

# THEIR WONDER YEARS: FALL 98

## Chapter 7: Crushed on the Quad

Bharath lingered for a moment near the steps.

The sun was fully up now, warm on his skin, sharpening the angles of the buildings and casting long shadows over the campus lawn. A light breeze stirred the trees, and somewhere nearby, someone was playing a guitar - lazy, open chords. The air felt alive, like something beginning.

And then - like gravity - his eyes found her again.

Ayesha.

She was sitting on a wide picnic blanket near the far end of the quad, surrounded by a semi-circle of students. A mix of people - well-dressed, confident, loud - the kind who already seemed to belong to each other. They were playing some kind of game. Charades, maybe. Ayesha was up now,

running in place and flailing her arms dramatically like she was being attacked by invisible bees.

The crowd around her burst into laughter and applause.

She looked radiant. Comfortable. Already part of the world Bharath had just stepped into. He stood watching her, heart caught in his throat.

He hesitated, then walked toward them, rehearsing a line in his head.

*Hey, I didn't know you were out here.*

*Want to grab a drink after orientation?*

Something casual. Friendly. Just enough to reopen the door.

As he crossed the lawn, Ayesha turned briefly to sip from a water bottle - and her eyes met his.

Just for a second.

Recognition. No warmth.

Then she turned back without a word, her expression unchanged.

Still, he kept walking.

“Hey,” he said softly as he reached the edge of the group.

A few people looked up. One or two gave him the polite, tight-lipped half-smile strangers reserve for harmless interruptions.

Ayesha didn't say anything.

Zara, lounging beside her in a pink halter top and mirrored sunglasses, turned with the precision of someone who *lived* to turn dramatically.

“Oh wow,” she said. “It's you again.”

Bharath blinked. "I just saw Ayesha and thought - "

Zara laughed. Not a real laugh - a dagger dressed in glitter.

"You *thought* what? That she was waiting for you? Sitting here hoping you'd come rescue her from her popularity?"

The people nearby chuckled, unsure, watching.

"I just - " Bharath started.

"Oh my God," Zara interrupted. "He's like a lost puppy that followed you from breakfast. Do you feed him, or does he just keep showing up on his own?"

A few more snickers. A guy in sunglasses murmured, "Damn..."

Bharath's ears burned. He looked at Ayesha.

She wasn't laughing. But she wasn't stopping it either.

She leaned back on one arm, her face unreadable behind her large sunglasses. Her silence was louder than any insult.

Zara pressed on. "Sweetie, we're kind of in the middle of something. Orientation, remember? You can't just walk up to every girl who makes eye contact and assume it's destiny."

Bharath tried to swallow. "I didn't - "

"Don't worry," she added sweetly. "It's cute, in a desperate kind of way. Like, try-hard energy. You should bottle that and sell it at the Desperate Dudes Store."

That broke the group. Laughter rippled through the blanket. Someone clapped.

Ayesha's mouth curved slightly - not quite a smile, but not quite guilt either. A flicker of amusement, maybe. Maybe relief that Zara was handling it so she didn't have to.

And that - that was worse than anything.

Bharath didn't say another word.

He just nodded once, woodenly, turned, and walked away.

Behind him, he heard Zara mutter, "These FOB guys, I swear... Think every girl in America is a Bollywood heroine waiting for a backup dancer."

And Ayesha's low laugh in response.

That one sound - casual, soft, unthinking - broke something.

Bharath kept walking.

He didn't know where. Just away. Away from the heat on his neck, the eyes that had watched, the laughter still ringing in his ears.

His map crinkled in his back pocket.

He shoved his hands into his jeans, head low, footsteps quickening until the noise behind him disappeared.

His chest felt hollow. His stomach twisted.

Whatever lightness he had found with Ravi, whatever warmth he'd felt in Ayesha's eyes hours ago - it was gone now. Not stolen. Not lost. *Given up.* By her. Willingly.

Smith Hall was quieter now. Most of the first-years were still off pretending to care about orientation or wandering campus in dazed herds, clutching maps like they were navigating the Amazon.

Bharath pushed open the door to Room 202 and walked into... chaos.

Jorge was sitting cross-legged on his bunk like a monk preparing for spiritual battle, eyes closed, bobbing his head to a rhythm pulsing through his bulky headphones. A portable CD player sat beside him like a holy relic.

Tyrel, shirtless (again), was slouched dramatically against the windowsill, chewing gum like it had personally insulted him. His arms were crossed. His jaw was set.

“What did I say, man?” Tyrel said, louder than necessary. “It’s just *noise*.”

Jorge whipped off his headphones, scandalized. “It’s *rhythm*, pendejo. It’s heat. *Reggaetón es vida*.”

Tyrel gestured broadly like he was dismissing a mosquito. “Nah, man. That ain’t life. That’s just someone banging on pots and yelling over it in Spanish.”

“You don’t even *speak* Spanish!”

“You don’t *need* to speak Spanish to know when something sounds like a blender trying to sing!”

Bharath froze in the doorway, still wearing his backpack. “Is... is this a fight?”

“It’s a *debate*,” Jorge snapped.

“It’s an *intervention*,” Tyrel corrected.

“About music,” Jorge added, as if that explained everything.

Tyrel pointed a dramatic finger at the CD player. “This fool tried to say reggaetón is better than Tupac.”

“Because it *is*! You can *dance* to it. You can *live* to it!”

“You can *die* to it, too. From embarrassment.”

They both turned to Bharath.

“Settle this,” Jorge demanded. “Best music. Go.”

Bharath blinked. “...I like the Backstreet Boys? Garbage? Illayaraja?”

Dead silence.

Even the CD player seemed to stop spinning in protest.

“You *what?*” Tyrel said slowly, as if he hadn’t heard right. “I thought you were just funning when you said that the first time.”

“Backstreet Boys,” Bharath repeated. “You know... *I Want It That Way?* Everybody back home loves them. I had their poster. I knew all the dance moves.”

Tyrel nearly fell off the windowsill laughing. “Oh hell *no.*”

Jorge squinted at Bharath like he was trying to see if he was real. “Seriously?”

“They’re catchy!” Bharath insisted. “In Chennai, everyone knew the lyrics. Girls made mixtapes. Boys sang *As Long As You Love Me* at cultural fest competitions. It’s a thing!”

Tyrel wiped a tear from his eye. "Bro. You just confessed to musical war crimes."

"They're not even the best boy band," Jorge muttered.

Tyrel turned, shocked. "Don't tell me you're about to - "

"N'SYNC is better," Jorge said firmly.

Tyrel threw his gum at him.

"Yeah," Jorge said. "But *N'SYNC* has Justin Timberlake."

"And Backstreet has - who even was in Backstreet?" Tyrel said. "Like seven generic white dudes and a fog machine?"

Bharath frowned. "Nick Carter! He is *very* popular with the ladies!"

"You know who else is popular?" Tyrel said. "Chicken nuggets. Doesn't mean they're music."

Bharath sat down slowly on his bunk, as if the very foundation of his adolescence had been yanked out from under him. “Back home, this got you *respect*. People cheered when you sang Backstreet at karaoke night.”

Tyrel snorted. “Here, that’ll get you kicked out of parties.”

Jorge nodded solemnly. “Or forced to wear a denim vest ironically.”

Bharath sighed. “Do you guys at least know A.R. Rahman?”

Tyrel blinked. “Who?”

“Bless you?” Jorge said.

“Never mind.”

A beat of silence passed. Then Jorge, ever defiant, put his headphones back on and cranked the volume, letting the reggaetón beat leak out like a stubborn argument.

Tyrel rolled his eyes. “This is why I keep headphones and a backup plan.”

Bharath lay back on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling tiles. The dorm room smelled faintly of disappointment.

Still... it was kind of comforting.

Sure, everything in America was louder, saltier, and vaguely judgmental - from the gravy to the music to the girls who'd already started ignoring him - but at least he had backup.

And that, for now, was enough.

Afternoon sun filtered in through the half-closed blinds, warming the dorm room into a hazy lull. Jorge was lying flat on the floor, flipping through the thick Georgia Tech orientation packet, while Bharath sat cross-legged on his bed, skimming through a separate stack of campus literature.

“Why do all these clubs have names like... Delta Psi Zeta?” Jorge asked, his finger tracing a flyer that featured glossy photos of smiling guys in polo shirts.

Bharath held up another page. “And look at this - Sigma Chi, Beta Theta Pi, Alpha... something. They all sound like equations.”

“Greek letters,” Jorge said.

“Yeah, but why Greek? This is the US.”

Jorge shrugged. “Maybe the Romans were busy?”

Bharath snorted.

Just then, Tyrel walked in, towel slung around his neck, earbuds dangling from his collar. He spotted the flyers spread across the floor and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s this?” he asked, flopping down on his bed.

“We’re trying to figure out what these *fraternities* are,” Jorge said.

“Yeah,” Bharath added. “Everyone keeps talking about ‘rush week’ like it’s the second coming. Should we go?”

Tyrel barked a laugh. “Oh hell no.”

Bharath looked up. “Why not?”

“Okay, lemme break it down for you,” Tyrel said, sitting up and cracking his knuckles. “Frats are like... clubs. But with way more alcohol, hazing, and entitlement. You pay dues to basically live in a house with a bunch of dudes who dress like they sell life insurance at 19.”

“Dues?” Jorge asked.

“Yeah. *Expensive* dues. Like hundreds, sometimes thousands of dollars a semester. You’re basically paying to get bullied, party a lot, and call each other ‘bro’ while wearing matching hoodies.”

Bharath frowned. “So why are people excited about it?”

“Because people are sheep,” Tyrel said flatly. “And because they think it gives them status. Connections. Some of these frats are old money - generational. If your dad was in it, you get legacy preference. Some of them are chill, but most just pretend to be the cast of Animal House.”

“So what’s rush week?” Jorge asked.

“That’s when all the frats open their doors and try to impress the new guys. They throw parties, give you free food, play beer pong, and then decide if you’re cool enough to join their little cult.”

“Sounds... very weird,” Bharath said.

Tyrel grinned. “Weird? Bruh, some of these kids get paddled in secret rooms, wear diapers, clean toilets blindfolded, and call it ‘tradition.’ One guy had to

dress as a chicken and cluck around campus all day while holding a sign that said 'My cock is loyal to Sigma.'”

Bharath's mouth opened slightly. “That’s... legal?”

“It’s tradition,” Tyrel said. “And in America, tradition is the loophole.”

“Should we go?” Jorge asked. “Like, just to see?”

Tyrel scratched his chin. “We ain’t pledging, unless you’ve got a trust fund stashed in that floppy disk pouch. But...”

He paused, grinning. “...some of these frats got bad babes. Like cheerleaders, sorority girls, the whole shebang. So yeah, we can go to a couple parties. Dance a little. Pull some bitches. And then bounce.”

“Pull some - ” Bharath started, then blinked. “Is that... slang?”

“Ya, dawg. It means flirt. Seduce. Get digits. You’re in the US of A now, gotta update your vocabulary.”

“I just learned ‘what’s up’”

Tyrel clapped him on the back. “Then you’re ready.”

He grabbed one of the flyers and scanned it. “This one here - Alpha Tau Omega - they usually throw a decent bash. But I’ll ask around. Once I find out which frat got the baddest babes this week, I’ll let y’all know.”

Bharath exchanged a glance with Jorge. It was hard to tell whether Tyrel was a prophet or a parody.

Still, a part of him - the part that still believed in American movies and bedroom-in-the-sky fantasies - perked up at the thought.

Maybe it *was* worth checking out.

If nothing else, it would make a good story.