy who thought cleavage was a social contract.

That made her want to tease him more.

“Okay,” she said, leaning so close she was basically over his shoulder now, her breast almost brushing his cheek. “So delta is like... how close we get to the x-value, right? And epsilon is for y?”

“Y-yeah,” he said, voice cracking just slightly. “Exactly.”

Her hair slipped over his arm. She didn’t move it.

He adjusted his position. Crossed his legs tighter. His pencil tip snapped.

He swore under his breath, quietly, and reached for another.

Mia smiled like a cat in the sun.

“Sorry,” she said innocently, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “I just get really close when I concentrate.”

“I noticed,” Bharath muttered, immediately regretting how it sounded.

She turned toward him slowly, meeting his eyes. There was a flicker of something between them-heat, humor, challenge. And maybe something softer underneath.

He looked away first.

She let him.

A beat passed. Then another.

He cleared his throat. “You really are picking this up fast.”

“Only because you’re patient. And kind,” she said, letting her voice drop a little lower. “And apparently immune to distraction.”

He looked like he might spontaneously combust.

“I... I wouldn’t go that far,” he said, standing too quickly. “But yeah. You’ve done enough for today. You nailed every concept.”

She sat back, triumphant. “So no homework?”

“God, no,” he muttered, already grabbing his notebook. “You’re good for the week. Maybe the semester.”

She grinned. “You remembered pizza, though?”

“Of course,” he said, holding the door open for her. “Pizza Hut? Student Center?”

She stood slowly, knowing full well his eyes had nowhere safe to land.

“Lead the way, Wild Stone,” she said, brushing past him with a bump of her hip. She wore her hoodie again and Bharath exhaled gratefully.

And when they stepped out into the hallway and she caught sight of two girls peeking around the corner-not at her, but at Bharath-she felt something fierce stir inside her chest.

He was wanted. Adored. Mythologized.

But right now? He was walking beside *her*.

And he had looked.

More than once.

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

Chapter 140: Mia... Meet Sarah

[1,709 words]

The walk to the Student Center was less chaotic than earlier, but only slightly. Students still gawked. A girl walking her bike actually paused and turned fully around. A guy near the vending machine whispered “*It’s him*” to his friend like they were discussing a comet.

Mia walked beside him with a mix of amusement and curiosity.

“They’re all staring,” she said.

“I’ve noticed,” Bharath muttered.

“Do you moonlight as a campus heartthrob?”

“No. But I do dance terribly. That might count.”

They ordered a couple of personal pan pizzas - and found a table by the window. He got her a Coke from the fountain, then sat across from her, arms folded as he tried to relax.

"You okay?" she asked, taking a bite.

"Yeah. Just... trying not to spontaneously combust after the tutoring session."

Mia laughed, low and knowing. "You *did* look like you were struggling back there."

He didn't deny it. "You're not subtle."

"I wasn't trying to be," she said sweetly, then leaned in a little. "So. Want to tell me what's really going on? With all the staring. And the whispering. And the note-passing?"

Bharath wiped his mouth with a napkin and met her eyes. "I will. Tonight. When we're not surrounded."

She tilted her head. "Tonight?"

"I was going to ask," he said. "If you wanted to spend the night. With Marisol."

Her expression flickered. Something unreadable passed over it. But then she nodded.

"I'd like that. It's been a while."

He nodded back, then added, "And I think it's time you saw... everything for yourself. Instead of hearing it secondhand."

She didn't press further, but he could tell she was filing that away for later.

They finished their pizza, shared a few jokes about cafeteria food, and gathered their things. As they stepped outside again, dusk had begun to settle over the campus. The air was brisk, crisp with the coming cold, and golden leaves fluttered down like confetti.

Mia fell into step beside him, arms crossed for warmth, but her heart was anything but cold.

She'd been flirted with more times than she could count-by classmates, waiters, even her friends' older brothers. She'd been called beautiful, magnetic, unforgettable. But no one had ever made her feel like this. Not breathless, not smitten-but undone. Not because of how he looked, though God help her, that didn't hurt. But because Bharath talked to her like she mattered. Not like a prize. Not like a project. Just... a person.

"God, what am I doing? He belongs with Marisol. But then why does every stupid joke he makes feel like it's just for me?"

Every time he smiled at his own terrible dad jokes, every time he tilted his head thoughtfully when she spoke, every time he said something smart without making her feel small-it cracked something open inside her. He didn't even know he was doing it. He was just being himself. Steady. Sincere. Kind in a way that made her want to cry and scream and lean into his warmth all at once.

And that terrified her.

Because her sister loved this man. And now Mia understood why. She felt it. That same pull. That same weightless falling.

And she hated that she couldn't stop it.

She tried to laugh it off, tamp it down, pretend it was just a crush-but it wasn't. It was something slower, deeper, coiling quietly in her chest with every word he spoke. And the worst part? He didn't have a clue. Bharath was just walking beside her like nothing had changed-because for him, nothing had. But for her, the world was already tilting.

He gestured to the left, his voice as casual and warm as ever. "Come on. I'll walk you through campus. Shortcut to our apartment's this way."

She swallowed hard and nodded, forcing her voice steady. "This place is pretty," she said after a moment. "I see why Marisol loves it here."

"It grows on you," Bharath agreed. "And it helps when the people around you make it feel like home."

They passed the reflecting pool, then the mechanical engineering building, the windows glowing orange with early evening light. Mia paused occasionally to take it all in-pointing out an ivy-covered arch, a group of students stringing fairy lights near the quad, and the tower where students swore a ghost haunted the fourth-floor lab.

"You know," she said quietly, "you don't act like someone who knows everyone's obsessed with him."

"I'm not obsessed with me," he replied, smirking like he'd made a good joke again.

"No," she agreed. "But you *could* be. And you're not."

He didn't know what to say to that. So he said nothing.

And maybe that was what made her look at him differently as they rounded the final path, campus quiet behind them.

Mia had seen a lot of boys with big mouths and big egos.

But Bharath... was all heart. And apparently, a legend.

Tonight, she was going to find out why.

They had just passed the corner of the civil engineering building when Mia glanced sideways at him, brow furrowed.

“Hey, wait a second,” she said. “Why are we still walking? Don’t you *live* on campus?”

“I do,” Bharath said, hands in his pockets. “Technically.”

Mia blinked. “So why are we walking twenty minutes off-campus like it’s a field trip?”

He smiled faintly. “I don’t really stay in the dorm anymore. I only go back for gaming nights with the guys.”

Mia shook her head. “You’re ridiculous. You have a perfectly good bed on campus.”

“You saw what that dorm is like,” he pointed out. “You really want me sleeping somewhere where guys post countdowns about when I might appear?”

Mia visibly shuddered. “Touché.”

He nodded toward the tree-lined lane ahead. “Besides, the house we’re going to-it’s kind of home now. Everyone hangs out there.”

“Whose house is it?”

“Sarah’s.”

That name. Again.

Mia’s ears perked up, even as she kept her tone casual. “Sarah. As in... the girl you rescued outside MARTA?”

“Yeah,” Bharath nodded. “That night changed everything. For both of us.”

There was something in his voice-soft, respectful, weighted. The same kind of tone he used when talking about Marisol.

Mia tried to ignore the flutter in her chest. *Curiouser and curiouser*, she thought.

“She’s a junior,” he continued, oblivious. “Chemical Engineering. Has a full ride here. One of the best in her program. And she came up through the foster care system. No parents. No safety nets. Just grit.”

Mia blinked. That wasn't what she expected.

"I don't think I've ever met someone more quietly fierce," he said.

Something in her heart tugged again. He talked about Sarah the same way he talked about Marisol-with reverence, respect, and that maddening *gravity* like he wasn't just describing people... but altars.

They reached the small two-bedroom bungalow tucked between older brick buildings. The porch light was on. The curtains were drawn. There was a warm glow behind the windows, and music-something Latin and cheerful-was playing faintly inside.

Then the door swung open and a familiar figure bolted out.

"MIIIIIIIIAAAA!"

"MAAAAAAARIIIIISOLLLLL!"

They collided in a blur of denim, curls, and shrieks. There was hugging. Spinning. The kind of excited squealing that could be heard three blocks away.

Bharath stood on the walkway, smiling like a man witnessing a seasonal phenomenon.

"I'm just going to stand here," he said, to no one in particular. "While my hearing recovers."

Sarah appeared behind them in the doorway, watching with a soft smile.

Slender yet fit but with bombshell curves. Effortlessly graceful, even in a loose grey sweatshirt that slipped off one shoulder and cotton shorts that barely touched mid-thigh. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun that somehow made her look *more* radiant, not less.

And her face-

Mia's breath caught.

Oh my god.

She was *stupidly* beautiful. Like, not just college-pretty or sorority-pretty. Not even model-pretty.

This was *Playboy centerfold in a "girl-next-door discovers astrophysics" special edition* kind of beautiful.

Mia actually stepped back a little.

She wasn't often intimidated. She'd grown up being the one girls whispered about in bathrooms. She was used to stares, compliments, double-takes. She had curves, lashes, walk, voice, wit-she knew her toolkit.

But this girl?

She was... something else.

Sarah's skin practically glowed in the porch light, warm and gold-toned. Her lips curved up in a knowing, dimpled smile as she walked barefoot toward them, as if she were gliding. Even the way she waved-soft, warm, slow-felt like something out of a shampoo commercial.

As Sarah turned to grab the door, Mia caught her own reflection in the dark glass of the window.

Just for a second-just long enough to see her own wide eyes, the too-carefully applied lip gloss, the blouse she had picked out that morning after trying on four others.

Her reflection looked younger than she felt. Smaller.

She straightened her shoulders. Tilted her chin up a degree. Blinked slowly. *Get your game face on Mia.*

"Hi, Mia," she said gently.

That voice. Low, honeyed. *Unfair.*

"Uh... hi," Mia managed. "You're Sarah?"

Sarah nodded. "It's really nice to meet you. I've heard so much about you."

Mia blinked, still processing. She glanced back at Bharath, who had that same quiet, steady expression he always had when he looked at Marisol. That soft smile, the weight in his eyes, like he was proud and awestruck and a little bit overwhelmed to be in the company of someone he adored.

He looked at Sarah like that too.

Mia's brain began assembling pieces.

Marisol had said *they were close*. Bharath had said this house felt like home. He had described Sarah the same way he spoke about her sister. And now this woman-this beautiful, barefoot, golden goddess-was smiling at her like she was being welcomed into something.

Mia's eyes narrowed slightly.

Something is going on here.

Sarah opened the door wider and gestured inside. "Come on. It's freezing out here. We've got cocoa, blankets, and the world's worst sitcom reruns waiting."

Marisol looped her arm around Mia's. "Wait till you see the couch. It eats people."

Bharath just laughed softly. "That couch has devoured half the friend group. Sit on it at your own risk."

They stepped inside together, warmth washing over her like a hug. The house smelled faintly of cinnamon, popcorn, and lavender. The lights were low, the mood cozy, and everything felt... weirdly intimate.

Mia glanced again at Sarah-now leaning against the arm of the couch, grinning at something Marisol had said-and then looked over at Bharath.

He wasn't even looking at either girl.

He was looking at *her*, his expression calm and unreadable.

Mia shivered.

This was not a normal tutoring visit.

She didn't know what awaited her inside this warm, softly-lit home, but her heart already knew one terrifying truth: whatever lay beyond that door would change her forever.

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

